

G. Kepel, (2003) Muslim Extremism in Egypt:  
The prophet and Pharaoh  
(Berkeley: University of California Press)  
pp - 70-103

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0010553309  
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The Society of Muslims

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Between 4 July and 1 December 1977, the Egyptian press—otherwise preoccupied with heaping laurels upon Sadat, the 'peace president', for his visit to Jerusalem in November—offered its readers daily photographs of bearded young men accused of belonging to a group of terrorist guerrillas called *Takfir wa'l-Hijra* (Excommunication and Hegira).<sup>1</sup> A long list of offences and crimes was attributed to the group, not the least of which was the kidnapping and assassination of Muhammad al-Dhababi, a religious scholar and former minister of waqfs.

Both the particular form of the violence — hostage-taking was unprecedented in Egyptian political life — and its fatal outcome seemed inexplicable: in the name of what sort of fanaticism would Muslims execute one of their own coreligionists? What kind of Islam did they have in mind? Later, when the arrest and interrogation of suspects enabled the public to form a clearer idea of the sect's practices and mores, the ideology of its leader (an agronomist named Shukri Mustafa), and the scope of its recruitment, Egyptian society was scandalized.

The mere existence of this sect was a social phenomenon. But the political consequences of the manner and timing of its conflict with the state came to constitute an important link in the chain of events that made 1977 a watershed year for the Sadat regime. The confrontation between the regime and the Society of Muslims, coming as it did between the January riots against price increases and the president's speech to the Knesset in November, prefigured the battle the government would later

1. The group's real name was Society of Muslims (*Jama'at al-Muslimin*).

wage against the Islamist movement, whose mass organizations refused to accept 'the shameful peace with the Jews'.

Before the onset of the peace process, relations between these two protagonists of Egyptian political life were fairly cordial. The regime treated the 'reformist' wing of the Islamist movement — grouped around the monthly magazine *al-Da'wa* and represented on the university campuses by the *jama'at islamiyya* (Islamic Associations) — with a benevolence that was well reciprocated, as the Islamists 'purged' the universities of anything that smelled of communism or Nasserism. Meanwhile, the marginal, sectarian wing of the movement was accorded a tolerance tempered by discreet police infiltration: the regime's aim was to offer Islamist dissidents some outlet other than planning *coups d'états*, the dangers of which had been highlighted by the abortive uprising of April 1974 at the Heliopolis Military Academy.

In 1977, however, this mutual tolerance soured into antagonism. The enmity provoked by Sadat's trip to Jerusalem mounted steadily until it climaxed in the conflagration of summer 1981 and its sequel, the assassination of Sadat by Islamist bullets on 6 October of that year. The confrontation between the regime and the Shukri Mustafa group, played for all it was worth by the government's media serfs, was a prelude to this process. Two voices were prominent in this clash, representing two institutions that challenged Shukri and his sect's claim to a monopoly on normative discourse: al-Azhar and the army. The latter eventually held sway over the former, and the military court that handled the case had the last word.

The court took care to circumscribe the affair, which had begun as social and religious in nature, and later impinged on politics. The judiciary, however, was determined to confine it to the criminal domain. The social, religious, and political aspects of the case were buried in a great flood of writings *about* Shukri, while his own words were distorted or concealed.

#### And God Came to Shukri

*Signposts* was a prison work, and it was prisoners who, between 1965 and 1971, made it their manifesto, or at least the source of

their inspiration in the development of their own doctrine.

The aspiration for a Muslim society, the qualification of Egyptian society as *jahiliyya*, and the belief that this society had to be destroyed and a Muslim society erected on its ruins lay at the root of Shukri Mustafa's thought. Most Egyptian observers of the Islamicist movement attributed the doctrine elaborated by Shukri Mustafa during his imprisonment to the virtually instinctive reactions of an unjustly incarcerated prisoner. Were that the case, however, it would be hard to understand the longevity of these ideas after their author's release in 1971. Shukri and his followers preached and recruited in a country whose president had solemnly affirmed that the Nasser regime's concentration camps were a thing of the past. Sadat's Egypt no longer punished 'crimes of opinion' as Nasser's had, but the *jahiliyya* model remained meaningful nevertheless. As far as the Islamicists were concerned, the 'worship of man by man' and the 'sovereignty of man over man', still prevailed, albeit in an altered form.

The police raids of 1965 had swept up not only former Muslim Brethren who had been arrested before back in 1954, imprisoned, and finally released after serving their sentences (and who therefore had police records), but also an entire generation of people who had either escaped imprisonment, like Zaynab al-Chazali, or had not yet reached the age of political consciousness at the time of the 1954 arrests. This was the case for Shukri, who was arrested for the first time in 1965 and imprisoned for distributing Muslim Brotherhood leaflets at Asyut University. A gulf soon opened between these two generations, young and old, the majority of the latter adopting a reformist orientation and seeking accommodation with the Sadat regime until 1977, while the most radical of the former declared the *takfir* (excommunication) of *jahiliyya* society and established the 'Society of Muslims' on its fringes.

Back in 1965, some observers had remarked upon the large proportion of young people, especially students, among the victims of the police raids. The leader of the Egyptian left, Khalid Muhieddin, noted that the Muslim Brethren had won the support of young intellectuals and that it was therefore increasingly urgent for the Arab Socialist Union to clarify its doctrine with respect to various ideological problems. This was, in fact, a new

phenomenon: elements of a generation that had grown up under Nasserism and knew no other kind of society were now revolting against it in the name of Islamic values and were joining the Muslim Brethren. The arrests and repression, which were felt to be out of all proportion to the crimes of opinion allegedly committed, turned the young sympathizers of the Muslim Brotherhood into the new leaders of the Islamicist movement and furnished the generation of cadres that later led the movement's revolutionary wing under the Sadat regime.

Shukri Mustafa was born on 1 June 1942 in the village of Abu Khurus, some thirty kilometres south of Asyut, in Middle Egypt. (Musha, the Qutb family's home town, was only a few hours away on foot, and the villages of the region have generally been Islamicist breeding-grounds.)

His father was the *umdati*, or mayor, of the heavily fortified village, which lies nestled in the foothills of the Libyan mountains at the outermost limits of the agricultural zone, alongside desert outcroppings riddled with innumerable ancient tombs and grottoes that have long provided hide-outs for smugglers, arms dealers, and hashish growers. In the late seventies a military road was opened along the ridge of the mountains so that the authorities could penetrate this traditionally delinquent district. But when Shukri was a child, the state's presence in the area was no more than episodic: the army would be sent into one or other village from time to time to confiscate taxes, track down highway robbers, or temporarily stamp out a ring of smugglers. At times like these, the inhabitants would take refuge in the grottoes, returning to their homes once the army had withdrawn.

Shukri was thus born in an out-of-the-way region traditionally resistant to the penetration of the central state, in a forgotten corner of Egypt where, for that very reason, many Christians lived. But Shukri soon had to leave the village: his father repudiated his mother, and she left for Asyut, the regional capital, taking the child with her.

In this town, with its sprawling colonnaded baroque villas in which Coptic and Muslim landlords lived lives of considerable luxury before Nasser's nationalizations drove them into exile (and turned their decaying homes into party headquarters and

police stations), Shukri attended not the select college founded by American missionaries, but a school run by an Islamic charity. He obtained mediocre grades, barely won his diploma, and enrolled in the school of agriculture at the university. It seems highly probable that it was there that he came into contact with the Muslim Brethren. Apparently he joined them, for in 1965, at the age of twenty-three, he was arrested for distributing their leaflets on campus. That, of course, was the year of the great wave of arrests after Nasser's announcement from Moscow that a Muslim Brotherhood conspiracy had been unearthed.

Shukri was first incarcerated in Tura prison, but in 1967 he was transferred to the Abu Za'bal concentration camp. He was released on 16 October 1971 as part of the package of measures decreed by Sadat after the 'rectification revolution' of 15 May of that year.

Shukri had spent six years in the camps. At an age when his class-mates were memorizing their professors' mimeographed handouts, he was reading Mawdudi and Qutb and learning to call the society that had produced the camps and torturers *jahiliyya*.

The imprisoned Islamist militants were divided in their reading of *Signposts*. While the old-guard supporters of Hudaybi defended established dogma against heresies by publishing 'Preachers, Not Judges', the youth soon split into various factions. These may be classified in two major currents, which disagreed as to the proper interpretation of Qutb's term *mu'asala*, or 'uzla' (separation, 'withdrawal'). One tendency held that withdrawal from society meant only spiritual detachment, while the other felt it meant total separation.

Those who preached 'spiritual detachment' from society called themselves the *jama'a al-'uzla al-shu'uriyya* (Spiritual Detachment Group). They argued that contemporary Egyptian *jahiliyya* society had to be excommunicated (*takfir*), but they were aware of the dramatic consequences any enunciation of *takfir* could have, since they found themselves in a position of 'weakness' (*is'raf*) relative to the enemy *jahiliyya* society.<sup>2</sup> Since they con-

2. They felt that during the time he lived in Mecca before the hegira, the Prophet was in a phase of weakness, which compelled him to avoid open confrontation with the ruling pagan Qurayshite tribe. After the hegira came the

tinued to live within that society, they concealed their views, pronouncing the *takfir* secretly in their hearts while awaiting the advent of the phase of 'power' that would enable them to excommunicate a society which they would then have the capacity to combat without being doomed to defeat. Not unlike the Shi'ite sects that practice *kitman* (concealment), every Friday they pretended to pray before an imam whom they actually held to be an infidel. Their apostolate would take effect gradually (*bi'l-tadrij*), according to the principle *al-haraka bi'l-mafhum*, an expression that may be called the 'arrested principle': in other words, a concealed advance, the nature of contemporary society and the group's objectives being revealed little by little to initiates alone, depending on their degree of initiation.

For obvious reasons, there was little talk during the Sadat presidency of the various sects issued of this current of thought, for they all believed they were in a phase of weakness and therefore were careful not to appear on the social scene. During periods of tension with the Islamist movement, the police would arrest the known members. Some were in Tura in 1977 [1].

The other faction, which preached *mu'asala kamila*, or 'total separation' from society, agreed with the first tendency that *jahiliyya* society had to be excommunicated. They were also aware of the danger of pronouncing this excommunication while they were still living in society in a phase of weakness'. But their method of averting the danger was to withdraw from society and to create, on its margins, a little Society of Muslims, which would then excommunicate *jahiliyya* society without 'concealment'. Shukri belonged to this second tendency, but he was not its original leader: that position was held by Sheikh 'Ali 'Abduh Isma'il, a young al-Azhar graduate who, until 1969, was the acknowledged leader of those who sought complete separation from society. All those fellow prisoners who refused to swear allegiance to the *jama'a* led by the young Azharist were declared to be *kuffar* (infidels). The young rival sect members in the Abu Za'bal camp, though by no means numerous, mutually excommunicated and refused to greet one another, and some-

Phase of strength (*amakkun* or *amkin*), during which he was able to wage the fight against them.

times even came to blows. It was in this atmosphere of fragmentation that the leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood stepped in, endorsing Hedaybi's book.

The excommunication movement was slowed but not halted by the defection of Sheikh 'Ali, who was convinced by Supreme Guide Hedaybi's arguments and signalled his renunciation of *takfir* quite dramatically: one afternoon in the summer of 1969, after leading his group in prayer, he threw off his white gallabieh and declared that he was renouncing *takfir* just as he had cast off his robe. The sect soon fell apart.

Shukri was finally left as its sole member, until he was joined by his nephew Mahir Bakri. Thus did the weapon of excommunication pass from the hands of a graduate of al-Azhar to a young Sa'idi<sup>3</sup> whose culture was rudimentary and who was therefore powerfully influenced by the cultural, social, economic, and political pressure brought to bear on him by Egyptian society. But he proved able to use that weapon effectively in the social domain, gathering a wide following who identified with him.

Shukri was released from the camp on 16 October 1971. He returned to Asyut, where he finished his agronomy studies while continuing to preach his *da'wa*. He soon gained a reputation in Islamicist circles. Qutb Sayyid Husain, an Azhar graduate and one of the first members of the Society of Muslims, relates that he travelled from Cairo to Asyut to see Shukri and then, having been won over by his eloquence and by the way he practised the *sunan* (bearded, his head shaved, wearing a black gallabieh), he decided to stay with him.

Every Friday, Shukri and his first disciples would roam the environs of Asyut, preaching in the hamlets and villages and gathering young men who would join the group. Success came rapidly, and by 1972 the police were keeping a watchful eye on his activities.

At the beginning of 1973, some of his disciples were arrested, and texts written by Shukri seized. The group then wandered among the mountain grottoes, actually implementing *lijra*, or withdrawal from *jahiliyya* society. The state did not consider

3. A Sa'idi is an inhabitant of Middle or Upper Egypt, traditionally considered rustic in his mores and speech.

Shukri and his companions especially dangerous, however, and after the October war against Israel in 1973 those who had been arrested were granted a presidential pardon.

At the time, the group seems to have been considered a sect of cranks who sought to withdraw from the modern world, seeking exile in Yemen; its principal offence was to entice young women away from their families to live with the members.

In 1974 and 1975 Islamicist militants known to the police were systematically tracked down after an attempted *coup d'état* organized by a rival group to Shukri's.<sup>4</sup> In May 1975 the Cairo daily newspaper *al-Akhir* published an article about Shukri and his disciples, calling them *ahl al-kahf* (people of the cave), an expression used in the Koran to designate the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus and, by analogy, any others who sought withdrawal from the real world. The group's wanderings in the mountains seem to have made an impression both on the authors of the police reports and on the journalists who copied them. In reality, however, the group had lived only very briefly in the grottoes. Most members lived together in furnished rooms in the poor neighbourhoods ringing Cairo and other cities.

Although they were placed under surveillance, Shukri and his friends were not systematically persecuted. But that changed dramatically in the autumn of 1976, when rival Islamicist groups tried to woo members away from Shukri's group, which now had some two thousand adherents in all. In the view of its leader, to quit the group was to abandon Islam as an apostate, and that was punishable by death. The police intervened during a punitive expedition Shukri was conducting against some dissidents, and made many arrests. Shukri himself was now a wanted man. The Egyptian media got hold of the story and depicted the Society of Muslims as a gang of fanatical guerrillas and criminals. They called the group *al-Takfir wa'l-Hijra* because it practised the excommunication of its fellow citizens (*takfir*) and withdrew into the mountains (*hijra*).

From his hideout, Shukri tried to issue communiques correcting this caricature, and hoped at the very least to turn the trial of

4. This was the so-called Military Academy group, which we will encounter later.

his disciples into a platform for the dissemination of his views. But none of his communiques was published and no trial was held.

On 3 July 1977 the group kidnapped Muhammad al-Dhahabi, a former minister of waqfs, hoping thus to elicit some response to their demands. But the only result was repression, and the members of the sect then killed Dhahabi. Within a few days, hundreds of them were arrested, including the entire leadership. After a rapid trial, five members, including Shukri, were sentenced to death and executed, and dozens were sent to prison.

Such are the broad chronological outlines of the public manifestations of Shukri's group. Nowhere in its entire treatment of the affair did the Egyptian press even mention the group's real name, Society of Muslims. Mendacious accounts of its ideology and social practices were published. The important thing was to ensure that Shukri was seen as an insane criminal; by holding him up to popular wrath, the state effectively announced that its alliance with the Islamist movement had been broken.

Let us therefore try to shed some light on Shukri's deliberately concealed discourse, to reconstruct the sect's ideology and social practices on the basis of the fragmentary information we possess. This will allow us to understand not only the reality of the Shukri group, but also the state and society in opposition to which it was formed.

### The New Hegira

The criminal trial of the Society of Muslims was held in three *in camera* sessions of the Military Court of State Security on the sixth, seventh, and eighth of November 1977. The principal defendant was asked by the judge to explain his doctrine, and he took the opportunity to present a didactic and coherent exposition structured by its own criteria of rationality and not by the court's questions.

For Shukri, *i'tizal* — the withdrawal from society that had shocked his contemporaries so deeply — was 'merely a consequence of Islamic thought taken as a whole'. It could therefore

be understood only in the context of a comprehensive description of this whole.

To begin with, Shukri recalled, Muslims hold that there is no science except in God. This assertion, based on many verses of the Koran, is accepted only figuratively by most believers today, but Shukri maintained on the contrary that the following concrete meaning should be ascribed to it: 'The Muslim is obligated to seek his path and knowledge before God alone, and so-called knowledge, which is actually no knowledge at all because it is not founded in the Lord, is forbidden.' Indeed, the Koran teaches (Sura II, 'The Cow', verses 216 or 232) that *God knows and you know not*. This means, according to Shukri, that everything that came after the Book and the accounts of the Tradition of the Prophet (the Sunna), is excluded from the domain of legitimate knowledge. The four great legal schools of the Sunni *imams* Abu Hanifa, Ibn Hanbal, Malik, and Shafi'i in particular are null and void. According to orthodox Islam, these four schools of medieval theologians and annotators established the limits of legitimate interpretation of the verses of the Koran. After them, the doors of interpretation (*ijtihad*) were closed, as the Arabic expression has it. Shukri told the court: 'We would like to call your attention to the following fact: Islam has been in decline ever since men have ceased to draw their lessons directly from the Koran and the Sunna, and have instead followed the tradition of other men, those who call themselves *imams*.'

The interpretive works of the four *imams*, Shukri argued, were wholly unnecessary. The Koran was delivered in Arabic; it is therefore clear, and the only tool that may be needed for explaining the meaning of some of its terms is a good dictionary. In what way do the glosses of the *imams* make its meaning more accessible? And why do the glosses of the *imams* themselves not need to be glossed?

After thus appealing to the plain common sense of his interlocutors, Shukri told them why the *imams* had closed the door to *ijtihad*: so that they and their texts would become objects of veneration, and they had indeed become idols (*tasnim*) worshipped like the deities of a pagan pantheon. They had therefore interposed themselves between God and the believers, and had

thus placed themselves outside Islam. They belonged to *jahiliyya*, to barbarism.

But the doors of *jihad* had not always been closed to everyone: 'Have those who sought to close the doors of *jihad* really done so? No, they have closed them for the *vulgar* *peccis* and the rest of the men of the *umma*, but for generations they held it wide open for the *ulama* of the sovereign, that they might issue *fatwas* tailored to fit the views of the sovereign — whoever he was, and whatever his views — in order to spread sin, to declare the illicit legal in the name of Islam. If we wanted to offer examples from the present or the past, no one could refuse us, for there are obvious cases of the authorization of usury and fornication, of the legitimation of government based on principles other than divine law, and even of approval of prostitution and wine in the name of Islam!'

In support of his contentions, Shukri cited Mahmud Shaltut, the sheikh of al-Azhar during the Nasser period, who had delivered a *fatwa* declaring banking interest legal, though other Muslims consider it usury. He also cited Sheikh Sha'rawi, the most famous preacher of official Islam during Sadat's presidency, who stated that Treasury bonds did not contravene divine law, and Sheikh Su'ad Jalal, who declared that beer did not fall under the prohibition of alcohol (which earned him the nickname 'Sheikh Stella', after the Egyptian brand of beer).

As for fornication, far from being punished, it is accepted by those who recognize existing civil law, which does not call it a crime, not to mention those who, worse yet, act as apostles of 'women's liberation' or the mixing of the sexes, which is nothing less than incitement to fornication, which can be committed, Shukri affirmed — basing himself on a *hadith*, or saying of the Prophet — by the hand, the eye, or the ear.

Muslim medieval scholarship in its entirety must therefore be scorned. Since the closing of the doors of *jihad*, the history of Islam has been the story of the *ulama*'s complicity with the princes. It now devolves upon Shukri, who has been chosen by God and is 'guided by Him on the Straight Path', to reopen these doors, to interpret the Koran and the Sunna as he understands them, and to derive a Law from them.

If Shukri makes a clean sweep of the past, abolishing the

history of Muslim civilization in favour of a direct appeal to the mythified epoch of its origins, he also attacks the contemporary symbols through which society — which he believes is equivalent to *jahiliyya*, to pre-Islamic barbarism — proclaims, or rather usurps, its Islamic character. At the top of the list of these symbols are the mosques:

'Mosques in which prayers are conducted must be called by their lawful (*shari'i*) name, which is "mosque of God". They must be constructed out of piety. One may not pray in mosques that have not been founded in piety.'

In Egypt, as in other Muslim countries, there are two sorts of mosque. *Hukumi* (public) mosques are controlled by the minister of waqfs, and the preacher who leads the daily prayers and delivers the Friday sermon is a state employee, usually a graduate of al-Azhar University, where he will have taken the religious studies course. *Alti* (private) mosques belong to private individuals, who choose the preacher without interference from the state.

In reply to the court's question, 'Do you believe that it is permissible for Muslims to pray in the mosques that now exist in Egypt?', Shukri replied: '... I say that there are some private mosques that are not subject to political influences, that are not dominated by the four Sunni legal schools of *jahiliyya*. I do not forbid prayer there. ... Nevertheless, I hold that my home and that of the Muslims [of Shukri's disciples, that is] are the most appropriate places for prayer.'

Shukri's affirmation of such a view was considered scandalous. He had desecrated a site that symbolizes Islam, calling the mosques mere temples in which idols were worshipped under the control of the political regime. But there is nothing reprehensible about praying at home. A Muslim can pray to his God anywhere, provided that he performs his ablutions, faces Mecca, removes his shoes, and does not stand directly on the ground. In Egypt today, for instance, countless Muslims bow down anywhere and everywhere at the times of the five daily prayers (dawn, midday, afternoon, sunset, and evening): on the streets, in work places or at home, standing on pieces of cardboard, folded newspapers, or, more rarely, small prayer rugs.

These daily prayers are an individual act, although one can of

course pray alongside other believers: they mark the relationship of the individual as such to God. On Friday at midday, however, the faithful gather for a collective prayer behind a preacher, who also delivers a sermon. This is supposed to take place in a mosque.

Even though prayer is one of the 'five pillars' of Islam (along with the profession of faith, the Ramadan fast, the giving of alms, and the pilgrimage to Mecca), Shukri unhesitatingly told his judges that the Friday prayer, which is meant to represent the assembly of believers, is illicit in a *jahiliyya* society. 'Such is the first condition for the accomplishment of the Friday prayer: it is permitted for the Society of Muslims only if it can take place publicly and openly (*zahiran*).' And this condition is met only when the Society of Muslims is in its phase of power (*tammakim*), once it has shifted the relationship of forces with the surrounding *jahiliyya* in its own favour. In 1977, however, the Shukri group was still in its phase of weakness (*istid'af*) and therefore refused to attend Friday prayers. In support of his position Shukri cited a *hadith* according to which Muhammad and his companions, who were in a phase of weakness *vis-à-vis* the polytheists in Mecca before the hegira, did not hold collective Friday prayers, but did so only later, in Medina. Shukri explained the transition from phase of weakness to phase of power in these terms:

'Power, like everything else, has degrees. The phase begins, in my view, when the circle of oppression and weakness is broken; it then progresses to conquest and expansion. There is no doubt that when the Muslims made the hegira from Mecca to Medina, they were already at the first stage of the phase of power, since no one could impose anything on them any longer.'

Shukri was then asked, 'And did not your group attain this lower stage in Egypt, so that you could pray anywhere on Friday?' 'Absolutely not', he answered. 'The proof is that in five years we have been defendants in more than fifteen trials and have suffered imprisonment; this time again many of us have been arrested. Where, then, is the power?'

This refusal to pay his respects to the mosque or to attend Friday prayers during the so-called phase of weakness would seem to reflect, in terms of great symbolic violence, the intran-

signance of Shukri's notion of rupture (*uzla*), a sort of constant reminder that the group found itself in a merely temporary situation, having not yet attained its goal, the reconquest of the *umma*. Only then would it be time to celebrate the glory of God collectively. Politically, this amounted to a refusal to accept the comfort, however relative, of the marginal toleration effectively accorded by the state until the end of 1976. It is this that explains the court's line of questioning. By building its own counter-society, however aberrant its practices, the Society of Muslims acted as a pole of attraction for young Islamist dissidents; although members were turned inwards, they were at least diverted from potential *coups d'état*. Had they prayed in their own mosques, they would have thereby shown that although they were oppositionists, they believed that the times in which they lived were Islamic. But by rejecting both the Friday prayers and the mosque, the Society of Muslims was implementing its own project: the destruction of *jahiliyya* and the erection of the Muslim society on its ruins. The sect thereby reminded its adherents of their objective and thus showed that it represented a constant danger to the established order.

Shukri demonstrated in practice that as far as he was concerned, Egyptian society in the seventies meant *jahiliyya*, barbarism of the sort described by Sayyid Qutb in *Signposts*. He strove to unmask it, and to invalidate the meaning of the symbols that had been usurped by those who sought to pass it off as a Muslim society. In accordance with this view, he undertook to destroy the instruments of legitimization of the Egyptian regime one by one. After the religious institutions, the next target of attack was the army.

One of the major reasons for the omnipotence of military officers within the Egyptian regime was the state of war with Israel that existed until 1977. In fact, the war against the Jewish state is one of the principal issues mobilizing the Arab and Muslim people behind their various states, serving to justify a sacred unity in support of the autocratic layer that monopolizes power. In the vocabulary of Arab nationalism, the Jewish state is an enclave of imperialism on occupied Arab land; in Islamic categories, it becomes a land usurped from *Darr al-Islam* by the

infidel, and therefore part of *Dar al-Harb* (the Domain of War), which must be attacked relentlessly by *jihad*, proclaimed and directed by the commander of the faithful.

While the first of these affirmations formed the heart of the vulgate of the Nasserist state until 1977, the latter was the favourite theme of *al-Da'wa*, the monthly magazine of the neo-Muslim Brethren, between 1976 and 1981. But Shukri now opposed this attitude, as Faraj was subsequently to do in 1981.

When the military judges asked Shukri what the attitude of the Society of Muslims would be if 'Jewish forces' invaded Egypt, this was his reply: 'If the Jews or anyone else came, our movement ought not to fight in the ranks of the Egyptian army, but on the contrary ought to flee to a secure position. In general, our line is to flee before the external and internal enemy alike, and not to resist him.'

It would be difficult to find a sharper expression of Shukri's rejection of the independent nation as it was structured by the Nasserist nationalist myth crystallized in the struggle against Israel. For the Society of Muslims, the Israeli army and the Egyptian *mukhabarat* (secret services) were equally and indistinguishably enemies. During the phase of weakness, the group's disaffection with the 'Zionist enemy' took the practical form of a refusal to be conscripted. The Society's members felt no allegiance to the state. They therefore not only refused to wear its uniform but also rejected anything else that was connected with the state or might serve it. For instance, Shukri also forbade his followers to be state employees, and those who worked in public services changed jobs upon joining the Society of Muslims.

Shukri also rejected education as dispensed in the Egyptian school system, as he explained in response to a question from the military tribunal:

*Question.* 'The tribunal would like to know your opinion of the teaching of writing.'

*Answer.* 'The teaching of writing for its own sake is illicit (*haram*). . . . The Prophet did not open *kitab* (Koranic schools) and institutions to teach Muslims writing and arithmetic, but permitted them to be taught according to needs and necessities.'

This rejection of public employment and of useless education does not appear to me, as Shukri's detractors argue, to be based

exclusively on a misinterpretation of the Koranic verse (Surah LXII, 'Friday', 2): 'He it is who has sent a Prophet among the unlettered people' (*unmumiyin*, or illiterates), from which Shukri is said to have concluded that illiteracy is the only hope. It would seem more pertinent to consider this rejection in the light of the conditions of public employment and literacy in Sadat's Egypt.

By law, every graduate in Egypt has the right to state employment. This measure, a powerful weapon against non-employment, is actually the purveyor of massive disguised unemployment in the offices of a swollen administration in which productivity is as low as the employees are badly paid. If the state employee lacks an additional source of income — either one or more 'moonlighting' jobs or assistance from his family — he can still manage to feed himself by buying the state-subsidized products on sale in the cooperatives, but he is unlikely to rise above this level of bare subsistence. Anything whose price is determined by the market is beyond his reach. Almost every state employee has a second or even third job which, though it owes nothing to his intellectual qualifications, being unrelated to his course of studies, assures the basic part of his income. Innumerable employees who sit all morning at desks in one or other of the countless ministry offices spend the afternoon working as plumbers or taxi drivers, jobs they perform so inadequately that they might as well be filled by illiterates, the competent plumbers having long since emigrated to the Arabian peninsula, where their spanners are worth their weight in gold. An illiterate peasant woman who arrives in the city and manages to land a job as a foreigner's maid will be paid more or less double the salary of a university assistant lecturer.

It is against this background that Shukri's initiatives must be seen: in forbidding the teaching of writing when it does not correspond to a need, and in ordering the members of the Society of Muslims to renounce public employment, he is not acting as a fanatic from a bygone century, as some have been pleased to claim. He is putting his finger — in his own way (and in a vocabulary that, while not sociological or Marxist, is quite meaningful and immediately comprehensible to the layers he is addressing) — on a crucial problem of contemporary Egyptian society. For many Egyptians it is indeed useless to learn to write,



and they have forgotten, without apparent ill effect, the rudiments they learned at school.

Struggle against religious legitimization of the state; indifference to the anti-Zionist struggle led by the iniquitous prince; radical rejection of any collaboration with the institutions of *jahiliyya*, including public employment and the educational system: Shukri placed himself on the margins of society, flouting established custom. He challenged the social conventions of daily life, revealing them as actually political.

#### Living Together in the Prophet's Way

The institution of marriage did not escape the corrosive social practice of the Society of Muslims. In fact, the first extensive police operations against the group's adherents seem to have been initiated after complaints by families whose daughters had disappeared to join the group and had found partners there. In fact, Shukri's group, unlike most other more or less clandestine Islamist organizations, had women among its membership; they were married within the group according to a special ritual and had children, thus assuring the survival of authentic Muslims.

This 'leading of women astray' outraged public opinion, and provided headline material and innumerable photographs for the Egyptian press. In the newspaper stories, the scenario never varied: seduced by the captivating words of Shukri or one of his disciples, a young girl deserts the paternal home and heath, abandons her studies, and goes to live among the group. Here is one such story, recounted from the witness stand at the military tribunal by an aggrieved father, two of whose daughters had disappeared. The witness was a man of forty-five, employed by a cotton-threshing company in Fayyum province. He spoke in a rural dialect:

'Last year, a little before the Lesser Holiday [which marks the end of Ramadan], my daughter Samiha came with an acceptance from the university dormitory, and afterwards her little sister Rawaya came to me and said: "Take me with you so I can see Cairo." I took them to Cairo and brought them to the house of

their older sister, who is married and lives there, and I went back to Fayyum for the holiday.

"Their mother said to me: "Go and find out why the girls haven't come home." So I went back to Cairo and asked Mahmud, their older sister's husband, "Where are the girls?" "Their brother Sa'id took them back to the countryside", he told me. "I've just come from the village; they aren't there", I said. Then he said, "Maybe you passed each other on the way." So I went back to Fayyum, and their mother said, "Where are the girls? Bring them back immediately, even if the devil himself's taken them." "So I went back to Mahmud and told him, "The girls still haven't come home." "What do you want me to do about it?" he said. "Their brother took them." "This went on for three weeks, back and forth, until finally Mahmud told me, "If you want to know where they are, go and see a fellow named Mustafa al-Jamal in Umm al-Misriyyin" [a poor neighbourhood in Cairo]. So I went, and he told me, "Forget it, they're married now, and the men we married them to are Muslims." Then — it was just too horrible — he said, "We separate Muslims from infidels." So I said, "Well, I want to see them. How do I know they're all right?" "Okay," he said, "come back in three days." I did, and then he told me, "In another week." So I went home to the village. But their mother couldn't stand it any more. I went back to this Mustafa, and he says, "Wait a minute." Then this other fellow called Abu'l-Fadl comes in. I talked to him and he says, "What girls? They're married." So I said, "You call this human? . . . They disappear from home and get married? One of them is only fourteen!" So he says, "That's how it's done." . . . The father then went to the police. At the end of his testimony, the son, Sa'id, shouted from the defendant's box, "Aren't you ashamed, father, to play along with this charade staged by the cops?"

Marriage as practised in the Society of Muslims, of course, did not entail the complicated contracts commonly drafted in Egyptian society to assure the bride's family that the groom will provide housing. It was 'Muslim' marriage, for which all that was required was the presence of witnesses and the couple's consent.

As far as is known, Shukri himself chose both partners. Some-

times the future groom was living outside Egypt, in an oil-producing country from which he sent back money orders to the Society of Muslims. His prospective wife would have seen no more than his photograph. Once the knot was tied, the couple would live with other members of the sect in furnished lodgings rented by the group. Because of overcrowding, there were several couples to a room; they protected their intimacy by hanging curtains.

These details, plus the *droit de seigneur* attributed to Shukri by public rumour, created a janus image of the veiled women of the group who so modestly hid their faces from the popping flash-bulbs of the paparazzi: their excessive religious devotion was seen as no more than a hypocritical disguise for the unchained debauchery of which Shukri was supposedly the coryphaeus.

Shukri maintained that if one of the partners of a couple but not the other joined the Society of Muslims, their marriage ties were null and void and a new union could be contracted. When it was the man who became a member — as in the case of the 'engineer' Fathi Abd al-Salam, who forced his wife to sell their refrigerator, cooker, and washing machine and then left her to go and live with a member of the Society in Mansura — the story might arouse some pity for the abandoned wife, of course, but no genuine reprobation. Islam permits every man to have four wives, and repudiation is a simple formality. The same step taken by a woman, however, is sacrilege. During the trial, the question of what would happen in such a case was raised. The woman, Shukri declared, would ask for a divorce on grounds of divergence of creed (*al-ikhtilaf fi'l-'aqida*), but even if that was refused her, she would not have to return to her husband. Moreover, if she wanted, she could marry a member of the sect, since the matrimonial ties of *jahliliyya* are valueless in the Society of Muslims.

The Shukri group made marriage possible and provided the young couples with a place to live, albeit cramped, in a 'furnished flat'. To understand why it had to be 'furnished', one must remember that a prospective groom in Egypt has to provide his future in-laws with proof that he has some housing. In theory, anyone can afford to rent a flat, because the law fixes rents at their nominal levels at the time of the Second World War,

which inflation has turned into a derisory sum. But the landlords make their profit by demanding that prospective tenants pay 'key-money', a practice as universal as it is illegal. The sum paid is more or less what it would cost to buy the property, and since a young man just starting out cannot get credit (nor can anyone else whose official salary is but a fraction of his real income), the only way to afford key-money is to emigrate to the Gulf for some years. That is why most Egyptian men leave the country between the ages of twenty and thirty. During that time, the young women wait.

But there is one category of housing that can be had without paying key-money: 'furnished apartments', which often contain little or no furnishing and whose rents are determined by supply and demand. These 'furnished' rooms are invariably inhabited by foreigners, prostitutes, people living on the margins of society, and others who are unable or unwilling to settle in one place on a long-term basis. The furnished flat provides temporary housing. As marginal elements, the members of the Society of Muslims could find lodgings nowhere else. Shukri settled his followers in flats like these, and there they lived communally.

This was the actual site of the *fijira*, the Society's hegira, its withdrawal from *jahliliyya* society. In their furnished rooms, the Society's members created a tiny, genuinely Islamic society of their own, based on their understanding of Islam. Here their lives changed radically: they married young, housing was immediately available without payment of key-money, and the values of Egyptian society no longer applied. Diplomas were considered mere scraps of paper, the mosques of the Ministry of Waqfs temples for the worship of medieval annotators, and Israel an enemy on the same footing as the iniquitous prince and his administration.

Having abandoned state employment on Shukri's orders, the members did manual labour, grew vegetables, and sold knick-knacks from pushcarts. But these activities did not earn enough to pay the rent for their furnished flats. Most of the group's resources came from money sent back from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, or elsewhere by members whom Shukri had sent into emigration by turns.

There were thus two *hijas* for Society members: the internal withdrawal from *jahiliyya* society to their life in the furnished flats of the Society of Muslims, and physical emigration outside the country like other young Egyptians, except that the income they earned was redistributed to support the rest of the members back in Egypt. On his return home, it seems, each member would be entitled to a wife.

This, of course, was a caricature of the sort of emigration forced on Egyptian citizens by the underdevelopment of their country, but it would be wrong to demean Shukri's experiment for that reason alone. He was seeking to procure funds by the only means open to the disinherited. The reformist tendency of the Islamist movement, with its representatives in business circles, enjoyed financial backing from Egyptian capitalists.

The importance and originality of the concept of *hijra* and its practice by the Society of Muslims cannot be overestimated. In Muslim tradition, the *hijra* refers to the Prophet's hejira. It is therefore part of a political strategy for dealing with *jahiliyya*, and consists of fleeing from an enemy that cannot be fought with any reasonable chance of success during the phase of weakness. But *hijra* as internal emigration was a social phenomenon that reflected Egyptian society of the seventies like a distorting mirror at a fun-fair, exaggerating deformities and defects.

Shukri, with his unpolished conceptual language — shaped by memories of a dissident childhood in Middle Egypt, his reading of Qutb and Mawdudi, and the experience of concentration camps — was able to attract the lost children of a Third World independent state who were convinced, in effect, that life was intolerable. The social mores of Shukri and his members were a kind of outcasts' hodgepodge that expressed, sometimes in the most conformist terms, their disorientation at the painful changes wrought by modernity. Nevertheless, identification of social dysfunction generally seemed more bold, authentic, and innovative when expressed in Shukri's Islamist categories than when stated in the wooden language of the Egyptian Marxists.

Marriage as practised by the Society of Muslims is a significant example of this apparent paradox. Shukri noted that in Egyptian cities today marriage inevitably comes very late and that young people suffer as a consequence. He thus reestablished early

marriage for his members, as practised in the countryside. But it was also arranged marriage, decided by Shukri himself and imposed on the couple.

Hermetic as it may appear to Western observers, Shukri's language nevertheless expressed demands that arouse deep feelings among Muslims who, like him, flounder in a society sinking ever deeper into the abyss of underdevelopment. It was therefore imperative to silence Shukri. But that turned out to be far from easy, and the state had to resort to the army. The final victory of Shukri Mustafa, chosen by God to lead Muslims on the Straight Path, was no doubt to have compelled the military society to come out into the open to inflict his martyrdom upon him.

#### Death of One of the Ulema

The Society of Muslims was by no means the only Islamist current, nor even the only underground group of Islamist dissidents. Shukri's attitude towards the Muslim Brethren and their epigones of the magazine *al-Da'wa* was one of unmitigated hostility. He came forward, in effect, as an opponent of the Brotherhood's dominant line, set by Supreme Guide Hasan al-Hudaybi, the author of 'Preachers, not Judges', and he is said to have spoken these ungracious words about the Brethren: 'I accuse these leaders of the Islamic movement who have led their men to their doom, . . . , these leaders of the Muslim Brethren who have delivered them to the executioners, the gallows, the prisons, of high treason . . . : they have ruined their men's lives, toying with them irresponsibly' [1].

There is in fact little doubt that Supreme Guide Hasan al-Hudaybi's shilly-shallying and lack of laical sense permitted the 1954 repression against the Brethren to attain greater breadth. After that date, however, all the various currents of the Egyptian Islamist movement look great pains not to leave themselves open to repression. The reformist tendency around the magazine *al-Da'wa* sought legal recognition from the regime in order to ward off the spectre of the gallows and the concentration camps. The radical tendency, inspired by Qutb's work,

opted for withdrawal from society or for the strictest clandestinity.

By choosing withdrawal and by expounding the theory of the 'phase of weakness', Shukri guided the lives of his flock without making any major compromise with *jahiliyya* as far as his ultimate aim was concerned: the erection of the Muslim state on its ruins. He had nothing but contempt for the strategy of the neo-Muslim Brethren of the *Da'wa* editorial board. He did not consider the Brethren, and still less their epigones, to be part of the Islamic movement, as he told the military tribunal: 'The Society of Muslims is the first Islamic movement (*haraka islamiyya*) to be founded in centuries. As for the Muslim Brethren, God did not grant them power, and that is irrefutable proof that they were not a true and legitimate Islamic movement, and that their apostolate was fraudulent.'

Although each denied the other's right to speak in the name of Islam, Shukri's group and the editors of *al-Da'wa* encountered one another only sporadically, since the former lived on the fringes of society while the latter manoeuvred within it. There were, however, clashes, sometimes violent ones, between the Society of Muslims and other more or less well-known Islamist dissident groups. These clashes, and the so-called 'physical elimination of apostates', were the first signs of the Society of Muslims' violent bent.

But it was another Islamist group that was the first to resort to violence in Sadat's Egypt. In 1974, a 'Military Academy' group led by a Palestinian tried to foment an uprising in the Helipolis military school in the Cairo suburbs and to assassinate the head of state. The facts of the case remain murky even now, but it is of interest on various counts. To start with, the abortive rising was a kind of dress rehearsal for the frontal assault by the Jihad group in October 1981. Second, it was the work of a tendency of the Islamist movement whose analysis of the state and society differed from Shukri's. Finally — though this is only conjecture — it seems likely that the secret services of Arab countries hostile to the Egyptian-American rapprochement that followed the October war of 1973 may have been in contact with the group's leader.

The latter had arrived in Cairo toward the end of 1971, about

the time that Shukri left the concentration camp. His name was Saïh Sirriya and he was born in Ijzim, near Haifa, in 1933. Ijzim was also the home town of an enigmatic figure of the Arab Islamist movement: Taqi al-Din al-Nabahani, the founder of the Islamic Liberation Party. Sirriya was probably a member of this party, which was founded in 1950 as a reaction partly to the defeat of the Arab armies in the 1948 war with Israel and partly to the assassination in 1949 of Hasan al-Banna, the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Unlike the Muslim Brethren, who sought to preach to the Muslim masses about the need to Islamize society, Nabahani's party held that political power had first to be seized in a *coup de force*. Islamism would then be instituted from above. Because of its objectives, the party was outlawed everywhere, its members hunted down.

Sirriya lived in Jordan until September 1970, when, like many other Palestinians, he left the country after the victory of King Husain's bedouins over the fedayeen in the civil war. He then spent a year in Iraq, but finally had to flee Baghdad, where he was sentenced in *absentia* in 1972 for membership of the party. He then moved to Cairo, where he worked in the 'education' section of the headquarters of the Arab League (he held a doctorate in education).

When he arrived in Cairo, Sirriya began frequenting the Muslim Brethren, especially Supreme Guide Hudaÿbi (who died in 1973) and Zaynab al-Ghazali, the movement's *passionaria*. He won her confidence and held regular discussions with her. At the same time, he began to assemble a group of young people, most of whom were students in Cairo or Alexandria.

Unlike Shukri, Sirriya created no counter-society and organized no *hijra* to Cairo's furnished flats. His disciples continued to lead normal lives, so as not to attract the attention of the authorities. In any case, they did not agree that all society represented *jahiliyya*, anti-Islamic barbarism, but held instead that the iniquitous prince alone blocked the spread of an Islamic mode of society.

Having organized a group of conspirators, Sirriya and his disciples then sought the most opportune moment for a *coup d'état*. They finally picked 18 April 1974. On that day several

conspirators, students at the Military Academy in Heliopolis, were supposed to seize control of the school's armoury, attack the presidential cortège, which was scheduled to pass near by, and kill Sadat.

The plan was set in motion, but ground to a halt within the grounds of the Military Academy, whose guards opened fire on the mutineers.

The plot was officially blamed on Libya, and a trial was held, after which two defendants, Sirriya and his top aide, were sentenced to death and executed. Twenty-nine others received prison terms and sixty were released.

The government made great efforts to implicate foreigners in the conspiracy, for it had been caught unawares by the sudden eruption of Islamist violence at a time when all the members of the movement who had been imprisoned by Nasser were being released and the Islamist movement was growing on the university campuses — with the sanction of the authorities, as we shall see.

Thus it was that as soon as Egyptian gaols were emptied of Nasser's Islamist prisoners, they were peopled again with Sadat's. These new 'martyrs' were soon being courted by the other underground Islamist groups, and one of the leaders of the 'Military Academy Group', Talal al-Ansari, joined the Society of Muslims while in prison. On the other hand, one of Sirriya's disciples who had been released, Hasan al-Hilawi, tried to lure away some of Shukri's friends to found his own group. It was this climate of fragmentation of the movement into rival sects and of incidents between them that gave the police the opportunity to intervene in the internal affairs of the Islamist movement.

In November 1976 the leaders of the Society of Muslims decided to react to various actions which they felt threatened their authority. Hilawi had managed to win over some of their members. More seriously, Rif'at Abu Dalal, who had been in charge of physical training in Shukri's group, also split away, taking several members with him.

Punitive expeditions to 'chastise the apostates' were launched against the homes of Hilawi and Abu Dalal on 18 and 22

November. Shukri felt that this was an internal matter, and he expected that the actions would bolster internal cohesion by dissuading potential future dissidents. But by resorting to attempted homicide against Egyptian citizens, he allowed the judiciary to take up his case, and therefore opened himself up to *jahiliyya* attacks while still in the phase of weakness. The police intervened to put a stop to the 'punitive expeditions' and fourteen members were arrested. A warrant for Shukri's arrest was issued.

This marked the beginning of a confrontation between the state and the sect that would end with the latter's destruction and the death of its leaders. Even now it is difficult to understand why Shukri risked this confrontation. Perhaps he believed that the assault on his authority represented by the dissident currents was an unacceptable challenge that threatened the future of the Society of Muslims. He may also have believed that the police would not intervene. Nor is the role of the police completely clear: it is not impossible that Hilawi and Abu Dalal were manipulated in order to draw Shukri into a trap. In any event, it is known that Egyptian General Intelligence was in contact with the Society of Muslims' second-in-command, Mahir Bakri, who had advocated collaboration between the Society and the state intelligence services against the other tendencies of the Islamist movement, in particular the putschist disciples and admirers of Sirriya [1]. Although he had termed the Egyptian state *jahiliyya*, Shukri himself had a less theoretical view of daily relations with the state apparatus: 'There is no doubt that the Sadat regime is a thousand times better than Nasser's. Nasser would never have allowed us to act as we are now acting, nor to carry out our propaganda openly' [1]. One of Shukri's close associates answered that whereas Nasser had struck at the Islamist movement with a hammer, Sadat was strangling it with a silken cord.

The leaders of the Society of Muslims therefore had no very clear tactics in their relations with the state, and clung instead to their general strategy of withdrawal, of *hijra*, during the phase of weakness. In this context, the imprisonment of fourteen of their members took them unawares, as did the denunciation of their 'group of fanatical criminals' on the front page of the semi-official Cairo daily *al-Ahram*.

Throughout the first six months of 1977, Shukri ceaselessly demanded that the fourteen 'martyrs' be released and that the press offer its readers an accurate picture of the Society of Muslims. He mobilized all the group's energies, explaining that they had now entered the 'stage of general proclamation' (*marhalat al-balagh al-'am*). They sent communiqués to the newspapers and tried to deliver statements to radio and television journalists. Shukri also wanted to publish a small book he had written, called *al-Khriafa* ('The Caliphate'). None of these initiatives worked, and Shukri's credibility within the group was threatened once again.

He then decided that some master stroke was needed to restore his authority, some direct challenge to the state. On the night of 3 July 1977, members of the group disguised as policemen kidnapped Muhammad al-Dhababi, a former minister of waqfs. The next morning, they issued a communiqué claiming responsibility for the kidnapping and formulating the following demands:

'1. Immediate release of all our imprisoned brothers, first of all Talal al-Ansari [the recruit from the 'Military Academy group'] . . .

'2. Amnesty for all those among us who have been sentenced . . .

'4. Delivery to us of the sum of 200,000 Egyptian pounds in cash . . . in unmarked, used notes, without sequential serial numbers.

'5. The newspapers *al-Akhir*, *al-Ahram*, and *al-Jumhuriya*, as well as the magazines *Akhir Sa'a*, *Ukhtbir*, and *Majallat al-Azhar* to apologize to us for their lies, these apologies to be printed on page one.

'6. Authorization to publish our first book, entitled *al-Khriafa* and now ready for printing; no obstacle to publicity for it in the newspapers may be erected.

'7. A committee of experts to be set up to investigate the activities of the following organizations: the prosecutor's office of the State Security Court, the magistrates, the General Intelligence Services, the Mansura prosecutor's office.

'8. This communiqué to be broadcast on news bulletins at 8.30 p.m. on 3 July.

'9. This communiqué to be published in the three Egyptian dailies on Monday, 4 July, also in the dailies *al-Ba'ith* in Syria, *al-Nahar* in Lebanon, and in the Saudi, Kuwaiti, Jordanian, Sudanese, Turkish, and Iranian newspapers, as well as in the *New York Times* in America, *Le Monde* in France, and the *Sunday Times* and *Guardian* in England, in their respective languages.

'10. As Muslims, we are bound by what we have said and by the conditions we have set, in accordance with what the *shari'a* prescribes . . . [followed by threats to kill the hostage if the police look for him or arrest the people delivering the communiqué].

The communiqué itself is a strange mixture of some demands that might be satisfied and others which were completely unrealistic in Sadat's Egypt, such as the formation of a 'committee of experts' to investigate the activities of the secret police. It reveals Shukri's difficulties in correctly and effectively understanding the state apparatus.

Dhababi was kidnapped while Sadat was on a visit to Morocco. Political leaders back in Egypt refused to deal with the Society of Muslims. Shukri, his back to the wall once again, had the hostage executed; his body was found on 7 July.<sup>5</sup>

There was great indignation in the country, and the press set to work amplifying it. Within a few days, most of the sect's members had been arrested in sweeping police raids. Sadat decided to convene a special military tribunal.

That a military rather than a civilian court was given jurisdiction, even though none of the accused had been members of the armed forces, aroused some dispute. Army discourse was thus accorded the force of law, to the detriment of other discourses on the Society of Muslims by institutions like the corps of *ulema*, which was thereby reduced to ancillary status. It was the military prosecutor, General Makhlut, who articulated the official view of Shukri and his group in the newspapers and at the hearings, while the sheikh of al-Azhar, Islam's highest authority in Egypt, was not even allowed to testify at the trial: in other words, the opinion of the group to which the victim belonged went unheard.

5. Some Islamicists claim that it was the police who killed Dhababi. I do not believe so, although I cannot offer any absolute proof.

In an initial interview with *al-Azhar*, General Makhlef explained that this civilian case had been entrusted to the Military Court of State Security because public opinion, shocked by the odious assassination, was demanding rapid judgement. Since the civilian courts were in recess for the summer, only the military tribunals could set to work without delay. The preliminary hearings were indeed conducted with alacrity, being completed on 27 July even though there were several hundred defendants. In a second interview with *al-Azhar*, General Makhlef congratulated himself on his diligent accomplishment of this task, reassured any readers who might raise niggling objections ('all the officers who participated in the interrogations had at least masters degrees, if not doctorates, in law'), and began to establish the army's line on the Society of Muslims, a master line that was shaped by the indictment and would dictate its own truth and its own analysis of the problem, its causes, and the requisite solutions.

Shukri, the general explained, was a *chaatlatan* (*hujjal*). He claimed to interpret the Koran and the *hadiths*, but he knew no more about either than he did about Arabic grammar, of which he was wholly ignorant. To speak in the name of the Koran or to issue *fatwas* required certain qualities that were acquired by following a course of Koranic studies, which Shukri had never done. In fact, when Shukri was imprisoned in 1965, he was unable to recite a single verse of the Koran. During his detention, he read deviant (*unwathari*) books,<sup>6</sup> which enabled him, after his release, to dupe and mislead some young people, with the aid of Mahir Bakri, 'the group's philosopher', whose educational career went no further than secondary school.

How was it, then, that someone so simple-minded could have hoodwinked educated people, *muthlaqqafin*, of whom the group had many? To this question the general replied that if the members had any culture, it was limited to that conferred by university disciplines such as medicine or engineering, which were powerless to remedy religious vacuity (*al-faraghi al-dhimi*),

6. The reference is to works by Qutb and Mawdudi, who were mentioned by name, the former in the deposition of 'Adil Mujahid, the secret police lieutenant-colonel in charge of surveillance of the Islamist groups, the latter in the military prosecutor's indictment.

the fundamental bane of Egyptian youth. The cause of this evil was revealed only when the general delivered his opening statement on 11 October 1977: 'the youth are no longer educated in religion'. His proposed therapy: the religious training of youth, from pre-school age to university level, through the compulsory study of religious subjects, complemented by an obligation on the part of journalists, authors, and other men of letters to defend and illustrate religion in their writings. As for the *ulema*, he directed the following two 'propositions' to their attention:

'That al-Azhar and the minister of waqfs undertake to investigate the deficiencies of Muslim preaching (*al-da'wa al-islamiyya*) and to seek out its causes, as well as the causes of the desecration of the sources irrigating the fields of religious instruction . . .

'That measures be taken to raise the level of al-Azhar graduates in the departments of preaching and guidance (*al-irshad*), so that they may be capable of fulfilling the noble functions with which they are entrusted, in a straightforward manner that will allow them to reach the hearts and minds of young people.'

Such was the army's line on the Society of Muslims: Shukri, a criminal charlatan who sought the overthrow of the regime, had been able to dupe many young people by cloaking his felonious projects in the mantle of religion; this was possible because the youth were suffering from religious vacuity due to al-Azhar's deficiencies. Clearly, the *ulema* had failed in their task.

The *ulema* found themselves in a highly uncomfortable position. Not only had the victim been one of their number, but the Society of Muslims considered them no more than lackeys of the prince, 'pulpit parrots' [1], while the army effectively accused them of dereliction.

Shukri had not selected Dhahabi at random, but held him largely responsible for concocting the negative image of the Society of Muslims: in July 1975, when he was still minister of waqfs, Dhahabi had written the preface to an official pamphlet directed against the Society. In it he traced the sect's inspiration back to Kharijism, thus reproducing the stereotypical discourse

7. This was already the case in primary and secondary schools, where religious instruction is compulsory and tested by an examination.

of the Muslim religious establishment when faced with any new and important phenomenon. Instead of analysing it as it deserved, so as to enable the state to understand it better and thus to counteract it more effectively, Dhahabi managed only to focus the hostility of Islamist youth on the *ulema*. The Muslim religious hierarchy thus showed the political regime that it was not a reliable institution capable of playing the role expected of it: to educate the youth in religion, or in other words, to make sure that Muslim practice was a force for social integration and not a mode of expression for revolt against society.

This ossification of the *ulema* has a relatively well-known history dating back to the rule of Muhammad 'Ali at the beginning of the nineteenth century. With the reform of al-Azhar in 1961 and that of the Ministry of Waqfs the following year, the Nasser regime had sought to open these institutions up to society, so that they would be able to act effectively as transmission belts carrying the regime's ideology to the masses. The *ulema*, dragging their feet as they had for the past century, thwarted the reforms of the sixties while seeking to preserve their special status and to avoid becoming mere religious functionaries of the state. Such was the cost of maintaining their popular credibility. In return, however, the state could not have complete confidence in them: admittedly, they served the state, but they had no intention of being lectured on their duties. It is in this context that we must understand the position of the sheikh of al-Azhar on the Dhahabi affair, and consequently on Islamist dissidence of the sort expressed by the Society of Muslims.

The sheikh, 'Abd al-Halim Mahmud, was in London from the third to the seventh of July 1977. His contribution to the press campaign against *al-Takfir wa'l-Hijra* did not appear in *al-Ahram* until 16 July. Although the grand *imam* rejected the group's ideas, he nevertheless explained that the cause of the phenomenon lay in the fact that power in Egypt had long been held by people whose political philosophy was not rooted in the religious culture of the country. It was this that explained why disoriented youth perceived society as *jahliliyya*. This was not the line of the military prosecutor, who said instead that the sect had cloaked itself in a religious garb in order to conceal its crimes.

The court refused the request of Shukri's lawyer, made in his opening statement on 23 October, to summon 'Abd al-Halim Mahmud to testify at the trial; al-Azhar's line on the Society of Muslims was thus concealed.

Nor was the state inclined to allow the military origins of the regime issued of the 1952 revolution to be placed on trial. Censure of Shukri's activities and ideology had to be expressed with a single voice. The Azhar sheikh therefore had to keep silent and let the military tribunal issue the canonical denunciation of the Society of Muslims on its own. But the publication of the court record on 12 March 1978 placed the *ulema* in the dock yet again, charged with having failed in their tasks of education and training. A furious 'Abd al-Halim Mahmud drafted a communiqué in reply, which received wide coverage in the Arab press, though not in Egypt itself. The sheikh accused the military court of incompetence because it had not been careful to distinguish between the assassination of Dhahabi on the one hand and Shukri's ideas on the other. Moreover, the sheikh revealed, the court had sought to associate al-Azhar with its ill-starred enterprise: the religious institution was expected to 'criminalize' (*ta'zim*) Shukri's thought — and solely on the basis of transcripts, without the *ulema*'s even being granted access to the texts of the accused or contact with their author. But 'in a country in which freedom of opinion holds sway, freedom of which atheists and communists avail themselves, it is not al-Azhar's function to criminalize thought "on the sly"'.<sup>8</sup>

The extreme violence of the Azhar sheikh's tone reflects the awkward situation of the *ulema*: the army's line had been favoured over theirs in a field of their own competence, the determination of religious deviance 'Six years after the 'rectification revolution' through which Sadat claimed to have restored the sovereignty of law and the normal role of institutions, the regime was forced, just as during the Nasser era, to call upon the army, the only institution whose loyalty was beyond question.

8. On the competition among the various intellectual discourses in Egypt today, see my article 'Les oulémas, l'intelligentsia et les islamistes en Égypte: Système social, ordre transcendantal et ordre traduit', *Revue française de Science Politique*, vol. 35 (1985), no. 3.



The Society of Muslims was a unique phenomenon in Sadat's Egypt. By organizing a counter-society in the furnished flats, a world in which the dominant social practices were inverted, it allowed the Islamist youth who followed Shukri Mustafa to live out their own utopia. Their impassioned revolt of the poor, the disinherited, and the hopeless was as clumsy as it was novel; their disconcerting theoretical hodgepodge bears the authentic imprint of those who suffer.

This tendency of the Islamist movement sank into a kind of oblivion. But its achievements and errors gave others food for thought, in particular the group that hatched the conspiracy that led to Sadat's assassination. The confrontation between the state and the Society of Muslims and the latter's destruction invalidated the 'phase of weakness' strategy, the basis of which had been laid by Sayyid Qutb. The young Islamists who came after Shukri would no longer avail themselves of it.

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In creating the Society of Muslims, Shukri Mustafa had stretched the concepts presented by Sayyid Qutb in *Signposts* to the limit. Another tendency of the Islamist movement chose a contrary approach, trying instead to prune the shoots *Signposts* had cast out in so many directions and to confine the mission of the Islamist movement to the path originally chartered by Hasan al-Banna, the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood.

This tendency had emerged as early as 1969, when Hasan al-Hudaybi, Supreme Guide of the Muslim Brethren, brought out his book 'Preachers, Not Judges'. The Brotherhood 'old guard' in Nasser's concentration camps, those of its leaders who had neither renounced their ideas nor fled abroad, rallied to this current. After Sadat released the Islamists, the members of this old guard came together and asked the state to grant them legal recognition. Although Sadat never agreed to the reconstitution of the Society of Muslim Brethren, in 1976 he nevertheless gave them permission to publish a monthly magazine, *al-Da'wa*, which appeared regularly until September 1981, when the president banned all the non-government press just one month before his assassination.

This magazine became the organ through which the reformist wing of the Islamist movement presented its positions to the general public on all social, political, economic, and religious questions, but it was also a sounding board for the various activities of the movement in its preferred fields of endeavour. Reading it therefore allows us to follow the Islamist view of the news on a month-to-month basis, to apprehend world events as diffracted by the magazine's editorial board in column after column.