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## Nasser and Qutb: The Lives and Legacies of Two Controversial Egyptians

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Nasser and Qutb:  
The Lives and Legacies of Two Controversial Egyptians

Rachel Leonard

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“The rationale and ideological foundation of radicalism is usually traced to the twentieth-century Egyptian Islamist Sayyid Qutb, whose views have been of profound importance in establishing the modern radical vision of Islam.”<sup>1</sup>

## **I. Introduction**

The problems of the Middle East are complex, in-depth issues that cannot be solved easily. The matters of oil, Islam and very limited participation of the people in government mix to create problems that defy solutions from those within or outside the region. Historians and political scientists have come to examine these issues more closely, especially because of the serious political, religious and military conflicts centered in the area. There has been an upsurge in political Islamist movements, radical, fundamental and otherwise, that tend to frighten policy makers in the West. These movements arose alongside and often in opposition to movements that emphasized Arab unity and secularism. These two groups of thought have their roots in the cultures and peoples of the Middle East and the Muslim world.

One specific case in which these two ideologies came to a head was in Egypt in the middle of the twentieth century. Gamal Abdul Nasser was the champion of Arab unity and secularism and Sayyed Qutb, the major ideologue of the Muslim Brotherhood, was the champion of political Islam. Qutb is often cited as the father or creator of modern political Islam, his writing and ideas influencing generations of young, disenchanted Muslims. Many scholars cite the 1967 war with Israel as the moment that defined the modern-day Middle East. This certainly may be true but there were things happening in Egypt with the Muslim Brotherhood and Qutb that would greatly effect the generations to come. Both Nasser and Qutb lived and interacted with each other

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<sup>1</sup> Graham E. Fuller. *The Future of Political Islam* (New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003), 52.

politically. They were polar forces within Egypt and the region and their individual philosophies have been passed on, whether truly or not, to the generations that followed. The years when both Nasser and Qutb were prominent in Egypt can be seen as a special period when the two forces of political Islam and secular Arab nationalism came to a head in two men. However, what may be more important is how their ideas have shaped the Middle East of today. They were not simply examples of these two philosophies; they were symbols of the attitudes and trends of the Arab and Islamic worlds. Nasser symbolized the great rise of pan-Arabism as the dominant ideology of the Middle East and also of its fall from grace. Qutb was not only the father of political Islam, he symbolized and embodied the struggle political Islam would engage in with the dominant ruling systems it has to work within.

After the Six Days War with Israel, many people lost faith in the ideas of pan-Arab nationalism. The war was the great failure of Nasser and it marked a turning point within the region. Nasser and his followers had seen the flaws in the system before 1967 but the Six Day War was the last straw, the one that pushed pan-Arab nationalism beyond the breaking point. After 1967 Egyptians were much less likely to tolerate things, like the socio-economic affluence of the officer class that was so like that of the Pashas they had removed, they had tolerated in earlier times. They had experienced first hand what it was like to live with Nasser and it was not all it was made out to be. The political climate did not change over night but this marked the beginning of a period of questioning, a period that would ultimately end in what is today a Middle East whose politics are heavily influenced by politicized Islam.

Although many were disenchanted with the ideas of Arab unity after the 1967 defeat, which many attributed to the failure of that ideology, Israel remained and remains today a point around which Arabs rally. It is topic at the heart of the Middle East and people are still today looking for a way to settle the matter. Israel and the Palestinian question was something around which the Arab world rallied and it allowed those who still wished to harness the power of secular pan-Arabism, embodied most prominently in the Baath party in Syria and Iraq. Saddam Hussein attempted to show himself as the political heir of Nasser after 1967. Saddam was “Nasser with teeth” and his secular regime was an evolution of the secular, Arab ideals the Nasser regime was based off of.

The legacy of Qutb is great, probably greater than his fame while alive. Although he was a popular writer in Egypt early in his life, it was his work later, on the subjects of Islam and politics, which would make him significant to the entire Muslim world. He was executed by the Nasser government but his work was carried through out the Arab world through the Muslim Brotherhood and other groups that adopted his Islamic philosophy. His vision for the world can be seen as inspiration for many of the political Islam groups through out the world, including perhaps the most famous group, Al Qaeda.<sup>2</sup> Not only are his ideas seen in the very radical and fundamental groups but they were also absorbed by generations of young Arabs who struggled with their identity in a world where the West was attempting to impose itself and there were few, Muslim or otherwise, who could hold back that tide. The plans and designs of Qutb and of Nasser not only affected the people that lived while they did, they have come to shape the modern face of the Middle East. Perhaps by examining these ideas more closely

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<sup>2</sup> Lawrence Wright. *The Looming Tower* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 7-31.

outsiders will come to understand and work within the systems of the region more successfully than they have in the past.

## **II Nasser and the Free Officers' Egypt**

To understand the relationship between these two men and their legacies one must understand the political situation in Egypt and in the region in general during the time they both lived. To write a complete history of Egypt here would be impossible but examining the political situation before and during the rule of Nasser should be sufficient. The Free Officers, the political group headed by Nasser, performed a coup d'état on July 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1952. Egypt had, until the coup, been ruled by a royal family with a parliament that was often dissolved by the King. There was a strong secular political system, one with roots going back to the 1919 revolution, but it had little power compared to the King.<sup>3</sup> Egypt had only been a Monarchy since 1922 but the tension between the people and the monarchs had become increasingly grave during the reign of King Farouk. Farouk, the last monarch before the coup, was notorious for being a party boy with deep pockets. He was also known to cave to the desires of the British, who had declared Egypt a protectorate and allowed for limited independence, which included the right of the British to interfere in Egypt anytime their interests were threatened. They could interfere on behalf of foreigners within Egypt, the Suez Canal, the Sudan and the defense of Egypt against foreign aggression.<sup>4</sup> The British military was also still present in Egypt,

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<sup>3</sup> Joel Gordon. *Nasser's Blessed Movement* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1992).

<sup>4</sup> Gordon, 16-20.

centralized around the Suez Canal zone, which they controlled. The British effectively controlled the monarchy, the army and the country.<sup>5</sup>

Parliament was dominated by the Wafd party which had originated during the years after World War I as a bid for full independence from the British and had been part of the 1919 revolution against British occupation. They had been present in 1923 for the first parliament and the drawing up of the constitution.<sup>6</sup> During the years leading up to the 1952 revolution the Wafd were known to cooperate with or oppose the monarchy as circumstance dictated. They had not gained the independence from the monarchy and the British they had originally aimed for. The parliament was at the whim of the monarch, who ruled an occupied country. Even though Farouk was a nationalist and offered protest to the British occupation and interference in his country, it was never strong enough to change the situation. He worked to closely with the British while at the same time claiming to want independence from them.<sup>7</sup>

The military was another institution within Egypt that did not function independently of the British. The British had controlled the military for many years and had kept it at a level of inefficiency that would not allow it to perform properly. They were trying to avoid exactly what Nasser achieved in 1952, a military coup that brought about the end of the Monarchy and the eventual ousting of the British from Egypt completely. This last issue was at the forefront of the Free Officers movement. A group of young officers in the Egyptian military had been gathering since 1940, angry with their ineffectiveness as a result of the Monarchy's complacency to the British. They

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<sup>5</sup> James L. Gelvin. *The Modern Middle East: A History* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2005), 92-96.

<sup>6</sup> Gordon, 15-20.

<sup>7</sup> Gordon, 14-22.



planned to remove the King and restore some kind of credibility to the government and the military.

Nasser emerged as the leader of the Free Officers from early on and, like the other members, was deeply disturbed and motivated by the Palestinian War of 1948. During this war the Egyptian army was deployed in Palestine to fight against the newly sanctioned Israeli state. It was a popular move in the region to send troops in to fight with and for the Palestinians but none of the armies, least of all the Egyptian one, were prepared for the fight. The troops had no maps, tents, ineffective and outdated weapons and ineffective leaders.<sup>8</sup> They also suffered from corruption back home: arms racketeering by members of parliament for personal profit created a big scandal.<sup>9</sup>

Yet somehow the combined forces were making headway against the Israelis, perhaps by sheer numbers, when several of the Arab governments involved, including Egypt, called for a truce. The military personnel involved saw this as a betrayal of the army by the King. Yet after a month, which the Israelis used to restock their weapons, the fighting resumed and this time the Egyptians lack of preparedness allowed the Israelis to walk all over them. They were pushed back from their previous gains and surrounded by the Israeli army. The King had no choice but to surrender and that was the end of it. The war had been thoroughly botched. Not only was there no communication between the Arab armies present but the Egyptian army was so unprepared and ill-equipped that it was nearly ineffective.

What Nasser and the other young officers experienced in 1948 the result of the corruption in the government by the British and by the ruling class of Pashas that owned

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<sup>8</sup> Said K. Aburish. *Nasser: The Last Arab* (New York, NY: Thomas Dunne Books, 2004).

<sup>9</sup> Gordon, 22, 50.

nearly everything in Egypt. They were ill-equipped, untrained and unorganized because that is how the government had made them. This is not to say that every officer was perfect except for his lack of equipment but this lack did make the group very ineffective. These inadequacies were proof of what many Egyptians had thought already: the monarchy was simply a puppet of the British government and would do as it was told even if it meant weakening Egypt. The officers could do nothing legally to stop these problems because they were built into the system, a direct result of a royal family that had been and continued to be in union with the British.

This lack of accountability created tension and anger between not only the Army and the monarchy but also the people and the monarchy. Popular opinion of the king, especially within the upper class that tended to be more politicized, was growing worse and worse and the Free Officers decided to make their move to take Egypt from the monarchy. The coup d'état took place on July 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1952 and was nearly bloodless. The leaders of the Free Officers, Nasser and his inner circle, planned to use their recruits within the military to take over important positions within Cairo and Alexandria. These included radio stations and government buildings. They took the palace and disbanded the monarchy, sending the king into exile. The Free Officers quickly declared their coup and the end of the monarchy, setting General Muhammad Naguib up as the front man of the government with Nasser still controlling the movement from behind the scenes.

The Free Officers took over the country intending to return it to some sort of legitimacy. These intentions did not come to fruition and Egypt became a military dictatorship. Nasser did not rule openly at first, allowing Naguib, a well known military figure, work as the symbol of his government, but Nasser was always in charge. It

wasn't long before he came out and ruled in the open, advocating a secular state, land reform, non-alignment with foreign powers, and Arab nationalism. Nasser's personality and ruling style quickly made him the darling of his people and many people across the Arab world. He appealed to the Arab masses and used that appeal to win their support. He was a famous orator, often speaking without notes or cues, and he inspired the masses with his grand visions of not only a stronger Egypt but of a unified Arab world. He enchanted the Arab masses yet he had never even been to many of the countries he sought to unite. He used the radio station Radio Cairo to send his voice and thoughts out into the region, a propaganda machine that could not be matched for many years. People were listening to Nasser from Damascus to Baghdad.

Nasser's years as head of Egypt were long and fraught with uncertainty, as any new regime is, yet he captured the hearts of the Arab street. When he first came to power some in the world saw him as a threat, including the leaders of the other Arab states, because of his popularity and his ability to influence their populations. Yet he is still today a hero of the Arab world, the darling of the 1952 revolution even after his death. Much of his policy within Egypt revolved around his foreign policy. He believed that Egypt was part of and had influence in three main spheres: the Arab world, the African world and the Islamic world. The one he focused on and the one that he claimed leadership of was the first because it was the one in which he had the ability to gain some sort of control. He did not have the resources to try to influence the other two the way he could the Arab world. He chose to downplay the second and especially the third, expressing doubt in the ability of a government to function with Islam as its only guide. This is not to say that he was not a pious or true Muslim; he performed all of the five

pillars of Islam including a much publicized *hajj* (pilgrimage) to Mecca. But he ruled with the wish to keep the government secular, as much as could be allowed.

Nasser's most important sphere of influence, the Arab one, was where he drew on the thread of Arab unity that had run through the region for many years. Egypt had been a cultural and intellectual leader of the Arab world for a long time and the other countries in the region looked to Egypt to set trends, socially and politically. So when Nasser started to proclaim the desire for a unified Arab world, whether he intended to follow through with it or not, there were plenty of willing participants who saw him as the leader of that movement. It was not that he fell in to the role but more that he was made for it. He had the charisma to win the hearts and minds of the people and he claimed the political ability to complete it. Yet when it came down to it, when Egypt and Syria unified to become the United Arab Republic (UAR) in 1958, Nasser could not hold together his proposed Arab unity. The UAR lasted for three years and its break up marked the beginning of the end of Nasser's grand schemes of pan-Arab nationalism.

When the UAR came into existence in 1958 many thought it was the beginning of a unified Arab world and that other states would follow to join the union. But the UAR was not created simply for the love of Arab unity. There were political and economic motivations on both sides and it was these concerns that lead to the inevitable break up of the union. There was strong popular support in Syria for unification and there was hope that it would open up new markets to Syrian products. But the Syrian Communists knew that Nasser suppressed the Communists in Egypt and were not for the union. The Communist tried to play Nasser against himself by proposing a full union, something they though he never would have allowed. This backfired when Nasser decided that a

complete union was better than allowing the Communists to control Syria. Nasser had originally opted for a less complete union but he saw the Communist party gaining in power and popularity in Syrian and supported the complete union in order to stop further growth. After the union Nasser immediately banned all political parties except for his own, a move that alienated the USSR because it eliminated the communist party in Syria. Nasser had tried to remain independent of Communist control even though he did associate with the USSR. He did not want to see a communist Arab world anymore than he wanted one that was controlled by former colonizers.

The capital of the UAR was Cairo and Nasser was its leader. Egyptian officials quickly moved into Syria, taking high ranking positions in the government and the military, something the Syrians resented. The Egyptians controlled more within Syria than did the Syrians and this lead to conflict. Syrians were also disappointed when they did not gain financially from the union, as they had originally thought they would. Agricultural reform, put in place by the Egyptian regime and based off of Egyptian policies that had succeeded for them, was very unsuccessful for Syria under the UAR. The union ended in 1961 with the secession of Syria and it was never, to the disappointment of pan-Arab thinkers, recreated.

Nasser liked the idea of a unified Arab world with Egypt in control but the realities were very different. What worked best for Nasser was to use his ideological and popular leverage to make decisions for the rest of the Arab world. He wanted to use his influence to control, not necessarily to rule, and to be the first leader that outside powers came to. This was especially important in his relations with the West, with whom he practiced what came to be called positive non-alignment.

Positive non-alignment was the result of the observation that most third world countries either found themselves in alignment with either the West, in the form of the US and Europe, or with the Soviet Union. These relationships were almost always one sided, with the larger, wealthier countries dictating the terms of exchange and the smaller countries coming out of it worse off. They were often based on former colonial relationships, without the formalities of an actual colony. What Nasser aimed to do was to remain independent of both sides and to use this fact to play the two sides off of each other. This was all in the hope that things would come out on the plus side for Egypt. He wished to use the threat of alignment with one side or the other to convince the other side to assist him. For example, when the US would not supply the weapons and military equipment he needed, he turned to the USSR for assistance instead but managed, to some degree, to remain independent of the USSR. This practice of non-alignment also gave the leader an authenticity that few others could claim.

Nasser's policies within Egypt were just as controversial as his foreign policy. Nasser and the Free Officers espoused a secular socialist system and one of the first things to be implemented after the coup was land redistribution. Egypt's land is very limited and at the time of the revolution was owned by few absentee landowners. These huge tracts of lands were pushed to their production limits in order to feed an increasingly large population. The land reform limited the amount of land that one land holder could own to 200 *feddans*<sup>10</sup> and redistributed the excess.<sup>11</sup> The limits imposed were modest; a compromise with the land owners who had held the large majority of land in Egypt for many years. Yet it was one of the first acts in many years in Egypt that

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<sup>10</sup> 1 *feddans* = 1.038 acres

<sup>11</sup> Keith Wheelock. *Nasser's New Egypt* (New York, NY: Frederick A. Praeger, Publishers), 77-85.

benefited the lower class. Along with the redistribution, the Nasser government attempted to do what all governments knew was necessary for Egypt's survival: increase the productivity of the land available and increase arable land. Many of these plans met with moderate success.

As for social development, the Nasser government implemented an increase in schools, primary and secondary, better health care, birth control, social security for the elderly and other social programs present in most Western countries. He also created a huge civil service; government jobs that he felt would create a middle class and a stable economy. Yet Egypt has many limits, not the least of which is its growing population and its very limited resources. Perhaps the intentions of Nasser and the Free Officers were to make Egypt great, to give everyone a better life but the truth of the matter was that much of the legislation and law they implemented was ineffective because of the limitations on the society. Nasser never succeeded in creating a healthy middle class and never overcame the limitations of an increasingly large population and very limited resources with which to feed that population.

Many of the Free Officers were members of the Muslim Brotherhood early in their military lives. The Muslim Brotherhood was a Muslim group in Egypt that functioned not only politically but also socially. This group, in the years of the monarchy, was one form of rebellious political expression available to Egyptians. The Brotherhood was and still remains the most popular political movement in Egypt, whether it is technically legal or not. The Brotherhood cooperated with the Free Officers during the coup, to what extent is unclear. But as Nasser took more drastic steps away from the ideals of the Brotherhood, they started to more openly disassociate themselves

with the Nasser government. The Brotherhood had expected to play a large part in the Egyptian government after the coup but Nasser and the Free Officers never allowed this to happen. This separation culminated with the attempted assassination of Nasser by several Brotherhood members, although it was probably staged in order to facilitate the persecution of Brotherhood members. After this Nasser saw the Brotherhood as a threat to his rule and to the health of his country. The government began mass arrests of Brotherhood members but at the same time, as it continues to do today, the Brotherhood was the most popular form of governmental opposition and its membership grew.

The suppression of the Brotherhood was part of Nasser's social reconstruction within Egypt. He felt that not only were they a threat to him and his regime, they were a threat to Egyptian society and its ability to move in the direction he wanted it to go. Nasser thought that he knew what Egypt needed and that he could bring that to Egypt. This is in contrast to what Egypt had been for many years, a very complex and old Muslim society, and his suppression of the more extreme Islamic sectors of Egypt, including the use of torture on those arrested, encouraged the formation of more and more extremist groups.

### **III Sayyid Qutb**

Sayyid Qutb was also present during the years that so greatly affected Nasser and the other Free Officers. Qutb was born in a small village in Upper (southern) Egypt in 1906, the oldest of five children. He was a bright student and loved to learn, skills that quickly allowed him to stand out amongst his peers. He entered the prestigious teachers college, Dar al-'Ulum, in Cairo in 1939. After graduating he continued in education, working in the college and then in the Ministry of Education. He quickly began writing



and publishing a number of varied works, including novels and poetry, and rose to become an important figure in the Egyptian literary scene. He was a member of the Wafd party, and an active critic of the monarchy, yet he continued to work within the system.

This all started to change when, in 1948 Qutb traveled to America, for disputed reasons, and quickly lost faith in the promises of the West. While in the U.S. Qutb traveled to New York City, Washington DC and Colorado, where he spent the longest amount of time. His travels were not simply for pleasure: Qutb was studying education and teaching while he was there but what he learned more truly was the nature of American culture, which disappointed him greatly. Some of the things that really affected him were the vulgar and blatant sexuality, racism and anti-Muslim attitude of Americans. He was in the U.S. when the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, Hasan al-Bana, was assassinated back in Egypt and the joyous reaction of the American people disgusted him.<sup>12</sup>

These experiences in the U.S. helped to move Sayyid Qutb closer to what he thought of as his Islamic roots. He started publishing books that criticized the Western leanings of Egypt and emphasized its Islamic identity. He became involved in the Muslim Brotherhood almost immediately upon his return home and quickly began writing for their publications. At around the same time, the Free Officers were looking to stage their coup and they looked to the Brotherhood for assistance and legitimacy within Egypt. Both groups had in common their dislike of the political conditions in Egypt at the time and this commonality was enough to allow them to cooperate in the coup. Qutb had risen quickly in the Brotherhood and after the coup Nasser, attempting to integrate

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<sup>12</sup> Wright, 7-31.

members into his government, offered the post of Minister of Education to Qutb, who declined. However, this time of cooperation quickly came to an end and the two groups grew apart. Both maintained their independence, with the Free Officers as the ruling party and the Brotherhood as their strongest opponents within Egypt. Then, in 1954, the Brotherhood was ordered to disband, marking the beginning of the campaign by the Free Officers to rid the country of this opposition party.

When the Brotherhood was banned in 1954 Qutb was jailed as a member, the first of several trips to jail during his short lifetime. Later that year he was also arrested again after the attempted assassination of Nasser by several Brotherhood members. From then on Qutb would spend nearly his entire life in jail, in a justice system where torture was standard operation. Yet his years being tortured in jail were his most prolific as a writer; he published his most influential work Milestones, also translated as Signposts, during this time as well as many commentaries on the Koran and other works on Islam and his framework for an Islamic system that incorporated all aspects of life. In 1965, after a short release from prison, Qutb was again arrested, this time with charges that related to the contents of his publications, and was sentenced to death by hanging on August 29<sup>th</sup>, 1966. His ideas, his Islamic philosophy were the cause of the great fear and disdain with which the Nasser regime treated Qutb. More than the man himself, Qutb's vision of a social system that made the Nasser government the enemy, one that offered an alternative to the secular government that Nasser was trying to set up, was the threat.

Qutb's ideology has circulated through out the Muslim world since his death. His ideas represent a clean break not only from the political world as it is today but also from previous Islamic traditions. He believed Islam was a religion like no other, embracing

and dictating every aspect of life, and that most Muslims today do not practice Islam properly, are not true Muslims. The world, argued Qutb, had receded into a time of ignorance, or *jahiliyyah*, similar to the period before the revelations of Muhammad. This proposal, laid out in his book Signposts/Milestones among others, advocated a rejection of all governing systems, stating that by following laws made by man people are giving sovereignty to man and not God. Qutb attributes sovereignty to God and God alone and advocates a world where people are free to submit to God only. This, says Qutb, is the main aim of jihad and the reason for the expansion of the Muslim empire during the prophets life and after his death. He uses the time during which the prophet lived as the example for the proper behavior of Muslims today and also the proper way in which to integrate the modern ideas of religion and politics into one Islamic system.

Qutb argued that all people should have the ability, unhindered by oppression by other people, to submit themselves only to God. Men or women who claim rule or leadership over other people are usurping the sovereignty of God. Thus, under Qutb's Islamic vision any governing system, whether it claims to be Islamic or not, is un-Islamic because it makes laws and rules designed by men. There are two ways by which Muslims can hope to free people from the rule of others. One is through persuasion and preaching, although Qutb believed that under oppressive political systems this could rarely succeed. The second is to carry out violent persuasion, or *jihad*, against those usurping God's sovereign role. The aim of *jihad* is not to destroy all non-Muslims but to free all the people of the world from oppression so they are free to submit themselves to God and his laws.

It was his ideas of jihad against the current political order, not only within Egypt but in the world in general, that many people took away from Qutb's writing. Qutb's philosophy, although it incorporates aspects of Islam that Muslims are familiar with, was revolutionary. In order for his ideal world to exist there would need to be complete overthrow and destruction of every governing system in favor of one that practices and enforces only the laws of God. He advocated violent *jihad* as the tool with which this could be accomplished and in so doing, he set the stage for the next generation to take his ideas and apply them to a Muslim world ruled by oppressive dictators, monarchs, and colonialists and then to a global world dominated by the West.

#### **IV 1967 War: The Hinge**

The hinging point for not only the nationalist, socialist movement in Egypt but for the entire modern Middle East was the 1967 Six-Day war. The Six-Day war was an aggressive Israeli assault on its neighbors and ended in the defeat of Egypt, Syria and Jordan by the Israeli forces. Israel took a pre-emptive strike against the Egyptian Air Force. The conflict had been building for a long time and there had been pressure on Egypt, as the self-proclaimed leader of the Arabs, to make a move against Israel, even though Egypt's army was unfit for serious combat. Egypt also had support from Syria and Jordan, as well as other Middle Eastern countries, thus cementing the collective defeat of the Arab world by Israel. In the end Israel took possession of the Sinai peninsula, the Gaza strip, the West Bank, eastern Jerusalem and the Golan Heights. But it was not only the territory that Israel took in the war, it was the faith of many Middle Eastern and Arab people in the vision of a strong Arab world, unified by Nasser's Arab nationalism.

## **V The Fall and the Legacy of Nasser**

The 1967 defeat was not simply a military one, it was a cultural and societal one as well. The defeat caused people all over the region to reflect on their society and their religion, looking for an explanation for the defeat. This reflection brought many to questions the current political order. What had gone wrong? Who was to blame? Many people started looking to religion, to Islam to find answers to these questions because the current secular system had failed them.

The nationalist, socialist, secular regime in Egypt that had so captured the hearts and minds of the region's people was being seen for what it really was and had always been. The Egyptian economy was declining steadily, the ruling military class was corrupt and Nasser made promises that he could not keep. The Egyptian people, who had to live with the realities of Nasserism from the very beginning, were the first to see the need for change whereas the rest of the Arab world tried to hang on to their hero, even in his failure. It was much easier for Egyptians to break with Nasser than it was for the rest of the Arab street, although they never abandoned him completely. He was still the Leader, although the leader had been defeated, and when he tried to resign the Egyptian people would not allow it.

The Nasser bubble broke. The people of the Arab world saw their precious leader as flawed and it was the beginning of the end for him. Nasser continued to use his charisma and ideals to woo his people but they became less effective and he became less of himself. His health was diminishing quickly and he continued to push himself past what he could handle. He had peaked not only in his physical ability but also in his popularity. Yet he had not lost his following completely and even after his death in 1970

there were those who tried to emulate him and considered themselves his heirs. The first of these supposed heirs was the regime in Libya, embodied in its leader Muammar al-Qaddafi. Qaddafi took power in 1969 as part of a group of officers and he saw himself as the ideological heir of Nasser. He espoused Nasserism and pan-Arabism after most of the Arab world had lost its faith in those ideas. He took up the pan-Arab mantle after Nasser died and, for a short time, had the backing and support as Nasser's heir. After Nasser's death, Anwar Al-Sadat became the head of Egypt but Sadat could not garner the support and excitement that Nasser had and he took Egypt in a very different direction than Nasser had. The problem was not that Qaddafi was implementing pan-Arab policy, putting it into practice: the problem was the general dis-approval of Sadat. When Nasser died he left a vacuum: where his strong personality had been to hold together what was left of his followers, there was now Sadat, who seemed weak and uninspiring and tried his best to rid himself of the remnants of Nasser. Qaddafi could take the position of Nasser's heir from Sadat, at least at first, because Qaddafi was the only one strongly espousing Nasser's supposed will.

Yet the support that Qaddafi garnered during Sadat's early years quickly faded as Sadat asserted himself and filled the vacuum, in new and diverse ways, which Nasser's death had brought. However, he did not fill that vacuum with more promises of a united Arab world, as Nasser had, because that dream had been critically wounded in 1967 and died completely with the death of its great leader. Sadat wanted to establish his own legacy separate from Nasser's and thus he tried to move quickly away from Nasser's big schemes and symbols.

Sadat went on to isolate Egypt from the Arab world when he made peace with Israel and even allowed the exchange of embassies with Israel. The opinion has sometimes been that Sadat's decision to make peace with Israel was a personality quirk and not something that reflected the attitude of the Egyptian people. There were of course those that objected heavily to the terms of the peace treaty but it is likely that it was something the Egyptian people approved of. Egypt had led the region for many years and had been on the front lines with the Israelis for most of that time. It was easy for a country like Saudi Arabia to stand back and judge but Egypt was and had always been deep in the fray. It was time for Egypt to make peace and stop fighting a war it could not win. This swift and absolute break with the political pattern in the region shocked the leaders of other nations and made it clear that pan-Arab nationalism had come to an end in Egypt.

While the dream of a pan-Arab state had practically died out by the end of the 1970's, there were still those that looked for a new Nasser to take the reigns, a new strongman to represent and steer the region as Nasser did. This need became even more acute in 1979 with the Iranian Revolution and the rise of Ayatollah Khomeini, the Shia cleric who brought about an Islamic revolution and government in Iran. The surrounding nations, who had majority Sunni populations but minority groups of Shia, feared the revolution was a Shia threat and their minority populations would rise up in allegiance to the Ayatollah.

Soon it became clear that the call for a strong leader would be taken up by Saddam Hussein of Iraq. He came to power with the Ba'th party, which in earlier years had espoused pan-Arab allegiances but had become a shell of its former self, redirected

by officers like Saddam who used it to gain power. But in the early years of the Iranian Islamic revolution it looked like Saddam was going to take up the reins that Sadat never had and lead the region to triumph against the Shia threat of Iran. “The crowd wanted a Nasser with teeth”<sup>13</sup> Saddam was not Nasser and could never be considered a true pan-Arabist but he used that still lingering desire for the great man, for the great things he promised and the allegiances he could gain just by speaking, and gained the admiration, at least for a short time, of the masses.

### **VI Qutb, Legacy and Influence**

Although Nasser’s star had shone brightly it quickly faded and a decade after the defeat in the Six Day war the three spheres that had been so important to him, the Arab world, the Muslim world and the African world, were moving on without him. What they were moving towards would no doubt have upset the leader who was known for his suppression and attempted destruction of the Muslim Brotherhood within Egypt. The trend after 1967 was for people to go back, review what had gone wrong and, instead of looking to the secular world that Nasser had tried to apply, they looked to Islam as the new solution. In fact, Islam was not the new solution but the old solution, the one that the people had forgotten, had strayed from when they were tempted by the modern Western world. A return to Islam, a return to religious roots became the pattern for old and young alike. Nasser had relied on the support of the youth of the Arab world and now those same groups were taking to a new ideology, were turning in a completely different direction for answers. This turn towards Islam had been, in some cases, inspired by thinkers like Qutb, thinkers that advocated the complete and total upheaval of the world system. This is not to say that the Islamic revival of the region today can all be

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<sup>13</sup> Fouad Ajami. *The Arab Predicament* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 13.



linked to Qutb but there were those who read his work and found new answers to the old questions the secularists could not answer properly.

This revival has many explanations and reasons, some unknown. There was an upheaval in the region after the 1967 defeat but this cannot be the sole reason for the religious revival that has swept the Middle East in the last forty years. Globalization and modernization took their toll on the region and perhaps a return to tradition and religion was the safest response for many people. Economic concerns were also part of the revival. The secularists had failed in terms of improving the lives of average citizens. A new Islamic system would implement new economic policies that might succeed where others had failed. Whatever the reason for the resurgence of Islam in the 1970's, the teachings of Sayyid Qutb played a role in inspiring some of those that were looking for answers within Islam. Qutb's version of Islam, incorporating jihad as violent struggle in order to end *jahiliyyah*, was not the only new interpretation of Islam to emerge in the twentieth century. Islam has a tradition of reinterpretation and Qutb was working within that tradition. Qutb's ideas offered an outlet for the frustrations of the Muslim youth who were alienated from the modern world and turned back to Islam to help them establish solid identities. Not only did he offer a new interpretation of Islam, Qutb offered a plan with which to overthrow the current world political system that had left the Muslim world behind.

With the resurgence of Islam throughout the Arab and Islamic worlds came an increase in religious schools and religious education, formal and informal. People were searching for answers and many came across the works of Qutb. His views spread through the region and the world, a generation of Islamists that draw from his work. His

books are banned in Egypt but they are read by those outside of Egypt. They are freely available today in many languages.

Qutb's legacy within Egypt is mixed. The Muslim Brotherhood, the original political home of Qutb in his radical years, has moved away from his extremist ideas and, although still officially illegal, functions quite normally within Egypt today. Leaders of the Brotherhood have denounced the violent ideas of Qutb but other groups within the country have taken up his slogan of jihad. In 1979 Sadat was assassinated and the group that claimed responsibility shared ideological foundations with Qutb. There are several very radical groups within Egypt today that seem to be carrying out the wishes and desires of Qutb, or so they claim, by acting out against the regimes under which they must live.

Qutb's legacy within the Middle East is hard to measure. How can one discover how one man's ideas have infiltrated the minds and souls of several generations and millions of people? What is clear is the rise of political Islam groups, groups that link politics intimately with Islam. These groups can often trace the roots of some of their ideas back to Qutb but they are most certainly not his direct disciples. He did not invent the idea or the term political Islam but he did much to shape and inspire those who would carry its banner. Most groups focus on the issues within their own countries instead of the global jihad Qutb envisioned. Yet jihad is becoming increasingly globalized and there are more and more groups that take advantage of modern technology to connect members around the world. The most visible example of this is Al-Qaeda and its terror network around the world. Many members of Al-Qaeda made their first jihads during the Soviet invasion and occupation of Afghanistan. This invasion stirred the emotions of

people all over the Muslim world and called them to come to the defense of their Muslim brothers. This is where the infamous Bin Laden first experienced jihad, a jihad that succeeded in driving the Soviets out of the country. The jihad against the Soviets in Afghanistan was seen as a legitimate jihad against an invading force and was supported not only by individuals but by the Saudi and American governments.<sup>14</sup>

Afghanistan was the beginning of a global jihad movement but it is not the only interpretation of Qutb's ideas of political Islam. There are groups throughout the Middle East and the Muslim world that advocate the combination of Islam and politics and they range from the traditional to the very modern and they are all working at creating societies that function with Islam as some part of the political framework. These groups are the less visible, at least to Westerners, legacy of Qutb in the Muslim world.<sup>15</sup>

## **VII Conclusion**

Where do these legacies leave the Middle East in the world scheme? How does the west take the information above and make policy decisions about the region? These questions need to be answered because the Middle East has become more and more important in world politics and relations and the trends in the region need to be understood. The world, especially the west, looks to the Middle East for the important oil resources it has. The world is concerned with the stability, or lack there of, of the area because it relies on the oil resources so heavily. The legacies of Qutb and Nasser are monumental in the area and the results can be dangerous to those who don't understand them or beneficial to those who understand them. Thus it is important to understand what these two men meant to the people of the Middle East and what they represented.

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<sup>14</sup> Wright.

<sup>15</sup> Fuller.

The great fervor of pan-Arab nationalism that Nasser stirred up died nearly as quickly as it arose. It was the great unifier of the youth of the region, the great dream during a time when the world was changing so rapidly. But people lost faith in this dream for several reasons. When the UAR collapsed it was clear that creating a united Arab world was much more difficult than dreaming of one. The 1967 War, when the state of Israel put an alliance of Arab states to shame, Egypt the most, many people were lost. And when the great leader himself died, the man whose personality and charisma held pan-Arabism together as it was ripping apart, the dream of pan-Arab nationalism had truly died. There were still those who tried to hold onto the dream and there was still the need for strong leadership in the region but we have yet to see someone fully take the place of Nasser in the heart of the Arab street. What took the place of pan-Arab thought, what people retreated to when they had lost faith in the secular systems, was Islam and the man who made the politicization of Islam popular, Sayyid Qutb.

Islam was there when modernization and secularization had failed. Yet some took Islam to a new extreme, took the ideas of Qutb and applied them to a world that had failed them. What would fix the Middle East after the Israeli assaults, a modern state that was at the same time steeped in religion and religious unity? What was talked about after the defeat was a unified Islamic world instead of a unified Arab world. More people started to identify most strongly with Islam instead of the idea of the Arab. There is still an Arab world and still an idea of Arab unity but it is not the glue that holds people together, not like it was in the 1950's and 60's. The unifying characteristic is Islam, not Arabism, and there is a much larger part of the world that identifies with Islam compared

to Arabism. So the ideas of Islamic unity and the Islamic state have taken root beyond the Middle East. The largest Islamic nation is not even inside the region.

So how does the knowledge of Qutb and Nasser help answer questions about the people and politics of the Middle East today? Both men still resonate through history and their names inspire passion and anger in equal amounts. But ultimately the region is ruled by things larger than men. Pan-Arab nationalism lived before Nasser but he was there in the right time and place, and with the right elements of his own, to try to make it work. He used the currents of a young Middle East with unattained dreams to inspire and unify the region, much like the Islamists do today.

The Middle East has to come to terms with its own identity not only as an Islamic region but also as one that, in the past and still today, strives to be modern and work within the world system. Cultures are constantly changing and cannot remain isolated from other cultures. Neither Qutb's Islam nor Nasser's secular pan-Arab view is more authentically Egyptian or Arab. It is up to the people, individually and collectively, to decide which one, or possibly neither one, works best. Will political Islam fall as quickly, with a swift blow to the head, as pan-Arab nationalism did? Probably not but it is to be seen how it will evolve and how people will use it or discard it when dealing with the issues that face every country.

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