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From Secularism to Jihad: Sayyid Qutb and the Foundations of Radical Islamism

Adnan Musallam

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The modern political idea of jihad?a violent struggle against corrupt or anti-Islamic regimes?is essentially the brainchild of one man who turned traditional Islamic precepts inside out and created the modern radical political Islamist movement. Using the evolution of Sayyid Qutb's life and writings, Musallam traces and analyzes Qutb's alienation and subsequent emergence as an independent Islamist within the context of his society and the problems that it faced. Radicalized following his stay in the United States in the late 1940s and during his imprisonment from 1954 to 1964, Qutb would pen controversial writings that would have a significant impact on young Islamists in Egypt for decades following his death and on global jihadist Islamists for the past quarter century. Since September 11, 2001, the West has dubbed Qutb the philosopher of Islamic terror and godfather ideologue of al-Qaeda. This is the first book to examine his life and thought in the wake of the events that ignited the War on Terrorism.

A secular man of letters in the 1930s and 1940s, Qutb's outlook and focus on Quranic studies underwent drastic changes during World War II. The Quran became a refuge for his personal needs and for answers to the ills of his society. As a result, he forsook literature permanently for the Islamic cause and way of life. His stay in the United States from 1948 to 1950 reinforced his deeply held belief that Islam is man's only salvation from the abyss of Godless materialism he believed to be manifest in both capitalism and communism. Qutb's active opposition to the secular policies of Egyptian President Nasser led to his imprisonment from 1954 to 1964, during which his writings called for the overthrow of Jahili (pagan) governments and their replacement with a true and just Islamic society. A later arrest and trial resulted in his execution in August 1966.

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