'Moderate' Islamic Cleric In Qatar Shows How Its Possible To Take The Middle Road
By Daniel Pearl

DOHA, Qatar -- America is trying to keep its war on terrorism from becoming a war with Islam, and a 75-year-old scholar working from a ramshackle bungalow at the university here could have a lot to say about whether the U.S. succeeds.

Yusuf Qaradawi, an Egyptian scholar based in the Gulf emirate of Qatar, is one of the most widely respected Islamic authorities. Considered by many to be a moderate Islamist, he has tried to steer an increasingly difficult middle path, condemning the Sept. 11 attacks but also railing against the U.S. for its strikes on Afghanistan. He joined a Sept. 22 ruling that said Muslims in the U.S. military can participate in the fight against terrorism, but also recently has come close to supporting Afghanistan's calls for a jihad against the U.S.

"Like a lot of people at the center, he doesn't want to upset people on the fringes," says Maher Abdullah, who presents the Al Jazeera satellite-TV channel's religion show "Shariah Alive," which frequently features Mr. Qaradawi. Normally, says Mr. Abdullah, clerics are "either with the government or with the people."

Mr. Qaradawi is considered more independent than most clerics in Saudi Arabia and Egypt, who operate under government control. Associated with the Muslim Brotherhood political movement in Egypt, he was imprisoned repeatedly by Egyptian authorities between 1949 and 1963, and finally came to Qatar and was granted citizenship. Since then, he says, Qatar authorities have never told him what to say. "Had I wanted to work for any government I would have done that for the Egyptian government," he says.

Still, Qatar's wealth and its experiments with democratic opening have proved a boon for Mr. Qaradawi. Besides making regular appearances on Al Jazeera, which reaches most of the Arab world, he helped launch a popular Web site called islamonline.net (www.islamonline.net1), which operates from a well-appointed office in Doha. Mr. Qaradawi criticizes Western secularism but was able to send most of his sons and daughters to the West to get advanced degrees. Some of his earnings come from serving on Islamic review boards for financial institutions in the Gulf.

Some Americans see Mr. Qaradawi as a potential ally. He has been critical of the ruling Taliban in Afghanistan for prohibiting women from working, for example. He traveled to Afghanistan last spring in an unsuccessful effort to save ancient Buddha statues from destruction at the hands of the Taliban, who considered them un-Islamic idols. The mission earned him the ridicule of London-based Islamic extremists.

Two weeks ago, Mr. Qaradawi took part in a conference in Rome aimed at promoting Muslim-Christian dialogue in the wake of the terrorist attacks. On his return to Doha, he got a visit from U.S. embassy officials hoping he could help keep calm in the Muslim world. "This is a war of
ideologies, and it has to be combated by ideologies," he told them. And, he said, America won't win any war in the region as long as it doesn't alleviate injustice in Palestine.

And that's where dialogue with Islamists such as Mr. Qaradawi gets tricky. His definition of terrorism has consistently excluded attacks within Israel or the Israeli-occupied West Bank. In an interview, he explains that Israelis are "from the U.S. or Europe or Russia, and they came with the intention of displacing the original residents." What if suicide bombings kill civilians? "Israeli society in general is armed," he answers.

"He's part of the problem, not part of the solution," says Daniel Pipes, director of the pro-Israel Middle East Forum in Philadelphia. He says Mr. Qaradawi is an influential figure, but "there is no consistency and no morality to condoning suicide attacks on Israelis and not Americans." After his last trip to the U.S., in which he made statements in favor of Palestinian militant group Hamas, Mr. Qaradawi says he learned the U.S. embassy in Doha no longer intended to honor his 10-year visa for the U.S. (Embassy officials declined to talk about visa cases.)

Other moderate Islamists are in similar positions, sometimes because of pressure from U.S. allies, says Graham E. Fuller, a former CIA official who met with Mr. Qaradawi last week as part of his research for a book on Islamist movements. He sees potential in dialogues between American social conservatives and Islamists such as Mr. Qaradawi. "Nothing would be a greater disaster than to perpetuate an ongoing confrontation with these movements," which are gaining force and abandoning the idea that Islam and democracy are incompatible, he said. "There is not an Islamic leader anywhere who hasn't said something harsh about Israel and Palestine."

In the Arab world, Mr. Qaradawi's anti-Israel stands put him firmly in the mainstream. "He's in the middle, that's why everybody likes him," said Abdulaziz al-Tamimi, a 29-year-old video librarian in Doha, on the way to see Mr. Qaradawi lead Friday prayers at the Government's Omar ibn al-Khattab Mosque.

There, before an overflow crowd, Mr. Qaradawi stood at the lectern and spoke without notes. "We should negotiate," he told his listeners. "Allah said don't fight with the Christian and Jewish people, because they are part of our religion." Terrorism was wrong, he said, adding that he had issued a fatwa, or ruling, more than a decade ago against the hijacking of airplanes. But terrorists have to be brought to justice in an international court, and "Muslims cannot be used as tools to kill brother Muslims," he said.

The idea of the U.S. attacking Qatar, its military ally, might seems far-fetched, but Mr. Qaradawi warned against the possibility in his sermon. He sees the U.S. as enraged, not even waiting to sift through its thousands of clues and determine for sure who committed the terrorist attacks. Islam says a judge must not give a verdict while he is angry, Mr. Qaradawi told reporters last week. "Anger can be a wall between him and seeing the facts."