

## Muslim Brotherhood cleric calls for Sunni jihad in Syria

The spiritual mentor of the worldwide Muslim Brotherhood movement has risked further inflaming sectarian tension across the Middle East by using highly charged religious rhetoric to call for a Sunni "jihad" in Syria.



Yusef al-Qaradawi was particularly critical of the roles played by Iran and the Lebanon Shia militia Hizbollah Photo: Heathcliff O'Malley

By Richard Spencer, Middle East Correspondent

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Yusef al-Qaradawi, who is based in Qatar and has been a leading voice supporting the Arab Spring, warned that Iranian Shia were trying to "eat" Sunni Muslims, who are a majority in the Muslim world.

He referred to Alawites, the followers of the Muslim sect to which President Bashar al-Assad of Syria belongs, as being "worse infidels than Christians or Jews". He also used the deliberately contemptuous term "Nusayris" when talking about them.

He was particularly critical of the roles played by Iran, which is largely Shia, and the Lebanon Shia militia Hizbollah whose name translates as Party of God but which he called "Party of Satan", in supporting the Assad regime.

"There is no common ground between the two sides because the Iranians, especially conservatives,

want to eat the Sunni people," he said.

The Syrian opposition is dominated, like Syria itself, by Sunni Muslims, but also includes a number of Christians, Alawites and other minorities.

However, Alawite militias loyal to the Assads have been responsible for sectarian attacks on Sunni villages, while there are also increasing reports of sectarian attacks by militant Sunni jihadists, many of whom regard the Shia and Alawites as heretics.

In recent days, a number of Shia shrines have been attacked and desecrated in rebel-held territory, including the tombs of Ammar ibn Yasir in Raqqa and of Hujr bin Uday al-Kindi near Damascus.

Alawite leaders have openly called for Sunni areas to be "cleansed" - coinciding with attacks by Alawite militias on civilian Sunni towns near Baniyas which killed 300 people.

The Muslim Brotherhood, though a Sunni, Islamist movement that has given birth to a number of jihadist offshoots, has been held up as a "moderating" force within Arab Spring countries with which the West "can do business".

Egypt has a Muslim Brotherhood president, while the coalition government in Tunisia is led by a Brotherhood-linked organisation backed by Dr Qaradawi.

Dr Qaradawi himself, who is Egyptian by birth but has lived in Qatar for many years and is regarded as a key factor in the active role the Qatari royal family has played in backing the Arab Spring uprisings with arms and money, has a controversial record in the West.

However, his latest comments, made in a mosque in Qatar on Friday, go beyond his previous political sermons. He himself acknowledged he had become more radical. "People involved in reconciliation between the sects... said that I used to be the one calling for reconciliation and doctrinal unity. They asked why I don't take up that call again.

"Well, I called for reconciliation but I found it did not bring the sects closer. They benefited from it and we failed to take advantage."

He also apologised for his past words in favour of Hizbollah. "The Shia deceived me," he said. "I was less mature than the Sunni scholars who were aware of the truth of that party."

He said Sunni Muslims around the world should not wait for the West to help the rebel cause against the "Nusayris", the Iranians and "the party of God". "They are the party of Satan, the party of the tyrant," he said. "The party of God does not kill Muslims, and these people draw close to God by killing Muslims."

The war in Syria has split the region largely along sectarian lines, with Sunni Gulf and North African states largely supporting the rebels, and Shia Iran and Shia communities in Lebanon and Iraq supporting the regime.

The city of Tripoli in northern Lebanon has already seen fighting between Sunni and Alawite districts, while there has been a rise in sectarian violence in Iraq where many Sunnis have tribal links to Syria but the government represents the majority Shia community and is close to Iran.

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