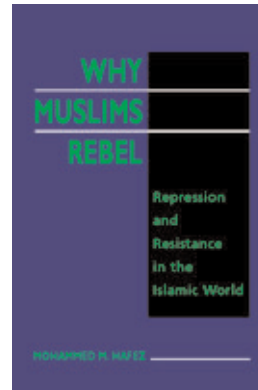


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Why Muslims Rebel: Repression & Resistance in the Islamic World

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Foreword:

Rebellion in the Islamic World

Fred Halliday

Every rebel, like every nationalist, claims to be different. Those who oppose such rebellions may equally feel, and claim, that they are facing something distinctive, but here too impressions are misleading. Yet, the very first instinct of a social scientist, even before that of explanation, is to compare and to set that which appears as distinctive and unique, and which often thus presents itself, in the broader context of human and social behavior.

The question “Why do Muslims rebel?” invites, therefore, an initial, straightforward answer: “For the same reasons as everyone else.” The study of revolt, and revolution, in modern history and sociology has produced a wealth of understanding as to why movements of collective protest develop, and as to the conditions under which they succeed or fail. Social and political factors may be at play, but often revolt is based on something equally widespread, the denial of national rights. If there is an argument to be made for the distinctiveness of the Muslim world, and of “Muslim” rebels, this is a case that has to be made, not assumed. Equally, claims made as to the uniqueness of particular acts of collective protest, be they the Iranian revolution, the activities of Hizb Allah in Lebanon, or the actions of Al-Qaida, need to pass, not be presumed already to have met, the criterion of distinctiveness.

The answer “for the same reasons as everyone else” is not, however, a sufficient answer, for any rebellion or group thereof. For even if the social scientist can determine what the reasons are, a greater incidence of rebellion (and of ideological definition) in one part of the world rather than in others invites the question as to why these factors are more prevalent. To answer this demands discussion of the factors

that set the context for revolt, including forms of state, external control, ideological formation, mobilization capacity, and class structure, to name but some. A comparative, reasoned account of rebellion in the Muslim world, drawing on the political sociology of revolt and on social movement theory, inevitably involves a discussion of the kinds of state and society that shape these actions. The question is not therefore why Muslims revolt but why states in these countries have the authoritarian character they do.

For all that the social scientist compares, and is skeptical of, motives proclaimed and ideologies espoused, the very fact that such movements appear to espouse a radical particularism, derived from religion, merits attention. We do not have to accept that self-definition or imagined roles are the determinants of political behavior to see that ideology has its own salience and autonomy. Indeed, ideology needs to be rescued from the ideational.

Finally, of course, there is no one answer to the general question, no shared answer on what “the same reasons” are. The development and richness of social movement theory, as it has developed in Europe and in the United States in recent decades, has produced a variety of different analytic schools. Each case study engaged is also an engagement with theory and with a competition of approaches. The greatest test of any theory is not its conceptual precision or volume of data and cases but its ability to provide plausible explanations of social processes.

It is the great merit of this work by Mohammed Hafez that he engages with these and many other issues in the course of his analysis. This is a work that makes a major contribution to the comparative study of revolt in Muslim countries, by comparing different countries and situations in the Muslim world and also by setting these cases in the framework of social movement theory. Dr. Hafez uses the revolts of the Muslim world to address debates in the social sciences in general, drawing attention to what he sees as weaknesses in some established approaches, including those based on class, religious formation, or psychological disorientation. Instead, he develops a case for analysis in terms of political context and, in particular, the ability or failure of the state to provide openings to Islamist movements for participation in the political process and the manner in which it represses dissent. The espousal of antisystem worldviews by Islamists is, he argues, a result less of an inherent ideological proclivity, and more of political exclusion and repression.

This is, therefore, a work that is theoretically astute and innovative. It is, at the same time, based on thorough knowledge and research of

unique Arabic sources. The dramatic irruption of radical Muslim movements onto the political scene has been a feature of the politics of the Middle East and of other countries for two decades past. It has become a major preoccupation of Western states since 11 September 2001, if not before. To understand such movements and to evolve a calibrated and informed response to them are a major challenge, intellectual and political, of modern times. In furtherance of that endeavor, Dr. Hafez has made a most original, and singular, contribution.

—*Fred Halliday*