Audit
of the Conventional Wisdom

Why Do Islamist Groups Become Transnational and Violent?

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Since al-Qaeda's rise to prominence as the most commonly recognized Islamist group worldwide, Islamist movements are increasingly viewed as violent, transnational organizations. Most Islamist groups, however, are actually non-violent and focused on the domestic audience of their home countries. They can become both violent and transnational as their domestic contexts and incentives change, however. The reasons that Islamist movements move from non-violence to violence, and from national to transnational strategies, have far-reaching implications for the way we deal with Islamist groups and are critical for policymakers to understand.

Looking at the Continuum

Primarily domestic, peaceful Islamist groups are often powerful political actors, yet they command far less foreign policy attention than do violent transnational groups. While much of the attention to violent transnational groups may be justified, such groups must be understood within the broader continuum of Islamist organizations of which they are a part. In addition, the historical context in which they have emerged and evolved provides important insight into how Islamist groups change over time.

Violent transnational groups have often come to be seen as inherently violent with global ambitions—unyielding in their objectives or methods—but many such groups have in fact evolved over time. They have alternated between violent and non-violent strategies and between a focus on domestic or global issues, depending on their external context.

Common beliefs that violent Islamist strategies are fixed have led to perceptions that few policy options exist other than military elimination or containment. Recognizing the inherent malleability of violent strategies, on the other hand, implies a broader range of policy options, including the structured political participation of Islamists.

Choosing Violence or Nonviolence

The choice regarding whether to use violent or non-violent methods of engagement is an important decision that distinguishes Islamist groups from one another. The chosen strategy may be informed by a group's ideology, although the ideologies of most Islamist groups are both broad enough and flexible enough to accommodate a range of strategic choices around the use of violence. A decision to use violence has far-reaching implications for both a group's visibility and how it is publicly viewed, but this strategic choice can change as influential external structural factors change. In particular, the dominant Islamist strategy of non-violent mobilization can shift to a violent strategy when a) there is a structural shift in the relationship between the Islamist movement and the state that removes incentives for participatory activities, or b) when there is a split within the movement that provides incentives for a radical wing to outflank a more moderate wing.

Even if an Islamist movement decides to use violence, those methods are most likely to be directed at domestic targets in the movement's home country—as Islamist movements historically have focused dominantly on domestic issues. However, violent Islamist mobilization can move beyond domestic political concerns as the organization evolves. In particular, Islamist movements are likely to become increasingly transnational under three principal conditions: a) when members of the domestic Islamist movement become linked to participation in external conflicts through training activities; b) when the movement's funding is transnational and the funding party creates organizational incentives for transnational ties; and c) when geographic resources necessary for sustained mobilization in repressive contexts become external to state boundaries.

As noted, Islamist groups differ from one another both in the scope of their intended constituency and in the type of mobilization strategies that they employ. Table 1 distinguishes prominent Islamist groups based on these two characteristics. Note that the ideology of an organization may impact both of the characteristics below, but that most Islamist ideologies are flexible enough to allow for movement between categories over time.

Table 1: Typology of Islamist Movements

		STRATEGY	
		Non-violent	Violent
AUDIENCE	National	Welfare (Turkey) Adl wal Ihsan (Morocco) FIS (Algeria) →	Gamaat Islamiya (Egypt) Hamas (Palestine) Afghan Mujahideen
	Transnational	Hizb ut-Tahrir Jamaat at-Tabligh	Al-Qaeda Takfir wa al-Hijra

Examples of prominent Islamist movements are included in each category. Arrows highlight the directional movement from one category to another in two examples discussed briefly in the discussion that follows (the Front Islamique du Salut (FIS) in Algeria, and Afghan groups, including mujahideen groups and the Taliban).

While not all organizations will change position on this table over time, movement between categories is possible because of changes in institutional contexts that shift incentives for choices

about audience and mobilization strategy. Founding documents or public declarations by Islamist movements often articulate initial choices of audience and strategy, so these choices become embedded institutionally and are not likely to change without strong external stimulus. Nevertheless, numerous examples demonstrate that these choices can and do change over time if the context is right. A number of Egyptian Islamist groups, for example, including the Gamaat Islamiya (highlighted in Table 1), moved from explicitly violent mobilization strategies during the 1990s to non-violent strategies in a context of heavy repression by the Egyptian state. Likewise, explicitly transnational movements like al-Qaeda, while maintaining a violent strategy, have become much more localized as individual cells are taking on specifically domestic objectives in many countries as a result of extensive pressure on the organization's global leadership and international network.

The question addressed here, however, is why Islamist movements choose to move in the opposite directions: from non-violence to violence, and from national to transnational strategies. Since non-violent and domestic Islamist groups are by far the numerically dominant type of Islamist organization, what institutional pressures lead them to choose violent strategies and move into the transnational arena?

Pressures Toward Violence

To start, a shifting relationship between an Islamist movement and the state can trigger a violent strategy. Moving from non-violent mobilization to violent mobilization is a costly exercise for any movement because it risks the lives of the movement's leadership and potentially the extinction of the movement as a whole. Therefore, in contexts where Islamists can effectively mobilize politically using peaceful means, such as through elections or street demonstrations, the potential cost in moving to a violent strategy is high, making it unlikely to happen.

However, when the state feels threatened by extensive electoral or protest forms of Islamist mobilization, it may choose to repress the movement in question. In so doing, it raises the costs of peaceful mobilization sufficiently that there is little difference between the movement's costs for mobilizing violently rather than non-violently. This means that in contexts where all Islamist political activity is costly because of state repression, violent strategies will be more common—especially when the Islamist group decides that violence may also yield other gains, such as media attention or demonstration of a credible threat. Like other actors, Islamists are more likely to take personal risks in contexts when they essentially have "nothing to lose."

The choice of a violent strategy is also more likely in contexts where the Islamist movement is highly fragmented into a number of competing factions or distinct organizations. In such cases, Islamist groups not only compete with the state, but also compete with each other for membership, attention, and credibility. This leads to a dynamic not unlike that shown to exist in ethnic politics,[1] in which Islamist groups try to "outflank" one another by increasingly

demonstrating their radical credentials in an effort to delegitimize groups that cooperate with the state. The choice of a violent strategy is therefore a useful tool for securing support in the context of internal rivalries. States are sometimes implicated in fragmenting Islamist movements and unwittingly radicalizing Islamist groups through the use of "divide and rule" strategies employed to weaken the Islamist opposition through differential treatment of individual groups.

Ultimately, the choice of a violent strategy does not imply that the violent strategy will be effective or sustainable over time. Violent activities are most sustainable under conditions of incomplete repression and when geographic and financial resources are available for the Islamist movement. Incomplete repression is difficult to predict, but is most likely in contexts of low state capacity and internal state divisions over the appropriateness of repression. Geographic resources such as mountains, jungle, or physical features that make transportation difficult from one region to another facilitate the survival of violent organizations. Likewise, domestic financial autonomy through control of natural resources, extortion rackets, or external funding from sympathetic outsiders (like petroleum states) may sustain Islamist movements.

Crossing Borders

Once domestic Islamist movements choose a violent strategy, why do they sometimes become transnational? For many Islamist organizations, the evolution from a national to a transnational organization is primarily the result of tactical rather than strategic choices designed to ensure the survival and legitimacy of the movement. These choices revolve around the need for key resources to sustain violent mobilization. Key resources are often found outside of the movement's domestic context, and include: a) external legitimacy and training, b) external funding, and c) external geographic resources. In the effort to secure these necessities, Islamist movements often find themselves embedded in transnational networks that expand the movement beyond national borders.

Over time, Islamist movements around the world have focused on specific external conflicts that have served as places to channel resources and where their members can gain training and experience. One of the most prominent of these conflicts has been the Afghan resistance to Soviet occupation, which despite having many ethnic, tribal, and nationalistic sources, was framed largely in terms of Islamist resistance to an atheistic Communist power. Members of Islamist movements around the world traveled to Afghanistan to fight the Soviets, which provided these movements with legitimacy as Islamist leaders and crucial avenues for military training and learning from other Islamist groups. Subsequent external conflicts, such as Afghanistan during the American invasion, post-2003 Iraq, Kashmir, Palestine, and to a lesser extent conflicts in Bosnia and Somalia, have served similar purposes for violent Islamist organizations in terms of training and learning. The results of member participation include transnational ties and an increasingly international perspective held by adherents once

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they return to their home countries. Participation in these events broadens domestic movements and creates opportunities for alliances with other organizations to form transnational movements.

To sustain violent mobilization on the home front, Islamist movements may also need to go transnational in order to obtain financial and geographic resources. Financial sponsors, such as Iran, Sudan, Saudi Arabia, or even wealthy individuals such as Osama Bin Laden, may provide needed resources for groups operating under severe constraints at home. Developing financial ties to outside states or individuals, however, also usually increases levels of organizational connectivity among Islamist organizations, which may be dependent on similar resources, or encourages the transfer of resources between groups. Hizbollah's financial dependence on Iran to sustain its military weaponry has created extensive links between the Lebanese movement and its Iranian sponsors, for example.

In addition to seeking financial resources abroad, Islamist movements may need to find physical refuge across borders to escape from state repression at home. In the process, they often develop organizational ties with Islamists in border countries or even in Western European cities, increasing the potential for international networks and transnational organizations. With new organizational connectivity developed by securing finances and obtaining geographic refuge, groups find increasing incentives to develop international organizations.

Algeria, Afghanistan, Palestine

Two brief historical examples highlight the processes discussed here. The first, Algeria in the early 1990s, highlights the process of moving from a non-violent to a violent domestic Islamist movement. The second, Afghanistan both during the Soviet occupation and at present, highlights the process of moving from a national to a transnational Islamist movement. A third contemporary case, that of the Palestinian Hamas movement, highlights how shifting incentives affect decisions regarding the strategic use of violence.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Algeria underwent a remarkable political experiment by rapidly liberalizing politics under conditions of economic distress and political protest at home. The principal beneficiaries of this political liberalization were Islamist movements, the most prominent of which, the Front Islamique du Salut, or FIS, was made a legal political party and enjoyed a major electoral victory in Algeria's first free municipal elections in 1990. Despite subsequent electoral gerrymandering, the FIS also dominated the first round of parliamentary elections in 1991, after which the military moved in to abort the electoral process and retake control of the state.

The non-violent character of the FIS was reaffirmed during numerous provocations both before and after the cancelled elections, as FIS leaders encouraged their members to refrain from political violence. Subsequently, however, as the military moved in to completely repress the party by exporting its municipal leaders to detention camps in the Sahara and eliminating any possibility of FIS participation in legal political engagement, the more radical wing of the party began to prevail.

Political violence by FIS members slowly began to escalate into civil war. State repression also facilitated a meaningful split in the Algerian Islamist movement in which a new armed group, the Groupe Islamique Armé (GIA), emerged to challenge the dominant FIS and effectively mobilize the urban poor by calling the Islamist credentials of the FIS into question. The GIA was able to effectively condemn the FIS in the minds of many Islamist activists for failing to resist the state's coercive demands. In the Algerian case, shifting patterns of state engagement and repression facilitated a change in the Islamist movement from non-violent to violent Islamist strategies.

The Afghan resistance to the Soviets during the 1980s involved a broad internationalization of the country's collection of Islamist groups (known as mujahideen) by extensively drawing upon international Islamist resources for financing, manpower, and refuge. In addition to the attention the conflict received from Americans and others because of its Cold War context, Islamist groups from many parts of the Muslim world sent money and volunteers for extensive combat training in the mountains of Afghanistan. The exchange of finances and manpower internationalized Afghan Islamist groups in new ways, but also had the effect of internationalizing primarily domestic Islamist organizations in the countries that sent volunteers. Additionally, millions of Afghans fled under Communist rule into neighboring countries of Pakistan and Iran, creating cross-border connections between Afghan militants and Islamic organizations in these host countries. After the departure of the Soviets in 1989, Afghan militants developed increasing connections with allies in neighboring Tajikistan, which facilitated the emergence of a violent transnational Islamist movement in that country as well.

A similar process has occurred in the Taliban and post-Taliban eras. Under the Taliban, international Islamist organizations found refuge in Afghanistan, associated with other movements, and increased the transnational character of their movements. During the post-Taliban era, Islamists have once again crossed borders into the tribal regions of Pakistan for refuge, creating an exceptionally transnational Pakistani-Afghani form of Islamism.

Today, the Palestinian Islamist movement Hamas provides a particularly engaging example of strategic calculations regarding the use of violence. Violent resistance to Israeli occupation has long been firmly embedded in Hamas' ideology, as articulated in the Hamas charter, which states that "there is no solution to the Palestinian problem except by Jihad."[2] Nevertheless, Hamas has made extensive use of the cease-fire, and suggested the possibility of a long-term cease-fire after winning control of the government in January of this year. Upon first recognizing their potential in free elections and then realizing that potential to mobilize their constituency in democratic politics, Hamas' appetite for political violence declined dramatically. Hamas' peaceful strategy prevailed despite determined international attempts to deprive the Hamas government of basic financing and the government's increasing desperation to pay its own employees. That commitment to a peaceful strategy recently began to break down, however, as Israeli troops invaded Gaza and the unity of Hamas loyalists over how to respond to Israeli incursions began to disintegrate.[3] Hamas' recent experience thus demonstrates that the use of violence is a strategic choice even in

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movements with a long history of violence. Violence can be abandoned when the potential for peaceful acquisition of power is high, and it can be retriggered under conditions of repression.

Policy Implications

The arguments presented here have several implications for U.S. and domestic state policies toward Islamist groups.

First, if even historically violent Islamist groups can change their strategies regarding violence based on shifting institutional contexts and calculations of cost and reward, the oft-repeated appellation of "terrorist group" loses some of its meaning. Groups may choose to employ or to abandon terrorism as a political strategy, and many groups have done so over time as their relationship with the state changes. Reframing this vision of historically violent Islamist groups suggests a greater need to pursue policies that address reasons for a group's choice of violent strategies rather than the pursuit of military-focused policies alone, which often fail to reduce Islamist violence.

Second, the arguments here suggest that policies of repression can and often do backfire in their attempt to contain or eliminate Islamist political mobilization. Repression often raises an individual's personal cost for the peaceful expression of Islamist preferences, making it more likely that determined Islamists will move from peaceful to violent mobilization under conditions of moderate and (almost always) incomplete repression. Policies that channel Islamist preferences into bounded political opportunities rather than meeting them with violence will be more likely reduce Islamist violence.

This has been the case with a diverse set of movements, including Hizbollah, which reduced its use of violence as it gained a measure of political power in Lebanese elections over the last decade. Despite a provocative kidnapping of two Israeli soldiers, Hizbollah's recent rapid escalation of violence against Israel came only in the wake of massive Israeli action in Lebanon. Israeli military action, despite its sustained force, served primarily to amplify local support for Hizbollah's violent strategy.

Third, if Islamist groups are not incorporated into domestic political processes but instead are forcibly repressed by the state, they may become transnational organizations, which are extremely difficult to control. Because transnational groups do not respond well to domestic policies, they are less likely to change in response to political incentives. Violent transnational groups, therefore, are those most likely to require coercive policies to contain or eliminate them. Focusing on transnational groups in isolation, however, often fails to recognize that many Islamist groups have historically evolved into transnational groups because of poor domestic policy choices in their home countries that have triggered the export of Islamists abroad. Focusing first on political solutions in the group's home country may reduce the potential for Islamist violence to become transnational over time, when military containment may become the only policy option.

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article footnotes

1 See Horowitz, Donald. 1985. *Ethnic Groups in Conflict.* University of California Press.

2 See Article 13 of the Hamas Charter (August 1988). Article 31 also states that the movement is "only hostile to those who are hostile towards it, or stand in its way in order to disturb its moves or to frustrate its efforts." As reprinted in Walter Laqueur and Barry Rubin, eds. 2001. *The Israel-Arab Reader: A Documentary History of the Middle East Conflict,* 6th ed. Penguin.

3 In July 2006 Hamas announced that it may renew attacks on targets within Israel if Israel failed to end its Gaza offensive.

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