GUSHIST AND QUTBIAN APPROACHES TO GOVERNMENT: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF RELIGIOUS ASSASSINATION

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Summary

The disciples and pseudo-followers of the religious ideologues Sayyid Qutb and Rabbi Zvi Yehudah Kook have now lived without their mentors for more than twenty-five years (in the case of Qutb) and for more than a decade (in the case of Kook). In both instances, putative “disciples” of these thinkers committed assassinations of the acknowledged domestic leader of a sitting government: Sadat in 1981 by al-Jihad al-Islami; Rabin in 1995 by Eyal. In this paper, the theories of both mentors and their ersatz disciples on the issue of violence against the sitting government will be examined for possible comparative results. Rather than finding a symmetry in these examples of Middle Eastern fundamentalist violence, the author elaborates a sharp difference between the two: one (Islam) is centered on the issue of apostasy, while the other (Judaism) is centered on the issue of communal rights and protections. Rather than providing a point for drawing similarities, fundamentalist-inspired assassination points out the differences between Israeli-Jewish and Egyptian-Islamic fundamentalisms.

On August 29, 1966, the grandfather of Egyptian Muslim fundamentalism, Sayyid Qutb, aged 60, was hanged in Cairo by an official government tribunal. For decades, Qutb had been an ideologue and publicist on behalf of a radicalization of the Muslim Brotherhood Association, which often stood in opposition to the ruling regime. Oftentimes, Qutb was imprisoned for his views and associations. In 1966, according to the Egyptian government, Qutb had been at the center of a plan for military action against the government, which included the planned assassination of President Gamal ‘Abd al-Nasir, along with the prime minister, and the heads of intelligence and the military police. For these crimes he was put to death.1
Fifteen years after Qutb died, on October 6, 1981, a young military officer named Khalid al-Islambouli, inculcated on Muslim Brotherhood doctrine, led a group of fellow soldiers towards a reviewing stand and killed the President of Egypt Anwar al-Sadat.

On March 9, 1982, the father of Israeli Jewish fundamentalism, Rabbi Zvi Yehudah Kook, died. Kook was the son of Rabbi A.I. Kook, first Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of Palestine, noted mystic and spiritual authority, a religious ideologue who had made a kind of peace with the godless cultural Zionism of state-building. The son Zvi Yehudah became his father's devoted editor and undisputed interpreter. To first a small group of disciples, and then—after the conquest of Biblical lands during the June 1967 Arab-Israeli war—to a swelling assortment of galvanized young men, Rabbi Zvi Yehudah Kook became the leading light of the religious-nationalist settlement movement, which ultimately crystallized into an organization called Gush Emunim (Faith Bloc). While Kook never plotted to kill the political leaders of Israel, he was inspiration to a range of disciples who chose over the course of the next few years to engage in “restrained intercommunal violence” (as Ehud Sprinzak characterized it) which to varying degrees has been treated by a succession of Israeli governments as illegal.2 As one recent observer put it: “To this day, more than a decade after his death, his ideas remain a beacon for many in the Zionist yeshivot, and even more so for the leadership of Gush Emunim and the movement for the settlement of Jews in Judea and Samaria.”3 Kook died not at the hands of the Israeli government, but of natural causes at the age of 91 years. By the time he died one of his legs had been amputated, apparently the result of uncontrolled diabetes.4

Thirteen years after Kook died, on November 4, 1995, a young law student 26 years of age by the name of Yigal Amir, inculcated on the religious-national teachings of Kook and his disciples, shot and killed the Prime Minister of Israel, Yitzhak Rabin.

By drawing these two semi-symmetrical characterizations and juxtapositions, I do not mean to equate Sadat’s assassin with Rabin’s. Nor, for the purposes of religious history, do I mean to compare the
religious or political impact of Sayyid Qutb’s legacy in Egypt with that of Rabbi Zvi Yehudah Kook’s in Israel. But there is a useful comparison which we might undertake in looking at the general principles involved in modern-day Islamic and Jewish radicalism when it comes to killing a head of state. To date, there have been only a very few attempts to draw thoughtful comparisons between Islamic and Jewish fundamentalism, and this study is intended to challenge the prevailing view which attributes a kind of symmetry to the two religious movements.⁵

One assassin acts on behalf of an organization which dubs itself al-Jihād al-Islāmī (“the Islamic Struggle”), rife with secret police operatives and in touch with substantial officious clerics who publicly and surreptitiously vindicate the crime; the other assassin acts in concert with an organization anacronymized as Eyal, an abbreviation for “The Fighting Jewish Organization,”⁶ rife with secret police operatives and in touch with substantial officious clerics who publicly and surreptitiously vindicate the crime. Both assassins act within a national legacy of political violence which continues to this day. Anwar al-Sadat was not the first victim of the assassin, nor was he the last. The Mubarak regime, with its layers of corrupt bureaucrats and intelligence officers, and a myriad of Egyptian intellectuals who are being left out to be dried, remains a target for some future Islamist avenger. On the other hand, with Nachman Ben-Yehuda’s timely study of Political Assassination by Jews,⁷ and with publicly-aired calls for the assassination of Israeli Supreme Court Justice Aharon Barak only a few months old, no one can justifiably see Amir’s act as a singular event in the Israeli national culture. These assassins are not crazed lone gunmen; they each symbolize a national mood and political environment.

I do not intend to specifically dissect the personal histories of Amir or Islambouli. Of far greater importance is the effort to understand the religious teachings which brought these two young men to do what they did.
To be more precise, in the case of Sadat’s assassination, we are in possession of a work entitled *al-Farīdah al-Ghā’ibah*, known in English as *The Neglected Duty*, written by a disciple of Qutb who was in turn put to death by the Egyptian government in April of 1982. The work, which has been translated and annotated by Johannes J.G. Jansen, was widely published in the Egyptian daily newspaper *al-Ahrar* just more than two months after the assassination. This pamphlet has been rightly dubbed by Jansen as “the creed of Sadat’s assassins.”

In the case of Rabin’s assassination, there does not yet exist a similar document. But in the state trial conducted against Amir, and in the freewheeling Israeli press, there has emerged what amounts to a “creed.” To be fair, neither the Egyptian *Faridah* nor the Israeli record specifically invokes either Qutb on the one hand or Kook on the other. I yet feel confident that we may speak of Qutbian and Kookist tendencies in the matter of murdering the legally authorized political head of state.

Before addressing the specifics of these two creeds, some context is in order. Long before the modern era, both religious traditions of Judaism and Islam were possessed of a mechanism whereby murder, under certain circumstances, was made licit. The Pentateuch may declare “Thou shalt not kill” [Ex. 20: 13] and the Qur’an may announce “Kill not your children... nor slay the soul which God has forbidden you to slay” [17: 33-35]; yet both sacred scriptures provide for what can only be described as religious exceptions to these lofty pronouncements. In the case of the Pentateuch, a range of non-Israelite cultic behavior merits death by communal, if not individual, action. And in the case of the Qur’an, behavior which affronts the believers’ faith merits the punishment of death.

By the time a post-scriptural tradition crystallizes, Rabbinic Judaism has abandoned the notion of licit murder for doctrinal grounds while still maintaining a mechanism for licit murder. The principle is neatly summed up by four words in the Babylonian Talmud—*ba’ le-hargekha, hashkem le-hargō*—“If someone comes to kill you—rise up to kill him.”

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Alternatively, Islam, because of its imperial and universal political scope, was able to establish a doctrinal threshold for inflicting capital punishment. The *murtadd*, or "apostate," is a Muslim, whether by birth or conversion, who abandons Islam either for authorized religions, or for heresy, or for idolatry. According to the *shari'ah*, the apostate is to be given a 3-day opportunity to recant, and if that fails to bring the expected result, he is to be executed. While it is nowhere explicitly stated in the Qur'an that execution is the appropriate punishment for apostasy, it is the case that Sura 2: 217: *wa-man yartadd min kum 'an dinihi fa-yamut wa-huwa kafir...* "Whoever among you apostatizes from his religion and dies an infidel..." is regarded as prooftext enough.9

It is in this legalistic context that Sadat's assassins explicate their action. In a work which cites most liberally from the strict 14th century Islamic jurist Ibn Taymiyah, the *Faridah al-Gha'ibah* declares:

The rulers of this age are in apostasy from Islam (*hukkam al-muslimin fi riddah 'ani-'l-isldm*). They were raised at the tables of imperialism, be it Crusaderism or Communism, or Zionism. They carry nothing from Islam but their names, even though they pray and fast and claim to be Muslim... an apostate has to be killed.10

In this instance, the author of the *Faridah* declares in religio-legalistic fashion that the legal schools of Malikis, Shafi'is, and Hanbalis are all in agreement that an apostate must be killed. The form of the apostasy is Westernism, or "Crusaderism," and the rightful punishment is death.

When we look to the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, we discover a very different order of argumentation invoked in justification of the assassination. The issue is not apostasy, or some doctrinal deviation. Indeed, in the classic codes going back to medieval times, and across the cultural divide of Islam and Christendom, there is in Jewish law no comparable assault on the life and limb of the apostate.11 Thus, the issue here is cast in a somewhat more interpersonal—or at least communal—texture, as it involves the legal ruling concerning the *mōser*, the one who hands over a Jew to be
killed, or the *rödef*, a person who is pursuing another in order to kill him. The relevant passages of the authoritative sixteenth-century jurist Yosef Karo may be cited:

It is permitted to kill the *moser* in any instance, even in our time. It is permitted to kill him before he hands a Jew over. But if he merely says, “Behold! I am about to hand over someone in body or in property”—and even if it is but a little property—he has rendered himself liable to be killed. One should adjure him not to hand over a person, but if he is insolent and says “No, I will yet hand him over!” it is a divine commandment to kill him, and he who is expeditious in killing him has greater merit.  

The relevant passage for the ruling of the pursuer in the same law code is found at *Shulhan 'Arukh, Hoshen Mishpat*, 425: 1:

He who pursues his fellow man in order to kill him, who has been warned, and yet he continues to pursue him; even if he pursues a minor, behold all Jews are commanded to save the victim by incapacitating the pursuer. If one cannot thereby avert the pursuer and save the victim, then one should kill the *rodef* of the victim. Thus, one has killed him even though he has not yet effected the murder.

Here then is what the young assassin-law student said according to police transcripts during his investigation, a position he and his supporters trumpeted from his arrest through the final day of court: “All that I did I would never have done were it not for my religious obligation to defend the people of Israel from the *moser* Yitzhak Rabin, as has been stated by many Rabbis who tremble over the destiny of the Land of Israel and the People of Israel.”

In both instances, religious authorities arose to counter the supposedly flawed understandings of tradition expressed by the assassins’ sympathizers. Jansen devotes nearly as much space to the *Faridah* in his study *The Neglected Duty* as he does to a range of responses penned by the likes of Shaykh Jadd al-Ḥaqq, mufti of al-Azhar at the time. Similarly, officious Israeli and American-Jewish rabbis have either pronounced to journalists or penned essays exposing the failure of Amir’s supposedly flawed analysis of the halakhic imperatives cited in his defense. Whether these apologists for a “kinder, gentler” tradition are right or wrong, there remains a core of believers who
live by the creeds of the assassins. They will not be silenced or stilled by apologia.

Returning to the Israeli version of our theme, nowhere in my search of Zvi Yehudah Kook’s writing could I find anything approximating a call to murder an Israeli head of state. The most agitated and uncompromising round of Kookist statements came during the first Rabin government, during the 1974 Kissinger shuttle diplomacy era. Zvi Yehudah Kook was unyielding; for example, he never referred to the US Secretary of State by name throughout the period—he always referred to this famously Jewish international power broker by the most indelicate euphemism ba’al ha-goyah, “he who is married to a gentile.” Rabbi Kook openly called the Rabin government of 1974 a “tragi-comedy” and a farce: “it is worthless, nothing more than a disgrace.” But try as I may, having perused his writings and proclamations from that time period, I find nothing which directly brings us from Zvi Yehudah Kook’s Point A to Yigal Amir’s Point B.

Still, the seeds for action were present in the Kookist world view. As one reads Kook’s venomous contempt for the first Rabin government, a portrait emerges which is no less radical than that of the Faridah: “If there is any coercion on the part of anyone to negate the sovereignty of our state from [Judea and Samaria], are we all not then religiously obligated to rise in insurrection and offer up our lives for such a cause?”

What I am more interested in is to draw whatever comparisons one might make between these two extreme acts of modern political violence. Do they indicate a symmetry between the fundamentalist movements in each state? And, since they both seem to be targeting policy makers who are pursuing peace of one kind or another, are the motivations for each group the same? We’ve certainly heard enough punditry to that effect. I argue differently:

In these acts, and in the swirl of authentic literature or evidence that they have generated, it becomes clear that these are two very different fundamentalisms, despite our incessant efforts to draw them together. One is a fundamentalism of an imperial, global, and universal religion—or at least with aspirations to such. Accordingly,
apostasy has been always punishable by death, and alternate ideologi-
cal constructs, such as “Westernism” become the actual threat worthy
of struggling against. The other is a fundamentalism of what one his-
torian has called an “ethnic monotheism” with no universal or global
aspirations.16 Except for the writings of Meir Kahane, I have yet to
find a far-reaching critique of Westernism in either of the two identifi-
able Israeli fundamentalist communities, the ultra-orthodox Haredim
and the nationalist Gush Emunim. In making this claim, I go against
the prevailing scholarly evaluation of Gushist ideology. The regnant
scholarly opinion may be rendered in one of two ways, either a) the
Gush itself is opposed to Western democratic values; or b) the Gush
functions in Israeli society as an anti-democratic and even fascist
force. On the other hand, I think there is ample evidence of a high
regard for democratic process, both within the movement and be-
yond it. Within the movement, popular consensus functions within
the limitations of charismatic leadership; and beyond the movement,
the Gushist argument relies heavily on a call to Jewish majority con-
sensus regarding the Oslo peace process. To cite but one example of
this “democratic” spirit, Rabbi Zvi Yehudah Kook openly declared
his support for the value of Jewish majority politics during the 1974
crisis, in the clear expectation that such a majority would concur with
his political stand:

A true majority of Jews, even if they are of different opinions, is a normal
majority. No matter whether they are Jews with ties to the commandments,
or whether they have ties to the Land of Israel—in any event they all belong
to the totality of the manifestation of the divine light. And this is a normal
situation. But a governmental structure which relies on the assistance of Arab
representatives is an embarrassment, and a blasphemy, for which there is no cure
and no penance.17

Only Meir Kahane clearly takes on the mantle of angry anti-
Westernism as a full-blown ideology akin to Qutb’s “Crusaderism.”18
In the rest of Israeli Jewish fundamentalism, where Westernism is not
explicitly identified as the bogeyman, grave sins against the correct or-
der are cast in a xenophobic pressure cooker of communal rights and
individual wrongs. Admittedly, some of the most messianic extremists in the Gushist camp imbue a global and universalistic messianic dimension to their Jewish particularism. Aviezer Ravitzky has culled a few examples out of the Gushist maelstrom of the early 1980s which acclaim the universal role the redeemed Israeli nation shall play in human affairs. He portrays Rabbis Hayyim Druckman and Eliezer Waldman—each deans of Gushist rabbinical seminaries and each former parliamentarians—as confessing the universal mission of Israel and her army during the depths of the Lebanon misadventure:

... we pointed out that it is Israel’s task to bring order into the world... Who is going to bring order into the world? Those who submit to evil? The great powers, which are themselves suffused with wickedness or give into it? The people of Israel is the only one which is prepared to bring order... 19

In making this global shift, Rabbis Druckman and Waldman moved beyond the parameters of the more inwardly oriented Kookist view of Jewish nationalism—this despite the fact that the elder Kook was wont to refer to Israel as “the pedestal of God’s throne in this world.” The tension between restraint and messianic excess helps describe Gushist ideology for the past twenty years—but never once (to my knowledge) has this messianism been invoked in the matter of the Rabin assassination.

If we turn back to the no-longer-present founding ideologues, Sayyid Qutb and Rabbi Zvi Yehudah Kook, we find that the distinction I have drawn in the act of latter day assassination still holds. Sayyid Qutb—the far more prolific, systematic, and substantial of the two—constructed a system based on jahiliyyah and jihad, “ignorance” and “struggle.” Whether we examine his masterful and extensive Qur’an commentary In the Shadow of the Qur’an or his famous prison manifesto Milestones, the motion of Qutb’s thought takes place on a global, and broad cultural, plane. Sayyid Qutb does not speak from ignorance; as is the case with many modern Islamists, his biography contains a decisive rendezvous with the Western culture he learned to hate. As an officer in the sprawling Egyptian Ministry of Education, he spent 1949-1950 in California and Washington, studying modern
pedagogic methods. He came back to Cairo and was permanently scarred psychologically from the prejudiced relations he experienced from Americans who dismissed him because of his dark-colored skin. Like many fundamentalists, he was exposed to American culture, and he hated what he was exposed to.20

Sayyid Qutb, and most Sunni fundamentalists, declare their opponents and the targets of their fury as living in *jahiliyyah*. According to Islamic teaching, before the prophetic career of Muhammad, all of humanity—but particularly the Arabs—lived in an Age of Ignorance. Until Islam came into their lives, Muslims believe that the pre-Islamic Arabs were immoral, lustful, and depraved Bedouins. These are the marks of the Age of *jahiliyyah*. Qutb taught that the modern Arab nationalist politician was just such an immoral and depraved ignoramus. “Modernity at all costs,” the new Middle Eastern politician seemed to be saying, “even if we must abandon that embarrassing, backwards, and irrelevant religion of Islam.” Sayyid Qutb taught his fellow Egyptians to regard such secular politicians as ignoramuses who were without divine guidance:

Islam cannot accept any compromise with *jahiliyyah*, either in its concept or in the modes of living derived from this concept. Either Islam will remain, or *jahiliyyah*; Islam cannot accept or agree to a situation which is half-Islam and half-*jahiliyyah*. In this respect Islam’s stand is very clear. It says that the truth is one and cannot be divided; if it is not the truth, then it must be falsehood. The mixing and coexistence of the truth and falsehood is impossible. Command belongs to Allah, or else to *jahiliyyah*. The Shari’ah of Allah will prevail, or else people’s desires.21

Qutb taught that concerning these ignoramuses, it was a duty and an obligation of every Muslim to strive or struggle against them. Qutb declared *jihad* against the Egyptian government and the politicians who pretend to be good Muslims, but who are allowing alcohol into restaurants, sexy movies into the cinema, and Western licentiousness into public life. The reigning leaders and policy makers are poisoned with an overarching vileness, “Westernism” which is *jahiliyyah*, the very same ignorance of the godless, compassless era before Islam was
Gushist and Qutbian Approaches to Government
delivered to mankind. These politicians may be willing to compro-
mise with Israel or they may not; it does not matter—these politicians
must be opposed, and opposed violently, and their world-wide allies
must be opposed, until they are gone. In response to such abstract
and abiding Ignorance, one might simply declare it apostasy and flee
from it (takfir wa-hijrah). Better yet, one must struggle against it
(jihād).22

In the more constrained world of Rabbi Zvi Yehudah Kook, the fo-
cus of opposition is not a broad cultural construct such as “the West”
or even the goyim, but Jews who would dare relinquish the Jewish
spatial patrimony. From his oft-cited “Nineteenth Psalm” delivered
on Israeli Independence Day in 1967, just a few weeks before the
Six Day War, to his most bitter verbal assaults during the first Rabin
government, his ire remains limited to the matter of land alone.

There may be a cultural component in Israeli society’s value wars
between secular Ramat Aviv and ultra-Orthodox Bene Brak, but when
an assassin coolly walked up to the duly elected head of state and
shot him in the back, he was not doing battle with a cultural icon and
Westernism, modernism, or all that other jive; he was killing a Jew
who was putting other Jews at grave risk. This simple, almost literal,
justification for the murder no doubt carries far-reaching cultural and
political ramifications, but as an instance of fundamentalist activity,
it points to how different Islamic and Jewish fundamentalisms really
are.

Through these two isolated yet intertwined acts, we see the differ-
ences of two nomocentric fundamentalisms in the Middle East; one
has global vision, and sees its enemies as outsiders and outside ide-
ologies; the other has tunnel vision, and sees its enemies as fellow
Jews acting injudiciously towards fellow Jews.

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1 Ahmad S. Mussali, *Radical Islamic Fundamentalism: The Ideological and Political Discourse of Sayyid Qutb* (Beirut: American University, 1982), chapter 1.


6 *Irgun Yehudi Lohem*.

7 (Albany: State University of New York, 1993).

8 BT Berakhot 62b; Yoma’ 85b and many parallels.


13 Cited from *Yediot Aḥaronot* at the Web site freenet.buffalo.edu/~bx796/biotam.html, devoted to the lionization of Amir.

14 *Erez ha-Zvi* (Bet El: Netivey Or, 1995): 74. Note the irony of entitling this posthumous collection of Zvi Yehuadah Kook’s pronouncements concerning the battle for the West Bank as “The Land of Zvi,” a mocking assault against the more famous and influential book “Land of the Hart” (*Erez ha-Zvi*; 1972) by Arie Eliav, an early Israeli proponent of coming to peaceful terms with the Palestinian national movement.

15 *Erez ha-Zvi*: 71.

17 *Erez ha-Žvi:* 75.

18 See the posthumously published *Or ha-Raʿayōn* (Jerusalem: N.P., 1993), index s.v. *demōqratyah*.


