Introduction

“Welcome to Allah Square”

My first visit to Lebanon’s northern city of Tripoli, in 2013, was memorable to say the least. I had come from Beirut to spend the day discovering this historical port of 500,000 inhabitants long reputed for the beauty of its old quarters, the quality of its food and the welcoming spirits of its residents. Yet, already during the journey, a passenger had vaguely warned me to “stay safe” and, upon disembarking the bus, I was unsettled by the sight of a giant black flag bearing Quranic inscriptions, which is often seen as a marker of militant Islamist ideology. The driver had dropped me off on Square of the Light, also known as Allah Square, Tripoli’s most central roundabout which overlooks a massive three-dimensional metal structure of the word “God” (Allah) visible from afar, surrounded by high-rise black flags widely associated with groups like Al-Qaeda or ISIS. What made the whole setup even more intriguing was the large and austere marble stele on which the metal structure was installed, for it read: “Tripoli the fortress of the Muslims welcomes you” (qal’at al-Muslimin Trablus turahhib bi-kum).

Welcomed I did not especially feel, though, and a growing sense of panic even gripped me as, minutes later, I heard gunshots in the air and saw a crowd of hundreds of bearded men, some on mopeds and other carrying weapons, marching toward Allah Square. This, in theory, could have been a golden opportunity to do research and ask some of them questions for, after all, I was writing on Islamist movements in Syria and Lebanon back then. Not feeling very brave, however, I instead rushed toward a side alley, entered the nearest restaurant, ordered a sandwich and rapidly headed for the furthest table away from the street. The owner, who right away grasped my anxiety but did not visibly share it, soon brought my food and tried to reassure me: scenes like this happened regularly, these were just bands of youths who neither hailed from Tripoli nor represented its spirits and would soon return to their districts. The loud and agitated protesters soon passed the alley and continued on their
way toward Allah Square, where they gathered and began chanting a mix of slogans to the glory of Islam, the Syrian revolution but, strangely enough, to Tripolitan pride too. I relaxed and wondered: who were these demonstrators supposedly “not from Tripoli,” but who seemed to know their way around the city and engaged with local identity? And why did the owner characterize them as “bands of youths,” when to me they looked more like militant Islamists?

The protesters, as my interlocutor had predicted, all dispersed barely an hour later. Tripoli’s city center regained its calm and the rest of my visit went as planned. The old quarter, with its millennial mosques, narrow alleyways and Crusader castle, was indeed a true architectural jewel; the local food had exceeded my expectations and the Tripolitans I met that day were all incredibly kind and warm, visibly proud that a foreigner visited their city. On my way back to Beirut in the evening, then, I was confused but also increasingly curious and intrigued at the various facets Tripoli had offered me. I would go back dozens of times.

As I kept returning to Tripoli over the next seven years, for research stays of a few weeks and one consecutive stay of five months, what increasingly struck me was the flagrant disconnect between the seeming prevalence of Islamist mobilization and militancy in the city, something which pushed journalists to dub it an “Islamist stronghold” or a “powder keg of fundamentalism,” and the sheer diversity lying behind the phenomenon of militant Islamism.

The story of Allah Square epitomized the need to investigate the whole spectrum of motivations which pushed parts of local society to embrace militant Islamism as an ideology. The massive metal structure of the word “Allah,” the black flags of jihad and the stele associating Tripoli to a “fortress of Muslims” had been erected in 1983 by a militant Islamist group known as Tawhid (Harakat al-Tawhid al-Islami or Islamic Unification Movement). Tawhid had seemingly emerged out of nowhere in 1982; within the mere space of months mobilizing 2,000–3,000 members and many more sympathizers, taking military control of the city and implementing what it grandly called an “Islamic Emirate.” In retrospect, some authors even characterized it as the “first ISIS-style Emirate”¹ because of the widespread sense that Tawhid had imposed Islamic law at gunpoint, ushered in a new social and cultural order in Tripoli and violently fought its ideological nemeses – from secular Sunni notables and leftist parties to the city’s religious minorities and the Syrian

¹ Alastair Crooke, “If Syria and Iraq become fractured, so too will Tripoli and North Lebanon,” Huffington Post (January 6, 2015).
regime whose army, back then, was occupying large swathes of Lebanese territory, including North Lebanon.

Most obviously, the rise of Allah on Tripoli’s most central square reflected Tawhid’s ideological supremacy. In fact, it had stemmed from the lobbying of a few dozen cadres within the movement who were especially ideologically driven and had long advocated for the erection of a symbol of divinity on the city’s main roundabout which, until then, had for nearly three decades featured a statue of Abdel Hamid Karame, a prominent local notable. They argued that a symbol of divinity would not only conform more to Islam, which prohibits “idolatry,” but that it would also indoctrinate Tripolitan society into Islamist ideology by anchoring into the local collective psyche the demand for “God’s rule on Earth.”

Yet, as I gradually became aware throughout my research, ideology was only part of the story. Allah Square, for many other members and sympathizers of Tawhid, had other types of connotation. While for some it symbolized Tripoli’s identity as a rebel city and its resistance against a “secular” Syrian regime despised for its brutal repression of the Syrian opposition in nearby Homs and Hama and for its occupation of Northern Lebanon, for the many poor who were marginalized it reflected their dislike of Tripolitan notables, epitomized their overthrow of the traditional power structures and mirrored their conquest of the city. And this, in turn, also explained Tawhid’s own success at recruiting and mobilizing so many. Far from homogeneously made up of hardened ideologues only, its members were committed to Islamism to various degrees and many had instrumentalized it; using ideology alternatively to channel tales of Tripolitan identity, protest against their conditions, prevail in preexisting neighborhood rivalries and social conflicts or get access to criminal networks and activities. In the shadow of Allah Square, Tawhid and the 1980s “Islamic Emirate” of Tripoli, then, lay ideology but also local solidarities, identities, grievances and myriad older antagonisms.

This book tells the fuller story of why and how Tawhid emerged in 1982, mobilized many Tripolitans into militant Islamism and was eventually defeated militarily in 1985. The story of these three years of Tripolitan history is gripping in itself. It features neighborhood strongmen and wealthy notables, staid traditional clerics in long robes and charismatic ideologues wearing the militant Afghan dress, a host of former Marxists turned Islamists as well as gangsters of all kinds; all competing with one another over the scenic setting of Tripoli’s port and maze of alleyways, historic mosques and Crusader castle, posh districts and dangerous wastelands with, in the looming shadow, the imposing presence of Allah Square. And it is far from a purely local tale. These struggles in fact soon attracted attention from some of the major
geopolitical players of the time, from Syrian President Hafez al-Assad and Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat all the way to Iran’s Supreme Guide Ruhollah Khomeini, who each dispatched some of their best spies to infiltrate Tripoli and plot in the background. Conflict was at the heart of that story too and, from peaceful protests to scenes of urban unrest all the way to assassinations, bombings, military battles and even true massacres, Tripoli witnessed a tragically large panoply of incidents which killed 3,600 people. In truth, this three-year period was so significant that it changed the course of its history. More than thirty years later, indeed, the city is still reeling from it. The wounds that were opened have not fully healed, resentment for much of the bloodshed still simmers and, although many residents try hard to exorcise the old demons, they always seem on the verge of resurrection.

This story is therefore intrinsically fascinating in its own right and, because it has never been told comprehensively before, it fills important gaps in the scholarship on the Lebanese civil war (1975–90) as well as on some overlooked aspects of Lebanese/Syrian and wider Middle Eastern history and politics. But, crucially, delving deep into the way Tawhid recruited, operated and engaged in violence also allows me to make local, city- and neighborhood-specific details speak to wider debates in political science. I especially use this story to theorize back on two themes of concern to those more broadly interested in “contentious politics” – this spectrum of conflictual mobilizations which traditionally aim at the state and range from peaceful and violent protests all the way to terrorism and civil war – with insights for the study of social, rebel and terrorist movements, including Islamist ones.

First, this book shows how space affects the way movements mobilize. I claim that Tawhid’s success in the 1980s at recruiting 2,000–3,000 members and many more sympathizers stemmed from its ability to root itself in local space – that is, in Tripoli’s physical structure (e.g. streets and mosques) but, as importantly, in its social fabric (e.g. local solidarities, grievances and antagonisms) and its symbolic meaning (e.g. local narratives and identities). The fact that the movement had built Allah Square as a site which addressed grand Islamist ideology but also explicitly engaged with issues of Tripolitan identity and local conflicts showed how far it was ready to go in order to use space to recruit and mobilize. I therefore argue that space was utilized as a physical, social and symbolic resource and I then highlight how it shaped the movement’s discourse and behavior, enhancing and restricting the prospect of mobilization. Through Tawhid’s case, then, I illuminate the importance of space in spurring, hindering and in any case in significantly informing the nature of activism.

Second, this book addresses the role of ideology in social, rebel and terrorist movements. Rather than assuming that Tawhid’s declaratory
beliefs guided all of its members and leaders and as a result homogeneously drove its behavior, I show that the movement was in fact deeply heterogeneous and made up of some who were sincerely committed to its ideology while others instrumentalized it for a variety of reasons. This internal variation in ideological commitment and motivations is here again reflected in the rise of Allah Square, which came to hold different meanings depending on Tawhid factions. I thus argue that even the most outwardly ideological movements can feature a surprisingly great degree of heterogeneity and I point to the disproportionate influence which small groups of highly ideological cadres can then have on movement discourse and behavior. The story of Tawhid therefore demonstrates the importance of disaggregating ideological commitments and considering the effect this internal variation has on movement behavior.

Throughout this book I also address the scholarship on Islamism by analyzing the duality and sometimes the tension between Tawhid’s embeddedness in local space and its loyalty to a much grander ideology. Islamism is often seen as a universalistic beliefs system advocating the unity of the worldwide community of Muslims irrespective of local solidarities and mandating the instauration of a religiously inspired political order, through violence in its militant version. But Tawhid’s case suggests that this ideology may resonate in some places for very local reasons; with a space’s traditions, identities, solidarities or antagonisms then impacting significantly the way such movements operate and pushing them toward a behavior unrelated to, and occasionally even in contradiction with, their Islamist beliefs. By exploring the duality of space and ideology in Tawhid, I suggest new ideal types to help grasp the interactions between Islamist movements, ideology and local contexts; in the process also stressing the importance of factoring in “the local” in studies of Islamism.

In sum, although this book provides an account of the “Islamic Emirate” of 1980s Tripoli, it also offers an in-depth look into how space and ideology respectively triggered and sometimes shaped the types of mobilizations Tawhid spearheaded in the city, with significant takeaways for all those interested in Islamist movements and in contentious politics at large. In the rest of this introduction I present in more detail the broader scholarships with which this book engages, my key concepts and contributions and the methods I employed.

How Local Space Impacts Conflictual Mobilizations

Tawhid was a militant Islamist movement which professed grand ideological goals, such as creating an Islamic Republic in Lebanon, struggling against Israel and the Syrian regime and even carrying out attacks on
American soil. Yet it was also grounded in local space to a striking extent, its activities remaining tied to Tripoli’s physical, social and symbolic structures.

Although, in theory, the movement had the potential to recruit in the Sunni Islamist constituencies growing elsewhere in Lebanon, its membership remained confined to Tripoli. And, remarkably, in this large city with a population that is 80.9 percent Sunni, it only attracted certain segments of Tripolitan Sunni society and became popular in some neighborhoods only. There, some may have been attracted by Tawhid’s Islamist ideology. But many also seemed drawn by other factors, such as the great degree to which Tawhid’s discourse was imbued in local narratives that glorified Tripoli’s prestigious past and rebel mythology, or the movement’s willingness to address grievances specific to the city and to some of its neighborhoods particularly, like its scathing criticism of the locally rooted power structures. In turn, the degree to which the movement grounded itself in space came to affect the way it mobilized and the nature of its activism. Instead of taking the struggle to its self-professed enemy in Beirut, the Christian-dominated Lebanese government, Tawhid became a spatially oriented movement vying for local resources and identities. It imposed its view of Tripoli as a “fortress of Muslims,” despite the presence of religious minorities such as its 8.9 percent of Alawis and 10.2 percent of Christians, even going to lengths to transform the city’s main roundabout into Allah Square. It also got drawn into locally rooted antagonisms unrelated to ideology, like a rivalry pitting two Tripolitan neighborhoods, Jabal Mohsen and Bab al-Tebbaneh, against each other, and the social tensions opposing wealthy New Tripoli to the impoverished districts of the Old City. And, finally, Tawhid’s embeddedness in Tripoli’s cross-border solidarities with Syria dragged it into a doomed struggle with the Assad regime. At times, therefore, it appeared as though local antagonisms, identities and solidarities drove it more than ideology. This demonstrates the importance of grasping how space affects conflictual mobilizations.

What is the role of local space – in other words, “the local,” or a locality’s physical structure, social fabric and symbolic meaning – in the basis and behavior of social, rebel and terrorist movements? Through which mechanisms can space constitute and shape activism?

Within the several subfields which make up the broader spectrum of contentious politics, the scholarship on social movements should in theory be best placed to answer these questions. It has risen to considerable prominence in political science and sociology in the past decades chiefly because of its success in countering the long-held view that contention, as “confrontational claim-making,” resulted from the
manipulation of “mad crowds” and arguing, instead, that it represented a rational way of conducting “politics by other means.”

As a result, four broad paradigms have emerged from this rich scholarship in order to analyze the factors affecting mobilizations and to address the recurring mechanisms through which activists make claims – although, at first, none of them made much place for space. The “political process” approach strove to explain dynamics of contention in relation to the broader and typically national context by arguing that social movements are more likely to emerge when they perceive the existence of political opportunities to affect change; the “resource mobilization” track offered an organizational account centered on how social movements acquire resources and mobilize members in order to take political action; the “cultural turn” emphasized the subjective dimensions of mobilization by pointing to the role of collective action frames, emotions and identities; and finally the “networks perspective” pointed to the embeddedness of movement participants in a broader web of social ties and to how these resulting networks and solidarities can at times become channeled into activism. Each of these traditions within social movement theory is empirically and conceptually rich and they all have insightful things to say.

about the way Tawhid mobilized in 1980s Tripoli. Yet none accounts for how space may constitute and shape activism; that is, for how movements can use a locality’s physical layout but also preexisting solidarities, narratives, antagonisms and identities to recruit and operate as well as the ways in which, in turn, “the local” comes to affect sometimes significantly the terms on which mobilization occurs.

This is not to say that space, as such, has been entirely overlooked in social movement theories. In the early 2000s, in fact, academics called for the scholarship to follow the broader “spatial turn” which, already since the 1980s, had witnessed other disciplines of social science such as geography and history incorporating the study of the role of spatial dynamics in their analysis. As a result, a new research agenda emerged that took space as more than a backgrounder or a mere local reflection of larger trends, instead highlighting how contentious actors could view it as a resource. In particular, Roger Gould, in his groundbreaking study of the Parisian insurrection of 1870–1, found that rebels had recruited not on the basis of class but, rather, of neighborhood ties; Dingxin Zhao in a seminal article recounted how the leaders of the 1989 Beijing student movement had profited from the built-in structure of the local campus architecture to mobilize; William Sewell contended that activists from Tiananmen Square to the Lincoln Memorial exerted what he called “spatial agency” by using and changing the meaning of symbolic sites in order to energize the base; and finally Charles Tilly explained the importance for dissidents to take control of “safe spaces,” which he defined as areas safe from enemy intervention where it is possible to meet, organize and act.3 These contributions were crucial because they shed light on the importance of space as a resource for movements and participated in the rise of a broader research agenda centered on the spatiality of contention. But they rarely emphasized the specific mechanisms through which space could come to constitute, trigger, restrict and in any case shape mobilizations.

In parallel, the scholarship on social movements witnessed another development as academics originally from more spatially aware disciplines brought their insights to the field. This was particularly the case with

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Some of them, such as Byron Miller, Paul Routledge, Deborah Martin and Walter Nicholls were instrumental in showing the spatiality of some of the processes identified by the four schools of social movement theory. They called for more attention to be paid to how political and economic processes unfold in uneven ways and produce spatial variations in grievances, to the extent they may even give rise to “terrains of resistance” which become ripe for activism; they highlighted the benefits movements could gain from “place-framing” their social and political agenda against the backdrop of the concerns specific to some spaces; and finally they pointed to the role of space and proximity as a “relational incubator” that could help networks of contention to connect.4

The contributions of these geographers therefore played an important part in the growth of the research agenda centered on space and social movements. They can be credited with enriching our understanding of space as a resource in contention and with ushering new discussions, for instance on the way movements may spatially diffuse through “scale-shift.” But their impact on the field of social movements has remained limited to a few scholars, something due to the fact that the discipline of geography has long been mired in a postmodern epistemological paradigm, which has limited the ability of geographers interested in certain localities to theorize on broader, more generalizable, processes and mechanisms. A few exceptions apart, then, the insights of geographers have tended to remain sidelined.

A similar dynamic has delayed the elaboration of fruitful discussions between the mainstream scholarship on social movements and urban sociologists. This is equally regrettable because the latter’s work has long highlighted the local rootedness of contention. A pioneer in the field,

Henri Lefebvre, was in fact at the forefront of the “spatial turn” in social sciences and some of his insights remain invaluable forty years later. For instance, by arguing that space was a social product which reflected power relations, he emphasized the spatiality of politics and thus pointed to the role of space, here the city, not just as a container of social movements and a resource for them but also as a target of popular mobilizations. Writing in the wake of the 1968 protest movement, which shook major Western cities, he acknowledged that the demonstrators aimed at the state but also claimed that one of their key demands was the “right to the city,” then more fully conceptualized by David Harvey as a collective claim to “some kind of shaping power” over the local processes taking place in cities. Manuel Castells took the logic further when he coined the concept of “urban social movements” to refer to those mobilizations which are not just based in but also oriented toward the city and strive to get more services, defend local identities and obtain autonomy.5

These insights could have helped shape the agenda on the spatiality of contention for they revealed how some movements were not just based in but also oriented toward space. But urban sociologists regret that, instead, their scholarship developed “in relative isolation from social movement theorizing generally,”6 as one of them put it; something due to the fact that this literature, for all the insights it yielded, was long characterized by its structuralism and locked in side debates over terminology and the specificities of “the urban.” As a result, its guiding ideas never powerfully entered mainstream social movement research, which continues to grapple with the question of how space constitutes and shapes contention.

Crucially, this question is relevant for social movement scholars, but also for those interested in the full spectrum of contentious politics – all the way to terrorism and civil wars. Much like social movements, in the

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past decade these subfields of contentious politics have started to acknowledge the importance of space. While the transnational character of the 9/11 attacks and the growth of “lone wolf” actions initially cemented the assumption that political violence was becoming deterritorialized, it transpired in the 2010s that terrorist groups were in fact deeply embedded in certain spaces in particular, which then had to be investigated. Some scholars of terrorism thus called for the “subnational turn” which is gaining traction in social science to be echoed in the field of terrorism studies and, consequently, a new generation of researchers has sought to assess where, below the level of the state, terrorist groups root themselves and why. But, on the whole, this literature is still in its infancy.

For its part, the scholarship on civil wars was long more sensitive to space. Yet its view of space has mostly been associated with physical structure, for instance correlating the presence of resources, borders or rugged terrain to the likelihood that a conflict erupts. The rise of a new research agenda spearheaded by Stathis Kalyvas on the “micro-dynamics of civil war,” in which he calls for the disaggregation of data at the subnational level, has the potential to enhance our understanding of how rebel groups can be grounded in, at times oriented toward, “the local.” Yet, so far a full analysis of the ways in which local features can impact the make-up, objectives, tactics and trajectory of a rebellion has yet to emerge.

Like social movement studies, then, the two fields of political violence and civil wars have so far tended to view space as a physical resource for terrorist and rebel groups typically aiming at the state. There has been little consideration of how the social and symbolic aspects of space can

also be a resource and of the sometimes very local nature of contentious politics. The scholarship is still missing an account of how movements engage with local solidarities, narratives, antagonisms and identities in order to recruit and mobilize and the ways in which space, in turn, then also comes to affect their behavior, discourse and exercise of violence. And, strikingly, although mechanism-based explanations have increasingly gained currency in social science in the past decade, few of the spatially aware studies in contentious politics consider the exact processes and mechanisms through which space impacts mobilizations. As a result, despite the initial promise of a broad research agenda which sought to address this main “silence” in contentious politics, there were influential voices in the field who by the 2010s still regretted the lack of progress in grasping the spatialities of contention.10

In this book I illuminate the spatially grounded and oriented nature of mobilizations, systematically accounting for the role of Tripoli’s physical structure, social fabric and symbolic meaning in Tawhid’s genesis and evolution, and by the same token identifying some of the underlying mechanisms through which space affects activism. To begin with I build on the scholarship which views space as a resource for mobilization but, instead of focusing on its physical aspect only, I highlight how movements also utilize the symbolic and social dimensions of space in order to root themselves locally. They may do so by reviving and appropriating local “tales of contention”; or these narratives which associate a certain space like a city to an older, glorified tradition of rebellion. This can help them mobilize by signaling embeddedness and casting activism as a duty in line with local history and identity. They may also enlist the support of “champions of mobilization,” or figures bound to their communities by such strong ties of local solidarity that they develop a large personal following and are able to ensure mass recruitment and mobilization in these spaces. By using mechanisms such as the revival of Tripoli’s “tales of contention” and the enlistment of “champions of mobilizations” in certain districts, I argue, Tawhid was able to strategically activate the symbolic and social dimensions of space in order to recruit and mobilize locally.

But space, I contend, is not just a resource strategically used by movements to root themselves and operate; instead, it can also significantly affect their behavior and discourse. Developing the insights pioneered by urban sociologists, I claim that as part of their strategy to appeal

beyond their ideological base and tap into the older and broader pool of discontent locally, some might be willing to act as “spatially oriented movements” which tackle local grievances and identities and seek to achieve a measure of local socio-political change. Yet, although this may bolster their membership, I point to how it then tends to draw them into preexisting antagonisms unrelated to ideology, rendering the nature of their activism more local. I also note another, less conscious aspect to the way space may affect contentious politics: as movements become more embedded in the social fabric and symbolic meaning of a space, they may develop a “habitus of place” or the set of locally rooted historical, cultural and political narratives which impacts the discourse and worldviews of activists, pushing them to interpret the world through partially local lenses while restricting their outside appeal. Tawhid’s readiness to act as a “spatially oriented movement” and its “habitus of place,” or internalized localism, were two mechanisms which explained how space affected activism, accounting for its strikingly local behavior and discourse and its lack of appeal outside Tripoli.

Naturally not all social, rebel and terrorist movements are as grounded in or oriented toward local space as Tawhid was. But, arguably, all of them are also embedded to at least some extent in specific places; and the physical structure, social fabric and symbolic meaning of these localities significantly impact their worldviews, discourse and behavior at times.

Highlighting the importance of “the local” in studies of contentious politics holds significant implications for the scholarship on Islamism and militant Islamism too. Of course, some scholars of Islamism have taken a city or a neighborhood – in other words, a local space – as a prism through which to analyze how Islamist groups operate more generally. But we still know little about why and how groups which profess an ideology mandating the unity of Muslims globally root themselves very deeply in some spaces especially; with local identities, solidarities and

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antagonisms at times shaping their behavior considerably. In a show of the
dearth of scholarship on how Islamism relates to local contexts, it is
revealing that the literature has produced a trove of excellent research on
Islamist groups that operate nationally (e.g. Muslim Brotherhood
branches) or transnationally (e.g. pro-Iran Shia Islamist militias, global
Salafi-jihadi networks), but has simultaneously overlooked localized
Islamist movements – even though this category accounts for a growing
part of the Islamist spectrum. In Libya and Syria, in fact, localized Islamist
rebel groups have accounted for a large chunk of the Islamist insurgency
after 2011.12 These movements still claim broad goals and remain shaped
by larger trends. Yet what characterizes them is that they become bounded
to a certain village, quarter, city or region, where they develop relationships
that can be so symbiotic that they affect them deeply, rendering their
behavior local and restricting their outside appeal. There, these groups
can embody the appeal of ideology. But they may also come to epitomize
the power of local solidarities or the defense of local communities, which
often pushes them to operate through local ties and to claim to embody
these spaces and their identities. They are so grounded in space that local
contexts can in fact shape them more than ideology.

But factoring in “the local” is not just useful to illuminate the myriad
Islamist groups at the subnational level, it can also help us grasp surpris-
ing variations in the way national and transnational Islamist movements
mobilize and how local dynamics affect their behavior. For example,
although nominally the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood is a nationwide
movement, it is historically stronger in some parts of the country than
in others; and the local solidarities, grievances, traditions and identities
of members from the cities of Hama and Aleppo significantly impact how
it thinks and operates, at times affecting its internal organization.13 Even
militant global Islamist groups like Al-Qaeda and ISIS can in practice be
very local too. These groups are considerably stronger in some localities

12 In the case of Libya, non-exhaustive examples include: the Benghazï Defence Brigades
(Saraya al-Defa‘a ‘an Benghazï) in the city of Benghazï, the Consultative Council of the
Holy Warriors of Derna (Majlis Shura Muhajedin Derna) in the city of Derna or the array
of localized rebel groups featuring an Islamist tendency in the city of Misrata which
collectively operate as “the Misrata Brigades” (Kata‘eb Misrata). In the case of Syria,
examples include: the Brigades of Darayya (Saraya Darayya) formed by Islamist rebels
from the town of Darayya who settled in Northern Syria, the Army of Islam (Jaysh al-
Islam) in the Damascus suburb of Duma, the Falcons of Greater Syria (Suqur al-Sham)
in the mountainous area of Jabal Zawiya, the Movement of Nur al-Din al-Zenki
(Harakat Nur al-Din al-Zenki) in the village of Qabtan al-Jabal in the western Aleppo
countryside or the Tawhid Brigade (Liwa al-Tawhid) in the neighborhoods of
East Aleppo.

13 Raphaël Lefèvre, Ashes of Hama: the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria (London: Oxford
University Press and Hurst, 2013).
than in others, and spatial variation in their recruitment and mobilization patterns stems partially from their ability to draw on the specific solidarities, narratives and grievances of certain spaces to root themselves locally. Whereas a respective third, two-thirds and up to four-fifths of all Syrians, Moroccans and Libyans who joined Al-Qaeda in Iraq after 2003 hailed specifically from the cities of Deir ez-Zoor and Casablancas as well as the province of Cyrenaica, a fifth of all Tunisians who joined ISIS after 2011 came from Tunis and especially the neighborhood of Ettadhamen. Moreover, in addition to their engagement in violence against targets such as symbols of the state or international organizations, what is often less noted is how these groups also get involved in tribal, ethnic and social conflicts at the subnational level, unrelated to ideology. It is therefore crucial to grasp the rootedness of Islamist movements – the ways in which they not only use space as a resource, but also see their behavior in turn shaped by “the local.”

Building on Tawhid’s case, I suggest four ideal types to help us think about how Islamist movements use the physical, social and symbolic dimensions of local space to root themselves with sometimes important effects on their behavior; thus introducing a new way of categorizing Islamists not depending on their ideology or their strategy, as existing typologies have it, but depending on the local contexts in which they mobilize too. Thus, I note that movements based in spaces characterized by a strong, longstanding identity like Tripoli may recruit by casting

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16 Most of the existing typologies in the Islamist politics scholarship categorize Islamist movements either depending on their ideology (e.g. state-oriented and reformist-type Islamism like the Muslim Brotherhood; Umma-oriented and revolutionary-type Islamism like Salafism, sectarian-oriented and anti-Shia-type Islamism like the Islamic State of Iraq) or on the means they employ (e.g. from proselytizing and participation in elections to different forms of violence such as vigilantism and domestic or global terrorism). For a sample of these existing typologies, see, among others, Thomas Hegghammer, Jihad in Saudi Arabia: violence and pan-Islamism since 1979 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 6, Peter Mandaville, Global political Islam
their Islamism within local cultural and historical narratives, but that this can also push them to espouse a “vernacular Islamism” which taints their discourse and actions with parochialism and restricts their outside appeal. I also point to how, as Tawhid became more embedded in Tripoli and addressed local grievances, it got dragged into older antagonisms which affected the nature of its behavior. For example, it became involved in the feud between the Tripolitan districts of Bab al-Tebbaneh and Jabal Mohsen and justified this ideologically; but what it truly gave rise to was a “neighborhood Islamism” more guided by local concerns and solidarities than ideology. Similarly, as the movement was prepared to embody “subaltern Islamism” in order to court Tripoli’s urban poor by providing a conduit for their socio-political revolt, they dragged it into a “social jihad” which was as, if not more, driven by older social tensions than ideology. And finally, Tawhid drew on criminal networks and practices, which allowed it to vastly increase its resources but simultaneously turned it into a vehicle for “Islamo-gangsterism,” or a type of behavior systematically prioritizing economic gains over ideological consistency. Far from mutually exclusive, of course, these ideal types can at times overlap and also coexist within one movement, so long as there is evidence that local contexts affect the nature of Islamism. The notions of “vernacular Islamism,” “neighborhood Islamism,” “subaltern Islamism” and “Islamo-gangsterism” all point to the relevance of viewing Islamism from below; that is, to grasp the local contexts in which these groups operate – and how the local” shapes them. Table I.1 shows how, as Islamist movements become embedded, local contexts can impact their behavior significantly.

All in all, therefore, exploring how Tawhid strategically used but was then also shaped by Tripoli’s physical, social and symbolic structure provides unique insights into the mechanisms through which space affects contentious politics at large and of the ways militant Islamist movements root themselves in certain places, with implications on their behavior.

**How Ideology Affects Social, Rebel and Terrorist Movements**

Naturally, that Tawhid acted as a spatially grounded and at times even spatially oriented movement should not blind us to the fact that its

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behavior was also significantly shaped by its ideology; in other words, by the set of views, values and objectives which taken together forms the militant Islamist beliefs system embraced by the group and provides a program of action. Yet there was also a puzzle about the true extent of ideology’s influence in Tawhid: while at first glance its behavior appeared obviously driven by beliefs only, it featured too many variations and inconsistencies to have guided all of the movement’s actions, all the time.

Tawhid, of course, took the struggle to the ideological enemies of Sunni Islamism in Tripoli, combating the city’s leftist parties and Alawi minority while undermining the secular notables. As it came to control the city through the force of weapons it imposed, sometimes violently, its vision of Islamic law onto local society, prohibiting alcohol, enforcing a ban on eating and drinking during the fast of Ramadan and pressuring women to wear conservative clothes. Even its foreign alliances seemed clearly driven by ideology only as it came to be backed by Fatah’s Islamist wing, the Islamic Republic of Iran and Syria’s Islamists. But, simultaneously, Tawhid’s exercise of violence featured too much spatial and temporal variation to be solely driven by ideology and it also engaged in practices which were in blatant contradictions with its Islamist views. It struck alliances with some of its ideological enemies, engaged in

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Primary features of the local context</th>
<th>Local manifestation of Islamism</th>
<th>Example of impact on Tawhid’s behavior</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Need for protection; intense solidarities; history of strongmen</td>
<td>Neighborhood Islamism (channels local concerns, solidarities and practices)</td>
<td>Support for Bab al-Tebbaneh’s neighborhood rivalry against Jabal Mhosen</td>
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<tr>
<td>Acute socio-political grievances; revolt against local power structures</td>
<td>Subaltern Islamism (channels local social tensions)</td>
<td>Involvement in a social jihad to undermine Tripoli’s elite and usher in a new social order</td>
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<tr>
<td>Identification to and pride in local space; willingness to defend local culture</td>
<td>Vernacular Islamism (channels local collective identity)</td>
<td>Adoption of an Islamist ideology shaped by historical and cultural Tripolitan narratives</td>
</tr>
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<td>Local opportunities to make profits; tradition of engaging in crime</td>
<td>Islamo-gangsterism (channels criminal networks and practices)</td>
<td>Involvement in criminal activities prioritizing economic gains over ideological consistency</td>
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</table>
criminal activities at odds with its self-professed beliefs, and it soon transpired that many of its members were not truly committed to Islamism. This ebb and flow of ideology’s influence on a movement’s behavior is not just typical of Tawhid and it raises the broader question of the ways in which ideology affects contentious politics.

What is the role of ideology in social, rebel and terrorist movements? And to what extent as well as through which mechanisms may it come to affect their behavior?

It is only recently that the subfields which make up the scholarship on contentious politics have begun examining these questions. This is something which can appear surprising given the importance of the role of ideology yesterday, in the context of the Cold War, and today, with the proliferation of movements espousing alt-right, anarchist and religious ideologies. And, while the literature has since then flourished, it still remains insufficiently theorized. This stems from many issues, like difficulties to develop sound methods to assess the influence of ideology in movements and a persistent lack of attention to the processes and mechanisms through which ideology matters. But at its core lies the broader challenge of overcoming the binary nature of debates about the role of ideology in contentious politics, for the scholarship has become locked in unsatisfying dichotomies between those who argue that a movement’s professed beliefs help predict its behavior and those who disagree, or those who claim members believe in ideologies and those who insist they instrumentalize them.

Social movement theories were the first to discuss the role of ideology in contentious politics. Yet, although the discipline’s early pioneers, like Charles Tilly, Doug McAdam and Sidney Tarrow, took the role of beliefs into account, they did not make them their focal point of analysis; something due to the fact that they were in the midst of pushing back against the view that collective action resulted from the manipulation of "mad crowds,” which as a result meant that they strove to portray social movement activism as overly instrumental or rational.

It was only with the “cultural turn” of the 1990s that scholars of social movements became more explicitly interested in understanding how ideology could affect activism. Two main perspectives arose which highlighted, but in contradictory ways, the ideational side of collective action and how the broader meaning movements gave to their actions mattered. On the one hand, David Snow and Robert Benford developed the “framing perspective” to argue that movement leaders could strategically articulate the grievances and beliefs of potential activists within a broader set of ideas, or “master frame,” in order to recruit them – they emphasized the mobilizing function fulfilled by the process of ideological
production. This, however, soon led to a forceful pushback as, on the other hand, other scholars such as Pamela Oliver and Hank Johnston insisted that there was more to ideology than framing. Ideology, they claimed, was not just a set of ideas stitched together to be “resonated with,” but was more often than not sincerely embraced and even helped predict behavior. Mayer Zald took this view to its fullest when he famously went as far as calling for the redefinition of social movement behavior as “ideologically structured action,” with the explicit assumption that ideology was often so deeply held that it shaped mobilizations. Debates became heated but the “cultural turn” had brought ideas back into the literature.

Yet by the 2000s and 2010s the scholarship on movements and ideology began to stall. Several reasons accounted for this. First, although the concept of “framing” was a major advance that allowed scholars to think about movement ideologies as the product of a strategic process, rather than assumed as given, it led to a proliferation of work which used this conceptual lens solely. This led to growing confusion between the concepts of “frames” and “ideology,” some scholars even complaining that the former was increasingly replacing the latter in the analysis of the role of beliefs in movements. It also delayed work on other important questions, for example what other functions ideologies fulfill during processes of mobilization, or how and to what extent ideology affects movements. A second problem was that, for decades until recently, empirical research on social movements remained confined to the West and in particular to the typically progressive, peaceful and issue-driven movements, in which an ideology was not always clearly articulated. And, while work on mobilizations that seem ideologically driven has recently grown, the scholarship has tended to become compartmentalized between the separate analysis of “extremist,” “violent” or “religious” movements instead of clustering around the role of ideology across cases. This has hindered


the development of a research agenda on ideologies and mobilizations. Third and lastly, the scholarship on social movements has struggled to develop methods other than discourse analysis to assess the role of ideology during episodes of contention. As a result, apart from the cognitive dynamics at play in “framing,” little is known about the other processes and mechanisms through which ideology may influence movements. Despite its initial promise, then, this literature has struggled to overcome the binary debate about whether activists believe in or instrumentalize ideologies as well as to develop a conceptual framework broader than “framing,” leading some to regret the “paucity” of that scholarship.

Just as the literature on ideology and social movements stalled, the scholarship on terrorism boomed and made the role of ideology in violence one of its key areas of enquiries. Here again pioneers in the field, like Martha Crenshaw or Donatella Della Porta, had long recognized the importance of individual commitment to an ideology in the decision to join a terrorist group and engage in violence, but it was not their central analytical focus. It was the growth of seemingly ideological violence that put the role of ideas in the spotlight. This resulted partially from the shock in the United States of the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing, perpetrated by right-wing terrorists, but more importantly from the fast-increasing number of attacks by Islamist movements, from Hezbollah and Hamas to Al-Qaeda and ISIS.

In theory, this could have provided a golden opportunity to better grasp the ideological underpinnings of terrorist violence, especially as governments invested massively in research. In fact, the field of terrorism can be credited with putting forward a new research agenda which centered on the question of how much ideology affected movement violence. This was especially the case after the growth of a literature on “new terrorism” by scholars such as David Rapoport, Walter Laqueur


and Bruce Hoffman. They argued that the “new,” ideologically driven terrorism including, typically, what their counterpart Mark Juergensmeyer called “religious violence,” had to be distinguished from the more instrumental, independentist or secessionist, type of terrorism – the former being allegedly so irrational that it made the nature of its engagement in violence more indiscriminate and lethal.

Their arguments initially stimulated a lively debate. Some, like Assaf Moghadam and Thomas Hegghammer, agreed that ideology had a causal impact on violence but nuanced their claims, arguing that while it may not always explain all movement behavior ideology still inspired recruits to take action and shaped group perceptions about who the enemy was. Others disagreed entirely. James Piazza and Robert Pape vigorously pushed back against the “religious violence” thesis, the former arguing that goal types are more indicative of lethality than ideology while the latter provided an instrumental account of ideology by suggesting that even when terrorists portray themselves as religiously or ideologically driven allegedly more important goals, like nationalist sentiment, drive their actual engagement in violence.

But although the literature on ideology and terrorism has thus become prolific, even occasionally having an impact on the public debate, it remains mired in debates on whether ideologically driven terrorism is new or old, or stems from irrational or instrumental logics. Moreover,

the implications of terrorism motivated by a religious imperative (Santa Monica: Rand Press, 1993) and Bruce Hoffman, Inside Terrorism (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).


For good overviews of these debates, see, for instance: Ersun Kurtulus, “The ‘new terrorism’ and its critics” Studies in Conflict and Terrorism (Vol. 34, No. 6, 2011), Jeroen Gunning and Richard Jackson, “What’s so ‘religious’ about ‘religious terrorism’?” Critical Studies on Terrorism (Vol. 4, No. 3, 2011), pp. 369–88 or, even
largely relying on large-n datasets, rather than ethnographic research, scholars have failed to identify the mechanisms through which ideology matters. So far, then, they have only had mixed success in grasping ideology’s complex role in terrorist movements.

By contrast, the study of civil wars has emerged as the most promising subfield of contentious politics in its treatment of the ways in which ideology affects movements. Despite not featuring prominently when the field emerged in the early 2000s, research on ideology became more common in the 2010s and addressed some of the gaps in the literature. For instance, scholars of rebel groups went further than social movement theories in showing that ideology matters by pointing to the functions it fulfills in rebel movements beyond “framing.” Most prominently, Elisabeth Wood and Francisco Gutiérrez Sanín claimed that, in rebel movements composed of combatants who hail from various horizons, ideology can help reinforce group identity and compliance by socializing members into similar discourses and objectives, sometimes even providing the motivations which might lead them to fight; Stefano Costalli and Andrea Ruggeri highlighted how ideology could act as a “pull factor” translating the private grievances of individuals into public grievances, thus attracting them to the movement; and Barbara Walter suggested that ideologies, extremist ones in particular, provide advantages by triggering the external support of radical networks and by allowing for the recruitment of ideologically committed members willing to pay the cost of fighting.27 Some of these studies were, much like in the field of terrorism, based on rigorous large-n studies. But, interestingly, they also relied more than before on ethnographic and archival research in settings such as El Salvador, Colombia and Italy, thus permitting a more refined

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understanding of the multiple functions which ideology comes to fulfill in rebel movements.

Yet, for all the significant contributions the study of civil wars has made to our understanding of the functions fulfilled by ideologies in movements, the literature has also stumbled on the same challenges faced by the other subfields of contentious politics. It has remained locked in a binary debate over whether ideology matters only because it has instrumental value, or instead shapes and therefore helps explain rebel behavior, from the selection of targets and intensity of violence to the movement’s institutions and everyday life. This dichotomy is unsatisfying because, while the instrumental perspective leaves little room for ideology to take a life of its own, arguments attributing a causal role to ideology typically assume that beliefs are homogeneous and cause action, whereas in reality even the most outwardly ideological movements feature at least some degree of heterogeneity, and their behavior, far from automatically stemming from their ideas, can at times vary significantly. Moreover, much like in the rest of the literature on ideologies and contentious politics, what is still missing in the scholarship on civil wars is more attention to the mechanisms through which ideology can influence behavior and outcomes. Some scholars, like Jonathan Leader Maynard and Elizabeth Wood, have singled out micro-level cognitive mechanisms, for example the internalization of beliefs, through which ideology may affect the actions of individuals. But the puzzle of the ebb and flow of ideology’s influence at the collective level of the movement and its behavior remains unsolved. This, finally, is also reflective of another challenge faced by the other fields of contentious politics – the conceptual and methodological difficulty in assessing the influence of ideology on a movement and to grasp its underlying mechanisms.

In this book I demonstrate ideology’s role in contentious politics, systematically exploring to what extent Islamist beliefs impacted Tawhid’s discourse, internal dynamics, decision-making process, exercise of violence and foreign alliances, and thereby also identifying some of the mechanisms through which ideology affects movement behavior. My central claim is that, instead of dismissing or assuming the commitment of members, we should disaggregate along a “spectrum of ideological commitment” the degree to which factions and individuals inside movements sincerely believe in and are driven by ideology. Through this notion I mean to conceptualize the heterogeneity of commitments that characterizes even the most outwardly ideological social, rebel and

terrorist movements, which are often made up of members who embrace ideology for various reasons. As a result they may be committed to their movement’s declaratory beliefs and guided by them to very different degrees. This includes the rank and file but also the leadership for, far from an assumption in the literature according to which commitment to a movement’s ideology is pyramidal, leaders being alternatively seen as the most or the least ideological actors, they can also instrumentalize beliefs, be guided by other priorities or see their commitments erode. Depending on their influence and degree of ideological commitment, then, members, cadres and leaders will push the movement to engage in more or less ideologically driven behavior.

This emphasis on internal variation in ideological commitment within movements, and the effect on their behavior, helps overcome two limitations of the instrumental and sincere accounts of ideology, which minimize its influence or assume and risk exaggerating it. First, it allows for the examination of the functions of ideology for the members who instrumentalize it, but also points out that in time they may move along the spectrum and internalize beliefs. This allows for ideology to retain agency even when initially embraced instrumentally. Second, it opens the door to the organizational investigation of how the push and pull toward or away from ideology between members and leaders on the “spectrum of ideological commitment” can explain the ebb and flow of ideology’s influence on the movement, when factions seek to steer its behavior in a more or less ideological direction. This breaks with the view of ideology as a disembodied variable, and instead helps locate it within human agency, contingency and a relational context, which all have to be unpacked.

Applying this logic to Tawhid, I disaggregate the ideological commitment of its main factions and groups of individuals and I find that it featured a very diverse pool of members. On the one hand, I argue that entire factions, neighborhoods and constituencies embraced militant Islamism instrumentally as a “protest ideology.” That is, many members and even some leaders were not intrinsically attracted by Islamism’s deeper set of beliefs but rather by the contentious potential associated with its symbols, vocabulary, practices and infrastructure. As a result they pulled Tawhid toward a behavior unrelated to, and at times at odds with, ideology. On the other hand, I claim that the movement was made up of many committed Islamists too, and I especially illuminate the role of a handful of highly ideologized cadres whom I call the “ideological entrepreneurs.” By this notion I mean those actors at the extreme of a movement’s “spectrum of ideological commitment” who are not just ideologically driven but also engage in costly efforts to spread their beliefs
to other members and to lobby the leaders to take ideologically inspired decisions. By mobilizing their worldviews in order to mold the nature of activism and of the broader environment around them, their “ideological entrepreneurship” acts as a central mechanism through which ideology affects movements. In Tawhid, although these figures only amounted to a few dozen they became influential because they fulfilled crucial functions, which for some time enabled them to push its discourse, exercise of violence and foreign alliances in an ideological direction. And, tellingly, as their influence later waned, Tawhid’s behavior became less ideological. I thus trace the ebb and flow of ideology’s influence on the movement back to internal interactions and to the push and pull between factions guided by ideology to different extents.

Of course, not all social, rebel and terrorist movements feature the great degree of internal variation which characterized Tawhid. But, arguably, none are ideologically fully homogeneous and all have a more or less wide “spectrum of ideological commitment” – the composition and evolution of which may explain some of the variation in their behavior.

Arguing that even the most outwardly ideological movements feature a surprisingly high degree of heterogeneity also holds major implications for the scholarship on Islamism. This literature, much like the subfields of contentious politics, has become torn between two approaches to the study of ideology in Islamist movements. While one camp largely focuses on Islamist ideologues and concepts and as a result has sometimes tended to overplay the causal role of beliefs in how movements recruit and behave, the rival perspective locates the growth of Islamist militancy not in a “radicalisation of Islam” but rather in an “islamization of radicalism,”29 which would allegedly stem either from a nihilistic quest for violence or from the grievances of Muslims, an instrumentalist approach explaining ideology away.30

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29 This is Olivier Roy’s term. See Olivier Roy, Jihad and death: the global appeal of Islamic State (London: Hurst, 2017) and “Radicalization of Islam or islamization of radicalism?” Wall Street Journal (June 16, 2016).

Instead, by highlighting the need to investigate the full “spectrum of ideological commitment” of Islamist groups, I point to the range of motivations for which recruits join, and I suggest that this internal variation impacts and therefore helps explain their behavior. Naturally, preexisting commitment to Islamism is an important part of that story, and many initially less committed members may become socialized and educated into these beliefs by “ideological entrepreneurs” in the movement who are striving to spread their worldviews. But acknowledging the heterogeneity of ideological commitments in Islamist movements also means exploring some of the factors beyond ideology which push other people to join. Through the notion of “protest Islamism” I especially point to how militant Islamism replaced revolutionary Marxism in the 1970s and 1980s as the quintessential rebel ideology, one which many people embraced instrumentally in order to express socio-political dissent. Other motivations stemming from the local context may matter too, and ideal types such as “neighborhood Islamism,” “vernacular Islamism,” “subaltern Islamism” and “Islamo-gangsterism” are again useful. As factions embodying one of these primary motivations gain the upper hand over others, they will steer the movement toward or away from ideology. Figure I.1 shows how, far from being homogeneous, Tawhid was a deeply heterogeneous movement; and Table I.2 illustrates how its main factions had different motivations and were guided by ideology to varying degrees.

Crucially these are not just abstract insights. They can help illuminate the discussion on Islamist “radicalization” or “extremism,” which too often posits that indoctrination precedes militancy and tends to overlook the range of motivations for joining violent Islamist groups. Unpacking the heterogeneity of these groups can also help us better grasp their behavior. For instance, although ISIS is often seen as a highly coherent,
doctrinaire movement, it actually features a wide “spectrum of ideological commitment.” Leaked internal documents suggest that only 5 percent of ISIS’s recruits are highly committed Islamists who are advanced students of religion, the rest of them split between 24 percent who say they have an “intermediate” grasp of Islam and a staggering

Table I.2 Tawhid’s wide spectrum of ideological commitment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tawhid faction</th>
<th>Degree of commitment to Islamist ideology</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ideological entrepreneurs</td>
<td>Very strong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Committed Islamists</td>
<td>Strong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neighborhood Islamists</td>
<td>Medium to weak</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subaltern Islamists</td>
<td>Medium to weak</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Islamo-gangsters</td>
<td>Very weak</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure I.1 Tawhid, an ideologically heterogeneous Islamist movement

Note: Ideal types draw on Tawhid factions: (1) Committed Islamists: Soldiers of God and Movement of Arab Lebanon; (2) Neighbourhood Islamists: Popular Resistance; (3) Subaltern Islamists: the bulk of Hashem Minqara’s faction in Mina; (4) Ideological entrepreneurs: Tawhid’s Education Office; (5) Islamo-gangsters: Anistaz Kouchari’s gang.

Source: Estimates of 2,000 Tawhid members gathered from interviews with Tawhid members and from the CIA. See: US Central Intelligence Agency, “Lebanon: Islamic fundamentalism in Tripoli” (Top Secret, NESAR 86-003JX, January 17, 1986)
70 percent who recognize only having “basic” knowledge of Sharia law.\(^{31}\)
From diehard ideologues and moderately committed Islamists to former Ba'athist officers and even profit-driven smugglers, then, the group features more heterogeneity than is often assumed and it is likely that internal interactions between these factions impact its behavior, pushing it toward ideological but at other points social and criminal violence. Disaggregating ideological commitments is key to grasping the behavior of Islamist groups.

Overall then, investigating the heterogeneity of commitments in Tawhid, and how the push and pull between more or less ideologically driven factions affected movement behavior, provides important perspectives on the mechanisms through which ideology affects contentious politics, with key takeaways for the study of militant Islamist groups.

**Researching Space and Ideology in Tawhid**

This book is located at the crossroads of three broad epistemological and methodological traditions. While it builds on political sociology by providing a sociological understanding of the phenomenon of Islamist militancy in 1980s Tripoli, it also situates itself in the footsteps of comparative historical analysis by stressing its broader temporal context. But, even more importantly, at its core this book is rooted in the tradition of analytical sociology. That is, it seeks to do more than provide a purely historical account of Tawhid’s “Islamic Emirate” in 1982–5 and than contributing to Lebanese/Syrian, Middle Eastern and Islamist politics. Instead it aims to participate to a broader effort at bridging the disciplinary gap between area studies and political science and to use Tawhid to derive lessons applicable to wider debates. Building on analytical sociologists Peter Hedström and Jon Elster, it especially strives to unpack what the latter would have called the “cogs and wheels”\(^{32}\) of the causal mechanisms through which space and ideology affected the nature of Tawhid’s activism. As such, it avoids putting forward general laws and, in the tradition of middle-range theory, instead privileges the partial

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explanation of social phenomena by identifying, through extensive empirical research, the links which allowed space and ideology to shape contention. And, precisely because analytical sociology places such an emphasis on providing ample evidence of the mechanisms at play, or what Derek Beach refers to as their “empirical fingerprints,” three main points on my methodology need to be clarified from the outset.

The first methodological point which must be tackled is the level of the analysis. In order to shed light on Tawhid’s behavior, and the role of space and ideology in it, I disaggregate its dynamics of contention and explore the movement’s behavior at three levels. The first one, which is most commonly used in studies of contentious politics, involves studying Tawhid’s interactions with political actors, both state and nonstate, at the macro level. Tawhid was far from a lone movement in one city completely detached from larger trends. Instead it was impacted by national and regional dynamics and at times shaped them too. It rolled back the influence of the Lebanese government, violently fought the Syrian regime, received backing from and strove to help Fatah and Syria’s Islamists and allied with Iran. Analyzing the movement’s behavior at the macro level is thus crucial. Yet, to grasp how space enhanced and restricted the prospects of mobilization, a second meso level of analysis is needed. It entails examining Tawhid’s relationship to the “local” – how it interacted with the physical structure, social fabric and symbolic meaning of Tripolitan space. Researching this meso level of analysis is key to uncovering the ways Tawhid embedded itself within Tripolitan society and how local identities, solidarities and antagonisms shaped it in turn. To identify the mechanisms through which local space impacted its behavior, I place the emphasis on explaining instances of spatial variation in the patterns of the movement’s recruitment, mobilization and engagement in contention and also on accounting for continuities with the behavior of older movements that used to be rooted in the same spaces. Last but not least, a third, micro level of analysis which is required in order to illuminate, this time, the role of ideology in Tawhid involves the investigation of intra and inframovement dynamics. Far from being fully homogeneous, Tawhid was made up of different factions and individuals themselves guided by conflicting motivations and priorities, and which would as a result try to steer the movement in a more or less ideologically driven direction. The disaggregated analysis of where its main factions stood on the “spectrum of ideological commitment” and how this affected its behavior is key to uncovering the role of ideology. And here,

to do so I spend particular effort on process-tracing instances in which Tawhid engaged in typically ideological behavior as well as on unpacking why its behavior at times varied considerably, being often unrelated to and at times even at odds with ideology. All the episodes recounted in this book comprise an integration of the three levels of analysis.

The second point that needs to be clarified is the ontology on which this book draws. To explain the dynamics of contention at the three levels stated above, I interpret social facts and phenomena by relying on the methodological doctrine of “structural individualism.” This ontological tradition was spearheaded by two fathers of analytical sociology, Peter Hedström and Peter Bearman, who attributed explanatory importance to the actions of individuals, whether intended or unintended, while stressing their embeddedness in social structures. This simultaneous emphasis on the causal role of both individuals and the broader relational context in which they are situated is crucial. Indeed, it helps to overcome the binary debate in contentious politics between partisans of structures and of agency, and instead places the analytical focus on the mechanisms linking one to the other. This has important implications when researching Tawhid’s mobilizations. Whereas most studies of contentious politics tend to either dismiss the role of individuals or to overemphasize the agency of them all in processes of mobilization, this book then highlights the disproportionate causal role of a handful of members and their social embeddedness. Interestingly, these individuals impacted the dynamics of Tawhid’s behavior at the three levels of analysis stated above. While, for instance, a select few intermediaries shaped the patterns of Tawhid’s relations with its key external allies, Fatah and Iran, a couple of “champions of mobilizations” were able to single-handedly recruit entire neighborhoods and a handful of “ideological entrepreneurs” tried shaping the movement’s decisions. Stressing at once the causal importance of some individuals, their social embeddedness and the broader importance of structures and social ties thus lies at the analytical core of this book.

The third point which must be specified is the methods I used to collect the data. Because I placed such a strong emphasis on integrating three levels of analysis, investigating the role of some individuals and unpacking the broader effects of structures, I had to considerably invest in unearthing new primary material. It took four full years and dozens of research trips to Tripoli to gather enough quantitative and qualitative

evidence about Tawhid before I was then able to inductively make inferences about the role of space and ideology. To collect this data I combined ethnography with archival research, which I detail below.

I began to gather material by adopting three ethnographic techniques. First, I developed insights through participant observation, undertaking dozens of weeks-long research trips to Tripoli between 2012 and 2016, including a five-month immersion in 2014.

Living in the city and its neighborhoods, interacting with residents in routine settings and forging close relationships allowed me to generate bottom-up insights into some of the features which recurrently impact Tripolitan society and politics, like a strong local identity. Then I undertook an oral history of the 1982–5 period, when Tawhid controlled the city. I asked a diverse group of two dozen Tripolitan residents to free-flowingly tell me the story of their lives during this period or first-hand accounts of certain interviews which sometimes lasted for several hours. Naturally I did not take all their accounts at face value, for the narration of some of these stories was evidently biased, either because three decades had passed or because of the suffering and bitterness associated with remembering often violent episodes of contention. But in the context of the lack of written sources, grounding this troubled period of Tripolitan history within human stories, recollections and even simply perceptions was invaluable to help reconstruct the underlying trends in local society and to grasp the mood of the time. The third ethnographic method I used was semi-structured qualitative interviews. Excluding the dozens of informal conversations drawn from participant observation and oral histories, I conducted over 200 interviews with a diverse pool of informants from July 2012 until September 2016, for meetings which sometimes lasted hours and were frequently reiterated. Most of these interviews were arranged by following the technique of snowball sampling – that is, by relying on the social network of interviewees for further contacts, which is particularly useful when trying to reach groups that are not easily accessible. Others also took place after identifying specific figures through the research material, getting in touch through official channels or meeting in unexpected circumstances during my ethnography.

When selecting whom to interview I made every effort to maximize the representativeness of my pool of informants. I interviewed Tawhid leaders but also cadres, rank and file and sympathizers, ideologues and fighters or current and former members. I was especially careful to follow a disaggregated approach, going to all Tripolitan neighborhoods to conduct interviews and interviewing Tawhid members situated on the whole “spectrum of ideological commitment.” In addition I also met Tawhid
allies. They included Sunni and Shia, Lebanese, Syrian and Palestinian Islamist actors in Tripoli and other cities, like Beirut and Sidon, as well as figures linked to Palestinian and Iranian intelligence. Finally, I went to lengths to interview those who were mortal Tawhid enemies and combated it, violently or not; from figures associated with Syrian and Lebanese intelligence to Tripolitan leftist militiamen, notables, independent clerics as well as civil society activists. All these interviews constitute the core of my research material and, even when I do not reference them explicitly in the rest of the book, they were still central in shaping my analysis of Tawhid’s involvement in contention, from general dynamics to the tiniest local details.

In order to cross-check facts, ground the perceptions of my interviewees within more objective observations and generate further data at the three disaggregated levels of analysis, I combined ethnography with extensive archival research in Arabic, English and French into Tawhid’s private archives, local press sources as well as UK and US institutional records. First, I secured access to Tawhid’s archival office, which included its flagship newspaper, *al-Tawhid*, distributed to its members and Tripolitan society at large in 1984–6, as well as troves of other written propaganda material but also many pictures and videos of speeches by some of its clerics and leaders in Tripolitan mosques as well as of mass protests they led. This allowed me to contrast perceptions or recollections of Tawhid – its ideology, views on many issues, inner working etc. – with previously undisclosed and specific details of the movement. Second, I conducted archival research into Tripolitan daily newspaper *al-Incha* for the period 1979–87 and into the local weekly *al-Tamaddon* for parts of the period 1974–2015. This was absolutely crucial in generating fully disaggregated data at the city and subcity level, assessing in detail the extent of Tawhid’s rootedness in certain Tripolitan spaces and grounding the movement temporally within older local traditions, identities and narratives. Third, I undertook research into the archives of Lebanese daily newspaper *L’Orient Le Jour* for the period of 1979–87, which allowed me to cross-reference the city-level data gathered through *al-Incha* and *al-Tamaddon* with national data, to generate insights into the way reporters from outside Tripoli viewed the evolution of the situation there in 1982–5 and to grasp how Tawhid’s mobilization was grounded in macro, national and geopolitical trends. Lastly, I conducted research into the declassified archives of the UK Foreign Office and the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) for the periods respectively of 1920–81 and 1976–87. Obtaining access to foreign institutional records pertaining to Lebanon and Tripoli was important to obtain additional data at the three levels of analysis, contextualize
local, national and regional level trends within the insights of particularly well-informed and sometimes on-site observers and, especially with the case of the CIA, to unearth detailed information about Tawhid and to grasp the way Western, security-oriented actors viewed the movement.

Triangulating the material I obtained through this multi-pronged archival research with data from my ethnography allowed me to overcome the challenge of conducting research on events that happened over thirty years ago. I then inductively developed insights into Tawhid and only later “theorized back”,35 that is, reflected on whether and how the results of my research spoke to wider debates, especially on the role of space and ideology in contentious politics.

The Structure of the Book

As this book strives to strike a balance between local empirical details and broader theoretical discussions in political science and sociology, chapters follow and build on each other chronologically while also being structured around key themes and concepts, with the goal of deriving insights from Tawhid but without betraying its multifaceted, at times messy nature. Individual chapters are then organized in the following way. Their introductions present the local puzzles which I seek to answer and lay out the key arguments I make; the body of the text lets the narrative be in the driving seat and occasionally signals through concepts that the empirics may have wider resonance beyond Tripoli; and concluding sections theorize back on how the story which has just been told holds broader insights and implications for the way we should think about the role of space and ideology in social, rebel and terrorist movements.

Chapter 1 provides an introduction to the Tripolitan, Syrian-Lebanese and wider Middle Eastern contexts within which Tawhid would emerge, and it hints at some of the local themes which the movement would address. It explains the rapid growth of Islamist movements in 1970s Tripoli with reference to their readiness to embody the city’s older rebel identity and to their ability to tap into its pool of discontent, itself stemming from particularly acute local political and social grievances. These functions used to be fulfilled by leftist movements but I note how their failure to oppose the Syrian regime, which was fast becoming the archenemy of many Tripolitans in the local collective psyche, led to their

35 This is Kevin Ward’s term. See: Kevin Ward, “Towards a relational comparative approach to the study of cities” Progress in Human Geography (Vol. 34, 2010), pp. 419–35.
decline and to the rise of Islamist movements instead, a trend also facilitated by the broader sense that Islamism had cultural and political momentum. This sets the scene for understanding the local context within which Tawhid was created and rapidly grew in early 1980s Tripoli.

Chapter 2 zooms in on the Popular Resistance, one of the militant Islamist factions which would merge within Tawhid upon its creation in 1982 and was disproportionately strong in one neighborhood of Tripoli only, Bab al-Tebbaneh. It explains how this originally Marxist group embraced Islamism instrumentally in 1980. This was because its leader, who also acted as the neighborhood strongman or informal local leader, sensed that this ideology would fulfill strategic functions for his district in a new security environment, one especially marked by Syria’s 1976 military intervention in Lebanon and occupation of Tripoli. In this increasingly repressive context, Islamist ideology not only allowed the Popular Resistance to continue mobilizing Bab al-Tebbaneh’s residents and to keep their local solidarities alive; it also enabled the faction to ally across space and class with resource-rich ideological actors and to enlist the support of militant Islamist militias in the local feud which opposed the inhabitants of the neighborhood to the nearby Alawi and pro-Assad district of Jabal Mohsen. After the Popular Resistance eventually merged with Tawhid in 1982, it would drag the movement into its neighborhood rivalry unrelated to ideology, which affected its behavior.

Chapter 3 provides an account of some of the other factions and individuals which created Tawhid in 1982. One of them, the Movement of Arab Lebanon, was like the Popular Resistance an originally leftist militia which embraced Islamism instrumentally, but its leader and members later became more sincerely committed. Other factions and individuals, like Soldiers of God and scattered groups of Islamist individuals, had for their part always been sincerely committed Islamists. In addition to detailing their respective origins and trajectories, this chapter also traces the root of the merger of all these Tripolitan Islamist factions and individuals back to two regional events which threatened to spill over into Tripoli – Syria’s February 1982 Hama massacre and Israel’s June 1982 invasion of Lebanon. Tawhid posed as a militant Islamist movement which claimed that it would protect the city from foreign invaders, take the struggle to Syria and Israel and create an Islamic Republic in Lebanon. As a result, it rapidly attracted the constituency of Tripoli’s committed Islamists.

Chapter 4 investigates why, despite a grand ideology which in theory had the potential to resonate in Lebanon’s entire Sunni Islamist constituency, Tawhid’s membership remained overwhelmingly confined to
Tripoli. This, I argue, partially stemmed from the highly fluid and heterogeneous nature of its militant Islamist ideology, which, beyond reflecting the commitment of some members, resulted from the fact that it fulfilled functions. These included outbidding rivals, strengthening internal cohesion and activating bonds of ideological solidarity with like-minded foreign actors to solicit their support. The fluid nature of Tawhid’s ideology, which drew on disparate Sunni but also Shia Islamist references, contributed to restricting its appeal among Lebanon’s more orthodox Sunni Islamists. Yet, in this chapter I also note another factor which limited the appeal of Tawhid outside of Tripoli: the sense that its Islamist discourse was deeply embedded in local identities and narratives. And, while I partially trace this to a movement strategy to recruit locally, I suggest that it also resulted from its own internalized rootedness, which led non-Tripolitan Lebanese Islamists to conclude that Tawhid was more of a Tripolitan than an Islamist movement.

Chapter 5 explores the dynamics of Tawhid’s engagement in low-level violence in Tripoli in 1982–3 and especially of the implementation of an “Islamic Emirate,” which amounted to the imposition of its Islamist ideological agenda onto the city. Tawhid’s behavior, instead of being homogeneous, came to vary sometimes significantly across space and to feature instances of inconsistencies with its declaratory ideology. This, I claim, originated from its readiness to recruit less or non-ideologically committed members who were often Tripolitan subalterns intent on utilizing the movement as a vehicle for their older social and political revolts. At first these urban poor provided the manpower Tawhid needed to implement its “Islamic Emirate” onto Tripoli. Yet, ultimately, this constituency dragged the movement into the city’s preexisting social antagonisms which were unrelated to ideology, pushing it to target the upper class and notables and to overthrow the local order.

Chapter 6 examines what accounts for Tawhid’s involvement in high-level, seemingly ideological violence in 1983 against Tripoli’s leftist movements and Christians. I acknowledge the causal role of ideology in this exercise of violence, mainly through the activism of a handful of highly ideologized Tawhid cadres who lobbied the leaders to engage in militant Islamist behavior and exacerbated a climate of ideological polarization. But I also note that, in spite of their increasing success in steering the movement’s behavior in ideologically driven ways, these figures were a minority. Instead I find that many of the rest of Tawhid’s members and leaders were not primarily guided by ideology in their exercise of violence, but rather by considerations of a primarily political, strategic, geopolitical and social nature. The heterogeneity of motivations which
had led Tawhid to engage in violence became evident as the dynamics of conflict exposed too much variation across space and time to be solely guided by ideology. And, in a show of how the movement’s internal diversity could affect its behavior, Tawhid would eventually be penetrated by criminals who steered its behavior and exercise of violence in a direction at odds with its Islamist ideology.

Chapter 7 considers the international relations of Tawhid, accounting for the factors behind its recurring tensions with the Syrian regime as well as its foreign alliances with Syrian Islamists, Fatah and Iran. Here again I point to the role of the handful of Tawhid cadres who, as a result of their strong commitment to Islamist ideology, became the principle handlers of the movement’s foreign alliances with like-minded Islamist actors such as Iran. This, I claim, at first reinforced their influence within Tawhid, which they used in order to push its discourse and behavior in an ideological direction and to make shared ideology the cornerstone of the movement’s foreign alliances with like-minded actors. But I remark that, as their influence became too strong and their ambition to turn Tawhid into a movement only driven by ideology clashed with the priorities of other factions, a heated debate ensued, leading to the killing of several of them. And, tellingly, the period of late 1984 and early 1985, which corresponds to the decline in the influence of these ideologized cadres, also matches a Tawhid behavior less driven by ideology than before, as it engaged in criminal practices and as its foreign relations turned more pragmatic.

Chapter 8 traces the downfall of Tawhid and analyses in particular what led so many members to mobilize during their doomed struggles against the Syrian army in mid-1985 and in late 1986. These two battles were framed as ideological conflicts pitting fundamentalist militants against partisans of a secular order and I do acknowledge the role of ideology, whether embraced sincerely or instrumentally, as it allowed for the enlistment of new Islamist recruits at the height of the fighting and for support from external Islamist allies. Yet I also note that virtually all Tawhid factions mobilized, including those who were less or not ideologically committed. I argue that this stemmed from the movement’s ability to cast the battles as part of a local collective duty in line with Tripoli’s history as a rebel city. It also resulted from its readiness to enlist the support of neighborhood strongmen who were linked to their communities by strong ties of solidarity and were thus able to draw in many locals. Despite Tawhid’s success at mobilizing so many members, however, the Syrian army and its allies were too strong to be beaten and they ultimately defeated the movement in bloodshed.
Finally, in the conclusion I reflect on the rise and fall of Tawhid in 1980s Tripoli, pulling the story together and summarizing the concepts I developed in my attempt to grasp Islamist movements from below and how space and ideology affect contentious politics. In doing so, I suggest their wider relevance and offer a tentative agenda for future research.