

Sayyid Qutb
Origins of Radical Islam
5/5/21

Who is this man?

Sayyid Qutb, was an Egyptian author, educator, revolutionary, Islamic theorist, poet, and a leading member of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood in the 1950s and 1960s. In 1966, he was convicted of plotting the assassination of Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser and was executed by hanging. He is considered as "the Father of Salafi-Jihadism", the religio-political doctrine that underpins the ideological roots of global jihadist organizations such as al-Qaeda and ISIL/ISIS.

Author of 24 books, ¹ with around 30 books unpublished for different reasons (mainly destruction by the state), and at least 581 articles, including novels, literary arts critique and works on education, he is best known in the Muslim world for his work on what he believed to be the social and political role of Islam, particularly in his books *Social Justice* and *Ma'alim fi al-Tariq (Milestones)*. His magnum opus, *Fi Zilal al-Quran (In the Shade of the Qur'an)*, is a 30-volume commentary on the Quran.

During most of his life, Qutb's inner circle mainly consisted of influential politicians, intellectuals, poets and literary figures, both of his age and of the preceding generation. By the mid-1940s, many of his writings were included in the curricula of schools, colleges and universities.

Even though most of his observations and criticism were leveled at the Muslim world, Qutb is also known for his intense disapproval of the society and culture of the United States, which he saw as materialistic, and obsessed with violence and sexual pleasures. He advocated violent, offensive jihad Qutb has been described by followers as a great thinker and martyr for Islam,¹ while many Western observers (and some Muslims) see him as a key originator of radical Islamist ideology, and an inspiration for violent Islamist groups such as al-Qaeda.

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Early life

Sayyid Ibrahim Husayn Shadhili Qutb was born on 9 October 1906 He was raised in the Egyptian village of Musha, located in Upper Egypt's Asyut Province. His father was an Upper Egyptian landowner and the administrator of the family estate, but he was also well known for his political activism, holding weekly meetings to discuss the political events and Qur'anic recitation At this young age, Sayyid Qutb first learned about melodic recitations of the Qur'an, which would fuel the artistic side of his personality. He eventually memorized the whole Qur'an at 10. In his teens, Qutb was critical of the religious institutions with which he came into contact, holding in contempt the way in which those institutions were used to form public opinion and thoughts. He had a special disdain, however, for schools that specialized in religious studies only, and sought to demonstrate that local schools that held regular academic classes as well as classes in religion were more beneficial to their pupils than religious schools with lopsided curricula. At this time, Qutb developed his bent against the imams and their traditional approach to education. This confrontation would persist throughout his life.

Qutb moved to Cairo, where between 1929 and 1933 he received an education based on the British style of schooling before starting his career as a teacher in the Ministry of Public Instruction. During his early career, Qutb devoted himself to literature as an author and critic, writing such novels as *Ashwak (Thorns)* In the early 1940s, he encountered the work of Nobel Prize-winner French eugenicist Alexis Carrel, who would have a seminal and lasting influence on his criticism of Western civilization, as "instead of liberating man, as the post-Enlightenment narrative claimed, he believed that Western modernity enmeshed people in spiritually numbing networks of control and discipline, and that rather than building caring communities, it cultivated attitudes of selfish individualism. Qutb regarded Carrel as a rare sort of Western thinker, one who understood that his civilization "depreciated humanity" by honoring the "machine" over the "spirit and soul" From 1948 to 1950, he went to the United States on a scholarship to study its educational system, spending several months at Colorado State College of Education (now the University of Northern Colorado) in Greeley, Colorado. Qutb's first major theoretical work of religious social criticism, *Social Justice in Islam*, was published in 1949, during his time in the West.

Though Islam gave him much peace and contentment, he suffered from respiratory and other health problems throughout his life and was known for "his introvertedness, isolation, depression and concern. Qutb never married, in part because of his steadfast religious convictions. While the urban Egyptian society he lived in was becoming more Westernized, Qutb believed the Quran taught women that 'Men are the managers of women's affairs ... Qutb lamented to his readers that he was never able to find a woman of sufficient "moral purity and discretion" and had to reconcile himself to bachelorhood.

Two years in the United States

Time in the United States, pursuing further studies in educational administration, cemented some of Qutb's views. Over two years, he worked and studied at Wilson Teachers' College in Washington, D.C. (one of the precursors to today's University of the District of Columbia), Colorado State College for Education in Greeley, and Stanford University. He visited the major cities of the United States and spent time in Europe on his journey home.

Before his departure from the United States, even though more and more conservative, he still was "Western in so many ways—his dress, his love of classical music and Hollywood movies. He had read, in translation, the works of Charles Darwin and Albert Einstein, Lord Byron and Percy Bysshe Shelley, and had immersed himself in French literature, especially Victor Hugo".

Criticisms of American culture and society

On his return to Egypt, Qutb published "The America that I Have Seen", where he became explicitly critical of things he had observed in the United States, eventually encapsulating the West more generally: its materialism, individual freedoms, economic issues , superficiality in conversations and friendships, enthusiasm for sports, lack of artistic feeling, "animal-like" mixing of the genders (which "went on even in churches"), and strong support for the new Israeli state.

Return to Egypt

Qutb concluded that major aspects of American life were primitive and "shocking"; he saw Americans as "numb to faith in religion, faith in art, and faith in spiritual values altogether". His experience in the U.S. is believed to have formed in part the impetus for his rejection of Western values and his move towards Islamism upon returning to Egypt.

Resigning from the civil service, he joined the Muslim Brotherhood in the early 1950s and became editor-in-chief of the Brothers' weekly *Al-Ikhwān al-Muslimīn*, and later head of its propaganda section, as well as an appointed member of the working committee and of its guidance council, the highest branch in the organization.

Nasser and Qutb's death

In July 1952, Egypt's pro-Western government was overthrown by the nationalist Free Officers Movement headed by Gamal Abdel Nasser. Both Qutb and the Muslim Brotherhood welcomed the *coup d'état* against the monarchist government – which they saw as un-Islamic and subservient to British imperialism – and enjoyed a close relationship with the movement prior to and immediately following the coup. Nasser would go to the house of Qutb and ask him for ideas about the Revolution. Many members of the Brotherhood expected Nasser to establish an Islamic government. However, the co-operation between the Brotherhood and Free Officers which marked the revolution's success soon soured as it became clear the secular nationalist ideology of Nasserism was incompatible with the Islamism of the Brotherhood.

Nasser had secretly set up a group that would sufficiently oppose the Muslim Brotherhood once he came to power. This was called "Tahreer" ("freedom" in Arabic). It was well known that the Brotherhood were made popular by their extensive social programs in Egypt, and Nasser wanted to be ready once he had taken over. At this time, Qutb did not realize Nasser's alternate plans, and would continue to meet with him, sometimes for 12 hours a day, to discuss a post monarchical Egypt. Once Qutb realized that Nasser had taken advantage of the secrecy between the Free Officers and the Brotherhood, he promptly quit. Nasser then tried to persuade Qutb by offering him any position he wanted in Egypt except its Kingship, saying: "We will give you whatever position you want in the government, whether it's the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Arts, etc."

Qutb refused every offer, having understood the reality of Nasser's plans. Upset that Nasser would not enforce a government based on Islamic ideology, Qutb and other Brotherhood members plotted to assassinate him in 1954. The attempt was foiled and Qutb was jailed soon afterwards; the Egyptian government used the incident to justify a crackdown on various members of the Muslim Brotherhood for their vocal opposition towards the Nasser administration. During his first three years in prison, conditions were bad and Qutb was tortured. In later years he was allowed more mobility, including the opportunity to write.

This period saw the composition of his two most important works: a commentary of the Qur'an *Fi Zilal al-Qur'an (In the Shade of the Qur'an)*, and a manifesto of political Islam called *Ma'alim fi-l-Tariq (Milestones)*. These works represent the final form of Qutb's thought, encompassing his radically anti-secular and anti-Western claims based on his interpretations of the Qur'an, Islamic history, and the social and political problems of Egypt. The school of thought he inspired has become known as Qutbism.

Qutb was let out of prison at the end of 1964 at the behest of the Prime Minister of Iraq, Abdul Salam Arif, for only 8 months before being rearrested in August 1965. He was accused of plotting to overthrow the state and subjected to what some consider a show trial. The trial culminated in a death sentence for Qutb and six other members of the Muslim Brotherhood. He was sentenced to death for his part in the conspiracy to assassinate the President and other Egyptian officials and personalities, though he was not the instigator or leader of the actual plot.¹ On 29 August 1966, he was executed by hanging.

Different theories have been advanced as to why Qutb turned away from his secularist tendencies towards Islamic sharia. One common explanation is that the conditions he witnessed in prison from 1954 to 1964, including the torture and murder of the Muslim Brotherhood members, convinced him

Qutb argued that anything non-Islamic was evil and corrupt, and that following sharia as a complete system extending into all aspects of life, would bring every kind of benefit to humanity, from personal and social peace, to the "treasures" of the universe.

Late in his life, Qutb synthesized his personal experiences and intellectual development in the famous *Shades of the Qu'arn*, a religious and political manifesto for what he believed was a true Islamic system. It was also in this text that Qutb condemned Muslim governments, such as Abdul Nasser's regime in Egypt, as secular, with their legitimacy based on human (and thus corrupt), rather than divine authority. This work, more than any other, established Qutb as one of the premier radical Islamists of the 20th century, and perhaps the foremost proponent of Islamist thought in that era.

Qutb, dissatisfied with the condition of contemporary Islam, saw many Muslims were forsaking their faith in the Qur'an, failing to enforce Sharia law. This had led to the virulent spread of a secular culture within Muslim societies, which, with the assistance of the innate and centuries-long Western hatred towards Islam, was a second important cause of the straying of many Muslims from the right path. Qutb asserted that the Islamic world had sunk into a state of *Jahiliyyah* (pre-Islamic ignorance).

Qutb was a staunch antisemite. In 1950, he published a book *Our Struggle against the Jews*, which forms a central part of today's Islamist antisemitism.

Jahiliyyah versus freedom in Islam

This exposure to abuse of power undoubtedly contributed to the ideas in his famous prison-written Islamic manifesto *Ma'alim fi-l-Tariq* (Milestones), where he advocated a political system that is the opposite of dictatorship — the Sharia, "God's rule on earth" Qutb argued:

- Much of the Muslim world approaches the Qur'an as a means to simply acquire culture and information, to participate in academic discussions and enjoyment. This evades the real purpose, for rather, it should be approached as orders to be followed ("what the Almighty Creator had prescribed for him"), as a source of "instruction for obedience and action".
- The way to bring about this freedom was for a revolutionary vanguard to fight *jahiliyyah* with a twofold approach: preaching, and using "physical power and jihad" to "abolish" the organizations and authorities of the *Jahili* system"
- The vanguard movement would grow with preaching and jihad until it formed a truly Islamic community, then spread throughout the Islamic homeland and finally throughout the entire world, attaining leadership of humanity. While those who had been "defeated by the attacks of the treacherous Orientalists!" might define jihad "narrowly" as defensive, Islamically correct jihad (according to Qutb) was in fact offensive, not defensive.

Qutb emphasized that this struggle would be anything but easy. True Islam would transform every aspect of society, eliminating everything non-Muslim! True Muslims could look forward to lives of "poverty, difficulty, frustration, torment and sacrifice."

Legacy

Qutb is considered one of the most influential Muslim thinkers or activists of the modern era, not only for his ideas but also for what many see as his martyr's death. According to authors Daniel Benjamin and Steven Simon, "it was Sayyid Qutb who fused together the core elements of modern radical Islamism. Qutb's written works are still widely available and have been translated into many Western languages. His best known work is *Ma'alim fi-l-Tariq* (*Milestones*), but the majority of Qutb's theory can be found in his Qur'anic commentary *Fi zilal al-Qur'an* (*In the Shade of the Quran*). The influence of his work extends to issues such as Westernization, modernization, and political reform and the theory of inevitable ideological conflict between "Islam and the West" (see Clash of civilizations),

Al-Qaeda and Islamic Jihad

Qutb had influence on Islamic insurgent/terror groups in Egypt and elsewhere. His influence on al-Qaeda was felt through his writing, his followers and especially through his brother, Muhammad Qutb, who moved to Saudi Arabia following his release from prison in Egypt and became a professor of Islamic Studies and edited, published and promoted his brother Sayyid's work.

One of Muhammad Qutb's students and later an ardent follower was Ayman Zawahiri, who went on to become a member of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad¹ and later a mentor of Osama bin Laden and a leading member of al-Qaeda. Zawahiri was first introduced to Qutb by his uncle and maternal family patriarch, Mafouz Azzam, who was very close to Qutb throughout his life. Azzam was Qutb's student, then protégé, then personal lawyer and executor of his estate – one of the last people to see Qutb before his execution. According to Lawrence Wright, who interviewed Azzam, "young Ayman al-Zawahiri heard again and again from his beloved uncle Mahfouz about the purity of Qutb's character and the torment he had endured in prison." Zawahiri paid homage to Qutb in his work *Knights under the Prophet's Banner*.



Osama bin Laden, first leader of al-Qaeda.

Osama bin Laden was also acquainted with Sayyid's brother, Muhammad Qutb. A close college friend of bin Laden's, Mohammed Jamal Khalifa, told Wright, that bin Laden regularly attended weekly public lectures by Muhammad Qutb, at King Abdulaziz University, and that he and bin Laden both "read Sayyid Qutb. He was the one who most affected our generation."

While imprisoned in Yemen, Anwar al-Awlaki became influenced by the works of Qutb. He would read 150–200 pages a day of Qutb's works, describing himself during the course of his reading as "so immersed with the author I would feel Sayyid was with me in my cell speaking to me directly."

Recognition in *The 9/11 Commission Report*

Chapter 2 of *The 9/11 Commission Report* (2004), "The Foundation of the New Terrorism," cites Qutb for influencing Osama Bin Laden's worldview in these terms:

[Qutb] dismissed Western achievements as entirely material, arguing that 'nothing will satisfy its own conscience and justify its existence.'

Three basic themes emerge from Qutb's writings. First, he claimed that the world was beset with barbarism, licentiousness, and unbelief (a condition he called jahiliyya, the religious term for the period of ignorance prior to the revelations given to the Prophet Mohammed). Qutb argued that humans can choose only between Islam and jahiliyya. Second, he warned that more people, including Muslims, were attracted to jahiliyya and its material comforts than to his view of Islam; jahiliyya could therefore triumph over Islam. Third, no middle ground exists in what Qutb conceived as a struggle between God and Satan. All Muslims – as he defined them – therefore must take up arms in this fight. Any Muslim who rejects his ideas is just one more nonbeliever worthy of destruction.

Important

It is important to note that not all Muslims follow Qutb, or his interpretation of the Qu'rn. While in the West we have seen the evil that the "base" (Al-Qaeda) and ISIL have wrought , not all Muslims, or even a majority, are violent or preach violent jihad.

We can see from this the corruption of a faith that began in peace towards Jews and Christians. Next week , we explore where we go from here.

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Sources: From Sayyid Qutb:

In the Shade of the Quarn

Milestones

Online resources

Sayyid Qutb and the Origins of Radical Islam

John Calvert