A New Approach to the Study of Islamic Activism

For decades, the study of Islamic activism has languished at the margins of social science theory. Excepting a handful of scholars, (particularly those who focused on the Iranian revolution), research on Islamic activism has not fully engaged the broader theoretical and conceptual developments that have emerged from the scholarship on social movements, revolutions, and contentious politics. This large body of comparative research on non-Islamic forms of collective action provides myriad tools for analysis and theoretical leverage over questions that interest students of Islamic activism, such as issues of recruitment, tactics and strategies, mobilization patterns, and state-movement interactions.

Research >
General

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Since the late 1990s, a number of Islamic movement specialists have begun to bridge the gap between the study of Islamic activism and social science theories of collective action (see Wiktorowicz 2004b). The underlying premise is that Islamic activism is not sui generis. Rather than emphasizing the specificity of Islam as a system of meaning, identity, and basis for collective action, these scholars point to movement commonalities rooted in process: how contention is organized, the way ideas are framed and propagated, how grievances are collectivized, and tactics and strategies formed in response to exogenous shifts in opportunities and constraints. By focusing on shared mechanisms of contention rather than the uniqueness of Islam, such an understanding avails itself of a broader array of concepts, theories, and empirical evidence.

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In this new approach, scholars emphasize three sets of processes – resource mobilization, decision-making, and framing – operative in both Islamic and non-Islamic activism.

Although this theoretical development is primarily rooted in empirical studies of Islamic movements in the Middle East, it addresses the same generic research questions posed by those who study Islamism in Asia. As a result, while the following discussion draws on theoretically informed studies of Islamic activism in the Middle East, the approach itself holds lessons for scholarship on Asian Islamism.

Resource mobilization

Many studies of Islamic activism emphasize the underlying grievances that engender collective action, including blocked social mobility, the lack of political freedom, economic despair, a sense of cultural vulnerability, and humiliation. The central argument is that, as Ted Gurr once famously put it, 'misery breeds revolt'.

The problem with such arguments is that while misery is ubiquitous, mobilization is not. Social movement theorists have attacked grievance-based explanations as incomplete: grievances are not irrelevant, but there is a missing intermediary set of variables necessary to translate grievances into actualized mobilization. In particular, movements need resources and mobilizing structures to collectivize what would otherwise remain individualized grievances. Money, communications technology, meeting places, social networks, and other resources are needed

to organize, direct, and mobilize contention. Without organizational capacity, individuals remain isolated from one another and unable to effectively launch collective endeavours. Differences in mobilization patterns are, in part, explained by the degree of resource availability and the types of resources and mobilizing structures utilized by particular groups. For Islamic activism, these include mosques, study circles, social networks, Islamic non-governmental organizations (NGOs), political parties, professional and student associations, and unions. All of these are utilized to recruit, organize, and launch contention.

Examples of resource mobilization abound. In the early 1990s, the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) utilized a national network of mosques and community organizations in Algeria to organize for elections. The electoral success of the FIS in the face of regime repression was, at least in part, due to the party's access to enduring religious institutions. The Gama'a Islamiyya in Egypt commanded similar resources in the 1980s. In the city of Dairut alone, the movement controlled about 150 mosques. Access to the mosques was used to develop support, organize, and create contact points with the public. When the regime tried to repress the movement, it met dramatic resistance because 'after a decade of organizing social and political networks in Upper Egypt, the Islamists had the capacity to fight back' (Hafez and Wiktorowicz 2004: 78). More moderate Islamic groups in Egypt, Jordan, and Yemen have utilized grassroots networks of NGOs and political parties to mobilize support. These institutions offer sources of patronage, outreach programmes to potential constituents, and forums for activism.

Resource mobilization is a process that transcends the specificity of ideology. Though ideology can limit the range of resource options by excluding some as contrary to movement beliefs, movement fortunes frequently ebb and flow with resource availability and institutional access. A focus on resource mobilization emphasizes *how* movements mobilize, rather than the ultimate goal of mobilization.

Decision-making

Some earlier research on Islamic activism assumed the pre-eminence of belief in dictating behaviour. Although this assumption was never a universal norm, Orientalist influence often privileged the causal importance of ideas and Islam as a belief system.

To a large extent, the new emphasis on process challenges some earlier ontological assertions about the Islamic activist. Rather than viewing activists as guided by dogmatic adherence to ide-

ology, a number of recent studies adopt a loose rational actor model. From this perspective, Islamic activists are driven by tactical and strategic assessments of costs and risks. Choices reflect conscious evaluation of whether decisions help to achieve goals within a context of opportunities and constraints. While the approach tends to avoid the conceptual language of rational choice theory (preferences, utility maximization, etc.), it shares the emphasis on strategic decision-making.

This trend is most apparent in studies of violent groups. Perhaps as a reaction to caricatures of the 'irrational zealot', social scientists have highlighted the strategic logic of radicals. Shaul Mishal and Avraham Sela (2000), for example, argue that Hamas strategically responds to changes in political context. Prior to the al-Aqsa intifada in 2000, the growing popularity of the Palestinian-Israeli peace process challenged the viability of Hamas. Strict intransigence towards peace eroded support from a population that sought an end to the economic and social hardships of occupation. In response, Hamas tactically adjusted its doctrine to accommodate the possibility of peace, framing it as a temporary pause in the jihad (this calculus, of course, changed with the al-Aqsa intifada). A rational actor model has also been used to examine an array of other radical groups, including the Armed Islamic Group in Algeria and al-Qaeda.

This is not to completely marginalize the role of Islamist ideology in decision-making. The universe of potential choices is circumscribed by the 'imaginable options' within particular world views. But the rationality of Islamist decision-making demonstrates that the process of choice is shared by many types of movements.

Framing

Although the new approach to Islamic activism de-emphasizes ideology and belief as causal variables, it does not reject the role of ideas altogether. Instead, the focus is on how ideas are socially created, arranged, and disseminated. In other words, the emphasis is on the process of constructing discourse, and the resulting ideational packages. In the parlance of social movement theory, movements must 'frame' their arguments to persuade audiences and elicit support and participation.

Al-Qaeda, for example, is embroiled in a bitter 'frame dispute' with the Saudi ulama (religious scholars), where each asserts a particular interpretation and the right to sacred authority (Wiktorowicz 2004a). Al-Qaeda emphasizes the knowledge, character, and logic of its scholars while attacking its detractors using the same criteria. Al-Qaeda supporters are framed as honourable, independent, and scientific in their approach to interpreting Islam. Opponents, in contrast, are framed as 'sheikhs of authority' or 'palace lackeys' inextricably linked to corrupt Muslim governments. The framing strategy is designed to insert al-Qaeda as sole mediator between the sacred texts and religious practice.

In some instances, Islamists construct frames that meld religious and non-religious themes to reach broader audiences. Appeals to nationalism, tribal symbolism, and even human rights find themselves intertwined with religion in ideational packages. The eclectic nature of such frames demonstrates the strategic dimension of framing: content is frequently selected according to its potential persuasive effect rather than solely on the basis of ideology.

An approach to the study of Islamic activism that draws from social science theory erodes essentialist assumptions about Islamic exceptionalism. Drawing from a large empirical base of comparative research, it offers analytic tools for addressing key questions. And by emphasizing the dynamics of activism rather than the uniqueness of Islam as an organizing belief system, the approach opens possibilities for dialogue with students of non-Islamic contention, potentially bringing new insights.

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While the illustrations outlined above are derived from work on movements in the Middle East, they emphasize possible lines of inquiry for students of Islamic activism in Asia as well. The focus on resource mobilization, rational decision-making, and strategic framing is offered only as a starting point. The hope is that theoretically driven research rooted in empirical studies of Islamism in Asia, the Middle East, and elsewhere will propel theory building in bolder directions. <

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