Sayyid Qutb’s Penned War for Islamic Society

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Introduction

Karan Johar, a leading Indian film director and producer, observed that one of the looming problems of the world “is about the perception of religion and the perception of a community of people that suffer on a daily basis because of a certain unawareness and misunderstanding” of the other.¹ At 8:46 a.m. on September 11, 2001, American Airlines Flight 11 collided with the North Tower of the World Trade Center in New York City. Less than seventeen minutes later, US Airlines Flight 175 crashed into the South Tower. For the first time in nearly sixty years, America watched a foreign attack in horror as our country simultaneously incurred additional attacks on the Pentagon and a failed attempt on the White House. This act of aggression, an event U.S. governmental leaders later believed to have been perpetrated by al-Qaeda terrorists, came to be recognized as the “largest and bloodiest act of war on American soil” since Pearl Harbor in December 1941.²

In the days following the September 11 attacks, the White House began responding to the questions preponderant in the minds of Americans: “Who attacked our country”³ and “Why do they hate us?”⁴ Aristotle once said that great tragedy provokes two primary responses, “an enactment of a deed that is important... and of [a certain] magnitude... and through pity and fear it effects relief.”⁵ From the moment the first planes collided with the World Trade Towers, Americans began processing the emotional stages of grief, beginning with denial, moving to anger, and finally developing a resolute mindset that “justice must be done,” an idea that resonated deeply with those who lost a loved one in the attacks.⁶ It was this focused anger and desire for justice that led America to respond with acts of courage, endurance, patriotism, and a

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¹ My Name is Khan, DVD, Directed by Karen Johar (2010); India: World: FOX Searchlight Pictures, 11 Feb. 2010).
⁵ Richard Janko, Poetics I; The ‘Tractatus Coislinianus;’ A hypothetical reconstruction of 'Poetics II;' The fragments of the 'On poets,' (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987).
sense of unification not seen since the First and Second World Wars. Following the attacks, in the President’s address to the nation, Bush acknowledged that “Today, our nation saw evil, the very worst of human nature.” As early intelligence reports began trickling in following 9/11, Bush began to allege that Islamic extremists, in particular al-Qaeda, had “perpetrated a new kind of evil, [thus providing justification for America to fight and] rid the world of these [dangerous and deranged] evil-doers.” Bush later clarified that these Muslim al-Qaeda terrorists, suspected of attacking the World Trade Center, “practiced a fringe form of Islamic extremism, [one that perpetrated jihad against the west, and] perverted the peaceful teachings of Islam.”

Today, contemporary historians and political theorists question how Sayyid Qutb’s perception of the Western world as Jahiliyah directly impacted the concept of Islamism and how this perception set the stage for the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

In the months following the September 11 attacks, the work of Sayyid Qutb, an Egyptian author and Islamic theorist, shot to prominence. Scholars began delving into the ideological origins of this horrific attack perpetrated on American soil, using Qutb’s Milestones as a signpost. Today, contemporary historians and political theorists question how Sayyid Qutb’s perception of the Western world as Jahiliyah directly impacted the concept of Islamism and how this perception set the stage for the 9/11 terrorist attacks. As a result, this paper theorizes that Sayyid Qutb’s classification of the Western world, especially America, as backwards, immoral, materialistic, and oppressive created the foundation for the spread of Islamism and “fanned the fire of Islamic revolution against the enemies of Islam at home and abroad.” Furthermore, the core ideas and worldviews presented in Milestones has both inspired and commanded Muslims around

8 Michael B. Oren, Power, Faith, and Fantasy: America in the Middle East, 1776 to the Present (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2007), 257.
the world to engage in *jihad* against these *jahili* societies, setting the stage for Islamist terrorist organizations, like al-Qaeda, to wage a physical and philosophical war against the West. The 9/11 attacks are just one example of this war.

**Rise of Sayyid Qutb**

On October 9th, 1906, Sayyid Qutb, the eldest of five children, was born into a well-regarded Sunni Muslim family in Musha, near Asyut in Upper Egypt. From an early age, Qutb experienced a rigorous education, instilling in him a deep love for learning and writing. “By the [time Qutb turned] ten he had become a *hafidh* (memorizer) of the Qur’an at the local primary school,” a feat few others could lay claim to. Less than a year after becoming a *hafidh*, Qutb’s father “sent him to Cairo to live with his uncle while he attended [government sponsored] secondary and post-secondary schools,” where he graduated in 1918. In 1929, Qutb enrolled in *Dar al-Ulum* Prepartory School, a prestigious teachers training college in Helwan, where he was subsequently employed as an Arabic Language teacher following graduation in 1933. Between 1933 and 1951, Qutb not only taught at the *Dar al-Ulum* Prepartory School, but was also employed by the Egyptian Ministry of Education. Throughout this time, Qutb wrote many works of fiction dealing with problems of love and marriage, literary criticism, poetry, and autobiographical sketches. However, these were all works he would later dismiss as unimportant, “apart from having helped him to develop and elegant prose style.” Then, in November 1948, at forty-two years of age, the Egyptian Ministry of Education awarded Qutb a grant allowing him to travel to the United States to study Western

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methods of education at the University of Northern Colorado.\textsuperscript{16} Today, many scholars argue that the Egyptian Ministry sent Qutb to the U.S. with “the assumption that direct acquaintance with America would incline him more favorably to official policies and induce him to abandon the oppositional activities that were increasingly taking on an Islamic dimension.”\textsuperscript{17} Unfortunately, these efforts would prove to be in vain, as Qutb’s writings became increasingly Islamic, nationalistic, pan-Arab, and revolutionary in the years following his return from the U.S. Today, many scholars believe that Qutb’s trip to Colorado was the stressor that convinced him of the West’s spiritual and moral bankruptcy.\textsuperscript{18}

Qutb’s severe dislike of Western culture, especially America, was what precipitated his joining of the \textit{Ikhwan ul Muslimeen} (Muslim Brotherhood) in the early 1950s.\textsuperscript{19} At the time, the Brotherhood preached anti-Western propaganda, primarily as a response to Western dominance over Egypt.\textsuperscript{20} The solution to Western domination, according to the Brotherhood, lay in a return to true Islam.\textsuperscript{21} Soon after becoming a member, Qutb became the editor-in-chief of the Muslim Brotherhood’s official journal called \textit{al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun}.\textsuperscript{22} During this period, Qutb published several books on Islamic ideology and Islam as a complete way of life, a political stance that would lead to tense relations between himself and the Egyptian government.

On July 23, 1952, the Egyptian monarchy was overthrown in a coup d'état mounted by Gamal Abdel Nasser with the help of the Muslim Brotherhood.\textsuperscript{23} One of the first steps Nasser took following his rise to power was the elimination of those he perceived to be a direct threat to his concentrated political power. This led him to turn on the Muslim Brotherhood, an organization that supported Nasser’s rise to power.

\begin{footnotes}
\item[16] Murr.
\item[17] Qutb, Milestones, 8.
\item[19] Qutb, Milestones, 7.
\item[21] Loboda, 2.
\item[22] Qutb, Milestones, 8.
\item[23] Qutb, Milestones, 9.
\end{footnotes}
until it became “obvious that the revolution was [moving] towards a secular state rather than an Islamic one.”

This specific targeting of Muslim Brotherhood members effectively removed any possibility for dissidents to compromise his power and legitimacy in the Egyptian government and military. Immediately after becoming president, Nasser “decreed the dissolution of the Muslim Brotherhood and arrested the leaders of the Ikhwan, including Sayyid Qutb, along with 4,000 members.”

Each member was charged with plotting to overthrow Nasser’s regime, and everyone who had been arrested received a sentence of life imprisonment.

From the moment Qutb was detained in a local prison, he was subjected to torture, even though he had a high fever and fainted several times on the way to the prison. According to several witnesses, “Qutb ripped off his shirt to display the marks of torture to the jury.” However, this was only the beginning of what Qutb was to endure. Over the next fifteen years, Qutb was forced to endure inhuman treatment and torture, followed by long periods of interrogation. While in prison, Qutb was introduced to the fundamental ideas of Maulana Mawdudi, one of the foremost Muslim thinkers in the twentieth century. According to Mawdudi, Islam is “a complete way of life and the establishment of the Shari’ah (Islamic Law) on earth as every Muslim’s primary responsibility.” This radical Islamic interpretation deeply influenced Qutb’s writings, leading him to complete several of his “most important writings,” including the Qur’anic commentary *Fi Zilal al-Qur’an (In the Shade of the Qur’an)*, his *tafsir* (exegesis), and *Ma’alim fi’l-Tariq (Milestones or Signposts on the Path).* Today, it is commonly recognized by Western scholars that Qutb’s writing is a direct reflection of the “physical torture he experienced and the psychological torture that
resulted from the murder of fellow Brotherhood members.” Qutb's renewed commitment to Islam formulated the foundation stone of his political outlook and writings for the rest of his life. His career, which was once defined by education, literary criticism, and penning works of fiction and poetry, was now injected with a thirst for a morality that could only be quenched by an intentional return to Allah, and a return to what he was taught in his youth and religious education.

“In December 1964, Sayyid Qutb was released from jail ... due in part to continuing ill health and in part to the intercession of Abdul Salam Arif, the president of Iraq, who invited him to settle in his country.” Unfortunately, Qutb would not be a free man for long. On August 5, 1965, Sayyid Qutb was rearrested on charges of subversion, terrorism, and the encouragement of sedition. The Egyptian government claimed that Qutb was plotting a violent revolt in an effort to shift Egyptian society from secularism to a pure Islamic society. Interestingly, no evidence was presented to illustrate the connections between Qutb or any group linked to him and armed insurrection. In an effort to prove the charge of encouragement of sedition, the prosecution pointed to the “widespread appeal and long-term revolutionary implications” Qutb outlined in his most famous book *Milestones*. On May 17, 1966, Qutb lost the legal battle and was sentenced to death by hanging. In the days leading up to his execution,

An emissary of Nasser came to Sayyid Qutb asking him to sign a petition seeking mercy from the president. Sayyid Qutb’s reply was forthright: “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.”

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32 Loboda, 2.
33 Brandon J. Simpson, "Sayyid Qutb's Milestones," Personal Lecture from TAU Master's Independent Speaker (Personal Discussion/ Lecture, Tel Aviv, 21 May 2014).
34 Qutb, Milestones, 12.
35 Qutb, Milestones, 13.
36 Qutb, Milestones, 13.
37 Qutb, Milestones, 13.
38 Zafar Bangash, "Remembering Sayyid Qutb, An Islamic Intellectual and Leader of Rare Insight and Integrity," 1 Sept. 1999, <web.youngmuslims.ca/online_library/books/milestones/remember.htm> (20 May 2014).
Qutb’s decision to follow his beliefs until his death earned him the title *Ash-Shaheed* or martyr, the highest honor in Islam.\(^{39}\) According to one witness:

> On the day of the execution, the military officer entered Sayyid Qutb’s cell under the pretext that he has been ordered to change his cell quarters. However... Sayyid Qutb knew that this was not just another cell change and said, ‘I know where you are taking me, for the Prophet Muhammad came to me in my dream and told me (about today), so take me.’\(^{40}\)

Today, western writers have come to name Sayyid Qutb as one of the most influential Muslim thinkers of the twentieth century,\(^{41}\) leading him to be commonly recognized as the father of modern fundamentalism.\(^{42}\)

### Literature Review

Published in 1964, *Ma’alim fi’l-Tariq*, also known as *Milestones* or *Signposts on the Path*, has “become one of the 20th Century’s most influential Islamic texts, available in almost every language, with over 2000 editions in print.”\(^{43}\) According to several accounts, Qutb “first developed the ideas illustrated in *Milestones*” through a number of dialogues with other Brotherhood detainees and a unique style of Qur’anic interpretation.\(^{44}\) These concepts, inspired by the circumstances of daily struggle and torture, were then encapsulated in letters that were smuggled out of jail “to be read by members of his family and close friends.”\(^{45}\) It was not until after his release from jail in 1964 that these letters were transformed into a political manifesto. The work was originally circulated underground before being published in Cairo and banned under the charges of sedition discussed above.\(^{46}\) Interestingly, this threat did little to stem the

\(^{39}\) Qutb, Milestones, 7 & 15.  
\(^{40}\) Qutb, Milestones, 16.  
\(^{41}\) Qutb, Milestones, 10.  
\(^{43}\) Mordechai Kedar and David Yerushalmi, “Mapping Shari’ah: Maalim fi’l-Tariq (Milestones).” *Middle East Quarterly* vol. XVIII, no. 3 (2011).  
\(^{44}\) Qutb, Milestones, 12.  
\(^{45}\) Qutb, Milestones, 12.  
\(^{46}\) Qutb, Milestones, 12.
spread of Qutb’s work. Scholars estimate that since its publication, over half the Muslim population of the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries, has read Milestones and drawn support and ideological influence from this text. Unlike his previous works, Milestones takes on a uniquely somber tone reflecting Qutb’s “frustration, even disgust, with Western civilization, which he denounced for seeking to ‘destroy all that humanity has produced in the way of spiritual values, human creeds, and noble traditions.’”47 Today, it is commonly recognized that Qutb’s doctrine was intended to inspire the masses and spark action from the Muslim community against the corrupt and oppressive Western regimes. The core reason Qutb composed Ma’alim fi’l-Tariq can be summarized in the following statement: “I have written Milestones for this vanguard, which I consider to be a waiting reality about to be materialized.”48 Interestingly, Qutb composed Milestones in such a way that it is both qualitative and quantitative in style and structure.

While highly idealistic and riddled with spelling and grammatical errors, this book “represented a concise and forceful summary of the main ideas Sayyid Qutb had developed: the jahili nature of existing society, government, and culture, and the long-term program (political jihad) needed for the establishment of an Islamic state.”49 In other words, Qutb sought to present the idealistic Islamic world, united by Shari’a rather than divided by nationality, race, or ignorance. Throughout the book, Qutb attempts to answer some of the fundamental questions of his time, such as the true reasoning for the Islamic revival and the implications of Islamic identity and existence, exploration of why no other way of life is adequate, and the methodology necessary for this divine way of life to be replicated.50 Similar to other Islamic revolutionary leaders, Qutb relies entirely on the Qur’anic concepts of

Jahiliyah (ignorance of divine guidance), Islamic concept (identity and existence), Islamic methodology, jihad, and Allah’s sovereignty, to delineate the strategy by which Muslims

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47 Helfont.
49 Qutb, Milestones, 12.
would realize the true significance and implications of *tawhid* (the oneness of God), understand the imperfections, injustices and moral poverty of *Jahiliyyah*, etc.\(^{51}\)

Today, it is commonly recognized that *Milestones* can be divided into three core themes: *Jahiliyyah*, critique of the West, and the concept of *jihad*.

### The Three Core Themes in Milestones

*Milestones* opens with this declaration: “Mankind today is on the brink of a precipice. Humanity is threatened not only by nuclear annihilation but by the absence of values. The West has lost its vitality and Marxism has failed. At this crucial and bewildering juncture, the turn of Islam and the Muslim community has arrived.”\(^{52}\) In other words, the permeation of and oppression perpetuated by Western culture illustrates the collapse of moral values. This leads Qutb to deem that the Western world is no longer capable of providing new values to humanity, and thus declare it *Jahiliyyah*, the first core theme evident in *Milestones*.\(^{53}\) Qutb’s conception of *Jahiliyyah*, originally defined as “the state of ignorance that existed before Mohammed’s message introduced Islam to the world,”\(^{54}\) was reinterpreted to mean brutishness due to the absence of Islamic principles.\(^{55}\) Throughout the remainder of his life, Qutb openly declared all non-Islamic societies that refused to implement *Shari’ah* and follow God’s divine guidance to be *Jahiliyyah*. Qutb defines *Shari’ah* as:

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\text{(T)he Islamic beliefs and concepts and their implications concerning the attributes of God, the nature of life, what is apparent and what is hidden in it, the nature of man, and the interrelationships among these. Similarly, it includes political, social, and economic affairs and their principles, with the intent that they reflect complete submission to God alone. It also includes legal matters ... it deals with the morals, manners, values and standards of the}
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\(^{52}\) Qutb, *Milestones*, 3.  

society, according to which persons, actions, and events are measured. It also deals with all aspects of knowledge and principles of art and science. In other words, living under Shari’ah requires the complete rejection of all man-made laws and social systems. These socio-political orders give only a few select men the power to institute legislation and determine the principles of right and wrong over other members in the community. This transfer of power from God to man is better known in Arabic as hakimiyyah, a word that can be translated as meaning “one who exercises judicial authority; a ruler or governor.” To Qutb, this represents the second greatest crime perpetrated in jahili societies: oppression. Unfortunately, Qutb fails further to define the term oppression, aside from noting qualities such as greed and submission to man-made laws, in relationship to jahili societies. This leaves the reader to ponder the true meaning of this word in the grand scheme of the book Milestones.

Interestingly, this critique applied to not only Western societies, but also contemporary Islamic societies, including Nasser’s regime. To Qutb, the implementation of man-made, non-Islamic law indicated that these jahili nations were “fundamentally the same because they ignore God’s authority over man and his actions,” rooted in human desires, and entrapped people in their ignorance and self-importance. In an effort to rid the world of the oppressive jahili states, Qutb emphasizes the need to implement the core tenants of Islamic society in every country of the world. To Qutb, Islam is not merely a “confessional affiliation, but behavior, culture, a way of life, and a system that regulates man’s conduct.”

Islamic society represents the true and complete way of life as it encourages submission to God, establishment of Allah’s order on earth, and complete conformance “to his divine guidance in all

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56 Qutb, Milestones, 107.
60 Loboda, 4.
matters.\textsuperscript{62} As a result, Qutb considers pure Islamic society ruled by \textit{Shari'ah} to be the antithesis of \textit{Jahiliyyah}. As Loboda states, it is possible that the “savagery [Qutb] was forced to endure led him to conclude that the common Muslim had adopted a Western conception of faith.”\textsuperscript{63} This is the foundation of Qutb's critique of all apostate (\textit{takfir}; non-Islamic) societies.

The second major theme evident in \textit{Milestones} is Qutb's critique of the West, especially America. Throughout this section, Qutb criticizes several fundamental elements of Western society, but this paper will only address the topics of sexuality and materialism. Qutb's criticism of sexuality within Western society begins with a discussion of gender and the Western family structure. According to Qutb, the lack of predetermined gender roles has muddled the relationship between the sexes, leading women to be viewed as little more than objects of sexual pleasure.\textsuperscript{64} Qutb illustrates the shift in perception of women in the Western world in the following passage:

The American girl is well acquainted with her body’s seductive capacity. She knows it lies in the face, and in expressive eyes, and thirsty lips. She knows seductiveness lies in the round breasts, the full buttocks, and in the shapely thighs, sleek legs – and she shows all of this and does not hide it. Then she adds to all this the fetching laugh, the naked looks, and the bold moves, and she does not ignore this for one moment of forget it!\textsuperscript{65}

This passage clearly illustrates Qutb's outright disgust at the uncovered flesh of a woman and her interactions with those around her. To Qutb, relationships between men and women in America revolved around impulse, lust, and passion, leading many women to disregard their dignified duty of childbearing.\textsuperscript{66}

“When all these factors are meshed together, Qutb believes that it is no surprise that the high rates of divorce and illegitimate children are considered mainstream and acceptable in the West.”\textsuperscript{67} Qutb further attributes this malady of society to women’s use of their bodies as weapons and her role outside the home,

\textsuperscript{62} Loboda, 4.
\textsuperscript{63} Loboda, 2.
\textsuperscript{64} Loboda, 1.
\textsuperscript{65} Sayyid Qutb, 'The America I Have Seen:' In \textit{The Scale of Human Values} (Portland: Portland State University, 1951), 2.
\textsuperscript{66} Loboda, 13.
\textsuperscript{67} Loboda, 13.
leading their overall value to plummet within Western society.\textsuperscript{68} To Qutb, women’s freedom represented the collapse of gender roles and a direct challenge to men traditional responsibilities. This disintegration horrified Qutb, leading him to liken Western societies to animals who focus solely on their desires. Today, “many scholars believe that it was during his trip to the United States that Qutb became convinced of the West’s spiritual and moral bankruptcy.”\textsuperscript{69} Qutb’s negative perception of the West was further solidified when he attended a church sock-hop in the late 1960’s, where he witnessed the unhidden sexual nature of Americans:

They danced to the tunes of the gramophone, and the dance floor was replete with tapping feet, enticing legs, arms wrapped around waists, lips pressed to lips, and chests pressed to chests. The atmosphere was full of desire.\textsuperscript{70}

This event led Qutb to conclude that American men are brutish animals, and the women are whores, an idea that would become the core critique throughout Qutb’s anti-Western rhetoric.\textsuperscript{71}

The second fundamental aspect of Western society Qutb critiques is the materialistic focus. Materialism can be defined as an “interest in and desire for money, possessions, [comforts and considerations], etc., rather than spiritual or ethical values.”\textsuperscript{72} Throughout his tenure at the University of Northern Colorado, Qutb witnessed what he considered to be an unwavering focus on material gain and a separation from religious values. This lead him to conclude that the West, especially America, is suffering from a “hideous schizophrenia.”\textsuperscript{73} Qutb further claims that the split between religion and society, belief and practice, and a renewed focus on materialism set the precedent for other societies and nations around the world, allowing the disease of \textit{Jahiliyyah} to spread to Islamic societies.\textsuperscript{74}
The third major theme evident in *Milestones* is the concept of *jihad*. One of the most complicated aspects of Islam, to Westerners, is the concept of *jihad*. To non-fundamentalist Muslims the concept of *jihad* is “a struggle in the path of God... [in particular] the personal struggle against one’s own shortcomings that is required of all Muslims so that they can perfect their submission.” Yet to many Islamist Muslims, *jihad* is perceived to be a form of Islamic holy war perpetrated against Western nations, Christians, and Jews in an effort to establish a worldwide Islamic society. The word *jihad* has multiple meanings, ranging from something as benign as a believer’s internal struggle to let their faith permeate their lives and actions (also known as the *jihad* of the heart, tongue, and hand), to the violent act of defending the Islamic faith regulated by the *Shari’ah* (better known as the *jihad* of the sword). Unlike non-violent Muslims, Qutb “recognized *jihad* as taking many different forms depending upon the stage of development of the Muslim community.”

The first and least important stage, according to the attention it receives in *Milestones*, is the struggle to assert the doctrine of *tawhid* (the oneness of God) against all odds. Qutb defines the second stage as the defense of a man’s right to freely practice his Islamic beliefs, even if it entails the use of arms. This stage can be divided into two parts: preaching and violence (movement). To Qutb, preaching is the “non-violent promotion of Islamic beliefs through public speech, demonstrations, and missionary work.” This form of *jihad* is utilized to not only target the core ideologies fueling *jahili* institutions on a philosophical plane, but also encourage friends and family to convert to Islam with the promise of eternal freedom under the rule of God. Today, preaching is perceived to represent the first, and least violent, step towards establishing an Islamic society. To Qutb, “preaching [represented an] essential [component of]

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76 Loboda, 24.
77 Murata and Chittick, 340.
80 Loboda, 21.
81 Loboda, 21.
jihad because it provides ideological justification."\textsuperscript{82} The second facet of jihad is characterized by movement, leading this subdivision to be defined as “war of ideas put into action; thus, movement is violence against jahili institutions.”\textsuperscript{83} Interestingly, this particular form of jihad is represented as an unending battle to establish Allah’s sovereignty on earth waged by all able-bodied Muslims no matter their race, sex, or country. This universal call later proved to be a unifying force, as illustrated by the attacks perpetrated on 9/11 by al-Qaeda, a fundamentalist branch of Islam that quickly embraced Qutb’s jihadist teachings.

Unlike his predecessors, who argue that change must occur from within before changing the community, Qutb argued that “jihad must be waged first against the external, for the sake of the internal, [as] a man’s soul is so strongly linked to society and his environment that he is incapable of cleansing his soul unless the external permits it.”\textsuperscript{84} In an effort to cleanse the environment, Qutb calls for the targeting of specific government organizations that encourage men to have sovereignty over other men, and institutions that prevent society from conforming to Islamic ideals and Shari’ah.

In Milestones Qutb argued that “all societies that do not apply Islamic Law (Shari’a) to the letter are jahili [ignorant], and called for a pioneering vanguard to retreat from the corruption of contemporary Muslim societies and lay the foundation for a struggle, armed if necessary, that would enforce Allah’s word upon the earth.\textsuperscript{85}

By attacking these jahili establishments, Qutb argues that man will be freed from the oppression of governments that prevent preaching and spreading Islam, and sexual impulses which cause suffering. As a result, Qutb perceives jihad as “the transforming moment between Jahiliyyah and Islam.”\textsuperscript{86} Qutb further strengthens his argument for movement through Qur’anic passage 4:74-75:

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\textsuperscript{82} Loboda, 21.
\textsuperscript{83} Loboda, 21.
\textsuperscript{84} Loboda, 19-20.
\textsuperscript{85} Shavit, Islamism and the West, 12.
\textsuperscript{86} Loboda, 18.
\end{flushright}
Let them fight in God’s cause - all who are willing to barter the life of this world for the life to come. To him who fights in God’s cause, whether he be slain or be victorious, we shall grant him a rich reward. And why should you not fight in the cause of God and the utterly helpless men, women, and children who are crying, “Our Lord! Deliver us from this land whose people are oppressors, and send forth to us, out of Your grace, a protector, and send us one that will help us.”

It is through the use of this verse and the promise of a reward that Qutb illustrates martyrdom as glorious and honorable, a concept that would prove to be a siren call to Islamists. Today, many contemporary Islamists “view suicide bombings and terrorism, which they believe is pursuant to the victory of Islam, as a glorious type of death.”

Impact of Milestones on Islamism

Following the atrocity of 9/11, political scientists and theorists were forced to grapple with the new and growing threat of Islamic terrorism. In recent years, scholars have begun urging the U.S. to educate themselves about the “appeal, underlying ideology, [and] radical Islamism” that appeals to many young Muslims in the Arab in many contemporary Islamic countries. Today, leading academics attribute the drastic change in the definition, understanding, and international attitude towards Islamism (that is, support for Islamic fundamentalism) to the terrorist attacks of September 11. This unique brand of Islamism can be found throughout Qutb’s final work Milestones.

Since 9/11, Islamism has become a “popular revolutionary movement in virtually every country” for three primary reasons. One of the first factors contributing to the proliferation of Islamism is the “general sympathy [exhibited by] the Muslim world for the Islamist cause, even if they do not agree with the means

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87 Loboda, 18.
88 Loboda, 34.
that the Islamists use to achieve their ends.”90 This sympathy, according to several Western scholars, stems from the indoctrination many young Muslim children receive in the local madrassas (religious schools) claiming the West, especially America in recent years, has devastated Islam’s homeland and smeared its religion.91 This calumniate campaign is led by a number of influential and powerful Islamic ideologues that claim Muslims “must support the Islamist ideology completely if they are true Muslims.”92 The support of these well-respected Muslim authority figures constitutes the second factor contributing to the proliferation of Islam. These esteemed leaders further utilize their power to claim that Muslims who do not support the Islamist cause “will be forever condemned to the House of War along with the infidels,” meaning that the final rationalization for the spread of Islamism to be the threat of physical violence.93

Today, scholars attribute the connection between Qutb’s Milestones and modern Islamist terrorism to Qutb’s brother, Muhammad, who “fled to Saudi Arabia after his brother’s execution [where he] carried on the torch, editing and publishing Sayyid’s books and preaching his ideas.”94 While in Saudi Arabia, Muhammad is believed to have come into direct contact with Ayman al-Zawahiri, al-Qaeda’s second in command and reportedly the mind behind the entire Islamist organization.95 In 1979, al-Zawahiri left his homeland in Egypt and traveled to Afghanistan where he joined al-Jihad al-Islami (Islamic Jihad).96 While in Afghanistan, al-Zawahiri met Osama Bin Laden, a man who was running a mujahideen (Islamic strugglers in the name of jihad) base called Maktab al-Khadamat (Afghanistan Services Bureau). In the months following their initial encounter, al-Zawahiri became Bin Laden’s mentor. It would not be until late 1998 that al-

90 Murr.
91 Murr.
92 Murr.
93 Murr.
95 Murr.
Zawahiri would formally merge *al-Jihad al-Islami* into al-Qaeda.97 Today, a consensus among Western scholars has emerged claiming that the road to 9/11 can be traced back to the writings of Qutb, a man “considered to be the intellectual godfather of al-Qaeda.”98

In examining Qutb’s life circumstances, one realizes that most of his opponents and critics who have portrayed him as the father of radical Islam and the spiritual leader of Bin Laden have reached this conclusion based on Qutb’s re-action, rather than actions; his revolutionary ideologies, as opposed to his entire life experience, and the final stage of his life rather than the two other stages of his life.99

Several comparisons between Sayyid Qutb and Osama Bin Laden can be drawn. When the Western world contemplates the stigmas of Osama Bin Laden, notions of him being an inciting and forceful Islamist fundamentalist come to mind. Bin Laden’s charisma and smooth speaking in the fundamentalist Islamic world would work in his favor. Unlike Qutb, Bin Laden never published any books or articles, instead choosing to give a handful of lectures, make declarations during interviews on al-Jazeera (a Qatar-based news source), and make current materials available on al-Qaeda affiliated websites.100

Both Qutb and Bin Laden were under the impression that ordinary Muslims were actively being oppressed by regimes that were imposed and supported by the West, especially America.101 To Bin Laden, this oppression was specific to Muslim peoples, while Qutb believed that even Westerners were oppressed by their man-made systems. While both expressed frustration and anger at the lack of an Islamic society, each had differing foundational reasons.102 Qutb’s animosity was due to the morally corrupt situation that plagued the Western world and was steadily seeping into the Eastern Islamic societies. Bin Laden, on the other hand, blamed the steadily declining morals on the American ‘crusaders’ and ‘the Zionists,’ both of

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99 Lo.  
100 Lo.  
101 Lo.  
102 Lo.
whom sought to annihilate and distort, in his opinion, the true meaning of Islam.\textsuperscript{103} Despite the difference in foundation, both Qutb and Bin Laden identify \textit{jihad} as the most important duty in Islam.\textsuperscript{104} Though Qutb and Bin Laden have many differences, it is commonly recognized that the writings of Sayyid Qutb provided Islamist leaders, like Ayman al-Zawahiri and Osama Bin Laden, “with a foundation for the philosophical defense of a staunch intense dislike of the West and its ultimate consequence, terrorism.”\textsuperscript{105} While Qutb and Bin Laden differ slightly in their perception of the world, it remains clear that Qutb directly impacted Bin Laden’s impressions of Western societies as \textit{jahili}. Today, it is believed that the core ideas and worldviews presented in \textit{Milestones} has both inspired and supplied the ideological basis for Bin Laden’s terrorist movements against the West.

One of the core aspects of contemporary Islamist thought is the deep-seated “resentment of the power the West [establishes over other nations, leading many to] view it not only as a physical enemy, but also as a philosophical and ideological one.”\textsuperscript{106} To these Islamists, the Western world, especially America, controls their civilization and encourages the sharing of values across international borders, an action that abhors many fundamentalists today. This enmity is echoed in al-Qaeda’s resounding cry:

\textit{The stakes are huge. The life or (continued) death of Islam itself hangs in the balance. Action is not just vital, but urgent. ‘Mankind today is on the brink of a precipice.” (p.7) Human beings only have two ways to go: God or Satan (p.117); good or evil (p.154); a wonderful world (rule by perfect law, harmony, peace, discoveries of nature), or the evil and corruption of everything non-Muslim. There’s no middle ground. Surely with all this in the balance, Muslims should not hesitate to use violence if necessary.}\textsuperscript{107}

However, Prophet Muhammad provides a very clear stance on the use of violence in specific circumstances:

\textit{The killing of innocent non-combatants is forbidden. According to Sunni tradition, ‘Abu Bakr al-Siddiq, the first Caliph, gave these instructions to his armies: “I instruct you in ten}\textsuperscript{103, 104, 105, 106, 107}
matters: Do not kill women, children, the old, or the infirm; do not cut down fruit-bearing trees; do not destroy any town.  

However, both Qutb and Bin Laden claim that “this ethical guideline can be justifiably overruled if they are pursuant to the foremost guideline of jihad: “oppression is even worse than killing.” In other words, as long as the means achieve the desired end, violent jihad is perceived to be allowable. This distorted understanding of acceptable behavior directly impacted more than a few Islamist groups, including al-Jihaad, al-Jihaad al-Islami, al-Takfir wa al-Hijrah, Jund Allah, and Tanzim al-Faniyyah al-Askariyyah, in the decades following Qutb’s execution and is perceived to have set the stage for the 9/11 terrorist attacks that shook the international world.

Conclusion

History has been filled with countless dreamers, each with their own ambitions to face an injustice and make a change. Sayyid Qutb’s classification of the Western world, especially America, as backwards, immoral, materialistic, and oppressive, reflected in his book Milestones, created the foundation for the spread of Islamism. Today, Qutb’s writings and legacy are admired by Muslims all over the world, especially those who harbor a great hatred towards the Western world. To Islamist terrorist organizations, Milestones offers the perfect ideological basis for obtaining legitimacy among fellow Muslims and advocating violence against every takfir government and society because they are all in a state of Jahiliyyah.

Today, it is commonly recognized that Qutb’s book Milestones has encouraged Muslims and Islamists around the world to “reintroduce Islamic practices in their lives and alter social and political

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109 Loboda, 21.
110 Murr.
112 Kedar and Yerushalmi.
institutions so that they reflect Islamic principles.\textsuperscript{113} The core ideas and worldviews presented in 
\textit{Milestones} has both inspired and commanded Muslims around the world to engage in \textit{jihad} against \textit{jahili} 
societies, setting the stage for Islamist terrorist organizations to wage a physical and philosophical war 
against the West.

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{113} Khan, <http://www.ijtihad.org/sq.htm>.
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