

# SAYYID QUTB

THE SOCIAL AND POLITICAL ROLE OF ISLAM  
ON THE AUTHORITY OF SAYYID QUTB

A PROSOPOGRAPHICAL PERSPECTIVE

"Perhaps it is these very words of Sayyid Qutb that  
may lead one to the truth of Qutb himself ..."

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## PREFACE

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I have received an overwhelming level of support and assistance in numerous ways from many people whilst embarking on my academic endeavours. My mother, Hajani Abeeda Sayed had passed away causing a cacophony of life events. It indeed spelled the most difficult time of my life and will forever be so in my history. I thank my mother for everything she had done. Thank you to my father, Hisham Sayed, and my family.

IPSA's Aisha Adjiet, Dr. Dawood Terblanche, Shaykh Fakhruddin Owaisi, and Prof. Yasien Mohamed thank you for your time, effort, and guidance. Thank you Shaykh Riad Fataar and Ahmed Mohamed for always being there to assist.

This brief paper is a small research paper I did whilst on study. Many people share different views about Sayyid Qutb. I looked at a number of them and share my thoughts about Qutb.

Faizal Sayed  
Cape Town  
2020

## Exordium

For most Sayyid Qutb is considered as a leading ideologue of the 20th century. Born as Sayyid Ibrahim Husayn Shadili Qutb in October 1906 and known as an Egyptian author, educator, theorist, revolutionary, and poet. This paper takes us on a journey through the biographical life, opinions, postulations, and apprehensions of Sayyid Qutb as a leading historical figure whose influence is felt up to this very day. We understand that the life occurrences of an individual help form a world view or frame of reference and in turn, determines subsequent outcome from an ideological and philosophical perspective with a seminal pragmatic outcome. Hence, we delve into the formation of these thoughts in the life and times of Sayyid Qutb to unpack that which has become apparent by him being known for his work on what is believed to be the social and political role of Islam.

Further, we explore the literary works of Sayyid Qutb to locate the nexus linking his ideology through the authoring of 24 books, 30 being unpublished for perhaps political reasons (Routledge, 2006). We will attempt to emphasize his Magnus opus, *Fi Zilal al-Quran* (In the Shade of the Qur'an) and of his most famous work *Ma'alim Fi al-Tariq* (Milestones), a publication that has played a definitive role in events leading up to his death. Through this paper, we venture on discovery into what we discern to be a prosopographic journey into the life and thought of Sayyid Qutb, a hero of conception and conviction to some but perhaps the antithetical embodiment of quotidian thought to others.

## Prosopography

Born in Egypt on the 9th of October 1906, Sayyid Qutb grew up in the village of Musha in the province of Asyut. Interestingly his father was a landowner and well known for his political activism specifically convening weekly meetings discussing political events and the recitation of the Qur'an (Musallam, 2005). It would be prudent to note the early life exposure of Sayyid Qutb to the world of politics within the childhood home. According to Routledge (2006), he completed the memorization of the Qur'an at the young age of ten. By the time Qutb was in his teens, he had already become critical of religious institutions scrutinizing how these institutions were used in the formation of public opinion and thought. It was at this time that he demonstrated his dislike for schools that focused on religious studies only. From this one can further see the peripheral development of Qutb's opinion when he becomes bent against the traditional approach by Imams to education, a view that would remain constant throughout his life (Khalidy & Saleh, 1999).

Sayyid Qutb left his mark as an author of which he wrote his first book at the age of 25 entitled *Muhimmat al-Sha'ir fi al-Haya wa Shi'r al-Jil al-Hadir* -The Mission of the Poet in Life and the Poetry of the Present Generation (Calvert. J, 2009). Rather defining to note is that in the 1940s he came across the works of Alexis Carrel, a French Nobel Peace Laureates', literary works that would have a lasting impact on Qutb. These works would entrench his criticism of Western civilization. Carrel believed that Western modernity ensnared man into a sense of spiritual numbing of control and discipline rather than building caring societies that eventually would develop attitudes of selfish individualism. Hence Qutb saw Carrel as a rare Western thinker and one who understood that his civilization depreciated humanity (Calvert. J, 2009). It is encounters like these that would later further shape the ideology of Qutb.

Like any other individual, Sayyid Qutb's personal life was not without challenge. From a religious perspective, Islam gave him peace and contentment with this evident in a quotation from *Fi Zilal al-Qur'an* in the introduction, Chapter one where Qutb writes "Allah has bestowed upon me with the life in the shades of the Qur'an for a period of time, I have tasted, during it, of his grace and beneficence, what I have never tasted at all in my life". He suffered from numerous medical ailments which included respiratory problems and was known for being an introvert at most in isolation with bouts of depression. At times he appeared pale with "sleepy eyes" and never married. It appears as if in some of his works he openly speaks of his personal life and what may have shaped some of his life's decisions. A classic example hereof is of Qutb's disclosure to his readers when he noted that he will never be able to find a woman of adequate "moral purity and discretion" and hence appropriated himself to remaining a bachelor. (Calvert. J, 2009).

Sayyid Qutb went to the United States between 1948 and 1950, a stay that certainly cemented his views on Western modernity. During this period, he pursued studies in Educational Administration whilst he worked at the Wilson Teacher's College in Washington, D.C. Whilst he was a staunch critic of the West, an irony in Qutb's personal life manifested. He was perhaps Western in many ways which included his dress style, love for Hollywood movies, and classical Music whilst immersing himself in the writings of Charles Darwin, Albert Einstein, and Percy Bysshe with a keen affiliation to the French Writer, Victor Hugo (Wright, 2006).

His visit to the United States sets the ideal stage for his criticism of American culture and society. In an unprecedented move, he publishes "The America that I Have Seen" on his return to Egypt. A publication where he analyses his observations of the United States. He speaks of his observances of materialism, individual freedoms, racism, the economic system, savage boxing matches, and "poor" haircuts (Von Drehle, 2006). Central to his observances Qutb outlined with clear remonstrance the openly displayed sexuality of women in America. Shortly after his return to Egypt he joined the Muslim Brotherhood and took up a post as the Chief Editor of a weekly publication entitled *Al-Ikhwān al-Muslimīn* and later an appointed member of the working committee of the organization itself (Moussalli, 1992).

It would be apt to deem the events to follow as the crescendo of Qutb's political career, one that would shape and define politics in Egypt for many decades to follow. In July of 1952, the pro-Western Egyptian Government was overthrown by the nationalist Free Officers Movement under Gamal Abdel Nasser. Qutb had welcomed the coup d'état against the government which was perceived as distant to the values of Islam and subordinate to British Imperialism. Nasser himself consulted Qutb on matters about revolution. During this period Nasser had set up structures that would oppose the Muslim Brotherhood once he came to power. Unfortunately for Qutb he did not realize the plans of Nasser and continued in meeting with him discussing a post monarchical Egypt with Qutb eventually realizing that Nasser had taken advantage of the secrecy between the Muslim Brotherhood and Free Officers. At this stage, Nasser offered Qutb position which he declined.

Qutb and others at the Brotherhood planned to assassinate Nasser and the attempt was foiled with Qutb being jailed (Isseroff, 2008). According to Isseroff (2008) conditions in prison for Qutb were bad especially in the first three years where it was reported that he was tortured. In the years to follow conditions improved and he was allowed the opportunity to write. It was during this time that Qutb produced his two key works, *Zilal al-Qur'an* and *Ma'alim fi-al-Tariq* (Milestones) which highlighted Qutb's convictions encompassing anti-secular and anti-Western sentiment based on his elucidation of the Qur'an and Islamic history and its connection to the political and social challenges faced by Egypt at the time.

Released from Prison in 1964 at the behest of the Prime Minister of Iraq, Abdul Salam Arif, Qutb was rearrested in August of 1965 standing accused of plotting to overthrow the state (Badrul, 1982). Charges against him were taken directly from *Ma'alim Fi al-Tariq* whilst he reinforced his written statements (Isseroff, 2008). The trial ended in a death sentence for Qutb and six others despite him not being the leader of the plot (Ajami, 1983). Qutb was executed by hanging on the 29th of August 1966.

### **The Social and Political Role of Islam in Qutb's Opinion**

Sayyid Qutb encapsulated is best known for his work on what he believed to be the social and political role of Islam. Egypt around the 1950s was in a period where one saw the emergence of a professional middle and working class. Before this period, elite and wealthy families had ruled Egypt for many decades. Nasser as Egypt's leader signified a period of modernization and socialist reform along with staunch advocacy of pan-Arab nationalism. Concerning the development, structure, and functioning of human society, Qutb found himself amidst the avant-garde of Muslim intellectuals who attempted to redress an epistemological crisis within the Muslim world (Masud, 2017). Perhaps a sociological polytheistic reality where Qutb believed that Muslims as a whole was in dire need of a revival.

Further to this Qutb held the belief in imperceptible matters being an important manifestation of man's propensity to accept knowledge from fields outside of science itself. In *Fi Zilal-al Qur'an* he asserts that "the concept of the imperceptible is a decisive factor in distinguishing man from animal. Materialist thinking, ancient as well as modern, has tended to drag man back to an irrational existence, with no room for the spiritual, where everything is determined by sensory means alone. What is peddled as 'progressive thought' is no more than dismal regression" (Qutb, 1952). Having returned from the United States in 1950 and subsequently reporting on his observances in the West or rather his disdain of what he had observed, it becomes apparent that a sense of moral or spiritual rebellion rose within Qutb. One gets the sense of Qutb shifting away from secularism almost in entirety at some point.

### **The Shift Away from Secularism**

Various theories exist as to why he shifted away from his initial secularist predilection toward Islamic Sharia. One such theory holds that the conditions witnessed by Qutb in prison between 1954 and 1964 which included the torture and murder of Muslims may have inveigled him towards a model which holds that only a government-run by Islamic Law could prevent such abuses. Further shaping his movement away from secularism comes a defining incident in Qutb's life. He embarks on a journey through studying the Qur'an in a very literal manner and slowly starts understanding the principles of the religion. Doubt is removed en route to America when aboard a ferry he saw the boat he was traveling in rocking in the water all under the control of Allah without sinking or capsizing. He relates that it was at this stage that he realized the power of Allah and belief entered into his heart.

It would be rather prudent at this stage to quote the opening lines of *Ma'alim fi al-Tariq* (Milestones) to hone into the mind of Qutb at the time. He writes. "It is necessary for the new leadership to preserve and develop the material fruits of the creative genius of Europe, and also to provide mankind with such high ideals and values as have so far remained undiscovered by mankind, and which will also acquaint humanity with a way of life which is harmonious with human nature, which is positive and constructive, and which is practicable" (Qutb, 1964). It is clear that in *Ma'alim fi al-Tariq*, Qutb holds that anything non-Islamic is clearly corrupted and evil and hence following Sharia as a comprehensive system and further extending it to all spheres of life would indeed benefit man from a social peace and personal point of view. Closely following the manifestation of the interrelatedness of events from a biographical standpoint and how these develop, alter, and shape Qutb's opinion, thought, and subsequent behavior becomes apparent when studying the chronological order of events as they occur in his rather enthralling life. Affixing his return from the West with the political and social challenges faced in the Muslim world at the time notwithstanding the apparent epistemological causative root of some of the challenges it comes as no surprise when Qutb asserts his notion of Jahiliyya.

### **The Abstract of Jahiliyya and the Seminal Effect on Politics**

Sayyid Qutb's idea of Jahiliyya departed from the classical understanding of the concept which at most regarded it as a period in time or the condition of a particular people (Masud, 2017). Qutb on the other hand stripped the concept of its limitations to time and space and opened the concept to refer to any place, state, race, or society. He asserted that Jahiliyya was a condition about a time and place where Allah is not held as the highest authority. He further held that this condition of Jahiliyya can arise at any period in time and that the very essence of the concept is to judge and legislate according to human desires notwithstanding if such desires is on the level of an individual, nation, group, or even an entire generation (Masud, 2017). According to Masud (2017) in *Milestones* Qutb relates this by saying "Our whole environment, 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!" The notion of God as the highest authority is further reflected in his concept of sovereignty or *Hakimiyya*. Interestingly Qutb appropriated the terms of Jahiliyya and *Hakimiyya* from another contemporary named as Sayyid Abu'l A'la Mawdudi, and also Abu'l Hasan 'Ali Nadwi. The latter was the one who introduced Qutb to Mawdudi's work, and they had corresponded many times (Masud, 2017). Regarding these assertions Masud, (2017) notes that Albert Bergesen stated that Qutb was drawing from the 14th-century Muslim scholar Ibn Taymiyyah by applying his framework to the current day political climate in Egypt. Taymiyyah's view was that the Mongols, despite converting to Islam and following its basic precepts such as praying and fasting, did not rule based on the Sacred Law. Ibn Taymiyyah considered the Mongols apostates because even if they were psychologically Muslim, they were not sociologically Muslim. Similarly, for Qutb, having faith requires having a political citizenry where the principles contained in the Qur'an is what governs society. One's idiosyncratic belief had to be accompanied by a collective and cooperative political structure (Masud, 2017).

Qutb saw the oneness of God with the oneness of political sovereignty. In this model, it then stands to reason that a Muslim who surrenders to the laws of society would then be deemed as an upstanding citizen. According to Qutb, Jihad was perhaps a means to overcoming the vices of Jahiliyya. For Qutb Jihad encompassed the jihad of the heart, hand, tongue, and sword. Jihad in Qutb's mind was not a defensive construct but rather a way to remove obstructions that blockaded the path toward sovereignty and an Islamic citizenry (Masud, 2017).

### **Disquisition of Political Philosophy and Jahiliyya in Relation to Freedom**

It would be fair-minded to state that Qutb's political standpoint centered on Islam. For Qutb, Islam was a comprehensive apparatus of justice, morality, and sturdy governance whose Sharia laws should form the basis of existence. His political ideation is often described as an endeavor to instantiate an intricate eschatological vision partly grounded in the counter-hegemonic re-articulation ideal of Islamic Universalism (Mura & Andrea, 2014). After the Coup of 1952, he sought a just leadership that would perhaps bestow political liberties to the high-minded only (Sivan & Emmanuel, 1985). He differed with the notion that democracy was Islamic. He further opposed the doctrines of Arab nationalism after becoming disillusioned with the Nasser revolution.

Qutb was antisemitic. 'Our Struggles against the Jews' was published in 1950 which remains widely distributed (Fatah, 2011). He had strong views that pertained to the purpose of this world noting that the world was meant to serve man if understood correctly. He wrote that Islam teaches that God created the physical world and all its forces for man's use and benefit.

Man is specifically taught and directed to study the world around him, discover its potential, and utilize all his environment for his good and the good of his fellow humans. Any harm that man suffers at the hands of nature is a result only of his ignorance or lack of understanding of it and the laws governing it. The more man learns about nature, the more peaceful and harmonious his relationship with nature and the environment. Hence, the notion of "conquering nature" can readily be seen as cynical and negative. It is alien to Islamic perceptions and betrays a shameless ignorance of the spirit in which the world has been created and the divine wisdom that underlies it (Qutb, 1965).

Qutb's subjection to the misemploy of power contributed to his ideas and philosophies in the famous *Ma'alim Fi al-Tariq* in which he propositioned the idea of a political system that opposed the dictatorship. A political system entrenched in Sharia where Qutb asserted that in his view much of the Muslim world converges on the Qur'an as a channel to procure culture and information whilst this evades the real purpose of the Qur'an being a source of instruction for obedience (Qutb, 1964). He asserted that the way to bring about freedom was for a revolutionary forefront to fight against Jahiliyya by preaching and using physical power to eradicate authorities of a jahili system. This revolutionary forefront would eventually grow through the process of continual preaching and jihad until the formation of a rather truly Islamic society at which point the system would eventually spread throughout the entire world effectuating the leadership of humanity itself.

Qutb understood that this quest would be fairly difficult but only true Islam would eventually transform every facet of society. Freedom was indeed the emancipation from a world purported or peddled as free but firmly rooted in the vices of materialism amidst other social and psychological iniquities.

### **Conclusion**

Sayyid Qutb is certainly a leading ideologue of the 20th century. A life subjected to challenge and one immersed in deep reflection and thought of the world around him and the world he saw as Utopic. Qutb has left a mark on society to be remembered for many centuries. Studying the life and times of Qutb, it becomes apparent that events that occurred on the timeline of his life played a role in shaping not only his frames of references but the very next layers of his life which ended in tragedy. He remained firm on his views despite facing imminent death as an outcome, an indication of his conviction to what he believed to be the antithesis of what he called jahiliyya. His literary works portrayed his ideation and his actions portrayed his works. The subject of many academics and commentators around the world one can at times understand what has led some to misinterpret Qutb to be what some call the father of Islamic fundamentalism. The mind can easily enquire about the agenda to such assertions and whether or not Qutb and his fate were used as a means to appease forces operating against the very ideology of what Qutb had stood for. Qutb is considered one of the most influential Muslim thinkers of the modern era not only for his ideology and philosophy but for what many see as a martyr's death of a man best known for his work on what he believed to be the social and political role of Islam. Is what is peddled as 'progressive thought' no more than dismal regression or something that should be investigated further? Perhaps it is these very words of Sayyid Qutb that may lead one to the truth of Qutb himself amidst a myriad of opinion.

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**FAIZAL SAYED**

TV Talk Show Host, Media Proprietor, and Activist. Faizal is the host of The Faizal Sayed Show known for its brutal truths and direct ability to get to the point of any matter. Faizal has a large social responsibility portfolio through strategic partnerships attending to many ill and deaf persons. He is the Ambassador of Hope for DKMS Africa which attends to the Stem Cell needs of patients with blood disorders. He is the chairman of the Moslem Cemetery Board and Secretary of the Burial Administration of the Muslim Judicial Council (MJC). His social media is widely followed by tens of thousands and he is considered a key influencer, Community builder, opinion shaper, industry disruptor, interruptor, mover, and shaker. Faizal also holds a BA (Hons) Degree in Islamic Studies from IPSA

