

Extremism in the Discourse of Sayyid Quṭb: Myth and Reality

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Abstract: Sayyid Quṭb has been much maligned in the West as well as in the Muslim World as an extremist and a radical whose writings have been the inspirational source of international terrorism. A discourse analysis of his writings shows that his views about Western culture and civilisation, the Zionist conspiracy to undermine the *ummah*, and Western education were highly critical and harsh, and these may have given the impression that he is a radical. His explanation of such concepts as *tawḥīd*, Islamic society and the infidelity of Muslim rulers may have added further impetus to the charge of extremism. These concepts, however, were explained by Quṭb with reference to the Qurʾān and the *Sunnah* and has precedence in the writings of other Muslim scholars. Further, Quṭb however advocated a peaceful, incremental methodology for the Islamic movement and personally abhorred armed tactics as means to usher in an Islamic society and state.

Sayyid Quṭb (1906-1966 C.E) was an author, a literary critic, and one of the most influential theologians of the modern Islamic era and a most controversial intellectual figure in the Arab world. Born in 1906 in Egypt, Sayyid Quṭb pursued a degree in education and then joined the Ministry of Education in Cairo. He was sent in 1948 to Colorado to study teaching curricula in the U.S. Upon returning to Cairo in 1951, he joined the Muslim Brotherhood.

In 1952, Quṭb became an avid supporter of the Egyptian revolution and participated in the councils of the Free Officers in the first few months of that year. Jamāl Abdul-Nasser was then a young General of the Free Officers who became President of Egypt in 1953. Nasser

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began to sense a threat from the Muslim Brotherhood in 1954 after a failed assassination on his life in Alexandria Square. Nasser arrested most of the members of the Brotherhood including Quṭb, who spent most of his life thereafter in a prison cell where he suffered brutal punishment. Quṭb was tried by Egyptian authorities for terrorist activities and for fomenting sedition.¹ The authorities could not prove the allegation of terrorism, but they inferred his seditious belief from one of his major works, *Milestones (Ma‘ālim fī al-Ṭarīq)*. Excerpts from this book were used against him during the trial. Quṭb was convicted for conspiring against the Egyptian government and was hanged on August 21, 1966. Quṭb’s best known work is *Ma‘ālim fī al-Ṭarīq*, but the majority of Quṭb’s theory can be found in his Qur’ānic commentary *Fī ḡilāl al-Qur’ān (In the Shade of the Qur’ān)*. This 30-volume work is noteworthy for its innovative method of interpretation of the Qur’ān.

A socio-political thinker, a journalist, an exegete, and a gifted speaker, Sayyid Quṭb is considered the foremost Islamic revivalist of 20th century Egypt. Western scholars and activists, however, have criticised his writings as nurturing extremist tendencies among contemporary Muslim youth. He is regarded as the father of modern extremism or an ideologue of terrorist organisations worldwide. It is, therefore, essential to analyse his writings and his activities to throw light on the phenomenon of extremism or terrorism to which Quṭb is accused of.

This article proceeds as follows: The first section describes the views of Western scholars who accuse Quṭb of extremism. The second section presents Quṭb’s criticism of the West which has contributed to his image as an extremists. The third section analyses the concepts used by Quṭb that tend to reinforce the impression of radicalism. Fourth, it examines the methodology of Islamic revolution advocated by Quṭb to usher in an Islamic system of administration and society. The final section discusses the activities of Quṭb in the light of the charges of sedition.

Western Critique

Sayyid Quṭb has been much maligned in the West. The end of the Cold War and the elevation of Islam as the newest enemy of the liberal West have given birth to the search for the ideologues whose

writings and movements inspire the Muslim youth to oppose the West. The incidents of September 11, 2001 made such a search all the more urgent and justifiable. In their efforts to come to grips with their newest enemy, Western scholars, activists and journalists have combed every inch of Osama bin Laden's life story for clues as to what turned an apparently quiet and unexceptional rich Saudi boy into the world's most feared terrorist. But, as Robert Irwin points out, the most useful insights into the shaping of Bin Laden may lie not in the rugged mountains of Afghanistan or the rampant materialism of Saudi Arabia, but in the biography of a long dead Egyptian fundamentalist scholar called Sayyid Quṭb.²

According to Daniel Brogan, "Quṭb's work is to militant Islam what *Das Kapital* was to Communism or *Mein Kampf* was to Nazis."³ To him, Quṭb combines in himself the Americans, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, Alexander Hamilton, and Thomas Paine, all in one. Quṭb's disciples include Anwar Sadat's assassins and Sheikh Omar Abdel Rahman, the Egyptian cleric convicted in 1995 of plotting to blow up several New York landmarks. They include militant groups like Hamas and Islamic Jihad. They also include a Saudi militant named Osama bin Laden. Brogan suggests that one has to know Sayyid Quṭb in order to know why Osama bin Laden hates America.

There are others with similar opinions including Middle Eastern scholars such as John Calvert, William Shepard, and the American journalists, Dinesh D'Souza, Ann Imse and Lawrence Wright.⁴ They believe that Quṭb's socio-political and religious thought is misleading, controversial, and inimical to inter-religious harmony. They argue that Quṭb criticises Western prosperity, pluralism, and equality of sexes as worthless and champions Islamic society as superior to Western society because it makes virtue, as laid down in the Qur'ān and the *Sunnah*, the chief end of government.⁵

The most recent allegation is made by Robert Worth, who argues that if one man deserves the title of intellectual grandfather to Osama bin Laden and his fellow terrorists, it is probably the Egyptian writer and activist Sayyid Quṭb.⁶ *The 9-11 Commission Report* has also depicted Quṭb's philosophy as one advocating violence and the killing of innocents.⁷

Qutb's Criticism of the West

Much of the Western denunciation of Sayyid Qutb's ideas is attributable to the latter's bitter criticism and rejection of Western thought and culture and his repeated assertion that Western ideas and theories should not become the foundation of Islamic culture and civilisation. To him, Western thought and culture are secular and hence antithetical to Islam. Muslims, he argued, should derive guidance directly from the Qur'an and *Sunnah*.⁸ They should not borrow from Western philosophy which is not at all compatible with Islam. Qutb warned Muslims that the glitter of Western materialistic culture should not blind them to the tangible misery which mankind suffers under its sway. He declared that white man's civilisation has come to a decadent end, whether it is Russian, American, English, French, or Swedish.⁹

Qutb denounced the West for denying freedom to the Arabs. France, he pointed out, despite its commitment to freedom, regarded the teaching of Arabic as a crime in Arab-Islamic countries such as Algeria and detained the old, the children and the women of liberation movements in Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco.¹⁰ Great Britain which claims to be the torchbearer of religious tolerance, prohibited the propagation of Islam in Southern Sudan. It hurled the bodies of wounded Egyptian commandos committed to the liberation of the Suez Canal from foreign domination to rapacious dogs.¹¹ The United States, the professed saviour of democracy and freedom, permitted its white-skinned citizens to lynch the blacks in public. During the Palestine war, when the problems of Egypt were presented to the UN Security Council for arbitration, the U.S. stood behind Israel and blocked Egypt's case from getting a fair hearing.

To Qutb, the Americans worship the gods of wealth and lust. The goals of the Capitalists are to distribute surplus American products in the Third World, eliminate unemployment among American workers, and develop Europe as a nucleus for world economic activities particularly to resist the Communists. He criticised America, its civilisation, its basic concepts and its ideology and exposed its tragedy and social ills. In contrast, he enumerated what is good in Islam and what Islam can offer them.¹² He reminded the Muslims of their responsibility to bring the humanity back to the One God.

Quṭb was not happy with the role of the superpowers in maintaining world peace and promoting justice. He believed that the United Nations was an instrument used by the superpowers to promote their selfish interests. He cited the planting of a Jewish state in the Arab land to prove his point. He, therefore, appealed to the Muslim *Ummah* to establish a third political force, the Third International Bloc (*al-Kutlah al-Duwaliyyah al-Thâlithah*), to unite the Muslim world and face the external challenges from “the Western Bloc under the leadership of the United States of America” and “the Eastern Bloc under the leadership of the Soviet Union.” He maintained that the Third Bloc would survive on the natural resources of the Muslim world. Quṭb’s observations on Western culture and civilisation and the role of superpowers and his call to Muslims to form a bloc of their own earned him the stigma of a radical bent upon undoing the supremacy of the West.

The Jews, the West and Muslim Education

Quṭb considered the Zionists, Communists and Crusaders as the Muslims’ enemies. He believed that the decline of the Muslims socially, ideologically, economically and morally was due to the conspiracies and machinations of the enemies. In particular, he singled out the Jews and accused them of planning to destroy the Muslim community: “The one who schemes secretly all over the World is the Jew... the Jew *per se*.”¹³ According to him, the Jews used the Communists and the Crusaders as instruments to realise their plans, which include the dismantling of the Caliphate in Turkey.

The Jews are behind every disastrous event in Muslim countries in all corners of the World. They exert all efforts to pulverise the Muslim renaissance. They help create situations to damage the Muslim Movements in every part of the Muslim World.¹⁴

Quṭb refers to the Qur’ānic verse 2:120 which declares that the Jews or the Christians will never “be satisfied with you unless you follow their form of religion.” Quṭb regrets that Muslims send their children to study Islam from them as it implies the understanding and acceptance of their interpretations of the Islamic heritage.

... with unprecedented stupidity we seek the opinion of the orientalist (of Jews, Christians and Communists) in the matter

of religion. We learn our history from them, trusting their statements about our heritage, hearing what they interpolate of doubts in their studies of our Qur'ān, the *Ḥadīth* of our Prophet, and the lives of our pioneers. We send our students to study from them the teachings of Islam. They graduate from their universities and return to us with infected intellect and conscience.¹⁵

Quṭb found justification for his belief in the claim made by Samuel Zwemer that his mission is “to have Muslims leave Islam and make them subservient to our teachings, our influence and our ideas... Everyone who graduates from these institutions abandons Islam in actuality if not in name. He becomes an aid to our policy without knowing or he becomes trusting of us...”¹⁶

Given his strong views on the Jews, it is natural for the West to brand Sayyid Quṭb an anti-Semite and an extremist generating hatred against Jews in particular, and against the Capitalist West in general. Consequently, Quṭb has been dubbed as the brain behind Osama and his *Milestones* as providing the basis for the denunciation of everything Western. Significantly, there are some Muslim scholars who criticise Quṭb for being emotional and non-academic in his analyses and for blaming Jews for every misery in the Muslim World. They argue, however, that Quṭb's writings were seriously impaired because of the long-term jail sentence and inhuman tortures he endured in the Egyptian prison. It is certainly true that Quṭb wrote his *Milestones* during a militant regime.

It is, however, noteworthy that nowhere in his writings does Quṭb advocate either the killing of non-believers or the use of force to convert them to Islam. On the contrary, Quṭb repeatedly asserts that Islam does not force people to accept its belief and that in an Islamic system, people will enjoy freedom to follow their own beliefs. He blames Western scholars, the vicious orientalist, for distorting the truth and for painting a picture of Islam as a violent movement bent upon forcing the non-believers to accept its creed.

The Concepts

Western scholars have singled out Sayyid Quṭb's explanation of certain concepts as being radical, i.e. deviating from the norm. These concepts include *tawḥīd*, Islamic society and religious infidelity. Quṭb

derived these concepts from the Qur'ān and explains their import on the basis of the Qur'ān. These concepts are explained by Quṭb to delineate the strategy by which Muslims should understand the meaning of faith in the exclusive unity of Allah (*tawḥīd*), the imperfections, injustices and moral poverty of *jāhiliyyah* (ignorance) and to empower themselves by submitting to the will and laws of Allah.

Tawḥīd

Tawḥīd (oneness of God) is the central tenet of the faith which Quṭb interprets differently from early and other contemporary Muslim scholars. To him, *tawḥīd al-ulūhiyyah* (God's divine unity) is the true foundation of the worldview of Islam. It embodies such essential features as *al-rubūbiyyah* (lordship), *al-ḥākimiyyah* (sovereignty), *al-qawwāmah* (guardianship), *al-sulṭah* (authority), and *al-tashrīʿ* (legislation). He quotes the Prophet (SAW) stating that it is imperative for every believer to establish the reality of *al-ulūhiyyah al-wāḥidah* (the unique divinity of God) and *al-qawwāmah al-wāḥidah* (the unique guardianship of God) in the life of man and in the administration of the universe.¹⁷ According to Quṭb, there is only One eternal God, the sovereign of the dominion who alone has the power to legislate for man and society.

The polytheists, to Quṭb, associate partners with God and other deities (*shirk*) in various forms. The *shirk* could be in respect of creed, in religious rites, and even in the revealed law of Islam. The core *shirk* is the recognition of someone other than God in organising life. *Al-ulūhiyyah* in the true sense refers to recognising God as the Creator, the Provider, the Life-giver, the Destroyer, the Powerful ruler and the Governor of everything. It also means *al-ḥākimiyyah*, *al-tashrīʿ*, *al-qawwāmah* and *al-sulṭah*, i.e. *al-rubūbiyyah*. *Al-rubūbiyyah* refers to invalidating the legitimacy of every ruling based upon other than the laws of God and His commandments. The ultimate aim of a committed Muslim is to establish *al-ḥākimiyyah*, the sovereignty of Allah on earth in order to end all kinds of suffering and oppression. Quṭb's views of *tawḥīd* are very similar to those held by the Pakistani revivalist Sayyid Abū al-Aʿlā Mawḍūdī (1903-1979 C.E). Quṭb admired Mawḍūdī and was deeply influenced by the latter's conception of Islam as a revolutionary force.

Islamic Society

Sayyid Quṭb's conception of an Islamic society has also provoked deep resentment among Western scholars even though his interpretation of the society is well received by Muslim activists. Most Muslim scholars look at his perspective as a positive contribution to contemporary Islamic thought. They believe that his critique of Western political ideologies is highly relevant.

Islamic society, according to Quṭb, recognises the laws of God as the law of the land. It asserts the Unity of God and its sincere observance both in theory and practice. Islam is a comprehensive way of living that encompasses all aspects of life, including the life in the hereafter. It provides the meaning of life for Muslims. Islam means submission to this "oneness" of God. This requires following Allah's method (*manhaj*) in every aspect of life. One does this by submitting to the laws and order of God.

For Quṭb, the only truly Islamic way of life is organised around the concept of *tawḥīd*. Islamic society is characterised by *ḥākimiyyah*, in which God is the supreme legislator, the justice and the ultimate source of governmental and legal authority. God does not descend to govern, but revealed his *sharī'ah* (law) to govern. In Quṭb's view, the *ḥākimiyyah* deals with the individual and groups, links them to the society and defines the individual's rights within the limits of the community. Such a society is concerned not simply with religious rites and rituals but also with implementing the laws of the Lord which is the complete code of life. People in an Islamic society voluntarily surrender to the Will of God, follow the teachings of the Prophet (SAW), and the ways of the Rightly Guided Caliphs.¹⁸

The alternatives to the Islamic way of life originate from the imperfect nature of humanity, which through arrogance, emotions, and other factors, create polytheistic thought and imperfect/corrupted religions. Secularism and secular way of life, to Quṭb, contradict the Islamic worldview which is based upon *tawḥīd*. The true Islamic society is superior to Western society because it makes virtue as enshrined in the Qur'ān and the *Sunnah* the chief end of government. Implied in Quṭb's writing is the incompatibility between the virtues found in Western society and those enjoined in Islam. He warns that if Muslims continue to proliferate these Western ideas, they would

cause damage to themselves and to all people, since they would be denying the true source of constancy, Allah (SWT).

To Quṭb then, human attitudes towards living are divided into two: the Islamic attitude and the chaotic (*jāhili*) non-Islamic attitude. The work of Sayyid Quṭb is dominated by the concept of *jāhiliyyah*. The *jāhiliyyah* society is antithetical to Islam because it is based upon man-made laws. It obstructs the implementation of the divine code as the sole source of conducting and regulating the economic, legal, moral, and social life. It collaborates with groups, nations or people who deviate from the fundamental principles of Islam. New names and philosophies are created and given the status of new gods. Sayyid Quṭb believed that the world he lived in was in an acute state of ignorance. Doctrines, customs, traditions, cultures, and arts indicate trends of *jāhiliyyah*. Communist and Capitalist societies alike embody some parts of *jāhiliyyah* because they give priority to materialism in various forms, which are the enemies of human spirituality. The *Jāhīlī* society encourages the worship of man by man and the domination of one over the other for the sake of power or promotes a clash among powers or ideologies or civilisations for their own sake, particularly towards meeting materialistic ends.¹⁹

Quṭb analysed the Communist society which interprets human history through economic materialism and class struggle. Its state structure is subservient to the will of the party. It limits life to only the satisfaction of essential human needs such as food, clothing, and shelter in a system which views humans as mere economic beings. Though it tries to solve some of the society's problems, it ignores the essential character of the spiritual life. It makes people more fanatical about worldly pleasures and due to its display of material lust, people are made to neglect everything else. It sterilises the human brain and conceals the truth.

In the predominant Christian and Jewish societies, prominence is given to their spiritual leaders. The Christians not only regard their priests as divine but almost worship them. They also give them the authority to make laws and enforce them. The Jewish rabbis and the Christian priests attempt to keep people away from the truth. They are treated as lords. The Jews and Christians nominate rabbis and priests as their intercessors in order to seek pardon from God.

Quṭb disapproved of such societies and categorised them as *jāhiliyyah* quoting verses from the Qurʾān to substantiate his view.

According to Quṭb, there are other societies too that are descendants of *jāhiliyyah*, because the laws that govern them have no link with a religion that connects them with the divine law of God. *Jāhiliyyah*, then, for him, comprises a few elements: first, it believes in gods other than the God. Second, it constructs an elaborate system of devotional acts to propitiate these deities. Consequently, the laws and regulations in *jāhiliyyah* societies are derived from sources other than God and His *sharīʿah*. They worship everything other than God and attribute a number of qualities to their deities. They consider these gods as supreme powers and they are not ready to return to the original source, which is God, the Supreme Power.

Quṭb further argues that all the existing so-called Muslim societies are *jāhili* societies. In spite of their belief in the Unity of God, they have slipped away from the divinity of Islam.²⁰ Their way of life is not based on the submission to God alone. They have delegated the legislative attribute of God to others and submit to this authority; and from this authority they derive their systems, their traditions and customs, their laws, their values and standards, and almost every aspect of life. Instead of turning their hearts toward Allah (SWT), they direct themselves toward their governmental systems to their own detriment. Quṭb quotes the Qurʾānic verses 5:45 and 12:40 to substantiate his argument.²¹

Religious Infidelity

Sayyid Quṭb was particularly disturbed by the growing secularism of Muslim states. According to his interpretation, God alone has the power to make laws and to judge. When men make laws and judge one another according to secular criteria, they are usurping God's prerogatives. All who obey such leaders, according to Quṭb, are treating their leaders as gods and therefore are committing *shirk*. They are not true Muslims but unbelievers regardless of whether they obey Muslim law and practice.

This view is again considered as yet another example of Quṭb's extremism, while others believe that Quṭb's statements have been misconstrued or misunderstood by his critics. According to some of

his critics, Sayyid Quṭb condemned all Muslims as infidels except those who were affiliated to Jamā‘at al-Muslimīn popularly known as Jamā‘at al-Takfīr wa al-Hijrah which is claimed to be the brainchild of Quṭb. Abū ‘Izzah, in particular, wrote several articles in the Lebanon-based *Majallat al-Shihāb* accusing Quṭb of condemning people in Muslim countries as infidels with the exception of members of specific Islamic organisations.²² This has been refuted by, among others, Sālīm al-Bahansāwī in his *al-Ḥukm wa Qaḍīyyat Takfīr al-Muslim* and Ḥasan al-Ḥuḍaybī in *Naḥnu Du‘āt Lā Quḍāt* arguing that Abū ‘Izzah and others have used some of the expressions in Quṭb’s *Zilāl* and *Ma‘ālim* out of context and interpreted these to further their organisational goals.²³

It must be stated that the allegations against Quṭb are ill founded. What Quṭb says about infidels is that a man inclines to *kufr* (unbelief) if he rejects God’s laws consciously. This view is based exclusively upon Qur’ānic verses, for example, verse 2:276 which declares that those who persistently continue usurious transactions, after its plain prohibition are transgressing infidels and deserve the hatred of God. This verse leaves no doubt that those who permit such practices specifically prohibited by God are considered to be infidels and wrongdoers even though they may chant the *kalimah* declaring the unity of God and prophethood of Muḥammad (SAW) thousands of times. This is because Islam is not simply a bundle of rituals, but a system of life and a practical methodology. Rejecting a part of Islam is like rejecting it in its entirety. Since the Qur’ān categorically prohibits usury, to regard it as lawful and to continue one’s life on the basis of its legitimacy is nothing but infidelity and transgression.²⁴

Evidently, Quṭb was only reasserting the law of God on usury. He was emphatic that the one who, despite his claim to be God-conscious, legalises what is clearly prohibited in the Qur’ān leaves the mainstream of *‘aqīdah* (faith). One can also cite the verse 6:121 which says: “Eat not of (meats) on which Allah’s name hath not been pronounced; that would be impiety. But the evil ones ever inspire their friends to contend with you if you were to obey them, ye would indeed be Pagans.” Quṭb literally adheres to the Qur’ānic text and says:

The verse (6:121) of the Qur’ān is clear that a Muslim’s obedience to a man even partly in the legislation of a law

which is not derived from God's *sharī'ah* and his rejection that God alone is the ruler, will certainly expel him from Islam and push him to *shirk*.²⁵

Quṭb substantiates his viewpoint by quoting Ibn Kathīr (d.774 A.H) who says that whoever obeys a man of his own desire instead of the *sharī'ah* even if it is a small fraction, is regarded as a *mushrik* (associating partners to God in *al-ulūhiyyah* and *al-rubūbiyyah*). A Muslim is expelled from Islam despite his testimony of faith if he receives (the law) from those other than God and obeys (someone) other than God.²⁶

Hence, Quṭb did not resort to a blanket condemnation of all Muslims as infidels. He considered, on the authority of the Qur'ān, that only those who claim to be Muslims yet consciously and deliberately reject the *sharī'ah* and choose to be governed by man-made laws are outside the pale of Islam.²⁷ Quṭb substantiates his argument further by referring to verse 4:65: "But no, by thy Lord, they can have no (real faith) until they make thee judge in all disputes between them, and find in their souls no resistance against thy decisions, but accept them with the fullest conviction" and verse 5:43: "But why do they come to thee for decision, when they have (their own) law before them? Therein is the (plain) command of Allah; yet even after that, they would turn away. For they are not (really) people of faith." Both the verses of the Qur'an categorically declare those who are not satisfied with the rule of God and His Messenger as having no real faith.²⁸ Quṭb's argument is supported by almost all Muslim jurists.

The issue of religious infidelity generally revolves around rulers who rule by laws other than what has been revealed by God. According to Quṭb, those who are ruled are not infidels except if they wish to be ruled by other than the law of God and are contented with the rule. He cites verse 4:60:

Hast thou not turned thy vision to those who declare that they believe in the revelations that have come to thee? Their (real) wish is to resort together for judgement (in their disputes) to the Evil One, though they were ordered to reject him. But Satan's wish is to lead them astray far away.

Quṭb argues that if the rulers wish to rule by false gods (*tāghūt*) they leave the fold of faith (*īmān*) and are committing *kufr*.²⁹ Quṭb

argues that the verse 5:44 declares that whoever does not rule by what has been revealed by God rejects *al-ulūhiyyah* of God, because one of its characteristics is *al-hākimiyyah al-tashrī‘iyyah* (legislative sovereignty of God). On the basis of this evidence, Al-Bahansāwī argues that Quṭb does not charge all present day Muslims with religious infidelity, but only their rulers who rule by other than what has been revealed by God. Quṭb does not presuppose that the subjects are contented with their rulers, but explains that *kufr* (unbelief) ascertains only with regard to those who are not satisfied with the rule of God and the Messenger and actively prefer modern *jāhiliyyah* (man-made) ideologies, philosophies, and worldviews.³⁰

Quṭb’s interpretation of the Qur’ānic verses are in conformity with the views of some early scholars. Al-Ṭabarī (d. 310 A.H) quotes Ibn Mas‘ūd as saying that both ‘Alqamah and Masrūq asked Ibn Mas‘ūd about corruption. Ibn Mas‘ūd replied that it was forbidden.³¹ They asked what the legal ruling was. Ibn Mas‘ūd replied that it was *kufr* and then recited the verse 5:44.³² Based on al-Ṭabarī’s explanation of the verse, the ruling is that whoever disbelieves and does not judge by what has been revealed by God is an infidel.³³ Al-Ṭabarī also argues that the rules followed by Jews and Christians are man-made and hence whoever follows their line of action is an infidel and it is obligatory to kill him unless he returns to the rule of God and His Messenger.³⁴

Contemporary Qur’ānic exegete Aḥmad Shākīr states that the action of the contemporary rulers who rule by other than what has been revealed by God has to be interpreted as shunning away the rule of God and preferring man-made laws over the laws of God.³⁵ This is *kufr*.³⁶ In this regard Ḥasan al-Huḍaybī says that a ruler who conceptualises the characteristics of legitimacy in terms contrary to the command of God is an unbeliever of the text.³⁷ ‘Abd Allāh ‘Azzām³⁸ says that a ruler who commands replacement of God’s religion with the laws of *kufr*, steps out of the community by this deed because he prefers the word of man over the word of God and believes that the laws of *kufr* are more suitable than the laws of God.³⁹

Muḥammad Quṭb, who is considered the chief interpreter of Sayyid Quṭb’s written works, asserts categorically that his brother,

Sayyid Quṭb, never charged Muslims as infidels even once. Muḥammad Quṭb says,

I myself heard Sayyid, more than once, saying: ‘We are preachers, not judges.’ Indeed ‘our mission is not to issue legal verdicts on people, but to explain the meaning and the reality of the testimony ‘*Lā ilāha illā Allāh*’, for people do not know its real intent and meaning and its consolidation of God’s *sharī‘ah*.’ I also heard him saying more than once that indeed to make legal judgement on people there is a need for irrefutable and definite evidence. And this matter is not in our hands, and thus we do not embark on the issue of legal judgement on people. Our existence is for *da‘wah* and we are not a state. The mission of *da‘wah* is to explain the realities to people and not passing judgement on them.⁴⁰

In one of the interviews to the Kuwait-based magazine *al-Mujtama‘*, Zaynab al-Ghazzālī states that Quṭb never accused individual Muslims of the society of being infidels. Zaynab al-Ghazzālī says,

this (issue of *takfīr*) is an imagination and false impression that some of the disciples of Quṭb had. I indeed sat with Quṭb in my house when I heard this news (rumour). I told him: certainly my house is the house of respected Muslim women; you make them respect me greatly, but they are now at the verge of blowing up this respect for ever if they know that I say about them or about one of their relatives that they are infidels. Quṭb was astonished to hear this and said that this (imagination) was a false understanding of what he wrote. And he promised that he would clarify this issue in his second edition of the *Ma‘ālim*. Indeed, Quṭb never charged the individuals but observed that the societies went far away from Islam to the extent that it had almost lost the quality (of *īmān*).⁴¹

The Issue of Arms

Sayyid Quṭb held the view that those who oppose Islamisation of society and state, particularly the rulers, are in a state of *jāhiliyyah* and that they need to be reformed. He also believed that the Egyptian regime was *jāhili* and hence its overthrow is legitimate. The Egyptian court which tried Quṭb accused him of preparing for an armed revolt against the government.

However, Quṭb's final treatise *Limādhā A'damūnī* presents a different picture regarding the issue. It is mentioned that 'Alī 'Ashmāwī, one of the five members of the Council of the New Brotherhood, was the one who, on his own initiative, prepared the ground to launch an attack on the government. As is obvious from his *Limādhā A'damūnī*, Sayyid Quṭb neither hatched a plan for revolt nor broached the idea of violence against either the civilians or the army.

A majority of the members of the Brotherhood doubted the sincerity of 'Alī 'Ashmāwī's allegiance to the cause of the Brotherhood and the genuineness of his friendship with Sayyid Quṭb. There are those in the Brotherhood who believed that 'Alī 'Ashmāwī was sincere in upholding the idea of reviving the Muslim Brotherhood and pursued its mission till he was arrested, prosecuted and given the death sentence, which was later commuted to life imprisonment. The majority, however, believe that 'Alī 'Ashmāwī was a spy for the military's Criminal Investigations Bureau and submitted a report of nine pages disclosing all information about the Brotherhood. They argue that although 'Alī 'Ashmāwī was convicted, he was soon released and later migrated to America.⁴²

It is believed that 'Alī 'Ashmāwī's ordering of arms and planning of an attack on the government was a well-organised attempt to destroy the image of the Brotherhood. The top leadership did not have knowledge of arms being ordered. They neither wanted to have arms, nor arranged for their purchase. Upon receiving the information of the purchase of arms from 'Alī 'Ashmāwī, Quṭb and other members were shocked. According to Sayyid Quṭb:

'Alī 'Ashmāwī informed me that for about two years he was requesting a brother from an Arab country a quantity of arms. Then, he left the subject for a while. Then he said that he got the news that a truckload of arms are ready to be despatched. It would be sent through Sudan and would arrive in two months' time. This was before the arrest. Since this news was a surprise to me, it was not possible to decide immediately. I suggested to him to discuss the matter with other (leaders). Then, we agreed on a time to discuss the issue with them. On the following day, as I correctly remember, but before the appointed time, 'Abd al-Fattāḥ Ismā'īl came to see me about

this issue and I thought that he knew it, of course from ‘Alī ‘Ashmāwī. He showed extreme fear and certainly, he was not in favour of it.⁴³

None of the members of the Council knew about this plan. Quṭb and one other member who came to know about the plan were worried about the consequences of such an action. Sayyid Quṭb narrates:

The leadership was shocked by the story of the arms then they decided to cancel the whole deal. They turned away from the very idea of arms and bent upon total rejection. The Five Brothers authorized me to stop the dispatch of arms from Sudan until thorough investigation was made about the source, funding with which the arms were bought, the method of the deal and the mode of transport. Moreover, it was decided to inform the sender not to send arms until further notification. The Brotherhood then subjected ‘Alī ‘Ashmāwī to an inquiry and sought an assurance from him not to indulge in this issue. However, the leaders were never suspicious of his connection with the Intelligence Agency. After a little over a month, ‘Alī ‘Ashmāwī came to the leadership of the Brotherhood with replies to the questions on the issue of arms. We observed that his sponsors (in the Intelligence Agency) had fully trained him with answers to instigate the plan of destruction of the Brotherhood. ‘Alī ‘Ashmāwī pacified them saying that the arms were acquired with the resources of the Brotherhood, particularly their money and that they had paid from their own resources for their serious needs. ‘Alī ‘Ashmāwī cut off the discussion of the leadership that focussed on the attempt for stopping the arms shipment or its cancellation or even its delaying, by informing them that the container had been actually despatched and it was not possible to stop its arrival.⁴⁴

‘Alī ‘Ashmāwī compelled the members instead to think of the imminent attack from the government and the possible response. In the tense political atmosphere following rumours of an attack on the Brotherhood, and the warning given to some of the Brotherhood leaders by Quṭb about the activities of the non-Brotherhood organisations particularly those of Munīr Dallāh and Farīd ‘Abd al-Khāliq, the Five Member Council took a decision to train the Muslim youth to repel the attack but only as a preventive measure.⁴⁵ Though they did not have the required means and potential, they agreed to

speed up the training of the youths. Quṭb reluctantly agreed to the proposal of providing training for retaliatory action. This was the last decision taken by the Council.

When the detention of the members of the Brotherhood began in 1965, Quṭb suggested to the leaders of the new organisation to reverse the decision made earlier. He conveyed his decision to ‘Alī ‘Ashmāwī and asked him to communicate the message to the rest of the Brotherhood leaders. But ‘Alī ‘Ashmāwī instead returned to Quṭb and asked whether this decision was final or likely to be changed. Quṭb states:

I sent to them through Zaynab my wounded feeling to finally stop the operation of Sudan, meaning the arms in particular in whatever way possible and to cancel every other operation and particularly the retaliation attempt. A question was asked by ‘Alī ‘Ashmāwī through Zaynab likewise whether the instruction was final or it could be reviewed. I replied to him that it is in this situation only, and upon confirmation or assurance of availability of possibilities of the work, it could be taken up and, if not, he should dismiss the whole process. But, I knew that they had practically no potential and therefore nothing happened ultimately.⁴⁶

Indeed, Sayyid Quṭb knew that the Brotherhood would not proceed with what they had considered in the past. ‘Alī ‘Ashmāwī’s arms never arrived and the arms’ training of the youth never took place. His instruction to ‘Alī ‘Ashmāwī was a farsighted one and he knew that nothing could be achieved, as they had no arms in their possession. But events moved very fast thereafter. Leaders of the new organisation and other members of the Brotherhood were arrested. Quṭb was also detained. No incidents as conceived and contemplated ever took place. The Brotherhood never enforced the concept of retaliation against the government. The arms, which according to ‘Alī ‘Ashmāwī had been actually shipped from Sudan and were nearing Aswān, never arrived.⁴⁷ The government never made any announcement after that about the detention of the members of the Brotherhood or about the seizure of any arms or their origin.

This entire episode shows that the story of the arms consignment was a plot, conceived by the Intelligence Agency acting through

‘Alī ‘Ashmāwī, to project the Brotherhood as a destructive, terrorist and militant organisation. It also shows Sayyid Quṭb’s innocence with regard to the arms deal, and casts doubts on ‘Alī ‘Ashmāwī’s trustworthiness and integrity. Al-Khālidī asserts that ‘Alī ‘Ashmāwī was in fact a government agent, planted to sabotage the Muslim Brotherhood from within. He infiltrated the Brotherhood, planned the arms shipment, forced the Brotherhood members to agree to training the youth for retaliation and eventually exposed everything to the government with purportedly solid evidence.⁴⁸ The Intelligence Agency used ‘Alī ‘Ashmāwī and the arms scheme to put an end to the new Brotherhood and to justify its ban once and for all.

Methodology of the Islamic Movement

While Quṭb was not involved in any armed revolt, he certainly was very much concerned about establishing an Islamic society and state. To him, the transformation of the *jāhili* society into a genuinely Islamic polity is the task of a dedicated “vanguard” (*ṭalī‘ah*) of Muslims. Its purpose is to lead the revival of Islam. The members of the *ṭalī‘ah* would be knowledgeable of their religion, as well as modernity. Mawdūdī advanced the same idea for a revolutionary vanguard in a 1955 work.

Comparing the Muslim Brotherhood and the Islamic movement of the first century of Islam, Quṭb argues that the two movements were dealing with the *jāhili* society, with people who were morally lax and ignorant about the Islamic creed. However, the Brotherhood faced with the additional challenge of dealing with the inimical external forces such as Zionists, Colonialists and Crusaders. These external forces, according to Quṭb, aim to destroy the activities of the Islamic movements by deploying local agents, sponsoring rival organisations and by hatching plots to demonise the Islamic call.⁴⁹

Quṭb argues that the Islamic movement is engaged in various political activities and appeals to governments to implement the Islamic system and Islamic law. But the society in general has deviated from true understanding of the meaning of the *‘aqīdah* and its implications. Thus, it is imperative to initiate an Islamic movement from below, i.e. by reviving the *‘aqīdah* in hearts and minds and training those who accept this call. He emphasises that it

is a waste of time to organise political upheavals and attempt to implement the Islamic system by force before founding the societies on the basis of the true understanding of the *‘aqīdah*.⁵⁰ He propounds the view that while engaging in training programmes it is also necessary to defend the movement from external attacks.⁵¹

According to Quṭb, the movement can be defended only by the collective discipline and spirit of sacrifice inculcated through an intensive training in creed and character. This movement shall not initiate any attack, attempt to overthrow the existing system of government, or participate in political activities. He often describes the movement as peaceful, regulated, firmly established and positive in education, understanding, training and reform. Often his message of the call to action is expressed in terms of an in-depth spiritual understanding achieved without resort to force or violence. The movement he envisaged is, therefore, one that does not interfere with or disrupt the routine administration of every day life. However, to preserve basic mission, the movement may retaliate and fight the aggressors but only with a force commensurate with the force used by the aggressor.⁵² This legitimisation of defensive retaliation has been grossly misunderstood by those who infer from it that Quṭb was encouraging confrontation and terrorism.

Quṭb repeatedly asserts that the implementation of an Islamic system is not an immediate goal and that it is not possible to realise it except after true Islamic understanding and comprehensive training. The most important issue is the mission and the spiritual transformation of individuals and groups among the Brothers in order to build a firm knowledge-based foundation for the movement.⁵³ He rejects the use of terrorism and violence, penetration into the army and the exploitation of the government machinery so that the Islamic movement may not be misunderstood and projected as violent, militant, terrorist, or plotting against the authority. He was convinced that for transforming the community it is imperative to promote correct understanding of the *‘aqīdah* and Islam.

In short, in terms of the methodology of the Islamic movement, Quṭb insisted on an approach in “stages” and repeatedly asserted that the need for implementing Islamic law would not arise until every member of the community had completely submitted to the sovereignty of Allah (SWT) and by that agreed to live under Allah

(SWT)'s laws which would then be framed merely to serve the needs of this Islamic society. This is a far cry from the perception that Quṭb and a handful of Islamists were out to impose an essentialised *sharī'ah* on all Muslims and non-Muslims living in Muslim lands.

Conclusion

Re-reading *Milestones* and other writings, it is clear that Quṭb articulated a bold, unapologetic conception of Islam that denies the authority of "foreign life conceptions," claims for Islam universal validity and decries the economic injustices which the masses have to endure. Quṭb argued that the dominant sociopolitical system of the contemporary Islamic and non-Islamic world is that of *al-jāhiliyyah* – a condition of sinfulness, injustice, suffering, and ignorance of Islam's divine guidance. All societies that do not follow the rule of Allah (SWT) are in a state of *jāhiliyyah*.

Quṭb's goal in life was the destruction of the *jāhilī* system, so that Allah's system may flourish. In this system, Islam would assume an exclusive role, since it is Allah's vision for humanity. In his view, Judaism and Christianity have corrupted the vision of God because their leaders allowed changes in the texts. Because of this, Quṭb called on Muslims to reject the traditions of the West because it was modeled after those of the People of the Book. Within this context, Quṭb was particularly critical of the Jews, due to the influence of the Zionist movement and the creation of the state of Israel.

Quṭb held the view that a state of constant struggle exists between faith and disbelief and between *tawḥīd* and polytheism (*shirk*). It is the duty of the faithful to revive Islam and thus to transform the *jāhilī* society through proselytization (*da'wah*) and *jihād*. Missionary activity or *da'wah* is the first step in the revolution. The aim of *da'wah* is to teach Muslims and others the "true essence" of Islam. *Da'wah* is not exclusively for non-Muslim societies, but it is also an activity that is required for Muslims in order to let the society to stagnate. While Quṭb affirmed the peaceful character of the Islamic faith, he did not rule out the use of holy struggle in the battle against *jāhiliyyah*.

Quṭb's writings are intended to show the Muslim world how world dominion by an Islamic nation is not attainable by other means than

through religion. Any other means would likely lead the Muslim world to where America is today, economically and politically successful but morally reprehensible. In providing a critique of Western society and culture, Quṭb's intention was not to instigate violence and destructive activities against the West but to show Muslims how not to build an Islamic society and state by using the West as their example. This has been the aspiration of all Islamic revivalists who have adopted the same strategy of highlighting Western fallacies so as to save the Islamic movement from falling prey to the Western ways of life. Quṭb's ultimate aim was to show how religious activism, when practiced properly under the provision of Islamic tradition, is the most important aspect to maintain when building an Islamic society.

Quṭb exhorted Muslims to activism but the line of activism proposed was the dissemination of the Islamic message and thought in a free and peaceful manner to build Muslim character and to create a vanguard of Muslims who, by consent of the people and through education and election, can take final charge of the affairs of government. Quṭb was not advocating the immediate overthrow of any government but a gradual transformation of society and its government as a whole.

Yet, after 9/11, Westerners looking for who and what may have inspired Al-Qaeda discovered Quṭb and found many of his ideas fit into the Western idea of an extreme Islamic ideologue. That Sayyid Quṭb cannot be accused of being a terrorist nor his writings be said to foment terrorism is clear. It is possible that Quṭb's call for the destruction of *jāhili* Muslim governments may have been used by some militants to attain their goal. Quṭb, however, should not be held responsible for the misinterpretation of his texts by extremists.

Notes

1. The term extremism is used to describe the attitudes, feelings, and actions of a person or group far removed from the ordinary. The terms extremist and radical are often used interchangeably to mean illegitimacy of certain ideas or methods. Terrorism has no agreed upon definition except that it involves violence and the threat of violence to create a general climate of fear in a population and thereby to bring about a particular political objective. Sedition

refers to covert conduct, such as speech and organisation, which is deemed by the legal authority as tending toward insurrection against the established order.

2. Robert Irwin, "Sayyid Quṭb: The Father of Modern Islamist Fundamentalism," *The Guardian*, November 1, 2001.

3. Daniel Brogan, *Denver's Mile Magazine*, June/July 2003, 1-6.

4. John Calvert, "The World is an Undutiful Boy!: Sayyid Quṭb's American Experience," *Islam and Christian Muslim Relations*, 2, no. 1 (2000): 89; William Shepard, *Sayyid Quṭb and Islamic Activism* (New York: E.J.Brill, 1996), xiv; Dinesh D'Souza, "Osama's Brain; Meet Sayyid Quṭb, Intellectual Father of the Anti-Western Jihad," *The Weekly Standard* (2002): 4.

5. Dinesh S'ouza, "Osama's Brain; Meet Sayyid Quṭb, Intellectual Father of the Anti-Western Jihad," 4.

6. Robert Worth, "The Deep Intellectual Roots of Islamic Terror," *New York Times*, October, 13, 2001.

7. *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States* (New York: W.W.Norton, 2004), 51.

8. Sayyid Quṭb, *The Characteristics of the Islamic Concept* (Delhi: Hindustan Publications, 1985), 17.

9. Sayyid Quṭb, *Al-Mustaqbal li Hādihā al-Dīn* (Kuwait: Al-Ittiḥād al-Islāmī li al-Munazzamāt al-Ṭullābiyyah, 1983), 55-64.

10. Sayyid Quṭb, *Naḥwa Mujtama' Islāmī* (Jordan: n.p, 1969), 22 & 24.

11. Sayyid Quṭb, *Al-Salām al-Ālamī wa al-Islam* (Beirut: Dār al-shurūq, nd), 158.

12. Sayyid Quṭb, *Ma'lim fī al-Ṭarīq* (Kuwait: Al-Ittiḥād al-Islāmī Li al-Munazzamāt al-Ṭullābiyyah, 1983), 215-216.

13. Sayyid Quṭb, *Fī Zilāl al-Qur'ān* (Beirut: Dār al-Shurūq, 1979), vol. 3, 1284. Sayyid Quṭb's views are based upon an indepth analysis of all the relevant verses of the Qur'an.

14. Sayyid Quṭb, *Fī Zilāl al-Qur'ān*, vol. 3, 1628.

15. Sayyid Quṭb, *Fī Zilāl al-Qur'ān*, vol. 1, 128. This is quoted by Haddad 'The Qur'ānic Justification for an Islamic Revolution: The View of Sayyid Quṭb, *The Middle Eastern Journal*, 37, no. 1 (Winter, 1983): 25.

16. Sayyid Quṭb, *Fī Zilāl al-Qur'ān*, vol. 1.

17. *Ibid.*, vol. 1, 383.

18. Sayyid Quṭb, *Ma‘ālim fī al-Ṭarīq* (Kuwait: International Islamic Federation of Student Organizations, 1978), 85-88.

19. *Ibid.*, 89.

20. *Ibid.*, 91.

21. “Those whom ye worship besides Him are but names, which you have named, ye and your fathers; Allah hath revealed no sanction for them. The decision rests with Allah only, who hath commanded you that Ye worship none save Him. This is the Right religion, but most men know not” (5:45). “And We prescribed for them therein: The life for the life and the eye for the eye, and the nose for the nose, and the ear for the ear, and the tooth for the tooth and for wounds retaliation. But who so forget it (in the way of charity) it shall be expiation for him. Who so Judgeth not by that which Allah hath revealed such are wrong doers” (12:40).

22. *Majallat al-Shihāb*. No. 21, dated Safar 16 (1393), 5.

23. Ṣalāḥ ‘Abd al-Fattāḥ al-Khālīdī, *Fī Zilāl al-Qur‘ān fī al-Mizān*, 1st ed. (Jaddah: Dār al-Manārah, 1986), 205.

24. Sayyid Quṭb, *Fī Zilāl al-Qur‘ān*, vol. 1, 328.

25. *Ibid.*, vol. 3, 1197.

26. *Ibid.*

27. *Ibid.*

28. *Ibid.*, vol. 2, 895.

29. *Ibid.*, vol. 1, 693.

30. Sālim al-Bahansāwī, *Al-Ḥukm wa Qaḍīyyat Takfīr al-Muslim*, 1st ed. (Cairo: Dār al-Anṣār, 1977), 139.

31. Muḥammad Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-Bayān ‘an Ta’wīl āy al-Qur‘ān* (Egypt: Dār al-Ma‘ārif, n.d.), vol. 10, 357.

32. “It was We who revealed the Law (to Moses): therein was guidance and light. By its standard have been judged the Jews, by the Prophets who bowed (as in Islam) to Allah’s Will, by the Rabbis and the Doctors of Law: for to them was entrusted the protection of Allah’s Book, and they were witnesses thereto: therefore fear not men, but fear Me, and sell not My Signs for a miserable price. If any do fail to judge by (the light of) what Allah hath revealed, they are (no better than) Unbelievers” (5:44).

33. *Ibid.*, vol. 10, 358.

34. Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-‘Azīm*, vol. 2 (n.p: al-Maktabah al-Tijāriyyah al-Kubrā, n.d.), 67.
35. Aḥmad Shākīr, *‘Umdat al-Tafsīr fī Ikhtisār ibn Kathīr* (Egypt: Dār al-Ma‘ārif, n.d), vol. 4, 74.
36. Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-Bayān ‘an Ta’wīl āy al-Qur’ān*, vol. 10, 348 (margin).
37. Ḥasan al-Huḍaybī, *Du‘āt wa lā qadāt* (np: Dār al-tawzī‘ wa al nashr al-Islami, nd), 207-208.
38. He was the founder of Jihād University in Pakistan. He was a strong advocate of Afghan jihād and worked for the greater unity of Mujāhids, particularly the Arabs and Afghans. He was assassinated in dubious circumstances.
39. ‘Abd Allāh ‘Azzām, *Al-‘Aqīdah Wa Āthāruhā Fī Binā’ al-Jīl*, 2nd ed. (Amman: Maktabat al-Aqṣā, 1980), 178.
40. See: Al-Khālīdī, *Fī Zill al-Qur’ān fī al-Mizān*, 227-228.
41. See: Al-Mujtama‘, No: 565 dated, 12 Jumādī al-Ākhirah, 1402 A.H, 21. This is quoted by al-Khālīdī, *Fī Zilāl al-Qur’ān fī al-Mizān*, 227-228.
42. Sāmī Jawhar, *Al-Mawtā Yatakallamūn*, 2nd Edition, (Cairo: Al-Maktab al-Miṣrī al-Ḥadīth, 1977), 50.
43. Sayyid Quṭb, *Limādhā A‘damūnī* (n.p: Al-Sharikah al-Su‘ūdiyyah li’l Abḥth wa al-Taswīq, n.d), 49-50. This booklet is a confession of Sayyid Quṭb in his own writing. It was written in al-Ḥarbī prison. It is dated 22 September 1965. And it was kept under the custody of state security in a special file no. 12 dated 1965 as top secret. And the issue no.484 Egypt, 1965.
44. Ibid., 50-52.
45. Ibid.
46. Ibid., 59.
47. Al- Khālīdī, *Fī Zilāl al-Qur’ān fī al-Mizān*, 408.
48. Ibid., 404.
49. Sayyid Quṭb, *Limdhā A‘damūnī*, 26-29; for the foundations of his methodology, see pages 42 to 45.
50. Ibid.
51. Ibid.
52. Ibid.
53. Ibid.