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Doctoral Thesis Review

Candidate: Ronnie Azoulay

Thesis title: *Sayyid Qutb Reconsideration: Understanding the Impact of Qutb's Ideology on Modern Radical Islamist Movement*, Faculty of Political Science and Journalism UAM, Poznań 2017, pp. 235

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I. Choice of topic

“Spain was hit by its worst terrorist attack in more than a decade on Thursday, when a van driver plowed into dozens of people enjoying a sunny afternoon on one of Barcelona’s most famous thoroughfares, killing at least 13 people and leaving 80 bloodied on the pavement”, wrote the New York Times on August 17, 2017. It is not an exaggeration to say that, nowadays, the Islamic terrorism is one of the main threats to security in Europe, Africa, and the Middle East. Reports on terrorist attacks carried out by Islamic extremists appear in media almost on a daily basis. Why does terrorist violence break out in the first place? Who are the attackers? What ideology drives them to attack the random people on the streets? These questions have already been raised by many researchers and experts. So far, however, no single and definite answer has been given. Mr. Ronnie Azoulay’s has contributed to this debate by examining the impact of Sayyid Qutb’s ideology on modern radical Islamist movement. Considering that Mr. Azoulay’s thesis may fill a gap in current debates on modern Islamic radicalism, I find his choice of topic relevant, important, and needed.

Sayyid Qutb is one of the main Arab thinkers whose ideology largely influenced the Muslim Brotherhood movement as well as Muslim societies and countries, in general. Although his ideology holds sway over the modern Islamic radical movements, his influence seems to be oversimplified by Western researchers. Western scholars rarely examine reasons that lead radical and extremists groups to adopt Qutb’s ideology and the extent to which this

ideology encourages the use of physical violence. Since, in the public discourse, the explanation of the phenomena of Islamic radicalism and extremism that fuel terrorist attacks seems to be dominated by the Western point of view, a different perspective is definitely needed. Providing this alternative view is Mr. Azoulay's prime objective. As he makes this point unequivocally, his work intends to examine Qutb's contribution to Islamic society and Islamic groups from a perspective that differs from that dominating in the Western studies because, he argues, in the existing literature, there is a lack of explanation of "Sayyid Qutb's ideology and the interpretation Islamist groups have chosen to give it" (p. 4).

II. Research objective, hypothesis, methods and thesis' structure

The methodology of the dissertation has been well selected, and it meets the requirements of a doctoral thesis. In *Introduction*, the author lists the elements required for a Ph.D. thesis: the objective of his study, its hypothesis, the research questions, the formal structure of the dissertation as well as the literature review.

The goal of his thesis is to "examine the factors that led radical Islamist groups to employ Qutb's ideology, leading to a great Islamist outburst, while also exploring the reason modern research does not tend to focus on Sayyid Qutb's true intentions when he wrote his extreme ideology" (p. 4). The author seeks to answer two main questions: What was Qutb's original intention when he developed his extreme theories? How have modern radical Islamic groups interpreted Sayyid Qutb's writings? (pp. 3-4). Mr. Azoulay claims that, in the mainstream Western scholarship, Sayyid Qutb's has been regarded as a father of all modern radical Islamic groups and that this view, he contends, needs to be reexamined.

Azoulay's assumption is that "radical Islamic groups gave a new interpretation to Sayyid Qutb's writing in order to promote their personal interests" (p. 4). In order to confirm this assumption, Mr. Azoulay examines the current outbreak of Islamic violence in a broader context of Salafist ideology, which, in his view, is needed to understand contemporary radical Islamic ideology. For this reason, Mr. Azoulay has formulated several relevant research questions: What were the factors that led the Muslim world to a deep ideological crisis? Who were Islamic intellectuals who led to the Islamic revival?; How does the position of fundamentalist Islam compare to Christian, Hindi and Jewish fundamentalism?; Does contemporary research adequately present Sayyid Qutb's contribution to Muslim world?; What are the circumstances and reasons that lead mainstream Western research to conclude



that Qutb is the father of modern fundamentalism? Why did the Islamic groups choose to adopt Qutb's ideology? (p. 8).

Research methods were selected appropriately (pp. 5-8). Mr. Azoulay's main methodological approach is a qualitative one. Even though I disagree with the author's statement that "qualitative approach is fundamentally descriptive", I concur with his subsequent clarification that "the study of culture and ethnicity cannot be measured in quantitative tools" (p. 6).

The dissertation's structure is clear and logical. The study has been divided into seven chapters. The first chapter outlines the main contentious issues within Islamic fundamentalism, including such problems as the roots of crisis in the Muslim world, definitions on Islamic fundamentalism, differences and similarities between fundamentalism in Islam, Hinduism, Christianity and Judaism, as well as Islamic revival period. The second chapter is dedicated to examining Sayyid Qutb's legacy that has not been fully scrutinized in the current research, and it focuses on positive aspects in Qutb's philosophy. The third chapter discusses the leading Western interpretations of Qutb's works that recognize him as a father of modern Islamic radical groups. Chapter four presents six Muslim thinkers who significantly shaped Sayyid Qutb's: Taqi Ad-din Ahmad Ibn Taymiyya, Jamal As-Din Al-Afgani, Muhammad Abduh and Rashid Rida, Abbas Mahmud Al Aqqad, and Sayyid Abdul Ala Al-Mawdudi. The fifth chapter highlights the impact of the most influential books of Sayyid Qutb, *In the Shadow of Qur'an* (1954) and *Milestones* (1964). While *In the Shadow of Qur'an* is a critique of the destructive influence of modernity on Islamic tradition, *Milestones* is a call to action to re-create the Muslim world on a strictly Quranic basis. The sixth chapter analyzes the ideology and circumstances that led to the success of modern radical Islamic groups. Four dominant Islamic groups are analyzed: the Taliban, Al-Qaeda, the Shia in Iran, and the Islamic State. The final chapter provides the assessment of Sayyid Qutb contribution to modern Muslim societies and groups.

It should be noted, however, that the scope and the length of chapters are overly diversified and unbalanced. E.g., chapter five has 40 pages whereas chapter two only 14. It also unclear why the author has decided to list conclusions as a separate chapter seven, considering that the introduction is not listed as a separate chapter.

All in all, Mr. Azoulay correctly conceptualized his main research task and carried it out adequately. It shows the author's good understanding on Sayyid Qutb's ideology and his ability to examine it critically and rigorously.

III. The sources of the dissertation

The sources of Mr. Azoulay's dissertation are adequate to carry out an appropriate analysis.

As Mr. Azoulay made it clear, he focused on two central sources: 1) "Sayyid Qutb's writings, 2) researchers, commonly used terms, opinion, and recommendations researching and analyzing Qutb's ideology and its influence on Arab-Muslim society in general and on radical Islamist groups in particular" (p. 7). Concerning the latter, two observations are in order.

First, some well-known writings on Sayyid Qutb's thought and/or legacy are missing from Mr. Azoulay's study. Though the author relied on books and articles written by notable scholars and analysts, his thesis would have been undoubtedly enriched by such books as John Calvert, *Sayyid Qutb and the Origins of Radical Islamism* (Columbia University Press, New York 2010), James Toth, *Sayyid Qutb: The Life and Legacy of a Radical Islamic Intellectual* (Oxford University Press, New York 2013), and Sayed Khatab, *The Political Thought of Sayyid Qutb: The Theory of Jahiliyyah* (Routledge, New York 2006).

Second, the list of the sources used in the dissertation was presented in a form of a bibliography. Dividing a bibliography into several categories – books, articles, and internet sources – would have made it much more lucid and in line with scholarly conventions.

IV. The content of the dissertation

The content of the dissertation corresponds to the topic defined in the title. The author has successfully presented information required to understand the question of Sayyid Qutb's ideology and its influence on modern radical Islamist movement. In the first chapter, Mr. Azoulay synthesizes the history of rivalry and struggle between the West and Islam, calling it the roots of crisis in the Muslim world. This part of his dissertation also includes a brief and interesting overview that helps to understand common relations between those two parties as well as changes in Muslims' attitudes towards the West and its values. Mr. Azoulay also rightly notices that fundamentalism should not be attributed exclusively to Islam but also to other religions, such as Christianity, Hinduism, and Judaism (pp. 28-34). Nonetheless, in said context, I would rather suggest that the term "Indian fundamentalism" should not be used as synonymous with "Hindu fundamentalism" (p. 30), as approximately 20% of India's population are not the followers of Hinduism.



In the chapters that follow, Mr. Azoulay argues that Sayyid Qutb's ideology has been misinterpreted by many Western researchers, and he reconsiders the Qutb's ideology and its impact on modern radical Islamist movement. His research leads him to a remarkable conclusion. He claims that the majority of Western researchers, who examine modern Islamism, misinterpret an influence of Qutb's ideology on radical Islamist movement, with its emphasis on violence, because they do not take into account the complexity of Islamic discourse as well as historical developments of Islamic ideology. Mr. Azoulay points out that the roots of contemporary violence can be found in 13th century works of Ibn Taymiyya. As he writes in the sixth chapter: "In order to comprehend the religious fanaticism that motivates the Al-Qaeda organization and all modern Salafist groups, one must go back in time to 13th and 14th centuries, and understand the radical thoughts of Ibn Taymiyya and the legacy he left for the generations that followed him. (...) The path passing as a unique line of thought from the 14th century to 20th century, clearly leads to Egyptian intellectual Sayyid Qutb" (chapter VI, p. 174). As a matter of fact, "the great similarity between Ibn Taymiyya's theories and declarations and those by Sayyid Qutb is very clear", the author claims (chapter VI, p. 175). He also states that it is not the ideology of Islam that promoted the development of contemporary Islamic violence; this ideology has just been used by leaders of Islamic radical groups who interpret Qutb's work in a very narrow sense. Mr. Azoulay states it clearly: "While Sayyid Qutb supported the idea of Jihad as a legitimate tool for combating injustice and wrongs, he did not explicitly declare that people were required to make use of physical violence in order to prevent injustice. (...) Radical groups (...) took the terms of *Jahiliyyahh* and *Jihad* as taught by Qutb and interpreted them in the narrow sense and the least important manner, as having the importance of a physical struggle" (chapter V, p. 158).

The author also makes another interesting observation that relates to linguistics. Mr. Azoulay notices that "most Western-oriented studies that examine the political aspects of Islam have drawn largely upon works written solely in English (...). In this manner, many Western scholars have difficulty in understanding the diacritical distinctions, which are very important when analyzing the complex texts written in Arabic" (chapter II, p. 57).

In order to understand the modern radical Islamist movement, the circumstances of its activities also need to be taken into account. Mr. Azoulay correctly points out that some researchers, especially Western-minded, seem to forget that it was the West's policy that contributed to the emergence of Al-Qaeda, the Taliban, and the so-called Islamic State, not to mention the outbreak of the Islamist revolution in Iran in 1979. In this context, some of Mr. Azoulay's statements seem thought provoking, to put it mildly. E.g., Mr. Azoulay writes that



“the West is obliged to make an extreme and drastic change that will unite all Western powers in an effort to destroy the continuity that grants jihadists the energy to fight, with great success, against Western powers. Should these powers join and unquestionably support Muslim societies with real economic, social and political assistance, it will be the beginning of a new path that will nip at the power and legitimacy of Islamist groups” (p. 211). If a policymaker was to accept the author’s recommendation, how should the West support Muslim societies with real economic, social and political assistance given a general distrust among Muslims towards the Western powers? In particular, in making realistic recommendations, shouldn’t one take into account a fiasco of the well-documented attempts at offering such assistance, especially in light of the failure of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership/Union for the Mediterranean?

Among substantive omissions, Mr. Azoulay’s does not clarify the meaning of “modern radical Islamist movement”, which, oddly enough, is part the title of his dissertation. In the first chapter, Mr. Azoulay explains what the Islamic fundamentalism is (pp. 24-35), but he does not discuss the relation – or a difference – between “fundamentalism”, “radicalism”, and “extremism”. Because those three terms are not synonyms, they should be defined or, at the very least, similarities and differences between them should be expounded, especially since the author uses all of them frequently in his dissertation – in addition to variations on said terms such as “extremist groups” (i.e., pp. 48, 62, 63) and “radical groups” (i.e., pp. 56, 82).

The same remark pertains to the use of the term “modern”. It is not clear throughout Mr. Azoulay’s dissertation what specific period the author has had in mind when referencing this term. One may extrapolate that “modern”, as used by Mr. Azoulay, relates to the time after Sayyid Qutb’s death in 1966. Nonetheless, this point is never clearly explained. By a similar token, the author never elucidates what he means by the term “movement”. This omission leads to a major confusion. For example, when Mr. Azoulay analyzes “modern radical Islamist movement”, he indiscriminately groups together such diverse entities like the Taliban, Al-Qaeda, the Shia in Iran, and the Islamic State. Mr. Azoulay explains that he focuses on “four central Islamist radical organizations, in which Qutb’s influence is apparent” (p. 98). On the surface this argument is correct. Yet, we need to bear in mind that these are four *distinct* entities, and some explanation is needed, especially if they are to be examined as similar, compatible or akin to each other as the author implies.

The lack of terminological precision seems to be the key liability of Mr. Azoulay’s work. For example, one of the key terms that Mr. Azoulay uses is “modernity.” Unfortunately, Mr. Azoulay never explains what he means by this term. “Modernity” has numerous



denotations, and the author should indicate which meaning of “modernity” he accepts - and why. Likewise, Mr. Azoulay never defines a difference between “Muslim” and “Islamic”. He seems to treat both as synonyms (i.e. “Islamic world”, pp. 42, 44, 113, 161 et al. and “Muslim world”, pp. 22, 27, 40, 43, 56, 113, 157 et al.), as if forgetting that terminological precision matters.

The above remarks notwithstanding, my overall assessment of Mr. Ronnie Azoulay’s thesis is positive. The content of the dissertation is indicative of the author’s high degree of familiarity with the questions he addresses. His presentation of arguments is logical, and the conclusions he reaches are convincing and appropriate. Even though some notions that he employs lack clarity or are not precisely defined, they are used in the acceptable manner, generally speaking.

V. Final remarks

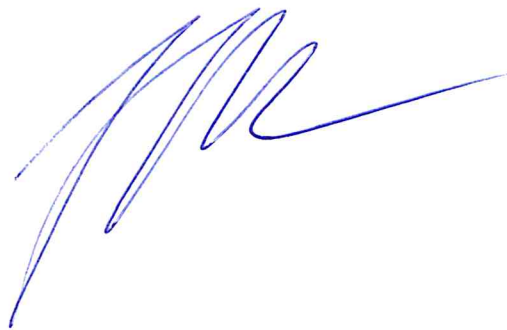
1. Mr. Ronnie Azoulay’s Ph.D. dissertation demonstrates the author’s high knowledge of the questions under examination. His study includes a detailed description and explanation of Sayyid Qutb’s thought and its contemporary legacy that differs from the perspectives dominate in the Western research. The author’s findings and observations are indicative of his familiarity with the facts, and they testify to his ability to conduct a critical scholarly analysis.
2. His work demonstrates that Mr. Azoulay is capable of applying research methods skillfully and answering research questions effectively. He accomplished his research task successfully.
3. In his work, Mr. Azoulay made a good use of notions, concepts, and terms that the discipline of political science employs, even though some of them fall short of precision (e.g., definitions of radicalism, extremism, modernity, etc.).
4. In terms of form and technique, the dissertation meets the expected high standard of analysis.
5. On a technical side, the noticeable difference between scope and length of chapters is troublesome. Some editorial errors and omissions can also be found.



VI. Conclusions

The doctoral thesis written by Mr. Ronnie Azoulay meets the requirements defined in Art. 13, section 1 of the Act of 14 March 2003 on scientific degrees and academic titles, and on degrees and titles in the arts [Ustawa z dnia 14 marca 2003 roku o stopniach naukowych i tytule naukowym oraz o stopniach i tytule w zakresie sztuki].

Mr. Azoulay's thesis shows the author's ability to connect methodological and theoretical premises with analysis of the empirical material. His is an original contribution to the research question as set forth in the dissertation's title. I motion for accepting the dissertation under review and allowing Mr. Azoulay to proceed to the next stage of the Ph.D. program.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, consisting of several fluid, overlapping strokes that form a stylized, cursive representation of the author's name.