



## Policy Paper

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# The relationship between Islam and ideology in relation to the political thought of Hassan al-Banna and Sayyid Qutb

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The aim of this essay is to show the way in which the political thought of Hassan al-Banna and Sayyid Qutb has influenced Islam's non-religious (mainly social and political, i.e. ideological) aspects. The concepts of religion and ideology will be quickly examined both in relation to Islam and to each other as well, al-Banna's and Qutb's political thought will be thematically analysed, while in the end a critique will take place.

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## Ideology and Religion: Islam as a political and social ideology

Ideology is one of the most abstract phenomena in the discourse of the ancient Greek, modern European and Islamic socio-political and economic thought. As David Minar points out it may have many uses: “to refer to those ideas that embody an orientation to normative and prescriptive issues”<sup>1</sup>; to be “more than the opinion of the moment, more than the isolated idea, more than the attitude ... [but] a psychological system”<sup>2</sup>; “to rationalise either life condition or action”<sup>3</sup>; to function “as a set of ideas that interpret an organisation to relevant audiences in the social world”<sup>4</sup>; “to refer to ideas expressed as verbal symbols and utilised in social relations for purposes of persuasion”<sup>5</sup>; finally, to function as “any thought or pattern of thought that is held by more than one individual, ... that is characteristic of the individuals comprising an identifiable social group, or ... that is characteristic of a specified kind of social group”<sup>6</sup>. In parallel, Willard Mullins has argued in favour of another five characteristics: “historical consciousness, action-orientation, cognitive power, evaluative capacity and logical coherence”<sup>7</sup>. As it will be cleared up later on, al-Banna’s and Qutb’s political thought gather up most of these characteristics.

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Ideology may extend to the whole range of human affairs. There are political, economic and social ideologies, while religions may be considered as ideologies too, since they are rarely limited to spirituality and faith. They usually have another aspect, which among other factors is made up of cultural systems, codes of morally proper social behaviour and stories of just and honoured rulers (which act as norms and patterns of the way power should be structured). Therefore, apart from the facts that Islam corresponds to most of these criteria mentioned above and, thus, that it is one of the most “ideological” religions, al-Banna and Qutb (together with many other Muslim thinkers) have taken it a step further by constructing ideologies which include both economic and (primarily) socio-political aspects. “Al-Banna believed that religion is but a part of Islam”<sup>8</sup>, while the rest of it concerned politics and society. For Qutb on the other hand, all of Islam is politics and religion at the same time; hence the two concepts should be viewed as one entity.

Islamic political thought was revived during the 19th century mainly because of the Muslim world’s gradual subordination to Europe’s superiority and the shock caused by that. Later, the collapse of the (Ottoman) Caliphate during the early 20th century, the need to redefine the context within which Muslim societies should be seen and the Western

Imperialism guided Islamist thinkers of that time (mainly Hassan al-Banna and Sayyid Qutb) to much more radical approaches, which were polemic towards the West and in favour of Islam as the only social and political system. Islam was considered as the only complete way of organising the state, the government and the society. Consequently, the belief in Allah's oneness was rationally connected to the levels of governance, law-making and ethics.

As Qutb himself argues,

*"one consequence of belief in the Oneness of Allah is that Allah Most High is the Lord and Sovereign of men not merely in their beliefs, concepts, consciences, and rituals of worship, but in their practical affairs... the Muslim believes that there is no true ruler above him except Allah, no legislator for him except Allah, no one except Allah to inform him concerning his relationships and connection with the universe, with other living creatures, and with one's fellow human beings. This is why the Muslim turns to Allah for guidance and legislation in every aspect of life, whether it is political governance, economic justice, personal behaviour, or the norms and standards of social intercourse"*<sup>9</sup>.

### **The Islamic state, government, society and the way to achieve them**

The radicalisation of both al-Banna's and Qutb's thought was partly expressed through their declaration in favour of the construction of an Islamic state in the image and likeness of the 7th century Caliphate under the Prophet Muhammad and the early Caliphs. This state should function according to the principles of the Qur'an and the Sunnah; hence Islam would be totally connected to the political, social and economic life of society. Even though the Caliphate seemed only to be the final (and not the short term) goal in both thinkers' ideas, it is still indicative of the confrontational narrative which had been developed against a materialistic, corrupted, imperialistic and decadent West, always unified against the Muslim world. Nevertheless, although Islam should provide the foundations for the modern Islamic state and despite the fact that the West is decadent, all of Europe's achievements in science, politics and economics should be incorporated<sup>10</sup>. Al-Banna thought that "even though Islam was over 1,300 years old, its general principles are sufficiently flexible for adaptation to any place or time"<sup>11</sup>.

Qutb was arguing in favour of the islamisation of politics too, but expressed through the different scheme of religious and political sovereignty. Since Islam is the only truly monotheistic religion and, since religion and politics are one,

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it is also the only way of organising politics. Sovereignty is used in Qutb's philosophy the way it appears in the phrase "give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's". Thus, for Qutb, Allah's Oneness does not only have a religious dimension, but a sociological one as well. It should be kept in every single field of a society's and an individual's life. A truly monotheist person will never accept to replace Allah with another deity, which, in the case of politics, is the state. In other words, nothing belongs to Caesar (or there is no Caesar at all) and everything belongs to Allah. To submit to anyone's (other than Allah's) authority and to exercise authority over another is "a usurpation of God's sovereignty on earth"<sup>12</sup>, or Jahiliyyah. Therefore, a society should only be organised according to Allah and his law.

None of the two thinkers have rejected or argued in favour of a more specific political system (democracy, monarchy etc.). Instead, their interest clustered around the necessity of the implementation of the Islamic law. Al-Banna believed that

*"Islam requires the establishment of a government to prevent anarchy, but does not stipulate any particular form of government. Rather, it lays down three basic principles. First the ruler is responsible to God and the people, indeed he is considered a servant of the people. Second, the Muslim nation must act in a unified manner because brotherhood among believers is a principle of faith. Third, the Muslim nation has the right to monitor the ruler's actions, to give advice to the ruler, and to ensure that its will is respected. Since these are such broad principles, Islamic states can take many forms, including a constitutional parliamentary democracy"<sup>13</sup>.*

Furthermore, a proper Islamic government should protect the people, make them respect the (Islamic) law, spread education, ensure that (Islamic) morality is strengthened, promote public health, protect public and private property, defend the Muslim nation, provide jobs and gradually convert all people to true Islam<sup>14</sup>. Any government which is not "Islamic" enough should accept advice and guidance from its people, whereas if this proves ineffective, it should be overthrown<sup>15</sup>. Therefore, the way for an Islamic state to be attained is from bottom up. The means to restore true Islamism (either to non-pious Muslims or to non-Muslims) is a non-coercive kind of Jihad.

Al-Banna rejected the multiparty system, since it breaks the unity of the Umma. If people support, vote for or act through different political parties, then they are acting in different ways, thus not as a whole. Instead, a single party was necessary, in order to ensure the unity of the Umma.

Elections should exist, but eligibility criteria should be applied, restricting candidacy to all but experts in religious law and public affairs<sup>16</sup>. The unity of the people is promoted through patriotism and nationalism<sup>17</sup>. Economic nationalism is also encouraged, as a means to construct a proper Islamic economy, in which companies should belong to citizens of the country, while people “would spend for socially beneficial purposes and donate to charities”<sup>18</sup>.

Again, Qutb was not far away from al-Banna’s thought, even though he expressed his ideas in a much more manichaeist way: there are only two possible ways of organising (political, social, economic and religious) life, the one close to Allah and the one away from him. More specifically,

*“there are only two possibilities for the life of a people, no matter in what time and place they live. There are the state of guidance or the state of error, whatever form the error may take; the state of truth or the state of falsehood, whatever may be the varieties of falsehood; the state of light or the state of darkness, regardless of following whims, no matter what varieties of whims there may be; the state of Islam or the state of jahiliyyah; and the state of belief or the state of unbelief, of whatever kind. People live either according to Islam, following it as a way of life and a socio-political life, or else in the state of unbelief, jahiliyyah, whim, darkness, falsehood, and error”<sup>19</sup>.*

When a society is characterised by Jahiliyyah, then the only path a loyal Muslim should follow is to overthrow it and replace it with a pure Islamic society. This will be achieved through Jihad, which, even if it may be transiently used for defensive purposes, it should never be interpreted in that way since its essence is “to spread the message of Islam throughout the world”<sup>20</sup>, “to establish God’s authority in the earth; to arrange human affairs according to the true guidance provided by God; to abolish all the Satanic forces and Satanic systems of life; to end the lordship of one man over others since all men are creatures of God and no one has the authority to make them his servants or to make arbitrary laws for them”<sup>21</sup>. Furthermore, Jihad should not be considered as a political tool, but on the contrary, as an action of “testifying, witnessing, and manifesting faith”<sup>22</sup>.

## Critique

Even though Hassan al-Banna and Sayyid Qutb are among the most important figures in contemporary Arabic political thought, there are certain weak points and controversies in their systems of ideas. In the case of al-Banna, they can be justified mainly by the fact that his thought developed

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as a result of his multiple, contradictory needs: to mobilise his supporters in order to transform Muslim Brotherhood to a mass social and political movement, to be established as one of the most important Muslim thinkers of his era, to answer to the problems Egypt was facing in the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s, and to succeed in being considered as the most important political representative of the contemporary movement of Islamism. Qutb on the other hand was mainly an activist, which may explain the weak points, since he had the "luxury" of never having to make decisions. His role was not as multidimensional as al-Banna's, while the time he spent imprisoned should definitely be recognised as a decisive factor.

Al-Banna's system of Islamic governance, which clustered around the idea of a government accountable to the people, as well as his declaration in favour of a constitutional parliamentary democracy is at odds both with his goal of a state conforming to the standards of the 7th century Islamic Caliphate and his rejection of a multi-party system. A government cannot answer to, accept advice from and, much more, be overthrown by the people when the only politically active members of the Islamic polity seem not to be them, but instead the experts in religious law and public affairs. Apart from the issue of who is going to judge who is an expert in such matters, the unity of the Umma, on which the rejection of the multi-party system is based, is broken by this very distinction between experts and non-experts. Another factor weakening this unity is the important role that al-Banna believed nationalism and patriotism (both economic and political) should play. At the same time, his discourse was centred too much on Egypt, despite the goal of the Islamic Caliphate, i.e. a state including all Muslims. Finally, even though al-Banna has strongly supported the rights of the religious minorities in the Islamic polity, he has also declared that all people should gradually be converted to Islam through Jihad, which is obviously contradicting. The fact that Jihad should not be violent may on the one hand be a sign of respect to the other people's identity, but on the other hand it may show a certain level of incompatibility between the goal and the means.

Jihad in Qutb is utterly connected to his controversial claim that his theories will lead to the liberation of all people, while at the same time he does not recognise to them the right not to follow the path he thinks as correct. Societies and individuals are separated on a manichaeist way: those who live by Allah's Oneness and those who do not. The former category, characterised by piousness, will use Jihad against the latter one, characterised by jahiliyyah. Furthermore, Qutb

believes in the absence of a state, as it would offend the Oneness of Allah, but he never explains what will replace the state. He declares his antithesis to anyone submitting to anyone's authority, as well as to anyone exerting power over anyone, as this is a violation of Allah's role, but he does not elaborate (in practical terms) on how an elementary level of social and political organisation will be achieved. According to Foucault, a society cannot exist without power relations<sup>23</sup>. After all, how will Jihad be carried out, if not using the already existing structures of a stable mechanism, such as the state: individually?

All in all, Qutb's political philosophy is more of a sterile critique to all other forms of governance and social organisation, praising only one which is not thoroughly analysed. If he had not declared that politics and religion should be viewed as one, it could have been said that, since Islam is not only politics, but a religion as well, a detailed political theory should not be expected. Therefore, Qutb's thought appears to be politically inapplicable.

## Conclusion

The aim of this essay was to present the ideological aspects of Islam as seen through the political thought of Hassan al-Banna and Sayyid Qutb. Both of them have strongly influenced Islam's relationship to ideology. This may be attested by the fact that they have radicalised the Islamic politics, at least in relation to their two major predecessors of the 19th century, Muhammad Abduh and Jamal al-Afghani, who have been characterised as liberals many times. The former's differentiation from the latter has set the theoretical basis for the several different versions of political Islam and Islamism appearing during the rest of the 20th and early 21st century. The two thinkers have virtually inspired every Sunni Islamist group now in existence. Furthermore, for the past 60 to 70 years, the political and social systems in the Arab and Islamic world were (and are) based only partly to the classical (but mostly Western) separation between Left and Right. The several versions of the political Islam and secularism constitute one of the most important levels of separation which slip into the modern politics of the Muslim world. Finally, the endurance of the Muslim Brotherhood, an organisation based on the basic principles of al-Banna (who created it) and Qutb (who supported it actively) shows the parallel endurance of the concepts and the structure of their thought.

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# NOTES

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20. Op. Cit. (endnote No. 9), Qutb, Sayyid, p. 62
21. Op. Cit. (endnote No. 9), Qutb, Sayyid, p. 70
22. Op. Cit. (endnote No. 12), Bergesen, Albert (ed.), p. 28
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