

Egyptian sheik hosted our Grand Mufti after praising al-Nusra

EXCLUSIVE

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Controversial Egyptian sheik Yusuf al-Qaradawi publicly praised al-Qa'ida in Syria three days before playing host to Australia's Grand Mufti Ibrahim Abu Mohamed.

The prominent Sunni theologian appealed to al-Qa'ida's Syrian chapter, the al-Nusra Front, to "maintain unity" with the Free Syrian Army in the war against President Bashar al-Assad.

Al-Nusra "has done very well in its jihad against the tyrant regime of Damascus", Qaradawi told the terrorist group in an open letter on behalf of the International Union of Muslim Scholars on April 23, 2013.

Al-Nusra was declared a terrorist organisation by the US in December 2012 and by Australia six months later.

As *The Australian* revealed last week, Dr Abu Mohamed visited the exiled Qaradawi at his base in the Arab Gulf state of Qatar on April 26, 2013. They reportedly "discussed the role of Islamic communities in Australia".

The Australian National Imams Council, which elects the grand mufti, joined the IUMS several weeks before Dr Abu Mohamed's visit.

IUMS secretary-general Ali al-Qaradaghi wrote to ANIC on February 6, 2013, to accept its membership request and ask for annual membership fees of \$200.

By then Qaradawi, the IUMS founder and president, was already notorious for sanctioning the suicide bombing of Israeli civilians as "heroic martyrdom operations" and had been banned from the US, Britain and France.

He had been denounced as a “theologian of terror” in a 2004 statement against the use of religion to incite violence signed by 2500 Muslim intellectuals from 23 countries.

The 89-year-old, who regularly preaches to tens of millions of television viewers, is considered the spiritual head of Egypt’s banned Muslim Brotherhood. Egyptian-born Dr Abu Mohamed is widely seen as a Brotherhood supporter.

Within weeks of hosting Dr Abu Mohamed, Qaradawi and the IUMS led a push by Sunni clerics to galvanise international support including foreign fighters for the war against Assad’s secular government. “Everyone who has the ability, who is trained to fight ... has to go. I call on Muslims to go and support their brothers in Syria,” urged Qaradawi on May 31.

Associate professor Rodger Shanahan of the Australian National University’s National Security College said it was a highly influential call — not least because of Qaradawi’s access to the Al Jazeera Arabic TV network, which includes Australia.

A fortnight later the IUMS called on Muslims, “be you Arabs or non-Arabs, in the Orient or Occident ... do not hesitate in fighting (regime supporters) until they comply with God’s commands and return to their senses”.

Qaradawi then referred to Australia at an international conference of Sunni clerics in Cairo on June 13. He said the IUMS was preparing “the first convoy of strong and fit scholars suitable for jihad and for fighting”, according to near-identical reports on Arab news sites Tunivisions and muslm.org on June 14.

Qaradawi “appealed to Muslims in Malaysia, Indonesia, Senegal and Australia and all countries to work for the protection of their brothers in Syria”, they reported.

It is not known why Qaradawi referred to Australia nor whether any Australians were at the meeting.

A conference final statement said: “Jihad is necessary for the victory of our brothers in Syria — jihad with mind, money, weapons;— all forms of jihad.”

It was “one of the most powerful statements yet for holy war” in Syria, Reuters reported.

Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood government immediately announced that Egyptians were free to join the fight in Syria and would not be prosecuted upon return.

The Syrian war soon began to lure large numbers of would-be jihadists from around the world.

An estimated 110 Australians were fighting with extremist groups in Syria and Iraq last month, Attorney-General George Brandis said. At least 40 have died since Sydney teacher and imam Mustapha Majzoub became the first Australian casualty in late 2012.

The Cairo conference was soon followed by an army coup that ousted Egyptian president Mohammed Morsi.

The Muslim Brotherhood is now outlawed by Egypt and the monarchies of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, which fear its popularity.

The UAE also lists Qaradawi's IUMS as a terrorist organisation.

Qaradawi is sought by Egyptian authorities on charges including incitement to murder and aiding a prison escape.

Dr Abu Mohamed's name and his Australian National Imams Council appeared on a petition last December condemning the charges as politically motivated and calling on Interpol to remove Qaradawi from its wanted list.

In Britain, Prime Minister David Cameron said last week that Brotherhood members should be considered as potential extremists but stopped short of banning the group.