

**Islamic Activism: A Social Movement
Theory Approach**

Quintan Wiktorowicz, ed.

Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2004. 316 pages.

This book, an exciting development in the study of Islamic activism, is destined to become a landmark text. The reason for this, as Kurzman observes in his conclusion, is as simple as it is strange: The authors treat Islamic activists as normal human beings who make decisions about activism in ways that are similar to decision-making methods used by non-Muslim activists. Were it not for the persistent notion in both academic and popular circles that Islamic activists are their own species, one that is motivated by an irrational fanaticism, any such conclusion would be seen as humdrum. Such is the isolation of Islamic studies from theoretical developments in other fields that it was not until the turn of the twenty-first century that schol-

ars began to study Islamic activists from the vantage point of state-of-the-art insights on social movements. For this, Wiktorowicz and the contributors to his book are pioneers who deserve our appreciation.

Islamic Activism is divided into three parts: “Violence and Contention,” “Networks and Alliances,” and “Culture and Framing.” It also features a foreword by Charles Tilly, an introduction by the editor, and a conclusion by Charles Kurzman. Each chapter is a strong contribution based on solid empirical research with Islamic activists from various Muslim societies. Many chapters also provide synopses of social movement theory before moving on to a discussion of their particular case study. Due to the profundity of social movement theory, this never becomes repetitive, and a non-specialist reader will gain an understanding of social movement theory while learning more about Islamic social movements. For this reason, both Tilly and Kurzman note that the study of Islamic social movements is not just a one way street – applying theoretical insights in social movement theory derived from the study of non-Muslims to Islamic activists. Rather, the broadening and deepening social movement theory itself is accomplished via the empirical study of Islamic activists.

The book presents a “purposefully broad” (p. 2) definition of Islamic activism in an attempt to be as inclusive as possible: Islamic activism is defined as “the mobilization of contention to support Muslim causes” (p. 2). Thus, the authors look at a whole range of activist behavior: from peaceful protest, to inwardly focused spiritual renewal, to using violence to attain movement goals.

Assuredly, it is the latter type of behavior that has maligned Islamic activism and given rise to the “terrorist” stereotype of Muslims in the West. Thus, the four chapters in part 1 that focus on violence as contention are crucial. Mohammed M. Hafez looks at GIA (Islamist Armed Groups) violence in Algeria after the military coup in 1991; Hafez and Wiktorowicz analyze Islamic Jihad and Gama`a violence in Egypt during the same time period; Fred Lawson discusses the Shi`ah uprising in Bahrain (1994-98); and Glenn E. Robinson investigates Hamas.

Using the concepts of political opportunity structures, resource mobilization, and framing, the authors provide a profound and nuanced understanding of these Islamic activists’ ideas, motivations, and actions. Rather than essentializing their recourse to violence as “they are motivated by a violent religious theology,” the authors look at the interaction between actor and environment. For instance, the article by Hafez, as well as the joint one by Wiktorowicz and Hafez, show the important role that state repression and

violence has played in Islamic activists' decisions to transition from peaceful protest to violence (resort to violence when the Islamic social movement is threatened in its membership and resources by violent state repression, isolation from the broader society as the movement goes underground, and development of stark "good movement" vs. "evil state" mental frames).

Part 2 contains four chapters that explore the role of networks in social movement activism. Diane Singerman reveals the important role that informal networks play in Islamic activism, especially given the repressive nature of Middle Eastern authoritarian polities; Janine Clark relates how Islamist women in Yemen recruit new members, as well as how their activism actually transforms and creates new networks that are changing the social configurations of Yemeni society; Benjamin Smith describes the bazaar network's role in challenging or sustaining the state in Iran; and Jillian Schwedler analyzes how Yemen's changing political opportunity structures affected an Islamist political party's move into formal politics.

Part 3 consists of three chapters: Carrie Wikham's study of how ideas matter in the recruitment of lower middle class graduates into the Islamic movement in Egypt; Gwenn Okruhlik's arguments on how cultural tool kits and cultural repertoires help explain the rise and patterns of Islamic activism in Saudi Arabia; and Hakan Yavuz's account of how economic liberalization in Turkey has created new cultural repertoires in which state-oriented Islamic movements have fared less well than society-oriented Islamic movements. The book ends with Kurzman's conclusion, in which he traces the parallel and eventually overlapping histories of Islamic studies and social movements studies since the 1950s.

Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Approach should be required reading for all policy makers, the epistemic community that influences them, and those journalists whose writings so influence the general reading public.

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