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From Chechnya to Israel: Social Movement Analyses of Opposition Groups

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Introduction

This issue of Strategic Insights presents articles applying social movement theory to the analysis of opposition movements in the Muslim and Arab worlds. The articles show how social movement theory can aid in understanding the impetus and the dynamics of opposition groups. While many analyses focus on leaders of opposition and Islamist groups, these articles highlight the grassroots and membership of a social movement as a key factor in mobilization or failure to mobilize.

The articles by Anderson, Fahoum, and Gust apply the concept of framing to understand the success and failure of mobilization. Frames used by a movement or group must resonate with the populace. Anderson explains the concept of framing, and argues that an understanding of framing can benefit the United States in Iraq. Fahoum analyzes the Chechen movement from a framing perspective, explaining why early frames resonated with the population, resulting in mobilization, while later, more religious frames failed to align with the populace's ideas and interests. Gust shows that framing is a central factor in the lack of mobilization of the Israeli Arabs up until the second intifada. It is not repression alone that mobilizes. For mobilization to occur, the conflict and cause of mobilizing must be framed in terms that resonate with the populace. Gust shows that at least until the second intifada, a frame joining the Israeli Arabs with their fellow Palestinians, most of who reside outside Israel, did not hold sufficient appeal to mobilize Israeli Arabs.

The articles by Munson and Howk analyze the trajectory of opposition movements in Israel and Oman respectively using social movement theory. Munson disaggregates the Israeli settler movement, demonstrating the role of electoral politics in the movement's growth, the importance of a security frame to the popularity of the settlers' cause, and the role of violence and radicalization. Howk examines the Dhofar Rebellion in Oman, highlighting the role of international alliances in aiding mobilization and particular government actions in decreasing it.

Finally, O'Connell tackles the theoretical nut of repression, analyzing when it results in mobilization and when it does not. He attempts to triangulate the different conclusions of research into repression and group mobilization. At some points, it appears that movements are stifled by repression, only to reappear later stronger and more violent. O'Connell concludes that the insights of nuanced theories disaggregating repression by timing and type are those which travel best and hold across new cases. Indeed, the effects of repression can only be delineated in conjunction with the political, framing, and resource dynamics of social movement theory.

Islamism and Social Movement Theory

As the hot intellectual topic of the day, Islamism is attracting numerous new researchers. The result has been a plethora of studies, some of which have reinvented the wheel, spending time to prove what others have already done, or superficial analyses attractive for publication but contributing little to our knowledge base. As scholars we are not talking to each other, not building our theory or store of insights. Data is accumulated in pieces, unconnected to larger questions or an interpretive framework. This can be remedied, I suggest, through adoption of a unified approach or research program anchored in a political framework.[1] Through this framework, scholars of Islamism and opposition movements in general can comparatively expand the universe of cases to discover what, if anything, is indeed unique about Islamism, and yield solid and effective policy conclusions.

Contentious mobilization, often called by the more user-friendly social movement theory, can provide such an approach.[2] Beginning as the study of social movements, the field includes non-movement forms of collective mobilization in order to make demands. The literature on contentious mobilization is more precisely described not as a theory, but a perspective for analyzing mechanisms of authority-opposition interaction and determining the requirements and dynamics of mobilization. This framework tells us what factors we need to know about groups, and provides a general ordering of the importance of differing variables and processes to the whole.

Simply, contentious mobilization and social movement theories are superior to other approaches because they explain more. Non-relational and non-comparative theories have been pushed out of the analysis of contentious actions in the rest of the world for this reason. Aspects of analysis that have withstood empirical research[3] have been retained within a unified perspective that focuses on political context, forms of mobilization, and frames or ideologies—how the group or movement sells itself to would-be members. Collective mobilization to make demands occurs on a continuum of how sustained the mobilization. A non-recurring event is at one end, with the continuously sustained mobilization of rebellion or revolution (the success of mobilization does not alter its internal characteristics) at the other end. Social movements fall in between. Groups that draw from the strength of the social movement, but are no longer connected to it, can be analyzed in this approach.

The mobilization framework avoids the pitfalls of viewing groups ahistorically, out of the context of their relation to authorities, ideologically unique, or reducing groups to economic or class characteristics. Further, this perspective guards against over-ideologizing Islamist movements, i.e. viewing the tactics of movements as directly stemming from their ideology and ignoring the context.[4] It does this not by ignoring ideology, but instead viewing it contextually as one indicator among many. We have learned that protests, demonstrations, and opposition mobilizing are political acts with political goals. While analysts often feel drawn to describe them as emotional, economic or desperate, doing so avoids the political questions such actions raise and still provides no answers.

Alternative approaches have numerous problems. Many suffer from the unknowing incorporation of assumptions regarding causality that have been questioned or disproved. Mobilization theory's relatively long comparative research background has brought these problems to light, yielding a more complicated and disaggregated view of reality. Alternative approaches are most obviously lacking when we cannot even pose relevant questions through these perspectives. How can ideological study of a group tell us when the movement alters that ideology and why? Left unaddressed are such topics as Islamic feminism, the role of social services and charity in generating support for movements, and when local movements ally with transnational ones, effectively altering their own goals in the process.

Despite a growing mass of profiles demonstrating Islamists as non-traditional, involved in the most modern sectors, upwardly mobile, and actively re-interpreting Islamic doctrine, the dominant approaches remain focused on economic deprivation and interpretation of religious texts. Ever increasing data is confirming that while economics may enter into movement calculations, basing our interpretation of groups, members, and the trajectory of Islamism as a whole on an economic interpretation is limiting and misleading.[5] Economic factors alone cannot explain why groups arise or why they turn violent. Nor can they explain membership (except when soldiers or members are regularly paid). As White demonstrates for the IRA, such a perspective cannot address participation by those without direct grievances.[6]

Fortunately, egregious mass theories of old have been buried under a mass of empirical data contradicting their assumptions. Group members are not marginal, deviant, poor, or characterized by a particular unique personality, culturally or religiously determined. In this older analysis, organizing was viewed as irrational, a pathology. This view was influenced by an elitism that feared the masses, ignoring the pivotal role of mobilizing in creating western democracies. Such biases and assumptions regarding mobilizing are still reflected in the knee-jerk explanations utilized often in journalism. The economic perspective also suffers from a functionalist view of causality, positing a direct linear correlation between economic conditions and mobilization or violence. This contradicts what we have learned about the course of mobilization: if grievances were immediately and accurately reflected in the creation of movements and trends, reality would be quite different. Movement research has demonstrated the difficulty of sustaining mobilization, and the many ways its path can be side-tracked away from connections to its population. While in democratic societies movements are more directly representative, in authoritarian societies group outcomes are highly distorted from grievances. The requirements of mobilization force movements to organize underground, give power to ideologies able to withstand such circumstances, and shift membership toward die-hards willing and able to continue in these conditions. The relationship between societal demands and the resulting movement must be discovered empirically, not assumed. The group's stated goals may differ dramatically from the local concerns that fuel the organization and feed membership.

Many analysts linger in Quranic exegesis, examining how the Quran made Islamists radical. However, textual religious approaches are problematic. Religion is fundamentally interpretable and changing. Perspectives on "correct" interpretation do not remain unaltered through time, and any analysis must answer the question of "why now." If the Quran, written long ago, is at fault, why only now has the problem arisen? Further, why are secular ideologies equally, if not more, implicated in terrorist acts? Interpretation is contextual. Local institutional, historical, and political backgrounds are key. Ideological statements often side-track the researcher. Alongside radical statements, the actions of some groups demonstrate moderation and doctrinal flexibility. The reverse could also be the case, as groups stating moderate ideologies engage in violent actions. Further, the authoritative basis of the Quran is not one-sided. Women have used particular readings of the holy book to marginalize male views in Islamic feminism or the gender jihad.[7] The outcomes are remarkably similar to the justifications and new interpretations of women's roles used in earlier eras in the west, when public service and home were combined as the latter served as justification for the former. In some areas Islamist women have gone farther than the previous western era. The idea of public service as a duty has been extended to include jobs as engineers, doctors, and lawyers, not just extensions of family life such as social service and charity work.

Tactics and ideology, means and end-goals, are not always correlated. Democratic movements use violence, and anti-democratic ones have been non-violent.[8] Tactics are strategies that alter, not essential movement characteristics.[9] Increasing complexity too, made possible through information and technological advances, does not necessarily alter the nature of the action. Movement choices are relational: they develop in intimate interaction with their external environment. Thus any analysis omitting the political playing field and organizational potential of

Islamist and alternative groups misses some of the driving forces for the structure and tactics of the organization.

Movements are political, and as such, we need to recognize the danger of leaving politics to dissidents: it polarizes and radicalizes. Ultimately, we should encourage the legalization of political participation of Islamists in the middle sphere of the local. As Goodwin aptly demonstrates, politically exclusive regimes are vulnerable to broad oppositional social movements.[10] Political inclusion provides social groups an interest in the regime, which is realistically viewed as a safer bet than revolutionary activism. Outlawing all forms of protest merely channels it into violent avenues, while legalizing it within bounds encourages non-violent protest and marginalizes violence. Instead of policies to eliminate Islamist groups, our goal should be to encourage their activism in the middle sphere of the local, connected to the community. It is this form that is most moderating and accommodating. In this sphere we can channel the practice of protest into non-violent formats.

References

1. See Brady, Henry E., and David Collier, eds. *Rethinking Social Inquiry: Diverse Tools, Shared Standards* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), 304.

2. For simplicity, I use mobilization theory. Contentious mobilization is the precise term, however it is not as user-friendly or accepted a phrase as social movement theory. The same analytical dynamics are useful to demand-making mobilization in general, but can be applied to groups in addition to movements.

3. An example of a discredited approach is the mass or crowd theory of protest.

4. Burgat, François. "Ballot Boxes, Militaries, and Islamic Movements," in *The Islamism Debate*, edited by Martin Kramer (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1997), 35.

5. For a summary, see my "Emotions, Poverty, or Politics? Misconceptions about Islamic Movements," *Connections* V, III, No. 1, March 2004. For an excellent comparative demonstration, see Hafez, Mohammed M. *Why Muslims Rebel: Repression and Resistance in the Islamic World* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2003.) For profiles of violent international Islamists, see Sageman, Marc. *Understanding Terror Networks* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004.)

6. White, Robert W., "Political Violence by the Nonaggrieved: Explaining the Political Participation of Those with No Apparent Grievances," *Social Movements and Violence: Participation in Underground Organizations*, edited by Donatella Della Porta (Greenwich, Conn.: JAI Press, Inc., 1992), 79-103.

7. Deeb, Lara, "An Enchanted Modern: Gender and Public Piety among Islamist Shi'i Muslims in Beirut," Ph.D., Emory University, 2003.

8. Della Porta, Donatella. *Social movements, political violence, and the state: A comparative analysis of Italy and Germany* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 6.

9. Tilly, Charles, "Terror, Terrorism, Terrorists," *Sociological Theory* 22, No. 1 (2004): 5-13.

10. Goodwin, Jeff. *No Other Way Out: States and Revolutionary Movements, 1945-1991* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).