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INTRODUCTION

Who was Sayyid Qutb?

This is a book about Sayyid Qutb (1906–66), the influential Egyptian ideologue of Islamism. It traces the development of Qutb's worldview from his village childhood up to his execution at the hands of Egypt's 'Abd al-Nasser regime. In so doing, it pays attention to the gamut of influences—cultural, political, social and economic—that shaped his discourse on the role of Islam in the state and society.[1]

Scholars, journalists and other observers generally credit Sayyid Qub with formulating the theoretical bases of Islamism in the post-colonial Sunni Muslim World. The judgment is valid. No other Islamist ideologue, with the possible exception of the South Asian Abu l-A'la Mawdudi (1903–79), exerted a comparable influence on the phenomenon, both in his own day and in the generations that followed. Before Qutb, Islamists such as Hasan al-Banna (1906–49), founder of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, had devoted the greater part of their attention to combating threats to Islam that came from outside the Abode of Islam—European imperialism, Zionism, and the Western cultural invasion. Qutb shifted the emphasis. Although he followed al-Banna's lead in condemning the West's hegemony over Muslim lands, he urged Muslims to confront what he regarded as the corrupt cultural and political foundations of their own countries. Muslims must strive, he said, to replace secular governance with God's judgment as manifested in the Shari'a. He urged Muslims in Egypt and around the world to unite around this goal.

In fact, wrote Qutb, the materialist ethos of the West had so deeply penetrated Muslims in countries like Egypt that they were no longer truly Islamic in character. Rulers had usurped the legislative prerogative that belongs to God and had thereby precipitated a condition of *jahiliyya*—"ignorance" of the divine mandate—that coursed through

the whole society. Nowhere in the world, Qutb intoned, did a genuine Islamic society exist. Yet, although he despaired, Qutb was not without hope. He believed that by the efforts of a "righteous remnant", a vanguard of true believers, the sovereignty of God over the earth could be restored, first among Muslims and then more expansively. Men who gave themselves wholly to the triumph of the creed should comprise the vanguard. It should begin by waging a "struggle by word of mouth, by propagation, by exposition, by refuting the false and baseless with a statement of truth proclaimed by Islam." Once the ground was prepared, the men of the vanguard should then lead others in forcefully striking at the "obstacles" in their path.[2] Only when the "idolatrous tyranny" (*taghut*) was overthrown would people be free to reconnect with God's universal order. As Qutb wrote in his Qur'an commentary, *Fi Zilal al-Qur'an* (*In the Shade of the Qur'an*), "Disbelief is a thick curtain. When it is dropped, nature establishes its links with the creator."[3] Qutb was under no illusions as to the difficulty of the task ahead. The struggle, he said, would be long and difficult. The vanguard would have to deal with Islam's traditional Christian and Jewish enemies, but also the legions of deceivers and hypocrites from within, the *faux* Muslims who fed from the troughs of Western-inspired barbarism. As the forces of the Egyptian state closed in on him, Qutb became convinced that he would not live to see the Islamic revolution and so prepared for martyrdom. In fact, Egypt's Nasser regime executed him and two of his closest companions in 1966. Today, Islamist circles revere him as an exemplary individual who sacrificed his life for the truth of God's sovereignty.

Qutb's quest for a clear alternative to the hegemonic social and political order, in combination with his call to resist the powers-that-be in the pursuit of change, qualifies him as a radical. In contrast to the reformist trend within Islamism, which has sought to implement change gradually through a campaign of hearts and minds, Qutb's writings targeted the state, insisting that the elite either conform to the precepts of Islam or step down. Yet he was late in coming to this position. During the first part of his Islamist career he was a moderate, a dyed-in-the-wool Muslim Brother who looked to politics as the appropriate means for Islamists to attain power. Only in the mid-1950s, largely in response to the Egyptian state's determined suppression of the Muslim Brotherhood, did he switch to radicalism. Consequently, Qutb's body of Islamist work spans the spectrum of Islamist positions, from reformism to revolution.

It should come as no surprise, then, that Islamists of various stripes have been attracted to different aspects of Sayyid Qutb's thought. All have found his basic position, that Muslims have an obligation to build a community based on the divinely mandated principles of compassion and respect for others, compelling. Thus, Abdallah Benkirane of Morocco's neo-conservative party al-Tawhid wa al-Islah (Unity and Reform) remembers how he was "overwhelmed" by reading Qutb's seminal tractate *Ma'alim fi al-Tariq* (*Milestones*): "Thanks to him I began to understand things. He completely changed my life."[4] In the late 1980s and early 1990s 'Ali Belhadj ('Ali Ibn Hajj), the firebrand preacher of Algeria's Islamic Salvation Front (French acronym FIS), adopted Qutb's teachings on the imperative of divine governance in condemning the state's party apparatchiks and "usurping" generals.[5] The Persian translator of Qutb's first Islamist book, *Al-'Adala al-Ijtima'iyya fi al-Islam* (*Social Justice in Islam*), published in 1949, explained his widespread appeal as due to his ability "to offer to the world Islamic issues in the style of today", as against "communism, imperialism, socialism and capitalism."[6] Rashid Ghannouchi of Tunisia's Islamist al-Nahda (Renaissance) Party recalls how after turning to Islamism in the 1960s he availed himself of the writings of its most important thinkers, especially Sayyid Qutb.[7] Shaykh Salamat Hashim (d. 2002), the leader and ideologue of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), testified that Qutb inspired him to plant the seeds of Islamic revolution in the Bangsamoro homeland in the Philippines.[8] Jamal Khalifa, a Saudi, was a student when he first started reading Sayyid Qutb: "In '76, '77 we used to read [Qutb's books] Milestones and In the Shade of the Koran [*sic*]. So Sayyid Qutb was concentrating on the meaning of Islam that it's the way of life. It influenced every Muslim in that period of time."[9] In 1984, the Shi'i Islamic Republic of Iran honoured Qutb's commitment to Islamist revolution by issuing a postage stamp showing him behind bars at the 1966 trial during which he was sentenced to death.[10]

Qutb's popularity among Islamists is such that translators have rendered his most important works from the original Arabic into a great number of languages, including, in addition to Persian, Turkish, Malay, Urdu, English, French and German. Reflecting Islamism's current presence in cyberspace, numerous web pages and blogs reproduce his writings and proffer commentary on them.[11] These blogs are interesting as they offer insight into how young Muslims, from around the world,

interact with the ideas of Sayyid Qutb. Many of Qutb's books are available for purchase through on-line vendors.

It is easy to understand the reasons for Qutb's popularity. More systematically than others before him, he established Islam as a culturally authentic, programmatic ideology at odds with the various political orders dominating the Muslim world. Against the modern-era Western hegemony, he upheld Islam not in terms of privatized religion but as a comprehensive ideological system (*nizam*) covering politics, society and the economy, which finds its form as an Islamic state. His was an ethical vision that connected Muslims to God's truth against the contingency and dross of the material world. It was also one intimately connected to the question of worldly power. According to Qutb, once Qur'anic principles are implemented in their entirety, Muslim societies will find their God-given potential and slough off the defeatism that has plagued them for the past two centuries or more. Strengthened thus, Muslims will defeat their enemies and lead humankind to a new future of prosperity, peace, and deep spiritual satisfaction.

Given Qutb's advocacy of systemic change, his influence has been strongest among Islamist militants who adopt the methods of "direct action" to bring about a theocratic state. By stressing the imperfection of man-made systems of governance, and through his advocacy of an activist approach, Qutb provided Islamist militants the justification for forcefully, even violently confronting the secular bureaucratic-authoritarian regimes of the Muslim world—what Islamists since the early 1980s have called the "Near Enemy", in contrast to the "Far Enemy", the Western foes. So for example, in the 1970s Marwan Hadid and his Syrian Muslim Brother colleagues drew upon the writings of Sayyid Qutb in launching their *jihad* against the 'Alawi–dominated Ba'thist regime in Damascus.[12] In the late 1980s and first half of the 1990s, Qutb's ideas inspired the vociferous and violent cadre of Egypt's Islamic groups (al-Jama'at al-Jihad) in their attacks on personnel and institutions connected to the Husni Mubarak government.[13] These and other Islamist revolutionaries may have taken Qutb's radical thought further in the direction of violent resistance than he would have counselled. Yet whether faithful to his strategic purpose or not, they followed the master in insisting that legitimate sovereignty belonged to God rather than to man. Given the influence that Qutb exerted over these and other Islamist activists, it is understandable that the political and religious establishments in many Muslim-majority countries regard his ideas with suspicion, loathing and fear.

Critical scholarship has been quick to recognize Sayyid Qutb's contributions to the Islamist cause. Already in 1951, three years or so after Qutb had hitched his wagon to Islamism, the American Council of Learned Societies' Near Eastern Translation Program placed his book *Al-'Adala al-Ijtima'iyya fi al-Islam* (*Social Justice in Islam*) near the top of its list of "the most significant modern works" in Arabic that should be translated.[14] Especially in the 1980s and 1990s, studies appeared that examined, in some detail, the contours of his thought and, to a lesser extent, the political and social circumstances that gave it shape. Gilles Kepel's *Le Prophète et Pharaon* (*The Prophet and the Pharaoh*, 1984), and Olivier Carré's *Mystique et politique: lecture révolutionnaire du Coran par Sayyid Qutb, frère musulman radical* (*Mysticism and Politics: A Critical Reading of the Qur'an by Sayyid Qutb, Radical Muslim Brother*, 1984), were two of the earliest of these studies. Composed in the wake of the Jihad Group's assassination of the Egyptian President Anwar Sadat, they carefully unpacked Qutb's key concepts, and in so doing paved the way for the studies that followed. These latter included books and articles by William Shepard, Youssef Choueri, Ibrahim Abu-Rabi, Ahmad Moussalli, Leonard Binder, Shahrough Akhavi, Yvonne Haddad, Muhammad Hafiz Diyab, Hilmi al-Namnan, Muhammad Tawfiq Barakat, Roxanne Euben and Emmanuel Sivan. More recently, Adnan Musallam and Sayed Khateb have produced volumes concerned with the evolution of Qutb's thought.[15] Collectively, these studies have significantly advanced our understanding of Qutb's position within the spectrum of Islamist thinkers and movements.

One of the most reliable sources on the objective aspects of Qutb's life and career comes from the pen of a strong supporter of Islamism, 'Abd al-Fattah al-Khalidi. A Palestinian who teaches the Fundamentals of Religion (*Usul al-Din*) at Jordan's al-Balqa Applied University, al-Khalidi obtained postgraduate degrees at the Imam Muhammad Ibn Sa'ud Islamic University in Riyadh, on the basis of a thesis on Qutb's life and thought; this work was published in 1991 as *Sayyid Qutb: Min al-Milad ila al-Istihhad* (*Sayyid Qutb: From Birth to Martyrdom*).[16] Despite al-Khalidi's strong partisan bias, his biography of Qutb is notable for its detail and pertinent excerpts from Qutb's vast *oeuvre*. Muhammad Qutb, Sayyid's younger brother, regards al-Khalidi's biography as "authoritative".[17] Muhammad Qutb's endorsement is perhaps not surprising given that al-Khalidi consulted him closely as he

researched his topic. Indeed, his thesis gained him the congratulations of Muhammad Qutb, whom the university had engaged as a discussant for the thesis defence. Al-Khalidi says, "Muhammad Qutb's praise for my thesis made me blush."[18]

The appropriation of Sayyid Qutb

If at first Qutb was a relatively obscure figure known principally to Islamists and handfuls of scholars, things changed following the September 11, 2001 attacks on New York City and Washington. Those attacks put Qutb on the map because of the supposed sway his ideas had over the hijackers. In the aftermath of the 9/11 atrocity, commentators scrambled to piece together Al Qaeda's ideological genealogy. Leading the way in the search for origins were investigative journalists—the chroniclers of contemporary history. Often supported by major media organizations, they roamed the earth interviewing personalities connected to the story. Perhaps not surprisingly, Middle East and Islamic Studies scholars were a little to the rear. As Thomas Hegghammer explains, many of these scholars "had long shunned the study of Islamic militancy for fear of promoting Islamophobia and of being associated with a pro-Israeli political agenda."[19] Quite soon, out of the confluence of journalistic and academic efforts emerged a bevy of studies that highlighted the contributions of four key players in the unfolding of the Al Qaeda saga: Usama bin Laden, his "lieutenant" Ayman al-Zawahiri, 'Abdullah 'Azzam, who in the 1980s mobilized Muslim volunteers against the Soviet Red Army in Afghanistan, and Sayyid Qutb. Sometimes the *silsila* ("chain") extends to include Hasan al-Banna and even mediaeval figures such as the Hanbali jurist Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328). Generally, in these studies, Qutb stands at the fore in the genealogical trail. A consensus has emerged that the "road to 9/11" traces back to him.[20] Some go so far as to conflate Qutb's identity and moral purpose directly with bin Laden and the Al Qaeda network. The popular media, especially, often portray Qutb sensationally as a "terrorist", an "Islamo-Fascist", or an advocate of murder.

Of course, not only journalists and critical scholars note Qutb's pivotal role in the formation of Al Qaeda ideology. The ideologues of Al Qaeda also explicitly recognize him as an important progenitor of the global *jihadi* cause. In his book *Fursan Taht Rayah al-Nabi* (*Knights under the Prophet's Banner*), composed in Afghanistan in the immedi-

ate wake of the 9/11 attacks, Ayman al-Zawahiri was concise in spelling out Qutb's importance: "Qutb's message was and still is to believe in the oneness of God and the supremacy of the divine path. The message fanned the fire of Islamic revolution against the enemies of Islam at home and abroad. The chapters of the revolution are renewing one day after another."[21]

Another Islamist who finds affinity between Qutb's ideas and those of bin Laden is the above-mentioned Salah 'Abd al-Fattah al-Khalidi, Qutb's Arabic biographer. In the introduction to his 2003 update of his anthology of Qutb's writings relating to the United States, al-Khalidi portrays Qutb as a prognosticator of America's current "war on Islam", including, most notably, the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. According to al-Khalidi, long before bin Laden was a twinkle in the eye of Islamists, Qutb had predicted that America would bait Islam into entering in a "war of civilizations", during which it would attempt to stifle the Islamic resurgence and exploit for its benefit the petroleum resources of the Arabian Peninsula. On the scantiest evidence, al-Khalidi supposes that Qutb would have aligned with bin Laden and welcomed the 9/11 attacks on America.[22]

One cannot deny Qutb's contribution to the contemporary tide of global *jihad*. His practice of sharply distinguishing between those who uphold a true and authentic understanding of Islam and iniquitous "others", no less than his view of *jihad* as the obligatory means to eliminate obedience to anyone but God, anticipate aspects of the Al Qaeda discourse. Yet, if the Al Qaeda threat has made Qutb a household name, it has also monopolized and distorted our understanding of his real contribution to contemporary Islamism. In the search for Al Qaeda's origins, even well intentioned observers tend to focus on points of similarity between Qutb's thought and that of Al Qaeda at the expense of significant anomalies between the two. Some have even suggested that the global *jihad* has remote origins in Qutb's uncomfortable experience at a church social in the conservative town of Greeley, Colorado in the late 1940s.[23] Read backwards from the event of 9/11, these accounts enfold Qutb in the Al Qaeda mantle in an attempt to make the variegated history of the Islamic movement into a cohesive narrative. If some students of the *jihad* are careful to situate Qutb correctly in relation to Al Qaeda, still they often consign him to the position of opening act. Rarely do observers of the scene address Qutb's singularity.

Yet in resorting to short cuts, we pass over a history that is as nuanced as any other. We run the danger of succumbing to a "neo-Orientalist" trope that subordinates particulars to an essential and enduring identity, and ignores complexity in favor of simplicity. Just as it makes no sense to confuse the outlook of Hamas, an organization focused on redeeming land lost to Israel, with the pan-Islamism of Al Qaeda, so too is it unwise to assume a direct link between Sayyid Qutb and Usama bin Laden. Researchers need to study each on its own terms with reference to its distinctive environment and concerns.

This book aims to rescue Qutb from obfuscation by examining the development of his thought on its own terms and within the multiple contexts of his time. It covers much the same terrain as previous studies of Qutb but pays more attention than these to biography, social and political structures, political events and the role of culture in articulating patterns of protest and dissent. In treating these areas of concern, it attempts to understand the evolution and meaning of Qutb's ideology in the myriad details of his life. It is a study of an individual and of his times; of objective circumstance and subjective experience, and of how each influenced the other.

At the heart of the narrative is the struggle between what the Egyptian historian Tariq al-Bishri termed *al-wafid* and *al-mawruth*, that is, the imported Western values favoured by Egypt's political elite, and elements that are indigenous to Egyptian-Islamic culture.[24] The conflict engaged the literate and politically aware sectors of Egyptian society and Qutb was a key player in the drama. In following Qutb's career, this study looks at his motives for drawing upon the rich resources of the Islamic heritage and how he formulated and repackaged these in order to fashion an antagonistic discourse in relation to the political establishment. As someone who straddled the dichotomous worlds of tradition and modernity, Qutb articulated an understanding of Islam that addressed the concerns of contemporary Muslims. Adopting language, doctrines and symbols resonating primordial truths, he eventually presented Islam as a revolutionary vision geared towards restoring God's justice on earth.

'Passionate politics'

We cannot properly understand Sayyid Qutb unless we plumb the depths of his religious imagination and take seriously his ethical and moral concerns. All too often in studies of Islamism, the Islamist sub-

jects are caricatures, treated casually as responding variously to anomie or to an ill defined quest for "cultural authenticity". As Roxanne Euben notes, scholars often understand Islamism with reference to its efficacy as a channel for material discontent, or else in terms of rational choice theory, which holds that most, if not all, forms of human activity are goal-oriented and organized around sets of hierarchically ordered preferences.There is a great deal of merit in these functionalist approaches and the present study draws upon some of them for explanatory effect. Yet, Euben continues, scholarly treatments of the phenomenon rarely acknowledge the religious motivations that drive many, if not most Islamists.[25]

It is true that some Islamists consciously manipulate religion for political ends and others, consumed with envy, are inspired to humiliate the strong. It is also true that Islamists, especially those in the ultra-radical Al Qaeda mould, are nihilists or anarchists in the style made famous by Dostoevsky. For nihilists, ends typically justify means, with conventional morality giving way to merciless purpose.[26]

Not for Qutb. For him, as for other Islamists, God is very real and very dear. In his view, humans must heed the ethical and moral demands God has placed upon them. For in submitting to God's will, people realize their potential and fulfil their destiny. Qutb wrote, "My study of the Qur'an has led me to the firm conviction that humanity will see no tranquility or accord, nor can peace, progress or material and spiritual advances be made, without total recourse to God."[27]

Qutb believed the divine message to the core of his being. Throughout his life, he was possessed of a mystical temper. It is true that he never joined the *dhikr* circles of the Sufi brotherhoods, something that Hasan al-Banna, a man of similar deep faith, was prone to do. Nevertheless, he displayed a Sufi–like disposition. In his Qur'an commentary, he repeatedly makes the point that the Qur'an speaks to the heart and the emotion rather than to the intellect. Occasionally, he says, God will reward the believer with great insight, as when, on a day of great inner temptation, he "lived for an instant in the company of the Prophet" in a "voyage of ecstasy".[28] Qutb wrote, "Beyond the visible world lies an unseen dimension which encompasses this life and the Hereafter. Man's origins extend back into the dim and distant past, and death is not the end of our perennial journey but a passing phase of a long journey that stretches to infinity."[29] Sayyid Qutb revered the Prophet Muhammad, and in the minutiae of his life he discerned the Godly template of

human existence. His primary contribution to Islamic thought lay in his ability to harness this deeply felt spirituality for purposes of worldly transformation. Acutely attuned to the needs, fears and passions of the people, he worked to restore a sense of religious meaning to an immoral and disenchanted colonial world. Olivier Carré is on the mark when he says that Qutb's Islamism was born of a confluence of "mysticism and politics".[30]

Not only do we need to enter into Qutb's world of mysticism, we must also tap his emotional state, especially his simmering discontent, which often spilled over into anger. Some of his irritation was undoubtedly a product of his personality—namely, his sense of intellectual superiority and inability to suffer fools gladly. On the other hand, objective factors also spurred his annoyance, specifically, the economic injustice, political corruption, cultural degradation and domination by foreigners that were characteristic of his time and place. As we shall see, the Qur'an's deep message of social equilibrium, justice and fair dealings in human relationships organized and energized Qutb's emotions, transforming them into a plan of action. In paying heed to the affecting aspect of Qutb's discourse, we recognize the contributions of social historians and anthropologists who have emphasized the importance of emotional perception as a form of social practice with effects in the world.[31]

All of this requires that we adopt an attitude of empathy toward Sayyid Qutb—empathy, not necessarily sympathy. In opening up to Qutb's universe of thought and emotion, by affording him a degree of compassion, we become privy to the textures, feelings and imaginings that contributed to the production of his Islamism. To be sure, there is much in Qutb's thought that many, if not most, people will find disagreeable. Against a liberal view that encourages openness, mutuality and communication across group boundary lines, Qutb spoke of cultures as monolithic and static—a hard "us" vs. "them" vision of the world that encouraged the worst kind of stereotyping. Yet if the goal is to understand him, an empathetic attitude allows the researcher to penetrate the discursive wall; it encourages him or her to discern textual nuance and ambiguity and to touch on the intimate aspects of the subject's life, such as family relationships, reading habits and styles of dress, all of which can reveal much about an ideology. It enables us to enter into dialogue with the subject, to hear his voice, rather than regard his thought simply, and uncritically, as a modern pathology.

Contours of a life

Qutb's career lends itself easily to the type of contextualization here suggested. His life unfolded against the backdrop of one of the most colourful and eventful periods in modern Egyptian history, years that witnessed the full flush of the British tutelary regime, the advent of Egyptian nationalism, and the political hegemony of 'Abd al-Nasser and the Free Officers. Over the course of his adult life, Qutb rubbed shoulders with influential and interesting figures, men like Taha Husayn, Naguib Mahfouz, and Gamal 'Abd al-Nasser himself. He was a brooding, introspective man who suffered inwardly from the type of melancholia common to intellectuals living in troubled times. He fancied himself a literary type. Constantly writing, he drove himself relentlessly, taxing his feeble body to the limit. He had few close friends—his younger brother Muhammad was his only true confidant. Yet, within literate Egyptian society, many knew him. His name popped up frequently in Cairo's lively press.

Qutb did not conceive his Islamism in full form. Rather, it evolved from interests that initially had very little to do with religion. In his formative years, he was representative of the cohort of nationalist intelligentsia that emerged in Egypt in the wake of the 1919 popular uprising against the British occupation. Like his mentor, the literary figure 'Abbas Mahmud al-'Aqqad, he was originally a man of the Wafd, the mass-based nationalist party that dominated the politics of Egypt until the Free Officers' 1952 coup d'état. However, in the mid- and late 1930s Qutb became increasingly critical of the political regime, chiefly in response to its inability to resolve Egypt's problematic relationship with Britain, diminish the growing gap between rich and poor Egyptians, and effectively support the Arabs of neighbouring Palestine against the influx of Zionist settlers. In voicing his displeasure, he was typical of a generation of Egyptians who were disappointed at the failure of the nationalist movement to bear fruit. In common with other writers of the period, he directed and subsumed the chronic discontent into a coherent theory of the Egyptian nation's unique identity and relationship with other Eastern lands.

All the while, he wrote literary criticism and imaginative works. Compared with the literary luminaries of the day, his creative writing was erratic and uncertain. But he had a passion for poetry, and through it he tapped into a secondary world that existed apart from the travails

of mundane society. Throughout Qutb's career, the aesthetic realm propelled him, providing teasing glimpses of a truth that lurked beyond the dross of everyday existence. His delight in art paid dividends. He was the first critic to put forward the thesis that the Qur'an's stylistic genius resided in its method of artistic representation.

Two competing tendencies, both fiercely critical of the traditional culture and each drawn from a different source, beset Egypt during Qutb's formative years. On the one hand was the Western cultural and material achievement, on the other, the pure and uncorrupted values of the nation, rooted in the traditions of the people and expressed perfectly in terms of Islam. Thus, there emerged in the 1930s and 1940s the opposition between the Westernizers and the Islamists. The struggle was similar to other cultural-political conflicts that took place in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, for example, that between Slavophiles and Westernizers in Czarist Russia. Whereas the Islamists believed that the revival of purified religious virtues could redeem Egypt and serve as an example to the world, the Westernizers desired to transform Egypt in the image of Europe. The contest was not absolute: Islamists conceded freely that they had much to learn from the West, especially in the realms of technological and organizational expertise; and the Westernizers were interested in maintaining the core features of Egypt's distinctive personality in relation to the Western and other nations of the world. Within each camp, also, there were numerous sub-positions and tendencies, either traditional or radical. Sayyid Qutb moved easily among these circles and debated the great issues of the day with their representatives. He held fast to his point of view, but at this stage he believed in open dialogue.

Increasingly, however, Qutb turned to the language and symbols of Islamism to voice his discontent. This change, which took place in the late 1940s, marks the second stage in the development of his thought. The transition from a scheme of freedom and fulfilment conceived in nationalist terms to one centred on Islam was easy for him; his definition of Islam as a self-contained system of ideas and practice was grafted easily onto his earlier concerns with organic romantic nationalism. In emphasizing the unique requirements of an Islamic order, he freed the nationalist discourse from its moorings in Western political concepts, which he now regarded as synonymous with European colonial domination. Additionally, his Islamism grew out of and complemented his spiritual disposition. As a "spiritually enlightened"

person, Qutb believed that he saw through "the Grand Illusion" to the heart of God's truth.[32]

Qutb knew the Qur'an well, having memorized it in his youth. He had studied the Arab-Islamic heritage at Dar al-'Ulum (Teachers' Training College) and was familiar with the classics of mediaeval Islamic learning. But he had no training at a *madrasa* or other formal institution of Islamic learning. In this respect he was typical of most other Islamist thinkers, including al-Banna and those who came after him, for example, 'Abbassi Madani (b. 1931), one of the former leaders of Algeria's Front Islamique du Salut (FIS), who studied for a PhD in Britain before returning to Algiers to teach the sociology of education. Qutb's lack of Islamic scholarly credentials earned him the censure of many *'ulama* (religious scholars) who believed that his interpretations of the Qur'an broke with tradition.

Recourse to Egypt's Islamic identity allowed Qutb effectively to distinguish Islamic civilization from the colonizing "other", thus allowing Muslims a sense of being different from it. At the same time, Islam elicited in him a burgeoning religiosity rooted in sentiments of cultural pride and authenticity. Whereas the peoples of the West were de-Christianized and materialistic, the Muslims of Egypt and the Islamic East were spiritual and holistically connected to the divine order. A sojourn of almost two years in the United States on behalf of the Egyptian Ministry of Education hardened his negative views of Western civilization. However, his American study mission was not the turning point in his career that some have supposed. It reinforced, rather than initiated, his Islamist predilections.

From the mid-1930s to the early 1950s, Egypt was a country awash in ideologically articulated discontent. By then, traditional forms of protest and rebellion, organized around Sufi *turuq* (orders) and millenarian expectation, had given way to an eclectic variety of social movements, voluntary associations, freelance guerrilla groups and secret societies, which reflected the interests of new social classes caught up in radically altered political, economic and cultural circumstances. Several displayed a distinct corporatist bent in their calls for the integration of all social classes into an organically whole community. Chief among these was the Muslim Brotherhood (Jama'at al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun), the Arab world's first true Islamist organization. Amid a continuum of political assassinations, workers' strikes and street brawls, Qutb began openly to call for the creation in Egypt of an

Islamic order (*al-nizam al-Islami*). In spirit, he was a liberator who moved from the contemplation of the idea to dynamic activism.

At first, Qutb was an independent Islamist thinker without institutional affiliation. Only in 1953, following the Free Officers' *coup d'état*, did he join the Muslim Brotherhood; in the confused period following the fall of the Old Regime, he understood the necessity of channelling all energies into the one organization capable of realizing the creation of an Islamic state. Recognizing Qutb's talents, the Brotherhood's leadership chose him to head its Propagation of the Call Department (*Qism Nashr al-Da'wa*). In common with other Muslim Brothers, Qutb hoped, and perhaps expected, that the military men would join the historic cause of Islam's revival. When it became clear that the Free Officers did not intend to fully implement the Shari'a, relations between them and the Muslim Brothers soured. In 1954, as tensions between the two mounted, 'Abd al-Nasser proscribed the Muslim Brotherhood and imprisoned hundreds of its members, including Sayyid Qutb. Qutb's imprisonment, which lasted about a decade, was by any standards a harrowing experience. If we seek a true turning point in his life, the moment when his ideology crystallized, it was during the period of his incarceration when he suffered terrible deprivation and ill-treatment.

Qutb spent his time in prison reflecting on the events that had transpired. Prison officials granted him the opportunity to write and he spent much of his time elaborating his Islamist doctrine in light of the changed circumstances. In a spate of forcefully written "prison works", he reacted to the Free Officers' "betrayal" of the Islamist cause by equating their rule, and the global secular culture that they emulated, with the disbelief of the pre-Islamic era: just as in the pre-Islamic era, *jahiliyya* enveloped the contemporary world. In Qutb's view, however much 'Abd al-Nasser and other government heads might claim to represent their populations, their refusal to fashion a polity based solely on Qur'anic principles qualified them as usurpers of God's sovereignty. In privileging the concept of the supra-denominational nation-state, Nasserism and Arab nationalism generally were mere avatars of European discourses that put the "people" ahead of God.

For Qutb, this period was one of intense reflection during which he hardened the lines between *Hizb Allah* ("the party of God") and *Hizb al-Shaytan* ("the party of Satan"). It represents the third and most radical phase of his intellectual career. No longer did he talk about

competing nations, regions or civilizations. He now preached a total and uncompromising struggle between Islam and its conceptual opposite, which must end in total victory for Islam. If there is a connection between Qutb's mature Islamism and the Al Qaeda ideology, it is here, in this existential understanding of global combat.

Released from prison in 1964, ostensibly for reasons of ill health, Qutb was shortly afterwards implicated in events—an alleged conspiracy against the government—that lead to his execution in 1966. However, his ideas lived on to inspire a younger generation of Islamist radicals. During the 1980s and 1990s, Qutb's ideological heirs attempted to topple the state regimes in Egypt, Algeria, Syria and elsewhere. In most cases the thinking of these militants, which they exposed both in writings and actions, was extreme and strayed wildly from the stated ideas of their mentor. For one thing, Qutb never would have sanctioned the killing of civilians, which several of the militant groups committed. For another, the militants went further than Qutb in casting aspersions on the fidelity of rulers and, in some cases, of general Muslim populations to Islam. Although Qutb condemned the general culture of the age as "ignorant", he avoided branding individuals *kuffar* ("unbelievers"), something that many of the radicals of the 1980s and 1990s were willing to do without compunction.

However, the efforts of these organizations to instigate revolution were unsuccessful. These failures eventually prompted one of their members, Ayman al-Zawahiri, to conceive the idea of striking the "puppet master" that sustained the "wayward" Arab regimes: none other than the United States. Such an attack, he figured, would inspire Muslims around the world and put the *jihad* on a new footing. Al-Zawahiri's bloody war against the "Far Enemy" took radical Islamism to a place that Qutb had never imagined.

Nation, revolution, and Islamism

As will become clear, Qutb's Islamism, in both its mainstream and radical incarnations, is modern and revolutionary in ways that take it well beyond the framework of a backward-looking utopia. It supplements the symbolic repertoire and rhetorical devices that were the common patrimony of pre-modern Islamic societies with styles of conceptualization appropriate for the generation of political action in a radically transformed social environment. Consequently, Qutb's Islam-

ist ideas have as much in common with processes of systems-oriented "imagining" and "planning", characteristic of twentieth century revolutionary nationalist ventures, as with the restorative visions of premodern Muslim activists such as the Fulani Usman dan Fodio (d. 1817) or Muhammad Ahmad (d. 1885), the Sudanese Mahdi—two of the better known nineteenth century Islamic revivalists. Beneath the Qur'anic veneer of Qutb's Islamist writings resides a structural resonance with modern-era ideological currents. That is to say, Qutb imbibed and repackaged in Islamic form the Jacobin characteristics of the European revolutionary tradition.

This is nowhere more evident than in Qutb's emphasis on the relationship between ideas and practical life. In a manner reminiscent of the Young Hegelians, Qutb sought to overcome the inhumanity of the world order by merging the "Islamic conception" (*tasawwur*) into the synthesizing practice of life. In common with the ideologues of the European Left, he eschewed the validity and worth of idealist and rationalist philosophies—the inert, exclusively cerebral contemplation of ideas—in favour of the active reshaping of society. Furthermore, he believed that a new moral and material world could only come into existence through the efforts of an elite cadre of revolutionaries. In espousing this idea, he resembled the nineteenth century Russian revolutionary Chernyshevsky and, later, Lenin. Like the professional revolutionaries of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, he was prepared to forego all enfeebling compromises in pursuance of the revolutionary idea, in his case even to the point of martyrdom.

Qutb absorbed the revolutionary discourse through osmosis. By his day, Western theories of collective assertion and national transformation were spreading through the Afro-Asian and Latin American worlds in a kind of global chain reaction against the "new imperialism"[33] of the predatory Western powers. Theories of this kind had taken hold in Old Regime Egypt. Revolution had become part of the global landscape, offering colonized and post-colonial African, Asian, and Latin American peoples new visions of their future and of community belonging.

The first two decades of the twentieth century were pivotal in this regard. In 1905, the revolutionary impulse in the Romanov realm crossed the Caucasus into Iran where it inspired an alliance of *'ulama* and reformist intelligentsia in a common effort to mobilize the popular classes against the Qajar Shah. In Mexico, a coalition of peasants and

constitutionalists arose in 1910 to undermine the entrenched powers of the *latifundistas*. In 1911, Sun Yat-Sen and the Chinese "self-strengtheners" moved to overthrow the divine authority of the Manchu Son of Heaven. In the Middle East, the most significant instance of nationalist revolutionary endeavour was that undertaken by Mustafa Kemal, after 1935 known as Atatürk, whose decisive actions and daring vision succeeded by 1923 in establishing an independent Turkish nation-state. Later, in the following decade, the Indonesian Tan Malaka (d. 1949), the Indian Manabendra Nath Roy (d. 1954), Vietnam's Ho Chi Minh (d. 1969) and the Tartar Mir Said Sultangaliev (d. 1940) all adapted the powerful Bolshevik model, at least in theory, to the regional and cultural specificities of their respective countries.

Certainly, there is an overlap between Qutb's Islamist project and the revolutionary nationalist tradition. Given Qutb's involvement in Egyptian nationalism during the first part of his life, one would expect as much. As an Islamist, he discerned in the Qur'an a paradigm of action and belief, relevant to all times and places, which mirrored the nationalists' opposition to the existing colonial order. Further, he infused his Islamism with nostalgia for an earlier age of social integration and moral absolutes, in this way maintaining the nationalist endeavour to awaken community members to moral and political regeneration.

But there is also a fundamental difference between Qutb's nationalism and his mature Islamist position. Whereas, in common with nationalists everywhere, he had originally conceived the community in terms that separated law and citizenship from religion, later he was forthright in affirming the metaphysical over all aspects of worldly existence. As an Islamist, Qutb did not believe that the Islamic community (*umma*) was limited by territory, nor that it was sovereign. Rather, following the Classical Islamic jurists, he defined the "homeland" of Muslims as a "theological space"—one that was given over to the practice of Islamic life in the world. It embraced all Muslims everywhere, and should eventually include all of humanity. Instead of taking cues from the sovereign will of the people and its political representatives, Muslims were beholden to the Shari'a, the assemblage of laws, regulations and advice that guides them in their affairs, and which exists prior to and independently of them. In Qutb's mature view, all the ideologies of the West, whether they championed ethno-linguistic autonomy or, as in the case of Marxism, secular trans-na-

tionalism, were "ignorant" and misguided in their dismissal of divine truths. Qutb's Islamism may have emerged from the matrix of Egyptian nationalism, but following a period of transition, it transcended the horizons of the nation-state to conceive Muslims as self-governing agents beholden to God's will. Seen in this light, Qutb, the Islamist, was much more than a cultural or a religious nationalist. He was at the forefront in conceiving a new moral framework for politics, one that in the present moment continues to inspire Muslim insurgents of various kinds.[34]

Even so, we must keep in mind the point already made—that Qutb shaped his Islamism in relation to contemporary realities. Thus, if Qutb conceived his prison writings as constituting a radical rupture, he deployed that claim, by default, within an existing symbolic field occupied by the nation-state. For when Qutb castigated the world order in terms suggesting rebellion against God's divine plan, he in effect defined his hoped-for new global order in relation to what had gone before. In this sense, the form of the Egyptian nation-state structured and limited Qutb's Islamist discourse, even as Qutb invented—the better to destroy—an image of the state wholly alien to the ideals he propagated.

Source material and chapter contents

Researchers are often surprised at the amount of material that exists for their projects. This was certainly my reaction as I waded into the ocean of Qutb's written work. For much of his life, Qutb was a part-time journalist, someone who could knock off a reasonably polished review piece in an afternoon. His articles, poems and essays, scattered in numerous journals, number many dozens. In addition to articles, he wrote books, including his multi–volume Qur'an commentary, *Fi Zilal al-Qur'an* (*In the Shade of the Qur'an*). In writing this book, I have drawn on as many of Qutb's writings as possible, focusing on those that are representative of his thought during the various stages of his career. English translations of several of Qutb's better-known works exist, and I have availed myself of many of these, taking care, where appropriate, to reference the Arabic originals. Adil Salahi's and A.A. Shamis's stylish English translation of Qutb's Qur'an commentary has been especially useful to me.

I have also drawn on articles and books by Sayyid Qutb's contemporaries, people like the Muslim activist Zaynab al-Ghazali, Qutb's

sister Hamida, and fellow Islamists like 'Ali 'Ashmawi, in addition to others who knew Qutb personally, sometimes shared his experiences, and had opinions about him. These materials have proven invaluable in fleshing out the details of Qutb's life and in illuminating aspects of his personality. Throughout I have used the Qur'an translation of Taqi-ud-Din Hilali and Muhammad Muhsin Khan (*The Noble Qur'an*, Riyadh: Darussalam, 1996), except in cases where Qur'anic quotes appear within excerpts from translations of Qutb's works.

The United States—a country about which Qutb had generally negative feelings—is home to a particularly interesting source of information relating to Qutb's career. In the summer of 1999 my friend and colleague Joel Gordon and I travelled by car across the hot prairie of Nebraska to Greeley, Colorado where Qutb had studied at the Colorado College of Education (the present University of Northern Colorado) in 1949–50. Aided by the university's librarian and Registrar, we unearthed the small cache of documents that has since become famous, at least among people interested in Islamist history. In addition to Qutb's college transcript, we found photos of him as a student there and an essay that he had written, in English, for the college's literary magazine. I have made use of these materials in reconstructing Qutb's American sojourn.

Finally, in order to gauge the social, cultural, economic and political forces that shaped Qutb's discourse, I have tapped both the vast corpus of scholarship pertaining to Egypt in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and select documents housed at the National Library and Archives of Egypt (Dar al-Kutub), the British Foreign Office and the US State Department. In drawing on all of these materials, I have tried to keep the focus on Qutb the person. To be sure, I discuss his ideas, but always in relation to the unfolding of his life.

The chapters that follow trace Qutb's journey to radical Islamism through the shoals and eddies of early and mid-twentieth-century Egyptian politics and culture. Chapter 1 treats Qutb's rural upbringing and his awakening to a wider world beyond the village. Here we examine the dialectic of the British-dominated Egyptian nation-state and the traditional peasant culture, which resulted in the intrusion of modernity into a world of divine order and the appearance at the local level of new forces of ideological cohesion.

Chapter 2 deals with Qutb's emergence as a literary figure and examines his early forays into the cultural politics of the 1930s. It cov-

ers his education at Cairo's Teachers' Training College (Dar al-'Ulum), his relationship with a network of Romantic poets, among them al-'Aqqad, and his growing disenchantment with the political regime and the Westernizing culture that sustained it. The chapter demonstrates that Qutb was typical of the cohort of nationalist intellectuals that emerged on the scene following the 1919 popular uprising against the British occupation.

Chapter 3 focuses on Qutb's activities over the 1940s. During this period Qutb continued his literary endeavours, including important studies of the Qur'an's literary effect, and also became a stronger advocate than before of Egyptian nationalism. The chapter goes on to discuss the reasons for Qutb's turn to Islamism in 1947–48 and analyzes his first true Islamist writing, *Social Justice in Islam*.

Chapter 4 follows Qutb as he made his way across the United States to study American curricula on behalf of the Egyptian Ministry of Education. Qutb recorded his impressions of America in letters and articles that were published in Egyptian periodicals, and the chapter draws on these to show how Qutb distinguished Islamic values from what he perceived as American materialism and atheism. The chapter makes the point that Qutb's American experience reinforced, rather than provoked, the development of his Islamist sentiment.

Chapter 5 traces the further development of Qutb's Islamist thought within the context of the political developments of the early 1950s, both within and beyond Egypt, including anti–colonial struggles for independence throughout Africa and Asia. It examines Qutb's early involvement with the Muslim Brotherhood and his troubled relationship with the Egyptian Free Officers. The chapter concludes with Qutb's arrest and imprisonment following the Free Officers' round-up of the Brothers in 1954.

Chapter 6 deals with Qutb's experience in prison and the effect it had on the development of his Islamism. Focusing on Qutb's "prison works", the chapter explains how Qutb sharpened the edges of his thought, emphasizing the chasm that existed, in his mind, between Islam and its opposite. It explores his conception of the much-contested Islamic concept of *jihad*, and examines his call for a vanguard of "true Muslims" to restore God's sovereignty on earth.

Chapter 7 covers the last years of Qutb's life, during which some of his followers established a clandestine organization aimed at reestablishing the Islamist movement in Egypt. The chapter explains how

Qutb became part of this secret organization following his release from prison, and goes on to recount his role in an alleged anti-regime conspiracy. The chapter concludes with Qutb's execution and his elevation to the status of martyr.

The book concludes with a short examination of how subsequent Egyptian Islamists took up Qutb's ideas, often giving them far more radical interpretations than Qutb would have allowed.