

Learning from Adel Hammouda's Work on Militant Islamist Movements

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SEVEN YEARS AFTER the September 11, 2001 attacks, it remains critically important for Western analysts to study previous works on Islamist movements by Arab writers. There are a number of Arabic-language books that can help provide insight into the thinking of today's Islamist militants. One such author is Adel Hammouda, an Egyptian social commentator, investigative journalist and researcher. More than two decades ago, Hammouda published an Arabic-language book that delved into the Islamist militant trend called the *sabwa* or Islamist re-awakening. The *sabwa* was an attempt to remedy the humiliating defeat of five Arab armies in the aftermath of the 1967 Six Day War through radical Islamist political action. Hammouda traced the evolution of the *sabwa* trend from radical political expression to violent direct action in his book *al-Hijra ila al-`Unf al-Tatarruf al-Dini min Hazimat Yunyu ila Ightiyal Uktubur* (Migration into the Violence of Religious Extremism from the June Defeat to the October Assassination). Hammouda was prompted to write his book in 1987 due to the failure of Egyptian intellectual voices to speak out against the Islamist militant trend. He was dismayed to find that the best research on Islamist militant groups during the presidency of Anwar al-Sadat were written by Israeli researchers.

Arabic books written about Islamist militants offer a treasure trove of understanding about the adversary on many levels from the tactical to the strategic. It is critical for U.S. strategists to study these books, such as Adel Hammouda's, to find insights from past militant Islamist movements so that they can be applied today.

Hammouda's Work on Egyptian Militant Islamist Groups

Hammouda's book offers an excellent expose into the militants who attempted to operationalize the theories of Islamist militant ideologue Sayyid Qutb, who is among the most important

ideologues of modern Islamist militant theory. Hammouda argued that several militants—including those who plotted Anwar al-Sadat's assassination in 1981—were attempting to put into practice Qutb's theories. Some argue that al-Qa`ida deputy Ayman al-Zawahiri is an outgrowth of Qutb's use of Islam to justify the complete rejection of 20th century Muslim society as corrupt, and the need to withdraw from society before forming a vanguard to lead a militant Islamist revolution.

Hammouda used his publication to criticize Egypt's *ulama* (clerical establishment), who thought that issuing written and verbal outrage was enough to counter the direction in which militants were taking Islam, chastising the clergy for not deconstructing Islamist militant ideologies and actions. The book is critical of 1970s senior Egyptian cleric Shaykh `Abd al-`Aziz `Isa for blaming Islamist militancy of the 1970s and 1980s on family upbringing and not the theology of militant Islam. Hammouda argued that militant Islamist theory needed to be refuted using cogent Islamic arguments. At the time, several questions were being asked by the Muslim youth (some of whom would later join al-Qa`ida), such as: is using force or evangelism to propagate the faith legitimate, and what constitutes an Islamic state? According to Hammouda, the clergy—caught between Islamist militants and the state—failed in their basic duty to answer these questions and, instead, ignored them.

Salah Sirriyya's Attempt to Storm the Military Technical College

After Qutb was executed in 1966, those who read his Islamist militant political manifesto, *Milestones Along the Road*, extrapolated that in the hierarchy and sovereignty of man and God (what Qutb called the *hakmiyya*), there must be no competition—God must be absolute. The trappings of a nation-state, a national anthem, honoring Egypt's tomb of the Unknown Soldier, and saluting the flag were all forms of idolatry because they competed for God's glory. Readers thereafter used Qutb and the Pakistani ideologue Abu al-A`la Mawdudi's reference of the secular state competing with God's sovereignty to delegitimize the modern nation-state. Due to Qutb's prolific writings that included not only his political manifesto *Milestones Along the*

Road, but books on Islamic economics, Qur'anic commentary and social justice, it is highly probable that had Qutb lived, he would have most likely written manifestos that transformed his militant visions and theory into recommendations for direct action.

Among the first terrorists and Islamist militants to operationalize Qutb was the Palestinian Salah Sirriyya, who led a failed 1974 attempt to storm the Military Technical College in Cairo. Sirriyya's theories can be reduced to the following points:

- Over the centuries, Muslims have consistently failed to act on their beliefs, choosing dialogue instead. This problem is not specific to Palestinians but rather the result of the general malaise of the Arab-Muslim world's failure to act.

- An Islamic state versus a secular nation-state has as its objective the spreading of the Islamic message and its complete application on all spheres of life. All instruments of the state (media, education, foreign policy, economics and military) must be placed in the service of Islam.

- An Islamic state can elicit help from non-Muslims for technical aid, but cannot accept the leadership of non-Muslims.

The book argued that Sirriyya was the first organized expression of Qutb and where the tree of *takfir* (declaring Muslims apostate) began to bloom. Prior to the events of April 1974 and his storming of the Military Technical College, Sirriyya participated in Palestinian rejectionist groups, including being a member of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. Sirriyya arrived in Egypt at an ideal time for Islamist radicals, between 1971 and 1977. During this time, Anwar al-Sadat used Islamist radical groups as a counter-weight to the Nasirists, leftists and Marxists who were attempting to remove him from power. Al-Sadat attempted to distinguish himself from Gamal `Abd al-Nasir by assuming the title of *Ra'is al-Mu'minin* (President of the Faithful) and cloaking himself in religiosity. The environment in Egypt, and the release of Muslim Brotherhood prisoners jailed by al-Nasir, provided an atmosphere for Sirriyya and others to experiment with staging a coup

using Qutbist theory as the basis of an Islamic revolutionary politics. He became disillusioned with Palestinian rejectionist groups and, having left Jordan for Egypt, found refuge in the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, where he would meet Muhammad al-Ghazali, Zaynab al-Ghazali, and Supreme Guide Hasan al-Hudaybi. Soon after Sirriyya's death sentence in October 1975, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood disassociated itself from him, and the details of the extent of the links between Sirriyya and the Brotherhood remain murky. Salah Sirriyya's storming of the Military Technical College in 1974 to lead a widespread military coup was ill-conceived and had no chance for success. He did, however, inspire those who were later involved in the successful assassination of Egyptian President Anwar al-Sadat. Sirriyya is considered the first person after Qutb's execution in 1966 to attempt to operationalize Qutbist theories.

Qutb in Practice: Shukri Mustafa's Violent Cult

Shukri Mustafa entered al-Nasir's prisons in 1965, interrupting his studies in agriculture at the University of Assuit. He was imprisoned for six years for agitating and inciting radical Islamist riots on campus. While in prison, Mustafa joined Jama`at al-Muslimin (GM).¹ GM was established by an imprisoned Azhar seminarian, `Ali `Abduh Isma`il, as an Islamic enclave in prison used to perfect an Islamic lifestyle among inmates and to establish the initial steps necessary in establishing an Islamic state. Hammouda detailed how this prison group tore itself apart by what is described as a *takfir* war with other prison groups, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, and prison authorities. Among GM's tactics were to declare whole swathes of prison inmates and authorities apostate. This became so disruptive that the supreme guide of the Muslim Brotherhood, Hasan al-Hudaybi, was brought in to rationalize with the GM. Al-Hudaybi would later pen a critique of *takfir*, entitled *Du`a laa Quda'* (Evangelicals and Not Judges). The seminarian of GM ceased his activities, depriving Mustafa of his only source of empowerment in prison. He would

withdraw into himself until his release in 1971, formulating what would become his cult, known as al-Takfir wa'l-Hijra (Anathematization and Emigration).

Mustafa's extended imprisonment from 1965 to 1971 found him recreating a society modeled on the Islamist prison group GM. By 1976, al-Takfir wa'l-Hijra had 5,000 members ranging in age from 14 to 70. In 1973, Shukri Mustafa linked up and merged with remnants of Salah Sirriyya's group, taking all of his followers to the mountains of Assuit to begin the creation of a perfect Islamic society. In 1975, Egyptians in the Assuit region became alarmed when young

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women disappeared and were presumed kidnapped. This was followed by disappearances of wives, husbands and students. These individuals had been enticed to join Shukri Mustafa's cult. Mustafa would claim to Egyptian authorities and court officials that he was the caliph of God on Earth. Members had to sell their worldly goods to join the group. Mustafa authorized only certain followers to trade for the group, who he established as street vendors selling produce and handcrafted goods in Alexandria. Mustafa also utilized child labor and sent cult members to Persian Gulf countries to send back remittances. Women worked in a collective and had to render Mustafa blind obedience. Mustafa also imposed a plethora of forbidden and permissible items. All aspects from the *jabilyya* society²—schools, mosques, food subsidies and clothes—provided by the government were prohibited.

On July 3, 1977, Mustafa's cult abducted at gunpoint a popular cleric and

former religious minister, Shaykh Muhammad al-Dahabi. Mustafa's cult took responsibility for the kidnapping and issued several demands, chiefly the release of Mustafa's followers in Egyptian jails; pardon for those sentenced to prison; and an investigation into the abuses perpetrated by Egypt's internal security apparatus. There are a variety of reasons why Shukri Mustafa's group targeted al-Dahabi, and some of them can be explained by looking at al-Dahabi's views on radical groups. Some of his views are outlined below:

- Some youth feel that social ills can be solved by force or by withdrawing from society. These youth have to be provided a relentless exposure to the reality of Islam, which rejects the path of extremes, ignorance and deception.

- Islam can propagate a rational and calm form of *da`wa* (evangelism).

- Islamic law must accommodate and serve the needs of the social problems of the age.

- Islam must be purified from fantasies, ignorance and pseudo-intellectualism. Regrettably, the voices of fantasy are louder than the voices of truth.

- Mosques need to be places that do more than serve as a prayer hall for the masses, but as a life-long school to explore Islamic thought and intellectualism.

- The imam must reach out to the youth and engage them in constructive dialogue to steer them away from radicalism through alternative Islamic arguments.

- Egyptians should not focus on just detaining youth, but offer alternative and constructive Islamic thought.

Al-Dahabi's views contradicted Qutbist militant thought, making him a target of Shukri Mustafa. The Egyptian government responded to al-Dahabi's kidnapping by conducting mass arrests of cult members. Shukri Mustafa himself was finally apprehended at a Cairo apartment. Al-Dahabi's murdered body, however, was found in an apartment in Giza near the pyramids. The government dismantled the group, and in 1978 three of its main leaders were sentenced to death, including Shukri Mustafa.

¹ The group's title is often transliterated as Gamaa al-Muslimin. The group is not to be confused with the better known and organized Jama`at al-Islamiya.

² *Jabilyya* society was a Qutbist perversion of how the Prophet Muhammad described aspects of Meccan society such as infanticide.

Mustafa's appeal was his ability to create an alternative society with a spiritual focus that enticed thousands.

Al-Dahabi's words should be assessed today to confront the current ideological war. Islamist radicals murdered him for his ideas because he directly challenged Qutbist militant thought. American strategists must now immerse themselves in what the United States once considered obscure and unknown criminal cases since they provide insights in waging the long war on terrorism. Arabic books provide a unique and in-depth perspective that cannot be ignored as America's future military leaders are educated.

Commander Youssef Aboul-Enein is considered an important thinker on militant Islamist ideology at the Department of Defense and is a frequent contributor to the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point. He currently serves as a Defense Department Counter-Terrorism Analyst. CDR Aboul-Enein wishes to thank the John T. Hughes and Brandeis University Libraries for making this work available for study. He also wishes to express appreciation to his colleague Mr. Gregory Elder for his edits and commentary that have enhanced this expose.