Understanding Islamic activism is an urgent concern in the aftermath of September 11, 2001. A wider audience now focuses on groups like al-Qaeda and Egypt’s Islamic Group and strives to understand the meaning, motives, and organization of these movements. Some do so simply to understand a phenomenon that has emerged as a seemingly new, significant actor in world politics; others do so for the express purpose of responding to the attacks of September 11 and undermining future operations planned by such organizations. Whether one’s goal is insight or eradication, our understanding of Islamic activism can be greatly enhanced by seeing such phenomena as a form of social movement activity and thus availing ourselves of the large and ever-growing body of theory and scholarship on social movements in general.

It may appear problematic to some readers to draw comparisons between radical Islamist activism and other popular social movements such as the women’s movement or the civil rights movement in the United States. As I hope to show, however, a comparative lens explains the similarities between movements across time and space and also suggests their distinctiveness. At the same time, a comparative lens challenges the all-too-common position, articulated by many throughout the media, government, academia, and the policy world, that Islamist activism is “exceptional” and somehow unique due to religious, ethnic, regional, or cultural factors.

In this chapter, I want to suggest that Islamic activism is not unique but rather has elements common to all social movements. The organizational structures, repertoires of contention, collective identity, and so forth of Islamic movements are similar to those of other movements throughout the world. However, what is specific to Islamic movements is the political context within which they operate. Many regimes in the Middle East rely upon
political exclusion and repression to maintain rule. Citizens, under such conditions, are forced to organize through informal networks and build collective identities through these networks; and it is this character of the Islamist movement which makes it distinct from other social movements. The networked world that constitutes associational life in the Middle East is what explains the emergence and organizational power of these movements and also the capabilities of such extreme elements as al-Qaeda in executing complicated, costly, and ultimately horrific attacks.

I will begin by discussing the political landscape of the modern Middle East and its exceedingly repressive nature. The costs of political participation in the region are high, and thus conventional forms of political expression are unavailable. As an alternative, people turn to informal networks to organize and advance their interests. The complex web of associability sits at the heart of Islamic movements and is fundamental to understanding them. Networks are not only the most viable means of building movements within the current political environment. They are also key transmission belts of collective identity, drawing the ideas, sensibilities, reflexivity of people together while criss-crossing social, economic, and political hierarchies. I then explore the dynamism between networks and the sense of solidarity they inspire. In particular, I suggest how collective identities are forged out of the sensibilities and ties that are cultivated by networks. Social movement theory helps us to understand the construction and significance of these identities, as activists draw upon nascent but invisible communities of sympathizers. I conclude by noting that the transnational dimension of Islamist activism, particularly its most militant variety such as the al-Qaeda network, is premised on a collective identity forged by the types of repression and informal networks commonly found at both the domestic and regional levels in the contemporary Middle East.

Families, Dynasties, Monarchies, and Contentious Politics

Social movements emerge out of specific local contexts, and this political environment is key to an understanding of an Islamist movement’s agenda and trajectory. The Middle East, as a region, is characterized by political exclusion and extremely limited practices of citizenship. Monarchy, dynastic rule, and the military dominate political life, plain and simple. Families, with a hereditary right to rule, govern 14 Middle Eastern states outright, including the Kingdom of Morocco, the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the Sultanate of Oman, and the seven federation members of the United Arab Emirates (Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Ajman, Umm al-Qaiwain, Ras al-Khaimah, Fujairah). Even in some of those states where elected opposition parties participate in parliament and prime
ministers wield some power, most notably Morocco and Jordan, legislative bodies remain subject to the pleasure of the monarch and political parties, and other groups suffer from legal and extralegal constraints on fund-raising, mobilization, and freedom of association (Posusney 2001). While some of the dynastic regimes, such as Bahrain, have recently restructured their governments toward a constitutional monarchy with promises of greater autonomy, at the same time they reaffirm their monarchical character (see Herb 1999 for a thorough discussion of the differences and commonalities of Middle Eastern monarchies).

In addition to the monarchies and sultanistic regimes of the Arabian Gulf, dynastic succession is de rigueur even in avowedly secular, nationalist regimes such as Ba’thist Syria, and the sons of secular rulers such as Saddam Hussein in Iraq (prior to the U.S. invasion in 2003), Qadhafi in Libya, Mubarak in Egypt, and Ali Abd Allah Salih in Yemen are rumored to be “in contention” for succession. In these regimes, ideological, developmental, and nationalist ideologies serve as the basis for legitimacy and authority, yet kinship seems to be trumping the ideologies of Arab nationalism and Ba’thi politics. The principle of dynastic succession was so firmly rooted, for instance, in Hafez al-Assad’s mind that after the heir apparent, Basil al-Assad, died in a car crash in 1994 he whisked his other son, Bashar al-Assad, back from Europe (where he was studying ophthalmology), gave him a crash course in Alawi/Ba’thist dominance, and rapidly promoted him in the military.

It is too early to tell if Egypt, Libya, or Yemen will follow in the footsteps of Syria and create dynasties with the outward appearance of nationalist, secular, authoritarian political systems, but such a trajectory would be consistent with other regimes in the region. For example, in Egypt Hosni Mubarak has ruled since 1981 in four successive terms without participating in a competitive election. Rumors of a “succession crisis” surround his presidency, particularly as he ages and continues to prevent competitive presidential elections, but there is strong evidence that, like other Middle Eastern monarchs (both of the republican/secular and conventionally dynastic kind), he is grooming his wealthy son, Gamal Mubarak, to be his political heir. Ann Lesch (1996) has appropriately labeled Egypt a presidential monarchy, and rumors of a dynastic succession only reinforce the monarchical tendencies of this centralized, bureaucratized state. In short, when considering the possible emergence of social movements and oppositional politics, it must be remembered that the political climate throughout the Middle East offers extensive power and authority to anyone who occupies the ruler’s office, whether a king, shaykh, amir, or president, and this authority often gets passed down through the ruling family. The modern state, as such, continues to thrive with little transparency, financial accountability, legislative or judicial autonomy, or rule of law.

Islamist activists must not only contend with the concentration of power
around the family at the elite level. Their organizational efforts are also deeply constrained by the military and its proximity to the center of power. Whether one adopts a historical or contemporary perspective, the military has often sat either at the heights of power or just below dynastic rulers. The Ottoman sultan utilized the military institution of slave-soldiers, or mamluks, collected from the outer reaches of the Ottoman Empire to conquer, protect, and eventually rule the sultan's territory. The officer corps of the military emerged not from the notable, aristocratic, or religious classes but rather from slave-soldiers who were loyal and dependent on the sultan for their power. While some Ottoman mamluks were eventually able to establish an independent dynastic rule, for the most part the officer corps was a cosmopolitan professional elite, which offered rags-to-riches opportunities for loyal, gifted, obedient soldiers, including sinecures in the Empire's administration. Even before World War I and the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire, officers and soldiers in Egypt, Syria, Turkey, and Algeria were already beginning to dabble in nationalism and express anticolonial and anti-Ottoman politics. Local nationals were finally admitted to national military academies in the 1930s, and the future leaders of nationalist regimes in the Middle East emerged from the first generations of graduates, who cut their teeth on anticolonial movements and the 1948 war with Israel.

The problem with militaries is that their coercive power and their increasingly national reach make them dangerous to rulers who do not have strong bases of support and legitimacy. As war making or preparations intensify, rulers must raise large standing armies that they or their notables or mercenaries can lead. But when armies become national and recruit ordinary soldiers and the middle class from their nations, they are in an advantageous position to take over their country. In some places in the Middle East, this is exactly what happened (Tarrow 1994, 59).

The first military coup d'état in the region and in Africa took place in Iraq in 1936, and during that same year the graduating class of the Egyptian military academy included Gamal Abdel Nasser and Anwar Sadat. Successful military coups followed in Egypt in 1952; Iraq in 1958; Algeria in 1965; Libya in 1969; Sudan in 1958, 1969, and 1989; and Syria in 1970 (only the latest coup). Originally motivated by nationalist, anticolonial, and modernist ideologies, the military coups did not become the "change agents of modernization" expected by some social scientists. In fact, Middle Eastern leaders have to constantly "check their back" and police their own military and security forces to avoid new coup d'états by challengers.

By the 1960s, Richard Bulliet (1999, 191) writes, "Most of the Middle East had become subject to autocratic regimes increasingly addicted to the use of police-state methods to maintain power. Indeed, after the fall of the Soviet empire in 1991, the Middle East became the world's foremost arena of despotic, non-participatory government, whether in monarchical or military
guise.” Bulliet uses the term neo-Mamluk to describe Middle Eastern military regimes that are embedded in secular or monarchical regimes.

[The term neo-Mamluk] stresses important continuities with the pre-imperialist past. Mamluks—professional military officers bound to one another by strong ties of training and camaraderie, but substantially divorced from the general populace in outlook and career path—had been a pervasive force in Middle Eastern governance for 600, if not 1,000, years prior to the onset of Westernization in the nineteenth century. The system, in a variety of forms, had consistently provided excellent soldiers, and it was often receptive to new ideas of a technical sort emanating from the West. But the system had been unrelenting in its tendency toward tyranny: government of the officers, by the officers, for the officers. . . . The term puts an emphasis on autocracy and the officers’ self-serving exclusion of the general populace from political participation, relegating issues of declared ideology to a subordinate role. Many have argued, for example, that the failure of these regimes to defeat Israel or secure the material blessings of modernization sapped their ideological legitimacy and made an Islamic resurgence possible. I would point not to these undeniable failures, but to the regimes’ success in instituting brutal and all-pervasive internal security structures as a root cause of Islamic opposition. (191–92)

In a similar fashion, Amira El-Azhary Sonbol argues that twentieth-century military regimes, such as in Nasserist Egypt, “should be seen as a resurrection of traditional military power” found among the khassa or special class holding power, which includes the ruling elite, the military, and the business classes (2000, xxiii–xxix). It is not that any military leader can become president or that ideologies, reputation, support, and luck do not play a role. The state depends upon the military and security forces to maintain the regime and public order. These institutions have certainly been the breeding grounds for presidents.

Within the Arabian Gulf, the royal family neutralizes the potential threat from the military by appointing family members to powerful staff positions, keeping armies small (which has its own risks), hiring foreign mercenaries, and relying on foreign military alliances (the Gulf war in 1990–1991 demonstrated some of the benefits and pitfalls of this approach; see Owen 1992, 50). Again, it is not that the military trumps the presidency, but it is the basis and means for regime stability. Only one supreme leader is allowed, and if the ruler discovers that his loyal servants are developing their own popularity, charisma, or power, they are quickly deposed, transferred to less important positions, or suffer “accidents” (see Hammoudi 1997 for a discussion about the entrenched master/disciple relationship in the Arab world).

Furthermore, while several Middle Eastern countries, including Jordan,
Morocco, Egypt, and Turkey, faced privatization pressures amid the growth of capitalism, they experienced a horizontal expansion of the military into the national economy. In regimes that owe their power to the military, even after the heydays of the 1960s and 1970s, the “officer-politicians continue to use these institutions to perform a variety of functions, becoming at once military commanders and civilian technocrats, ideologues, and commercial producers. . . . Hegemony within these states continues to lie with the armed forces, even if the state has assumed a civilian character more than ever before” (Kamrava 2000, 80).

Oppositional forces, whether democratic, Islamist, or leftist, can certainly ridicule the ideological (anti-imperialist, modernist, or nationalist) pretensions that militaries once espoused, but there are great risks in challenging the coercive, economic, political, and bureaucratic might of the militaries since they are now clearly stakeholders. The unusually powerful role of the military can be seen even in the most democratic countries of the Middle East, Israel and Turkey, where challenges by Palestinians and Islamists, respectively, have provoked severely “illiberal” policies. In these “military democracies,” despite a tradition of electoral competition, vibrant oppositional politics, political turnovers, and peaceful succession, “civil military interactions are cemented either by institutional devices (the National Security Council in Turkey) or international geopolitical realities or tradition (retired Israeli officers becoming politicians). [The] military is a highly visible and integral feature of the political system [and] the legitimacy of the military’s political influence is seldom questioned by the electorate” (ibid., 70–73).

In an effort to retain power, by the 1990s authoritarian military regimes had “been reduced to autocratic mukhabarat (intelligence) states, and in a number of instances, notably in Algeria, Iraq, and Sudan, they had also become instruments of random terror and bloodshed” (ibid., 81). Absorbing the limited resources of even wealthy Gulf countries, the Middle East remains the most militarized region in the world by virtually every measure. NATO countries spend approximately 4.5 percent of their GNP on military expenditures. Developing countries on average spend about 5.5 percent of their GNP on similar outlays. In contrast, countries in the Middle East devote 17 percent of their GNP on military expenditures, while North African nations spend about 8 percent of their GNP (Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Chad, Mauritania, and Western Sahara) (Cordesman 2001, 34, 37). International actors such as Russia, the United States, France, and the United Kingdom are key supporters of foreign military aid and private arms sales to the region.

The collusion among monarchical, dynastic regimes, the military, and intelligence forces has suffocated a wide range of mediating structures and formal organizations throughout the region, whether they are professional associations, regional clubs, neighborhood and community organizations, political
parties, women’s associations, human rights groups, youth groups, etc. The power and organizational vitality of society has been diminished by draconian laws of association and assembly, limitations on fund-raising, a censored press, and regulatory overkill (see, e.g., Amnesty International 2000). This has left the state, kinship, and religious institutions in place, offering few rights of citizenship, representation, voice, or political freedoms in return. Thus, the ground for activism—no less Islamic activism—is littered with risks and formidable obstacles (Ibrahim et al. 1996). Whether one follows descriptive accounts of political life in the post-1967 order in any single country in the Middle East, analytic single-case studies by social scientists and/or indigenous intellectual critics, official government publications, human rights reports, or reports from such institutions as the World Bank, UNESCO, and the European Union, the prognosis on representative, open, participatory politics in the region is bleak (though important concessions to collective life occur occasionally in certain countries) (see, e.g., the UN Arab Human Development Report 2002 for further analysis).

Informal Networks and Islamist Movements

Monarchy, familial rule, the military, and intelligence services retain a strong hold on citizens of the Middle East and stifle civil society. This would explain the weakness of social movements in general and opposition groups in particular. Nonetheless, as is well known, the region is replete with domestic (often illegal) political activism and provides a base for transnational activist forces. Why is this the case? And why have Islamist activists, as opposed to liberals, democrats, socialists, or communists, been able to build and sustain a regional, if not international, movement? The diverse trends within social movement theory and arguments about contentious politics, collective identity, and informal networks are quite useful for understanding the rise of Islamist movements, their limitations, and the predicaments they continue to face. At the same time, the universality that implicitly underpins many strands of social movement theory has obscured some of the more distinctive elements of Islamist movements.

Like other social movement theorists, McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly’s view of contentious politics as “public” unintentionally narrows the scope of social movement activity within the historical and cultural context of the Middle East, even though they claim to “challenge the boundary between institutionalized and non-institutionalized politics” and “insist that the study of politics has too long reified the boundary between official, prescribed politics and politics by other means” (2001, 6). They define contentious politics as “episodic, public, collective interaction among makers of claims and their objects when (a) at least one government is a claimant, an object of claims, or a party to the claims and (b) the claims would, if realized, affect the interests of at
least one of the claimants” (5, emphasis added). They make a further distinc-
tion between transgressive contention, which fulfills these first two criteria, and contained contention where two additional criteria are fulfilled: “(c) at least some parties to the conflict are newly self-identified political actors, and/or (d) at least some parties employ innovative collective action” (emphasis added). Collective action is defined as innovative in the above definition if it “incorporates claims, selects objects of claims, includes collective self-
representations, and/or adopts means that are either unprecedented or forbid-
den within the regime in question” (7–8). Islamic activism is best described in terms of “contained contention.”

What marks the innovative style of Islamist movements is twofold: first, they challenge most reigning regimes in the Middle East by rearticulating the boundary between the “public” and “private” itself to propose a less secular and autonomous vision of the “good life” and governance. This rejection of secularism and a Westernized version of “the public” threatens almost every Middle Eastern regime, albeit in different ways. Even in nations which claim religious legitimacy or whose laws are heavily influenced by Islam, such as Morocco, Jordan, and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, religious authorities are subordinate to dynastic rulers and/or the military. Islamists wish to change this formula. For example, despite the fact that Article 1 of Saudi Arabia’s “Basic Law of Government” states, “The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is a sov-
eign Arab Islamic state with Islam as its religion; God’s Book and the Sunnah of His Prophet, God’s prayers and peace be upon him, are its consti-
tution, Arabic is its language and Riyadh is its capital,” Islamists attack the government for its monarchical rule, which they condemn as un-Islamic (see chapter 10 by Gwenn Okruhlik in this volume).2

We see that across Islamist movements in the region, the contours of pub-
lic and private spheres, state and society, are themselves contested. As Seyla Benhabib has argued, “All struggles against oppression in the modern world begin by redefining what had previously been considered private, non-public, and non-political issues as matters of public concern, as issues of justice, as sites of power” (1992, 84).3 Struggles over the boundaries between the public and private are contested issues in Western democracies (abortion, education, school prayer), and they remain at the heart of debates about rule and power in the Middle East. The Islamist vision of the “good life” is “not simply about ‘religion’ or ‘politics,’ but is part of a cultural battle over the very definition of these terms” (Wuthnow 1991, 16). Islamist movements have framed their agenda around fundamental questions about the meaning of life and how Islamic beliefs and practices should inform daily life, law, morality, the economy, and governance. While Islamist groups have certainly targeted their governments, made claims against regimes, and established mass organi-
zations and political parties, they have more commonly and successfully di-
rected their message and organizational strategies toward changing practices
and the meaning of everyday life. Battles over dress, morality, marriage, celebrations, entertainment, sexuality, and faith as well as conflicts over governance and law are at the center of Islamist oppositional frames that have attracted sympathetic support. The Islamist movement reshapes how “people understand themselves as creators and practitioners of their world” (Escobar 1997, 63).

On more conventional political grounds, Islamists point to the model of the prophet Muhammad when he created an Islamic state in the seventh century and argue that his example is relevant for the twenty-first century as well. Even more moderate religious movements and authorities, such as the Muslim Brotherhood or state-supported religious institutions such as al-Azhar in Egypt, argue that Islam and its laws, morals, and practices should serve as the ideological and authoritative basis of the polity. These theocratic positions clearly challenge the legitimacy and authority of the nationalist, authoritarian, developmentalist, and liberalizing regimes of the region.

Second, Islamists are innovative because they utilize informal and less visible means to mobilize supporters and build movements (see, e.g., Wiktorowicz 2001a). The use of informal networks, in addition to formal, bureaucratized, mass organizations, definitively displaces Islamist movements from the “contentious politics” framework, since their collective action is often not “public” in a conventional sense. Their strategies of mobilization and their ideological vision often rely upon informal, personal networks and religious and cultural associability to build movements. Wiktorowicz (2001b) has argued that al-Qaeda “members” act not according to organizational dictates but rather according to the accepted Salafi method of religious interpretation that joins al-Qaeda supporters together in a loose transnational network of Muslims as they continue to dispute, revise, and transform religious understanding. (The Salafi school in Islam argues that the salafis or original companions and followers of the prophet Muhammad in the seventh century created what should stand as the model for any Islamic society and polity.)

The vague call that “Islam is the solution” resonates on so many levels in the Muslim world, and as a result it influences multiple social and political fields and encourages a collective identity. Purchasing a cheap pamphlet from a street vendor on proper Islamic dress for women, visiting a medical clinic attached to a mosque, attending study circles with clerics, making the pilgrimage to Mecca, veiling, or reading a religious magazine links an individual, indirectly perhaps, to a larger social phenomenon. In this context, Melucci’s understanding of collective action as a phenomenon rooted in identity construction, contingent upon culturally and historically constructed notions of “the public” and “the private,” and based on informal networks as a strategy for mobilization and a conduit for the constant regeneration of a “meaning machine,” seems more appropriate than the conventional approach.
to contentious politics, which subscribes to the notion that collective action must be “public” (and thus misses the heart of the Islamist phenomenon). Wearing a particular type of dress or praying in a radical mosque can get one arrested in neighborhood sweeps by internal security forces, but it also enhances the feelings of belonging to a distinct group. Melucci’s approach thus allows for a wider definition of an “activist,” since as collective identity is constantly constructed and reconstructed, the plane of action and the definition of the actor shift as well.

Collective identity as a process involves cognitive definitions concerning the ends, means, and field of action. These different elements or axes of collective action are defined within a language that is shared by a portion or the whole of a society or that is specific to the group; they are incorporated in a given set of rituals, practices, cultural artifacts; they are framed in different ways, but they always allow some kind of calculation between ends and means, investments and rewards. (Melucci 1995, 44–45)

For purposes of emphasis, a collective identity is something that is shaped, intentionally and unintentionally, by movement entrepreneurs and cultural producers, such as religious and intellectual authorities, poets, essayists, journalists, cartoonists, and even movie producers. In a region that forbids so much formal political participation and constrains and harasses governmental associations and civil society in general, participating in “given sets of rituals, practices, and cultural artifacts” can themselves be “evidence” of commitment to the Islamist movement and signs of shared beliefs that resonate among fellow travelers. Identifying movement adherents by these processes of signification can be much harder for outsiders than reading membership lists of formal organizations, but nevertheless these movement “adherents” convey their interests without risks of visible, political, formal collective action. The ability to “flip” a sympathizer into an activist is a main preoccupation of any movement, and a shared collective identity is a prerequisite to providing additional resources, labor, money, or facilities to the movement (see McCarthy and Zald 1977). Tarrow (1994, 3) notes that particularly in repressive systems, symbolic politics and collective identity build movements characterized as “discursive communities.” Furthermore, as Aminzade and Perry (2001, 159, 161) point out,

Religious groups have a unique institutional legitimacy that gives them distinct advantages; it is harder to repress them; and they feel “safer” to confront and discuss issues that no one else can. . . . Religious leaders do not have to rely only on rational persuasion since their followers can be “moved by the spirit” rather than persuaded by rational arguments. Given the highly salient nature of these beliefs and their imperviousness
to falsification, they often sustain the level of commitment required for high-risk activism and violent challenges to secular authority.

A range of social movement theorists have noted the important links between collective identity, mobilization, and activism. As Melucci argues, a collective identity can develop long before mobilization. It produces solidarity and a shared moral investment in a set of issues (Melucci 1995, 52–53). This sense of collective identity forges links among sympathizers to the movement while making them internally and externally distinctive. Northern white students, for example, who joined Freedom Summer in 1964 in Mississippi adopted blue jeans and overalls, “liberated” sexual mores and behavior, and manners of speech to signify their solidarity with African Americans in the South, their membership in the civil rights movement, and their rebellion against white Northerners and Southerners (McAdam 1988, 93). In similar ways, young women in Egypt reject “Western” clothing and adopt Islamic dress that covers the body, hair, and face. Men and women join religious study groups, attend prayers at mosques regularly, engage in charitable associations and services organized by mosques, and read the newspapers and books of the religious groups and publishing houses. These types of behaviors signify to others that such individuals subscribe to a more religious way of life which often, but not necessarily, communicates adherence to the goals and vision of an Islamist movement.

In the language of rational choice theory, movements overcome the free-rider problem by developing programs that offer collective incentives of group solidarity and commitment to moral purpose (Jenkins 1983), something that Carrie Wickham discusses in chapter 9 in this volume. A strong sense of collective identity promotes a reflexive feeling of solidarity among like-minded travelers, who become more entwined through ideological, educational, cultural, political, or social networks. Individuals join movements, but movements are built through networks of associations that ultimately build and cultivate a collective “we.” People who know each other can “vouch” for, motivate, comfort, and challenge one another and use their shared history in the face of political and social risks. Knowing someone who is already involved is one of the strongest predictors of recruitment into the membership of a social movement (McAdam and Paulsen 1997, 146). Dense interpersonal networks exclusive to group members, particularly in a situation where the group feels challenged by authorities or the status quo (as in the racist South of the 1960s), means that the group represents a “mobilization potential” (Klandermans 1984, 1988) for activists. Movement entrepreneurs can recruit already existing networks of people with a strong sense of collective identity in blocs much more easily than random individuals (see McAdam 1988; Morris 1997).

Here again, it is important to emphasize the critical role of nurturing a
collective identity, which can then draw people together in interpersonal networks. These networks may be cemented through a particular mosque, migration, school, work, prison, repression, or an ideological vision, but they also reinforce shared identities, create group feeling, solidarity and distinctiveness, and make mobilization easier while reducing its uncertainty (McAdam and Paulsen 1997, 146–47). As Mueller (1997) notes in her explanation of the rise of the women’s movement in the United States in the late 1960s, submerged networks become “cultural laboratories” within civil society, only emerging in confrontation with the state at a later point in public policy debates. Islamists have also created “cultural laboratories” that have influenced oppositional strategies and changed the behavior of elites themselves.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, social movement theorists have long noted the importance of “social networks.” For example, Tarrow’s (1994, 27) four-part inquiry into the dynamics of social movements suggests that we examine (1) opportunity structures that create incentives for movements to form; (2) the repertoire of collective action they use; (3) the social networks on which they are based; and (4) the cultural frames around which their supporters are mobilized. Tarrow also suggests that the major external resources of social movements are the social networks in which collective action occurs and the cultural and ideological symbols that frame it (44–45). Melucci (1995, 45) argues that “collective identity as a process refers thus to a network of active relationships between the actors, who interact, communicate, influence each other, negotiate, and make decisions. Forms of organizations and models of leadership, communicative channels, and technologies of communication are constitutive parts of this network of relationships.” And Tilly has argued that movements are built through lateral moves of categories of networks (of personnel of movements from one group to another). Following Harrison White (n.d.), Tilly (1978, 63) suggests that “catnets” are sets of individuals that form both a category because they share some common characteristic (education, neighborhood, migration, worship, kinship, collegiality, occupation, or prison) and a network. Tilly argues that “catness” times “netness” (or how extensive a network may be) equals organization. Network multiplicity is a key to mobilization, and particularly weak or loose ties created by newspaper, print, and informal social networks make coordinated collective action possible across groups, diffusing collective action and making coalitions possible (Granovetter 1995; Gould 1997, 133–34).

While social movement theory has focused on “social” networks as critical to the growth and base of social movements, networks have long been an important component of political life in the Muslim world, though perhaps this has not been typically recognized by many Western social scientists, since these networks tend to be informal and relatively invisible. Networks need to be understood within the context of specific political structures and environments. More than a question of semantics or a tug-of-war over the terrain of
the disciplinary boundaries between sociology and political science, networks take on political meaning and political utility in circumstances where formal, bureaucratized, visible, legal collective action is systematically repressed. Under these conditions, informal networks constitute a parallel site of political life, connecting disparate and varied individuals, families, and communities to larger places and centers of power and political contestation. Elsewhere, I have used the term informal rather than social to describe networks in Cairo, since it calls attention to the extremely sensitive and politicized nature of associational life in contexts where the state closely and minutely supervises any formal, legal, public associations (Singerman 1995). “Informal activities,” whether economic or political in nature, are those which escape licensing, regulation, and even enumeration by the state and thus have an illegal or quasi-legal status (see Hart 1973; Abdel-Fadil 1980, 15; de Soto 1989; and Singerman 1995). Despite the lack of formal, legal, political space for citizens in Egypt and elsewhere throughout the region, these networks articulate and further the demands of their members for such things as jobs, houses, cheap food, public goods, community order, conflict resolution, and public morality. The preponderance of informal networks provides an organizational grid in these communities, a type of associational life that remains outside the surveillance of the state, precisely because it is informal, invisible, unregulated, and unlicensed in nature. In Egypt, these networks are ubiquitous among the residents of lower income communities within both the older popular quarters of Cairo and the newer, informal housing areas that ring central Cairo, and they exist in similar locales throughout the Middle East.

Networks clearly have macro implications as they spread transnationally and regenerate throughout society and the polity. Thus, it is not surprising that familial, mosque, occupational, educational, clerical, and village networks of activists that already crisscross the globe and connect such disparate locales as New York City, Cairo, Jerusalem, Paris, London, Kabul, Hamburg, Khartoum, and Boston should serve as a significant structural characteristic of Islamist movements. These heterogeneous, informal networks must be considered in any assessment of the phenomenon of Islamist movements, since they provide a vehicle for recruitment, facilitate the consolidation of their material and social bases, and offer general support and solidarity. Islamist movements do not necessarily produce these networks, but they rely on them, since the networks are deeply embedded in society. Furthermore, informal networks transcend both the spatial boundaries of neighborhood, work, and state institutions, as well as cultural, class, and gender boundaries, incorporating men and women, different social classes, and various status groups into complex networks. Teachers, religious leaders, artisans, bureaucrats, police officers, engaged couples, and leaders of informal credit associations maintain links and networks to each other to further their interests.

Networks also have a material dimension or value in that they facilitate
the production and distribution (and redistribution) of goods and services. Though many of the goods and services procured through informal networks are technically illegal (private tutorials from schoolteachers, bribes for bureaucrats, currency exchanges, black market food, informal housing) but not always illicit (drugs and prostitution, for example), their engagement in the economic sphere enhances their utility and reinforces their popularity in the community. Networks facilitate access to knowledge and resources, whether in the sense of finding the right people who can present one’s case to the police or housing authorities, directing poor women and men to someone who will initiate an informal savings association on their behalf, or finding a cleric to advise young people on morality, marriage, or religious observance. The integration of informal networks in the local and international economy reinforces their authority in the community.

Informal networks constitute an organizational grid in the community, which may be enlisted to support clandestine activities or collective repertoires of action, so essential to social movements. Since networks are designed to aggregate the interests and demands of individuals and groups, many, though not all, of the constituents of a network know and trust each other, and these networks can be easily exploited for the purposes of more visible and direct resistance to the state and its institutions. Putnam defines social capital as “features of social organization . . . that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions” (1993, 167). I would argue that “efficiency” is not quite the right term to use in describing the value of these networks because it strips the political dimension from our attention. In Egypt, people rely on social capital, in the context of networks, because, in part, they are objects of rule rather than true citizens of their state with full political rights. Western analyses of Islamist movements often dismiss the key role played by political exclusion in the region, which obscures not only the role of networks in movements themselves but also the weight and legitimacy they carry within society at large.

As political activists in Islamist movements grow bolder and more organized, informal networks are essential for activities such as mobilizing supporters, raising funds, promoting symbolic protest, smuggling arms, hiding and feeding people, eluding the police, dispersing propaganda, and organizing mass protests. Throughout the Middle East, the level of Islamist violence and government repression has steadily increased since the mid-1980s. Yet, even though governments increased repression and Islamists countered with more violence, movements were able to sustain themselves and perhaps even grow throughout the 1990s, particularly in heavily populated urban areas, provincial cities, the countryside, and transnational communities (as September 11 clearly demonstrated) (see Fandy 1994; Toth 1998). Despite this growth, however, popular support for radical Islamists in Egypt declined after the horrific massacre of tourists in Luxor in 1997 by a faction of the Islamic
Group. In addition, increased use of military and security courts in the 1990s kept Islamists in jail or in exile.

Transnational Islamist Activism

Due to limitations of space, I cannot address sufficiently the obvious transnational dimensions of contemporary Islamist movements. Nonetheless, there are clear links between the domestic and regional dimensions of Islamic activism (discussed above) and the broader transnational expressions that now garner so much attention in the post–September 11 period. For this reason, let me simply concentrate on how the three themes of this article—informal networks, political exclusion and repression, and a strong collective identity—affect, and are effected by, the transnational dimensions of Islamic activism. In this final section, my analysis compares Islamist movements with other social movements.

The ubiquity of informal networks in Islamist movements and the regional tradition of political exclusion, as well as the presence of a strong Islamist collective identity, brings us to a particular appreciation of the goals and vision of the more radical and extreme expressions of Islamic activism, exemplified by the al-Qaeda network. It has been extensively reported since September 11 that Egyptian Jihad leader Ayman el-Zawahri formed a new joint operation with Osama bin Laden in 1998 called the International Islamic Front to Combat Jews and Crusaders. This operational merger between some of the al-Jihad leaders in Egypt and the networks, resources, and labor of Osama bin Laden’s al-Qaeda produced a more powerful network with enhanced organizational capabilities (Rashwan 2000). The new umbrella organization also included three Islamist groups from Pakistan and Bangladesh. It was this alliance which explained the phenomenal “success” of al-Qaeda’s growth under the protection of the Taliban. In isolation and security, this organization could then plan the attacks on U.S. installations in Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Kenya, and Tanzania and plan for the September 11 attack in the United States and Europe. The transnational dimension of this movement is obvious, since it was quite capable of moving its operatives, weapons, communication capabilities, and other resources across national boundaries with ease. The thousands of Muslims from Sudan, Egypt, Palestine, England, France, Algeria, and other countries who went to protect Muslims in Bosnia, Afghanistan, and Chechnya (often at the urging of Middle Eastern governments and religious institutions) constituted a labor force and set of activists whose experiences of violence, brutality, and oppression obviously radicalized them. (The United States also recruited Muslims for the jihad against the Soviets in Afghanistan.) In addition, many returned to Europe or the Middle East with greater ideological commitments, deeper loyalties to a particular community, and military experience.
In the 1980s and 1990s, these same young men (and it was primarily men who went abroad in the name of the Afghan or Bosnian "jihad" to defend their fellow Muslims) largely returned to domestic economies with limited opportunities and to highly charged political environments where the "Afghans," as they were called, were immediately deemed politically suspect and suspicious due to their travels. Some of these men returned several times for further training in Afghanistan or education and employment in Europe, and their networks and sense of collective identity grew. The "white heat" of the war in Afghanistan and Bosnia was a transforming, radicalizing experience that is not dissimilar to the effects of the violence of the American South in the 1960s on black and white civil rights activists. In Mississippi and elsewhere the brutality of racism produced a generation of activists who worked together in the early 1960s (most notably during Freedom Summer in 1964) and then went on to form other movements such as the Free Speech movement in Berkeley, the antiwar movement, the student movement, and the women’s movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s (McAdam 1988). By way of analogy, such solidarity-building, in response to what were seen as intolerable and repressive conditions, took place in the Middle East as activists from groups such as al-Gama’a al-Islamiyya or al-Jihad in Egypt enhanced their sense of collective identity and commitment through their prison experiences and the general experience of operating in an authoritarian environment. Again, we see the cumulative and cyclical consequences of political repression and state violence against challengers in the region, as activists burrow deeper into subterranean and invisible places.

The dynamic between informality, repression, and networks can also lead to greater fragmentation within movements. Arrests or prison may destroy the movement’s leadership, and cells are left to operate on their own with increasingly desperate and hardened leaders in control. As David Smilde comments about al-Qaeda’s attacks on September 11, great historical moments are created by individuals, and the actions of one can create turning points that alter everything that comes “after.” “Social movements are effective precisely to the extent that the actions of a relatively small group of people are successfully projected as representing a much larger collectivity. That representation may or may not be true, but whether it is true rarely has much relation to the movement’s impact” (AMSOC list-serve e-mail, October 10, 2001).

Conclusion

Reasonable reflection on the kind of collective identity that Islamist movements cultivate, the informal character of their organizations, and the general dynamics of how such movements emerge and operate might reveal that Islamist movements are less effective than they would otherwise be. If such groups pursued more formal types of organization or joined official types of
representation (however limited), perhaps they would be better able to advance their aims. This is the point of social movement theorists who employ a quasi-modernist understanding in which social movements do best when they engage the state, become part of its organs, and win major concessions. While such strategies may be effective for some movements in some settings, there is strong evidence that informal organizational strategies—which can take advantage of nascent support communities and concomitant fervor—may provide greater instrumental benefits.

Piven and Cloward (1979) have long argued that movements often lose steam and are co-opted by elites and thus are ultimately compromised as they concentrate on building permanent, centralized, bureaucratized mass-membership organizations. From this perspective, disenfranchised groups, reacting to widely experienced social dislocation and galvanized by consciousness-raising and greater feelings of efficacy, should take advantage of “moments of madness” that the movements produce. As collective defiance mounts, they can exert leverage by causing or contributing to “dealignments” among elites and escalating, not compromising, their demands. Popular insurgency, Piven and Cloward argue, “flows from its own structure, logic, and direction and is historically specific” and should not always be stuffed into a Leninist strategy of building a disciplined, bureaucratic party structure (1979, xii).

It is important to reiterate that Islamist movements cannot easily organize mass, centralized, bureaucratic organizations; their governments will not let them. Their sympathizers may increase, but the resources for repression at the hands of the Egyptian, Syrian, or Saudi governments are huge. Thus, some movements have turned away from local insurrection to destabilizing their enemies and producing fear, crises, and uncertainty. The consequences of violent political actions, often associated with Islamist movements, are not uniform or predictable. Nonetheless, they often cause the status quo to change by exposing vulnerabilities and challenging established wisdom and practices.

In the aftermath of September 11, observers of all stripes struggle to understand the character of Islamist movements. In this chapter, I have attempted to contribute to this understanding by employing conceptual categories from social movement theory in the context of the contemporary Middle East. The unique element of the Middle East is the extreme repression and political exclusion practiced by regimes, and this most marks social movement activity by forcing associational life to go underground, as it were, thus creating and sustaining enduring collective identities and networked action.

If there is a political prescription embedded in the chapter, it is that the most effective way for Middle East regimes to address the interests and grievances of Islamist movements is to open up their polities and allow for political inclusion. Whether one abhors or embraces these movements is immaterial. What is clearly necessary is to allow people to make these decisions as citizens.
rather than as objects of rule. This will both blunt the violent strains of Islamist aspirations and enable Islamist movements to conceive of themselves as full, invested citizens. The lessons we can learn from this study are not merely academic but will hopefully highlight the enduring costs of political exclusion and constrained civil societies in the Middle East that produce funnels of political violence. The “criminalization of politics” produces activists and sympathizers who create their own political world, with different rules and norms where the transcendental end justifies the means. Dualistic rhetoric of good and evil not only blot out the place for complexity in our analysis but also distract us from our mutual responsibility in how we make the world.

Notes

I would like to thank students in my seminar at American University on social movements in spring 2002 for indirectly influencing this essay as well as the AMSOC list serve following September 11. I also appreciate the assistance and advice received from Paul Wapner, Steven Cook, Suzanne Hitchman, Nida al-Ahmad, and Seda Demiralp.

1. Many observers have suggested that the recent prosecution and imprisonment of Dr. Sa’ad Eddin Ibrahim, the founder of the Ibn Khaldun Center for Development Studies, was motivated by the Mubarak administration’s severe displeasure over an article by Dr. Ibrahim and his comments on television, which suggested sarcastically that “the Arab world’s contribution to political science” was a term that he coined _gumlukiyya_. This term is a pun that combines the Arabic words for republic (_gunhuriyya_ and _malakiyya_). He used the term to describe how the new president of Syria, Bashir al-Assad, had assumed office automatically after his father died, even though the country hadn’t been a hereditary kingdom for centuries. He was also making a pun, because _gumlukiyya_ rhymes with _mulakhiyya_, a word for a viscous vegetable soup that Egyptians use to describe a mess. When pressed by a call-in questioner, Dr. Ibrahim reluctantly suggested that President Hosni Mubarak, marking his twentieth year in power, might be grooming his son Gamal as his successor. Seventeen days later, armed State Security policemen stormed into Ibrahim’s home and arrested him. He was eventually acquitted.


3. In the Middle East, this politicization of the “private” due to struggles against injustice, exclusion, and patriarchy is further complicated by European colonialism in the Middle East, which entailed the adoption of foreign legal codes. Civil and criminal codes were borrowed from Belgian, French, British, or Swiss legal jurisprudence, greatly reducing the jurisdiction of _shari’a_, or Islamic law. Only matters of “personal status” remained within the realm of _shari’a_, and Islamic family courts and religious authorities jealously guarded any further encroachment upon their reduced authority. These affairs of marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance seemed, particularly according to Western tradition, “private” concerns, yet in Islam they are central concerns of Islamic law and crucial to the morality of the community of believers.

Diane Singerman

160
Like feminist organizations in the West, women’s rights activists have waged controversial campaigns to change Personal Status Law, with moderate success (see Sonbol 1996 and Charrad 2001). Islamists have been particularly antagonistic to women’s groups and others who support a woman’s right to divorce and enhanced rights in marriage, child custody, and inheritance. Arguments about the gendered division of labor, female employment, birth control, child-rearing practices, sexuality, and morality are at the center of public debate and Islamist discourses.


5. One government report in 1993 estimated there were 23 informal settlements in the Greater Cairo Region (GCR) of 5.88 million people, while another survey from the Ministry of Local Administration estimated that 4.52 million people live in 171 informal housing areas in the GCR (Arandal and El-Batran 1997, 1–2). According to the 1996 population census, 10 million people inhabited the GCR (Electronic Atlas of Cairo 1998).

6. The post–September 11 investigation of al-Qaeda, for example, revealed the complex mix of primarily informal financial networks that supported the conspirators.

Works Cited


Diane Singerman

162


