

The “Humanity” of Radical Jihad

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The term “Islamism” encompasses a variety of socio-political movements oriented toward the establishment of Islam, however interpreted, as the fundamental framework for the political and social ordering of the state.¹ Though Islamist movements often differ dramatically from each other—ranging from formulations of ideological critique to political reform to revolutionary violence—the “understanding Islam” literature of the post-September-11 era has tended for obvious reasons to foreground today’s most radical manifestations of Islamism.² Few phenomena, however, present a greater challenge to concerted, dispassionate analysis than lawless acts of violence of the sort executed by the 9/11 hijackers, and it is therefore hardly surprising that post-9/11 theorizations of Islamism have generally foundered upon the doctrine of radical jihad—a doctrine which rests at the heart of Islamism’s most extreme movements. The difficulty of theorizing such violence has left analysts mired either in defensive apologetics or in lofty abstractions of the sort invoked in Roel Meijer’s synopsis of this issue (p. 16, this issue). In both cases the rhetoric of

**Sayyid Qutb
behind bars in
Cairo, 1966**



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Sayyid Qutb, one of the fathers of modern Islamic fundamentalist thought, located physical jihad at the centre of his vision of twentieth century political Islam. Although analysts—particularly in the post-9/11 era—have tended to conceptualize physical jihad as a thoroughly warlike enterprise, Qutb’s rhetoric reveals a very different logic at work in the propagation of jihad as a primary means of political transformation in the name of Islam. In fact, Qutb’s most influential work frames jihad as a particular strategy of socio-political activism—an activism geared toward the reinvigoration of particular conceptions of human nature and human agency.

practical political activism, frequently a central feature of both radical and more dialogical Islamist discourses, becomes overlooked or occluded.

What do we miss when we neglect the rhetoric of political practice not merely within contemporary Islamism but, more specifically, within its radical jihadi movements? Roxanne Euben asserts that such neglect is tantamount to ignoring the manner in which such radical discourses sync with broader anxieties and critiques pertaining to modern socio-political patterns of life—in other words, to the manner in which radical Islamism might be un-

derstood to participate within a broad process of modern self-criticism which has, in diverse contexts, swept the globe in the latter half of the twentieth century.³ A key figure within this Islamist critical tradition is Sayyid Qutb, an Egyptian thinker of the 1940-60s who shifted earlier fundamentalist discourses in the direction of revolutionary jihadism and who has been labelled by Paul Berman as “the Arab world’s first important theoretician of the Islamist cause.”⁴ Though the direct influence of his writings upon contemporary jihadi groups such as al-Qaeda remains under debate, Qutb’s most popular work, *Ma’alim fi-l-Tariq*—known in English as *Milestones*—is widely credited as the first systematic theorization of a violent jihad directed primarily against Islamic leaders and intelligentsia, whom Qutb determined to be guilty of propagating and legitimating immoral “Western” values within the North African and Middle Eastern societies of his day. Qutb’s particular doctrine of jihad endures within contemporary radical Islamist movements, even within those movements such as bin Laden’s al-Qaeda that have shifted their rhetorical attention to the West itself as the primary and direct threat to the Islamic societies of today.

Jihad and the choice to believe

The force of Qutb’s impact upon today’s radical Islamists notwithstanding, *Milestones* presents an important articulation of the logic of socio-political activism embedded within the doctrine of radical jihad, and this work has thus undergone something of an analytic renaissance as scholars and policymakers in the post-9/11 era have attempted to come to an understanding of terrorism. Most crucial to an understanding of the link between jihad and socio-political activism is Qutb’s framing of the jihadist as the unique bearer of a vision—indeed, of a strategy—of socio-political liberation capable of galvanizing victims of Western cultural and material domination and of countering the “universal” values of post-Enlightenment secularism (be such secularism in the form of liberal, socialist, or communist society). Qutb’s peculiar take upon these matters stems from his insistence upon the centrality of “free moral choice” to the establishment and the ongoing promotion of Islam in its original, most authentic, form.⁵ Not only does Qutb designate such choice-making as the quintessential activity whereby man distinguishes himself from all other animals—hence effectively equating conversion to Islam to the “fullest expression” of “man’s noblest characteristics”—but he also states that the optimal context for this choice-making in which man realizes his noblest qualities is a context in which all socio-political “obstacles” have been removed in such a way that “no barrier remains” between the individual and the only religion which “places the highest value on the ‘humanity’ of man.”⁶ In other words, while “Islam does not force people to accept its belief,” it does “wan[t] to provide a free environment in which they will have the choice to believe” and thus the choice to elevate themselves “far above the purely animal level.”⁷

In a manoeuvre which flies in the face of the “Western” vaunting of universal values such as dignity, liberty, and equality, Qutb accuses secular societies of actually overlooking the true source of human dignity and—in conceiving of humanity primarily in terms of science or “materialism”—of placing “biological chains” upon beings designed by Allah to be free and equal.⁸ After all, asserts Qutb,

“[M]an is able to change his beliefs, thinking, and attitude toward life, but he is incapable of changing his colour and race, nor can he decide in what place or nation he is to be born. Thus it is clear that a society is civilized only to the extent that human associations are based on a community of free moral choice, and a society is backward in so far as the basis of association is something other than free choice ... Only Islam has the distinction of basing the fundamental, binding relationship of the community in belief. On the basis of this belief, black and white and red and yellow, Arabs and Greeks, Persians and Blacks; all the nations of the earth become one community.”⁹

Ultimately, such accusations create the dual effect, in the first place, of undermining the universalistic claims of Western secularism and, in the second place, of initiating a call “for the Muslim community to come vigorously into presence” and to exercise its “right to take the initiative for human freedom.”¹⁰ Qutb locates the jihadist at the forefront of this Islamic vanguard, framing him as a moral revolutionary who, in the name of Islam, “does not attack individuals” but “attacks [Westernized] institutions and traditions in order to release human beings from their pernicious influence, which distorts human nature and curtails human freedom.”¹¹ Not only does such a framing of jihad call into question the widespread understanding of such violence as simple “warfare” against non-Muslims or inauthentic Muslims, it emphatically refutes the related notion of jihad as a purely “defensive” enterprise. Harkening repeatedly to what can only be described as a proactive and fraternal conceptualization of jihad, Qutb asserts that “[i]f we insist on calling Islamic jihad a defensive movement, then we must change the meaning of the word ‘defence’ and mean by it ‘the defence of man’ against all those forces that limit his freedom.”¹²

Of course, we might very well question the logistics and even the sincerity of Qutb’s formulation of jihad as a means of bestowing upon one’s fellow man the opportunity to achieve “real and complete” dignity, freedom, and equality.¹³ How, for example, is the jihadist to distinguish between “individuals” versus “institutions and traditions” as objects of his physical attacks? Is such a distinction ultimately important to Qutb, or is this distinction (as well as the rest of his discourse) merely a rhetorical flourish designed to rationalize a revolutionary and perhaps a wanton violence? How, precisely, would the facilitation of a “free environment” lead to a conversion to Islam that is nevertheless “noncompulsory,” and what would happen should the free, choice-making individual opt not to embrace Islam? *Milestones* sidesteps all of these issues, largely by way of its particular approach to what Qutb calls the “man-made systems [of theories and laws]” at the foundation of Western—and, increasingly, so-called Islamic—societies.¹⁴ The elevation of such “man-made” systems of knowledge to the highest source of socio-political authority not only amounts to a form of human self-worship in the guise of scientific objectivity but, most important to the issue of jihad, it engenders complacency and lack of initiative within the individuals looking to such systems for moral guidance. As Qutb puts it, man-made theories and laws tend to mire people in “discussion, learning, and information” for its own sake rather than for the sake of “knowing with the intention of acting upon it,” which Qutb believes to be intrinsic to the authentic message of Islam.¹⁵ In the interest of combating such complacency, of “rend[ing] the curtains that ha[ve] fallen on the hearts and minds of people” and smashing “all the walls that [stand] between man and the truth,” Qutb seizes upon jihad as the quintessential gesture of unequivocal and unmediated socio-political activism; a gesture which affords each individual the means of breaking radically with the “scholastic sophistry” of Western rationalism while simultaneously presenting a similar opportunity to the oppressed individuals around him.¹⁶

Jihad as political activism

Though Qutb declares the “foremost objective” of *Milestones* to be the transformation of individuals in such a way that they become empowered to “change the practices of [their] society,” his formulation of jihad functions at a broader level as a powerful and surprisingly “post-modern” ideological confrontation of the Western/secularist worldview believed by many to be the source of the socio-political ills of the twentieth century—a worldview marred in Qutb’s mind by excessive theorization, neglect of personal initiative and responsibility, and disregard of free moral choice as representative of the highest human value.¹⁷ Anticipating what has today become a primary explanation for the rise of Islamism (of all sorts) within the Middle East, Qutb exhorts his readers that the “enemies of the believers may wish to change this struggle into an economic or political or racial struggle, so that the believers become confused concerning its true nature and the flame of belief in their hearts goes out.”¹⁸ He encourages his readers to recognize this manoeuvre as “a trick” designed to deprive authentic Muslims of “their weapons for true victory”—namely, their intractable commitment to translating Islam “into a living reality” rather than into a privatized system of belief along the lines of the secular model of religion.¹⁹ For Qutb, jihad represents the quintessential practical means by which Islam becomes translated into such a living reality, for it places in the hands of each Muslim the power to create the initial “free environment” necessary for conversion to Islam and it thereafter propels Islam’s “growth through the struggle against surrounding forces”—a struggle which, due to the “residual influences” of the Western worldview, is predicted by Qutb to endure “until the Last Day.”²⁰

Of equal importance to the issue of jihad and the spread of Islam is the manner in which this forceful method of socio-political engagement might be understood to hold the promise, if properly channelled, to engender a society in which “man’s dignity is held inviolable to the highest degree.”²¹ Such utopianism serves to elevate (for the jihadist, anyway) what might otherwise be comprehensible only as an act of war or self-defence to the level of a humanitarian intervention of sorts—to a project, as Euben quotes, of securing “the well-being of all humanity.”²² Thus, in addition to placing in the hands of the Muslim the power to initiate and to propagate the spread of Islam, jihad as framed by Qutb affords the Muslim the power to bestow a particular conceptualization of “humanity” upon his fellow humans—a conceptualization that remains more faithful, according to Qutb, to man’s unique stature than does the scientific vision of “humanity” propounded within the modern West. As the primary translator of Islam’s promise into immediate and unequivocal action—an action, as Baudrillard attests, without equal in the Western “zero-death system”—the jihadist is endowed by Qutb with the extraordinary capacity to deploy physical violence as the means of freeing himself and those around him from the fetters of materialism “so that they might rise above the angels.”²³

Notes

1. Alan Richards, “Explaining the Appeal of Islamic Radicals,” *Center for Global, International and Regional Studies*, January 2003.
2. Clifford Geertz, “Which Way to Mecca? Part II,” *New York Review of Books*, June 2003.
3. Roxanne Euben, *Enemy in the Mirror: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Limits of Modern Rationalism* (Princeton, 1999), 124.
4. Paul Berman, *Terror and Liberalism* (New York, 2003), 62. Berman, of course, is guilty here of conflating jihadi Islamism with Islamism in general. It would therefore be more correct to credit Qutb as “the Arab world’s first important theoretician of the radical Islamist cause.”
5. Sayyid Qutb, *Milestones* (Indianapolis, 1990), 81.
6. Ibid. / 7. Ibid., 46, 82. / 8. Ibid., 81, 108. / 9. Ibid., 81. / 10. Ibid., ii, 62. / 11. Ibid., 61. / 12. Ibid., 50. / 13. Ibid., 81.
14. Qutb does not actually believe that any of the “Islamic” societies of his time are worthy of the name, 79.
15. Ibid., 14. / 16. Ibid., 30. / 17. Ibid., 16. / 18. Ibid., 138. / 19. Ibid., 138, 31. / 20. Ibid., 31, 87. / 21. Ibid., 81.
22. Euben, “Killing (For) Politics: Jihad, Martyrdom, and Political Action,” *Political Theory* 30, no. 1 (2002): 13.
23. Jean Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism* (New York, 2002), 16; Qutb, 108.

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