



# Centre for Social Cohesion

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## **Scottish Islamic Foundation to launch on Thursday: A new front for the Muslim Brotherhood?**

On Thursday 26 June 2008, a new Muslim group called the Scottish Islamic Foundation will be [launched](#) in Edinburgh in the presence of Alex Salmond, Scotland's First Minister. The leading members of the group, together with many of those who lead its events are closely linked to the Muslim Brotherhood.

The Muslim Brotherhood is an Islamist movement with regional branches which aims to re-create the global Caliphate. The Brotherhood's motto is:

"Allah is our objective. The Prophet is our leader. The Qur'an is our law. Jihad is our way. Dying in the way of Allah is our highest hope."

In 2007, Mehdi Akef, the leader of the Brotherhood in Egypt said that neither women nor Christians could become president of Egypt under an Islamic state, [saying](#): "It is the Muslim Brotherhood's opinion that a woman cannot be president." He added: "How can a Christian president protect the religion of Islam?" In 2004, he [said](#) that "I have complete faith that Islam will invade Europe and America, because Islam has logic and a mission." In December 2005, Akef [described](#) the Holocaust as a "myth".

### **Osama Saeed**

Osama Saeed is the chief executive of the Scottish Islamic Foundation (SIF) and is the group's most high-profile member. He has worked as a researcher for Alex Salmond and has been selected as the SNP's candidate for Glasgow Central for the next general elections.

Saeed first came to prominence as a spokesman for the Muslim Association of Britain (MAB), the British version of the Muslim Brotherhood with whom he became active after 9-11. By 2003, he was encouraging Muslims on behalf of MAB to vote along religious lines, urging them to vote against Labour and in favour of the SNP, telling the Evening Times in an article published on 30 April 2003: "What we are urging people to do is what is in the best interests of the Muslim community."

Like the Muslim Brotherhood's leaders, Saeed has also advocated the re-creation of the Caliphate, [writing](#) in The Guardian in November 2005, that "a restored caliphate is entirely compatible with democratically accountable institutions" - although he did suggest that this could take the form of an "economic block" [sic]. Simultaneously, however, Saeed defends sharia punishments:

"The aim of Islamic law, contrary to popular belief, is not punishment by death or amputation of body parts. It is to create a peaceful and just society, with Islamic scholars over centuries citing its core aims: the freedom to practise religion; protection of life; safeguarding intellect; maintaining lineage and individual rights."

This passage shows that Saeed does not reject "punishment by death" or "amputation of body parts" but rather implies that these measures may be necessary to "to create a perfect and just society."

In a previous Guardian article, Saeed had compared criticising the caliphate to criticising the pope - implying that both were unacceptable, [writing](#) that "Mr Blair has attacked the idea of the caliphate - the equivalent of criticising the Pope... Such actions and omissions fuel the suspicion that we are witnessing a war on Islam itself."

However, Saeed has himself criticised the pope on numerous occasions. For example, calling for Pope Benedict XVI to ["apologise"](#) for his September 2006 Regensburg address, accusing the Pontiff of issuing a ["fatwa"](#) and describing his attempts to interpret the Quran as "outrageous".

Saeed again attacked the principle of free speech when he attacked the publication of the Danish cartoons, [writing](#) on his blog:

"The right to offend doesn't work on the playground and it shouldn't work on the international arena either. Even if there is a right to offend, surely there is also a right to be offended? And to complain and even boycott as a result. But the cartoons have nothing to do with ridiculing. You just don't do pictures of the Prophet, period. It's a cultural thing, accept it and respect it."

In other circumstances, however, he has defended Muslims' right to free speech. For instance, on 8 August 2007, he posted on his blog extracts from his speech to the annual Scottish conference of MAB and the UK Islamic Mission, entitled 'Time for Muslims to cry freedom'. This [criticised](#) the government's anti-terrorism policies for limiting Muslims' free speech and attacking Muslims' "beliefs and practices":

"What was forgotten was the idea in our society that you can do as you please, as long as you do not bring harm to others. These principles have been all too easily forgotten in recent times. It led us to the remarkable situation where Muslims were having to dole out lessons to the government about liberalism."

In these statements, Saeed seems to suggest that Muslims should be allowed to say and act as they want, but that non-Muslims should not criticise the idea of the Caliphate or draw cartoons of Muhammad.

In a further assault on free speech, Saeed attacked the BBC for publicising that Yusuf al-Qaradawi, the spiritual leader of the Muslim Brotherhood, openly advocates wife-beating and the murder of homosexuals. For example, on 13 January 2006, he criticised Nicky Campbell, the radio presenter, for bringing attention to Qaradawi's teachings, [writing](#) "[Campbell has] spoken about Shaikh Qaradawi being a man who promotes the beating of women and killing of gays. This is truly unacceptable from the BBC."

Saeed has defended Qaradawi on numerous other occasions, in keeping with his own background as a spokesman for MAB. Writing for The Guardian, for example, Saeed [described](#) Qaradawi as "an eminent scholar" who "has worked hard to reconcile Islam with modern democracy", and [predicted](#)

on his blog that Ken Livingstone's support for Qaradawi "will be proved on the money in the fullness of time". In another [blog post](#) he accused those opposed to Qaradawi's visits to the UK of suffering from "paranoia". However, when confronted on his own blog with quotes by Qaradawi, Saeed [responded](#) "What the MB [Muslim Brotherhood], Qaradawi et al say is their business and I'd thank you for not ascribing the views of others to me."

Despite this it is clear Saeed has made several genuine and important contributions to community cohesion. For example, he has [called](#) on the government to act to end forced marriages and has spoken out strongly against racism. He has also clearly denounced Islamic terrorism on several occasions, [writing](#) on his blog after the June 2007 attack on Glasgow airport.

"You have to salute the brave police, airport staff and members of the public who confronted the would-be killers at Glasgow Airport on Saturday. John Smeaton has rightly become national hero [sic] with his tale of how he punched the man on fire. How I envy him. I would have loved to be delivering some good punches, kicks and more."

Saeed also helped organise a demonstration against terrorism shortly after the attack which was widely reported in the [media](#).

### **Scottish Islamic Foundation**

Although the SIF launches officially on the 26 June, the group has been active for several months, organising residential weekends, holding lectures and engaging with the Scottish government. In many cases, these events have been held by senior members of the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist groups.

One of the most recent events advertised on the SIF's website is a residential weekend held on 4-6 April 2008 on the subject of 'Dear Beloved Son', a book by the medieval Islamic scholar Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali which has been translated by Kemal Helbawy. The weekend was hosted by Helbawy himself and Ahmed Saad.

Helbawy was formerly the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood's main spokesman in Europe and co-founded the MAB. During his career, he has frequently denounced the Jews and non-Muslims. For example, in 1992 he [told](#) a conference in the US:

"Do not take Jews and Christians as allies. For they are allies to each other. Oh Brothers, the Palestinian cause is not of conflict of borders and land only. It is not even a conflict of human ideology and not over peace. Rather, it is an absolute clash of civilizations, between truth and falsehood. Between two conducts - one satanic, headed by Jews and their co-conspirators - and the other is religious, carried by Hamas, and the Islamic movement in particular, and the Islamic people in general who are behind it."

Ahmed Saad, who hosted the SIF's weekend course along with Helbawy, is the imam of the North London mosque (better known as the Finsbury Park mosque). He was appointed imam of the mosque after it was taken away from Abu Hamza's followers and put in charge of a group led by MAB in [2005](#). The mosque's new management had [undertaken](#) to end extremism in the mosque. In fact, the mosque's trustees have [reportedly](#) turned a blind eye to recruitment and fund-raising in and around the mosque by members of Hizb ut-Tahrir and Somalia's [Islamic Courts Union](#), an extremist group linked to al-Qaeda.

Significantly, the SIF's event was "organised in partnership" with the Federation of Student Islamic Societies, the Muslim Association of Britain and the UK Islamic Mission - all of which are prominent Islamist organisations founded by followers and supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood and Jamaat-e-Islami, the South-Asian equivalent of the Brotherhood.

The most recent event held by the SIF was a residential weekend led by Fadel Soliman who it describes as "one of the world's leading experts on presenting Islam" and the "director of the Bridges Foundation". The SIF did not mention that Soliman is also the former executive [director](#) of the US branch of the World Association of Muslim Youth (WAMY), a Wahhabi organisation which Kemal Helbawy [co-founded](#) in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, in 1973. The US branch of WAMY reportedly ran summer camps for Muslim children at which they were taught pro-jihadist songs. [Reported](#) lyrics include:

"Hail! Hail! O Sacrificing Soldiers! To Us! To Us!  
So we may defend the flag on this Day of Jihad, are you miserly with your blood?!  
And has life become dearer to you? And staying behind sweeter?"

On 27-29 June 2008, Soliman led a residential weekend in rural Stirlingshire for the SIF as part of their "Muslim Leadership Training Programme". The SIF promoted the [event](#), entitled 'Engaging Scotland: Explaining Islam' as "A unique weekend residential equipping Scottish Muslims with knowledge and skills needed to clarify the basics of their way of life and increase understanding between communities." Activities at the weekend included "air rifle shooting, archery, fencing and abseiling". The SIF said that one of the course's aims was "to develop an agenda for longer-term projects to increase awareness and understanding of Islam and Muslims." The event was co-sponsored by Islam Festival and the UK Islamic Mission.

In January 2008, the SIF held another one-day [course](#) on 'Self-Leadership'. A flyer advertising the event read "this event aims to lay out a practical strategy for successful and happy lives. It will show how Muslims can be rooted in their faith, and at the same time, active and empowered citizens." The course was given by Alamin Belhaj who is described only as having "a post-graduate diploma in management who has lectured widely on topics such as self-leadership, strategic planning and self-development." In fact, Belhaj is the [leader](#) of the [Libyan](#) Islamic Group, the Libyan wing of the Muslim Brotherhood.

On 1 September 2007, the SIF had held another one-day [event](#) on the subject of 'Surah Yusuf', a chapter in the Quran. This event was given by Hesham al-Awadi, an academic who has lectured at Exeter and Cambridge universities. Al-Awadi's most significant [publication](#) is 'In Pursuit of Legitimacy: The Muslim Brothers and Mubarak, 1982-2000' which was published by Palgrave Macmillan and Tauris Academic Studies. The book describes the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt as a progressive, reformist and democratic movement which has been unjustly oppressed by President Mubarak's dictatorship. Al-Awadi has [spoken](#) regularly at high-profile Islamist events, such as at the Federation of Student Islamic Society's 2005 annual conference.

Other SIF events on the subject of 'personal development' have been chaired by Mustaqeem Shah and Haq Ghani from the UK Islamic Mission, Zubair Malik from the Islamic Society of Britain and by Ghassan Hemi from the Muslim Association of Britain. On 23 June 2008, the SIF [joined](#) Church leaders to call for a peace in Israel and Palestine. On 9 May 2008, the SIF held a [dinner](#) to mark the 60th anniversary of what Palestinians call the Nakba (disaster), putting the proceeds towards the UN body which provides aid to Palestinian.

### **Influence in government**

The Scottish Islamic Foundation appears to be aiming to become the Scottish government's default Muslim partner organisation, a role the Muslim Council of Britain previously fulfilled for the British government. Although the SIF has not yet officially launched, it has already gained some influence within the Scottish government.

For example, in February 2008, the Scottish government set up a [working group](#) to examine whether or not to replace the Trident nuclear weapons system. The 13-member group, which first met for the first time on 10 April, includes Osama Saeed on behalf of the Scottish Islamic Foundation.

The Scottish Islamic Foundation has also been cited in the Scottish parliament in respect to counter-terrorism [legislation](#) as well as being consulted on issues such as whether [halal](#) slaughter amounts to cruelty to animals.

The SIF also hopes to get funding from the government. Speaking on 16 June to publicise the group's forthcoming launch, Saeed made a clear [appeal](#) for government money:

"There is hundreds of millions of pounds sloshing around in England for this sort of stuff but in Scotland, we are largely relying on volunteers. This is something that needs to be looked at."

### **Summary:**

Although the SIF seeks to present itself as representing Scottish Muslims, in practice the SIF's events appears to be disproportionately dominated by members and supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood. Furthermore, the group, which does contain moderate members, appears dominated by Osama Saeed who is by far its most high-profile member.

Since entering politics, many of Osama Saeed's actions and statements have often been openly hypocritical and duplicitous; defending Muslims' freedom of speech while seeking to restrict the freedoms of others; describing Qaradawi as "an eminent scholar" while seeking to silence his critics; repeatedly inviting Muslim Brotherhood members to host SIF events but then concealing their most significant affiliations.

The SIF's tactics are not new. They have previously been extensively used by other Islamist groups in the UK - such as the British Muslim Initiative, and Hizb ut-Tahrir - in an attempt to present themselves as being representative of British Muslims. The SIF - its moderate members notwithstanding - represent only a narrow form of political Islam which has been repeatedly rejected by Muslims around the world.

### **Recommendations:**

It is clearly tempting for the Scottish government and politicians to turn to the SIF whenever it wishes to address Muslim concerns or to understand Muslims' perspectives. However, this temptation should be resisted. Instead, the Scottish government should treat British Muslims as full and equal citizens and as individuals, rather than as a faceless bloc who can only be addressed and understood through self-appointed community representatives.

**[The Centre for Social Cohesion is an independent thinktank](#)**