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# Politics, Poverty, and Rage: Misconceptions About Islamist Movements

Anne Marie Baylouny

In recent years violent movements in the name of Islam have been catapulted to centre stage in U.S. foreign policy circles. Yet before concrete strategies can be formulated to deal with this phenomenon, the nature and dynamics of Islamist mobilisation itself must be understood.<sup>1</sup> What motivates an individual to join an Islamist group and possibly engage in violent activities? Under what conditions will these groups moderate their views, and when will they radicalise? While our policy choices dealing with the Muslim world and international terrorism inevitably hinge on our answers to these questions, a serious theory has been lacking.<sup>2</sup>

Lessons extracted from contentious study are used to provide insight into complex political allegiances in the Muslim world which are further contributing prescriptive policy formulations to defuse Islamist movements' violent path. Social movement theory in particular demonstrates local political inclusion can stimulate moderation, stunting militant Islamism progression in its infancy.

## THEORETICAL EXPLANATIONS AND INADEQUACIES

Analysis of the roots of Islamism have typically been based upon emotions, economic desperation, or cultural rejection. By this line of reasoning, poverty, hatred of Western culture, or lack of hope spur group formation that aim, either through the creation of an Islamic state or isolation from the global community, to return the Muslim world to a past state of glory. Some link Islamism to poverty and deprivation while others including Islamists themselves, reiterate Samuel Huntington's claim that the West is culturally opposed to the rest of the world. Under these theories, policies to decrease Islamism's appeal would centre on either

economic growth or cultural separation; the rest of the world should work to either increase living standards in Muslim nations or relax their pace of integration into the international economy. Appealing as those objectives may be to many, the data on Islamism, and on oppositional movements in general, indicate that the equation of economic or cultural distress with Islamism is misplaced, or at the very least incomplete.

Psychological and economic explanations situate Islamism as the result of an explosion of pent-up grievances,<sup>3</sup> the last resort of a person "fed up" and gone crazy. While such a description makes intuitive sense, the theory does not fit reality. Varying economic circumstances across regions and time periods do not match the occurrence of rebellions and protest movements, as many scholars have shown.<sup>4</sup> In fact, economic grievances abound throughout history, but movements based on them have been rare. When is a grievance bad enough to start a movement? And why do starving populations often not rebel, while their well-off neighbours do? Iran's Islamist revolution occurred in a context of economic plenty, and an analysis of Muslim countries demonstrates the lack of fit between this theory and the actual history of Islamist actions.<sup>5</sup>

The social background of individual movement members further demonstrates the fallacy of such theories. Islamist activists are neither economically deprived nor culturally monochrome. They are neither loners nor marginalised individuals searching for meaning and belonging in modern society. Rather Islamists background is from the most technically advanced sectors of society, often students or graduates of sciences and social sciences. Islamist activists are well rooted in their communities and have extensive personal networks, parallel to nationalistic terrorists in other regions of the world.<sup>6</sup>

The 9/11 terrorists – along with suicide bombers in the Palestinian territories – are a testament to this profile.<sup>7</sup> A survey of Hizbullah adherents found that despite its rhetoric, the party was not in fact the representative of the lower class rather the bulk of its support came from the middle and upper classes.<sup>8</sup>

Focusing on religion or religiosity to identify Islamists is similarly misguided. Religious involvements in political Islam are not directly related since Islamists and their supporters are not more religious than non-Islamists. Similarly, the level of support for Islamist movements diverges sharply from the level of popular acceptance of their goals, particularly the establishment of an Islamic state. In Lebanon, the overwhelming majority of Hizbullah adherents, along with most Shī'ites in general, prefer a Western political system (modelled on Switzerland or the United States), not a theocratic one. Discrepancies exist between the percentage of people who voted for Hizbullah and those who chose it as their favourite political party with lower ratings for the latter, thus indicating the practice of strategic voting instead of widespread belief in the movement itself. Hizbullah members are not significantly more religious than the adherents of secular political parties. In fact, a significant number of the highly religious declared themselves opposed to the establishment of Islamic political parties.<sup>9</sup> Surveys in the West Bank and Gaza found similar opinions. Overall, less than three percent of Palestinians in the territories desired an Islamic state while almost 21% trusted Hamas more than any other political factions.<sup>10</sup> The group subsequently won the Palestinian elections running on reform and anti-corruption mandate.

Culture and economy are only indirectly related to Islamist mobilisation for violent and moderate groups alike.<sup>11</sup> Grievances alone do not create a movement as such; at most they are but one element that organisers can exploit to aid in organising. This directly contradicts explanations of Islamism based on economic opportunities is the fact that substantial resources and networks are necessary for movements to

organise.<sup>12</sup> Leaders generally have privileged backgrounds, thus the substance of the movement and its ability to mobilise members are more important than the broad statements about motivations picked up by the Western press. What does it take to attract an initial following and then organise it into a network?

**Islamist movements differ considerably from each other having been moulded by the states they oppose, the resources at their disposal, Islamists networks, and local factors.**

#### **SOCIAL MOVEMENT THEORY AND ISLAMIST RESPONSES TO DEMOCRATIC CARROTS**

Adversarial political theories, of which social movement is the most prominent branch, are well situated to address these issues.<sup>13</sup> Social movement theory has long addressed the questions of terrorism and violent conflict and through its lenses Islamism conundrum – so baffling from other perspectives – becomes clear. Beyond the demonstrations and letter-writing campaigns common to democratic systems, contentious politics span a wide horizon from riots to revolutions to terrorism.<sup>14</sup> Non-violent movements more typically recognised as social movements are included however these are rare under authoritarian regimes.

In spite of the claims of movement adherents, the real motivating grievances of Islamism are local issues like any other social movements including the anti-globalisation campaign. The concerns that motivate Islamists centre in their towns, provinces, and local economies, however, Islamist movements differ considerably from each other having been moulded by the states they oppose, the resources at their dis-

posal, Islamists networks, and local factors. National movements have different goals than international activists, and ally only when their goals coincide. Even within the same state, movements can have radically opposed motivating agendas and in some cases, compete and attempt to defeat rival Islamist movements<sup>15</sup> as witnessed in parts of Iraq currently. Statements by group leaders and Islamist charters should be viewed in light of their actions in response to concrete changes and often, the “rhetoric of rebellion” does not equate to the actual grievance. Viewing entire movement practices instead of simply their statements reveals an alternative logic.<sup>16</sup> Consider Hamas’ political win, inconsistent yet clear changes in party policy on Israel were voiced, including the possibility of subjecting policy on Israel to a public vote whose outcome the party agreed to follow. Internally, Hamas debated and discussed its own positions on elections subjecting them to an internal referendum.<sup>17</sup>

Acknowledging Islamism as a form of opposition politics means its trajectory is not random, rather governed by political considerations and strategic calculations. It can develop into different forms of protest and organisations, including civil society and social welfare associations, given appropriate and credible incentives. The relevant influences for these movements are the array of political opportunities they face. The key questions for policy makers are many and simply put, what are the prevailing power relations? How does the group want these relations to change and what paths to mainstream political inclusion are open or blocked? The third question includes splits among elites that movements can exploit, opportunities to partake in elections, and the character of repression by the state.

Exclusion or inclusion from the political system plays a powerful role in radicalising movements. While fears of “one person, one vote, one time” will remain, data indicates when given the opportunity to participate in politics at the price of moderation, movements will alter their very nature to respond to this stimulus. Hizbullah’s experience demonstrates this dynamic. The group moderated to enter general election by reframing

its central objective and foregoing its stated goal of an Islamic state. Lebanon’s substantial Christian population makes this a special case to which Hizbullah must be sensitive in order to avoid renewed conflict.<sup>18</sup> The party formed alliances with Christians and supported Christian candidates in elections. The incentives Hizbullah responded to demonstrate the fundamental logic of the movement, notwithstanding any rhetoric to the contrary. In parliament, Hizbullah representatives discussed not religion but economic development.<sup>19</sup> Hizbullah’s political actions following the 2006 war with Israel further demonstrate the political logic of Islamist movements. Riding on a wave of mass support after the Israeli bombardment, Hizbullah utilised the democratic tools of demonstrations and boycotts in a fight to gain more power in government. Unsuccessful, the movement dropped its tone and offered a compromise.

Democratic theory has long held that mainstream political participation moderates political parties. Movements are co-opted, choosing to work within the limits of the system. Not all will participate, however increasingly Islamist political parties have chosen the electoral path. They hope for change through the political process rather than risk a violent conflict. Furthermore, once leaders or political parties have obtained a vested interest in the system, they will exert pressure upon the more radical wings of their movements not to jeopardise their established position. On the other hand when the opposition party is illegal, no incentive to moderate exists.

To mobilise continuous support organisations must provide public demonstrations of the movement’s endurance, a type of advertisement or communication with the constituency. Newsletters may work for Greenpeace, but an illegal movement must employ alternative means to advertise its existence.<sup>20</sup> Front page news serves as advertisements for a movement’s effectiveness; international news reaches international adherents while local news suffices for domestic movements. This is one way that violence as a tactic glues a movement together creating an identity and group solidarity.

Absent viable participation in the political realm, violence also serves the movement function of communicating demands to authorities.<sup>21</sup> When groups are legal, demonstrations can perform this vital role.

Movements do not merely build upon pre-existing identities or reflect group feelings already in place. Social movements actively fashion new identities mainly through framing techniques. Framing is the formulation of ideological schemes akin to slogans that sell the movement to a constituency. Frames must resonate with the population by tapping into existing symbols while at the same time transforming their cultural meanings. Problems are spun as unjust grievances for which clear blame can be assessed and a solution proposed by the movement. Familiar symbols are used in novel ways, much in the way that liberation theology altered Christianity by reframing poverty, once accepted as an act of God, now a social issue of fundamental injustice.

Religion plays a key role in Islamist movements without focusing on doctrinal specifics or religiosity of Islamists. The practice of Islam within Islamist movements has been shown to be malleable by adopting aspects of left-wing politics and nationalism to deploying Leninist manoeuvres often deemed antithetical to the religious doctrine itself.<sup>22</sup> Religious movements have distinct advantages in authoritarian contexts given the solidarity frame provided by, particularly when other organisational elements are forbidden.

State restriction on mobilisation not only pushes religious movements to monopolise the organisational field but religion also provides symbols of justice extending beyond the individual's rational cost-benefit calculus.<sup>23</sup> In non-democratic environments, symbolic protest – the veil, the kaffiyeh, the colours of the flag, or vague slogans such as “Islam is the solution” – dominates political communication. The necessary resources and networks to mobilise support – integral to social movement success – are also found in religion's institutional legacy and its charitable activities. In most areas of the Middle East, Islamist movements have been pro-

moted by the state in previous decades as a counter to the left, a harvest whose fruit the region is now reaping<sup>24</sup> and currently, Islamist charities substitute for the state's bankrupt social welfare institutions.

The democratic process itself may well be central to removing the impetus for violent tactics in Islamist movements; however this democracy must be considered fair, authentic, and legitimate within the states in question. The Arab world is rife with countries whose elections display a democratic facade while substantial violations pervade the process, escaping international criticism. Many countries use Islamism rhetoric to deny civil liberties and basic human rights, fuelling precisely the dynamic which drives targeted organisations to use violent tactics in their fight with the opposition. Any policy encouraging democracy must be uniform, neither barring participants from the democratic process or cancelling elections Algerian-style.

## CONCLUSION

Islamism is one of the most important geopolitical topics today, yet misconceptions about it flourish. We lose a great deal by ignoring the knowledge generated through years of study in other parts of the world, data that could aid in correctly identifying what Islamism is, what causes it, when it turns violent, and how best to meet our policy aims regarding it. Movement pragmatism provides an opportunity to craft targeted policies. Disregarding Islamist movements to respond to democratic incentives is tantamount to the tunnel vision that led to the surprise at the fall of the Soviet Union and the Islamic revolution in Iran.

Some individuals and groups may be beyond the pale, immune to the blandishments of democratic politics, however even these hard line groups originally grew out of local politics which could have been defused or moderated at that level.

## ENDNOTES

1. “Islamism” or political Islam is preferable to Islamic fundamentalism since fundamentalism was derived from the protestant Christian context which loosely fitted Islamic movement.

2. Middle East and Islamic specialists are often found parochial in terms of remaining uninfluenced by social sciences' extensive research into opposition politics and unwittingly operating with discredited theoretical frameworks. Theory-oriented scholars for their part generally steer clear of Islamism, perhaps out of a belief in the areas presumed cultural exceptionalism, or its admittedly complicated details.
3. This is the relative deprivation thesis of rebellion, pioneered by Ted Robert Gurr, *Why Men Rebel* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970).
4. See Mohammed M. Hafez, *Why Muslims Rebel: Repression and Resistance in the Islamic World* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2003); Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics*, 2nd ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Charles Tilly, *Popular Contention in Great Britain, 1758-1834* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995); and Charles Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1978).
5. Hafez, *Why Muslims Rebel*.
6. See Peter Waldmann, "Ethnic and Sociorevolutionary Terrorism: A Comparison of Structures," 237-57, and Donatella Della Porta. "Introduction: On Individual Motivations in Underground Political Organizations," 3-28, both in *Social Movements and Violence: Participation in Underground Organizations*, ed. Donatella Della Porta (Greenwich, Conn.: JAI Press, 1992).
7. On the latter, see Lori Allen, "There Are Many Reasons Why: Suicide Bombers and Martyrs in Palestine," *Middle East Report*, no. 223 (Summer 2002): 34-37.
8. Judith Palmer Harik, "Between Islam and the System: Sources and Implications of Popular Support for Lebanon's Hizbullah," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 40, no. 1 (March 1996): 55.
9. A significant percentage of the highly religious were found to be most distrustful of religious political parties. Harik, "Between Islam and the System: Sources and Implications of Popular Support for Lebanon's Hizbullah," 41-67. Confirming these findings, see Hamzeh's data cited in Augustus Richard Norton, "Religious Resurgence and Political Mobilization of the Shi'a in Lebanon," in *Religious Resurgence and Politics in the Contemporary World*, ed. Emile Sahliyeh (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 229-41.
10. Interestingly, support for an Islamic state in the West Bank was higher than in the Gaza strip, the home territory of Hamas. Jerusalem Media and Communication Center, *Public Opinion Poll No. 42: On Palestinian Attitudes Towards Politics Including the Current Intifada - September 2001*, [www.jmcc.org/publicpoll/results/2001/no42/htm](http://www.jmcc.org/publicpoll/results/2001/no42/htm).
11. The prevailing typology to date distinguishes between radical (that is, violent or extremist) and moderate movements. This categorisation can be based either on the tactics the movement chooses, or more commonly, their stated end goals in relation to the political system. The moderates work within the system, often concentrating on social welfare or civil society organizations.
12. John D. McCarthy and Mayer N. Zald, "Resource Mobilization and Social Movements: A Partial Theory," *American Journal of Sociology* 82, no. 6 (May 1977): 1212-41.
13. For social movement theory, see Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001); and by the same authors, "To Map Contentious Politics," *Mobilization* 1, no. 1 (1996): 17-34.
14. Following Tarrow, contentious politics can be defined as collective activity on the part of claimants, which uses extra-institutional channels to communicate their demands. Demands and activities to achieve them exist in relation to the prevailing political system, members of the elite, or the opposition. Social movements are oppositional challenges, which are sustained continuously beyond the distinct moment of protest. Sidney Tarrow, "Political Protest and Social Change: Analyzing Politics," *American Political Science Review* 90, no. 4 (December 1996): 874-83.
15. Prominent examples are the various movements in Egypt. Mamoun Fandy, "Egypt's Islamic Group: Regional Revenge?" *Middle East Journal* 48, no. 4 (Autumn 1994): 607-25; Ziad Munson, "Islamic Mobilization: Social Movement Theory and the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood," *The Sociological Quarterly* 42, no. 4 (2001): 487-510; David Zeidan, "Radical Islam in Egypt: A Comparison of Two Groups," in *Revolutionaries and Reformers: Contemporary Islamist Movements in the Middle East*, ed. Barry Rubin (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 11-22.
16. Charles Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1978), 234.
17. See Shaul Mishal and Avraham Sela, "Participation without Presence: Hamas, the Palestinian Authority and the Politics of Negotiated Coexistence," *Middle Eastern Studies* 38, no. 3 (July 2002): 1-26; and Robert A. Pape, "The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism," *American Political Science Review* 97, no. 3 (August 2003): 343-61.
18. See Nizar A. Hamzeh, "Lebanon's Hizbullah: From Islamic Revolution to Parliamentary Accommodation," *Third World Quarterly* 14, no. 2 (1993): 321-37; Muhammad Hussayn Fadlallah, "Interview: Islamic Unity and Political Change," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 25, no. 1 (Autumn 1995): 61-75.
19. el-Bizri, D. (1999). *Islamistes, Parlementaires et Libanais: Les interventions à l'Assemblée des élus de la Jama'a Islamiyya et du Hizb Allah (1992-1996)*. Beirut, CERMO.
20. Social movements make collective demands and undertake mobilizing or public activities, which unify the constituency. Charles Tilly, "From Interactions to Outcomes in Social Movements," in *How Social Movements Matter*, ed. Marco Giugni, Doug McAdam and Charles Tilly (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 253-70.
21. Violence may be unrelated to the movement's actual goals, but serve instead to create organizational cohesion. Martha Crenshaw, "Theories of Terrorism: Instrumental and Organizational Approaches," in *Inside Terrorist Organizations*, ed. David C. Rapoport (Portland: Frank Cass, 2001), 13-31.
22. Henry Munson, "Islam, Nationalism and Resentment of Foreign Domination," *Middle East Policy* 10, no. 2 (Summer 2003): 40-53; As'ad AbuKhalil. "Ideology and Practice of Hizbullah in Lebanon: Islamicization of Leninist Organizational Principles," *Middle Eastern Studies* 27, no. 3 (July 1991): 390-403.
23. Ron Aminzade and Elizabeth J. Perry, "The Sacred, Religious, and Secular in Contentious Politics: Blurring Boundaries," in *Silence and Voice in the Study of Contentious Politics*, ed. Ronald R. Aminzade, Jack A. Goldstone, Doug McAdam, Elizabeth J. Perry, Jr. Sewell, William H., Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 155-78.
24. Joel Beinin and Joe Stork, "On the Modernity, Historical Specificity, and International Context of Political Islam," in *Political Islam: Essays from Middle East Report*, ed. Joel Beinin and Joe Stork (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 3-25.

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