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MOBILIZING THE FAITHFUL

Militant Islamist Groups and their Constituencies

campus

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1. Introduction

Two violent incidents in the early 1980s directed Western public attention to what seemed to be a new kind of threat posed by militant Islamist groups. On October 23, 1983, at approximately 6:20 a.m., a young man in a yellow Mercedes truck approached the U.S. Marine compound at Beirut International Airport, headquarters to the American contingent of an international peacekeeping force sent to oversee the PLO withdrawal from Lebanon. The driver accelerated towards the perimeter, broke through barbed-wire and sandbag barriers, and exploded a charge equivalent to more than five metric tons of TNT, which led to the collapse of the entire four-story building and killed 241 soldiers. Only minutes later an almost identical suicide-bombing was carried out against the French contingent, killing fifty-eight. The attacks were disturbing not only because they caused an immense number of casualties, but also because of the way in which they were perpetrated. The two attackers, later identified by their noms-de-guerre as "Abu Mazen" (age 26) and "Abu Sijaan" (age 24), not only willingly sacrificed their lives to carry out the bombings but did so, according to witnesses, with joyful expressions on their faces.[1] A statement sent by a group calling itself "Islamic Jihad", believed to be connected to the then largely unknown Hizbullah, claimed responsibility and threatened further attacks, declaring: "We are fond of death."[2]

The second incident had occurred two years before, on October 6, 1981, when Khalid al-Islambouli, a lieutenant with the Egyptian army and member of the radical Islamist group al-Jihad, assassinated the Egyptian president Anwar al-Sadat during a military parade outside Cairo. Islambouli became famous not only for his deed, but also for his words after the attack, when he shouted, "I have killed the Pharaoh, and I do not fear death!" The attack was not conceived as a suicide mission, but the perpetrators clearly expected to be killed, as Al-Islambouli's lawyer later recounted, "They wanted to enter paradise. They considered themselves martyrs."[3] The dangerous new quality of this threat from "religious fanatics" seemed obvious. Because the attackers were driven, as a Western news-magazine put it, by a "zeal to die and win a passport to heaven," the rationale behind their attacks seemed different from those of other insurgent or terrorist groups, which made them unstoppable by conventional security measures or the threat of retaliation.[4]

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[1] See United States District Court for the District of Columbia, Valore et al. v. The Islamic Republic of Iran, Civil Action 03–1959 (RCL), p. 3; Report of the DoD commission on the Beirut International Airport Terrorist Act, October 23, 1983, Dec. 20, 1983, pp. 84–89.

[2] *The Economist*, Oct. 29, 1983.

What is the logic behind Islamist violence? According to one influential interpretation it is the logic of another world, which translates into forms of "fanaticism" and acts of violence that defy conventional rationality. Rather than seeking to extract political gain and address political audiences, the perpetrators seem to follow divine imperatives or sacred duties, expecting rewards in the hereafter. To capture this phenomenon, scholars of political violence developed categories such as "religious terrorisms" or "sacred terrorism", referring to what was seen as a particular type of militant group (Rapoport 1990, Hoffman 1995). One quality of this "religious terrorism" is especially relevant to this study: the presumed relationship between militant groups and their social environment. Whereas secular terrorists seek to gain the support and sympathies of certain communities or parts of a population, religious militant groups are assumed to "execute their terrorist acts for no audience but themselves" (Hoffman 1995, 273); as a result they are "unconstrained by the political, moral, or practical constraints that seem to affect other terrorists" (Hoffman 1995, 272).

This book challenges that interpretation. There might be violent religious groups that correspond to this description, but these are rare and rather exceptional cases.[5] For the vast majority of religious militants, and especially for militant Islamist groups, adhering to a religious frame of reference does not preclude orientation on and attachment to social constituencies. One could say that, on the contrary, religious perspectives entail and require social reference groups. This results, firstly, from the inherently social character of religion. While religious perspectives certainly include a transcendental or "cosmic" dimension (Juergensmeyer 2000, 145–163), and notions of the divine and the sacred shape symbolic language and violent acts, they cannot be reduced to this aspect alone. Not only have ideas of redemption and religious action necessarily an "inner-worldly" component. Violent religious groups also have a genuinely religious but entirely worldly reference group – the *religious community*. Religion, as inter alia Appleby (2000, 9) and, more recently, Kippenberg (2008, 23/24) emphasize, is in its origin a communal phenomenon. It is the product of communal action and rooted in the community of believers, which is at the same time its bearer and objective. The religious community, in other words, is the social substratum of religion. This communal character of religion is indicated by the origin of the term itself, in the Latin *religare*, "to bind together" (Appleby 2000, 9). Reviving the faith, therefore, necessarily means reviving the faith of the community, and defending the religion implies defending the religious community. The second element closely linking militant religious groups to their social environment is the fact that they often have a directly political agenda, as many groups address the state itself, seeking to re-make the social and political order. This is particularly true in the case of most militant Islamist groups. The Islamist perspective emerged as part of a broader movement of "Islamic Awakening", and one of its core characteristics is the notion that Islam proscribes a comprehensive and divine order for all aspects of personal, social, and political life. The French term for the phenomenon, *intégrisme*, refers precisely to this aspect. Thus, Islamism is a religious, but also an essentially social and political movement as it refers to a religious community and aims at influencing its moral and political order. It propagates a return to the pure foundations of Islam with reference to authoritative sources and historic precedents, while denouncing folk religiosity as well as the political quietism of the traditional religious establishment. So, militant Islamist movements do in fact refer to a wider community of believers, such as confessional minorities, Muslim societies, or the global *ummah*, whom they seek to lead back to the true faith, to re-shape according to an Islamic moral and ethical order, or to liberate from oppression.

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[3] Personal interview with lawyer Abdel Halim Mamdour, Cairo, February 2005.

[4] *Newsweek*, Nov. 14, 1983.

[5] Socially isolated "cults" might fall under this category; see Malthaner (2005, 118/119).

Khaled al-Islambouli was clearly willing to die when he carried out the attack on Sadat. And convinced that he was committing the deed for God's sake, he was confident of being received as a martyr. At the same time, however, the attackers saw their deed as part of the struggle for an Islamic order and for Muslims in Egypt. As one leader of al-Jihad explained, "They did not start from the wish that they want to go to heaven, and therefore they killed him. No! They wanted to change the system, of course!"[6] Similarly, while the belief that sacrificing his life would yield heavenly reward might very well have inspired the suicide bomber in the U.S. Marine headquarters attack, the incidents were at the same time part of a broader violent campaign to force American and other "imperialist" forces to leave the country, to end the Israeli occupation of South Lebanon, and to lead the Lebanese Shiite community back to the true faith. During the following years, the Shiite Islamist movement established a broad array of social facilities, charity networks, and medical and educational institutions. They also took part in elections, and, at some point in time, formed a media department to win support for their violent campaign among the Shiite community in Lebanon and beyond. In an interesting development, the strategy of suicide bombings was drastically reduced after the mid-1980s, despite a large number of volunteers. The reason were pragmatic political considerations rather than divine imperatives. As one spiritual leader explained, "The present circumstances do not favor such operations anymore."[7]

Islamist movements and militant groups are among the most prominent actors in contemporary conflicts in the Middle East and parts of Africa and Asia. Comprehending the rationale behind their actions and the dynamic of their development is crucial for finding constructive ways of dealing with them. This study proposes an approach of analyzing the behavior of militant Islamist groups by focusing on the relationship with their social constituencies. In a comparative study of two cases – the Lebanese Hizbullah and al-Jamaa al-Islamiyya (and al-Jihad) in Egypt – it outlines emerging relationship structures and traces the way in which both sides mutually exert influence on the other's behavior. The underlying thesis is that, beyond repressive intervention by security forces and economic limitations, it is this relationship with their constituencies that influences and constrains the violent campaign of militant Islamist groups.

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[6] Personal interview with the leader of a Jihad-group, Cairo, January 2005.

[7] Cited in Kramer (1997, 120).