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John Calvert. *Sayyid Qutb and the Origins of Radical Islamism*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010, pp. vii+377, (Hardback). ISBN978-0-231-70104-4, Reviewed by Mohamed Daadaoui, Oklahoma City University, Oklahoma City, O.K., US

John Calvert's *Sayyid Qutb and The Origins of Radical Islamism* is an ambitious investigation into the life and thoughts of Sayyid Qutb at a distance from al-Qaeda and similar radical Islamism. The book is a contextualized approach to the life and thought of Sayyid Qutb, which seeks to go beyond points of similarity between Qutb's fiery and uncompromising ideas and contemporary militant violent Islamism. For Calvert, Qutb's Islamism is a function of the post-independence Egypt caught between crises of modernization and subsequent authoritarian regime. Calvert's biographical book is chronologically organized to mirror the trajectory of Qutb's ideas and views of the state and society from early rural upbringing to his eventual execution at the hands of Nasser's state in 1966.

British occupation of Egypt would serve as one of the main points of contest in Qutb's early discourse and foment his early nationalist zeal. In this period, Calvert weaves a seamless intellectual mosaic of Qutb's thought from the early years in *Dar al 'Ulum*, where he studied teaching and education methods to his later revolutionary Islamist discourse most exemplified in his treatise *Milestones*. Qutb's early literary aspirations spawned of his close association with Egyptian literary stalwart 'Abbas Mahmud al-'Aqqad. In this period, Qutb seemed less radical and more conciliatory, for instance, in his argument for a limited role for religion in the arts (pp. 72-73) and for his literary muses with romantic poetry and criticism of neoclassic poets.

The end of WWII period saw Qutb's early creative and aesthetic analyses of the Qur'an, which will later provide the basis for his seminal commentary on the Qur'an, *In the Shade of the Qur'an*. Qutb's literary approach to Qur'anic studies is less preoccupied with semantics and grammar and more with the hidden artistic qualities of "rhythm, the sound of words, and the symmetry of images" in the holy book (p.113). This approach reawakened Qutb's inner Islamist long perched beneath the modern Cairene *Effendi* look.

Faithful to his contextualized approach, Calvert points out to two main factors that contributed to the early radicalization of dissident *effendis* like Qutb. First the general post-WWII self-determination/anti-colonial movement, and the growing Zionist project in Palestine, which will become the cause célèbre for generations of Arab nationalists and Islamists alike (pp.116-117). Qutb viewed western colonialism as the source of all socio-economic ills and cultural corruption of Muslims societies. Themes that Qutb punctuate in his *Social Justice in Islam*'s sharp call for Muslim reform and a return to a pre-modern Islamic concept of justice to restore balanced order



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in society away from western manifestations of materialism and decadence. Qutb's anti-western views will find their affirmation during his "American Sojourn."

Studying education methods in Greeley, Colorado in 1948, Qutb's lamented the social inertia, decay and sexual permissiveness in US society. A man of dark complexions, Qutb was particularly critical of racial segregation at the height of "Jim Crow" laws in the US (pp. 148-149). His cultural and ethical rebuke of the US amounts to what Calvert, through Syrian cultural critic Sadiq al-'Azm terms as "Orientalism in Reverse," which is the tendency of Easterners to "validate the Self in relation to the Other in the modern period" (p.153).

Upon his return to Egypt in the early 1950s, Qutb wrote his commentary on the Qur'an (In The Shade of the Qur'an) in 1954, two years after the Free Officers Movement coup d'état against King Farouk. Qutb joined the Muslim Brotherhood in 1953 and endorsing and working with the Free Officers during the early post-putsch days. However, as Nasser moved to exact his authoritarian control of Egypt, Nasser would view the Muslim Brotherhood as subversive agents. Consequently, the Muslim Brotherhood was banned and Qutb imprisoned after a botched assassination attempt against Nasser.

In jail, Qutb becomes more radicalized in his discourse vis-à-vis the police state of Nasser. During this period, Qutb authored several books that culminated in his *Milestones* in 1964, in which he condemned Jahili societies, a reference to the pre-Islamic age of "ignorance," and modern Muslim societies, that which have subverted God's sovereignty to a man-made form of governance. Qutb advocated a return to the contentions concept of Jihad as a struggle against Islam's enemies, including the Egyptian state.

Such views will serve as a template for later generations of radical Islamists, and would seal Qutb's fate as Nasser's regime moved to quell the subversive effect of Qutb's ideas under trumped up charges of complicity with anti-government forces. Despite offers of clemency in exchange for Qutb's admission of guilt, he steadfastly embraced his fate to the very last minute when he was executed in 1966. Qutb's "Martyrdom" will serve as rallying force for generations of radical *takfirist* Islamists that took advantage of Qutb's *Jahiliyya* concept to "excommunicate" millions of Muslims and launch a global terror campaign.

Calvert's book is judicious as he painstakingly sketches out a portrait of the making of a revolutionary Islamist. As Calvert shows, Qutb's intellectual progression is gradual and has to be disaggregated from the common quick association with modern militant and violent Islamism of al-Qaeda et al. The narrative Calvert writes is masterful in its contextualization of Qutb's views as a response to the tumultuous times of post-colonial Egypt and the brutal dictatorship of Nasser.



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Buried in Calvert's rich details of the contentious Nasserite regime in Egypt is an inexplicable reference to polemical Muslim scholar Tariq Ramadan, son of Said Ramadan, who fled Nasserite persecution in 1956. The reference is tangential and appears ad hoc and irrelevant to the chronological flow of events. Calvert seems to reduce the intellectual worth of Tariq Ramadan to that of "da'wist" finishing the Brotherhood's work from the 1950s and 60s in Europe. Perhaps Calvert is guilty of the same guilt by association that many critics of Tariq Ramadan are, questioning the motives of Ramadan in light of his ancestors' Muslim Brotherhood credentials.

Less important are some problems with transliteration. In two cases, Calvert mis-transliterates first the word *Jahili* as *Jalili* (p.58) and *Hadith* (present/contemporary) as *Hadir* (p. 67). Despite these few shortcomings, Calvert's book is a well-researched and written biography of arguably the most important figure in modern militant Islam. It is recommended for both its depth and breadth, and novel Qutbist-centric approach at a distance from modern linkages to al-Qaedaism.
