Al-Noor, The Boston College Undergraduate Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies Journal, aims to: ✦ Facilitate a nonpartisan, unbiased conversation within the Boston College community and beyond about the Middle East. ✦ Provide a medium for students to publish research on the Middle East and Islam. ✦ Promote diverse opinions and present a comprehensive view of the myriad of cultures, histories, and perspectives that comprise the Middle East. ✦ Be considerate of the complexity of the region while pursuing the utmost objectivity.
Cover Photo: Souk of Kuwait by Daniel (Jaehyung) Lee.

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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Reflecting upon the content included in this issue of Al-Noor, we are reminded of the importance of exchange, be it of culture, intelligence, ideas, or resources. Given its geopolitical, historical, and social influence, the Middle East has always been a bastion of crossover. This semester, our articles illuminate the significance of both internal exchange within the region and external interactions between the Middle East and the rest of the world.

For this semester’s interview, Al-Noor staff sat down with Charles Butterworth, Professor Emeritus of Government and Politics at the University of Maryland, College Park. In his enlightening discussion of pre-modern Islamic political philosophy, particularly focusing on the works of Alfarabi, Butterworth addresses modern problems of the Islamic world and draws valuable connections from these writers of the past.

In Cycle of Trauma: Syria’s History and Today’s Civil War, Kelly Laughlin challenges mainstream understandings of factions in the Syrian Civil War. Instead, she presents the nuances of Syrian social dynamics, emphasizing the need to manage divisions without exploitation or oppression.

In Covert Failure: U.S Intelligence Prior to the Iranian Revolution, Julie Orenstein investigates the activities of the American Intelligence Community leading up to the overthrow of the Iranian shah. She argues that misinterpretation of intelligence and a lack of understanding of the situation on the ground prevented American analysts from accurately predicting events during the revolution.

In this issue’s photo essay, A Walk through the Marketplace: Souqs of the Arabian Gulf, Daniel Lee explores the Souq Al-Mubarakya of Kuwait City and Souq Waqif in Doha, Qatar. In his pictures, he captures the essence, colors, and beauty of bazaars in these cities of Arab Gulf countries.

In The 1973 “Oil Weapon”: Turning a Regional Conflict into a Global Crisis, Cristina Martin details the effects of the 1973 oil embargo, analyzing the method in which OPEC utilized a vital natural resource to influence international politics. She then outlines the effects of the embargo on the Western world and Japan.

In The Islam of Sayyid Qutb: A Comparison to Classical Islamic Thought, Megan Stewart examines the life of Sayyid Qutb and the influence of his works within radicalized Islamist views. She contends that Qutb’s ideas are not based on religious laws set forth by the Qur’an and that radicalized interpretations of Islam must be analyzed critically.

Lastly, each copy of Al-Noor is the product of countless hours put in by our staff and advisors. We would like to express our gratitude to all of our editors who work tirelessly to deliver only the highest quality finished publication. In particular, we would like to thank our predecessor Paul Davey for his dedication over the past four years.

On behalf of our dedicated staff, we would like to thank you for your continued readership and support. It is immensely rewarding to watch Al-Noor be shipped out to readers around the world. We hope you will enjoy this issue.

As always, comments, questions, and suggestions are welcome at eic@alnoorjournal.org.

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Medieval Islamic Philosophy for the Modern World
An Interview with Charles Butterworth

Al-Noor Staff
Before Charles Butterworth began his work, there was not much of a field of scholarly research in Islamic philosophy. That has changed in the last half-century because of Dr. Butterworth’s dedication and ingenuity in studying pre-modern Islamic philosophers, including Alfarabi, Al-Razi, and Averroes. In doing so, Dr. Butterworth has introduced the Western world to some philosophic masterpieces for the first time and has encouraged an active appreciation of an often-misunderstood school of thought. He received his B.A. from Michigan State University. In addition, he studied at the University of Ayn Shams in Egypt and received a Doctorate in Philosophy from the University of Nancy in France before obtaining his Ph.D. in political science from the University of Chicago. He served for several years as the Principal Investigator for the Project in Medieval Islamic Logic in Cairo with sponsorship from the Smithsonian Institute.
Dr. Butterworth also served for a period as president of the American Council for the Study of Islamic Societies. He taught for most of his career at the University of Maryland, College Park, where he is currently Professor Emeritus of Government and Politics.

Dr. Butterworth has traveled extensively throughout the Islamic world, and he has lived in most Arabic speaking countries. In his work, he has completed original translations of works by Rousseau in addition to the translations he has done for texts of Islamic political philosophers. He has written critical editions of most of the Middle Commentaries written by Averroes on Aristotle's logic and has published studies of different aspects of the political teachings of all of these writers in ancient and contemporary terms.

What lead you to first become interested in Islamic political philosophy?

**Butterworth:** When I was at the University of Chicago, I had the pleasure of studying with Leo Strauss, and one day in class he mentioned that in order to understand the history of philosophy, one really had to understand what happened in the Medieval Period, but not only Latin/Christian philosophy, also Arabic/Islamic and Hebrew/Jewish, so one thing led to another and I decided to study Arabic and see if that was accurate. I think it was. I thought it was going to be a detour of a couple of years, and it’s turned out to be a detour, more or less, of a lifetime, but it’s a huge, rich world that we really do need to know about.

Do you feel that the study of Islamic political philosophy has become more popular since that time?

**Butterworth:** I think that it’s certainly become more popular since that time. It’s not simply popular. What’s happened in our time is that we’ve seen that there are a number of very interesting younger scholars who are doing Arabic/Islamic philosophy. You have somebody here at Boston College—James Morris—who specializes in Persia or Iran and studies Persian mystical philosophy or mysticism, so you have people involved in all sorts of different aspects of studying this culture—this very wide culture—and I’m fascinated every time I open up a journal to see how many new voices there are of people coming along and doing this work.

What did you study during your time at the University of Chicago?

**Butterworth:** I went to the University of Chicago to study political philosophy with Leo Strauss, and because of this detour towards Arabic/Islamic philosophy, I then began to work with Muhsin Mahdi, who later ended up teaching at Harvard. While at Chicago, my work was mainly with Mahdi, but there was a woman in the Oriental Institute by the name of Nahbia Abbott, who was a remarkably disciplined historian of the early Islamic period and she wrote a lot of articles on how papyrus turned into paper. Things started being written on papyrus, and later as paper became more the material to be used for writing, that was used. Then there were other people—it was a rich department, even in those days—Jaroslav Stetkevych, who did poetry and literature. A fellow by the name of Norman Golb, who was very interested in Judeo-Arabic, the Arabic language written in Hebrew letters used by many Jewish scholars throughout the years, and I worked closely with him as well. So, I had a lot of varied training at the University.

Then, after you left the University, what experiences did you have that you particularly enjoyed or found rewarding?

**Butterworth:** It’s been a great pleasure to be able
to travel a lot to the Middle East over the years. I spent a year doing fieldwork research in Egypt when I was writing my dissertation, and that opened me to a whole new world of contacts and possible ventures. Eventually, after leaving the University of Chicago and becoming a young assistant professor, I was able to persuade the Smithsonian Institution that paper was just as important an artifact as shards. The Smithsonian was giving very generous grants of money to people doing pieces of pottery—trying to figure out cultural traces through pottery, but they had never considered that maybe manuscripts would be another way to do this. I wrote a persuasive grant application to study medieval Arabic logic and started a whole program on that in Cairo, which lasted six or seven years. In my case, I went back and forth. I used my summer and winter break time to go to Egypt and work on manuscripts—editing them and later translating them. And then also, from that, all sorts of other projects developed. So, I have had the pleasure of traveling through almost all of the Arab world and also through Persia, back before the Khomeini revolution.

For some of the texts that you have written about, you are one of the first persons to translate them, or you translate them in unique ways. What is your process for translating these often confusing Arabic texts?

Butterworth: It’s a learning experience. Something that used to happen and was well known for scholars of Greek or scholars of Latin, but wasn’t well known for the rest of us, was that someone working on a text used to make a working translation, to help himself or herself go through the text. I guess what I have done is the same sort of thing, but then tried to come up with a finished product, something that is readable in English. As I have been doing this, the discovery that I have made for myself is how nuanced the language can be. Words do not always mean the same thing. It’s good to try to translate the same Arabic word by the same English word, and to use one English word for one Arabic word. You sometimes can’t do that, but should try to keep to that rule as much as possible. Then, to think how in Arabic—as in English and many other languages—the same word used in a different context can have a different meaning. So, you can use that word, but you have to understand that it takes on a nuance. Essentially, this exercise has become a marvelous learning tool to learn for myself—and hopefully to pass onto others—how a person thinks—how the author thinks, and then helps us to think through that author’s thought process.

What was the state of philosophy in Islam prior to Alfarabi’s writings?

Butterworth: Roughly speaking, he is the third person in the Arabic/Islamic world to write in a philosophic manner. You have al-Kindi, you have al-Razi, and then you have Alfarabi. Al-Kindi is about fifty to sixty years older than Alfarabi. Al-Razi is about five to six years older than he is. What they did, compared to what Alfarabi did, is really very little. Al-Kindi is primarily interested in talking about the books that had been discovered from the Greek tradition, especially Aristotle’s books, trying to place them in a context.
Then, he wrote a long study of part of the *Metaphysics*, especially that having to do with the unmoved mover—that having to do with God. Al-Razi wrote a number of different treatises. He was especially interested in medicine. As far as philosophy goes, his most famous contribution was a defense of his own life patterned after Socrates’s defense of his life—a kind of Apology for what he—Al-Razi—was doing, patterned after what Socrates had for the Athenian people at his own trial. Alfarabi comes along with something entirely different, and seems to be convinced from the outset that what had been known as philosophy was in disarray. It was not understood, neglected, and needed to be reinvigorated. So, he sought to approach it from a new perspective and to bring back philosophy the way it had been understood both by Plato and Aristotle, and present it to the Arabic-speaking people. What is so interesting about that is that he was a non-Arab. His mother-tongue was either Dari or Pashtu, a dialect of Persian, but he learned Arabic, taught in Arabic, and understood the need to reinvigorate philosophy for Arabic speakers.

*Butterworth:* I don’t think that there was a problem during his time period. There is discussion going on, there’s certainly theological and juridical investigations, but there’s also a notion that we, the jurists, or we, the theologians, will stay doing what we’re doing, and not a sense that they have to smash anybody who disagrees with them. That comes later, especially with Al-Ghazali, but during Alfarabi’s time period, there’s either elation about all the new learning that’s coming forth—and it’s probably that more than anything else—or there’s some kind of reason for having a laissez faire attitude; letting people study what they want. So he has no pressure on that square, to the best of my knowledge.

*Butterworth:* I’ve never thought of it that way. There’s probably something there. Especially Maimonides; what he’s interested in is trying to understand Aristotle better, and Alfarabi helps him to do that. Maimonides is very aware of the different schools of theology in Islam. The juridical schools are not anything he has to be concerned with, as a non-Muslim, he has to worry only about the religious school, the place that he’s living, and make sure he doesn’t go against it, juridically speaking. So he doesn’t get into these questions of the dialogues, the debates that are going on among the different juridical schools. And as far as the theologians go, in *The Guide*, Maimonides has no patience at all for the arguments that they’re engaged in. But he is intrigued by what he learns from Alfarabi, because Alfarabi helps him see much clearer what’s going on. The same thing’s true for Averroes. I don’t know Thomas well enough to know what he says about Alfarabi, but that might well be what’s going on for Thomas. He doesn’t have to worry about defending the faith against Alfarabi; he can learn from Alfarabi.

*Butterworth:* Do you think that borrowing between faiths and cultures is lacking today? Do you think that an interchange similar to that between these early philosophers would be possible today?

*Butterworth:* As far as the dialogue among faiths, yes. There was this disastrous speech that Pope Benedict gave at Regensburg that angered the Muslims very, very much. It angered people who understand Islam a great deal. It was needlessly offensive. But it gave rise to a very interesting dialogue. And that dialogue is still going on. It also, in one way or another, prompted a lot of reaching out from Christians to Muslims and from Muslims to Christians. Sadly enough, there is not that much going on with respect to Muslim-Jewish or Jewish-Muslim understanding. A lot of that has to do with Israel and the Palestinian question. So the short answer: there is a lot going on and especially here in the United States, there is a great deal going on, but elsewhere as well. In the UK, to a certain extent, until these tragedies of January in
“I would love to see Egyptians devoting themselves to reading Alfarabi and understanding the different political regimes that he sketches out and learning that the infatuation they now have with Field Marshal Al-Sisi is probably misplaced.”

France and in Germany, and now you’re beginning to see people backing away from that and starting to become biased towards Islam.

Besides direct theological dialogue, do you see other influences between philosophers, similar to how Maimonides and others learned from the Islamic philosophical tradition to advance thinking in their own religious tradition? Do you see that borrowing as happening or being possible?

Butterworth: I don’t see that happening on a large scale, but I am intrigued to see how many Westerners of Christian background are trying to use the philosophers of Islam to understand philosophic questions better. On one level it’s just a simple matter of becoming culturally aware of something different, but then it goes deeper. And there really are important questions about the way we live with one another that grow out of that beginning discourse, the whole anti-colonialist impetus that you see or read about today. We in the United States who don’t have to worry about people from our colonies coming back can try to understand the UK, France, Germany, Holland and their problems much better. A few people there who have this awareness of the Middle East are also trying to help their fellow citizens do that. So there’s a very lively debate going on. Right now it looks like the biased folks are getting the upper hand. Hopefully that’s just going to be for the immediate future and pass away.

There have been a lot of Christian and Jewish philosophers and theologians who appreciate Alfarabi and his philosophy, but many in the Islamic tradition see it as conflicting with important religious beliefs. Could you talk about what ways that is so and how those differences might become palatable to the Islamic tradition?

Butterworth: It’s something you find in every religious tradition, the true believer who wants to stick to them, the text, the revealed text and nothing but the text of the sacred scriptures and the writings that derive from them. Alas, in the Islamic world, there is a great deal of that kind of closed mindedness that prevails, but because of education and because of the widespread emphasis on learning more about the other, that is being nibbled away. Chunks are being broken off of that, and there’s an openness coming. What I’ve grown up with and have seen among people living in the Arab/Muslim world, is either a kind of mindless secularism among people, and therefore, a willingness to devote themselves to the here and now. That’s not very interesting. Or a very blinkered religious faith that doesn’t want to consider other possibilities. That latter is being challenged because we’re now learning so much more by interaction. I realize there’s one problem for what I’m saying, and that is this Islamic State and all the nonsense and all the horrible acts that are coming from it and the notion that young people, who have grown up in the West, feel an attraction to go and join it. That’s a problem. We’re going to have to overcome that. Today I don’t see a solution, but I find it hard to think that infatuation with what they stand for and what they’re doing, can prevail. It’s abhorred action, and I think people will come to their senses.

What do you think that contemporary Muslims can learn from the teachings of Alfarabi or from the tradition of Islamic political philosophy?
Butterworth: To understand their world better, and above all, I would love to see Egyptians devoting themselves to reading Alfarabi and understanding the different kinds of regimes that he sketches out in the Political Regime and learning that the infatuation they now seem to have with Field Marshal Al-Sisi is probably misplaced. Al-Sisi is a tyrant. People need to see that. I do not that think that the judgment about Morsi, the former president, is a correct judgment. I think that he was an incompetent president that made many mistakes, but I do not think for a moment that he was corrupt or that he was planning to bring about an end of the state and install a caliphate. I think that's a falsehood. So, they could learn something like that. We can't really talk about Syria. It's in shambles. It would be delightful to have a discussion with some of the mullahs in Iran, could they read Alfarabi and talk about his writings. There was a president of Iran, Mohammed Khatami, who was—who is—very conversant with Alfarabi and who seems to have profited from that. He's no longer in power, no longer has any influence, but there are others like him, and that's really a thriving society with lots of interesting, intelligent, educated people, whom hopefully we'll be able to get to know as relationships get better. And I think you could go around and look at different Arab [countries]. Jordan, which has been sleeping for a long time, seems to be waking up to a new place in the world, and, of course, Lebanon represents something very special. All of North Africa, especially Morocco and Tunisia, is very promising places. So, there is something, and what's fascinating in Tunisia and in Morocco, there's an indigenous interest in philosophy among university students and teachers that is unlike anything else elsewhere in the Arab world, so that's very promising.

Would you say, other than Tunisia and Morroco, that these texts aren't being as widely discussed and grappled with as they could be?

Butterworth: Tunisia, Morocco, Lebanon, and Iran to a great extent seem to be the places of intellectual effervescence. Egypt, of course, even today, seems to be of an important place. It's just that the tyranny that Egyptians are living under is making itself felt. When you watch television, Egyptian television, you see that people are not speaking [their minds]—well, who knows whether they're speaking their minds, but too many people are saying the same things. It looks like a party line. It looks like they're trying to please the ruler.

What are the roots of Alfarabi's philosophy? He adopts many of his teachings from ancient Greek texts, but what methods and lessons does he adopt, in particular, and why does he find them valuable?

Butterworth: If I understand Alfarabi correctly, philosophy came to fruition in Greece at the time of Plato and Aristotle. It reached a very high point with Plato, and it reached an even higher point with Aristotle. I mean there is a very definite gradation there. That was philosophy at its best, since then there has been a degradation, and he's trying to reverse that—stop it, reverse the trend, and get a restoration of philosophy back in place. A lot of it has to do with understanding what the logical arts—what we can

“If I understand Alfarabi correctly, philosophy came to fruition in Greece at the time of Plato and Aristotle. It reached a high point with Plato, and it reached an even higher point with Aristotle.”
learn from the different parts of logic—and how to express our thoughts in correct Arabic. We don't need to be parrots who imitate sounds, we can work our way through things, and he's very willing to show us how to do that. He shows us by doing it himself, rather than saying look here, look here, look here. He does it, and, what it seems to me, his procedure is a dialectical procedure—you take the opinions that are dominant today, in the day you're living, and you try to look at what they rest on and you see whether those premises are sound or not sound and then point to other alternatives.

He differs in one remarkable way that ought to open our minds to all sorts of other possibilities. For both Plato and for Aristotle the best regime could be no big than a city—that was the size. Alfarabi thinks there are three kinds of regimes: a city, a nation, and an association of nations; in other words something that looks like the Islamic empire that he knows. He seems to suggest that this new possibility is viable, if we can only figure out how to make it work. That's a major difference.

For the rest of it, it's a matter of human beings haven't changed so what makes a human being virtuous, or what makes a human being fully human, hasn't really changed. So we just have to adapt those virtues to the different society that we are working with or the demands of the day. But it seems that there is nothing to be changed there, there is no reason for innovation.

This is a fascinating suggestion, because after all, like Christianity, Islam is a proselytizing religion. There is a promise of the whole world becoming Muslim, just as there is a promise of the whole world becoming Christian, and one has to think through with Alfarabi what the conditions for that are. It might be, that that is not such a good idea after all that variety is better than homogeneity. But he puts that out there and makes the reader think with him about the problems of the text about the way to do it and the problems that are along the path.
Cycle of Trauma

Syria’s History and Today’s Civil War

Kelly Laughlin

Kelly Laughlin is a fourth year student at the University of Virginia. She studied abroad in Amman, Jordan during the summer of 2014 and became acutely aware of the Syrian refugee crisis and the immeasurable strain it has placed on the region. Since returning home, she has worked with refugee communities living near UVA’s campus and in her hometown of Denver, Colorado. After graduation, Kelly plans to move to Austin, Texas, where she has accepted a position with a consulting firm, hoping to work extensively in their non-profit division.
As the Syrian Civil War continues to descend further into chaos and confusion, searching for root causes or clear solutions to the conflict becomes increasingly agonizing, frustrating, and seemingly hopeless. Bashar al-Assad’s regime has effectively created a smoke screen in the country, distorting reality and instituting extreme fear. As Nadim Shehadi describes, “It’s a mind game. If you want to beat Assad, you have to disassociate yourself from his make-believe reality just as he has disassociated himself from everyone else’s.” Beyond his aptitude for psychological manipulation, Assad has allegedly engaged in a variety of oppressive actions against opposition to his rule, according to various firsthand accounts.
In Revolt in Syria: Eye-witness to the Uprising by Stephen Starr and A Woman in the Crossfire by Samar Yazbek, the authors discuss the shabiha, or government-backed, ‘Alawite gangs. The word shabiha is related to the Arabic word for ghosts, insinuating that the armed groups are responsible for making individuals disappear. Starr and Yazbek accuse the regime of arming ‘Alawites who are not members of these gangs, and then inspiring extreme paranoia, causing them to lash out against other religious sects if they feel threatened. Other observers of Syria argue against these observations, contending that the sectarian divides were already prominent problems in the society.

The Assad family did not create the tension between religious sects in Syria since coming to power in 1970, but they did manipulate existing divisions that were vulnerable to exploitation. In this way, they perpetuated a cycle of trauma that is present throughout Syria's history. This paper will demonstrate how Syria has witnessed periods of increased unity, followed by systemic breakdown into extreme discontent and conflict. The last century of Syrian history reveals the complicated nature of the country's religious, ethnic, and cultural composition. In addition to the ‘Alawi minority, who adhere to an offshoot of Shi’a Twelver Islam and comprise approximately 12% of the current Syrian population, Druze and Kurdish minorities contribute their own narratives to the nation's fabric. The country's complex past illustrates a different type of legitimacy for the Syrian opposition from what is usually portrayed by the media, which mainly focuses on the Sunni-'Alawi divide. History shows that the current conflict involves more elements than a dichotomous battle between a Sunni majority and an ‘Alawi minority.

**The French Mandate and the Great Revolt**

Before the Assad family took power in Syria, several important events occurred that would influence the makeup of the regime and the Syrian people. The origins of the sectarian divide in Syria date back to the Ottoman period due to the geographic separation of ‘Alawites from the cities of Aleppo and Damascus. These cities were more connected to the empire's center than that isolated, coastal mountain regions, which were home to the four main ‘Alawite tribes until the early 20th century. Economic inequality between ‘Alawites and Sunnis began as early as the sixteenth century because the ‘Alawi peasants of the plains had been the principal food producers of the Latakia region for several centuries. After the Ottoman Empire fell in the early 20th century, the country experienced a power vacuum. The ‘Alawites viewed this as an opportunity to gain autonomy in the region of Jabal al-Nusayriya, where they comprised 62% of the population.

Eventually, the ‘Alawites gained influence under the French Mandate as they received autonomy from the centralized state and became overrepresented in the army. Yet, the ‘Alawites initially created problems for the French by staging revolts and maintaining their independent bands of fighters during the first year of the occupation because it was not immediately clear how the minority group would benefit from French rule. In October 1918 when Ottoman Turkish officials had completely abandoned the port of Latakia, a predominantly ‘Alawite city, Sunni Muslim notables formed a provisional government, which proclaimed allegiance to the Sunni nationalist government in Damascus. A month later, the first French military detachment reached Latakia from Tripoli, Algeria and

“History shows that the current conflict involves more elements than a dichotomous battle between a Sunni majority and an ‘Alawi minority.”
dismissed the new government.⁸

Therefore, the French interfered with the northern coastal strip of Syria more than two years before they succeeded in occupying the interior, when the French Mandate officially began in 1920.⁹ Following the demise of the Sunni provisional government, Shaykh Salih al-‘Ali, an ‘Alawite tribal chief in the bordering district of Tartus, organized resistance to French rule. He had previously fought against Ottoman rule, and desired the protection of ‘Alawite districts from external interference.¹⁰ This resistance prevented the French from achieving military victories in the northern coastal and mountainous areas until 1920.¹¹ As a result, political power in the mountainous ‘Alawite region did not transfer to French control until they succeeded in bringing interior cities like Damascus under their control. Once the capital fell, material military assistance from the nationalist government and additional troops from the private militias of Sunni landowning families ended.¹² Since the regionally concentrated ‘Alawite minority had been receiving aid from the capital, this indicates that their relationship with the Sunni majority was not antagonistic at this time. Until the defeat of the Sunni-nationalist government in Damascus, both constituencies embraced a unifying nationalist agenda.

Despite their minority status and connections with outside groups, the ‘Alawites subscribed to nationalism primarily out of self-interest. As Philip Khoury describes, “Syrian historiography has ascribed nationalist motivations to all the revolts against the French during the early Mandate. Although some uprisings were nationalist in flavor, those like the ‘Alawite movement which involved compact minorities were more often inspired by local considerations, or at least, non-ideological ones.”¹³ By incorporating concerns important to those outside their community, the ‘Alawites were able to gain significant support from other nationalist forces. For example, Shaykh Salih is remembered in the Syrian interior as a fighter for the “territorial integrity and independence of the Syrian nation.”¹⁴ However, in his own region, he is remembered as the defender of ‘Alawite independence from foreign hegemony.¹⁵ This reflects how the ‘Alawite sect could not completely cast off connections with the larger population of Syria, even as they worked to preserve their regional power. Although the French Mandate provided ‘Alawites with unprecedented autonomy and control, the years from 1918 through the early 1920’s witnessed ‘Alawite protests against the French rule and coalitions with nationalist forces in the interior cities of Syria, such as Damascus and Aleppo.

This cooperation later proved less likely as Arab nationalism became associated with Sunni Islam. The minorities present in Syria increasingly suspected Arab nationalism as a disguise for “unrestrained Sunni ascendancy.”¹⁶ As a result, the minorities grew increasingly alienated from the interior cities and the Sunni majority despite initial years of cooperation and resistance to French rule. By September 15, 1922, the ‘Alawite-dominated province received legal autonomy from greater Syria, ending practices such as Sunni control of court cases involving ‘Alawites.¹⁷ The French created special ‘Alawite detachments, which also included other minorities such as the Druze, Kurds,
and Circassians. This strategy increased French control because it isolated minorities that had previously endorsed the Syrian nationalist cause. Although the French did not create these sectarian divides, they actively manipulated the regionally concentrated minorities to weaken nationalist sentiments.

Philip Khoury argues that the French strategy for governing the area of Jabal Druze, represents their general strategy for imperial governance in Syria. This involved pitting the rural areas against nationalist areas, creating a situation where elites worked against each other. The Druze inhabited a remote and inaccessible agricultural area, just as the ’Alawite sect did. Additionally, rival clans prone to severe internal conflicts controlled the local government in the Jabal. Therefore, even though the French granted these ruling clans a special administrative district separate from the Damascus state, internal divisions between the Druze led to continued antagonism toward the imperial power.

The Druze uprising would ultimately spark the Great Revolt (1925-1927) against French imperial rule. Similar to the uprisings in 2011, the rural areas erupted in protests before the urban centers in the country. Despite Druze isolation, their revolt did take on a popular, nationalist character that quickly resonated with the interior cities. The French policy of “divide and rule” with the intention of instigating conflict among religious sects to justify their presence in Syria seemed to have failed. Despite their lack of participation in the Great Revolt, ’Alawite separatist sentiment remained strong during this period. Yet, they could not speak with a unified voice on the subject. Divided by tribal affiliation, religious sub-sects, and geography, the ’Alawites were unable to produce a common, cohesive political leadership. Even though
many groups within the citizenry harbored separatist sentiments, some religious groups could not formulate a coherent anti-French movement. The patchwork nature of the Great Revolt is echoed in the nature of the opposition today. Rather than forming two, distinct groups—with the regime and against the regime—the Syrian people represent a spectrum of positions regarding Bashar al-Assad’s government.

**Syrian Independence and the Rise of the Ba’ath Party**

After World War II, Syria separated from France and the new government’s primary goal was to decrease and eventually eliminate regional and communal representation in the parliament. Believing the regionally compact minorities had benefitted the most from French rule, the government took immediate actions to end these perceived advantages and establish centralized rule in Damascus. A new elite emerged in Syrian society after independence, as demonstrated by the early years of the Ba’ath Party. Created in 1940 as a reaction to the continued French presence in Syria, the party framed the nationalist struggle of Syrians in pan-Arab terms. Still, by 1947, the Ba’ath Party had failed to “strike deep roots outside urban centers.” In 1952, the original party merged with a group of Arab socialists, gaining 4,500 members and extending membership to students from a rural or peasant background. Following this merger, the Ba’ath Party pursued populist policies. In 1958, nationalist and communist officers in the Syrian army traveled to Nasser’s Egypt, hoping to establish a union between Syria and Egypt. Nasser accepted the union and began to implement Egypt’s divisive economic policies in Syria, such as large-scale nationalization and redistribution of land. This won support among the peasantry and middle class, but upset the mercantile class.

The “transitional” Ba’ath Party began to form during this period of union with Egypt. The Military Committee, created in secrecy in 1959, would become the center of the party’s new wing, although it would remain covert until 1964. Without their involvement, a coup against Nasser occurred in Syria on September 28, 1961. The Ba’ath leaders then attempted to transform the military from within, starting with the officer corps. By the 1960s, the ‘Alawite sect would come to dominate the officer corps as successive purges cleared the army’s upper ranks of Sunni officers. Starting in 1963, the Ba’ath Military Committee began to purge the army extensively to make it even more ruralized. Prior to this, ‘Alawi strength in numbers in the army had come from the lower ranks, namely common soldiers and non-commissioned officers. But the ‘Alawi officers increasingly replaced the upper leadership, leading to the decline of urban Sunni military elements.

Beyond increasing the rural and ‘Alawite character of the military, an introduction of “country elements” also occurred in the state bureaucracy. Especially with the re-nationalization of large corporations in 1964, the state bureaucracy willingly accepted individuals from rural and peasant backgrounds as employees. This shows that the incorporation of peasants, many of whom are ‘Alawite, occurred far before Hafez Assad’s period of total control over Syria, which began shortly after the 1967 war.

In fact, Assad would initially supposed the economic interests of the bourgeois class rather than his rural constituencies, particularly in the city of Damascus. He wanted the regime to adopt a “modern look,” so he reformed the parliament despite lacking independent authority as head of state. In addition to this, Assad took advantage of the ‘Alawi officers in the army and intelligence agencies, creating a strong center for the regime. However, by 1980, Assad sensed that he needed to institute changes in the makeup of the Ba’ath Regional Command. In an effort to alter the public perception of the regime’s “sectarian” nature, he increased the proportion of Sunnis at the level of party leadership from 57.1% to 66.7%. In turn, the ‘Alawi proportion decreased from 33% to 19%.

Despite the salient role of ‘Alawis in the Ba’ath Party and the fact that Hafez al-Assad himself was an ‘Alawite, the party membership included relatively low proportions of peasants in Ba’ath organizations in the ‘Alawite-dominated cities of Latakia and Tartus. From 1963 until the late 1980s, many ‘Alawis moved into the larger cities. Furthermore, this low statistic could be related to the declining number of peasants.
present in the country over time. In 1974, peasants comprised 25.1% of the Ba’ath Party, but by 1989, they were 12.4% of entire membership. Despite smaller number of ‘Alawites at the membership level, Assad appointed many members of his sect to elite positions in the armed forces, smaller military groups, and security or intelligence apparatuses. Of the 31 officers appointed from 1970 to 1997, 19 were ‘Alawi and eight of those were from his own tribe—al-Kalbiyyah.

Conflict with the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood was a prominent problem of the Assad regime, though this tension began before Hafez’s rise. Even though the issue of a particular religious sect ruling the country emerged with the beginning of Assad’s rule in 1970, the beginnings of the Islamist opposition to Ba’athism began in the 1950s and 1960s. In April 1964, Sunni religious leaders led a campaign against the secular Ba’ath Party, including street riots that occurred mainly in Hama. Then, Prime Minister Amin al-Hafiz and General Salah Jadid ordered the bombing of Sultan Mosque, which was considered an act of atheism and secularism, rather than a sectarian attack. This tension continued into Hafez al-Assad’s reign.

By the late 1970s, Islamic opposition to the Ba’ath Party was discussed in sectarian terms. The gradual radicalization of the Islamic movement culminated in the Brotherhood endorsing jihad against the secular party in late 1979. The Fighting Vanguard, an extremist group that much of the Syrian Brotherhood rejected as members, had begun carrying out terror attacks in the country. By late 1979, the state repression of the Brotherhood, particularly in Hama, reached such an extreme level that the Fighting Vanguard and the Brotherhood formed an alliance.

Hama’s Muslim Brotherhood grew increasingly distant from other components of the Syrian Brotherhood because it sought to protect its hometown from the Ba’ath regime. The government was provoked by the protests, resulting in a massacre of the city with estimates of the number killed ranging from 10,000 to 40,000. After the 1982 massacre at Hama, Assad faced no meaningful opposition to his rule, which allowed for the political positioning of his son, Bashar al-Assad.

Bashar al-Assad’s Consolidation of Power

Within two days of Hafez’s passing, the ruling Ba’ath Party leadership ensured that the military leadership promoted Bashar al-Assad to commander-in-chief of the armed forces, and the interim President oversaw the Parliament’s sole nomination of Bashar al-Assad for national referendum. On the one-month anniversary of his father’s death, Bashar received over 97% of votes in the referendum for his presidency. Stacher argues that elite from the military, intelligence services, and ruling party cooperated to prevent factionalism, since hereditary leadership selection ensured the continuity of the system’s core agents. In an attempt to maintain the power they had acquired during Hafez’s reign, these elites chose to make his son president. As a result, Bashar did not inherit the full powers his father had held. However, within five years Bashar rid the system of his father’s elites and gained full control. Just as Hafez al-Assad reached across sectarian
divisions early in his rule, Bashar immediately focused on Syria’s main cities and the private sector, despite his rural, ‘Alawite roots. In this way, the second Assad failed to uphold the unspoken agreement between the government and the Syrian people, which had appeased rural populations with social welfare programs and some degree of development. During the first ten years of Bashar al-Assad’s rule, the regime supported the creation of various NGOs in order to fulfill these needs. However, these new NGOs could not replace the popular programs that existed in Hafez’s era. Despite the limited scope of civil society during his rule, state institutions and corporatist unions were successful in carrying out socialist, developmental policies. By contrast, Bashar al-Assad allowed these new NGOs to adopt tasks traditionally completed by the government, even though they lacked the same resources to fulfill the needs of these communities.

The two leaders’ different approaches to social welfare and sectarian balance represent one of many explanations for the 2011 uprisings. Bashar’s inability to prevent opposition stems from his failure to balance the needs of different communities in Syria. The country’s complex history and social divisions prevent ruling with ease. The seemingly unbreakable cycle of trauma encourages rulers to use whatever methods possible when facing difficulties. Despite the incredible amount of violence during the latest phase of Syrian history, the events demonstrate continuity with past events. Just as opposition to French imperial rule could not be divided into two neat categories, the current Syrian opposition contains many contradictions. Most observers will attribute the muddled nature of the opposition to increasing levels of foreign involvement with the civil war. However, the internal components of the conflict challenge this viewpoint.

Khaddour and Mazur argue that even in ‘Alawite-dominated areas, where religious sects are more concentrated than in Sunni-dominated areas, regional identification is more important than a sectarian one. For example, the city of Tartus witnessed many pro-regime demonstrations. Even though it is more homogenously ‘Alawi than the city of Latakia, it has become a refuge for elite Syrians of many backgrounds from the fighting in Homs, Aleppo, and Damascus. Despite the perceived importance of religious sects in Syria, the true indication of an individual’s political views seems to be rooted more closely in their region of origin or their current city. With this knowledge, the regime can manipulate the country in a terrifyingly effective manner.

**Conclusion**

Ultimately, Syria’s civil war cannot be understood as a dichotomous relationship between ‘Alawites and the opposition to the regime. Even without considering the foreign and extremist elements playing large
roles in the conflict, it is clear how nuanced political affiliations are in the country. Since the protests against French imperial rule, some elements of the country remain isolated from a political center and some regions rise in protest before others. Since Hafez al-Assad’s rule, some sectors of the population have benefited enough from regime policies to remain silent, while others became so oppressed that they had to take action. For Syria’s rulers, understanding the complications of the country’s regions becomes the key to control. Bashar al-Assad has been able to manipulate vulnerable and pre-existing social cleavages to remain in power. Even after over four years of war, fear keeps Assad in a position of chaotic, loose control. This fear of vulnerability, which is the result of distrust and competition between different groups in Syria, still exists today. Without directly addressing this issue, the conflict cannot end. No Syrian leader has proven able or willing to navigate regional and sectarian divides in a manner that does not manipulate them and perpetuate the Syria’s cycle of trauma. Until a figure emerges that can maneuver Syria’s divisions without bias or malice, the rhythm of oppression and isolation will beat resoundingly without end.

ENDNOTES

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Covert Failure

U.S. Intelligence Prior to the Iranian Revolution

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According to political scientist Robert Jervis, intelligence organizations do not necessarily hold prime positions for understanding revolutions and general political developments. “The CIA and its counterparts are in the business of stealing secrets, but secrets are rarely at the heart of revolutions,” Jervis writes.\(^1\) Some would argue that one of the most significant instances of intelligence failure—what Jervis defines as “a mismatch between the estimates and what later information reveals”—occurred in the years immediately prior to the Iranian Revolution of 1979, as U.S. intelligence agencies mismanaged information about Mohammad Reza Shah and Iran’s domestic situation, or lacked information entirely.\(^2\) Among the factors that contributed to this clear intelligence failure were the pre-existing beliefs that many American intelligence analysts held about Iranian politics, these analysts’ lack of comprehensive understanding about
the shah personally and politically, and their failure to fully recognize the importance of the religious component of the brewing revolution about the shah personally and politically, and their failure to fully recognize the importance of the religious component of the brewing revolution.

Background

While Mohammad Reza Shah’s rule experienced periods of political stability and prosperity, there were also times of unrest, economic decline, and growing tension between the shah’s modernizing regime and traditional religious leaders. The regime’s tenuous hold on power was challenged in the late 1970s by growing economic stagnation, undeniable social inequality, political repression, and cultural discrepancies between influential segments of the Iranian population. At the top of the Iranian social hierarchy was a small group of privileged urban residents that received the bulk of economic benefits, and beneath them sat a larger group of educated and reform-minded young professionals and bureaucrats, a growing middle class of smaller businessmen, white-collar employees, and middle-grade government servants that also emphasized the value of education. Below these groups were the remaining segments of society, including the bourgeoisie and bazaar merchants; the manual workers and low level government employees; and finally, the rural migrants, unemployed, peddlers, and urban poor, who did not receive much benefit from the country’s economic gains as a result of the shah’s policies.

As Iranians—the educated young professionals and university students, in particular—realized that the shah’s rule was becoming increasingly repressive, they began to form the basis of the regime’s principal opposition.

In the eyes of the U.S. Intelligence Community, the political realm of pre-revolution Iran was seemingly stable. A 60-page study completed by the CIA in August 1977, entitled “Iran in the 1980s,” was based on the assumption that “the shah will be an active participant in Iranian life well into the 1980s,” and that “there will be no radical change in Iranian political behavior in the near future.” Perhaps most infamously, the CIA’s National Foreign Assessment Center (NFAC)’s National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) on Iran in 1978 stated that Iran was “not in a revolutionary or even a pre-revolutionary situation.” The NIE, Jervis notes, did not lead to much productive discussion on key issues surrounding Iran, as there was an unquestioned, unchallenged general consensus among participants in its drafting, and the final product embodied a writing style that was rambling, disorganized, and lacking a well-crafted argument.

The Department of State’s Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR) did present a slightly less optimistic outlook than the CIA, indicating that the shah’s prospects were “somewhat less favorable than portrayed in some parts of [the] NIE.” The majority of the Intelligence Community, however, did not share this viewpoint.

As the initial sparks of revolutionary action began to unfold, including the violent demonstrations in Qom in January 1978, American intelligence reports analyzing the situation in Iran slowly shifted in tone. Following the events in Qom, the NFAC reported that “religious dissidents would be considered a more serious threat if they were thought to be allied” with other opposition elements, not recognizing that the

“As Iranians—the educated young professionals and university students, in particular—realized that the shah’s rule was becoming increasingly repressive, they began to form the basis of the regime’s principal opposition.”
religious component of the opposition played a significant role already. In February, new reports claimed, “It seems likely that tension will continue between secular authority and the religious community with violence breaking out from time to time. Neither side will prevail completely but neither side can afford to capitulate.” This is yet another overestimation of the shah’s stability and underestimation of his opposition’s strength.  

More disturbances throughout March and April indicated the growing dissatisfaction of conservative religious elements, though they were still not portrayed as overly dangerous threats to the regime’s hold on power. A mid-September 1978 edition of the National Intelligence Daily (NID) articulated the difficulties that the shah would face in dealing with the opposition pressure, indicating that the opposition leaders would have to show greater willingness to cooperate in order to reach a resolution. In the reports that began to emerge in the early fall of 1978, Jervis writes, the language shifted toward talk of problems and difficulties—both politically and economically—for the shah. “There is no sense that the shah will have everything his way. But the overall impression is still that he will probably be able to outmaneuver his opposition,” one report read. It was not until the end of October in 1978—when the shah’s regime was unable to publicly divide Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini from less extreme ayatollahs—that the NFAC concluded that the shah’s chance of preserving the Pahlavi dynasty was substantially reduced, due to his failure to take action against his opposition.

**Political Analysis Falling Short**

It could be argued that the central issue that caused the ultimate intelligence failure regarding the Iranian Revolution was related not to a misinterpretation of specific pieces of information, but rather to both a misguided analysis of the general situation before the revolution and strongly biased pre-existing beliefs about the events. For many American intelligence analysts, it was difficult to fathom that a well-entrenched leader such as the shah, with the support of powerful armed forces and security services, could be overthrown, as indicated by then-director of Central Intelligence Stansfield Turner:

“We were aware the shah had opposition. One difficulty was it was hard to appreciate that a man who had the backing of the military and SAVAK [the shah’s secret police] would be toppled by people parading in the streets. When you make an intelligence forecast, you make an assumption.”  

Furthermore, many analysts did not look beyond the norm that had been established regarding the shah’s stability from the U.S. perspective: following the 1953 coup, the shah had turned Iran into “an oasis of stability in the Middle East” for the U.S, according to President Jimmy Carter, helping to contain communism and preserve access to oil reserves. With these facts in mind, analysts shared similar beliefs that fit pre-established views of the shah and had little incentive to challenge these beliefs. This mindset
also negatively affected American policymakers’ ability to remain open-minded in making foreign policy decisions regarding Iran. “Long-standing U.S. attitudes toward the shah inhibited intelligence collection, dampened policymakers’ appetite for analysis of the shah’s position, and deafened policymakers to the warning implicit in available intelligence,” according to a report from the U.S. House of Representatives Select Committee on Intelligence.18

Seeing as many arms of the American intelligence and national security bureaucracies believed that the shah was stably in power, agencies were often inclined to forego staffing in their Iranian analytical sections, a destructive consequence of steadfastly accepting the prevailing notion on Iran.19 The CIA station in Tehran was understaffed immediately prior to the revolution, and there were only two political and two economic analysts dedicated to Iran at Langley, creating a small and isolated community of analysts addressing the situation.20 Further, the agency almost exclusively utilized signals and imagery for intelligence assessments.21 The State Department and CIA had long since stopped gathering most of their own intelligence within Iran and relied heavily on SAVAK to share domestic intelligence.22 Not all of the collected information on Iran was available to analysts, who had limited opportunities to debrief embassy and Tehran station personnel and little control over what information they received; some evidence at the time pointed to the shah’s vulnerability, yet it was scattered and ambiguous.23

Beyond a lack of manpower devoted to Iranian issues, much of the intelligence that analysts had to work with yielded almost no information about non-elite segments of the population. The U.S. administration’s contact with Iran was limited to primarily the shah’s inner circle, the armed forces, and SAVAK, which left American analysts at a disadvantage in trying to understand the opposition that was mounting against the shah.24 A CIA report published in August 1978 considered only the traditional elite power structure in Iran as a central factor in ensuring a future smooth transition of power after the shah, and did not consider the potential role of those in lower strata of society, who eventually became the central players in the movement against the shah.25 Jervis suggests that there were untapped sources of intelligence that could have led to a better understanding of the opposition, including the opposition press and American academics who had good relations with those making up the forces challenging the shah.26

Weak Grasp on the Shah

Part of the U.S. Intelligence Community’s belief that the shah was secure came from the assumption that he would use his power to crack down on any opposing force that sought to overthrow him—a course of action that he ultimately did not take. Analysts expected him to simply destroy the opposition and defy all predictions of his downfall, as he had done in the past. “Most diplomatic observers and dissidents agree that the shah has more than enough resources to crush any serious challenge to his regime,” wrote William Branigan in the Washington Post in April 1978.27 The CIA believed that the shah would in fact crack down if his rule was threatened, though it did not take into account that this contradicted its continual advice to the shah that he should pursue democracy and reform.28 The Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) did acknowledge the difficult situation that the shah faced in determining whether to impose force against his opposition, writing in August 1978, “The government will probably be able to handle the situation, but the shah is still faced with a dilemma: How to continue liberalizing Iranian society and maintain order at the same time without cracking down too harshly on the dissidents.”29 Jervis points to the hesitation that the shah showed toward using force as an additional reason for the instability of his regime:

“Vacillation not only cast some doubt on the expectation that the shah would crack down, but may have been an important cause of the growing unrest. On the one hand, the repressive incidents further alienated large segments of Iranian society and probably made people even more skeptical of the shah’s professed desires to liberalize. On the other hand, the concessions to the protestors and the restraints on SAVAK weakened one of the main pillars supporting the regime and, more...
importantly, led people to see the shah as vulnerable.”

Overall, Jervis rightly notes that CIA analysts in the NFAC did not adequately analyze evidence regarding the threats to the shah’s power by not probing the shah’s tendency to shift from showing leniency to repression and back again for patterns that could indicate what would lie ahead in the future.

In addition to not understanding the shah from a political standpoint, American analysts lacked an understanding of the shah from a personal standpoint, with regard to both his personal demeanor and health. If the CIA and other American observers had better understood the shah at these levels, Jervis argues, they would not have been so certain that he would act boldly to save his regime. He was more indecisive and hesitant than many believed, and, in the year before the revolution, he was further weakened by the deaths of two of his closest confidants. Perhaps most importantly, the CIA was not even aware that the shah was seriously ill. A November 1977 issue of the CIA’s Weekly Summary noted, “there is no serious domestic threat or political opposition to the shah’s rule. At 58, he is in good health and protected by an elaborate security apparatus; he would seem to have an excellent chance to rule into the next decade.”

This illness likely had a significant impact on the shah’s decision to zealously pursue rapid modernization for Iran. Increasingly aware of his own mortality, he attempted to realize his dreams for the country in a manner that eventually caused major disjunction within Iranian society and growing discontent from the lower and middle classes.

In the face of mounting opposition, the shah also wavered due to his illness—he wanted to pass on his rule to his son, though he knew that his son was not capable of running the kind of repressive regime that would be necessary for several years after a major crackdown. Further, his son did not have the unwavering loyalty of the military. Therefore the shah did not want to increase the sway of the military with a repressive movement against members of the opposition, only to see his son unable to manage strengthened armed forces.

**Ignoring the Religious Element**

The largest shortcoming as far as American intelligence analysts misinterpreting the Iranian domestic situation stemmed from their lack of emphasis on the importance of the religious dimension of the revolution. “The senior Iranian political analyst had a great interest in the religious establishment and had conducted thorough if descriptive research on this subject, but he did not perceive the beginnings of what we would now call radical or fundamentalist Islam,” Jervis writes. “It seemed inconceivable that anything as retrograde as religion, especially fundamentalist religion, could be crucial.” Jervis also points to
four central elements of the religious-based opposition that contributed to its mass appeal and were not well addressed in American intelligence reports. First, there was a multitude of attacks on the shah for the ways in which he was changing Iran by allegedly ignoring the mullahs, disregarding many Islamic customs, denying key parts of Iran’s past, and aiding the rich elite more than the poor. Second, the U.S largely misinterpreted the nationalist element of the religious opposition. Iran, in the era prior to the revolution, was culturally impacted by the continuous struggle between the Western-leaning shah and the traditional members of the clergy. The shah, an unabashed Westernizer, was often considered by his opponents to be a “puppet” of the West, enjoying support from the United States and United Kingdom in particular, even owing the fact that he remained in power following the 1953 coup to these Western nations’ intervention. Some argued that religious leaders—such as the shah’s ardent opponent, Khomeini—were more attentive to all segments of society, including the urban poor that were largely ignored in the redistribution of land and wealth resulting from the shah’s reforms. Analysts were aware that Khomeini was leading protests against the status-of-forces agreement that dictated the small American military presence in Iran over a decade earlier in 1964, yet they did not see that Iranian nationalism had shifted not against the U.S. directly, but against the shah, who was seen as easily manipulated by American interests.

Third, the populist tradition of Shi’ism, in which religious leaders gain and retain authority when followers recognize them as men of wisdom and piety, formed the basis for Khomeini’s rising influence and apparent legitimacy over the shah. Fourth, and finally, there was an influential traditional role for Shi’ite clergy to act as spokesmen for political protests, a role Khomeini was taking on without the CIA or other American intelligence agencies knowing much about him at all. American analysts did not take Khomeini seriously because they were unaware of much information about him or the influence of other Iranian religious leaders.

The NFAC was, to some extent, aware of religious groups playing an important role in the revolution, and the problem was not that analysts missed a few vital facts that indicated the nature of these groups. Instead, their error appears to have been in a “general outlook [that] did not give credence to the links between the religious leaders and the grievance of wide ranges of the general population.” This outlook powerfully influenced the interpretation of incoming information and led to analysts’ apparent insensitivity to the possibility that a larger opposition could unite behind Khomeini. Among the most influential segments of the population to oppose the shah were students who supported Khomeini’s protests. A June 1978 edition of the NID noted, “Militant students

Carter with top national security advisors, including DCI Turner. © Wally McNamee/Corbis
... added their weight to religious demonstrations this year,” yet many efforts by students received little attention from American officials.42 Their support for Khomeini could have “indicated that what he stood for was not as repugnant to the students as most U.S. officials thought,” and, on a larger scale, that Khomeini was able to attract followers from a wide variety of religious and social backgrounds:

“There were scattered reports that Khomeini ‘is widely respected among diverse opponents of the shah who do not necessarily share his religious beliefs, specifically leftist students … among the devout bazaar merchants of the country, large sums of money are still collected in his name. These collections are voluntary, not by duress.’”43

In sum, former DCI Turner admitted that U.S. agencies fell short of fully understanding the religious dimension of the revolution, saying, “We did not understand who Khomeini was and the support his movement had. We were just plain asleep.”44

Qualifying the U.S. Intelligence Errors

While the consensus view holds that the U.S. Intelligence Community did not adequately anticipate the Iranian Revolution of 1979, Jervis—one of the CIA’s main critics—does acknowledge the points that analysts interpreted correctly, and the aspects of the situation that made successfully dealing with the crisis extremely difficult. With regard to positively impactful intelligence interpretation, American analysts were right to pay little attention to the communist Tudeh Party, not allowing the minor threat of this party to overshadow the more important issue of general, widespread political unrest. Further, they correctly analyzed the unity and morale of the Iranian armed forces, recognizing that they would stay loyal to the shah and willing to execute his internal security orders until very late into 1978; the armed forces only wavered and defected once the shah appeared close to leaving Iran.45

As far as obstacles that made the pre-revolution period particularly challenging for analysts, the Iranian Revolution—which embodied a mass uprising that overthrew an entrenched regime that boasted years of unbroken royal success and had the support of large and well functioning security force—was unprecedented. Even more unanticipated was the large number of unarmed people who were willing to repeatedly participate in mass demonstrations with the clear knowledge that they may be killed. The intensity of a feeling—in this case, the hatred for the shah—is hard to analyze, as individuals in the midst of a massive public protest do not frequently discuss the lengths to which they are willing to go to overthrow the regime. The motivations for such feelings are also difficult to understand when they are based on religion and analysts are viewing the circumstances from a perspective in a secular culture; this division makes it difficult to empathize with the members of the opposition and fully understand their beliefs, which provides some justification for American analysts’ failure to comprehensively grasp the religious aspects of the opposition’s argument. Lastly, in the case of this revolution in particular, events continued to unfold from the fall of 1977 onward, creating a pressure for analysts to keep up with the latest updates and inhibiting their ability to step back and assess the incoming information in the larger context of the entire revolution’s timeline.46
Conclusion

According to former National Security Council member Gary Sick, a 1980 study by the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence found that, “intelligence collection and analysis were weak [prior to the Iranian Revolution] and that the confidence of policymakers in the shah, which intelligence reporting did not challenge, further skewed the U.S. reading of the situation and contributed to the warning failure.”47 As it has been demonstrated, the Intelligence Community, and especially the NFAC, failed to foresee the course of events in Iran from late 1977 to late 1978. Despite a long history of contact between the United States and Iran and the ability of analysts—before pressure mounted in the summer of 1978—to focus on long-run considerations, assess developments, and reevaluate previous assumptions, the joint effort by several intelligence agencies inadequately covered the Iranian situation.48 These errors came not only from misinterpreting the information and intelligence that was collected, but also from lacking significant sources and ranges of data that could have been useful in better understanding the crisis. Jervis claims that intelligence agencies are in the secret-stealing business, yet secrets are not frequently at the heart of revolutions. Higher quality, non-secretive information—acquired by means such as sending operatives to join the protests to learn more about the opposition on the ground—was needed for American analysts to get to the heart of the revolution, and properly anticipate the events that were to unfold in Iran.

ENDNOTES

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A Walk through the Marketplace
**Souqs of the Arabian Gulf—A Photo Essay**

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A Walk through the Marketplace

Ceiling of the Blue Mosque in Istanbul.
The 1973 “Oil Weapon”

Turning a Regional Conflict into a Global Crisis

Cristina Martin Ristori

Cristina Martin Ristori is a senior at Carnegie Mellon University, majoring in Global Studies and in International Relations and Politics, with a concentration in Middle Eastern and Arabic Studies. Born in Málaga, Spain, her passion for the Middle East started when she began studying Arabic during her freshman year of college. Her main interests are the study of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, of Arabic language and culture, and of conflict resolution in the Middle East.
Oil is the single most important resource to countries all over the world, and many are willing to pay a high price for it—giving the producing country the power to become a puppeteer in the realm of international relations. A prime example of this power of manipulation was the Arab-led embargo that resulted from the 1973 Arab-Israeli war—initially just another chapter in the ongoing Palestinian-Israeli conflict, which caused the stakes of this regional conflict to escalate. The war quickly incited a global economic crisis when the Arab petro-states decided to use the “oil weapon” to advance their interests in supporting the Palestinians. OAPEC (the Organization of Arab Petroleum Oil Exporters, or the Arab members of OPEC) declared its global oil embargo in October of 1973 as a response to American intentions of supporting Israel.
As oil prices skyrocketed, the ensuing economic crisis caused societies to question the true power of their governments against these oil monopolists. The 1973 oil embargo was the ultimate proof that the “oil weapon” could have truly devastating effects, and that political power was in the hands of those who controlled this resource.

Geopolitical factors are important to take into account. Pan-Arabism accounts for part of the reason why the OAPEC countries united forces to take part in a conflict that did not concern them directly. On the other hand, explaining Israel’s actions during this conflict requires understanding its relationship with the United States, its most important ally. The US weighed its options when facing the threat of the embargo to ultimately make the decision to cooperate with Israel anyway, in secret, during Operation Nickel Grass. What is it about an alliance with Israel that could make the United States risk its relationship with the biggest producers of oil in the world?

Additionally, it is important to evaluate the effectiveness of the oil embargo. Was it worth it for the producing nations? What was at stake for them—was pan-Arabism truly a good enough reason to risk their economic stability, or was the oil weapon used to reassess their strength in the international political arena? It is necessary to analyze the power struggle among its three main actors: the United States, Israel, and the Arab oil producing countries. This paper will focus on the politics of the Middle East in relation to the power of oil, using the 1973 embargo as an assessment of the Middle Eastern OPEC members’ success in influencing international politics.

**Historical Background—Israel, Palestine, and the Arab states**

The history of the state of Israel and the Arab-Israeli conflict began in 1948, when the Jewish community in the mandate territory of Palestine declared a Jewish state, known as Israel. According to the UN Partition Plan for Palestine, drafted in 1947 when the British left Palestine, the territory was to be divided into two states, giving Israel 56% of the land. Immediately, Palestinians and the Arab states refused to support the plan. This led to the First Arab-Israeli war, which began directly after Israel declared a state in the territory that had been given to it by the United Nations. The result was an unexpected Israeli victory, where Israel not only kept the territory that had been given to it by the United Nations, but also 50% of the territory that had been given to the Palestinians. The rest of the territory was occupied by two Arab states: Jordan governed the West Bank and Egypt the Gaza Strip. These countries were to take care of the 700,000 Palestinian refugees.

The situation in Israel and its neighboring countries was unstable in the years following 1948. Tension continued to escalate until 1967, when the Six-Day War took place. Israel started the war when it launched a series of surprise airstrikes against the Egyptian forces, which had been mobilizing along the Israeli border in the Sinai. Syria, Egypt and Jordan responded to this by sending their forces into Israel. In spite of three Arab states fighting against a single state, Israel won the war and claimed the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, and the Syrian Golan Heights. With these acquisitions, all the formerly Palestinian territories came under Israeli control. In the decades to come, Israel used these territories to encourage what became known as the “Land for Peace” strategy, exchanging the territory taken over in 1967 for peace agreements with the Arab countries.

After the 1967 war, the Arab countries had been humiliated, and the pan-Arab dream had been crushed. Israel was more detested than ever before, but it had firmly established itself geopolitically. The war produced the 1967 Khartoum Resolution, when the Arab League agreed that there would be “no peace with Israel, no recognition of Israel, no negotiations with it, and insistence on the rights of the Palestinian people in their own country.”

Therefore, the stakes were particularly high for the Arab states at the precipice of the 1973 war, as they felt the need to prove their power against a state they refused to recognize. It was a perfect opportunity for the Arab states to redeem themselves, and the oil embargo that ensued was an obvious part of the struggle for power and dignity that the Arab states had launched. Egypt and Syria launched a surprise attack on Israel during Yom Kippur, the most sacred Jewish
holiday, catching the Israeli armed forces unprepared. Arab forces entered Israel from the Sinai Peninsula and the Golan Heights. A UN ceasefire agreement ended the war after only 19 days.\(^8\) Israel was successful in repulsing the Arab forces out of its territory, and the Arab states did not gain back any part of their former territory. However, the Arab world interpreted the end of this war as a victory—as a way to redeem themselves after the shame they suffered in 1967. It served to show that the Israeli army was not completely invincible, that it could be taken by surprise, and that the Arab armies were still relevant and worthy of being taken seriously.

**The Geopolitics of the 1973 Oil Embargo**

The Arab oil embargo began days after the Yom Kippur War and lasted from October 1973 to March 1974. It was initiated by the Arab states to prove their strength to the rest of the world. OAPEC kicked off the embargo by immediately increasing the oil price by 70% in response to the persistent aid to Israel by the US and the Netherlands.\(^9\) Days later OAPEC agreed on a more defined economic strategy, which cut production by 5% from their September levels and continued to cut production by 5% every month.\(^10\) The Iraqis rejected the plans for the embargo, arguing that it would punish friends and enemies alike, and demanded much more severe punishments on countries that supported Israel. The countries that carried out the embargo, all OAPEC members except Iraq, became known as the Conference of Arab Oil Ministers.\(^11\) They decided to divide the world into three groups and developed a strategy for each:
friendly countries would not suffer the consequences of the oil embargo, neutral countries would experience 5% reduction in production, and enemies would be completely subjected to the embargo.\textsuperscript{12}

It is important to note that the embargo's negative effects on international oil companies (IOCs) working in those countries were also seen as part of the “attack” on the West that OAPEC planned with the embargo. With the formation of OPEC, the producing countries had gained more control over their oil resources, and the main reaction of the IOCs was to agree with the decisions of the countries and to accommodate their business policies to the country’s laws—an unsuccessful attempt to prevent the nationalization of oil. Therefore, with the IOCs trying to please OAPEC countries and adapt to their decisions, the countries participating in the embargo were in full control of the process. Through the use of their power, the Arab countries could advance their own national interests, which at times conflicted with those of the IOCs. Geopolitics would continue to dictate the policies of Arab countries’ oil supplies.

At this time, pan-Arabism was a huge influence in the Middle East. During the 1950s and the 1960s, Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser promoted an image of unity and cooperation among the Arabic-speaking nations. He aspired to be the leader of this unified Arab world and offered a different kind of world leadership from the one provided by the governments of the West.\textsuperscript{13} While the 1973 oil embargo did not have any planned side effects of global leadership, the pan-Arab dream that was still prevalent explains why the OAPEC countries decided to defend Palestine and attack Israel and its supporters. The Israeli occupation of Palestine only affected the Palestinians directly, but all the countries were invested in the rejection of Israel’s right to exist in support of the Palestinian cause, as they were seen as part of the pan-Arab nation. The embargo, and its goal of harming Israel and its allies were in part a reflection of this pan-Arab sentiment towards the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

OAPEC’s embargo was a direct response to the Yom Kippur War, and its main purpose was to defend the integrity of the Arab Middle East against Israel. However, it was clear that Arab-Western geopolitics was a key consideration in OAPEC’s decision to start the embargo; particularly, OAPEC sought to counter the history of Western interference in the Middle East. Beginning from the colonial period, Western powers consistently took advantage of the energy resources of the Middle Eastern countries, exploiting their oil reserves and dominating their economic profit they got from them. With the embargo, the OAPEC countries tried to alter the international political order, through means of economic pressure. They were determined to reaffirm a political stance through a power that only they had, and which had too many times been taking advantage of by countries who had no right to do so.

**The Effects of the 1973 Oil Embargo**

One of the most important effects of the oil embargo was the radical change in global energy economy, which caused an immediate price rise and created an economic crisis with effects over the course of a decade. By 1974,
the price of oil quadrupled to nearly $12 per barrel.\(^4\) This had a dramatic effect on the producing countries of the Middle East, as they finally seemed to gain control of the price of oil its distribution, rather than the IOCs. The embargo eventually led to the nationalization of several national oil industries, including Saudi Arabia’s when it acquired full control of Aramco in 1980.

The embargo caused chaos in the West, especially in countries highly dependent on oil. In the United States, the price of gasoline rose from 38.5 cents in May of 1973, to 55.1 cents in June of 1974.\(^5\) Not only did the prices rise, but there was also a shortage of oil, as many Middle Eastern countries refused to ship to the United States. This caused the U.S. government to pass policies to ration oil. Gas stations were prevented from selling gasoline on weekends, which caused long lines during the week. Other policies included setting a maximum speed limit of 55 mph, to help decrease consumption, and odd-even rationing, under which cars with odd numbers in their license plates could only purchase gasoline on odd numbered days and vice versa.\(^6\)

However, to consider whether the embargo was a success, it is necessary to assess whether the OAPEC countries achieved their primary goal: a shift in the global support for Israel after the Yom Kippur War. First, although the United States was affected by the embargo, it only imported 12% of its oil from the Middle East at the time.\(^7\) For this reason, the world’s greatest superpower remained in support of one of its most important allies, Israel. Its decade-long relationship with Israel was too important to give up for what Americans hoped would only be a temporary shortage of oil. Israel provided the US with a strong ally in an important region to U.S. interests, even though this alliance conflicted with its desires to establish better relationships with the Arab countries. The geopolitical benefits of this alliance surpassed the consequences of weakened relationships with Arab countries.\(^8\) In addition, most of the Arab countries were supported by the Soviet Union during the Cold War, providing a further incentive for the United States to take the other side in the conflict. Therefore, the embargo did not manage to make the United States, Israel’s most important ally, budge, and throughout the war, US Operation Nickel Grass continued to supply Israel with arms.

In contrast to the US, Western Europe and Japan did not have as important of a relationship with Israel. They relied much more on Arab oil—Europe imported 80% of its oil from the Middle East, while Japan imported more than 90%.\(^9\) Because they had much more to lose from supporting Israel than the United States did, they shifted their policies to a more pro-Arab stance, succumbing to the pressures of the embargo. At the beginning of the conflict, Japan was seen as a “non-friendly” nation by the OAPEC countries because of its policy of neutrality. How-ever, after only a few days under the OAPEC embargo, Japan issued an official statement condemning Israel and
declaring support for a Palestinian state. Its status was changed to that of a “friendly” nation within days. Furthermore, the European Community also altered its policy towards Israel and the Arab countries in response to the embargo. The United Kingdom, for example, denied the United States access to British bases in the UK and Cyprus to airlift supplies to Israel. In addition, the members of the European Economic Community issued a statement that was widely seen as pro-Arab, which resulted in OAPEC lifting the embargo against EEC members.

For its part, Israel responded to the embargo by maintaining its long-standing oil trade agreement with Iran. Israel also acquired part of its oil resources from the Sinai Peninsula, which had been controlled by Israel since the Six Day War in 1967. This was effective until the land was given back to Egypt in 1979, although an agreement to sell oil to Israel was part of the treaty signed at the time. Thus, Israel was not very affected by the 1973 embargo—it had not been dependent on Arab oil before the war. Its conflicting political situation with its neighboring countries preemptively saved it from an economic crisis.

Conclusion

In analyzing the power of the oil weapon and its effectiveness during the 1973 oil embargo, it is necessary to assess the importance of the affected regions around the world. Although the United States was not as dependent on Arab oil as other regions of the world, the embargo still managed to shake its economy and affect the lives of its entire population through the energy crisis that ensued. Because of its long-term commitment to Israel, the United States simply could not afford to yield, instead electing to maintain its position throughout the embargo, suffering through production cuts and radical price changes. In this sense, the use of the oil weapon could be interpreted as a failure—it lacked the ability to force the world’s largest superpower, both economically and politically, to alter its policy in the context of the Arab-Israeli conflict. However, the United States would not have been able to halt its support to Israel, as it was determined to remain a firm ally under any circumstance. Therefore, seeing as it would have been impossible for the Arab states to attempt to stop United States support for Israel, it cannot be considered a failure.

The way in which the embargo influenced Western Europe and Japan, however, was a definite success. Considering the fact that these two regions consumed far more Middle Eastern oil than the United States, the embargo was destined to have a much stronger effect on them. These countries were also not as supportive of Israel as the United States was; however, all of these countries could potentially benefit from American goodwill had they supported Israel in the war. The fact that they gave up this relationship for a stable flow of oil into their countries provides evidence for a final claim: the 1973 embargo was successful in furthering Arab interests in response to the 1973 Arab-Israeli war. More importantly, this serves to prove the power of the oil weapon: a resource that has the ability to influence international politics in ways that very few things can, and can give immense power to nations that lack geopolitical importance otherwise.

ENDNOTES

2 Joel Bennin and Lisa Hajjar, “Palestine, Israel and the Arab-Israeli Conflict: A Primer,” Middle East Research and Information Project.
3 Ibid.
4 Benny Morris, The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem Revisited (Cambridge: Cambridge University
6 Ibid.
8 Bickerton.
10 Ibid.
11 Ibid.
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The Islam of Sayyid Qutb
A Comparison to Classical Islamic Thought

Megan Stewart

Megan Stewart is a Masters student at Brandeis University in a Joint MA program for Near Eastern and Judaic Studies & Coexistence and Conflict Studies. Originally from Bangor, Maine, she received her Undergraduate Degree in Anthropology at Texas A&M University in 2012 where she focused her studies on Near Eastern religion, Arabic language studies, and archaeology. Megan’s interests include both early and modern Quranic interpretation as well as improving international relations between the Near East and the United States.
During the time of Western expansion in the Middle East, the identity of the general Middle Eastern population went through a number of changes that would later influence how the region viewed the Western world. Sayyid Qutb grew up in the Middle East in the early twentieth century as the region was establishing its identity, struggling to meld the traditional and modern. Qutb became a vocal opponent of Western society and worked to persuade Muslims everywhere of the need to return to tradition, reject Western culture, and devote themselves to God. Although his radical views ultimately brought about his execution, his death did little to stop the spread of his ideas, which were soon adopted by Islamist terrorist groups across the Middle East. Though Qutb refers to some of the earliest Islamic Prophetic Sunnah to make his points, the overall message of his *Milestones* does not agree with the Classical
Islamic sources. By looking at the Qur’an, Quranic commentary, Hadith, and other sources of the Islamic Prophetic tradition, it can be shown that Qutb’s views are not Islamic.

**A Short Biography of Sayyid Qutb**

In 1906, in the Egyptian village of Musha, Sayyid Qutb was born into a well-respected, educated family. His father, Qutb Ibrahim, was a farmer and a political activist in the local branch of the Egyptian Nationalist Party. His mother, Fatimah, was a very devout Muslim who encouraged him to obtain a good education and memorize the Qur’an, which he accomplished by the age of ten. During the 1919 revolt in Egypt, Qutb’s primary school was closed, and his family soon moved to Cairo. He was later enrolled in a preparatory school in Cairo and then enrolled at Dar al-‘Ulum in 1929, graduating with a Bachelor’s Degree in Arts of Education.

During his years in Cairo, Qutb composed poetry and wrote essays that were published in Egyptian journals, including al-Hayat al-Jadidah (“The New Life”) and al-Balagh (“Proclamation”). At the age of nineteen, Sayyid Qutb published his earliest poem in al-Balagh, in which he attacked British policies and defended Egypt’s current leader, Sa’d Zaghlul. Qutb distinguished himself in his field and upon his graduation was employed at the university as an instructor. Following that, he worked in the Egyptian Ministry of Education. In 1939, Qutb began pursuing a career in literary criticism, which brought him back to the Qur’an. At this point, he started to examine the Qur’an beyond its religious qualities and to contemplate it as a book of law.

Qutb’s hatred of Western ideology became more prominent. He thought the Middle East’s imitation of the West’s replacement of moral and religious values with modern inventions and material possession was a mistake. His hatred of the West intensified in 1942 when President Truman began supporting a Jewish homeland in Palestine. Sayyid Qutb further solidified his distaste for Western society in 1948, when he enrolled at the International Center for Teaching Languages in Washington, D.C. and then at the Colorado State College of Education. Qutb visited the United States at the emergence of the sexual revolution, a period marked by great debate on morality, love, sex, and relationships. Qutb grew uncomfortable during his time in the United States, and deepened his disapproval of American values.

Qutb also joined church groups to observe how Americans worshipped God. He noted that the church functioned primarily as a place to meet with friends, not as a place of worship. Both genders worshipped together, and churches competed to attract parishioners. In his book Amrika allati Raaytu, he expresses disgust for a priest who promoted fun and dancing at a church event, believing the priest acted merely as stage manager. When Qutb returned to Egypt, his career plans had changed:

“Two events in particular from his sojourn in the United States made him entertain joining the Muslim Brethren. The first was ‘the happy and joyous American reception’ in 1949 of the assassination of Hasan al-Bannā, the founder of the Muslim Brethren. The second was meeting with a ‘British agent,’ identified by Qutb as James Heyworth-Dunne, who told him...”

![Emblem of the Muslim Brotherhood. © Maher Attar/Sygma/Corbis](https://example.com/embroider.png)
that the Muslim Brethren was the only movement that stood as a barrier to Western civilization in the East. Dunne also showed Qutb ‘intelligence reports’ on al-Banna and his organization. that the Muslim Brethren was the only movement that stood as a barrier to Western civilization in the East. Dunne also showed Qutb ‘intelligence reports’ on al-Banna and his organization. 

After joining the Muslim Brotherhood in the early 1950s, Qutb became the chief managing editor of the weekly Brotherhood journal, which was banned in 1954 on suspicions of conspiracy. A majority of the Muslim Brotherhood, including Qutb, was jailed, and the organization lost followers, even though the court could not find enough evidence to convict the members of the Brotherhood.

Qutb spent the rest of his life working with the Muslim Brotherhood and publishing his radical Islamic books. Much of his work on the Qur’an was written during his time in prison. Upon his release in 1964, he gained approximately one hundred followers, and together, they worked to plan the assassination of major Egyptian governmental figureheads, as well as the destruction of national infrastructure.

After being arrested for these activities, Qutb and other leaders within the Muslim Brotherhood were hanged in 1966. Qutb’s execution marked the government’s move to curtail the spread of his ideas and of the Muslim Brotherhood. This plan backfired, angering the extended family of Qutb, increasing the number of others, and inspiring Qutb’s followers to publish his works. His brother Muhammad Qutb fled Egypt and began teaching Sayyid’s works in Saudi Arabia. Qutb’s ideas were widely read and implemented by radical Islamists, including Osama Bin Laden, Ayman al-Zawahiri, ‘Abdallah Azzam, and more.

**Milestones**

Of the numerous books written by Sayyid Qutb, his most renowned, *Milestones*, was the work that ultimately led to his re-arrest and execution in 1966. In this text, he emphasizes the need to return to a time when Islamic law reigned supreme but believed that only a complete annihilation of the current system would guarantee the formation of an ideal society. Qutb’s primary idea, expressed in every chapter of *Milestones*, is that humanity has devolved into *Jahiliyyah*, or “the Age of Ignorance,” which represents the time prior to the Qur’an.

The message of God revealed to Muhammad, delivered believers out of the time of ignorance. Notably, the Qur’an differentiates between those who are ignorant of the message and those who are *kafirs*, or disbelievers. According to Islam, disbelievers have no chance at Paradise following the Day of Judgment. For this reason, the claim that all Muslim societies are *jahili* societies is inaccurate. Qutb most likely took the idea of continued *Jahiliyyah* from verse 5:50 of the Qur’an: “Is it judgment of the Age of Ignorance that they seek? And who is fairer in judgment than God, for a people who are certain,” which alludes to the possibility of ‘ignorance’ happening at any point in time. However, the ‘Age of Ignorance’ in general should not be associated with Muslims.

Qutb’s continuous use of the word *Jahiliyyah*
and his definition implies that ‘current Muslims are not true Muslims.’ However, the Qur’an specifically tells Muslims not to accuse the other of disbelief. Accusing a Muslim of apostasy is a practice in Islamic law called takfir, which if unjustly declared, is considered impermissible by every school of Islamic law. Ironically, Qutb himself was unable to follow the Qur’an’s most basic injunctions.

Though Qutb’s idea of Jahiliyyah as expressed in Milestones differs in definition from the ‘Age of Ignorance’ with which Muslims are most familiar, earlier Islamist radicals, among them Nadwi and Mawdudi, had also used the term to describe “a transhistorical reality definitionally opposite to Islam.”

Although “Qutb described himself as someone who lived in the Jahiliyyah for many years devoting himself to the quest for knowledge and studying whatever sciences came to his hand,” Qutb’s claim that he lived in Jahiliyyah due to his quest for knowledge can be seen as a gross contradiction to the classical Islamic view to actively seek knowledge.

In Milestones, he discourages the current Muslim population from striving to compete with Western industry and to instead focus primarily on establishing a new world order focused on submission to God. “The Muslim community today is neither capable of nor required to present before mankind any great genius in material inventions, which will make the world bow its head before its supremacy and thus re-establish once more its world leadership.” Qutb believes that seeking knowledge distracts from religious obligations but claims later that Islam supports education, including a secular one. His claim that God wants Muslims to stop educating themselves goes against a number of prophetic Sunnah within the Islamic tradition. An example of this can be seen in a sahih hadith composed by at-Tirmidhi, which states that the Prophet Muhammad encouraged Muslims to seek knowledge as a way of understanding God: “Whoever takes a path upon which to obtain knowledge, Allah makes the path to Paradise easy for him.”

An entire chapter of Milestones is dedicated to the Islamic idea of Jihad. According to Qutb, “the Jihad of Islam is to secure complete freedom for everyman throughout the world by releasing him from his servitude to other human beings so that he may serve his God.” This passage presents an extremist interpretation of Jihad, especially since Qutb believed that the only way to obtain ‘freedom’ was the destruction of jahili society.

The permission to fight granted by God in Quranic verses is interpreted by Qutb to mean that those who do not dedicate their life to God are the ones who should be fought and that it is the right of the ‘true Muslim’ to fight against those who oppose the Message of the Prophet Muhammad. In Milestones, Qutb concludes with the following:

“In the verse giving permission to fight, God has informed the Believers that the life of this world is such that checking one group of people by another is the law of God, so that the earth may be cleansed of corruption […] this struggle is not a temporary phase but an eternal state—an eternal state, as truth and falsehood cannot co-exist on this earth.”

What is interesting about this interpretation is that the majority of tafsir concerning verses 22:39-40 of the Qur’an addresses these verses as circumstantial, particularly referring to the state of the Muslim community during the hijra to Medina following their expulsion by the Quraysh tribe of Mecca. Ibn Abbas explains that the interpretation of this “permission to fight” is directed solely at the permission to fight against the Meccan oppressors of the early Muslim community.

For this reason it can be concluded that Qutb’s belief in the Muslim right to fight non-believers solely for their disbelief is misplaced and that his...
hatred for Western culture caused him to stretch the verse to meet his needs. He further uses his hate for Judaism and Europe’s support of Israel to blame Jews for Western expansionism.23

Though the Qur’an often takes an ambiguous stance towards Christians and Jews, it does acknowledge that their holy books contain the word of God. Though the path laid out by Muhammad is regarded as the “straight path” to God and therefore believed to be the most truthful of God’s Revelations, the Qur’an does state that all People of the Book have a chance at Paradise. The Qur’an generally puts forth an amicable attitude toward the People of the Book, and for this reason it can be Sayyid Qutb’s anger for the Jews is not based on the Qur’an but instead on the political events of the Middle East.

Conclusion

This paper sets the framework for discounting some of the unfounded interpretations put forth by radicalized Islamist groups. Due to the Islamic teaching that the Qur’an can and should be interpreted in many different ways, Sayyid Qutb and his ideas cannot be considered wholly non-Islamic. However, although the works of Sayyid Qutb, Milestones in particular, use the Qur’an to validate his claims, it can be shown that Qutb’s thoughts and ideas are not based on the religious laws set forth by God in the Qur’an and the hadith of the Prophet, but are the extreme prejudice of an individual who feels as though his culture has been destroyed by Western society. Thus, it is the imperative of those who read Qutb’s teachings today to develop a critical perspective towards the interpretation of Islam used to justify their actions.

ENDNOTES

2 Ahmad S. Moussalli, Radical Islamic Fundamentalism: The Ideological and Political Discourse of Sayyid Qutb, (Beirut: American University of Beirut, 1992), see Chapter 1.
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