

**Defending the Enemy:
Reinterpreting the Prison Writings of
of Sayyid Qutb**

I

Introduction

In his book Holy War, Inc., Peter Bergen, CNN's "terrorism analyst," profiles the man behind modern Islamic terrorism. Sayyid Qutb, he writes, is "the leading ideologue of the *jihadi*st movement... One cannot underestimate the influence of Qutb on the *jihadi*st groups in Egypt and, by extension, on bin Laden."¹ Qutb, he says, inspired Islamic militants in Egypt, who spread their influence to the rest of the Middle East and eventually inspired al-Qaeda. Berman adheres to the established conclusions; every book and article I read on this subject affirms that Qutb's writings are the foundation of militant Islam. In the West, in the media and in scholarship, we have come to know Sayyid Qutb as the enemy, as the father of modern terrorism.

FROM MUSHA TO GREELEY

Sayyid Qutb was born in 1906 in the village of Musha in Upper Egypt. He attended a new state school in Musha instead of the *kuttab*, the traditional Islamic elementary school. The public school did not teach memorization of the Qur'an, but, to prove that his state education was

¹ Peter L. Bergen, Holy War, Inc. (New York: The Free P, 2001) 199.

just as good as the traditional village *kuttab*, he memorized the Qur'an on his own and encouraged his friends to do the same by organizing recitation competitions.² By age ten, he had memorized the entire Qur'an.³ Later, in prison, he would recall the years he spent memorizing the Qur'an as the happiest years of his life.

While Qutb was a child, his father held political meetings in their home. Listening to the adults' discussions, Qutb became politically aware while still very young and sympathized with the nationalist movement against the British colonial presence in Egypt. He attended college in Cairo and then worked as a teacher, ministry official, and literary critic. His work from that period reflects the liberal and secular currents of elite literary culture in Egypt. Like most intellectuals, he joined the Wafd party and supported its articulation of national liberation politics. Although he remained a faithful Muslim, he lost his youthful devotion. His passion was for literature.

Gradually, his attention shifted to political topics. By 1945, he had stopped writing literary criticism all together and focused his writing on political and social problems. During this time, politics in Egypt became increasingly chaotic and corrupt as the British manipulated an ongoing power struggle between the Wafd and the palace in order to support its own interests. In 1942, British authorities had "forced a reluctant King Faruq to install a Wafdist ministry"⁴ and by accepting the help of the British, the Wafd permanently soiled its image. The incident humiliated the King and caused a permanent rift between the palace and the Wafd -- neither would ever regain the respect of the Egyptian people. Nasser later wrote that he and the other young army officers "felt humiliated by the British action and as a result became determined to

² John Calvert and William Sheppard, Introduction. *Child from the village*, by Qutb, Sayyid. i.

³ Gilles Kepel, *Muslim Extremism in Egypt* (Los Angeles: U of California P, 1984) 38.

⁴ Israel Gershoni and James P. Jankowski. *Redefining the Egyptian Nation, 1930-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995) 195.

sacrifice themselves to restore the nation's dignity.”⁵ Though Qutb had supported the Wafd as a young man, he watched in frustration as the party became more and more corrupt and compromised its original goals.

Like most Egyptians, Qutb saw a dire need for reform in Egyptian politics. The wealthiest class controlled the government and the “middle class in 1945-1952 resented the concentration of power in the hands of the king and a few large landowners who dominated Egyptian life”⁶ and who controlled the political parties, parliament, and foreign policy decisions. Like most intellectuals and members of the middle class at the time, Qutb abandoned all political parties out of frustration with the corruption of the entire system.⁷ Western systems of government would always end in corruption and failure, Qutb believed. Western interference in Egyptian politics led to an unhealthy balance of power. Only by escaping the fetters of the West could Egypt ever solve its problems -- Islam and the dignified cultural history of Egypt could provide all the solutions, he believed. Qutb published condemnations of Western influences: he condemned the king and parliament for cooperating with British, condemned the king's policies that pushed towards Westernization, and criticized the Western-influenced education system. Reportedly, Qutb's criticisms reached King Faruq and angered the monarch. “The king wanted to imprison him,” and only Qutb's connections prevented his incarceration. “Instead he went into a kind of *de facto* exile.”⁸ The Ministry of Education sent Qutb to the United States to study

⁵ Adnan A. Musallam, From Secularism to Jihad (Westport: Praeger, 2005) 14.

⁶ Musallam 14.

⁷ Kepel 40.

⁸ Kepel 40.

the education system there in hopes that this trip would silence his criticisms and teach him to appreciate the Western way of life.⁹

Qutb spent two years in the United States. He arrived in New York and then traveled all over the country, spending most of his time at universities in Washington D.C., Greeley Colorado, and Palo Alto, California. He wrote of his experiences in letters to friends and in articles for Cairo periodicals. He wrote that New York was loud and chaotic, its residents hard-nosed, panicked, and materialistic as they prepared for the holidays without joy. He wrote that he pitied the pigeons that lived lives as joyless and gray as New Yorkers'.¹⁰ He soon left New York for Washington D.C. where he enrolled in classes at the Wilson Teacher's College. There, he improved his English, but grew tired of conversations. He wrote to a friend, "How much do I need someone to talk to about topics other than money, movie stars, and car models."¹¹

After leaving Washington D.C., he traveled to Greeley, Colorado to pursue his master's degree at the Colorado State College of Education. When Greeley's founders settled in Colorado in 1870, they planned a utopian community. In 1949, the residents of Greeley still saw their town as a haven of morality and conservative values. Greeley's inhabitants banned alcohol, attended churches, and fostered community spirit. For Americans, Greeley was the opposite of New York City. Qutb, however, was not impressed. The values of the people of Greeley were just as warped as the values he observed in New Yorkers. Residents of Greeley, he noted, seemed obsessed with lawn care and spent all their free time in their gardens.

It was, in his opinion, symptomatic of the American preoccupation with the external, material, and selfishly individual dimensions of life. Rather than engage in the spirited

⁹ John Calvert, "The World is an Undutiful Boy!" Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations 11:1 (2000), 91.

¹⁰ Calvert, "The World is an Undutiful Boy!" 93.

¹¹ Calvert, "The World is an Undutiful Boy!" 94.

social exchange that is the concomitant of meaningful community interaction, Americans, in Qutb's view, chose instead to live within the confines of closed circles, symbolized by the residential yard, which protected the private spaces of individual homeowners against the unwelcome intrusions of neighbors... Such social behavior was disconcerting for Qutb, who was raised within a nurturing endogamous village community and, as an adult, was accustomed to the vibrant street life of Cairo's closely-packed neighborhoods.¹²

Qutb had been critical of Western values in the years before he traveled to the U.S., especially of the U.S.'s support of Israel, but the longer he spent in the country, the greater his disgust grew. Many recent newspaper and magazine biographies about Qutb describe his experience at a sock hop at a Greeley Church. Hoping to experience the community life of Greeley and American religion, Qutb joined a church club. After the service one night, the church held a dance that Qutb attended. What he saw appalled him. In 1951, he described the scene in an article for the Egyptian newspaper al-Risala: "The dancing intensified. The hall swarmed with legs. Arms circled arms, lips met lips, chests met chests, and the atmosphere was full of love." Even the pastor contributed to the sexual depravity, lowering the lights to create a "romantic, dreamy effect," and playing 'Baby, it's Cold Outside' on the gramophone.¹³ In Colorado, Qutb saw proof of the moral disintegration of Western society.

Qutb compared what he saw in the West with the changing values back home. He feared Westernization and the loss of morality and spirituality in Egypt. In an article entitled "The World is an Undutiful Boy," Qutb wrote that, on the worldwide scale, the hollow materialism and inferior values of the West had eclipsed the superior cultural and spiritual contributions of

¹² Calvert, "The World is an Undutiful Boy!" 96.

¹³ Sayyid Qutb, "Amrika allati ra'ayt: fi mizan al-insaniyya." Al-Risala. 1951, 959: 1301-6. as quoted in Calvert 98.

Egypt.¹⁴ Qutb had criticized Western values before visiting the United States, but his observations in the U.S. reveal growing disgust with the lack of morality and spirituality that led him to reject the Western lifestyle completely. After his experiences in the United States, Qutb embraced Islam renewed with passion and devotion.¹⁵

THE MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD

Qutb had renounced political parties, but upon his return to Egypt, he joined the Muslim Brotherhood, and through this alliance his ideas reached millions. He had completed his book Social Justice in Islam immediately before departing for the United States. Published the year before he returned to Egypt, this work had caught the attention of the leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood, an organization founded in 1928 by Hasan al-Banna as a social welfare and political organization. When Banna, a layman educated as a teacher, began the organization, he had a vision of restoring Egypt socially and politically by establishing a modern, dynamic Shari'a state. He hoped for a return to Islamic government, moral values, and reason that would adapt to modern times to serve modern Egypt.¹⁶ The organization's commitment to social justice and political harmony attracted hundreds of thousands of followers in the 1930s and 40s. Banna claimed that Islam was the only path to social justice and community ethics.¹⁷ The Brotherhood practiced its values: it served as a social welfare organization, offering free clinics, food, shelter,

¹⁴ Calvert, "The World is an Undutiful Boy!" 101.

¹⁵ Calvert, Child from the village, Introduction. v.

¹⁶ Richard P. Mitchell, Society of the Muslim Brothers (New York: Oxford UP, 1969) 232.

¹⁷ William L. Cleveland, A History of the Modern Middle East, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Westview, 2004) 302.

and schools to the poor and marginalized masses of Egypt, services the government could not offer.¹⁸

After World War II, the Brotherhood added a new platform to its ideology, a campaign for national independence. The establishment of an Islamic community, wrote Banna, was the only way to solve the problems of society, but foreign influence and control prevented the establishment of the this community. Banna wrote to Faruq that Egypt “is ‘at the crossroads.’ It is facing two directions: ‘the way of the West’ and ‘the way of Islam.’”¹⁹ It was not enough, however, to win political independence. “Banna warned his followers early and often that ‘formal political independence was worthless unless accompanied by ‘intellectual, social, and cultural independence.’”²⁰ Free of the corrupt ideologies of the West, Egypt would finally be able to establish an “Islamic order.”²¹ Creation of an Islamic government, Banna believed would solve social, political, and economic problems that the British, the Egyptian king, and the parliament had been long unable to solve. Meanwhile, the gap between the wealthy and impoverished was growing, leaving almost all the land in the hands of a few absentee landlords. Unemployment continued to rise, leaving many educated youths without futures. The British still controlled the Suez Canal and maintained a military presence in Egypt. Faruq had lost the respect of the Egyptian people with scandalous behavior and submission to British capitulations.²² The political parties, too, lost credibility. Egyptians saw that the Wafd, the strongest political party and “traditionally a ‘middle-class’ stronghold, was being dominated in its leadership by men whose interests lay rather with the ruling elite” and was failing to address

¹⁸ Cleveland 199-201, 306-7.

¹⁹ Mitchell 232.

²⁰ Mitchell 230.

²¹ Mitchell 234.

²² Mitchell 38.

the needs of the people.²³ In addition, the Wafd had compromised its traditional platform of national independence with “its acceptance of power at the hands of the British” in 1942.²⁴ With no legitimate advocates in the government, many Egyptians became desperate. The struggle turned violent and “any and all groups wielding a minimum of power, official or unofficial”²⁵ took up arms and set off a wave of destruction and bloodshed. Like members of other parties, militants among the Muslim Brotherhood joined the violent struggle, attacking British soldiers and assassinating judges. Desperately, al-Banna attempted to ease the tensions between the Brothers and the government and abate the violence, but his efforts proved futile. In 1948, a Brother assassinated Prime Minister Mahmud Fahmi al-Nuqrashi. Al-Banna was in no way responsible, but the new Prime Minister blamed him anyway and arranged his assassination in 1949.²⁶

This then was the political climate in Egypt when Qutb returned from America in 1950. He published seething criticisms of America and left the Ministry of Public Education. That year, he officially joined the Muslim Brotherhood. At the age of forty-five, he considered this a new beginning: “I was born in 1951,” he said.²⁷ A year later, the Brothers elected him to the leadership council to head the Department for the Propagation of Islam.²⁸ In this post, Qutb became the principle ideologue of the organization. He began publishing chapters of his monumental undertaking, In the Shade of the Qur’an, an interpretation of the Qur’an that would eventually span thirty volumes. For a few months, he published sections in a monthly journal,

²³ Mitchell 37.

²⁴ Mitchell 37.

²⁵ Mitchell 59.

²⁶ Mitchell 71.

²⁷ Kepel 41.

²⁸ Kepel 41.

and then decided to release the volumes as books. In 1952, he published the first volume. One year later, he published the first fourteen out of thirty.²⁹

In 1952, the Free Officers seized control of the Egyptian government in a coup. For a brief period, the Free Officers and the Muslim Brotherhood worked together. The regime authorized the release of political prisoners, appointed three Brothers to the Constitutional Committee, and “exempted the Brotherhood from the ban on political parties.”³⁰ In exchange, the Brotherhood supported the Free Officers unconditionally. During this period, Qutb met with Nasser frequently to advise him on Islamic issues. In 1952, Qutb chaired a “conference on ‘intellectual and emotional emancipation in Islam’ attended by everyone who was anyone in revolutionary Cairo, and was warmly congratulated by Nasser and Neguib, Egypt’s first president after the coup.”³¹ This cooperation between Nasser and the Brotherhood, however, would not last long.

The ruling junta gave the Brotherhood a role in the new government and the Brotherhood attempted to exert its influence and gain a greater say. The regime resisted the Brotherhood’s influence and their relationship “devolved into one of unspoken competition.”³² The ruling junta attempted to control the Brotherhood by urging the organization to dissolve into its own political movement, The Liberation Rally. The Brotherhood resisted and tensions increased between the two.³³ The Supreme Guide of the Brotherhood, Hasan al-Hudaybi privately criticized the junta’s

²⁹ Manazir Ahsan, Preface. *In the Shade of the Qur'an*, Vol 1. By Sayyid Qutb. (Leicester: The Islamic Foundation, 1999) viii.

³⁰ Joel Gordon, *Nasser’s Blessed Movement* (New York: Oxford UP, 1992) 101.

³¹ Kepel 41.

³² Gordon 101.

³³ Gordon 102.

use of martial law and press censorship, and he “urged the government to rely on popular support, by which he meant the Brotherhood,” instead of force.³⁴

The junta had been unable to dissolve the Brotherhood, but it could foster internal divisions. The regime supported Hudaybi’s opponents and sparked controversies and disarray within the party. Nasser played a “dangerous, duplicitous game,” cultivating “Hudaybi foes” and almost succeeding in destroying the Supreme Guide’s authority.³⁵ By December of 1953, however, Hudaybi had reorganized the organization behind him and reaffirmed his leadership. The regime needed a new way to destabilize the organization. In January of 1954, it found its reason: a scuffle between student supporters of the Liberation Rally and the Muslim Brotherhood on a university campus. The regime arrested hundreds of Brothers and outlawed the organization. At this point, however, cracking down on the Brotherhood was a propaganda move against Hudaybi and his supporters – “the regime left avenues for future cooperation open.”³⁶ Nasser was not yet attempting to destroy the organization.³⁷ Qutb was among those arrested and spent three months in prison. But less than one month after the crackdown, the Brotherhood had regrouped and it continued to meet and publish papers. Upon Qutb’s release, he accepted the post of editor-in-chief of the newspaper ‘The Muslim Brothers.’

The relationship between the Brotherhood and the ruling junta had by now “deteriorated to the point of unveiled enmity.”³⁸ In October of 1954, a member of the Brotherhood attempted to assassinate Nasser. According to the Brotherhood, however, the regime staged the assassination. Either way, Nasser now had an excuse to destroy the Brotherhood. Immediately

³⁴ Gordon 102.

³⁵ Gordon 103.

³⁶ Gordon 106.

³⁷ Gordon 106.

³⁸ Gordon 106.

following the assassination attempt, mobs composed of members of government-controlled unions ransacked and burned the Brotherhood's headquarters in Cairo and district headquarters all over the country. The next day, Nasser appeared at a rally to launch a campaign against the Brothers. Hudaybi was arrested along with leaders and members all over the country.³⁹ Many fled into exile, but Qutb refused to leave. He was among one thousand Brothers arrested and tried at the "People's Tribunal."⁴⁰ Kepel summarizes the proceedings of the trial as "farical:"⁴¹ defendants were tortured into confessions, witnesses were confused and coerced, and the trial was "a memorable exhibition of the rights revolutionary governments have and take as regards to the due process of the law."⁴² Throughout the trial, the regime turned out propaganda detailing the extensive "conspiracy" it had uncovered.⁴³ The court found Qutb guilty of conspiring against the government and sentenced him to twenty-five years hard labor. Qutb endured ten years of torture, forced labor, and 22-hours a day of loudspeakers blaring the slogans and speeches of Nasser. Despite these conditions, Qutb continued to write. He completed the remaining sixteen volumes of his commentary, In the Shade of the Qur'an, and rewrote many of the first volumes in a new style: these commentaries from prison are deeper, more expansive and more radical. This work reflects the torment of the prison. He published these volumes by smuggling the pages out of his cell⁴⁴ and, even though he was in prison, he was "the pole around which the remaining supporters of Muslim Brotherhood gathered."⁴⁵

³⁹ Mitchell 152.

⁴⁰ Mitchell 153.

⁴¹ Kepel 41.

⁴² Mitchell 152, 156.

⁴³ Mitchell 152.

⁴⁴ David Sagiv, Fundamentalism and Intellectuals in Egypt, 1973-1993 (London: Frank Cass, 1995) 37-38.

⁴⁵ Kepel 41.

In 1964, Iraqi President ‘Abd al-Salam ‘Aref, believing Qutb to be wrongfully imprisoned, personally intervened and petitioned Nasser for Qutb’s release. Nasser complied and authorized his release, but Qutb knew he was still in danger. He suspected the regime was looking for a reason to rearrest and execute him.⁴⁶ Both Iraq and Libya offered Qutb political refuge, but, again, he refused to flee. He had a duty to his followers, he said, to show he was willing to die for his beliefs. Three thousand young men and women followed his teaching, he said, and “he did not want to undo a lifetime of teaching by refusing to give those 3,000 people an example of true martyrdom.”⁴⁷ The next year, Nasser ordered him arrested again and tried him for treason on the ludicrous charge of attempting to initiate a Marxist revolution in Egypt. The real reason for his execution, the real threat to Nasser, was Milestones, the last book Qutb wrote. In Milestones, Qutb denounced modern governments and called modern rulers tyrants. The court convicted Qutb and sentenced him to hanging. Before the scheduled execution, Nasser sent an emissary to convince Qutb to sign a plea for mercy. Qutb refused: "If I have done something wrong in the eyes of Allah, I do not deserve mercy; but if I have not done anything wrong, I should be set free without having to plead for mercy from any mortal."⁴⁸ He faced his execution as a martyr.

Death did not silence Sayyid Qutb. Nasser banned his books and called him a traitor, but illegal copies of his most influential works, Milestones and In the Shade of the Qur'an, circulated with immense popularity. “Intimacy with Milestones was considered an act of heroism among

⁴⁶ Musallam 165.

⁴⁷ Paul Berman, “The Philosopher of Islamic Terror,” New York Times 23 Mar 2003. 2 Apr. 2003 <<http://nytimes.com>>.

⁴⁸ Zafar Bangash, “Remembering Sayyid Qutb, an Islamic intellectual and leader of rare insight and integrity,” Muslimedia 1-15 Sept 1999, 5 May 2003 <<http://www.muslimedia.com/archives/features99/qutb.htm>>.

the youth, a testimony to courage,”⁴⁹ writes Dr. Ahmad Zaki Hammad in his introduction to Milestones. The work inspired readers throughout Egypt and spread to the rest of the Middle East. But Qutb was put to death before he could answer many questions and he left interpretation of many key points to the reader. Qutb’s words spread like fire after his execution, but he could not defend his meaning or correct misinterpretations, so his disciples build on his philosophy in any direction they chose. Indeed, “young Islamicist militants interpreted [Qutb’s word] in a fashion that hardly conformed to the dominant current of thought within the Muslim Brotherhood.”⁵⁰ Older members of the Brotherhood, including Sayyid’s own brother Muhammad, published commentaries on the martyr’s work in which they attempted to steer him away from extremist interpretations. But Qutb himself was untouchable. He both “fascinated and embarrassed” the Brotherhood’s reformist wing, but no one dared criticize him directly.⁵¹

QUTB’S PHILOSOPHY

Qutb’s ideology pivots around a few central themes. In Milestones, his most popular work, he excerpts passages from In the Shade of the Qur’an and summarizes many points of his commentary.⁵² Much of his philosophy rests on a new designation for an old word: *jahiliyya*. In his prison writings, Qutb explained that a society follows the enlightened inspiration of the Qur’an or descends into a chaos of ignorance and idolatry. He could not envision a secular compromise between an Islamic society and a state of chaos, ignorance, and idolatry, the state he calls “*jahiliyyah*.”⁵³ *Jahiliyya*” means the “Age of Heedlessness and Ignorance,” and

⁴⁹ Ahsan i.

⁵⁰ Kepel 63.

⁵¹ Kepel 61-62.

⁵² Ahsan i.

⁵³ Sayyid Qutb, Milestones (Indianapolis: American Trust. 1990) Ch 1.

traditionally refers to the period in Arabia before the Prophet and the Revelation of the Qur'an. Muslims look at that time with fear and scorn -- *Jahiliyya* implies polytheism and idolatry, the antitheses of Islam. The *jahili* culture of pre-Islam Arabia followed a complex system of tribal patriarchy, desert customs, and inherited taboos.⁵⁴ The Revelations of the Qur'an countered ignorance with divine scripture, and the new Muslims of the seventh century based their community on sacred injunctions of the Qur'an.

Qutb created a new set of meanings around the word *jahiliyya*. Before Qutb, *Jahiliyya* referred to one specific time period – the time before the advent of Islam – and one specific place – the Arabian Peninsula. Qutb expanded the definition so that *jahiliyya* could refer to any society, past or modern, anywhere in the world, that is not Islamic.⁵⁵ Using this historical term as a metaphor, with one word, Qutb conveys a range of negative connotations to a Muslim reader – one word conveys a society that is backwards, cruel, ignorant, unstable, and lacks true spirituality.

The resemanticization of the word is critical to Qutb's thought. Today, says Qutb, people worship false gods: material possessions, *jahili* governments, sciences, and their own desires. A society that worships these idols is polytheist and therefore *jahili*, trapped in the same darkness as the pre-Islamic polytheists. “[The nature of *jahiliyya* in the world today] is the same as during the first period of Islam,” writes Qutb, “and it is perhaps a little more deeply entrenched.”⁵⁶ Today's societies have fallen more deeply into *jahiliyya* because, unlike the polytheists of pre-

⁵⁴ Toshihiko Izutsu, Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qur'an (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University, 2002) 16,101.

⁵⁵ Elliott Colla, Conflicted Antiquities: Egyptology, Egyptomania, Egyptian Modernity (Duke University Press, forthcoming, 2007), 414.

⁵⁶ Qutb, Milestones 15.

Islamic Arabia who had not yet heard the Prophet's call, *jahili* societies today have knowingly turned a blind eye to the gifts of the Qur'an and closed their hearts to Islam and the one true God.

At first, Western influence in Egypt concerned Qutb. *Jahiliyya* threatened Egypt, threatened to eclipse Islamic morality and spirituality in his home country. Later, Qutb came to see Nasser's regime as *jahili* as well. Human beings, Qutb wrote in Milestones, should never submit to rulers other than God. Qutb believed that man-made laws and all existing governments force mankind to worship and submit to lords other than Allah.⁵⁷ No man should rule over another, for this is tyranny, the usurping of God's authority.

[*Jahiliyya*] attempts to transfer to man one of the greatest attributes of Allah, namely sovereignty, by making some men lords over others. It does so not in the simple and primitive ways of the ancient *Jahiliyya*, but in the more subtle form of claiming the right to create values, to legislate rules of collective behavior, and to choose a way of life rests with men, without regard to what Allah has prescribed. The result of this rebellion against the authority of Allah is the oppression of his creatures.⁵⁸

Human beings, Qutb explains, become slaves to tyrants when they are forced to submit to man-made laws. In this slavery, humans lose their natural dignity and fall into sorrow and immorality. Allah explained the only right laws, the Shari'a, in the words he revealed to Muhammad, and those words are preserved in the Qur'an. Allah knows His creation and therefore established the only perfect, natural laws for mankind to follow. "The growth of a human being, his conditions of health and disease, and his life and death are governed by the system of natural laws that comes from Allah... Therefore he should also follow Islam in those

⁵⁷ Qutb, Milestones 15.

⁵⁸ Qutb, Milestones 8.

aspects of his life in which he is given a choice.”⁵⁹ Shari’a is natural because, like the other laws of the universe and man himself, it comes from God. “If a man follows shari’ah, it results in a harmony between his life and his nature.”⁶⁰ By this reasoning, any law but Shari’a law is unnatural, and to follow man-made laws is to live in a form of slavery.

No nation in the world, he believed, was truly Islamic, even those nations with the most severe forms of Islamic regime. No nation truly follows the laws of God because *jahiliyya* invades peoples’ minds. “Our whole environment,” he wrote, “people’s beliefs and ideas, habits and art, rules and laws – is jahiliyyah, even to the extent that what we consider to be Islamic culture, Islamic sources, Islamic philosophy, and Islamic thought are also constructs of jahiliyyah!”⁶¹ *Jahiliyya*, he said, had overtaken every nation in the world.

Every modern government is *jahili* and blinds and enslaves its citizens. The *jahili* powers hide the truth from the people, tell lies about Islam, and force people to accept a fallen social system. But, says Qutb, “[Islam] has a right to destroy all obstacles in the form of institutions and traditions that restrict man’s freedom of choice.”⁶²

The Qur’an offers release from the pain and hollowness of modern life. Man, Qutb believed, can find freedom through submission to Allah alone.⁶³ Suffering in prison, guilty only of opposing Nasser’s dictatorship, Qutb developed his critique of modern *jahili* regimes while also envisioning the ideal society, an Islamic utopia. Islam was the one and only path to real social justice, he wrote. Only the pure divine knowledge of the Qur’an could offer mankind freedom from centuries of slavery and confusion, exactly as the revelations of the Prophet had

⁵⁹ Qutb, Milestones 38.

⁶⁰ Qutb, Milestones 74.

⁶¹ Qutb, Milestones 15.

⁶² Qutb, Milestones 61.

⁶³ Qutb, Milestones 38.

brought light to the Arabs. The few true Muslims who understand this have a duty, he says, a duty to establish and spread Islamic community and Shari'a and free mankind from the slavery and darkness of *jahiliyya*.

Qutb dreamt of a time when the light of Islam would vanquish *jahiliyya* and free mankind from its delusions. "Only in the Islamic way of life do all men become free from the servitude of some men to others..."⁶⁴ Much of his work focuses on the path to establishing a society that lives the Islamic life. The title of his book, Milestones, refers to the markers along this road. He defines the steps that every Muslim must undertake to spread Islam and defeat *jahiliyya*.

Muslims fulfill this duty through jihad, a personal struggle in the service of Allah that takes different forms at different times. Jihad, he stresses, is always active, not a battle of theories or a defensive war. Muslims must strive and radiate Islam outward to destroy the tyranny of *jahiliyya*. These beliefs form the foundation of Qutb's ideology.

PERCEPTIONS OF QUTB

Qutb appears frequently in the post-September 11th discussions of Islamic terrorism. Qutb is the reason for militant Islam, many journalists explain. Articles trace al-Qaeda back to Egypt, to the Tura prison, to Qutb. In the New York Times, Paul Berman explains that Qutb is "the intellectual hero of every one of the groups that eventually went into Al Qaeda, their Karl Marx (to put it that way), their guide."⁶⁵ He continues, "[Al-Qaeda and other militant fundamentalists] are in possession of a powerful philosophy, which is Sayyid Qutb's."⁶⁶ Robert

⁶⁴ Qutb, Milestones 9.

⁶⁵ Berman.

⁶⁶ Berman.

Irwin credits Qutb as “the father of Islamic fundamentalism.” He asks, “Is [Qutb] the man who inspired Bin Laden?” He goes on to answer this question,

[The] most useful insights into the shaping of Bin Laden may lie not in the rugged mountains of Afghanistan, or the rampant materialism of 1970s Saudi Arabia, but the biography of a long dead Egyptian fundamentalist scholar called Sayyid Qutb. Qutb, regarded as the father of modern fundamentalism and described by his (Arab) biographer as ‘the most famous personality of the Muslim world in the second half of the 20th century,’ is being increasingly cited as the figure who has most influenced the al-Qaeda leader.⁶⁷

Though different journalists attribute varying levels of influence to Qutb, agreement is clear in every article I found that discussed Qutb: the Muslim who reads and implements Qutb’s philosophy into action is a radical fundamentalist, a terrorist.

Newspapers and magazines are not the only publications to share this consensus -- scholarship on political Islam also casts Qutb as a figure who inspires violence. In his book on Muslim extremism, Gilles Kepel refers to as Qutb a “militant.”⁶⁸ And in an article for the journal *Terrorism and Political Violence*, John Zimmerman writes, “We may never know what the 19 Al-Qaeda hijackers of 11 September 2001 were thinking as they steered the airplanes toward the twin towers of the World Trade Center, the Pentagon and an open field in Pennsylvania. However, we can be certain that they were immersed in the ideas of Sayyid Qutb.”⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Robert Irwin, “Is this the man who inspired Bin Laden?” *Guardian* 1 Nov 2001. 10 Jan. 2006 <www.guardian.co.uk>

⁶⁸ Kepel 38.

⁶⁹ John C. Zimmerman, “Sayyid Qutb’s Influence on the 11 September Attacks,” *Terrorism and Political Violence*. 16 (2004): 222-252.

Western scholars and analysts, however, do not need to open Milestones to learn that Qutb's philosophy is fundamental to these fundamentalists: many radicals quote him, credit him, and draw on his ideology in their speeches. We know Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri as Usama bin Laden's right hand man, the ideologue of al-Qaeda. Zawahiri quotes Qutb extensively with great respect. In his 2001 autobiography,⁷⁰ Zawahiri writes, "Qutb was the most prominent theoretician of the fundamentalist movements."⁷¹ Qutb's message of the "oneness of God and the supremacy of the divine path... fanned the fire of Islamic revolution against the enemies of Islam at home and abroad."⁷² Zawahiri describes himself as a disciple of Sayyid Qutb with pride. Qutb, says Zawahiri, inspired him to fight and kill. Zawahiri writes, "Qutb said, 'Brother push ahead, for your path is soaked in blood. Do not turn your head right or left but look only up to Heaven.'" ⁷³

* * *

I question the one-dimensional picture the Western media paints of Sayyid Qutb. The picture is sensationalist, pointing fingers at an innocent man for shock value and dramatic headlines. In addition, I question al-Qaeda's interpretation of this philosopher. Al-Qaeda, I argue, twists and distorts Qutb's philosophy to justify terrorism. Both the Western media and the terrorist organizations read Qutb selectively through the lens of their own agendas.

What does Sayyid Qutb really say and how does he say it? Why is his philosophy so easily misinterpreted? Is there a way to follow his path, his milestones to his utopian civilization? To answer these questions, I will focus on his prison writings, especially

⁷⁰ Ayman al-Zawahiri, "Knights Under the Prophet's Banner," Al-Sharq al-Awsat Dec 2001.

⁷¹ Lawrence Wright, "The Man Behind Bin Laden," The New Yorker 16 Sept 2002. 8 Jan 2006.

⁷² Montasser al-Zayyat, The Road to Al-Qaeda, Trans. Ahmad Fekry. 2nd ed. (Sterling: Pluto P, 2004) 25.

⁷³ Wright.

Milestones, his most famous work, and volume seven of In the Shade of the Qur'an, the work in which he discusses jihad in the context of the Battle of the Badr Wells.

In the end, I will show that violent interpretations of Qutb ignore the fundamental message of his life's work. Qutb does not command violence against non-Muslims or Muslims who do not follow his teachings. He claims to love all human beings because they are inherently moral, though many are misguided. Believers have a duty, he says, to combat *jahiliyya*, to free humans from tyrants and false idols, and to strive towards an Islamic utopia. The battle, the jihad, towards this goal is never violent in Qutb's philosophy. Through a series of steps, he aims to save people, not kill them.

All utopias, however, are impossible, and, in the end, his entire ideology is based on paradoxes that collapse in the light of reality. He writes to his own situation, assuring himself in the face of impending death. From this perspective, his only focus is paradise, in this world or the next. The danger of Qutb's philosophy lies not in evil-intentions or an inherent call to violence, but in its contradictions. His complete philosophy is impossible to implement, so followers pull pieces out of context. I will examine the actions and ideologies of Qutb's disciples and those groups that claim to follow his teaching.

Terrorist organizations that actually practice Wahhabism claim to follow Qutb. He articulates a tolerant, embracing spread of Islam: he voices what they claim to do, what they would like to publicize. Qutb is an idealist philosopher who wants a better world without killing. He articulates a definition of jihad without violence at its core. However, the radiant Islamic energy of Qutb seized in the minds of al-Qaeda becomes an evil inspirational force, a perversion of his devotional genius. Al-Qaeda, wanting to kill and seize power, needs a philosophical base to seem inspired. They steal it from Qutb.

II

Society is the Prison

Could Sayyid Qutb, “the father of Islamic fundamentalism,” express any compassion for infidels and idolaters? In Milestones, his most famous work, he writes, “We invite people to Islam because we love and we wish them well, although they may torture us.”⁷⁴ Not only does he feel compassion, he feels love for other humans. He pities the people who live without the light of Islam and feels a duty to save them, to welcome them into his utopian society. “This *din*⁷⁵ aims at bringing back the entire human race to its Sustainer and to free it from servitude to anyone other than Allah.”⁷⁶ His community welcomes all races and nationalities to live together in a “relationship of love.”⁷⁷ He believes that he has found the solution to human suffering and he wants to share it with every human being.

In a 1946 article for the Egyptian newspaper al-Risala, however, Qutb condemns Westerners: “How I hate and despise those Westerners! all without exception: the British, the French, the Dutch, and now the Americans...I hate and despise just as much those Egyptians and

⁷⁴ Qutb, Milestones 118.

⁷⁵ Literally, *din* means religion, creed, faith, or belief. Qutb defines it as “eternal and universal ‘religion’” and “way of life” Qutb, Milestones 26, 45.

⁷⁶ Qutb, Milestones 48.

⁷⁷ Qutb, Milestones 41.

Arabs who continue to trust Western conscience.”⁷⁸ And, later, in his Qur’anic commentary, he instructs Muslims to wage war against secular governments. If he hates Westerners, why does he invite all people to utopia? Does he hate some people or love everyone?

MAN VERSUS SOCIETY

Qutb’s appeal to love and hatred appear to contradict one another only when extracted from the context of his entire philosophy. Though it may not be clear in one isolated quote, I argue that, within the broader context of his work, Qutb differentiates between man and society, never treating society as the aggregate sum of individual people. Instead, the two are at odds: modern society is the enemy of man, the prison of individual men. Recognizing this distinction reveals that, while Qutb hates societies and their leaders, he loves the human individual.

Similarly, when he enjoins Muslims to battle the forces that oppose Islam, he orders them to fight only against the leaders who represent the society and control mankind. While he rarely uses words as strong as ‘hate’ to describe his attitude towards societies -- this quote represents the extreme of his language – he explains that these *jahili* societies are unhealthy, and devoid of morality. These societies strip humans of their dignity and lead people to rebel against God.⁷⁹

He calls on Muslims to destroy the institutions of this established order. Qutb, however, never calls for an attack on people. He writes in Milestones,

[Islam] has the right to destroy all obstacles in the form of institutions and traditions that restrict man’s freedom of choice. It does not attack individuals nor does it force them to accept its beliefs. It attacks institutions and traditions in order to release human beings

⁷⁸ Sayyid Qutb, “al-Damir al-Amrikani...!wa-qadiyat Filasin,” Al-Risala 21 October 1946: 1155 as quoted in Adnan Musallam, Sayyid Qutb: The Emergence of the Islamicist, 1935-1950 (Jerusalem: Passia, 1990) 64.

⁷⁹ Qutb, Milestones 5-9.

from their pernicious influence, which distorts human nature and curtails human freedom.⁸⁰

According to Qutb, Muslims must not attack individuals. Instead they must battle the forces that restrict the transmission of the message of Islam, the societies that imprison their citizens and the tyrants who force other humans to obey them.

Before turning to the religious context of Qutb's philosophy in order to identify the distinction between man and society, we should examine the historical and cultural background of Qutb's thought in order to place Qutb's hatred in a social context. Examining the specific historical context reveals why Qutb first hated society and shows how this hatred paved the way for the development of the ideology of Milestones and In the Shade of the Qur'an. To explain these origins and the process of development, I examine when and why Qutb wrote this article condemning Westerners for al-Risala.

SOCIAL CONTEXT FOR HATRED

Qutb wrote of his hatred for Westerners in this article in 1946. World War II had just ended. Only months before the publication of the article in al-Risala, President Truman asked the British to allow 100,000 Jews from Europe to move to the Palestinian Mandate. Truman's support of Israel shocked and enraged Arab intellectuals. The United States claimed to support international social justice – like many Egyptians, Qutb had expected the U.S. to support the Palestinians. But this action, this willingness to gamble “with the fate and rights of humans in order to win a few votes in an election,” showed the true “conscience” of America, Qutb wrote.⁸¹

⁸⁰ Qutb, Milestones 61.

⁸¹ Musallam, From Secularism to Jihad 6,8.

In 1946, Qutb came to see the U.S. as just another imperialist power bent on destroying the political and cultural sovereignty of Middle Eastern people in order to expand its influence.

Qutb, like all intellectuals of the Arab-Muslim world, saw the foundation of Israel as another page in the long book of Western imperialism, another instance of Western crusader mentality aimed at occupying and stealing Arab lands. Egyptians, too, had suffered under occupation, and, like most people who have lived under an imperialist power, Qutb deeply resented imperialism.

Qutb learned to hate imperialism at a young age. Britain had militarily occupied Egypt since 1882, exploiting Egypt's resources for its own benefit. In the beginning, Lord Cromer and an elite class of inexperienced British bureaucrats controlled Egyptian politics and barred Egyptians from any say in their own government. Later, with the outbreak of World War I, the British declared martial law and put political power in the hands of the British High Commissioner. The demands of war, ever-increasing needs for food and labor, fell upon Egyptian peasants and wartime measures caused great anger and resentment among the populace. The difficult economic conditions and the refusal of the British to give the Egyptian people any control in their government led to the rise of the nationalist movement, increased calls for independence, and finally the popular revolution of 1919 to 1922.⁸² Qutb, a teenager during this period, had listened in on his father's political meetings and shared in these nationalist sentiments. He would continue to condemn imperialism for the rest of his life.

The 1919 revolution in Egypt brought the establishment of parliamentary monarchy, but the British were not willing to abandon their interests in Egypt. The British maintained control

⁸² Musallam, From Secularism to Jihad 3.

by manipulating the palace and the parliament, pitting the parties against the king.⁸³ The most powerful political party, the Wafd -- a party founded with a goal of national independence -- negotiated with the British and accepted political favors from them while the king struggled and failed to exert his power against the British and the parliament. In addition, The Egyptian monarchy encouraged Westernization and supported reforms in the educational system based on the Western model. Qutb believed that the government betrayed the Egyptian people by negotiating with the British and allowing continued British military presence and economic control. Qutb, like many Egyptians, saw with increasing frustration that the Egyptian government did not represent the Egyptian people.

Qutb echoed the views of earlier Islamic reformers, describing a “corruption of faith” in Egyptian society and blaming the growing influence of foreign values in Egypt. Qutb saw decay in Egyptian society. He saw the humiliation of Egyptians who were not allowed to govern their own country nor attend to their own needs. Like other Egyptians, he suffered the shortages, economic hardships, and the presence of British soldiers.

Qutb, however, feared more than political imperialism – he feared moral imperialism. Not only did the British control the government and economic policies of Egypt, but their Western way of life invaded Egypt as well. Western values crept into Egyptians’ minds and corrupted their consciences. In his writings during that period, Qutb expanded on the ideas of Easternism, an intellectual movement in the 1920s and 30s that contrasted the spiritual and oppressed East against the materialistic and imperialist West.⁸⁴ Qutb wrote that the Western conscience was “rotten,” a product of the materialistic civilization that has no soul or spirituality. The West planned to invade the minds of Muslims with these devices – it planned a “slow

⁸³ Musallam, From Secularism to Jihad 2-11.

⁸⁴ Musallam, From Secularism to Jihad 8.

annihilation and profound and complete corruption” of Muslim morality.⁸⁵ This mentality spreads, says Qutb, for Western society tricks humanity with “its luster, noise, and sensual enjoyment in which the soul suffocates and the conscience dies down, while instincts and senses become intoxicated, quarrelsome and excited.”⁸⁶ In prison a decade later, Qutb would call this civilization *jahiliyya* and explain that it is the nature of *jahiliyya* to spread, to “crush all elements that seem dangerous to its personality.”⁸⁷ Like an imperialist empire, the decaying conscience spreads and threatened the morality and humanity of Muslims. First it overtook the West and now it threatens Egypt and “the spirit of Islam.”⁸⁸

Qutb felt pride in Egypt’s own cultural history, spiritual identity, and integrity. Egyptian culture was more spiritual and pure, he said, and did not need to borrow systems from the West or adopt the materialistic Western way of life. Qutb asked Egyptians to stay true to their cultural heritage and their religion and not to mimic their Western oppressors. “The question for me,” wrote Qutb in 1946, “is my honor, my language, and my culture.”⁸⁹

This background illuminates the reasons behind Qutb’s hatred of the West and the context explains the contradiction between his love and hatred. In 1946 when he wrote this article, Qutb watched in fear as Western culture invaded Egypt and threatened Eastern values. Western leaders, the leaders of the United States for example, lacked moral conscience and would use any means necessary to gain power, to conquer the rest of the world. Qutb hated the hollow civilization, the rotten conscience, and the heartless, power-hungry leaders. Instead of resisting the West and fighting the imperialists, Egypt’s leaders, the palace and the parliament,

⁸⁵ Mitchell 227.

⁸⁶ Musallam, From Secularism to Jihad 84.

⁸⁷ Qutb, Milestones 38.

⁸⁸ Mitchell 230.

⁸⁹ Clavert, “The World is an Undutiful Boy!” 90

accepted help from the West, made compromises, and submitted to capitulations. Instead of shunning Western influence, the Egyptian powers encouraged Westernization. Instead of driving the rotten Western conscience out of Egypt, the leaders welcomed it in and pushed it onto Egyptians. Qutb, therefore, hated the political powers of Egypt, “the Egyptians who continue to trust the Western conscience.” Western societies and Western leaders with the cooperation of the rulers of Egypt imperialized, corrupted, and exploited Egypt. When Qutb says he hates Westerners or Egyptians, therefore, he refers not to individuals, but to the societies and their leaders. Leaders and societies, not individuals, corrupt Eastern morality and spirituality.

AMERICA AS ONE EXAMPLE

In articles in Western media, writers describe Qutb’s trip to the United States as the pivotal experience in his life and thought. In the *New Yorker*, Lawrence Wright adheres to the common view: “Qutb returned to Egypt a radically changed man. In what he saw as the spiritual wasteland of America, he re-created himself as a militant Muslim, and he came back to Egypt with the vision of an Islam that would throw off the vulgar influences of the West.” Scholars, too, cite Qutb’s trip to the U.S. as the origin of his radical thought. Emmanuel Sivan wrote in his book Radical Islam that Qutb’s experience in America “was indeed the formative experience that converted him [...] to fundamentalism.”⁹⁰

The facts, however, undermine this depiction. Qutb had published seething attacks on Europe and the United States years before he even left for the U.S. – his criticisms of Westernization were part of the reason for his exile. His experiences in America “confirmed and honed the distinctions which he had long supposed separated the West, including America, from

⁹⁰ Clavert, “The World is an Undutiful Boy!” 89

the East...⁹¹ but those experiences did not inspire a radical or sudden shift. Qutb's years in the U.S. reinforced his existing views of the West, to Western imperialism and Western values. Qutb did not develop his philosophy suddenly or impulsively. Nor did he develop his philosophy in reaction to America specifically; within Qutb's worldview, America is an example of a Western civilization, a society with a "rotten conscience." America is not the only example, but one of many. Though American journalists and scholars attempt to depict Qutb as hating Americans with anecdotes of his experiences in the U.S., in reality, Qutb hates American society because he hates Western civilization.

SHIFT TO RELIGIOUS TERMS

Though the shift was not sudden, Qutb's thought did evolve during the time he spent in America and continued to develop after he returned to Egypt. After his return in 1950, Qutb began to describe the influence of Western society as more than moral and cultural imperialism. In later writings, he began to express his hatred for Western societies in religious terms. He labeled these societies *jahiliyya*, ignorant and ungodly, antithetical to Islam.

In In the Shade of the Qur'an, Qutb describes in Qur'anic terms the struggle that righteous Muslims must undertake against fallen society. As before, man and society remain distinct – hatred for society does not extend to individuals. Now, however, hatred becomes action: Qutb describes the role of the righteous man in the battle against *jahiliyya*. In his interpretation of Sura al-Anfal in volume seven of In the Shade of the Qur'an, Qutb explains the duty of the believer, the jihad against *jahiliyya*, and the utopia to come using the sura to frame these themes. These ideas reappear in Milestones and are, therefore, well known, appearing

⁹¹ Clavert, "The World is an Undutiful Boy!" 89

frequently in popular discourse. We return to the Qur'anic commentary beyond Milestones to examine the foundation of Qutb's thought.

SURAT AL-ANFAL

According to Islamic history, the Prophet received most of the revelations of Surat al-Anfal immediately after the battle of Badr. When the battle ended, God revealed to Muhammad that he had assisted the Muslims and ordained the victory. The sura describes the battle between the Muslims of Medina and the Quraysh of Mecca, a powerful tribe in pre-Islamic Arabia. The verses reveal details about the battle itself, as well as the proper way to divide the spoils of war and the proper treatment of prisoners. In addition to the references to the battle in the Qur'an, the *hadith*⁹², collections of sayings and deeds of the Prophet, and eighth and ninth century histories detail the battle.

The battle occurred in 624 C.E., the second year after the Prophet emigrated to Yathrib (now Medina) from Mecca. The Muslims were still a minority in Yathrib, and their position was fragile. The Battle of Badr was the first major battle for the Muslim community: this victory against great odds established the Muslims as "challengers and potential inheritors to the prestige and the political role of the [Quraysh]"⁹³ and established the authority of the Prophet. Soon after the battle, the Muslims won many converts and gained control of Yathrib.

Originally, Muhammad had planned to raid a Qurayshi caravan carrying goods from Syria back to Mecca. As the Prophet and his small army of just over three hundred companions

⁹² Scholars of Islam examine the chain of transmission of each saying of the Prophet and consider the credibility of each source. When scholars consider the sources credible, they consider the *hadith* to be an infallible historical record. See chapter 4 for more details.

⁹³ Marshall Hodgson, The Venture of Islam: The Classical Age of Islam (University of Chicago Press, 1974) 176-178.

rode through the desert towards the caravan, they received news that the Quraysh had sent an army of a thousand men to protect the caravan. The Prophet asked his companions if they wished to continue. Despite the size of the Meccan army, the companions chose to stand by the Prophet's command and follow him into battle. The Muslims proved victorious. They killed approximately fifty of the Quraysh on the battlefield, took between fifty and seventy more as captives, and forced the Qurayshi army into retreat.⁹⁴

Though custom dictated that the captives be held until their families paid their ransom, the Muslims killed three captives immediately. The first was Amr ibn Hashim, a leader of Mecca whom Muhammad later named Abu Jahl, the Father of Ignorance. Amr ibn Hashim fought the spread of Islam and brutalized converts: he beat 'Abd Allah, the first man to recite the Qur'an before the Ka'ba, ridiculed and blackened the names of new Muslims, whipped slaves who converted to Islam, and forbid Meccans from buying goods from Muslim merchants in order to drive them into poverty. 'Abd Allah decapitated Amr ibn Hashim as he lay wounded on the battlefield. The Muslim troops killed two other captives, clan leaders who had tortured Muslim converts. Then the Prophet received revelation to spare the other captives: "O Prophet, say unto those captives who are in your hands: 'If God knoweth any good in your hearts, He will give you better than that which hath been taken from you, and He will forgive you. Verily God is Forgiving, Merciful.'⁹⁵" Muhammad ordered the Muslims to treat the rest of the captives well until their families paid the ransom.^{96 97}

⁹⁴ Martin Lings, Muhammad: his life based on the earliest sources (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1983) 155-159.

⁹⁵ Q8:70 translation by Lings

⁹⁶ Lings 138-151.

⁹⁷ Muhammad himself killed two more captives before returning to Medina. He knew they "would immediately resume their evil activities... there was no sign of any change of heart in

INTERPRETATIONS OF SURAT AL-ANFAL

This sura invites many possible readings. The interpretation is pivotal because the sura outlines the role of the believer in holy war. Deplorably, some have used Surat al-Anfal to justify indiscriminate violence. Saddam Hussein's secular regime in Iraq, for example, used the sura to justify genocide against the Kurds. His campaign of genocide was called "al-Anfal" in an attempt to lend religious justification to the murder of hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children, most of them Muslims. Muslim extremists, too, use Surat al-Anfal to motivate recruits to attack non-Muslims and to justify this violence.⁹⁸ They quote, for example, verses 12 and 13: "Your Lord inspired the angels saying: 'I am with you. So give courage to the believers. I shall cast terror into the hearts of the unbelievers. Strike, then, their necks and strike off their ever fingertip.' (12) This is because they have defied God and His Messenger. Whoever defies God and His Messenger [will find out that] God is severe in retribution. (13)"⁹⁹ Other readers, however, argue that these injunctions only apply to specific situations in history. Historian Karen Armstrong explains that, because these verses were revealed during a war, they only apply to wartime when the lives of the believers are at risk. God ordered Muhammad to kill the unbelievers because "if the Muslims were defeated, they would all be slaughtered to the last man

either man, and during the march it became clear to him that it was not in accordance with the Will of God that they should be left alive." Lings 151-152.

⁹⁸ Philippines Terrorism: the Role of Militant Islamic Converts, International Crisis Group (UN Refugee Agency, 2005) 7.

<<http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/home/opendoc.pdf?tbl=RSDCOI&id=43bd4c144>>.

⁹⁹ Trans. Salahi for:

Sayyid Qutb, In the Shade of The Qur'an, Ed. Adil Salahi. Trans. Adil Salahi. Vol. 7. (Leicestershire: The Islamic Foundation, 2003) 95.

or woman.”¹⁰⁰ Armstrong notes that extremist groups like al-Qaeda quote these verses out of context and ignore the verses that prescribe peace. Read in context, she argues, the Qur’an only justifies a war of self-defense and only as a last resort.¹⁰¹ How did Qutb, the so-called father of Islamic militancy, read this sura?

In volume seven of his commentary, Qutb uses Surat al-Anfal to expound his major theme: the destruction of *jahiliyya* in order to establish an Islamic utopian state. He reads each verse as a part of a greater picture -- each verse is an arrow that points in the same direction. Unlike most commentators who focus on one individual verse at a time, Qutb draws on verses from various suras to show how a major theme runs through the entire Qur’an.

In this way, Qutb’s reading of Surat al-Anfal supports a facet of his theme, his belief that leaders, not individuals, are the enemies. He is clear: the enemies at the Battle of Badr were the *Jahili* leaders. The Muslims did not fight the pagan civilians of Mecca – they fought an army led by the most vicious opponents of Islam. They fought the leaders of Mecca who prevented Muhammad from spreading his message. His reading of 8:12-13 provides a clear example. In verse 12, God orders the angels to strike off the heads and fingers of the unbelievers. Verse 13 continues, “Whoever defies God and His Messenger [will find that] God is severe in retribution.”¹⁰² What does it mean to defy God and the Prophet? Does this mean that God will punish the person who has not chosen Islam?

In his commentary, Qutb responds,

¹⁰⁰ Karen Armstrong, “Is Islam Violent?” Taking Back Islam, Ed. Michael Wolfe. (Rodale, 2002) 27-32. 28.

¹⁰¹ Armstrong 28.

¹⁰² Trans. Salahi.

ثم وقف قاعدة وسنة أنه حينما إنطلقت العصبية المسلمة في الأرض لتقرير ألوهية الله وحده منهج الله وحده
كان وإنقامة التثبيت والنصر للعصبية المسلمة وكان الرعب منها عدو لها موقف المشاقة لله ورسوله
والهزيمة للذين يشاقون الله
هلوسرو

Whenever a Muslim community takes active steps to establish the principle of God's oneness and to implement His message, it will be granted victory against any enemy that opposes *it* in defiance of God and His Messenger.¹⁰³ [italics added]

Does God grant victory against an enemy that opposes the concept of His oneness? Does Qutb say that the Muslim community, with the help of God, will force a person to accept Islam? Salahi translates the feminine pronoun “*ه*” to “it”: “It”(italicized above) will triumph against any enemy that opposes “it.” In the Arabic, “it” can refer to the Muslim community or the community’s message. “It” cannot refer to “God’s oneness” because “God’s oneness” is a masculine noun. An individual could refuse to accept “God’s oneness,” but only a leader could prevent the Muslim community from spreading its message. In light of this distinction, it is clear that the Muslim community does not battle the individual who does not believe in the Islamic God, “God’s oneness” – this person is not the enemy. Qutb repeats 2:256 throughout his work: “There is no compulsion in religion.” Muslims must not force their beliefs onto any individual, but they must be free to spread Islam without impediments, to present it to everyone so they may choose to become Muslim. The community *will* battle who or whatever attempts to block the

¹⁰³ Arabic: Sayyid Qutb. *Fi Zilal al-Qur'an*, Vol. 3. (Cairo: Dar al-Shorouk, 1968) 1486.
English: Sayyid Qutb. *In the Shade of The Qur'an*, Ed. Adil Salahi. Trans. Adil Salahi. Vol. 7. (Leicestershire: The Islamic Foundation, 2003) 95.

spread of the message. “And [Islam] uses physical power and jihad to abolish the organizations and authorities of the *jahili* system which prevent people from reforming their ideas and beliefs, forces them to follow deviant ways, and make them serve humans instead of their Almighty Lord.”¹⁰⁴ Islam opposes those with the power to keep the masses ignorant of Islam. God will grant Muslims victory against the leaders and remove the barriers to the spread of Islam.

Qutb interprets Surat al-Anfal within the historical context by describing verses in relation to the Battle of Badr. He then extends the interpretation to apply to modern times. The Quraysh controlled the shrine at Mecca, and therefore held great power in Arabia. Historical accounts show that the Quraysh did not merely disagree with Muhammad’s message – they tortured Muslims and intimidated converts.¹⁰⁵ The Quraysh represent the powerful and corrupt political leaders who attempt to prevent their followers from converting to Islam. In the Battle of Badr, however, the Muslims killed only fifty combatants and released most of the hostages. The Prophet’s companions executed only five of the most hostile leaders, those who had tortured Muslims. The Muslims executed three leaders immediately after the battle, but then God revealed verse 70¹⁰⁶: “Prophet, say to the captives who are in your hands: If God finds goodness in your hearts, He will give you something better than all that has been taken from you, and He will forgive you your sins. God is much-Forgiving, Merciful.”¹⁰⁷ According to the historical account, most of the captives did not convert and were instead released when their families paid the ransoms. For Qutb, however, encouraging a hostage to convert to Islam is the most important reason to take captives in battle. Qutb comments on verse 70:

¹⁰⁴ Qutb, *Milestones* 45.

¹⁰⁵ Lings 58-60, 149-150.

¹⁰⁶ Lings 149.

¹⁰⁷ Trans. Salahi.

From the Islamic point of view, keeping prisoners of war in the hands of believers is only a means of opening up the essence of goodness that may be deep in their hearts. Thus their nature becomes recipient to the call to accept the divine faith and follow guidance. No vengeance is to be exacted on those prisoners of war.¹⁰⁸

The purpose of this battle, and every battle, was and is to facilitate the spread of Islam. Gentle preaching to hostages is the best way to teach them the faith. Before the companions received verse 70, they slew five of the most hostile leaders of the Quraysh. Qutb is clear, however, that the revelation of verse 70 forbid killing for revenge. The ultimate goal of military jihad is to open the pathways for verbal jihad, and then free all people, even cruel leaders, from *jahiliyya*.

Qutb calls for the destruction of institutions that “restrict man’s freedom of choice,”¹⁰⁹ the Qurayshi ruling council for example. In order to destroy these institutions, Muslims must remove their leaders. Qutb, however, never instructs his followers to kill the leaders. The goal is not violence or vengeance but to open their hearts to Islam so they no longer restrict the spread of the message. In Qutb’s vision, the leaders will convert to Islam and renounce their positions as leaders of *jahiliyya*. In this way, it is possible to destroy the *jahili* leaders without resorting to violence. In Qutb’s reading, Muslims fought at Badr not only to free the people of Medina from the Quraysh, but also to free the Quraysh themselves from *jahiliyya* and to allow them all to freely embrace Islam.¹¹⁰

Surat al-Anfal has great significance for Qutb – this sura sets the historical precedent for a modern-day battle against the modern *jahiliyya*. The Battle of Badr was the first major battle between the Muslims and the forces of *jahiliyya*. In Qutb’s mind, this was not just a lesson in

¹⁰⁸ Qutb, In the Shade of the Qur’an, Vol. 7. 202-203.

¹⁰⁹ Qutb, Milestones 61.

¹¹⁰ Qutb, In the Shade of the Qur’an, Vol. 7. 38.

history, for today *jahiliyya* threatens Muslims again. Qutb thus calls for a new battle; he asks Muslims to follow the example of the Prophet and vanquish *jahiliyya* again. In order to fulfill their duty to free mankind and to protect and spread Islam, Muslims must fight the *jahili* leadership. Qutb calls for an attack, a ‘holy war’ against ‘the apparatus which directs the operation of deception.’¹¹¹ He calls for an attack against the machine, the leaders and the culture itself.

ANOTHER JAHILI GOVERNMENT

When the Free Officers seized control of Egypt in 1952, Qutb and the Muslims Brothers had high hopes. After the revolution, Qutb met with Nasser to council him on Islamic issues and chaired the conference on “intellectual and emotional emancipation of Islam” that Nasser attended.¹¹² Qutb even had an office in the leadership building of the RCC (Revolutionary Command Council.)¹¹³ He had great faith in Nasser and his promises of social justice. In the first days after the revolution, Qutb wrote on the front page of al-Risala,

We the people recognize that today a new dawn appeared and that a new reign casts its shade on this valley. We recognize that this blessed move is not for the sake of an individual or a body or a party. Rather it is for the sake of us, the people. This new uprising alone tore up the political police, curtailed capitalism, [and] gave freedom to workers’ unions...¹¹⁴

Qutb believed the Free Officers would bring true change to Egypt. He saw within them elements of his ideal leaders, the leaders he described in Social Justice in Islam: he believed the Free

¹¹¹ Mitchell 230.

¹¹² Kepel 41.

¹¹³ Musallam, From Secularism to Jihad 139.

¹¹⁴ Musallam, From Secularism to Jihad 138-139.

Officers expressed the will of the people of Egypt and would strive always towards the common good. Qutb hoped Egypt would cast out capitalism and corruption – products of Western influences -- and take a step on the path to a truly Islamic society. In August of 1952, Qutb published a letter in the paper al-Akhbar asking for the establishment of a “just dictatorship for six months for a comprehensive purgation which deprives corrupted ones of every constitutional activity, and which does not permit political freedom except to honest persons.”¹¹⁵ Democracy, he said, was unnecessary, because the most important goals – freedom from the British, feudalism, and capitalism -- were “entrenched in the conscience of the nation and its collective mind.”¹¹⁶

It wasn't long, however, before relations between Nasser and Qutb turned sour. Sources differ on the reason for their disagreement, but, whatever the reason, Qutb resigned from the RCC and became more deeply involved with the Muslim Brotherhood. In the year that followed, tensions between the Free Officers and the Brotherhood escalated. The regime had already abolished all political parties claiming that this action was necessary to achieve the revolution's goals of destroying “corruption and imperialism.”¹¹⁷ The Free Officers, however, had allowed the Brotherhood -- classified as a religious organization -- to persist. Despite the initial cooperation between the two groups, the Free Officers saw the Brotherhood as an increasing threat to their power and in January of 1954 the regime found an excuse -- a student rally that escalated into violence -- to outlaw the Brotherhood and arrest its leaders. Then, three months

¹¹⁵ Musallam, From Secularism to Jihad 141.

¹¹⁶ Musallam, From Secularism to Jihad 139.

¹¹⁷ Mitchell 126.

later, the regime legalized the Brotherhood again and released the leaders from prison since, as President Neguib put it, they “promised to behave themselves.”¹¹⁸

The Brotherhood, however, continued to criticize the regime. When the regime negotiated the Heads of Agreement, a treaty granting the British a right to reoccupy the Canal Zone for seven more years, the Brotherhood was outraged. The regime had censored the press, but the Brotherhood circulated secret pamphlets condemning the agreement. Qutb criticized the government in these pamphlets, taking aim at its secular policies, its willingness to compromise its goals by negotiating with the British, and its attempts to destroy the Muslim Brotherhood.¹¹⁹

A few months later, after a Brother attempted to assassinate Nasser, the regime lashed out against the Brotherhood and arrested over one thousand members and leaders with the intention of completely destroying the organization and, with that, “the regime cleared the path for long-term dictatorial rule.”¹²⁰ This was not the short term, just dictatorship that Qutb had asked for two years earlier.

Convicted of taking part in a conspiracy against the government, Qutb spent the next ten years in prison. It was during those years that he began to describe Nasser’s government as the example of tyranny and *jahiliyya*.¹²¹ He saw that the regime was *jahili* and idolatrous to its core: the brutality of the prison guards convinced him that these men had abandoned God and worshiped Nasser instead.¹²² The rulers of Egypt served neither the will of the people nor the law of God, but enforced laws of their own making. The regime forced Egyptians to obey and worship it. In addition, Qutb believed that Nasser fought against Islam by attempting to

¹¹⁸ Mitchell 133.

¹¹⁹ Musallam, From Secularism to Jihad 149.

¹²⁰ Gordon 175.

¹²¹ Kepel 41.

¹²² Kepel 41.

“modernize the institutions of official Islam, particularly al-Azhar, in an effort to turn them into the most effective possible transmission belt for state ideology.”¹²³ This tyrant, this “iniquitous prince,” attempted to destroy Islam and overwhelm it with *jahili* systems. Nasser had turned himself into a false God and was steering the Muslims in the country to *jahiliyya*.

In the beginning, Qutb had hoped the Free Officers would usher change and steps towards a moral and Muslim society, but now he saw that Nasser was fighting Muslims in Egypt and forcing them into idolatry. Not only the West had fallen, he wrote while in prison, but so had Egypt and every country in the world. Nowhere in the world were people truly free – *jahiliyya* had overtaken the entire world. “The whole world is steeped in *jahiliyya*,”¹²⁴ wrote Qutb. Now was the time for action, for Muslims everywhere to join together in jihad to save the entire world from *jahiliyya*.

LOVE FOR ALL MANKIND

Though these people who have strayed from God are infidels, Qutb’s appeal to hate is not directed toward them. Non-Muslims are not evil, only misguided and ignorant of Islam. The Qur’an¹²⁵ says that at the time of creation, God instilled every human with an ability to understand religious Truth. Therefore, Qutb says, all people have the ability to discern and follow the will of God. All people possess an inborn capacity for goodness. Morality and love of God are natural to humans. The problem arises, however, when man, “swayed by his desires, deviates from the truth imbedded in the depth of his innate nature, and when he tries to follow

¹²³ Kepel 52.

¹²⁴ Qutb, *Milestones* 8.

¹²⁵ Q30:30-31 Trans. Salahi.

laws of his own making, or follows his own opinion instead of Allah's commandments...¹²⁶ If a person falls into this trap, only religion can bring him back, and his *fitra*, his natural inborn character, will guide him back to his natural state.¹²⁷ People stray, not because they are evil, but because they lose touch with their *fitra*. Muslims, therefore, must teach Islam and help people reawaken their *fitra*. They must tear down the obstacles that prevent man from acting in accordance with his nature.

Qutb shows compassion for the individual – he believes that the mission of Islam is to free all people from their prisons, to show them happiness, to fulfill them, and to save them. “Islam will take the initiative and move to save humanity and free people throughout the world from servitude to anyone other than God. It is not possible that Islam will confine itself to geographical boundaries, or racial limits, abandoning the rest of mankind and leaving them to suffer from evil, corruption, and servitude to lords other than God Almighty.”¹²⁸ The purpose of Islam is to save every human being.

Even the most vicious opponents of Islam can reform. As Qutb explains in his description of the significance of the Battle of Badr, the *jahili* leaders may open their hearts to Islam and denounce their past. The purpose of taking hostages is the hope that they may open their hearts to Islam. “God will then find goodness in them... Thus their nature becomes recipient to the call to accept the divine faith and follow guidance.”¹²⁹ In other words, Muslims may fulfill their duty to destroy *jahili* leaders not by killing them, but by teaching them Islam, by appealing to their human goodness and helping them to reestablish their human qualities. Some

¹²⁶ Qutb, Milestones 77.

¹²⁷ Abdulaziz Sachedina, The Islamic Roots of Democratic Pluralism (New York: Oxford, 2001) 152n27.

¹²⁸ Qutb, In the Shade of the Qur'an, Vol. 7. 22.

¹²⁹ Qutb, In the Shade of the Qur'an, Vol. 7. 202.

people have buried their *fitra* deep within themselves, but, if they are willing, God will find it. Conversion, not murder, is the goal.

Qutb believes he can spread Islam through words, example, and by establishing freedom for all people. He shows total faith that each person, granted freedom and shown the purity and beauty of Islam, will choose Islam on their own. God instilled morality in all human hearts, so Qutb says he loves them. “We invite people to Islam because we love them, not because we have something to gain from their conversion.”¹³⁰ His intentions are positive – he believes conversion will bring a person back to their natural, harmonious state.

PERFECT SOCIETY

Islam is not only a religion, says Qutb, it is an all-encompassing way of life. “By the *Shari’ah* of Allah is meant everything legislated by Allah for ordering man’s life. It includes the principles of belief, principles of administration and justice, principles of morality and human relationships and principles of knowledge.”¹³¹ In Qutb’s vision, there can be no division between church and state. God is the only true ruler, and Islam is the only possible system of rules. If a person must submit to the man-made laws of a secular state, he or she must obey powers other than God. “According to the *shari’ah*, ‘to obey’ is ‘to worship.’”¹³² “Anyone that serves anyone other than God in this sense takes himself out of Islam, no matter how strongly he declares himself to be a Muslim.”¹³³ To obey a power other than God is *shirk*, polytheism, a grave sin. In a secular society – or any society that is not perfectly Muslim -- the rulers, the

¹³⁰ Qutb, Milestones 118.

¹³¹ Qutb, Milestones 91.

¹³² Qutb, Milestones 49.

¹³³ Qutb, In the Shade of the Qur’an, Vol. 7. 10.

state, politics, nationalism, and parties become false idols and usurp the sovereignty of God. These societies enslave their citizens and force them into polytheism.

A man can only serve one master, says Qutb, and that master should be God. Only God's law perfectly suits man's nature. The Shari'a is natural because like the laws of the universe and, like man himself, the Shari'a comes from God. Only the Shari'a can create "harmony between [man's] life and nature."¹³⁴ When man worships many idols, when he obeys many laws and rulers that conflict with his nature, he becomes confused and miserable. Modern society creates within man a "hideous schizophrenia," and this is "the origin of modern misery – the anxiety of contemporary society, the sense of drift, the purposelessness, the craving for false pleasures."¹³⁵

Only by forming a Muslim community and accepting the Shari'a into every aspect of their lives can people escape this confusion and misery. True Muslims base life on *tawhid*, the unity of God. *Tawhid* mandates the unity of church and state because state and religion must be the same in order for men to worship and obey only one power. There are cannot be human laws or constitutions, only the Shari'a, God's law.

The Muslims in this community will unite and love and support each other. "In the world there is only one party of Allah," Qutb writes, "All other parties are of Satan and rebellion."¹³⁶ Because all people worship and obey one God, Qutb assumes they will naturally form a single harmonious community. Like the first Muslim community in the time of the Prophet, people

¹³⁴ Qutb, Milestones 74.

¹³⁵ Berman.

¹³⁶ Qutb, Milestones 102.

will join together “on an equal footing in the relationship of love.”¹³⁷ The community welcomes any and all human beings. In one sense, Qutb is radically pluralist:

Those who opt for another system, whether based on nationalism, colour and race, or on class struggle, or similar corrupt theories, are truly enemies of mankind. They are the ones who do not want man to develop those noble characteristics which have been given to him by his Creator. Nor do they wish to see a human society benefit from the harmonious blending of all those capabilities, experiences and characteristics which have been developed among the various races of mankind.¹³⁸

In this community, there is no conflicting patriotism or false allegiances -- Islam is the only nationality. Race does not divide people; love and worship unite them. Non-Muslims, too, are welcome in the community, for, according the Qur’an “there shall be no compulsion in [matters of] religion” and it would be tyranny to force someone into Islam. Non-Muslims, though they worship a different God, will benefit by living under the Shari’a – in his vision, the Shari’a will foster the human dignity of every person, even if they do not worship the same God. Qutb’s utopia, based on love and submission, brings out the noblest characteristics in humans by welcoming peoples of all abilities, different strengths, and varied racial heritage. In this perfect community, humanity flourishes.

Despite rejecting man-made law, Qutb recognizes the need for some form of government. Only a few lines of Milestones and In the Shade of the Qur’an explore the practical matters of government. Qutb prefers to discuss the ideology and leave the logistics for the scholars of the future community. His description of the governing structure is therefore vague and general. He is clear that he does not mean to destroy a tyrannical system just to replace it with another:

¹³⁷ Qutb, In the Shade of the Qur’an, Vol. 7. 218.

¹³⁸ Qutb, In the Shade of the Qur’an, Vol. 7. 219 and also appears in Qutb, Milestones 42.

“Establishing the rule of God on earth does not mean that sovereignty is assigned to a particular group of people... God’s rule is established when His law is enforced and all matters are judged according to His revealed law.”¹³⁹ A just and faithful ruler will merely serve as the voice of the community to implement and enforce the Shari’a. A ruler who has proven unwavering faith to God alone will not strive for power or pride and will never use his political authority for the benefit of himself, his family, or his tribe.¹⁴⁰

In his earlier work Social Justice in Islam, Qutb explains his vision of government in the Muslim community in a little more depth. He explains the importance of *shura*, consultation. *Shura*, he says, is “one of the principles of government in Islam” because the Prophet frequently consulted his companions and accepted their advice.¹⁴¹ In addition, the first Caliphs consulted with the Muslims of the community before making decisions.¹⁴² Based on the Prophet’s example, *shura* is an element of the Shari’a and is therefore a religious duty. Muslims should only obey a leader who “recognizes that government belongs only to God” and implements the Shari’a¹⁴³; therefore, any ruler who does not consult with the people has no authority. Government must be completely consensual, ruled by the majority through one representative, never a self-serving elite. Qutb’s divine utopia will be a form of democracy because the Qur’an commands it.

PATH TO THE SOLUTION

¹³⁹ Qutb, In the Shade of the Qur’an, Vol. 7. 9.

¹⁴⁰ Qutb, Milestones 26.

¹⁴¹ Sayyid Qutb. Social Justice in Islam, Trans. Willian E. Sheppard (London: Brill, 1996) 116.

¹⁴² Qutb, Social Justice in Islam 116.

¹⁴³ Qutb, Social Justice in Islam 115.

Muslims have a duty, explains Qutb, to engage in jihad to abolish *jahiliyya* and free mankind from tyranny. Muslims, however, should not be hasty – in the beginning they should not fight outside forces. The battle begins within the Muslim’s own heart. Qutb bases this belief on the first years of Islam when the Muslim community was still small and weak. This period, the Mecca period, was a time of training, preparation, and education – not fighting. Qutb explains the reason why the earliest Muslims refrained from battle during this time. It was important to begin by,

[Disciplining] the Arab mind to persevere and endure personal and collective hardship as a means to transcend personal egos. One’s own self and immediate community should no longer be the focus and prime movers in one’s life. People needed to be taught restraint and self-control and how not to react with immediate rage and anger, as was their nature.¹⁴⁴

Before beginning an external jihad, every believer needed to strengthen his or her own faith and establish his or her place in the community. The believers would not enter the eventual battles against the Quraysh with haste or anger. Instead, they would study and train. Later, when fighting the Quraysh, they would see the battle as a carefully planned step in a larger mission.

Qutb asks his followers today to base their jihad on the example of the Prophet’s community. The believers must be realistic and levelheaded, move slowly, and evaluate the situation at every step.¹⁴⁵ From there, Qutb recommends a process of activism to his readers. First, the believers must disentangle themselves from modern *jahiliyya*. They should symbolically reject and withdraw from their society and process of government and combat the

¹⁴⁴ Qutb, In the Shade of the Qur’an Vol. 7. 16

¹⁴⁵ Youssef M. Choueiri, Islamic Fundamentalism (Washington: Pinter, 1990) 131.

influences of *jahiliyya* within their own minds.¹⁴⁶ From there, they initiate the offense, jihad, the struggle to disarm the enemy.

Jihad has two forms, a military form and an advocacy form, but, Qutb writes, The Islamic approach does not resort to the use of verbal argument when confronting material power. Nor does it ever resort to compulsion and coercion in order to force its beliefs on people. Both are equally alien to the Islamic approach as it seeks to liberate people from subjugation so that they may serve God alone.¹⁴⁷

Preaching alone is not enough to tear down this real prison. Mere words will not topple tyrants. Believers, says Qutb, must accompany their words with action and fight the oppressors. But, believers must never direct this action against individuals. Blurring the distinction between individual and tyrant leads to a common misreading of Qutb, a misreading that leads terrorist organizations like al-Qaeda to commit murder. True, Qutb instructs Muslims to fight and to preach. Preaching and fighting, however, are not simultaneous or interchangeable. Muslims must fight against tyrants and preach the message of Islam to individuals. Qutb repeats over and over, “There is no compulsion in matters of religion” and he explains that Islam does not gain converts through physical force. Qutb is emphatic: the goal of jihad is not to force conversion, but to wrest political power from the tyrants, to seize their weapons of law and communication.¹⁴⁸

When channels of communication are open and the Muslims have toppled the tyrants who sought to deceive people, the call to Islam must be a gentle, loving invitation. “The correct procedure is to mix with discretion, give and take with dignity, speak the truth with love, and

¹⁴⁶ Choueiri 141.

¹⁴⁷ Qutb, In the Shade of the Qur’an, Vol. 7. 7.

¹⁴⁸ Choueiri 144.

show the superiority of the Faith with humility.”¹⁴⁹ The ultimate goal of jihad is not oppression, dominance, or personal gain, but to set humans free and violence against them will not free them.

Some “defeatists,” writes Qutb, define jihad as a purely defensive war. They “succumb to the pressure of the present circumstances and to the Orientalists’ wily attacks” and try to find evidence that the early Muslims only went on jihad to expel invaders and defend the community against outside attack. This kind of thinking, says Qutb, “betrays stark defeatism” and “a lack of understanding of the nature of Islam.”¹⁵⁰ Jihad is an active, offensive movement that seeks to free mankind all over the world. “If we must describe Islamic jihad as defensive, then we need to amend the meaning of the term ‘defence’ [*sic*] so that it means the defending of mankind against all factors that hinder their liberation and restrict their freedom.”¹⁵¹ The battle is offensive, but the goal is defensive. The military form of jihad is necessary to eliminate the barriers to free choice and communication and to replace unnatural laws. An active approach is the only possible way to save mankind, to impose God’s law and true freedom. After removing the obstacles, jihad takes another form, preaching and advocacy. Muslims must teach the message of Islam and welcome all human beings into the Muslim community. In this state of free choice and open communication, says Qutb, each person may choose to accept or reject Islam.

¹⁴⁹ Qutb, Milestones 120.

¹⁵⁰ Qutb, In the Shade of the Qur’an, Vol. 7. 12.

¹⁵¹ Qutb, In the Shade of the Qur’an, Vol. 7. 12.

III

THE IMPOSSIBLE UTOPIA: CONTRADICTIONS IN QUTB'S VISION

Sayyid Qutb dreamt of utopia. His entire ideology, his thirty volume Qur'anic commentary, and all his popular publications point towards the establishment of a perfect Islamic society. He envisioned a society based on love and cooperation, complete submission to God, perfect democracy, and social justice. Three passages summarize his vision of the Muslim community and the roles of the leaders in this community:

[Individual Muslims] must form themselves into an active, harmonious and cooperative group with a separate and distinct existence. Like the limbs of a human body, all individuals in this group work together to strengthen its foundation, and to enable it to expand and defend itself against any external attack which threatens its existence.¹⁵²

When belief in *La ilaha illa Allah* [trans: there is no God but God] penetrates into the deep recesses of the heart, it also penetrates through the whole system of life, which is a

¹⁵² Qutb, In the Shade of the Qur'an, Vol. 7, 210. Repeated in Qutb, Milestones 39.

practical interpretation of this faith. By this means, those who believe are already pleased with the system which this faith uniquely determines and therefore submit in principle to all the laws and injunctions and details even before they are promulgated. Indeed, the spirit of submission is the first requirement of this faith. Through this spirit of submission the believers learn the Islamic regulations and laws with eagerness and pleasure. As soon as a command is given, the heads are bowed and nothing more is required for its implementation except to hear it.¹⁵³

The believers in this faith must be autonomous and have power in their own society, so that they are able to implement this system and enforce its laws. Moreover, power is also needed to legislate laws according to the need of the group as these arise in its day-to-day affairs.¹⁵⁴

Qutb describes an ideal but impossible society. This community will function as one body, Shari'a will permeate every aspect of life, and the leaders will only serve the people and the Shari'a. The community functions together like a flock of birds. Acting in perfect harmony and agreement, the community anticipates and accepts every law. Each person has already submitted to God and will therefore follow His law without question. When everyone follows one God and one law, there can be no deviation or disagreement. The citizens, then, have complete autonomy and the leader merely states the wishes of the united populace. And underlying these essential attributes is the basic assumption that every person in the community will be free and autonomous.

¹⁵³ Qutb, Milestones 27.

¹⁵⁴ Qutb, Milestones 28.

Qutb's community looks beautiful on paper. He describes this utopia as real and attainable, but this perfect society can exist only in his imagination. He promises loving peace, universal acceptance, a smooth democracy, and absolute freedom for the entire world, but his definitions conflict with Western ideals. And far worse, his philosophy is an illusion. Built on contradictions, it is impossible to implement in the real world. In this chapter, I will show how these essential attributes of the ideal community contradict human nature, the lessons of history, and the circumstances of the modern world.

FORCE THEM TO BE FREE

Qutb's concept of freedom fails for many reasons: it contradicts itself, non-Muslims within the community can never be truly free, and, though he envisions universal reception to his philosophy, Westerners will never accept his ideology because it contradicts their preestablished concepts of freedom. Qutb shatters his own concept of freedom through the act of describing it. Islam, he says, liberates people from external pressures and invites them to its spiritual message. It appeals to their sense of reason, and gives them complete freedom to accept or reject it. This freedom, however, does not mean that they may "elevate their desires into gods, or that they may willingly remain in the servitude of other human beings, some men lords over others."¹⁵⁵ He claims all members of the community will have complete freedom from tyranny, oppression, injustice, inequality, and material desires. But under this law, *he* dictates what is and is not a god and forbids human servitude. He simultaneously imposes a human law and a limit on freedom - people are free to be anything but servants, and he, a human, sets the definition of servitude.

¹⁵⁵ Qutb, Milestones 50.

Qutb's concept of freedom similarly collapses when applied to the non-Muslims in the community. He claims people are free to choose any faith, but must pay a tax and submit. The battle with non-Muslims ends, he says, when "they pay the *jizya*¹⁵⁶ with willing submission and feel themselves subdued" for "there is no compulsion in religion." To whom must the non-Muslims submit? If they submit to God, they are Muslims.¹⁵⁷ This would be coercion into religion. If Qutb means that non-Muslims must submit to the community, this is *jahiliyya*, the lordship of some men over others. Under this 'freedom,' the non-Muslim has only two choices because a person must either convert or pay the tax and may not avoid Islam completely. To the unbeliever, both options are the same: either submit to a religion they do not see as divine or submit to the authority of other men. Either way, they must submit to human authority and contradict Qutb's definition of freedom. Qutb's concept of freedom can only extend to Muslims, and even then it is not complete freedom. The community is not truly plural or equal for it does not grant the same freedoms to Muslims and non-Muslims.

The contradiction in Qutb's ideology is rooted in a one-sided view of humanity. Qutb believes there is only one correct choice: conversion. He believes that the righteous Christians, 'the true monotheists,' converted to Islam as soon as they heard the Qur'an, so he is convinced that, given complete freedom, all people will immediately flock to Islam. The 'freedom to choose' is based on his belief that there is only one possible choice.

FREEDOM FOR PEOPLE WHO NEVER ASK QUESTIONS

¹⁵⁶ *Jizya* is a tax that non-Muslims pay to the Islamic community. Qur'anic commentators disagree on the significance. Most agree that it serves as payment in return for the community's protection. Some commentators believe it may also be a form of punishment for not submitting, a payment for entering into a treaty with the community, or a symbolic gesture of submission.

¹⁵⁷ Literal English translation of "Muslim": one who submits.

Qutb hopes to liberate non-Muslims around the world, but his ideology of freedom does not extend to them. Eliminating obstacles will not lead most non-Muslims to Islam. Destruction of their institutions will only arouse their anger and hatred. Qutb's belief that most individuals will immediately convert reveals his limited perspective and denial of pluralism. The only way to impose this "freedom," is to command it. History shows that theocracy often becomes tyranny. On this subject, Peter Berman makes a good point:

[Qutb's community] was an impossible vision -- a vision that was plainly going to require a total dictatorship in order to enforce: a vision that, by claiming to not rely on man-made laws, was going to have to rely, instead, on theocrats, who would interpret God's laws to the masses. The most extreme despotism was all too visible in Qutb's revolutionary program. That much should have been obvious to anyone who knew the history of the other grand totalitarian revolutionary projects of the 20th century, the projects of the Nazis, the Fascists and the Communists.¹⁵⁸

Qutb assumes that power will not corrupt Muslim leaders. Their faith, he believes, will make them moral. But history shows that no matter how well meaning and idealistic the philosophers, a society that depends on fundamental goodness and morality of humans will immediately fall to tyranny.

Berman, however, forgets the closest modern example of "Qutb's revolutionary program": Iran. Creation of the Shari'a state in Iran reveals one of the greatest problems with the implementation of Qutb's philosophy: the Shari'a. Qutb proposes that the Islamic state will follow the Shari'a in all aspects of life. The Shari'a, however, is complex and often contradicts itself. Multiple interpretations are always possible, so someone must decide which interpretation

¹⁵⁸ Berman.

is correct. In Iran, Ayatollah Khomeini called his theory of government *velayat-i faqih*, government by jurisprudence. Islamic scholars interpreted the Shari‘a and the government imposed their decisions on the masses.¹⁵⁹ Qutb’s theory could also be called government by jurisprudence – like the Iranian system, his utopia requires leaders to interpret the law for the masses. But, in this system, who provides checks and balances on the leaders? If the leaders believe they speak for the masses and expect the citizens to think as a unified whole, what outlet exists for political dissent?

QUTB’S VISION A REALITY? THE EXAMPLE OF IRAN

Through massive protests, Iranians ousted the shah in 1979 to create an Islamic republic. For the next three years secular and religious parties competed for control of the country. Then in 1982, the group of ayatollahs led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini established complete control of Iran.

For over a decade Khomeini had criticized the shah from exile, preaching that the shah was a tyrant and his rule was contrary to Islam. Khomeini had preached that it was indeed possible to form an Islamic community based on the Shari‘a alone. We cannot know for sure if Khomeini ever read Qutb for he never references him¹⁶⁰, but clear parallels exist between their ideologies. Khomeini does not use the term *jahiliyya*, but he outlines the same type of struggle towards the same ends. He describes his mission in the same language that Qutb uses. “In order to attain the unity and freedom of the Muslim peoples,” he writes in his book Islam and Government, “we must overthrow the oppressive governments installed by the imperialists and

¹⁵⁹ Cleveland 436.

¹⁶⁰ Vanessa Martin, Creating an Islamic State: Khomeini and the Making of a New Iran (London: I.B. Tauris) 2000.

bring into existence an Islamic government of justice that will be in the service of the people.”¹⁶¹

Both Qutb and Khomeini lived under oppressive monarchies and saw Islamic government as the path to freedom and representation for all citizens.

Also like Qutb, Khomeini acknowledged the need for social leadership. Qutb saw that his society would require new leadership and he envisioned a democratic ruler who would serve as a single voice for all the people. The ruler’s job would be to execute the Shari’a and to guide, unite, and strengthen the community. “[The rulers would know] that the true source of authority is Allah alone and they are only His trustees,”¹⁶² Qutb explains. In Islam and Government, Ayatollah Khomeini described the role of the leader in his ideal society in exactly the same terms: “The rulers are subject to a certain set of conditions in governing and administering the country, conditions that are set forth in the Noble Qur’an and the Sunna of the Most Noble Messenger.... Islamic government may therefore be defined as the rule of divine law over men.”¹⁶³ For both men, the ruler served both God and men, acting as the voice of the Shari’a and the populace. If all the citizens are Muslims, Qutb and Khomeini assume, the voices of the people and the rulers will speak in harmony with the words of the law.

In the post-revolutionary process of creating an Islamic Republic in Iran, Khomeini sat on the Assembly of Experts, a popularly elected council of imams. After the new political leaders drafted a constitution, they submitted it to the Assembly for revision and ratification. The Assembly completely rewrote the constitution to give complete control of the government to the ulema. Under the new constitution, the people elected the president and national assembly, but nonelected religious leaders held the final authority. The body appointed Khomeini to a lifelong

¹⁶¹ Ruhollah Khomeini, Islam and Government (Berkeley: Mizan P, 1981) 49.

¹⁶² Qutb, Milestones 26.

¹⁶³ Khomeini 55.

term as Supreme Islamic Jurist in 1982. Together with the Council of Guardians, a group of twelve imams, Khomeini interpreted the law on behalf of the Hidden Twelfth Imam.¹⁶⁴ As the Supreme Islamic Jurist, Khomeini had the power to appoint half of the guardians and to oversee all their decisions. He personally held complete control of the entire government. He held the power to appoint and dismiss the military commanders, to veto the presidents' election, and to veto any legislation that did not conform to the Shari'a. By establishing and assuming this position, he realized his ideal society: a society in which all rights and laws were based "one hundred percent on Islam"¹⁶⁵ – on his interpretation of Islam.

Unlike the examples that Berman gives – the Nazis, the Fascists, and the Communists -- Iran under Khomeini did not exactly fall into tyranny. The ruling imams did often act in their own interest and did not always consider the needs of the people, but Khomeini himself did not exploit his extreme power or become a dictator. He dutifully performed his role, making decisions on major legal and religious questions. Iran, however, proved that the Shari'a state is not the easy and natural utopia that Qutb envisioned. First, the difficulties of implementing the Shari'a became obvious. For example, during the revolution, many peasants had lost their land. Wealthy landowners held large properties while the peasants had nothing. The government proposed sweeping land reforms in observance of the Islamic principles of social justice and just distribution of wealth. However, members of the ulema, many of whom held large properties, protested, claiming that the Shari'a protected their right to private property. If the law contradicts itself, promising land to peasants while protecting the land of the rich, how can any

¹⁶⁴ Shi'a Muslims believe that the twelfth imam, born in 869 C.E., went into hiding as a child. The Hidden Imam is the messiah and God will reveal him in the last days of mankind.

¹⁶⁵ Cleveland 432.

government claim to follow the law in every decision? The land reform legislation never passed.¹⁶⁶

Second, not every person living in this perfect Islamic society was satisfied with its laws. The ulema found that traditional family life was more important than the emancipation of women. Women lost the right to initiate divorce, to pursue many professions, and now faced arrest if seen in public without the hijab. Women could not work, travel, or attend school without their husbands' permission. The ulema created new laws to force everyone to conform to their vision of Islamic virtue. The punishment for immodesty or immorality ranged from lashing to prison to public stoning. The ruling ulema deemed newspapers and radio stations that questioned their legitimacy unIslamic and shut them down. The regime alienated many youths as well by banning Western music and media, public dancing, and "impure" elements of society.¹⁶⁷

Most importantly, the system of "authoritarian populism" did not allow any form of dissent. Most people supported Khomeini and his policies -- in that way, the system resembled Qutb's idea of autonomy of the body of people. For those who did not support Khomeini, however, the government employed the Revolutionary Guards, bands of men who beat, arrested, and executed dissenters. The Revolutionary Guards targeted political opponents as well as people who refused to follow Khomeini's strict interpretation of the Shari'a. The guards roamed the streets at night to watch for illegal satellite dishes, women without the hijab, and public dancing, and to listen for illegal Western music. In Qutb's utopia, there was no dissent, no need to enforce laws, for "the believers learn the Islamic regulations and laws with eagerness and pleasure. As soon as a command is given, the heads are bowed and nothing more is required for

¹⁶⁶ Cleveland 436.

¹⁶⁷ Cleveland 437.

its implementation except to hear it.”¹⁶⁸ The real Shari’a state, with its roaming guards, prisons, censorship, and public stonings, was a far cry from Qutb’s utopia, from the society that moved like a single body. Utopia in Iran failed for the same reasons that Qutb’s utopia would fail. This real Shari’a state was free only for those who agreed with the rulers and their interpretations of the Shari’a. Is it freedom if there is no way to dissent? And even if everyone were unanimous, what is the point of a democracy if there are no dissenters?

* * *

Unanimity, leadership and freedom are not the only problems in Qutb’s ideology. He bases every step along the path to his utopia on contradiction. Qutb says to depose leaders and battle *jahiliyya* but not to attack the slaves of *jahiliyya*. The leaders and the elite, however, don’t fight wars. The soldiers are common men who follow the orders of the leaders. How can Muslims attack a government without hurting the people they are trying to free? How does the peaceful and humble message of Islam agree with the forceful deposition of political opponents? The Shari’a presents another problem. Hundreds of years after the death of the end of revelation, new issues arise that the Qur’an does not anticipate – for example, the Qur’an does not include traffic ordinances. More importantly, the Shari’a requires some form of interpretation. Qutb denies the need for an interpreter: “There is no excuse for anyone to understand that government in Islam requires anything more than enforcing the Islamic Shari’ah...” The example of Iran, however, illustrates that not everyone understands religious law in the same way, and the law often contradicts itself. Someone must choose between land reform for social justice or the

¹⁶⁸ Qutb, Milestones 27.

protection of private property. Practically, the leader cannot extract the complete law from the Qur'an and traditions without interpretation.¹⁶⁹

Qutb's philosophical concepts contain internal contradictions that prevent them from practical implementation in social life. How does one attack a government without hurting people? How can Muslims be active and offensive but humble and loving? How can they force people to be free?

The only way to bring the illusion to life is to mutilate it. In the example of Iran, Khomeini did not base his mission on Qutb's work, but on his own interpretation of Islam. Many modern fundamentalists, however, do attempt to carry out Qutb's vision. In this respect, Qutb's language is dangerous. Worse than an ideology of theocracy, his words, read out of context, lead to violence and murder: followers read selectively and lose sight of the complete message. Followers misinterpret Qutb's writings because they are contradictory – they are impossible to interpret and implement correctly.

Qutb was an idealist dreamer, full of impossible ideas – impossible, but not evil. Suffering in prison, he wanted freedom and justice for every human being. He didn't want others to suffer as he did. Pushed into existence in the hands of the militants, however, Qutb's idealism turns to radical violence.

¹⁶⁹ Sayyid Qutb, Sayyid Qutb and Islamic Activism: A Translation and Critical Analysis of Social Justice in Islam, Trans. W.E. Shepard. (Leiden: Brill Academic, 1996) 113.

IV

THE PURE SPRING?

QUTB'S METHODS OF INTERPRETATION

Sayyid Qutb spent ten years in prison with his memory of the Qur'an to comfort and occupy him. Through his own torture and the suffering he saw around him, he dreamed of a perfect world, a world where all people would be free and equal. He found the basis for this world in the Qur'an. Qutb believed this perfect community to be the self-evident theme of the Qur'an, obvious to any reader who read the Qur'an as a whole.¹⁷⁰ He believed all the chapters related to this one theme, this one overall goal of Islam. Individual passages established the details of structure, organization, and implementation of the true Muslim state.¹⁷¹ He wrote a thirty-volume commentary to expound on the details of this clear truth.

¹⁷⁰ Issa J Boullata, "Sayyid Qutb's Literary Appreciation of the Qur'an," Literary Structures of Religious Meaning in the Qur'an, Ed. Issa J. Boullata (Richmond: Curzon, 2000) 354-371. 356.

¹⁷¹ Boullata 366.

RETURNING TO THE PURE SPRING

Qutb saw the community of the Prophet as the perfect civilization and asked, why was the *umma* perfect during the first years of Islam? Why were the first believers able to live in complete obedience to God and perfect cooperation with each other? Was the Prophet's presence necessary? In Milestones, he proposes the answer,

Had the person of the Prophet, peace be on him, been absolutely essential for the establishment and fruition of the message, Allah would not have made Islam a universal message, ordained it as the religion for the whole of mankind, given it the status of the last Divine Message for humanity, and made it a guide for all the inhabitants of this planet in all their affairs until the end of time.¹⁷²

God would not have provided instructions that were impossible to follow for Muslims after the death of Muhammad. Muhammad served only to communicate and reinforce the message. He recounts this *hadith* to support his belief: "When someone asked the Mother of the Faithful 'Aisha, may Allah be pleased with her, about the character of the Prophet, peace be on him, she answered, "His character was the Qur'an."¹⁷³ According to Qutb, the Qur'an provides all the guidance that a person or a community could need. God's message stands alone and needs no explanation, promotion, or intermediary. Muhammad was only a man, and because the Qur'an surpasses human knowledge, the Prophet has no special claim of understanding or influence on the revelation.¹⁷⁴ The believer needs no guidance but the Book. If the first community of

¹⁷² Qutb, Milestones 11.

¹⁷³ Qutb, Milestones 12-13.

¹⁷⁴ Ahmad S. Moussalli, Moderate and Radical Islamic Fundamentalism: the Quest for Modernity, Legitimacy, and the Islamic State (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1999) 135-6.

Muslims did not rely on Muhammad's guidance, why cannot modern Muslims return to the perfect *umma*?

The first believers, answers Qutb, established a perfect society because they drank from a "clear spring,"¹⁷⁵ the pure, unpolluted Qur'an. Later, the spring became mixed with other sources: "Greek philosophy and logic, ancient Persian legends and ideas, Jewish scriptures and traditions, Christian theology, and, in addition to these, fragments of other religions and civilizations."¹⁷⁶ Islamic jurisprudence, Qur'anic commentaries, and soon all Islamic theology mingled with these other forms of thought. In Qutb's reasoning, non-Qur'anic traditions -- traditions born of *jahili* sources -- polluted Islam. Muslims today cannot live in the same utopia of the first believers because they follow a tainted Islam.

Hundreds of years of *tafsir* stand on *jahili* foundations, says Qutb. *Tafsir*, the process of interpretation, elucidation, and clarification of verses in the Qur'an, began with the Prophet, who was both reciter and interpreter of the Qur'an. In the next thirteen hundred years, *tafsir* expanded into a complex science with many branches and schools.¹⁷⁷ Qutb rejects these schools and advocates a return to the foundation, a return to the pure spring. "We must remove ourselves from all the influences of the *jahiliyyah* in which we live and from which we derive benefits. We must return to that pure source from which the first generation derived its guidance, free from any mixing or pollution."¹⁷⁸ Qutb claims to see through all the pollution of the last thirteen hundred years and offers to guide the reader to this pure version of Islam. The only accurate way a person can interpret the Qur'an, he says, is to disregard all *jahili* interpretation and rely on the

¹⁷⁵ Qutb, Milestones 12.

¹⁷⁶ Qutb, Milestones 13.

¹⁷⁷ Mahmoud M. Ayoub, The Qur'an and its Interpreters, Vol. 1 (Albany: State University of New York P, 1984) 25.

¹⁷⁸ Qutb, Milestones 16.

Qur'an itself and a few of the most trustworthy sayings of the Prophet -- only those almost universally accepted as accurate.¹⁷⁹ The truths of the Qur'an are self-explanatory, he says, self-evident to any person with clear sight.¹⁸⁰ Qutb does not see his interpretation as interpretation at all – just a logical examination of the true themes of the Qur'an. He does permit “carefully delineated” *ijtihad*, independent interpretation of the legal injunctions of the Qur'an, as long as the interpreter focuses on the Qur'an alone. Even this, though, only allows a superficial understanding, not the apprehension of greater truths and themes. Qutb believes that only he and a few others have seen the light of truth and understand the greater meaning of the Qur'an. As Euben puts it, “Qutb assumes for himself (and for perhaps a few other select Muslims) the status of one who has ceased to watch shadows on the wall, one who has ascended beyond the mouth of the cave and into the blinding light of the sun.” Qutb believes that most people are still trapped in *jahiliyya* and cannot disentangle their minds from corrupting influences.¹⁸¹ Therefore, Qutb ironically implies that a Muslim cannot see the “self evident truth” of the Qur'an without his guidance.¹⁸²

Qutb has not been the only modern scholar to disregard the centuries of Qur'anic commentary and look back to the roots of Islam. Like fundamentalists, many modernists also return to the foundational text and disregard the interpretations of traditional commentators. Modernist scholar Abdulaziz Sachedina believes that thirteen hundred years of tradition and interpretation have emphasized the negative implications of the Qur'an – violence and antipluralism – because of societal influences. These aspects, he says, are rooted in culture and not theology. Sachedina also has a vision of a free Islamic state, but his vision is different than

¹⁷⁹ Ayoub 7.

¹⁸⁰ Ayoub 7.

¹⁸¹ Roxanne L. Euben, *Enemy in the Mirror* (Princeton: Princeton, 1999) 59.

¹⁸² Euben 59.

Qutb's: "Islam does support functional secularity, some kind of separation of jurisdictions that allows religion to remain beyond government's intervention. These separate jurisdictions allow the necessary freedoms for all citizens."¹⁸³ Like Qutb, Sachedina finds freedom for all people by returning to the roots of Islam, but he presents a different kind of freedom than Qutb's utopia: in his vision, freedom for all is the secular state, while in Qutb's it is the Islamic state. And Sachedina engages in debate with the commentators of the past while Qutb writes them off unconditionally as products of *jahiliyya*, thereby giving his own work exclusive authority.¹⁸⁴ Both men return to the early sources and find opposite paths to a free and peaceful society. Their different interpretations prove that there is no one true Islam.

IS QUTB'S SPRING PURE?

Qutb hates philosophers. In The Islamic Conception and Its Characteristics, Qutb argues that any form of philosophy encroaches on the realm of God.¹⁸⁵ Philosophers presume to understand a reality beyond human understanding and thereby draw the need for scripture and unquestioning obedience into doubt. Philosophers question divine truths using their merely human capabilities. Humans need reason, says Qutb in The Islamic Conception, only to find Islam and to understand that it is the only true path. A truly logical person will use his logic to understand the limit of his own understanding. He will embrace God's whole truth without question because he understands that divine truth is beyond his reason. Philosophers, however,

¹⁸³ Zahir Janmohamed, "Fear Of A Shia Crescent: Dr. Abdulaziz Sachedina on Iran & Iraq," Alt.muslim 12 Oct. 2005. Halalfire Media Network. 1 Mar. 2006 <http://www.altmuslim.com/perm.php?id=1565_0_25_0_C38>.

¹⁸⁴ Euben 59.

¹⁸⁵ Euben 70.

in their presumptions of superhuman understanding, call Islam and divine truth into question.¹⁸⁶

Euben writes, “Given Qutb’s insistence on the limits of human reason, philosophy thus appears both methodologically and epistemologically antagonistic not only to Islam but to the very truths of human existence.”¹⁸⁷ Like *jahiliyya*, philosophers attempt to destroy Islam and undermine humanity. Philosophy runs through the ocean of *jahiliyya*, the corruption that has flooded into Islam and polluted its pure meaning.

But Qutb, of course, is a philosopher, even though he claims that he only expounds the pure truth of God. He claims that he does not interpret at all: he presents the pure spring. He distilled Islam from *jahiliyya* and he describes the one eternal truth. After discussing the boundaries between science and faith, he writes, “Even this is not my personal opinion... This is the decision of Allah and His Messenger...”¹⁸⁸ Qutb removes himself from the process of interpretation.¹⁸⁹

When Qutb claims that he alone has access to God’s one truth, that he alone can see through the forces of *jahiliyya* and that his reading is, therefore, not an interpretation at all, he removes all possibility for dissent and invalidates any other interpretation.

Is it possible to read the Qur’an without interpreting? In the introduction to the English translation of *In the Shade of the Qur’an*, translator Manazir Ahsan writes,

[O]n matters where the Qur’an does not provide more than basic information and the Prophet has also not provided any clear indication or details, unlike some *mufassirin*, [those who undertake *tafsir*, interpretation,] [Qutb] scrupulously avoids speculation, and refrains from putting forward any subjective judgments or opinions. Not only does he

¹⁸⁶ Euben 70-71.

¹⁸⁷ Euben 71.

¹⁸⁸ Qutb, *Milestones* 96.

¹⁸⁹ Euben 88.

carefully avoid unnecessary legal polemics, he also refuses to engage in speculative *tafsir* arguing for or against various schools of philosophical thought, his main concern being to present the clear messages of the Qur'an as expounded by the Prophet, his Companions, and scholars of earlier generations.”¹⁹⁰

The translator sees the work as fact, unbiased elaboration and clarification of the basic Qur'anic principles and themes. In his book The Qur'an and its Interpreters, Mahmoud Ayoub characterizes Qutb's commentary as unfettered by outside influences, “a conscious effort to remain within the purview of the Qur'an.”¹⁹¹ Has Qutb found the original intention of the Qur'an? Has he discovered the pure spring and escaped the influences of *jahiliyya*?

In The Enemy in the Mirror, Roxanne Euben asks the obvious question: what special knowledge does Qutb have that allowed him to escape the “false consciousness” of *jahiliyya*?

His indictment of *jahiliyya* ... has reflexive force. Although he is quite alert to the complex of influences and circumstances that condition interpretations with which he disagrees, Qutb's tendency to regard truth and falsity as self-evident inures him to the conditionality of his own interpretation...[W]ithout a hint of self consciousness, Qutb claims to see clearly what the rest of us cannot.¹⁹²

Qutb claims a unique view of the truth, says Euben. He claims to identify the corrupting forces and sees through them to the pure unitary truth. He does not stop to question his own influences.

In reality, of course, *jahiliyya* influences Qutb too – could anyone completely strip his or her thought of every intellectual influence? As Euben observes, “Qutb is preoccupied with such distinctively ‘modern’ phenomena as Enlightenment philosophy, socialism, and liberalism,

¹⁹⁰ Qutb, In the Shade of the Qur'an, Vol.1. ix.

¹⁹¹ Ayoub 7.

¹⁹² Euben 59.

unintentionally incorporating many of the terms and concerns of these discourses while insisting on philosophical ‘purity.’”¹⁹³ Qutb’s entire thought process, “the reification of Islam, the understanding of social systems in terms of dynamic social processes, the incorporation of an idea of progressive (if contingent) historical change, the pronounced concern for social justice...and the very concept of modern *jahiliyya*,” stems from his modern consciousness, even as he claims to return to the roots of Islam.¹⁹⁴ In addition, much of Qutb’s philosophy is a reaction: Qutb reacts against Westernization, Nasserism, and the bankruptcy of modern secular liberalism. Just as he unconsciously forms his thought in the shape of modern social discourse, he forms his thought against modern systems. Either way, these “*jahili*” movements shape his thought.

A couple examples will show that Qutb not only brings his modern consciousness into his interpretation, but also stretches passages and engages in contradictory methods of interpretation in order to prove his interpretation is correct, often reading against the clearest meaning of the verses. First, an example from Euben: Qutb believes that both men and women possess equal capacities for piety and obedience to God, and are therefore equal in the most important respect. But how can he resolve that with the Qur’an?

[H]ow does Qutb’s distinction here square with the Qur’anic passages which clearly state, for example, that men have ‘precedence’ over women; that men are to receive double the inheritance of women; and that the testimony of one man equals that of two women?... Qutb thus confronts two dilemmas with regard to gender. First he must show that certain Qur’anic passages mean something different from what they seem to say.

¹⁹³ Euben 84.

¹⁹⁴ Euben 84-5.

And second, he must convince his readers that such a task is not an act of interpretation but is, in fact, the discovery of the ‘true Islam.’¹⁹⁵

How does Qutb attempt this? Euben provides a quote from Social Justice in Islam to explain Qutb’s treatment of the subject.

As for the relation between the sexes, Islam has guaranteed to women complete equality with men in regard to sex, and it has allowed no discrimination except in some incidental cases relating to endowments, customs or responsibilities, none of which affect the actual situations of the two sexes. So whenever endowments and customs and responsibilities are equal, and whenever they are different, discrimination between the sexes follows accordingly.¹⁹⁶

Thus, according to Qutb, men and women are equal in the eyes of God; inequalities are due only to their unequal circumstances, unequal physical abilities, and unequal roles. Qutb claims that there is no discrimination – except when discrimination is necessary. And why do men and women have unequal abilities and unequal roles? God created humans and endowed them with abilities and God outlined their roles in the Qur’an. Women are equal in the eyes of God, but God created them with unequal abilities and roles? These discoveries, readings against the obvious meaning of the text in order to support his preexisting view, are not discoveries of the true meaning. They are the twisting and stretching of interpretation – interpretation to fit his main theme: the establishment of a perfect community. For his community to be perfect, every person must be equal and have a defined role. With this theme always in his sight he interprets any passage to support it.

¹⁹⁵ Euben 65-66.

¹⁹⁶ Euben 66.

Another example shows that Qutb not only interprets individual passages towards his theme, he warps the entire science of interpretation to allow him to support his one truth. Manazir Ahsan believes that Qutb's refusal "to engage in speculative *tafsir* arguing for or against various schools of philosophical thought" allows him to "present the clear messages of the Qur'an as expounded by the Prophet, his Companions, and scholars of earlier generations." The refusal to engage in this type of *tafsir*, however, does not lead to the presentation of a clear message – in fact, it produces the opposite result. In other words, Qutb's rejection of the traditional schools of interpretation does not mean that he does not interpret. On the contrary, this refusal allows him to oscillate between them, at different moments drawing from different genres of interpretation, using whichever method allows him to arrive at his predetermined interpretation. He goes so far as to shift between two modes in the interpretation of a single passage. An example from volume 7 of In the Shade of the Qur'an in which Qutb deals with the role of the believer in holy war reveals how Qutb's rejection of established methods of interpretations allows him to extract whatever meaning he chooses from the text.

Before showing how Qutb disregards traditional methods of interpretation, I will provide a brief explanation of these traditional methods. Before showing how Qutb manipulates the science of abrogation, I will explain how other scholars employ this science. The Qur'an is replete with internal contradictions. For example, both 16:125 and 9:29 address the Muslim's role and responsibilities in spreading Islam. 16:125 enjoins non-violent means of spreading the message of Islam. "Summon to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good admonition and argue against them with what is better, for your Lord knows best who has strayed from His path

and who has been guided.”¹⁹⁷ In this sura, God instructs the believers to dialogue with unbelievers. There is no injunction toward violence, for God is the ultimate judge. Scholar al-Wahidi supports the traditional view in placing the revelation of this verse immediately after the Battle of Uhud in 625 C.E.¹⁹⁸

Five years after receiving 16:125, Muhammad received this revelation: “Fight those who believe not in God nor the Last Day, nor forbid, nor profess the religion of truth from among the People of the Book until they give the *jizya* tax by hand, being subdued.” Traditional scholars date verse 9:29 to 630 C.E. after the raid on Tabuk. In this verse, God orders the Prophet and his companions to fight the pagans until they submit. How do interpreters deal with contradictions like this?

Historically, Muslims have relied on the life and sayings of the prophet, the *hadith*, for assistance and guidance in interpreting the Qur’an and resolving its internal contradictions. The Qur’an is not arranged in the chronological order of revelation, but by chapter length. Interpreters must therefore rely on *hadith* to determine which passages came last in chronological order. A chain of transmission links each account to a direct witness. Muslim historians analyze each source and determine whether each individual is trustworthy. Scholars only recognize *hadith* transmitted through a chain of reputable sources. One widely accepted mode of interpretation, *naskh*, abrogation, presupposes that the passage that Muhammad received last is true for all time. Previous verses, those that have been abrogated, relate to specific circumstances within the early Muslim community and are therefore no longer valid. This, however, leads to one of the greatest difficulties in interpreting the Qur’an. Mahmoud Ayoub

¹⁹⁷ Reuven Firestone, “Disparity and Resolution in the Qur’anic Teachings on War: A Reevaluation of a Traditional Problem,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 56 (1997) 5.

¹⁹⁸ Firestone 5.

summarizes the problem: “[A]mong Muslim scholars there is no general agreement as to what verses are abrogated and by what verses.”¹⁹⁹ If interpreters cannot be sure which verse came last, they cannot decide which injunctions hold true for all time. For many verses, however, most scholars agree on an overall timeframe and therefore agree on the final eternal injunctions. Most scholars believe Muhammad received 9:29 five years after receiving 16:125, so 9:29 abrogates. Muhammad died in 632 C.E., so many scholars believe this was the last revelation concerning war that he received and therefore is true for all times and all places to follow.²⁰⁰

Some scholars, however, emphasize the importance of the historical context of each verse. This school of interpretation looks to occasions of revelation, *asbab al-nuzul*, to determine whether a verse has a general or specific meaning: some verses may be true for all times and places while some are true for a particular time or person only. The *asbab al-nuzul* tell which are which. This method of interpretation puts less emphasis on the complete annulation of a verse and seeks to find the situations to which each verse would apply.²⁰¹ These scholars resolve contradiction without abrogation by positing that each passage reflects a specific circumstance during the Prophet’s career. The role of the jurist, in their view, is to consider each ruling in light of specific circumstances because there is often no one correct ruling for all people at all times. For example, Muhammad received the earlier verses that prescribed non-confrontation while the Muslim community was still small and weak. According to this genre of interpretation, the community should avoid war at any time it is weak and fight only when it is strong.²⁰²

¹⁹⁹ Ayoub 20.

²⁰⁰ Firestone 16-17.

²⁰¹ Ayoub 32.

²⁰² Firestone 5.

Muhammad received Sura 8 after the Battle of Badr in 624 C.E, a year before verse 16:125. According to scholars of the *naskh* genre, this verse has been abrogated. Qutb indirectly addresses issues of abrogation in his commentary on verses 8:39-40 that read,

Fight them until there is no more oppression, and all the submission is made to God alone. If they desist, God is certainly aware of all they do. But if they turn away, know that God is your Lord Supreme. How splendid is this Lord Supreme, and how splendid is the Giver of support.

The description of the role of the believer in jihad and destroying oppression is obviously crucial to Qutb's philosophy. In the following commentary, he writes,

This is the purpose and the limit of *jihad*, or struggle for God's cause, not only at a particular time, but at all times. The statements related to *jihad* and the laws of war and peace in this *surah* are not the final ones. The final version is that included in *Surah 9*, Repentance, or *al-Tawbah*. On the other hand, Islam is a positive movement which deals with human situations employing means that are suitable for different situations.

Moreover, it is a well structured movement that uses fitting means and methods for every stage. Nevertheless, we have here a statement that lays down a permanent principle that defines the objectives and the confrontation between Islam and un-Islamic social set-ups.

This is embodied in the verse which says: "*Fight them until there is no more oppression, and all submission is made to God alone.* (Verse 39)²⁰³

In this commentary, Qutb says that 8:39-40 is both true for all times and abrogated by a later verse. When he says that Sura 9 gives the final version, he stands within the traditional bounds of *naskh* and agrees with the general consensus that this verse has been abrogated. But then he

²⁰³Qutb, In the Shade of the Qur'an, Vol. 7. 133.

says that 8:39-40, though abrogated, “lays down a permanent principle.” How is this possible? If he believes this verse has been abrogated, it cannot apply to some situations or lay down a permanent principle. Then he states that Islam provides different injunctions for different times, now looking at the verse from the *asbab al-nuzul* perspective. Can *asbab al-nuzul* resolve this difficulty? If the verse has been abrogated, could it still retain meaning in certain circumstances? Or has it been abrogated by the permanent injunction in Sura 9? Either way, whether he believes the verse abrogated or applicable only to some situations, how can he claim that it holds truth for “all times”? What is Qutb doing in his interpretation of this verse?

In the quote above, Qutb attempts to separate the verse into two intentions: revealing the laws of war and defining actions for the believer in jihad. The laws of war and peace change in the next sura – the laws in Sura al-Anfal are temporary and invalidated by abrogation. The role of the believer, however, was not abrogated. This verse describes the correct action for any times the believers find themselves in this particular circumstance. As Muslims now face the same *jahiliyya* that the earliest Muslims faced, the sura establishes the objectives of jihad for all modern Muslims. And because Qutb believes this battle with *jahiliyya* will never end, the verse becomes true for all time – the particular circumstance of its revelation is eternal. Qutb uses *naskh* to invalidate the verse and *asbab al-nuzul* to give the same verse continuing significance – he draws conclusions out of the same passage using different means at the same time. This method allows Qutb to preserve an important foundation of his philosophy, freeing the unbelievers from oppression -- a goal that the wording of 8:39 supports -- while supporting the rules of war in Sura 9. Also, this method allows him to remain within the mainstream genre of *naskh*. Qutb steps back and forth between two genres of interpretation to extract the meaning he needs to prove his argument. Refusing to choose between methods of interpretation does not

mean Qutb does not interpret. Instead of choosing one method or the other, Qutb chooses both and alternates to suit his need. Not only is this an interpretation -- an interpretation that employs not one but two hermeneutical modes -- it is an impossible method that refuses to acknowledge any concrete meaning in text.

To this point I have used the English word “interpretation” and the Arabic word “*tafsir*” to describe the process of analyzing, explaining, elucidating, and commenting on the Qur’an. *Tafsir*, however, is only one of the two possible branches of interpretation of the Qur’an: *tafsir* and *ta’wil*. Early commentators used the terms interchangeably, but over time, the meanings diverged. *Tafsir* came to describe “the general elucidation of a verse with respect to discovering its exoteric meaning and application.”²⁰⁴ *Tafsir* often centers on understanding of a specific verse, deciphering the language, or interpreting legal codes within the Qur’an. *Tafsir* is unveiling. *Ta’wil*, on the other hand, is concerned with the general and specific meanings of the text. *Ta’wil* looks for broader themes, esoteric meanings, the “final purpose, meaning, or end of a thing.”²⁰⁵ The difference between the two, “according to some commentators, is that *tafsir* is concerned primarily with the transmission (*riwaya*) of tradition, whereas *ta’wil* is concerned with the deeper comprehension (*diraya*) of the inner meaning of the sacred text.”²⁰⁶ *Ta’wil* allows the commentator greater freedom, though often commands less respect as a valid interpretation. “It has been through *ta’wil* that Muslim scholars and mystics were able to bring the Qur’an into the hearts, imagination, and total life experience of the masses. ...[A *mu’awwil* (esoteric exegete)] enjoys the infinite scope of his imagination...”²⁰⁷ Qutb would deny that his description is esoteric – indeed, he purports it as the clear, obvious truth. In reality, however, he presents much

²⁰⁴ Ayoub 21.

²⁰⁵ Ayoub 21.

²⁰⁶ Ayoub 21.

²⁰⁷ Ayoub 24.

more than that. Qutb works towards one goal and brings the Qur'an to support that goal. He employs his imagination to interpret every passage towards that goal. He brings the Qur'an into the "hearts, imagination, and total life experience of the masses." He moves beyond the words on the page into an interpretation for modernity, an interpretation for his own political agenda. How does Qutb's style of interpretation compare to that of other commentators? Is Qutb's style closer to *ta'wil* or the *tafsir* of traditional commentators?

ALL VERSES POINT TO ONE THEME

In The Qur'an and its Interpreters, Mahmoud Ayoub compares a range of schools of *tafsir*, "examples of juristic, Mu'tazili, philosophical, and mystical *tafsir*" as well as Shi'i and modern *tafsir*.²⁰⁸ Ayoub compares Qutb's interpretation of 2:276 to 2:281, the usury verses, to the interpretations by other commentators. Ibn Kathir, for example, attempts to place the verse in the historical context and establish a background of *hadith*. Both Ibn Kathir and Nisaburi examine the meaning of the language and ask what possible significances the word *riba*, usury, could have. Tabari expounds on the punishment for usury. Numerous commentators focus on the intended audience for these verses. In short, each commentator focuses on the individual verses, attempting to extract the exact meaning, history, and implication of the prohibition of usury.

Qutb alone takes a different path. He pulls the verses into a modern social context.

Ayoub quotes Qutb:

God speaks the truth, for we see no society practicing usury but that it loses comfort, blessing, happiness, and contentment. One may see affluence on the surface, production,

²⁰⁸ Ayoub 3.

and many resources, yet blessing is not in the magnitude of resources, it is rather in the wholesome quiet and secure enjoyment of these resources. One can observe the frustration, unhappiness, and fear which exist in the rich nations. We have pointed to the psychological disturbance which wealth magnifies rather than being able to cure. From these nations, unrest, fear and trouble flow into the world at large where humanity lives in continuous fear of conflagration.” Sayyid Qutb then contrasts this situation with the society organized on the principle of sharing with contentment and almsgiving God’s boundaries and his favors.²⁰⁹

Unlike these other commentators, Qutb uses these verses as more examples for his one main theme – the establishment of a utopian society on earth. Instead of focusing on the meaning of the individual verses, exploring the significance of the word *riba* like Nisaburi, analyzing the context like Ibn Kathir, or considering the judicial implications of the verse like Tabari, Qutb applies these verses to modern times and reads into them an attack on capitalism, Western society, and Westernization.

Qutb crosses over the vague line into *ta’wil*, engaging his imagination, vision, and bending the verses to fit his own time. He searches for the final purpose, the one true meaning. Though he claims this is the obvious truth, his reading in fact grasps for the deeper, broader-reaching meaning. In light of Ayoub’s definition of *ta’wil*, I would further specify Euben’s characterization of Qutb. He does not only interpret and then deny the act of interpretation – he denies that his *ta’wil*, his loose and esoteric interpretation, is anything but the pure, self-evident truth.

* * *

²⁰⁹ Sayyid Qutb, *Fi Zilal al-Qur’an*, 7th ed. Vol. 1 (Beirut: Dar Ihya’ al Turath Al-‘Arabi, 1971) 481-482. As quoted in Ayoub 273-274.

Qutb departs from centuries of interpretations and commentaries on the Qur'an, calling them polluted.²¹⁰ He illuminates the pure, uncorrupted Qur'an. He offers the pure spring as it flowed in the time of the Prophet. This is the dangerous contradiction underlying Qutb's entire theology: Qutb believes that his interpretation is not an interpretation, only a literal reading for modern times. According to his reading, other religions, philosophers, interpreters, sects, and societies are *jahili*, so he is the only true Muslim and only his reading conveys the intended meaning. "Even this is not my personal opinion," Qutb writes. "...This is the decision of Allah and His Messenger..."²¹¹ Qutb removes himself from the process of interpretation and thereby silences discourse and debate.²¹² He can answer any argument and support any claim by claiming, "It is that way because God says so."

Qutb hates philosophers but enters into esoteric speculation, as I have shown. He hates *jahiliyya*, but his interpretation reflects modernity. He denies that his interpretation is an interpretation at all. His words take on an authority above all others. Many readers, even his translator, believe he espouses the one truth.

Qutb *must* portray his interpretation as the presentation of the one clear truth of the Qur'an because his portrayal of Islam depends on the assumption that there is only one truth. Euben writes,

Qutb implicitly suggest that without the possibility of unitary knowledge – and in particular acknowledgement of a moral unity it terms of which we can organize human

²¹⁰ Qutb, Milestones 16.

²¹¹ Qutb, Milestones 96.

²¹² Euben 88.

life – humanity is cut adrift, doomed to a knowledge that is purely positivistic and instrumental.²¹³

Without one clear truth, one guiding light for all people, human beings have no hope of escaping the “hideous schizophrenia” of *jahiliyya*. To establish one unified community for the entire world, a community without dissent, there must be one clear and concrete truth. Qutb’s entire philosophy and mission rests on a belief in the existence of a single truth.

INTERPRETING THE QUR’AN AS A WHOLE

Most interpreters lost the true meaning of Islam because they are steeped in *jahiliyya*, says Qutb, but he sees another problem with their methods of interpretation. Elite scholars, the ulema, exegeted the passages line by line, even word by word, and broke the continuity of the Qur’an. The discussions were “erudite” over analyses and did not apply to the real world.²¹⁴

Qutb diverges from the traditional format of Qur’anic commentary. Traditional commentaries focus on the individual significance of each verse, each word. Qutb’s commentary, however, looks different. He begins with broad histories and overviews and explains his entire philosophy before he even quotes the Qur’an. When he does turn to verses, he works in the opposite direction of a traditional interpretation: instead of analyzing each verse, he employs them as support within the text of his argument. Qutb has already indicated the major themes of the Qur’an, he knows the goal of the Qur’an, and he knows where the verses point before he even begins to quote them. The Qur’an is the background for his argument, the foundation of a pre-established philosophy. Unlike the “erudite” scholars who focus on theology

²¹³ Euben 72.

²¹⁴ Hugh S. Galford, “Sayyid Qutb and the Qur’anic Story of Joseph,” Muslim-Jewish Encounters, Intellectual Traditions, and Modern Politics, Ed. Ronald L. Nettler, and Suha Taji-Farouki. (Amsterdam: Harwood, 1998) 42.

and jurisprudence, Qutb writes a manual for action with In the Shade of the Qur'an. Milestones, then, is the logical next step: he has stripped most of the Qur'anic basis from his philosophy and presented the major themes as a concise guide. Milestones is simple and easy to read. Understanding its concepts requires only a basic understanding of the Qur'an and Islam. The book is powerful, uplifting, and inspiring, completely unlike the meticulous, "erudite" theological commentaries of many ulema.

Qutb is not the only interpreter to look for broad themes: modernist scholars like Fazlur Rahman put forth interpretations based not on individual words or passages, but on a general understanding of overarching themes.²¹⁵ The goal of Muslim modernists is to reconcile Islam and the Western world, to revitalize Islam in the modern world and extend its scope. They seek to improve the world by bringing Islam to modern society, by revealing the progressive, non-violent ideals buried under centuries of tradition. Interpreting the Qur'an in terms of broad themes creates a practical model, a straightforward image of Islam with which the reader can actively engage. The interpretation becomes a manual for action.

In addition to this method of interpretation, Qutb shares some goals with the modernists. Both advocate forms of democracy, and cite *shura*, consultation, as a mandate for representative government. They support personal freedoms, moral societies through individual responsibility and spiritual satisfaction, racial diversity, and community ties. Qutb is not the only modern interpreter who believes Islam has a place in government. Sachedina, for example, believes that a moderately religious government will rule fairly and help establish unity between the government, individual, and community. Both believe that *fitra* can guide individual morality

²¹⁵ Fazlur Rahman, Major Themes of the Qur'an (Minneapolis: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1994)

and uphold ethics and order within the community.²¹⁶ Both claim to support religious freedom. In fact, Sachedina quotes Qutb to summarize his own interpretation of the non-compulsion verse: “Sayyid Qutb regards the verse as ‘the manifestation of God’s favor toward humankind,’ because the message upholds dignity and respect for individual autonomy in the matter of guidance and error in belief.”²¹⁷ If both Sachedina and Qutb write manuals for the perfect society with similar goals, why is Qutb considered a dangerous fundamentalist while Sachedina is considered peaceful and progressive?

The visions of Qutb and Sachedina diverge when actually implemented in the community. Qutb implies that everyone, if truly free, will choose Islam, while Sachedina’s community reflects progressive Western bias: religious diversity is not only tolerable, but enriches the community. This is an example of the fundamental difference between Qutb and other modernists: instead of attempting to bring Islam to modernity through compromise, Qutb wants to bring modernity under Islam.

The modernists and fundamentalists outline their visions for the ideal community, but regardless of the differences, history suggests that a perfect community, Islamic or otherwise, is an impossible dream, an idealist illusion. Would Qutb’s utopia succeed while all other large-scale utopias in history failed? Too often, leaders imposed utopian doctrine by force. Force required prisons, torture, and mass executions. The record of history shows that Qutb’s community would end in oppression and disaster like all other enforced utopias. While Sachedina argues that a peaceful, secular Islamic state is possible and is the intention of the Qur’an, Qutb argues that the establishment of the pure Islamic state is the only correct choice for

²¹⁶ Abdulaziz Sachedina, The Islamic Roots of Democratic Pluralism (New York: Oxford, 2001)

92.

²¹⁷ Sachedina 90.

all of mankind and Muslims must fight to create this state. After destroying the obstacles, all people, he believes, will enter the community. This, then, is the difference between the two interpreters: Sachedina says the community is possible, while Qutb says God mandates the community as the command of God.

Qutb may be dangerous, but for different reasons than CNN's terrorism analysts tell us. Qutb is an idealist – he does not command violence and, like other 20th century modernists, he dreams of a utopian state. His utopian state, however, is not secular but Islamic. The danger in Qutb's thought is his denial of the validity of all other interpretations of the Qur'an. All real Muslims, he says, must agree with him. In the absolutism of his vision, Qutb most resembles other political thinkers of the modern era. Unlike them, however, he relies on religious discourse — not the secular principles of the Enlightenment — to ground his arguments. Indeed, the combination of his hermeneutic certainty – his denial that his interpretation is an interpretation -- and his demand for universal application share more with European utopian theorists of the extreme Left and Right than it does with the theological traditions of Muslim ulema of either the modern or pre-modern era. His is the only truth, the truth that God intended. But his vision is an interpretation, *ta'wil* -- Qutb uses the Qur'an as a springboard for his imagination and creates a dream world. Welcoming all people into his dream world becomes forcing his world upon all people. He turns the invitation to utopia into an order, forcing it onto Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

Still, Qutb shuns violence. Love is his fundamental motivation, the reason behind his entire project. As we have seen, there are no non-violent means of bringing the entire world today into an Islamic *umma*. But, instead of collapsing as an impossible contradiction, his philosophy spread. He became “the father of Islamic fundamentalism” because readers chose to

ignore the platform of love and the commands against violence. Why do his readers read selectively? Why do they ignore the purpose of his mission?

V

QUTB AS A MASK OF LEGITIMATE IDEOLOGY

Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri, “bin Laden’s right hand man,”²¹⁸ the theoretician of al-Qaeda, describes his intellectual debt to Sayyid Qutb: “Qutb was the most prominent theoretician of the fundamentalist movements.... Qutb said, ‘Brother push ahead, for your path is soaked in blood. Do not turn your head right or left but look only up to Heaven.’”²¹⁹ Qutb motivates Zawahiri’s mission, his violence, his jihad against *jahiliyya*. How does the idealist philosopher with his dreams of utopia motivate violence and terror? How do Zawahiri and al-Qaeda use Qutb’s philosophy to justify bloodshed? How do words travel from the pen of a philosopher to the lips of murderers?

THE SPREAD OF QUTB’S IDEOLOGY

Immediately after Qutb’s execution, Milestones became the handbook of Islamic activism in Egypt. In the introduction to Milestones, Dr. Ahmad Zaki Hammad describes the book’s popularity.

²¹⁸ Zayyat.

²¹⁹ Wright.

Milestones was banned and confiscated from libraries, bookstores, and homes. Its owners jailed, its readers threatened with ruin, every impounded copy of this little book was burned by military order. Yet the fiery response burned not the ideas expressed in the book, nor suppressed the desire in the hearts of many to seclude themselves with the forbidden thoughts of freshly martyred Sayyid Qutb. The image of young and inspired university students secretly copying the book by hand, rushing to their closeted readings, will never leave my mind.²²⁰

Hammad goes on to explain the courage students felt reading Milestones. The mere act of reading became a rebellion against the *jahili* regime. As Milestones swept through Egypt, it inspired new movements and organizations, each with its own interpretation of Qutb's ideas and its own mission for freeing Egyptian society from *jahiliyya*. Qutb had been the ideologue of the Muslim Brotherhood, but, after his death, the organization would move towards a more centrist agenda, leaving Qutb to the militants.

In 1971, the new president Anwar Sadat legalized the Muslim Brotherhood in an attempt to win support from the organization. He freed long-imprisoned members and allowed the organization to preach and advocate on the condition that the Brotherhood would not resort to violence. The Brotherhood complied, rejected past violence, and assumed a centrist and moderate Islamic political dogma. Along with changing its stance, the Brotherhood attempted to distance itself from Qutb's thought. Though no leaders of the Brotherhood directly criticized his thought, they indirectly questioned his logic and attempted to steer interpretations of his work away from extremist interpretations.

²²⁰ Ahmad Zaki Hammad. Introduction. Milestones, By Sayyid Qutb. i.

Sadat's gesture did not abate the frustrations that had led to militancy and violence and the Brotherhood no longer provided an outlet for radicals. Dozens of militant splinter groups arose. Both the Islamic Group (*al-Jamaa 'a al-Islamiyya*) and Egyptian Islamic Jihad, the two largest and most active groups in Egypt at the time, found their inspiration in Qutb's writings.²²¹

In the early seventies, radical groups calling themselves the Islamic Group appeared on university campuses across Egypt. These groups united in a call for a return to Islamic society. The Islamic Group was not an official organization, but an umbrella organization of dozens of cells.

Muhammad 'Abd al-Salam Farag founded another group, al-Jihad, that eventually merged with the Islamic Group. He drew from Qutb and the thirteenth century jurist Ibn Taymiyya and published a pamphlet titled "The Hidden Imperative." In the pamphlet, he explained that jihad against tyrants was the duty of all Muslims, calling it the sixth pillar of Islam. The ulema, he claimed, had attempted to hide this duty and the only way to free Egypt from *jahiliyya* was to embark on jihad against its *jahili* leader, Sadat, the "iniquitous prince."²²²

In 1979, Farag united several small groups under his leadership. The next year, he managed to bring the Islamic Group into his control as well and unify the groups under the spiritual guidance of Sheikh Omar 'Abd al-Rahman. As the group's advisor, Rahman issued *fatwas*, legal opinions based on the Shari'a, to justify violence in the name of jihad.²²³ Rahman had studied Qutb's work, and scholars credit Qutb with forming 'Abd al-Rahman's extremist views.²²⁴ This

²²¹ Cleveland 446.

²²² Kepel 193.

²²³ Kepel 207.

²²⁴ Peter Steinfels, "Many Varieties of Fundamentalism," New York Times 8 March 1993, B4.

network organized the assassination of Sadat in 1981. Murdering him, they believed, fulfilled their duty to overthrow *jahili* leaders and establish an Islamic state.²²⁵

After Sadat's assassination, the authorities imprisoned the leaders and members of al-Jihad and the Islamic group and executed Farag. Ayman al-Zawahiri, a member of al-Jihad at the time, was among those arrested. Zawahiri disagreed with Rahman about who should assume the role of leader after Farag's death. Their disagreement led the two groups to split. The Islamic Group remained under the leadership of Rahman. Despite his implication in the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center and subsequent imprisonment, Rahman continues to lead the group from a U.S. prison.²²⁶ The other group continued as al-Jihad under the leadership of 'Abdoud al-Zumar and Zawahiri went on to lead the group in 1992. Eventually al-Jihad joined with al-Qaeda under the joint leadership of Usama bin Laden and Zawahiri. The Islamic Group established strong ties and contributed many members to al-Qaeda.²²⁷

Though both groups connect to al-Qaeda, this paper will not focus on the Islamic Group or Islamic Jihad, or their interpretations or misinterpretations of Qutb. In 1980, Yusuf al-Azam analyzed radical readings of Qutb and attempted to exonerate him from the shadow that extremist groups cast on his work.²²⁸ In this chapter, I present these two groups to outline the methods of diffusion and transmittance of Qutb's ideas to a modern organization of Islamic terrorism, al-Qaeda. Instead of looking at Qutb's readers in the sixties and seventies, I will focus on two groups who quote Qutb now: al-Qaeda and the Western press. I aim to show that both groups interpret Qutb's message to support their own preestablished agendas.

²²⁵ Cleveland 447.

²²⁶ Musallam 196.

²²⁷ "Jamaat Al-Islamiyya, Egyptian Islamic Jihad," Council on Foreign Relations Oct. 2005. 30 Mar. 2006 <<http://www.cfr.org/publication/9156/>>.

²²⁸ Kepel 66.

FROM EGYPT IN THE 1960S TO THE WHOLE MUSLIM WORLD: WHY IS QUTB'S IDEOLOGY SO POPULAR?

Qutb's ideology relies on and addresses to the fear and disillusionment of his followers. He appeals to Muslims who feel disillusioned with the modern world and see no solution, to those who feel trapped and confused by the disparity between modern liberal society and sacred societies of the past. He resonates with Muslims who feel out of place in contemporary society, unfulfilled, and disjointed.²²⁹ He promises a society without compromises, divisions, or conflicting forces.

Qutb writes to their fear and invokes their desperation. They fear the West will crush Islam, they fear its "crusade-consciousness." But he offers the solution, outlines the path, defines the struggle, and identifies the enemy. The Western *jahiliyya* is the enemy and the path is jihad. Only the spread of Islam can save humankind from the grip of tyrants. Only by overcoming the *jahili* societies can Muslims rid the community of the modern influences. Islam demands activism.

Qutb encourages and elevates his follower. The battle is necessary, and the risks are great, but the Believer is always superior. Allah stands with him and comforts him when he is weak. In death, he becomes a martyr and paradise awaits him. "Those who risk their lives and go out to fight, and who are prepared to lay down their lives for the cause of God are honorable people, pure of heart and blessed of soul. But the great surprise is that those among them who are killed

²²⁹ Berman.

in the struggle must not be considered or described as dead. They continue to live, as God Himself clearly states.”²³⁰ Thus, he turns his followers into fearless warriors for his vision.

Qutb’s views are more extreme than those of other modernists. He is unwilling to compromise and rejects all other interpretations of the sacred texts of Islam. He claims that his reading of the Qur’an is the only literal reading, not an interpretation, but a modern application, built solely on God’s authority. Therefore, his views cannot be questioned, and his ideology is closed to argument, a stable pillar in an uncertain world.

Qutb became even more popular after his death because of his willingness to accept martyrdom. In his 2001 autobiography, Ayman al-Zawahiri writes of his great admiration for this martyr who lived and died by his words. Nasser believed he could silence Qutb by killing him, but his execution only etched the message into the minds of Muslims in Egypt and the rest of the world.²³¹

WHO FOLLOWS QUTB?

Modern scholars and analysts can trace the flow of Qutb’s ideas through Egypt and the Muslim world and we can follow his students from Egypt to Afghanistan and search for evidence of his influence in the speeches of modern terrorists.

Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri provides the clearest, most direct connection between Qutb’s thought and modern-day terrorism in his autobiography. In 1992, Zawahiri became the leader Islamic Jihad in Egypt. He traveled frequently to Afghanistan, “the land of jihad” where he met bin Laden.²³² In 1998, Zawahiri united his organization with al-Qaeda. In his autobiography, al-

²³⁰ Qutb, Milestones 122-5.

²³¹ Zayyat 25.

²³² Zayyat 48.

Zawahiri wrote, "Qutb was the most prominent theoretician of the fundamentalist movements."²³³ He wrote, "Sayyid Qutb underscored the importance of monotheism in Islam and that the battle between it and its enemies is at its core an ideological difference over the issue of the oneness of God."²³⁴ Zawahiri, the man often described as the ideologue of al-Qaeda and Usama bin Laden's right-hand man, places himself as the intellectual heir of Qutb.

Usama bin Laden was also aware of Qutb's thought. He attended King 'Abd al-Aziz University where he studied Islam under Sayyid Qutb's brother Muhammad. As well as teaching Islamic studies, Muhammad wrote books and articles to defend and expound the ideas of his brother. Bin Laden's professors laid the foundations of the "jihad approach" in his mind, though it was Zawahiri who, years later impressed upon bin Laden Qutb's rhetoric of jihad.²³⁵

Al-Qaeda uses language that echoes Qutb. Bin Laden warned Iraqis not to participate in elections saying, "[A]nyone who participates in these elections has committed apostasy against Allah" because the Iraqi constitution is "a *jahiliyya* constitution that is made by man."²³⁶ Bin Laden draws on Qutb's language by using the term *jahiliyya* to describe a set of laws that are not based in the Qur'an. Zawahiri, too, employs Qutb's language to describe his mission. U.S. intelligence intercepted a letter from Zawahiri to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi dated July 9, 2005. Zawahiri wrote, "It has always been my belief that the victory of Islam will never take place until

²³³ Wright.

²³⁴ Zayyat 24.

²³⁵ Zayyat 69.

²³⁶ Nimrod Raphaeli, "The Sheikh of the Slaughterers: Abu Mus'Ab Al-Zarqawi and the Al-Qa'ida Connection," Update From AIJAC 1 July 2005. Australia/Israel & Jewish Affairs Council. 28 Mar 2006 <<http://www.ajac.org.au/updates/Jul-05/060705.html>>.

a Muslim state is established in the manner of the Prophet in the heart of the Islamic world...²³⁷
Zawahiri echoes Qutb's main theme.

Ultimately, however, I aim to prove that modern terrorists do not follow Qutb – if they did, they would not kill. As I explained in chapter two, Qutb's goal is to free mankind, not to kill them. His motivation is love, not revenge.

However, before I can show that terrorist organizations are not Qutbists in any way or explain why I believe they use his language, I must ask whom the terrorists are. If they do not follow Qutb, what ideology do they follow?

WHOM DO THESE GROUPS ACTUALLY FOLLOW?

Journalists and analysts like Paul Berman and Peter Bergen look for one foundation, one philosopher or jurist who set the machine in motion. No such figure exists, no one treatise paved the way for future fundamentalists and terrorists. These groups do not express – they do not attempt to realize a philosophical dream. These groups react -- react to colonialism, imperialism, political circumstance, modernity, and power dynamic. We can trace influences, but we will never find the one source.

One major influence is the eighteenth-century puritan zealot Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhab. While parallels exist between Qutb and Wahhab, the differences are far more significant. Wahhabism better describes modern fundamentalist ideology than Qutbism.

'Abd al-Wahhab sought to rid Islam of corruption – like Qutb, 'Abd al-Wahhab believed that corrupting influences had eroded the pure message of Islam. He passionately opposed philosophy, mysticism, intellectualism, rationalism, and most existing interpretations of the

²³⁷ "Letter from al-Zawahiri to al-Zarqawi," Office of the Director of National Intelligence 11 Oct. 2005. US Gov. Nov. 2005 < www.dni.gov/release_letter_101105.html>.

Qur'an. True Islam, 'Abd al-Wahhab believed, demanded a straightforward and literal reading of the Qur'an and *hadith*. There was only one true Islam, he said, and no middle road. 'Abd al-Wahhab went far beyond Qutb. He created lists of improper practices and beliefs that would instantly turn a Muslim to an infidel. On his lists he included art, music, and poetry, even in praise of God, because, he believed, imagination and creativity were steps to *kufir*, unbelief. Most importantly, although 'Abd al-Wahhab's thought may resemble Qutb's thought in some ways, his methods and practices are starkly opposed to those of Qutb.

Qutb declared governments *jahili* if he believed they enslaved their citizens or barred them from embracing Islam. 'Abd al-Wahhab eagerly branded individuals *kafirs*, infidels, despite the fact the Qur'an forbids *takfir*, the practice of calling another Muslim an infidel. Furthermore, Qutb never promotes violence – his motivation is love. 'Abd al-Wahhab, on the other hand, firmly believed it to be the duty of true Muslims to execute a *kafir*, even if that person claimed to be a Muslim. 'Abd al-Wahhab planned the executions of jurists and scholars with whom he disagreed.

'Abd al-Wahhab led a small number of followers but commanded little respect from other scholars. Most people found his disrespect for Islamic history and diversity of thought to be baffling and unprecedented. His own brother Sulayman was among his sharpest critics. Sulayman claimed his brother had not read and did not understand the history and jurisprudence that he so eagerly dismissed. He had not even read or understood the complete thought of the few scholars he claimed to follow – he merely selected a few passages that supported his actions. Sulayman accused his brother of ignorance, despotism, and of claiming his interpretation was the infallible truth. In a pamphlet denouncing his brother, Sulayman recalled fifty-two *hadiths* that forbid *takfir*.

A few desert tribes embraced the simple decisiveness and seeming purity of Wahhabism, but other than that the movement died out, too radical to gain much following. In early twentieth century, however, ‘Abd al-Aziz allied with these tribes, adopted Wahhabism, and rebelled against the Ottomans to establish Saudi Arabia. He implemented Wahhabism as the state mandated system. Wahhabism thrived and its ideals spread for several reasons. The victory against the Ottomans cast Wahhabism as an ideology of autonomy and revolution in the eyes of the Muslim world. Today, oil wealth allows the Saudis to exert influence around the Muslim world. In addition, as guardians of Mecca and Medina, the Saudi rulers promote Wahhabism to the millions of pilgrims who visit the holy cities each year. As a result, Wahhabism reemerged and continues to thrive within contemporary Islam.²³⁸

Muslims who follow ‘Abd al-Wahhab’s teaching do not call themselves Wahhabis. Wahabism is not a school, they believe, it is not based on the thoughts of a man – Wahabism is pure Islam. And, Muhammad b. ‘Abd al-Wahhab was an ignorant, intolerant evangelist. As a philosopher, he does not command respect in the Muslim world. The Wahhabis, therefore, found a different banner for their ideology.²³⁹

Khalid Abou el Fadl creates a new term to describe radical puritan Islamic groups today. He describes the radical puritans of Saudi Arabia as well as the Taliban and al-Qaeda as “Salafabis” -- he describes their ideology as a combination of Wahhabi and Salafi ideology. Or, more specifically, they are Wahhabis under a cloak of Salafism.

Salafism is more difficult to define than Wahhabism and its lack of a concrete definition makes it a useful cloak for Wahhabism. When Muslim reformers founded Salafism in the late

²³⁸ Khaled Abou El Fadl, “The Ugly Modern and the Modern Ugly,” Progressive Muslims, Ed. Omid Safi (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2003) 33-77.

²³⁹ Abou El Fadl 54.

nineteenth century, the precept was simple and undeniable for many Muslims: Muslims should follow the teachings of the Prophet and the Rightly Guided Companions, *al-salaf al-salih*. Instead of relying on interpretations and established doctrines, Muslims should refer to the original texts, the Qur'an and *hadith*, and interpret these texts for themselves. Although Salafism was not interested in history, it did not reject history, intellectualism, or scholarly tradition. Mostly, Salafi scholars were nationalists, eager to mesh Islam with modernity. They mixed and matched traditions and interpretations to arrive at the desired conclusions and create an Islam that would serve modern circumstances.²⁴⁰

Salafism, however, compromised its principles in favor of political expedience. Salafists supported Wahhabism in hopes of propelling Salafism via already popular Wahhabism. Salafism diluted and shifted its principles in attempts of gaining political favor. As a result, the ideology lost any clear definition. In the 1970s, Wahhabism “proceeded to co-opt the language and symbolism of Salafism...until the two had become practically indistinguishable.”²⁴¹ Abou el Fadl labels this unity Salafabism and goes on to describe the message, draw, and danger of Salafabism:

...the consistent characteristic of Salafabism is a supremacist puritansim that compensates for feelings of defeatism, disempowerment, and alienation with a distinct sense of self-righteous arrogance *vis-à-vis* the nondescript “other” – whether the “other” is the West, non-believers in general, or even Muslim women.²⁴²

Salafabism is an ideology of reaction; it does not unite followers towards a goal but unites followers against certain circumstances. Abou el Fadl goes on to explain that bin Laden, al-

²⁴⁰ Abou El Fadl 57.

²⁴¹ Abou El Fadl 57.

²⁴² Abou El Fadl 58.

Zawahiri, and most other Muslim extremists are Salafabis. Like Qutb and Wahhab, Salafabis read their agendas into sacred texts and claim to find the pure truth of Islam. Like Wahhab, they lash out against the other. We do not, however, find this violence in Qutb. Qutb's ideology does not attack the individual, not with words or *takfir*, and never with violence.

A LINE BETWEEN QUTB AND THE SALAFABIS

Sayyid Qutb died for his beliefs. He refused exile, refused to flee, and became a martyr. He died, but he would not kill and he rejected violence. Qutb wrote, “[Islam] does not attack individuals.”²⁴³ Qutb focused jihad against *jahili* governments. Even then, Qutb envisioned violence against the leaders as a last resort: he uses the example of the battle of Badr to show that only the most tyrannical leaders should be killed, and only if they show no hope for reform. His intentions for the individual, however, were positive: he invites the individual to freedom and utopia. Not only did Qutb shun violence against the individual, he did not engage in attacks through *takfir* against individuals; a Muslim may be misguided, but *jahiliyya* is to blame. His mission is to teach, not kill. Wahhab, on the other hand, mandated execution for any person who did not conform to his precise breed of Islam. While Qutb died for his faith, Salafabis murder for their faith. Qutb's willingness to die proved his faith in God and his dedication to his ideology. He believed he would achieve paradise through death. The Salafabi, however, tries to prove dedication and achieve paradise through murder. A terrorist, a government, or a suicide bomber crosses a line between Qutb and Salafabism when they murder, and crossing this line negates the teachings of Qutb.

²⁴³ Qutb, Milestones 61.

Some may argue that al-Qaeda does not intentionally kill civilians, the “prisoners” under Qutb’s philosophy. Some may argue that these deaths are incidental to the greater mission to destroy the symbols and leaders of Western countries. True, bin Laden does attack symbols, but his goal is to kill civilians as well. Bin Laden, Zawahiri, and other al-Qaeda leaders issued a *fatwa* in 1998 declaring that the Americans have declared war on God and the *fatwa* makes no distinction between leaders and citizens or between military and civilians. “The ruling to kill the Americans and their allies – civilians and military – is an individual duty for every Muslim who can do it in any country in which it is possible to do it...”²⁴⁴ He goes on to quote 8:39, the Qur’anic command to fight the unbelievers until there is “no more oppression.” Qutb interpreted the same verse as a command to fight the leaders of *jahiliyya* until their followers -- their “prisoners” -- were free. Bin Laden, on the other hand, interprets this passage as a command to kill all unbelievers until Muslims are free from the oppression of these unbelievers. According to bin Laden, all Americans are the oppressors, military leaders and civilians alike, and all deserve to die.

THE FALSE HISTORY OF IDEAS

The influences and similarities between Qutb and the Salafabis are only superficial, only for show. If we examine their missions and their ideologies, we find no basis of the latter in Qutb. In the end, the only concrete link between Qutb and modern terrorists is the claim that there is a link. The claim comes from both the Western media and the terrorists themselves. Each has their own motivation for establishing a false link.

²⁴⁴ Usamah Bin-Laden, Ayman Al-Zawahiri, and Shaykh Mir Hamza, “God's Order to Kill Americans: Usamah Bin-Laden's 1998 Fatwa,” Extreme Islam, Ed. Adam Parfrey (Los Angeles: Feral House, 2001) 290-292. 291.

Every American and European newspaper article and magazine special that describes Qutb repeats corollaries of a single conclusion: modern Islamic fundamentalism traces back to a single point, the philosophy of Sayyid Qutb. Robert Irwin calls Qutb the “the father of modern Islamist fundamentalism.”²⁴⁵ Lawrence Wright calls him “the man behind bin Laden” and “a master of terror.”²⁴⁶ Peter Bergen calls Milestones “the key text of the jihadist movement.”²⁴⁷ In his New York Times article, “The Philosopher of Islamic Terror,” Paul Berman explains how the Egyptian factions that joined al-Qaeda shaped al-Qaeda’s ideology -- Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri, the leader of Islamic Jihad, became “Al Qaeda's top theoretician.” Berman continues,

The Egyptian factions emerged from an older current, a school of thought from within Egypt's fundamentalist movement, the Muslim Brotherhood, in the 1950's and 60's. And at the heart of that single school of thought stood, until his execution in 1966, a philosopher named Sayyid Qutb -- the intellectual hero of every one of the groups that eventually went into Al Qaeda, their Karl Marx (to put it that way), their guide....

“Milestones” became a classic manifesto of the terrorist wing of Islamic fundamentalism. A number of journalists have dutifully turned the pages of “Milestones” trying to decipher the otherwise inscrutable terrorist point of view. I have been reading some of Qutb's other books, and I think that “Milestones” may have misled the journalists.

Has Berman discovered the other side of Qutb’s message? Does he see the foundations in love and compassion, the hopes for freedom for mankind? Does he realize that all the other journalists are incorrect in drawing a straight line between Qutb and al-Qaeda? Berman continues,

²⁴⁵ Irwin.

²⁴⁶ Wright.

²⁴⁷ Bergen 47.

"Milestones" is a fairly shallow book, judged in isolation. But "Milestones" was drawn from his vast commentary on the Koran called "In the Shade of the Qur'an." By now I have made my way through a little less than half of "In the Shade of the Qur'an," which I think is all that exists so far in English, together with three other books by Qutb. And I have something to report.

Qutb is not shallow. Qutb is deep. "In the Shade of the Qur'an" is, in its fashion, a masterwork. Al Qaeda and its sister organizations are not merely popular, wealthy, global, well connected and institutionally sophisticated. These groups stand on a set of ideas too, and some of those ideas may be pathological, which is an old story in modern politics; yet even so, the ideas are powerful.²⁴⁸

No. His deeper reading has only led him to reaffirm the oft-repeated conclusion. He discovers that In the Shade of the Qur'an illuminates and grounds Milestones, but he never reassess his conclusions surrounding the contents – the conclusions of the “misled journalists.” Not only is Qutb’s thought the foundation for al-Qaeda, discovers Berman, it is a deep, sophisticated, philosophical foundation.

Despite Berman’s claims – we can find the answers to modern terrorism in the philosophy of a long-dead Egyptian writer – he fails to establish any convincing link between Qutb’s thought and al-Qaeda’s ideology. In fact, he doesn’t try. Berman writes this article to attempt to explain modern terrorism, and yet, in an eight thousand-word article about the life and work of Qutb, he does not compare Qutb’s ideology to the ideology of any modern terrorist organizations. Therefore, he does not notice the glaring incongruity between Qutb’s philosophy and terrorism. In truth, Berman presupposed a connection before he even opened In the Shade of

²⁴⁸ Berman.

the Qur'an. He assumes that, because leaders of Islamic Jihad and the Islamic Group studied Qutb's thought and these groups joined with al-Qaeda, al-Qaeda is a Qutbist organization. Perhaps he believed Zawahiri's claims in Knights Under the Prophet's Banner or heard bin Laden's rhetoric of jihad. If he did, he does not mention it in his article. In his article, Berman presupposes a direct link, a direct flow of thought from Qutb to al-Qaeda. Like other Western journalists, he implicates Qutb without explaining why.

The Western media, like their counterparts in the Arab world, aims to sell stories and answers. In these articles, analysts attempt to wrap modern problems into neat packages, into cause and effect relationships. These stories attempt to establish a history of ideas, a single point of origin to explain why everything went wrong. Every journalist wants to discover the cause of terrorism. So they point to Qutb. I aim to show that, although Qutb's philosophy may exert some influence on modern terrorist organizations, he is not the cause of terrorism. Al-Qaeda ignores whole sections of Qutb's philosophy – if they followed all his teachings, there would be no terror.

Bin Laden and al-Zawahiri do not follow Qutb's philosophy. Berman errors when he connects the two in his New York Times article – a dividing line, a chasm, separates Qutb from these men. Qutb instructs the reader to fight tyranny for the freedom and dignity of every human being. It is not love of humans that motivates Bin Laden and al-Zawahiri today, but power, revenge, and religious fanaticism.

In his first years with Islamic Jihad, al-Zawahiri adhered, at least partially, to Qutb's ideology. In the beginning, al-Zawahiri “thought there was only one way to bring about change: toppling the government through a military coup.”²⁴⁹ He believed violence was the only path to

²⁴⁹ Zayyat 70.

success and he shunned the nonviolent stance of the Muslim Brotherhood. Nevertheless, he only advocated an attack on the highest government authority: Sadat himself. It was not until after the assassination of Sadat that other members of the group convinced al-Zawahiri to support assassinations of other government officials. Before merging with al-Qaeda, Egyptian Islamic Jihad never attacked tourists or civilians.²⁵⁰ Before associating with bin Laden, Al-Zawahiri would not support action against the United States or Israel. “He always said that the only acceptable form of jihad is armed struggle and the true Muslim should confront the internal enemy, or the ‘near enemy,’ and only after that the external enemy or the ‘far enemy.’”²⁵¹ Qutb describes this imperative in both In the Shade of the Qur’an and Milestones: the vanguard of Muslims must first establish a community by removing immediate obstacles to the formation of that community -- their own weakness and tyrannical rulers who oppose their freedom – and then engage in jihad against the far enemy – the rulers of other societies who imprison their citizens. By combating the far enemy, Muslims spread the community to encompass the entire world. During his first years with the movement, before joining with al-Qaeda, al-Zawahiri remained within the purview of Qutb’s ideology: he endeavored only to kill the most powerful tyrant of Egypt.

Eventually, however, al-Zawahiri compromised his principles to gain power and he crossed the line into extreme violence and out of Qutb’s philosophy. Zawahiri yielded to pressure from the young members of his group. Young men, recently returned from Afghanistan and eager to utilize their new training, cajoled Zawahiri to expand their targets. “Contrary to his better judgment, he ordered his followers to perform armed operations against some of the top

²⁵⁰ United States Department Of State, comp. “Terrorist Group Profiles,” Naval Postgraduate School May 2005. US Navy. 22 Mar. 2006 <<http://library.nps.navy.mil/home/tgp/jihad.htm>>.

²⁵¹ Zayyat 62.

Egyptian figures.”²⁵² Not only did these operations compromise his principles, they proved unsuccessful. The foiled operations led to arrests and public outrage against the group and thereby weakened al-Jihad. In addition, between 1993 and 1995, financial difficulties threatened the survival of Islamic Jihad: Zawahiri was unable to pay the salaries of leaders and members. In short, in the early 1990s, internal divisions, the arrests of important leaders, and financial difficulties forced Zawahiri to restructure and to change the objectives of his group to ensure its survival. “[The weakening of the group] eventually forced Zawahiri to stop armed operations in Egypt and sign an agreement to join the International Islamic Front for Jihad on the Jews and Crusaders with Osama bin Laden [*sic*].”²⁵³ By joining this organization in 1998 and pulling his group under its auspices, Zawahiri greatly altered his philosophy. Instead of directing jihad against the near enemy, against the tyrannical rulers of his own nation, he supported jihad against far enemies, Israel and the United States. The organization issued a *fatwa* commanding Muslims to kill Americans, both military and civilian, and take their money.²⁵⁴ By joining this group and issuing this *fatwa*, Zawahiri adopted a completely opposite philosophy from the philosophy he had previously espoused. Zawahiri abandoned and negated Qutb.

Zawahiri first met Usama bin Laden in Afghanistan in 1986. The two men influenced each other immensely. At age twenty-two, bin Laden had joined the jihadi movement in Afghanistan, first fundraising and providing financial support for the mujahideen. In the early 1980s, he brought machinery, trucks, and bulldozers into Afghanistan to aid the building of tunnels, shelters, hospitals, and trenches. Later, he built guesthouses and training facilities for Muslims on their way to fight. Despite the fact that the mujahideen also received support from

²⁵² Zayyat 60.

²⁵³ Zayyat 67.

²⁵⁴ Zayyat 64.

the U.S., bin Laden preached against the U.S. and called for boycotts on American goods.²⁵⁵ In 1986, however, Zawahiri “convinced bin Laden of his *jihadi* approach, turning him from a fundamentalist preacher whose main concern was relief work, into a *jihadi* fighter, clashing with despots and American troops in the Arab world.”²⁵⁶ Zawahiri expanded bin Laden’s mission from a jihad to expel the Soviets from Afghanistan to a jihad to expel all foreigners, tyrannical leaders, and obstacles to the Muslim community. Bin Laden had already studied under Sayyid Qutb’s brother Muhammad, but it was Zawahiri who sold him these elements of Qutb’s philosophy. But bin Laden had a mission long before he adopted Qutb’s words.

Long before he adopted the rhetoric of jihad against tyrannical governments and obstacles to Islam, bin Laden had wanted to kill American civilians. In 1982, years before he met Zawahiri, bin Laden watched the Israelis bomb towers in Lebanon using American-made planes. Bin Laden told al-Jazeera in 2004 that he first got the idea to destroy the Twin Towers at that moment.

As I watched the destroyed towers in Lebanon, it occurred to me to punish the unjust the same way – to destroy towers in America so that it can taste some of what we are tasting and to stop killing our children and women. God knows that it had not occurred to our mind to attack the towers but after our patience ran out and we saw the injustice and inflexibility of the American-Israel alliance toward our people in Palestine and Lebanon, this came to my mind.²⁵⁷

Before he spoke of jihad against the West, before he founded al-Qaeda, bin Laden planned to kill Americans. Despite the cruelty he witnessed, despite his hatred for the *jahili* system, Qutb never

²⁵⁵ Bergen 51.

²⁵⁶ Zayyat 69.

²⁵⁷ Mia Bloom, *Dying to Kill* (New York: Columbia UP, 2005) 190.

writes of revenge. Instead, he says, “We invite people to Islam because we love and we wish them well, although they may torture us.”²⁵⁸ As he describes in his comments on the Battle of Badr, Qutb believes Muslims should welcome their most vicious opponents to Islam. His mission is to save, not kill. Vengeance, however, motivates bin Laden. Zawahiri extracted Qutb’s description of jihad from Qutb’s complete philosophy and presented this rhetoric to bin Laden. From Zawahiri, bin Laden adopted the rhetoric of jihad, stripped of Qutb’s motivations of love and compassion, in order to validate his vengeance.

Years later, bin Laden would exert great influence on Zawahiri, convincing him to ally with al-Qaeda against the Americans and Israelis and cease actions in Egypt. Bin Laden, through his friendship with Zawahiri and the promise of financial support, convinced Zawahiri to reverse his philosophy.²⁵⁹

Al-Qaeda strives for power, but power was never Qutb’s goal. Qutb describes the leader of his utopia as a just ruler, elected by the *umma* to ensure adherence to the Shari’a. He provides vague descriptions of the good leader and just government based on the leadership of the four rightly guided caliphs. In Qutb’s vision, Muslims first form the community and then the community elects the leaders. The leaders do not impose themselves upon the community. “Establishing the rule of God on earth does not mean that sovereignty is assigned to a particular group of people...”²⁶⁰ Religion, he says, does not give any person or group license to force their rule onto others. In his letter to Zarqawi, Zawahiri writes that after expelling the Americans from Iraq, his organization will “establish an Islamic authority or emirate, then develop it and support it until it achieves the level of a caliphate...” Islam will prevail, he says, when the

²⁵⁸ Qutb, Milestones 118.

²⁵⁹ Zayyat 69.

²⁶⁰ Qutb, In the Shade of the Qur’an, Vol.7. 8.

Muslim state encompasses “the Levant, Egypt, the neighboring states of the Peninsula and Iraq.”²⁶¹ Al-Qaeda wants to rule.

Al-Qaeda hopes to rule an empire that will include Saudi Arabia with its and control of Mecca and Medina and its oil resources. Analysts note that al-Qaeda uses acts of terrorism in Saudi Arabia in an attempt “to bring down the Saudi government as well as to create fear and spread terror.”²⁶² Al-Qaeda hopes to depose the Saudi ruling family in order to take control of the country. “Saudi Arabia is the golden egg. Economically, politically, religiously and socially, it is a perfect fit for al-Qaeda's orientation and ambitions.”²⁶³ Al-Qaeda’s goal is to obtain power and support for the organization, not to establish freedom and justice for all human beings. The caliphate that Zawahiri hopes to create fits Qutb’s description of tyranny, *jahiliyya*, the lordship of some men over others.

Without focusing on the details of Qutb’s philosophy, Montasser al-Zayyat notes in his biography of Zawahiri that Qutb’s work “forms the framework for Zawahiri’s ideology and his approach to affecting change.... Zawahiri’s love for Qutb is clear in that he quotes him in almost everything he publishes.”²⁶⁴ I argue that Zawahiri originally followed Qutb in some form, but he turned away from Qutb to join with bin Laden. Zawahiri may love Qutb, but he abandoned Qutb’s philosophy. Nevertheless, as Zawahiri is deeply familiar with Qutb’s work, he must know that he has negated him. If Zawahiri left Qutb behind in the nineties, why, in his 2001 autobiography, does he credit Qutb with inspiring his actions?

²⁶¹ “Letter from al-Zawahiri to al-Zarqawi,” Office of the Director of National Intelligence 11 Oct. 2005. US Gov. Nov. 2005 < www.dni.gov/release_letter_101105.html>.

²⁶² Richard Armitage quoted in Afp, “Suicide Bombers Kill 17 in Housing Compound,” Sydney Morning Herald 10 Nov. 2003. <<http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2003/11/10/1068329460866.html?from=storyrhs>>.

²⁶³ James Eldridge, “Saudi Arabia: Al Qaeda's Strategic Goals,” Stratfor Weekley 18 June 2004. <<http://www.utoronto.ca/csus/pm/saudi.htm>>.

²⁶⁴ Zayyat 24.

How could any militant Muslim read Qutb and claim to follow him even though he preaches non-violence? Why chose an ideologue whom one must read selectively? Why follow teachings that one's own course of action will negate? Why do they claim to follow Qutb when they clearly do not? Why pull this idealist philosopher into a bloody battle?

WHY DO THEY PULL HIM ACROSS THE LINE INTO VIOLENCE?

Sayyid Qutb's philosophy and persona provide a mask, a white screen of respectable moderation, the screen to shield the Wahhabi extremism of fanatical groups like al-Qaeda. Qutb was impassioned, compassionate, erudite, and clean of fanaticism, senseless rage, and slaughter. Qutb is popular and inspirational. Muslims around the world know his name and basic themes of his philosophy. As a martyr, he commands great respect and great legitimacy. Qutb presents a workable public front, an image that Muslims can relate to and the West can attempt to understand. His eloquence gives fundamentalist rage focus and direction. When Zawahiri co-opts Qutb's language, he pulls Qutb's legitimacy onto his own mission.

Qutb validates and justifies their jihad. He describes jihad as a noble religious duty: "The causes of Islamic jihad should be sought in the very nature of Islam and its role in the world, and in its high principles, assigned to it by Allah..."²⁶⁵ Jihad is natural and unquestionable, every Muslim should fight – it is the will of God. Without actually practicing Qutb's form of jihad, they co-opt his language to justify their action.

The screen deceives Paul Berman – he believes the mask and misses the truth. He observes that Qutb's philosophy is "deep," "a masterwork." Without any critical assessment, he assumes that al-Qaeda actually stands on this philosophy and is therefore equally deep. "Al

²⁶⁵ Qutb, Milestones 47.

Qaeda and its sister organizations are not merely popular, wealthy, global, well connected and institutionally sophisticated. These groups stand on a set of ideas too, and some of those ideas may be pathological, which is an old story in modern politics; yet even so, the ideas are powerful.”²⁶⁶ Berman fails to glimpse behind the mask. He mistakes al-Qaeda’s disguise for the truth.

Zawahiri and bin Laden do not merely deceive Western journalists. They cut and paste Qutb’s words to validate their struggle in the eyes of Muslims, to validate their willingness to kill and die in the struggle against *jahiliyya*. Zawahiri selects themes from Qutb and directs them to his own agenda. For example, Zawahiri quotes Qutb in his autobiography. "Qutb said, 'Brother, push ahead, for your path is soaked in blood. Do not turn your head right or left but look only up to Heaven.' ”²⁶⁷ Lawrence Wright includes this quote in an article for The New Yorker about Zawahiri. Both Wright and Zawahiri interpret this quote as Qutb’s support for bloody battle and murder in the name of Islam. By my reading of Qutb, both are incorrect. Qutb describes this blood-soaked path in Milestones:

[Muslims who call others to Allah] will not be anxious to find help and victory, while traversing this road paved with skulls and limbs and blood and sweat, or be desirous that the decision between Truth and falsehood be made in this world. But if Allah Himself intends to complete the mission to call all men and women to His universal and eternal *din* through their efforts, He will bring about His Will, but not as a reward for their sufferings and sacrifices. Indeed, this world is not a place of reward.”²⁶⁸

²⁶⁶ Berman.

²⁶⁷ Wright.

²⁶⁸ Qutb, Milestones 137.

Examining the blood-soaked road in this context, I make two observations. First, the blood and skulls do not belong to slaughtered enemies in the path of the Islamic movement. There is no mention of murder. Especially in context with the rest of Qutb's writing, in no way should this carnage be interpreted as the blood of non-Muslims, hypocritical Muslims, or even tyrants. In this passage, Qutb describes the role of the martyr, the martyr's "sufferings and sacrifices." Qutb, therefore, refers to the blood of martyrs. The Muslim, he says, must be prepared to suffer and die for the cause, without any hope of reward. Second, Qutb does not expect immediate success or reward. The mission is in God's hands. The believer has a role. By fulfilling the role, the believer carries out the will of God. The believer cannot control when or how success will come. Qutb does not support the killing of innocents and political expediency would not validate murder in his eyes. Qutb's philosophy does not support Zawahiri's decision to murder to ensure the survival of his group.

Al-Qaeda co-opts Qutb's words to inspire and motivate their followers and to validate their mission. As a martyr, Qutb's life inspires followers to die for jihad. When al-Qaeda takes his words out of context, his words inspire followers to kill for jihad. Stolen pieces of Qutb's philosophy validate the vengeance, the struggle for power, and the murder of civilians.

Qutb recognizes that the Prophet and his companions gave the vicious opponents of Islam a chance to open their hearts to Islam after the Battle of Badr. He is clear that there is no compulsion in religion and that any leader or organization that forces its beliefs onto others is tyrannical, a force of *jahiliyya*. Qutb presents an impossible vision, an impossible path to an impossible utopia. Nonetheless, his words are powerful, his jihad noble, his motivations pure. He suffered and hoped no other human would suffer as he did. All over the world, Muslims respect him – he died for his beliefs without compromising for one second. Today, terrorist

organizations steal his language, strip the compassion and hope for humanity from his message, and co-opt the passion and the validations of hatred for the current system. Qutb provides a mask of legitimate ideology. So far Western media and Western scholars have been unwilling and unable to strip this mask from the true face of Islamic terrorism.

VI

Conclusion:

In Defense of the Enemy

Qutb wrote, “[Islam] had the right to destroy all obstacles in the form of institutions and traditions that restrict man’s freedom of choice. It does not attack individuals nor does it force them to accept its beliefs.”²⁶⁹ Qutb’s philosophy includes a goal, the utopian *umma*, and a path, jihad. These two sentences summarize his vision of jihad. Jihad tears down prisons, topples tyrants, and frees the prisoners from their cells of ignorance. Islam does not attack the individuals it tries to free. The terrorists who claim to follow Qutb, however, read selectively and implement the active, the violent, the angry and outward without the passive, loving, and inward. Leaders steal his words to legitimize their means and motivate their followers. Suicide bombers obey his calls to martyrdom, but ignore his objections against killing the innocent. They murder the people they should be trying to save. Usama bin Laden directs Muslims to use their lives to kill the infidels. “We -- with Allah's help -- call on every Muslim who believes in Allah and wishes to be rewarded to comply with Allah's order to kill the Americans and plunder

²⁶⁹ Qutb, Milestones 61.

their money wherever and whenever they find it.”²⁷⁰ Organizations like al-Qaeda ignore Qutb’s message that all modern societies are *jahili* and Muslims must battle the near enemy and establish the *umma* before they turn to the far enemy. Instead of working to establish their paradise on earth, members of al-Qaeda direct their battles against America as a symbol of the West even though Qutb described America as just one example of *jahiliyya*, one example of the depravity of all secular societies. The actions of al-Qaeda reveal that they are not trying to rid the world of *jahiliyya*, not taking active steps towards a real goal. Instead, they make violent symbolic strikes against the perceived enemy. “It is essential to hit the main enemy who divided the Ummah into small and little countries and pushed it, for the last few decades, into a state of confusion.”²⁷¹ Bin Laden speaks only of attacking this symbol of the West, of revenge and hatred. He never once speaks of converting Americans.

In one paragraph of his Declaration of War, bin Laden echoes Qutb’s main goal when he speaks of “the unification of the people under the divine law of Allah.”²⁷² But the rest of the declaration is only hatred, threats, and calls to violence: “there is nothing between us that needs to be explained, there is only killing and neck smiting.”²⁷³ Al-Qaeda’s leaders studied Qutb’s philosophy and claim to follow his teaching. But where is Qutb’s “correct procedure,” “to mix with discretion, give and take with dignity, speak the truth with love, and show the superiority of the Faith with humility?”²⁷⁴

²⁷⁰ bin-Laden, “God's Order to Kill Americans: Usamah bin-Laden's 1998 Fatwa,” 292.

²⁷¹ bin Laden, “Jihad against Jews and Crusaders.”

²⁷² Osama bin Laden, “Declaration of War Against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places,” The Idler 23 Aug 1996. 2 May 2003.

<<http://www.geocities.com/dcjarviks/Idler/vIIIIn165.html>>.

²⁷³ bin Laden, “Declaration of War Against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places.”

²⁷⁴ Qutb, Milestones 120.

Many modernists and apologists have suggested that terrorists selectively read the Qur'an to pick out the passages that condone violent jihad. Another problem is the selective reading of Qutb. Qutb is not dangerous because he preaches violence. He is dangerous because there is no way to follow his complete philosophy. A selective reading is the only possible reading.

DEFENDING THE ENEMY

Terrorist organizations attack civilians and focus their hatred on America. They believe Westerners are the enemies and they believe they follow Qutb when they commit mass murder. Another reading of Qutb, however, a reading stripped of preconceptions, desperate violence, and desire for revenge, reveals that Qutb never calls for violence. He calls for defense. He asks the believer to defend the souls of those lost in *jahiliyya*, to teach, to lead by example, to save unbelievers from hollow existence and suffering. Qutb does not tell Muslims to fight the unbelievers, but to fight for them. Westerners, says Qutb, are not the true enemies.

At the same time, discourse in the West paints Qutb as the enemy, the father of terror. The war on terror, promises Bush, is a war of ideas. Could we teach a new understanding of Qutb? Could we defend him from the one-sided attacks of the Western press? Could we promote a new reading of Qutb among militant youths before they become suicide bombers? Could we destroy the false conceptions of his philosophy that the radical leaders use to exploit their followers? If we acknowledge the truth – this beloved martyr did not advocate violence, but urged his readers to strive for utopia – how many lives could we save? Like the radical fundamentalists, the Western press and many Western scholars paint Sayyid Qutb as our enemy, the father of terror, the inspiration of fundamentalism. In reality, he need not be our enemy at all.