CIVIC EXCLUSION AND ITS DISCONTENTS:  
THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF CONTEMPORARY ISLAMIST MOVEMENTS

David Waldner  
Department of Government and Foreign Affairs  
University of Virginia  
daw4h@virginia.edu

August 31, 1994

Contemporary Islamist politics combines ideas and interests into hybrid movements. While Islamist discourse places a premium on cultural issues of restoring familial and patriarchal authority, regulation of gender relations and sexual mores, cultural authenticity, and the restructuring of the political community according to religious norms, practices associated with these movements are colored by more profane, material concerns. In Egypt and Algeria, Islamist groups acquire popular support through the provision of public services that corrupt state institutions can no longer perform, while in Iran, participants in popular demonstrations against the Shah chanted slogans identifying Islam with social justice and equity for lower classes. In Syria, merchants of the suq in Aleppo and Hama opposed to government economic policies closed down their shops in support of Islamic groups, while in Turkey, the Islamic political party has called for a new development policy that will end the bias towards large "cosmopolitan" firms and begin supporting smaller Anatolian merchants and artisans.

The dichotomous nature of these movements is reflected in academic debate. On one side stand positivist scholars, who locate the origins and dynamics of Islamist politics in socioeconomic crisis and relegate its cultural dimensions to auxiliary cognitive or ideological roles. (Davis 1984; Ayubi 1991). In a paradigmatic statement of this position, Philip Khoury argues that Islamic revivalism is a reaction to the failure of the modern secular state to fulfill the modernization project. He then notes that

> For the classes sponsoring revivalism, Islam must be seen as the vehicle for political and economic demands, rather than as being itself the "impulse" behind these demands. Given the position of these classes in the social hierarchy and their continued attachment to the traditional sectors, Islam is their most convenient, readily available ideological instrument." (Khoury, 1983: 215, italics added)

Standing in stark contrast to this position are those scholars who argue that positivist approaches introduce extrahuman forces into the analysis, thereby negating the

To some extent, this debate is a function of which group the analyst chooses to study, leaders of the movement or its popular constituencies. Analysts of politicized religious movements in other parts of the world have noted the gap between the idealist rhetoric of religious leaders and the material aspirations of their followers, and we should not be surprised that the same disparity appears in Islamic contexts. We must, in other words, treat Islamist movements as internally differentiated coalitions, carefully distinguishing between persons who join Islamist organizations, and those people who provide varying levels of support for those organizations. But the nonpositivist critique has merit and should not be ignored: most of the arguments rooting Islamist politics in socioeconomic factors have undertheorized that crisis, limiting their analysis to often vague categories like state exhaustion or accumulation crisis. Doubtless these phenomena have real content, but more specificity is required in accounting for how crisis is translated into protest movements, why Islam is the vehicle for those protests, and which groups support those movements. Baker's critical commentary on the positivist penchant for assuming that generic socioeconomic crises are automatically translated into Islamist politics is thus apt. He writes, "We knew, but somehow forgot in the Muslim context, that the most precise and detailed study of an external pressure cannot reveal how particular human subjects respond to it."1

This essay represents an attempt to mediate between the idealist and materialist positions on Islamist politics. We can begin this mediation by drawing on the

1 Sidney Tarrow (1989: 21) has generalized this point, writing "Structural changes in society have usually been seen as the major producers of protest or mobilization potential...But on its own, structural change only creates the objective potential for movements and cannot overcome the personal inertia nor develop the networks and solidarities necessary to mount group action."
broader literature of social movements. Sidney Tarrow, for example, has commented on the interplay of culture and interests by noting that most protest movements couch instrumental demands in uncompromising symbolic terms; that regardless of the expressive content of their demands, all challengers involved in collective action must make strategic decisions about strategies, goals, and tactics; and that protest movements involve competing claims stemming from conflicts of interest. (Tarrow 1989)

Furthermore, rather than beginning our analysis from generic socioeconomic crises, we can analyze the specific conflicts of interest engendered by contemporary political-economic arrangements. These conflicts, and the mobilization that has proceeded in response to them, can be understood as a variant of Tilly's polity model of social mobilization. (Tilly, 1978). In this variation, civic inclusion refers to the incorporation of social groups into state-controlled distributive networks, not routinized access to central decision-making institutions. In many cases, the distribution of patronage is based upon explicitly class-based criteria. (Leca, 1990).

The resulting political-economic system is one that I have called "constituency clientelism" to distinguish it from more commonly observed--and theorized--patterns of patronage. (Waldner 1994) In standard patron-client relations, private goods are exchanged between individual patrons and personally dependent clients. Civic orders based on constituency clientelism, on the other hand, have three character-defining properties: the patron is the state, not notables or brokers; clients are social classes, not individuals or sub-class corporate groups; and the goods exchanged for political support and loyalty are collective, not private, goods. Public goods are characterized by the infeasibility of excluding additional consumers and jointness of supply: this means that if they are provided to one member of a group, they are provided to all members of that group. The critical point is that state-society relations based upon constituency clientelism institutionalize patterns of inclusion and exclusion. Groups of people receive asymmetric
benefits from civic inclusion or exclusion: some social categories benefit more than others, and some categories suffer net losses, or fear loss in the future.

In Syria and Turkey, for example, the main beneficiaries of constituency clientelism have been family farmers and organized labor in the public sector. Farmers receive high commodity prices and subsidized inputs, while workers benefit from liberal employment and wage policies. The Syrian regime has made a greater effort than center-right Turkish governments to earn the allegiance of civil servants, while successive Turkish governments have forged closer ties with the business class than have the Syrians. In both countries, relations with the bourgeoisie tend to be a melange of patron-client relations (based upon private goods like discretionary access to foreign exchange or import licenses) and constituency clientelism (based upon public goods like tariffs).

The classes most conspicuously left out of these arrangements are urban middle classes: educated professionals and the petite bourgeoisie. In Turkey, Anatolian provincial merchants and artisans constitute the main base of support for the various incarnations of Necmettin Erbakan’s Islamic movement, which began, notably, as a revolt within the Union of Chambers of Commerce assaulting the evident biases in state development policy that favored big business at the expense of smaller Anatolian businessmen. (Landau 1976; Barkey 1990). In Syria, urban small traders and artisans provided critical political and financial support for the more militant groups whose members were drawn from the sons of urban educated classes: significantly, the 1980 uprising in Aleppo targetted government-owned cooperatives as a principle target of

2 Through 1980, Turkish wages in comparison to per capita GNP were high in absolute terms (Boratav 1983). Syrian wages were comparatively lower, but still much higher than those countries that sought to compete in international markets based upon low labor costs.

3 There are numerous ways to distinguish petite bourgeoisies from bourgeoisies that are not dependent upon enterprise size or wealth, including the extent of their enmeshment in capital and labor markets, administrative differentiation, and the properties of the markets whose demand they meet.
destruction. (Batatu 1982; Lawson 1982). Equally significant was the response of the regime: alongside of the brutal and often arbitrary use of repression, the state signalled its understanding of the rules of the game by implementing a new land reform, raising wages, freezing prices for consumption goods, and other policies designed to resecure the loyalty of its popular base. In Syria and Turkey, then, an important component of the Islamist movements is an expression of the discontent of urban middle classes at their exclusion from the benefits of dominant political-economic arrangements.

In capitalist systems, where major social actors have undergone civic inclusion in the sense of low-cost and regularized access to the major decision-making institutions of society, where the parameters of state-economy relations have received broad acceptance and legitimation over long periods of time and conflict resolution, and where "neutral" market mechanisms mediate outcomes, discontent over particular outcomes can be expressed and redressed without challenging the system. In the Middle East, where systems of constituency clientelism were established as a means of unilaterally resolving intense conflict over the economic borders of the state, where civic inclusion entails the political marginalization of most social groups, and where economic outcomes are transparently political, expressions of discontent take the form of system-challenging movements. Basically, challengers recognize that the only way to alter existing inequities in the distribution of economic benefits is to capture political power.4 Furthermore, groups excluded from patronage systems based upon constituency clientelism

4 Of course, not all Islamist movements undertake direct political activity. More broadly, we can consider the Islamic resurgence to be an example of what Richard Rorty (1989) has called the contest of vocabularies. Vocabularies are methods of redescribing "lots and lots of things in new ways, until you have created a pattern of linguistic behavior which will tempt the rising generation to adopt it, thereby causing them to look for appropriate new forms of nonlinguistic behavior, for example, the adoption of...new social institutions." All modern Islamist movements, then, represent "a contest between an entrenched vocabulary which has become a nuisance and a half-formed new vocabulary which vaguely promises new things." In this paper, however, I concentrate on organized political movements.
characteristically consider the entire political system to be illegitimate. In societies where public goods are deemed essential to the smooth functioning of the economy, there will be clashes over interests within the system; where public goods are used as props for otherwise unpopular regimes, political contestation will typically entail clashes about normative evaluations of the entire system of resource allocation and distribution.\(^5\)

Note the ways in which this account of the material bases of Islamist movements differs from the more abstract and generalized "socioeconomic crisis" approach. First, cleavage structures are inherent components of existing political-economic arrangements from their inception; conflict, then, predates full-blown crisis, although crises might catalyze mobilization, organization, and political action. Second, not all patronage systems award largesse to the same groups: thus, we can begin to correlate patterns of inclusion and exclusion with patterns of mobilization into polity-supporting and polity-challenging coalitions.\(^6\)

A third distinguishing characteristic of this conceptual framework is that it problematizes the notion that all grievances and conflicts of interest will be acted upon. The *leitmotif* of contemporary social movement theory is its focus on the inherently difficult processes of mobilizing and organizing large groups of people for collective action. Indeed, it has been argued that the major factor accounting for any social movement is not the existence of conflicts of interest or grievances, which are taken to be constant features of all organized human communities, but "the availability of resources, especially cadres and organizing facilities." (Jenkins, 1983: 530). Organized political action, in other words, is predicated upon overcoming the collective action problem.

---

\(^5\) The distinction is drawn from Claus Offe, as cited in Rudy (1994).

\(^6\) For some sense of cross-national variation in the composition of groups supporting Islamist movements, see Munson 1988: 95-104.
Briefly, collective action problems exist when rational actors decide not to participate in the provision of public goods since, by definition, they cannot be excluded from the consumption of those goods whether or not they bore the cost of providing them. (Olson 1965; Hardin 1982). Using the collective action problem as an analytic point of departure, we can begin to analyze the tactical and strategic functions that Islamist ideologies perform. In addition to, and, arguably, because of their manifest expressive content, Islamist organizations serve instrumental purposes by helping to solve collective action problems. Islamic political activists act as political entrepreneurs, translating often diffuse grievances into a specific political agenda, while pre-existing religious organizations facilitate collective action by lowering the transaction costs of constructing large-scale organizations.

Mobilization entails three aspects: reducing the claims on potential members' resources by competing organizations, developing an agenda that both defines and meets the interests of members, and creating a group structure that enhances loyalty while minimizing exit and voice. By making strict codes of belief and behavior incumbent upon adherents, the expressive content of Islamist ideologies, organizations, and practices promotes mobilization. On the one hand, the moral content of the Islamist program plays a role in persuading at least some people to overlook the logic of collective action and participate in the provision of collective goods: to the extent that individuals can be persuaded to give priority to collective goals, collective action is facilitated. On the other hand, demanding high levels of commitment increases the extent of collective resources under the control of challenging groups operating in a strategic environment in which rivals control a formidable array of carrots and sticks. Rosabeth Kanter ably summarizes the centrality of what she calls commitment mechanisms:

Since the community represents an attempt to establish an ideal social order...it must vie with the outside for the members' loyalties...It must often contravene the earlier
socialization of its members in securing obedience to new demands... The problem of securing total and complete commitment is central. (Cited in Tilly, 1978: 72).

Analyzing the strategic dimensions of Islamist ideology and practice is not equivalent to denying the salience of the expressive content of that ideology and practice. There is no reason to doubt that members of these organizations have committed themselves to collective definitions of themselves, and that this identity has fundamental implications for their notions of political community and social justice, for the goals they aspire to, and for their behavior. Indeed, were it not for a high level of commitment to the identities upon which these organizations are founded, Islamist ideology and practice could not perform the strategic functions that I have outlined above. Instead, my argument is that ideas and interests are not necessarily in conflict, and that one way to think about their interconnections is through what we might call the strategic externalities of ideas in promoting collective action.

Let's consider the strategic aspects of identities from another perspective, which also serves to highlight the deficiencies of extant approaches linking Islamist politics to socioeconomic crisis. Just as all personal identities are multi-dimensional, conflicts of interest can be interpreted in multiple ways. This is important, because each potential interpretation of a single conflict of interest denotes a particular group of people with whom an individual will ally, a corresponding rival alliance, and a specific distribution of politically relevant resources. Alessandro Pizzorno (1978) provides the example of a small Corsican wine grower who must decide whether to cooperate with a specialized winegrowers' association, a farmers' union, a Corsican regionalist movement, or a national political party. Each potential base of identity and organization constitutes a distinct interpretation of the interest to be defended, a political strategy, and a store of politically relevant resources to call upon.

From this perspective, choosing to support an Islamist movement is fundamentally a strategic choice. The strategic value of this choice is precisely that
Islamist groups do not claim to defend narrow economic interests. As a result, through their appeals to popular notions of social justice, and through intentionally vague economic programs that appeal to broad sectors of the population, Islamic movements are capable of forging cross-class coalitions. Not coincidentally, this strategy mirrors the coalition-building strategy of the ruling regimes they oppose.

I have argued that we cannot assume that socioeconomic crisis automatically elicits Islamist groups, and that the decision to support those groups has important strategic implications. By focusing on the strategic dimensions of collective action that transcend the dichotomy between ideas and interests, I have not specified why large groups of persons, including some groups or individuals whose interests are not objectively at stake in current political-economic arrangements, elected to join or make alliances with Islamist movements: after all, other bases of identity and organization could have fulfilled the spoken to the same strategic imperatives. The reasons for electing to support Islamist movements are potentially many, and there is no reason to assume that one uniform reason holds across cases. The answer may be that other potential identities, ideologies, and associated organizations were coopted, repressed, or discredited. It may be that adherents and supporters had made prior commitments to religious identities, making Islamist organizations more recognizeable and appropriate. Or it may be that Islamist activists are particularly potent political entrepreneurs. Comparative investigations of modes of recruitment, mobilization, and organization could conceivably be correlated with observed patterns of behavior to provide some answers to this question. The focus on the dynamics of group action, in other words, suggests several potential research projects.

7 Briefly, a person can benefit from political-economic arrangements and still oppose them from the conviction that they are corrupt and promote despotic government.
Finally, comparative investigation of specific modes of action and behavior of Islamist groups would profitably focus on political opportunity structures. Political opportunity structures are attributes of the political system that provide greater or fewer opportunities for political protest movements operating without official sanction. The potential for protest has been related to three such characteristics. (Tarrow, 1989). First, the degree of openness or closure of political institutions to participation by excluded groups conditions how those groups respond. The second factor is the stability of existing political alignments, which in turn effect the balance of power between regime and opposition. Political and economic crises weaken existing alignments, providing incentives for political entrepreneurs to seek new allies, while convincing potential constituencies of improved potential of political challenge. Finally, it has long been noted that cleavages within the existing elite invite action by marginalized groups, because those cleavages militate against cohesive state responses, and because they provide opportunities to win over members of the elite.


Al-Haraka Al-islamiyya Fi Al-watan Al-`arabi, 107-22. Beirut: Markaz Dirasat Al-
Wahda Al-`Arabiyya.


