

# Sayyid Qutub: The Architect of Contemporary Islamic Ideology

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## Abstract:

Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966) was a pivotal Egyptian writer, educator, and Islamic theorist whose ideas have profoundly impacted modern Islamic thought and political ideology. Known for critically examining contemporary Muslim societies and advocating for an Islamic resurgence, Qutb's works have inspired and polarized audiences globally. This article delves into his life, major works, and the lasting effects of his ideas on Islamic thought and movements.

A leading figure in the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood during the 1950s and 1960s, Qutb was executed in 1966 after being convicted of plotting to assassinate President Jamal 'Abd al-Nâsir. His influential book, *Ma'âlim fî al-Ṭarîq* (Milestones), published in 1964, remains a cornerstone of Qutbism. Born on October 9, 1906, Qutb authored 24 books and left 30 unpublished manuscripts. Notable works include *Fî Zilâl al-Qur'ân* and *Ma'âlim fî al-Ṭarîq*, which discuss the unique Qur'anic generation and the Islamic nation's path to leadership. Qutb argued that despite technological progress, the modern world is in a state of ignorance (jâhiliyyah).

**Keywords:** Sayyid Qutb, Islamic thought, Qutbism, Milestones, Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, Islamic resurgence, jahiliyyah, Qur'anic generation.

## Introduction

Sayyid Qutb was born in 1906 in the village of Musha in Upper Egypt. He rose to prominence as a literary critic, poet, and later, a leading figure in the Muslim Brotherhood. His transformation from a secular intellectual to a staunch Islamist was marked by his experiences in the United States and his subsequent imprisonment in Egypt. Qutb's most notable works, including "Social Justice in Islam" and "Milestones," articulate his vision for an Islamic society and critique the moral and spiritual decay he perceived in both Western and Muslim societies.

Sayyid graduated from the Dar Al-Uloom preparatory school in 1929 and joined the Dâr Al-'Ulûm College at the end of the same year. He studied theology, philosophy, Hebrew, the Syriac language and its comparison with the Arabic language, history, and political economy.

Sayyid was not satisfied with the curriculum at Dar Al-Uloom College despite the variety of subjects and their focus on religious sciences, literature, and language. His eye was on the College of Arts affiliated with Cairo University, and he expected it to be better in its curriculum than the College of Dar Al-Uloom.

One of the reasons for his dissatisfaction with the curriculum at Dar Al-Uloom was its lack of emphasis on teaching foreign languages. He made thought-provoking notes in which he suggested changes to the curriculum in a memorandum to the college administration while he was still a student. Sayyid was known among the students for his critical opinions, and he used to present his views on literature, criticism, and poetry with frankness, courage, and conviction.

Sayyid managed the literary and critical discussions at the college, where the literary debates and battles were sharp, violent, and harsh. Sayyid disagreed with his teachers on some literary and critical issues with politeness, respect, and appreciation. During his time at the college, he had many friends, including Asmaa Sa'ad Al-Lebanon, Muhammad Ibrahim Jabir, Bayed Al-Amrousi, and Abdul Aziz Ateeq. The atmosphere in the village prior to 1919 AD was changed and the house of Sayyid's family was the centre of many meetings held by the village's faces with his father and their conversations were whispered between them Sayyid was watching what was going on in the house with a keen eye, "and it seemed that there was a certain feeling brewing he remembers now that and he realizes that when he was a child he was expecting something in his sense, with these men, The secret meetings that take place in his house the doors are closed and the voices are whispering these meetings were throwing in his mind this mysterious thing that he does not know Mysterious, he does not know what it is nor how it will happen but something will happen and peace. He was the principal of the school gathered the students and gave them a fiery patriotic speech and he told them: The school will be closed for an indefinite period because he and his classmates are going to work in the revolution and this is the duty of every person. Sometimes it fell on his hand and he set out on the enthusiasm and immediacy of the revolution.

He wrote speeches and included verses of poetry – he thought they were well-balanced while they were worn out – and he delivered them in synagogues and mosques where the sacred revolution was blown into the crowd. So they began to listen to every call for the revolution and if he was a young child like him, he hardly exceeded.

Sayyid Qutub graduated from the Faculty of Dar al-Uloom in the summer of 1933 AD. He worked immediately after graduating in the Ministry's schools as a teacher. He was appointed as a teacher at the Dawoodiyyah Preparatory School... in Cairo on December 2, 1933 AD. After more than six years in the teaching profession, Sayyid moved to the Ministry of Education on 31/1940 AD. He was transferred to the Department of Translation and Statistics on 17/4/1940. Then he was transferred as an inspector of primary education on 7/1/1944. This transfer was due to the anger of the Minister of Education on him, due to his cultural, literary and political activity. Then he was returned to the General Culture Department in April – 1945 and he was its president is Ahmed Amin.

Sayyid remained in his work until the end of 1948 AD, when the planners in the ministry arranged for him a scientific mission to America, where he traveled to America on 3/11/1948 AD. His travel was on a scientific mission from the Ministry of Education, to specialize in education and the fundamentals of curricula. Sayyid stayed in America for about two years then he returned from it on 23/8/1950 AD. He was appointed as an assistant observer in the office of the Minister of Education. He was transferred to the southern educational district of Cairo in 10/1951 22/ AD He was returned to the Ministry on 17/5/1952 AD to work as an assistant observer in technical research and projects. Finally, he submitted his resignation from the Ministry 18/10/1952 AD.

Minister Ismail Al-Qabbani tried by various means to persuade Sayyid to abandon his resignation and return to work, and he delayed the resignation for more than a year, despite Sayyid's reversal of it. And in 13/1/1954 AD, the Council of Ministers in the revolutionary government approved Sayyid Qutub's resignation from the ministry from the date Sayyid submitted it to it, which is 18/10/1952 AD. It is not from the date of the Council's approval of it, and the decision of the Council of Ministers is harmful to Sayyid, and it was taken after the relations of the revolutionary governments with the Muslim Brotherhood had worsened. It was

Sayyid's service in the ministry from 2/12/1933 AD to 18/10/1952 AD. Their total was: eighteen years, ten months and sixteen days.<sup>1</sup>

Sayyid Qutub and the Educational Journey to America after the mid-forties, Sayyid turned towards Islam and preached to it. He also had an interest in the political, social and national issues that Egypt and its people lived through, and his literary style employed him to address these issues, meaning that he moved literature from the stage of 'literature for literature' ...to the stage of literature for the service of life and belief.

The disease after the second war, Egypt was living with Issues and problems, and suffering impasses and crises, at all levels and levels. Sayyid observed what the people were suffering from, looked at the basis and source of the calamity, and found it in the English colonialism that perched on the country, and then in its tools and aides in the country, such as the palace, the government, parties, feudal lords, major merchants, the owners of false claims, and the enemies of morals and virtues, and Sayyid was linked to the Prime Minister. In that time "Mahmoud Fahmy al-Nuqrashi is an old connection, so al-Nuqrashi worked on arranging a mission for him to America. His dispatch to America was with the aim of getting rid of him, protecting his articles, and his reform activity turned on this goal the desires of the three parties: the palace, the government, and his superiors in the Ministry of Education. So he arranged his travel to her. The reason for going to America to obtain a master's degree, and others thought that he was sent for a doctorate, he was working in the technical inspection in the Ministry of Education, they arranged for him what is consistent with this work – so they asked him to see the curricula and systems of education in America, as an expert in curricula, and a specialist in programs When Sayyid arrived in America, he spent months studying the English language – and when he mastered the English language, he began making field tours to universities, institutes, and schools, with the aim of acquainting himself with their curricula and educational systems, and getting acquainted with the programs and methods of teaching in them. His tour included several states, where he visited different cities, such as New York, Greeley, and sanfrancisco. Sayyid traveled several states of America. He visited several universities and institutes there, and learned about the curricula and teaching methods in them. And his time allowed him to make tours and visits to

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2. Qutb, S. (2000). In the Shade of the Qur'an (Fi Zilal al-Qur'an). Islamic Foundation. (Original work published 1951-1965).

the facilities of the cities in which he resided, and to look at their features and landscapes in their mountains and valleys. 2

He made field tours, examining samples and models of American society. Through these tours, he studied social life there, mingling with members of society, studying their lives, and discussing them. He sent his articles to various newspapers and magazines in Egypt and wrote personal letters to his brothers, relatives, and acquaintances. He resided in New York City and learned about the general nature of American life, referring to it with a unique term, "the huge workshop."

In New York, Al-Kitab magazine in Egypt published his work. He also stayed in Washington, DC, for a while, where he sent two Islamic critical letters to Tawfiq al-Hakim, which were published. Another city he stayed in briefly was Greeley, Colorado, where he completed his studies of the English language. During his stay there, he visited a church and sent a lofty treatise of faith from this city, which he called "Lights of Man." This work was also published by Al-Kitab magazine in Egypt.

He contributed to Al-Medina magazines, writing an article titled "The World is Born Disobedient," which was based on an ancient Egyptian legend.

He resided in California for a long time. He first lived in the state's capital, San Francisco. It seems that its atmosphere did not agree with his health, so he fell ill and was admitted to a hospital. There, he witnessed manifestations of joy and jubilation among the hospital staff at the martyrdom of Hassan Al-Banna, the General Guide of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt.

He left San Francisco and settled in a beautiful rural village nestled in an agricultural valley nearby, in the village of Palo Alto. Later, he resided in the city of San Diego and sent two letters from there to Abbas Khadr, which the latter published in his column "Literature and Art in a Week" in Al-Risalah magazine. He also sent some private messages to Egyptian magazines, which previous writers called "the Brotherhood messages" that he sent to his acquaintances, relatives, and brothers.

When Sayyid Qutub returned from America to Cairo on 8/19/20 AD, he appointed him as an "assistant observer in the office of the Minister of Education at the time – Ismail Al-Qabbani in

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3. Kepel, G. (2002). Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam. Harvard University Press.

the Ministry of Education. Then he was transferred to the “South Cairo” area on 22/10/1951 AD. He was reinstated to his first job as an “assistant observer” for technical research and projects, on 17/5/1952. After the continuous succession between him and the senior men of the ministry because of their standing in his direction and their rejection of his reformist views of an Islamic character, he submitted his resignation to the Minister of Education Ismail Al-Qabbânî on the date 17/10/1952 AD. Since he joined the job on December 2, 1933 AD, he deserves to be referred to retirement, after a full twenty years of service. Honourable Minister of Education Ismail Al-Qabbânî submitted his resignation, and he tried several

### **His Early Life and Education:**

Qutb's early education was steeped in traditional Islamic studies, but he also pursued modern education, earning a degree from Dar al-Ulum in Cairo. His initial career as an educator and literary critic involved extensive engagement with contemporary literary circles, where he advocated for literary realism and was a proponent of Egyptian and Arab cultural revival. Traditional Islamic Education: Sayyid Qutb was born in 1906 in Musha, Egypt. He memorized the Qur'an by age ten, reflecting a traditional Islamic upbringing that influenced his later works.

Local Schooling: He attended primary school in his village, receiving a combination of religious and secular education.

Formal Education-Dar al-Ulum, Cairo: Qutb moved to Cairo in 1929 to study at Dar al-Ulum, where he graduated in 1933 with a degree in education. This institution blended traditional Islamic studies with modern subjects, and Qutb became an accomplished literary critic during this time.<sup>3</sup>

Professional Career and Further Intellectual Development- Teaching and Educational Inspector: After graduating, Qutb worked as a teacher and educational inspector, traveling across Egypt and observing social and economic conditions, which later influenced his social critiques.

Literary Criticism: He gained prominence as a literary critic, publishing extensively on Arabic literature and establishing himself in Egypt's literary circles.

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4. Algar, H. (2000). Wahhabism: A Critical Essay. Islamic Publications International.

Study Abroad- United States (1948-1950): Qutb was sent to the U.S. by the Egyptian Ministry of Education to study the American educational system. He attended several institutions, including Wilson Teachers' College, Colorado State College of Education, and Stanford University.

Disillusionment with Western Culture: Qutb's experiences in the U.S. led to his disillusionment with Western society, which he viewed as morally decadent and materialistic. This experience significantly shifted his views towards a more radical stance against Western modernity and secularism.

Intellectual Transformation and Return to Egypt, Shift to Islamism: After returning to Egypt in 1950, Qutb's writings began to reflect a commitment to Islamic principles. He joined the Muslim Brotherhood and became a leading intellectual in the organization.

Prison and Radicalization: Qutb was arrested in 1954 and imprisoned under harsh conditions. During this time, he wrote influential works such as "In the Shade of the Qur'an" and "Milestones," which reflected his radicalization and critique of secular governance. Sayyid Qutb's education encompassed traditional Islamic studies and modern secular education. His experiences in the United States profoundly influenced his ideological shift towards radical Islamism. His educational background and professional experiences provided the foundation for his influential and controversial contributions to modern Islamic thought.<sup>4</sup>

Transformation and Ideological Development: Qutb's turning point came during his two-year stay in the United States (1948-1950), where he was deeply disillusioned by what he saw as the moral and spiritual bankruptcy of Western civilization. His observations during this period profoundly shaped his later works, which emphasized the need for a return to Islamic principles.

### **Major Works:**

Social Justice in Islam (1949): In "Social Justice in Islam," Qutb argued that true social justice could only be achieved through the implementation of Islamic principles. He critiqued both capitalism and socialism for their failures and proposed Islam as a holistic system capable of addressing human needs.

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1. El-Affendi, A. (1991). *Who Needs an Islamic State?* Grey Seal Books.

*In the Shade of the Qur'ân* (1951-1965): This multi-volume exegesis of the Qur'ân represents Qutb's most extensive work. It reflects his deepening Islamic convictions and his vision for a society governed by Sharia (Islamic law). The work is notable for its literary quality and its emphasis on the practical application of Qur'ânic principles.<sup>5</sup>

*Milestones* (1964): "Milestones" is perhaps Qutb's most controversial work. Written during his imprisonment, it calls for a revolutionary vanguard to establish an Islamic state and criticizes existing Muslim societies for their deviation from true Islamic values. Qutb's concept of *Jahiliyya* (pre-Islamic ignorance) is central to this work, positing that modern societies are in a state of ignorance akin to pre-Islamic times.

### **Influence and Legacy**

Qutb's execution in 1966 by the Nasser regime turned him into a martyr for many Islamists. His ideas have inspired a wide range of movements, from moderate reformists to radical groups advocating for violent jihad. Qutb's emphasis on the sovereignty of God (*Hakimiyya*) and the necessity of a vanguard to implement Sharia has been particularly influential in the ideological development of groups such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS. Sayyid Qutb's legacy is multifaceted, encompassing significant influence on modern Islamic thought, political movements, and the broader discourse on Islam and modernity. His works, especially "Milestones" and his Qur'ânic commentary "In the Shade of the Qur'ân," have left a lasting impact on both supporters and critics.

**Intellectual Influence- Revival of Islamic Thought:** Qutb is credited with revitalizing Islamic thought in the mid-20th century. His emphasis on returning to pure Islamic principles and his reinterpretation of concepts like *Jâhiliyya* and *Hakimiyya* has become central themes in contemporary Islamic discourse.

**Qur'ânic Exegesis:** His extensive commentary on the Qur'ân, "In the Shade of the Qur'ân," remains a key reference for many Muslims seeking to understand the text from a modern yet conservative perspective. It emphasizes the applicability of the Qur'an to all aspects of life, including politics and society.

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6. Shepard, W. E. (1996). *Sayyid Qutb and Islamic Activism: A Translation and Critical Analysis of Social Justice in Islam*. Brill.

Political Impact-Islamist Movements: Qutb's ideas have profoundly influenced various Islamist movements worldwide. The Muslim Brotherhood, which he was a part of, adopted many of his principles. His call for an Islamic state governed by Sharia law inspired groups seeking to implement Islamic governance.<sup>6</sup>

Radicalization and Jihad: More controversially, Qutb's writings, particularly "Milestones," have been interpreted by some as justifying violent jihad. Radical groups such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS have drawn on his works to legitimize their actions. While Qutb himself did not explicitly call for terrorism, his rhetoric about the need for a vanguard to lead an Islamic revolution has been co-opted by militant extremists.

Critique of Western Modernity- Anti-Western Sentiment: Qutb's critique of Western materialism, moral decadence, and cultural imperialism resonated with many Muslims who felt marginalized by colonialism and global Western dominance. His works provide a framework for resisting Western influence and advocating for cultural and religious authenticity.

Cultural and Moral Critique: His observations on the moral and cultural failings of the West continue to influence debates within the Muslim world about modernity, secularism, and Westernization.

Martyrdom and Symbolism- Execution and Martyrdom: Qutb's execution in 1966 by the Egyptian government turned him into a martyr for many Islamists. His death is often viewed as a symbol of resistance against oppressive regimes and the struggle for Islamic principles.

Inspirational Figure: For many, Qutb remains an inspirational figure who stood against tyranny and sought to re-establish Islam's role in public life. His life and works are frequently cited by those advocating for political and social change based on Islamic values.<sup>7</sup>

Academic and Scholarly Discourse- Subject of Study: Academically, Qutb's works have been extensively studied and analyzed. Scholars explore his impact on Islamic thought, his theological arguments, and his socio-political critiques. His writings are central to understanding the development of modern political Islam.

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7. Sedgwick, M. (2004). *Against the Modern World: Traditionalism and the Secret Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century*. Oxford University Press.

1. Ayoob, M. (2008). *The Many Faces of Political Islam: Religion and Politics in the Muslim World*. University of Michigan Press.

Criticism and Debate: Qutb's legacy is not without controversy. Critics argue that his ideas promote intolerance and extremism. Debates continue about the interpretation of his works and their implications for contemporary Muslim societies. Sayyid Qutb's legacy is enduring and complex. He is seen as a pioneer of modern Islamic thought, whose ideas have inspired both peaceful Islamist activism and radical militancy. His critique of Western modernity and advocacy for a return to authentic Islamic governance continue to influence a wide range of Islamic movements and intellectual debates. Understanding Qutb's legacy is crucial for grasping the dynamics of contemporary Islamic politics and thought.<sup>8</sup>

### **Conclusion:**

Sayyid Qutb remains a pivotal figure in modern Islamic thought. His works continue to be studied, debated, and utilized by diverse groups seeking to navigate the challenges of contemporary Muslim societies. While his ideas have sparked considerable controversy, Qutb's call for a return to Islamic principles as a solution to societal ills resonates with many Muslims around the world. The Islamic thinker Sayyid qutub was one of the most prominent Islamic scholars in the world, and his personality combined many talents that are rarely found in one man. Sayyid qutub was the most famous writer of the twentieth century. He wrote more than sixty books on social and Arabic studies. In addition to his breadth of knowledge, he was a caller for Islam, humanity, and security, so he founded a movement for the message of humanity. His writings express his breadth of knowledge and his determination to create a just and ideal society that enjoys freedom. It is the effect of using easy, simple language in both his writings and speeches. It reviewed the stages that Sayyed Qutb went through to reach the prestigious position he enjoyed in the Arabic language, literature, and Islamic culture. He began his academic career as a researcher in the world of literature, poetry, and criticism. Then he became a researcher in structural, aesthetic, and artistic studies of the Holy Qur'an. Then He became a researcher in general Islamic thought. He became a researcher in practical change thought.

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