‘ulamā’ seems to be increasing at the expense of the Saudi rulers. In Pakistan the ‘ulamā’ have found common cause with Islamists over such issues as Indian Kashmir and the Soviet and U.S. presence in Afghanistan. Zaman notes within these three examples a common development. An advantageous ground is staked out by the ‘ulamā’, since “…the ruling elite have sometimes enhanced the scope of the ‘ulamā’s authority as a counterweight to the Islamist challenge to their regimes. But this has enabled the ‘ulamā’ not only to challenge the Islamists on behalf of the state, but also to challenge the state itself on behalf of Islam” (p. 172). As a result, the ‘ulamā’ benefit greatly from being able to play both sides — switching association as they need to in their struggle with the state or with the Islamists for authority.

With this book Muhammad Qasim Zaman has placed the modern ‘ulamā’ squarely into the debates over the rise and appeal of Islamist movements. His analysis, stressing the flexibility and dynamism of the ‘ulamā’, has made them now part of the power equation which often has simply opposed Islamism to secular governing bodies. The book presents a well-documented exploration of the ‘ulamā’ in the Subcontinent, and an important comparison of the modern ‘ulamā’ of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and India.

Richard McGregor


Of the various accounts of the Islamic movement in contemporary Egypt, this is the most riveting, insightful, up-to-date, and self-critical. There are numerous writings on the Islamist movement; however, few offer an insider’s perspective on contemporary Islamism, its trials and tribulations and the challenges it has faced since the attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001. In this important work, Egyptian Islamist lawyer Muntašir al-Zayyāt critically discusses the life, thought, and activities of the founder of the Egyptian Jihād movement, Dr Ayman al-Zawahirī, second-in-command of the Qi‘īdah, who has been accused by the United States of being the brains behind the attacks on the United States. The book offers a detailed analysis of
Zawahiri’s social and educational background, religious philosophy, and involvement with activist Islamist concerns in Egypt before his permanent departure to Afghanistan in 1987.

This book is a welcome addition to the meagre literature in Western languages on the role of the Islamist movements in contemporary politics, their social and economic origins, political and religious philosophies, and the impact they have presumably had on world politics, such as the events surrounding the tragic attacks on the United States in 2001. An important thesis of this work is that the decision by the Qā‘idah leadership in Afghanistan to attack the United States has created a serious backlash with far-reaching consequences for the entire world. Undoubtedly, one must understand these ramifications in the post-Cold War context: the military and economic supremacy of the United States in the wake of the Soviet Union’s collapse in the early 1990s, the recent decision of the United States to invade Iraq and topple the Ba‘thist regime, as well as many other related factors. A second thesis of the author is that only a minority of modern Islamist movements has promoted violence against the state in the Muslim world, and that political repression by the governments of the Arab and Muslim worlds have been solely responsible for the creation of such radical movements. Furthermore, the attacks on the United States have given the political elite in the Muslim world more leverage than before to increase their repression of the Islamist movement, and indeed any oppositional voice that dares to call for democracy in these countries. A healthy democratic process is unlikely to take hold in the contemporary Muslim world because of the declared aim of the United States to wage an unlimited battle against terrorism and because of the support the United States has lent in the past to most of the dictatorial regimes in the Muslim world.

At the outset, it is quite important to underline the fact that Islamism in the modern Arab and Muslim worlds has never been a monolithic phenomenon. There are three types of Islamism in the modern Muslim world: (1) pre-colonial; (2) colonial; and (3) post-colonial. Wahhabism falls into the first category, whereas the Ikhwān of Egypt (The Muslim Brotherhood Movement) falls into the second, and the Jihād and al-Jamā‘ah al-Islāmiyyah movements fall into the third. By and large, modern Islamism has been the product of modern conditions in the Muslim world, such as the spread of colonialism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the rise of the nation-state, and the failure of its modernization programmes.

Zayyāt’s book falls into the genre of religious and political self-criticism. In this sense, it sheds much light on the Islamic movement in the last three decades of the twentieth century. This genre of Islamist writing is somewhat
rare; it has captured the imagination of many Islamist leaders since Sayyid Quṭb’s execution by the Egyptian government in 1966. The strength of the book stems from the fact that its author is one of the most significant members of al-Jamā‘ah al-Islāmiyyah, an Islamist organization that at one time advocated violence against the state in Egypt.

Many major developments have taken place in Egypt and the Arab world since Quṭb’s execution: the imprisonment or exile of thousands of members of the Ikhwān; the 1967 Arab defeat in the war with Israel and the failure of Nasserism to build a new Arab society based on socialism, nationalism, and unity; the death of Nasser in 1970; the accession of Sadat to power in the same year, and the subsequent de-Nasserization of Egypt in the 1970s and 1980s. These major events, combined with the failure of the state to modernize Egyptian society in the wake of launching its Open-Door Policy in the early 1970s, created deep social, economic and ideological fissures within Egyptian society, which translated into the rise of several Islamist movements that were inspired by Quṭb’s confrontational ideology, especially as it developed in his later years in prison before his execution. Zayyāt correctly notes that Quṭb, especially in his prison phase, had influenced Zāwāhirī’s thought tremendously and in fact the latter considered Quṭb a saint and martyr of the Islamist movement. Quṭb’s *magnum opus*, *Fi Ṣiḥāl al-Qur‘ān* is a document of great importance. According to Zayyāt, the Egyptian regime thought that with Quṭb’s execution, the Islamist movement was dead: little did they realize at the time that the *jihād* movement would be born from the womb of Quṭbian ideology, and that his execution and radical thought would determine the ideological and religious philosophy of the movement for several decades to come.

Egypt knew a plethora of radical Islamist movements in the 1970s, but none attracted more attention than the al-Jamā‘ah al-Islāmiyyah and the Jihād movements, which were established in the Egyptian prisons in the 1960s and 1970s. These two movements forged a major alliance that remained more or less intact until 1987. Sadat’s assassination in 1981 put these movements in very difficult positions, since literally thousands of their members were jailed or escaped to countries outside of Egypt.

Zayyāt highlights Zāwāhirī’s social class and educational background. Zāwāhirī hails from an aristocratic Egyptian family; his grandfather on his mother’s side is the late ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ‘Azzām Pāsha (d. 1954), the founder of the Arab League and a major player in Arab and Muslim politics before 1952. Is there a connection between social class and violent Islamism? Zayyāt seems to think that Islamic faith/ideology exerts immense influence on all sorts of people because of the doctrinal message of Islam. In addition to
highlighting Zawāhirî’s social and educational background, Zayyāt persuasively argues that the 1967 Arab defeat with Israel had a tremendous influence on young Zawāhirî’s thought, as well as that of other Islamists in the 1960s and 1970s.

Sadat’s assassination in 1981 signalled a major and dangerous shift in the relationship between the state and radical Islamist movements. Upon assuming power, Sadat was tolerant of these movements because of his insistence on eradicating the power of the left and nationalism in the country, but the state was having a hard time repressing these movements by the end of the 1970s. The state hoped that these movements would phase out due to the severe repression they faced after Sadat’s assassination. Zayyāt correctly notes that the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in 1979 gave a major boost to the Jihād and other radical movements. Zawāhirî and thousands of others belonging to radical movements throughout the Muslim world went to Afghanistan to fight the Soviets with an eye toward training a strong cadre of Islamist militants who, upon returning to their countries, would topple the existing regimes. Zayyāt vehemently disagrees with those who argue that Zawāhirî was exiled to Afghanistan by order of the Egyptian government. Zawāhirî went to Afghanistan for the purpose of implementing his ideas of jihād in a new environment and away from the watchful eyes of the Egyptian secret police. According to Zayyāt: “Afghanistan formed the necessary bases for the settlement of Zawāhirî and his followers since its environment of jihād and fighting suited very well their desires and objectives” (pp. 165).

What is significant about Zayyāt’s analysis of the Jihād movement, the Qā’idah, and the attacks on the United States is that he does not doubt for a second that the Qā’idah was behind the attacks on the United States. There is a common suspicion in the Arab and Muslims worlds that the September attacks were not the work of the Qā’idah or any Islamic group but rather were perpetrated by the CIA or Israel. Zayyāt does not seem to buy this argument. He is convinced beyond any shadow of doubt that Zawāhirî was the brains behind this attack. In order to prove his point, Zayyāt marshals a great deal of evidence to demonstrate Zawāhirî’s infatuation with “revolutionary or coup d’etat conditions”, which are predicated on the use of violence to achieve political objectives.

Zayyāt traces Zawāhirî’s violent approach to politics to the 1980s. In fact, his philosophy of violence had matured long before he went to Afghanistan. Meeting Bin Laden in Afghanistan enabled Zawāhirî to recreate his Jihād movement when the two became close friends and strong allies. Zayyāt notes that Bin Laden influenced Zawāhirî as much as Zawāhirî influenced Bin Laden. Though Zawāhirî does not possess Bin Laden’s orational or preaching
skills, neither does Bin Laden possess Zawahiri’s ideological acumen and skill in planning. Both were in agreement over the use of violence against the foreign and domestic enemies of Islam. Both, who come from aristocratic backgrounds, shared a common goal: fighting the enemies of Islam. To Bin Laden, American presence in the Gulf was an anathema, and U.S. support for Zionism and Israel was unforgivable. These factors galvanized the ‘Arab street’ behind Bin Laden. Zawahiri influenced Bin Laden in the sense that he was able to sell Bin Laden his ‘revolutionary jihādi ideology,’ which changed Bin Laden from a salafi preacher doing charity work to a jihādi fighter immersed in finding legal rulings to fight against the Americans and Zionists. Furthermore, Zawahiri surrounded Bin Laden with some of the most important leaders of the Jihād movement, all of whom highly respected Zawahiri’s personality.

The rise of the Taliban movement to power in the early 1990s and its control of most of Afghanistan by 1996 gave an immense political and military boost to Zawahiri’s Jihād movement. The Taliban movement came to power on the heels of the failure of the different parties to unite Afghanistan after the Soviet withdrawal. Zayyāt does not tell us much about the reasons behind the rise of the Taliban or why Pakistan provided such enormous assistance to Taliban. However, he notes that Zawahiri became infatuated with the Taliban philosophy and way of life to the extent that he supported their ban on women’s activities outside their homes. In this sense, Zawahiri was more concerned about implementing his revolutionary ideology, controlling power, than in protecting human rights.

The following were probably the reasons for the alliance between the Taliban, on the one hand, and Bin Laden and Zawahiri, on the other: (1) The Taliban conservative ideology; (2) Bin Laden’s financial aid to them; and (3) their role in jihād against the Soviets. The Taliban heavily relied on the Qa‘idah organization in their dealings with the external world, and it is highly doubtful that they understood the position of Afghanistan in the world political scene after the Soviet withdrawal and the subsequent fall of the Soviet system. In addition to providing a safe haven to members of the Egyptian Jihād movement, the Taliban opened Afghanistan’s doors to members of other Islamist organizations (militant or not), such as those of the Jam‘a‘ah al-Islāmiyyah, who could not return to their original countries for fear of being persecuted by their governments; however, Zayyāt adds that Jihād members enjoyed privileged positions under the Taliban, and were the envy of other organizations.

Because of this privileged position, the Jihād organization began to act as a state within a state in Afghanistan to the extent that Zawahiri planned to assassinate a number of prominent Egyptian political and military leaders,
such as the Minister of the Interior and others. In the 1990s, Egypt was rocked by assassination attempts, made possible by the unlimited amount of money Bin Laden had placed at Zawāhirī’s disposal. By targeting prominent Egyptian leaders, Zawāhirī did not differentiate between domestic and foreign enemies; on the contrary, his priority at this stage (around the mid 1990s) was to wage jihād against those he considered domestic enemies by raising the motto that the way to Jerusalem passes through Cairo, Tunisia, and Algiers. Zayyāt, therefore, registers his astonishment when in 1996 Zawāhirī placed his signature behind the establishment of the “International Islamic Front to Wage Jihād Against Jews and Crusaders”. Undoubtedly, this change in tactic was forced on Zawāhirī after his organization failed to achieve its goals of violent change in Egypt and after the arrest of many of its members in Egypt and overseas.

What is interesting in the last section of the book is Zayyāt’s discussion of Zawāhirī’s criticism of the mainstream Ikhwān, as well as his critique of Zayyāt himself because of the latter’s role in advocating peaceful instead of violent means to stop the bloodshed in Egyptian society. Zawāhirī accused Zayyāt of treason to Islam and of being a stooge to the Americans and Israelis. What many ultimately find troublesome about Zawāhirī is his propensity for chaotic stands, his use of violence and accusation. According to Zayyāt, Zawāhirī’s haphazard attitude resulted in his joining of the International Front and accounts for his violent bent of mind. In establishing the Front, Zawāhirī actually included the Jamāʿah al-Islāmiyyah without consulting its leaders.

Under the heading “Islamists have paid for the mistakes of Zawāhirī”, Zayyāt sheds important light on the events that surround 9/11 and the position of the Islamist movement ever since. He is convinced that the violent attacks on the United States were, first and foremost, the product of an angry, violent, and vengeful mentality that cared less about the consequences of such an attack and more about the immediate damage these attacks would produce and their political ramifications. Because of this carelessness, Zawāhirī has placed all Islamic movements, including the mainstream, in grave danger both at home and abroad. Zayyāt does not disagree with either Bin Laden and Zawāhirī that both America and Israel are the main enemies of the Arab and Muslim peoples; however, he does not think that violence can achieve political objectives. The violent attacks on the world’s only superpower gave the United States and its allies in the Arab and Muslim worlds the golden opportunity to attack and eradicate all Islamist movements. Those Islamists who were not members of the Jihād movement and who had sought refuge in Afghanistan because of political oppression in their home countries found themselves face-to-face with America’s huge anger and power. They found
themselves in a battle that was not of their making and suffered death or imprisonment as a result.

Zayyāṭ places his fingers on a major problem in the contemporary Arab and Muslim worlds: How to deal with Islamist movements? As a lawyer, Zayyāṭ does not believe that repression is the solution, and that the 9/11 tragedy has given an upper hand to dictatorial regimes in the Muslim world to perpetrate more oppression against Islamist movements and other oppositional political and religious forces. I believe that one has to embark on a careful examination of the roots of violence in contemporary Arab and Muslim societies. However, Zayyāṭ does not dwell much on this point. Clearly, the Arab and Muslim worlds have been plagued by tremendous social, economic, and political difficulties that produced violent movements like the Jihād and the Jamā‘ah Islāmiyyah. The increasing authoritarianism of the political elite and the increasing gaps between the haves and have-nots in the Arab world are not likely to mitigate the problem of violence but will instead permit it to fester. Finally, the unlimited war on terror declared by the Bush administration is not helpful in dealing with the problems either. The American occupation of Iraq is certainly going to enhance the position of extremist Islamist movements in the Muslim world.

Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi‘


Jeremy Seabrook’s most recent book, *Freedom Unfinished*, deals with development in Bangladesh and in it he contends that the victory of the liberation war was never fully realized. Following the assassination of Sheikh Mujib, a military dictatorship was established that had the support of religious fundamentalists. This book is an exploration of the intersection of economic oppression, religious fundamentalism, and dysfunctional governance. Seabrook argues that non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are the primary means by which the poor resist the power structures of the rich and