

Sayyid Qutb: The Life and Legacy of a Radical Islamic Intellectual

By James Toth

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Sayyid Qutb is widely considered the guiding intellectual of radical Islam, with a direct line connecting him to Osama bin Laden. But Qutb has too often been treated maliciously or reductively-"the Philosopher of Islamic Terror," as Paul Berman famously put it in the *New York Times Magazine*.

James Toth offers an even-handed account of Sayyid Qutb and shows him to be a much more complex figure than the many one-dimensional portraits would have us believe. Qutb first gained notice as a novelist, literary critic, and poet but then turned to religious and political criticism aimed at the Egyptian government and Muslims he deemed insufficiently pious. After a two-year sojourn in the U.S., he returned to Egypt even more radicalized and joined the Muslim Brotherhood, eventually taking charge of its propaganda operation. When Brotherhood members were accused of assassinating Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser, the group was outlawed and Qutb imprisoned. He was executed in 1966, becoming the first martyr to the Islamist cause. Using an analytical approach that investigates without passing judgment, Toth traces the life and thought of Qutb, giving attention not only to his well-known *Signposts on the Road*, but also to his less-studied works like *Social Justice in Islam* and his 30-volume Qur'anic commentary, *In the Shade of the Qur'an*. Toth's aim is to give Qutb's ideas a fair hearing, to measure their impact, and to treat him like other intellectuals who inspire revolutions, however unpopular they may be.

In offering a more nuanced account of Qutb, one that moves beyond the cartoonish depictions of him as the evil genius lurking behind today's terrorists, *Sayyid Qutb* deepens our understanding of a central figure of radical Islam and, indeed, our understanding of radical Islam itself.

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Editorial Review

Review

"Toth provides an important analysis of one of the most influential Muslim thinkers of the twentieth century. He presents a portrait that includes Qutb's activities as a young Egyptian intellectual as well as his later works as an articulator of militant Islamic ideologies. A special strength of this study is that Toth provides a much-needed contextualization of Qutb within Egyptian intellectual life during the first two-thirds of the twentieth century."--John Voll, Professor of History, School of Foreign Service, Georgetown University

"Toth avoids the trap of automatic, simplistic condemnation and instead unveils the vexing, evolutionary and ultimately fascinating mind of Qutb. The book is a surprising and rounded read." --*Publishers Weekly*

"Toth provides an important analysis of one of the most influential Muslim thinkers of the twentieth century. He presents a portrait that includes Qutb's activities as a young Egyptian intellectual as well as his later works as an articulator of militant Islamic ideologies. A special strength of this study is that Toth provides a much-needed contextualization of Qutb within Egyptian intellectual life during the first two-thirds of the twentieth century." -- John Voll, Professor of History, School of Foreign Service, Georgetown University

"An evenhanded analysis of Qutb's philosophies in light of his experiences."
--*Library Journal*

"Excellent . . . hefty and impressively researched . . . [Toth's] book provides a useful précis of the main themes that Qutb explored and the terms he introduced. This is no small feat, considering that the Muslim Brotherhood's preeminent thinker penned countless articles and more than twenty books, one of them a six-volume commentary on the Koran."
--*New York Review of Books*

"In providing a balanced account of Qutb's ideas, [Toth] measures their impact, and approaches him like other intellectuals who inspire revolutions, however unpopular they may be to some. While Qutb is reviled by propagandists of a certain bend, Toth's work deepens the understanding of a central figure of a movement." --*Islamic Horizons*

"Toth presents a balanced, nuanced picture of the often-misunderstood Qutb..." --*Journal of Church and State*

About the Author

James Toth is an anthropologist who studies Egypt, the Arab world, and the wider Islamic community. He has taught at the American University of Cairo and at Northeastern University, and since 2011, has worked at New York University in Abu Dhabi. He is the author of *Rural Labor Movements in Egypt and Their Impact in the State, 1961-1992*.

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