

# Islamic Transnational Movement Action and the Construction of Social Movement Spheres: a New Theoretical Assessment

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## Abstract

The growth and expansion of transnational Islamic movements in the global system has created new questions for sociologist and social movement scholars alike. Mainly, how do Islamic movements cross the transnational chain and sustain their presence in new contexts? This paper addresses this query by advancing traditional social movement paradigms by introducing the concept of social movement spheres (SM spheres). These spheres are sustained by two internally distinctive processes: the imagined solidarities (Ummah) that exist between and among Muslims globally and the Mosque institution. Through comparable global cases, this paper will show that SM spheres are constrained by the Islamic legal tradition and Muslim cultural frameworks, which forcibly enables localized movements to share economic, social, and cultural forms of capital with transnational movements. This in turn facilitates the expansion and institutionalization of new movement in different global settings.

**Keywords:** Social Movement Spheres, Islamic Social Movements, Ummah, Mosque, Mobilization, Transnational Social Movements

## Introduction

Globalization and religion have the status of paradoxical subjects in the social movement theory literature (Fominaya, 2014). Though many social scientists have reproached the under-theorized territory, the scales of analysis have remained primarily local and national (Tarrow, 2005). The globalization of religion and in particular the rise of religious movements has contested these planes with limited perspectives from social movement theory (Wiktoriwicz, 2004; Fadaee, 2011). Although there have been excellent insights into the dynamic variations that exist among Islamic movements (Moghadem, 2013; Bayat, 2005; Wiktoriwicz, 2004) there has been very limited work in dissecting and differentiating Islamic movements from (SMT) a social movement theoretical perspective (Bayat, 2005). The diminutive work that has been done on Islamic movements has not satisfactorily addressed the incongruity that characterizes Islamic movements through psychological and political strains; often constructing totalizing narratives that more often than not have mislead and mischaracterized the movements insidiously.

However, the question remains whether SMT is adequate enough to explain the fragmented nature of transnational Islamic movements, while not succumbing to overarching

generalizations. In this orientation, Bayat (2005) is correct in noting scholars that have attempted to understand Islamic activism, “into the realm of social movement theory tend to borrow rather than critically and productively engage with and thus contribute to social movement theories (p.892).” However, even Bayat mischaracterizes the nature of Islamic movements by portraying the movements’ primary existence in the Muslim world and within national contexts, while ignoring the ever-increasing presence of Islamic movements at the transnational stage, including the West. This is important because these movements are no longer grounded only in the Muslim world but are now a part of the Western experience.

A unique development and underlying characteristic of all Islamic movements is their transnational disposition, rendering movement frameworks that move beyond primordial loyalties traditionally inherent in Muslim societies. The movements’ detachment from the nation-state, tribe, race, ethnic identity, and family has allowed for the construction of new ideological sentiments and discourses that are grounded in the Islamic faith, or the perceived commonness that exists between and among Muslims. Thus, allowing Islamic movements like the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and the Indian Tablighi Jamaat, two movements with drastically different orientations to sustain their presence and objectives within Muslim communities in various socio-political and economic contexts. The emergence and institutionalization of Islamic movements in multiple global settings has perplexed scholars of both SMT and Islamic movements alike, producing inquiries that have failed to capture the intricacies of this new phenomenon. Spurred by the recent developments in social movement literature this paper will explore how Islamic movements span continents to find an interpersonal community at the other end of the transnational chain (Tarrow, 2006) without resources flowing in from international sources?

This paper will explore this issue by developing a conceptual framework that advances traditional SMT paradigms by revealing the disjuncture that exists within the literature, which presupposes SMT purports a rational basis for collective action (Wiktorowicz, 2004). This disjuncture between SMT and transnational Islamic movement action has allowed us to develop a new concept of social movement spheres (SM spheres). SM spheres will explain how localized Islamic movements act irrationally by sharing various sources of economic, social, and symbolic capital with transnational movements with opposing ideological sentiments in order to facilitate the movement’s success in new and uncharted political and social settings.

Thus, this paper has a three-fold agenda. First, the exploration of this question will show that while Islamic movements share common elements to all social movements, Islamic movements construct SM spheres which are sustained by two internally distinctive processes: the imagined solidarities that exist between and among Muslims globally and the Mosque institution which constrains movement action locally and globally. These two variables will explain how localized Islamic movements participate in SM spheres to allow transnational Islamic movements to sustain success in new settings. Secondly, this paper contributes to social movement studies and Islamic movement research by challenging and building upon elementary theoretical orientations in the social movement theory literature in order to understand how Islamic movements are transforming and challenging dominant paradigms in SMT. Finally, this paper will solve the paradox in transnational movement studies by showing how social movement success in new localized settings is not dependent on economic capital

from the movements nation of origin. Accordingly, I shall proceed by first discussing the theoretical ineptitude of dominant SMT paradigms towards transnational Islamic movement action then employ contextual logic by presenting our concept of SM spheres through comparable cases in support of our theoretical orientations.

### **Transnational Islamic Movements and Social Movement Theory**

The recent rise of Islamic movements has restructured and challenged prevailing ideas about the role of religion in the modern world. The discord that accompanies the contested intellectual terrain on Islamic movements is fragmented and often times maintain opposing vantage points. One version of the argument promulgates the potential of Islamic movements in being catalysts for democratic change in the Muslim world (Bayat, 2005), while others view modern Islamic movements as a part of the global rise of fundamentalism, or as Sidney Tarrow eloquently proclaimed as “ugly movements,” that seek to promote, “violent, sectarian and self-enclosed identity movements (Tarrow, 1998, p. 203-204).” Consequently, how do we understand these multifaceted, dynamic movements as transnational movements when the sheer diversity and worldwide presence of these movements makes it almost impossible to construct a grand theory on Islamic movements?

In his (2004) anthology, Wiktorowicz moved beyond psychologistic explanations of Islamic movement mobilization prevalent in orientalist intellectual currents by focusing on “various generations of social movement theory and (the) concomitant debates (that) have demonstrated that other factors are inextricably linked to mobilization processes, including resource availability, framing resonance and shifts in opportunity structures” (p.4). Wiktorowicz’s application of SMT orientations toward Islamic movement action within bounded national territories has clearly revealed the theoretical appeal and the extractive power of SMT for students of Islamic movements. This is particularly notable in his seminal works on the Muhajiroon Islamic movement in England (Wiktorowicz, 2005) and the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan (Wiktorowicz, 2001). However, when we apply SMT orientations towards transnational Islamic movement action we find that SMT fails to sufficiently comprehend the organizational forms and structural capacities Islamic movements accord as global actors. Moreover, why localized Islamic movements provide transnational Islamic movement’s access to various forms of capital and mobilizing structures whether they support or oppose the movement’s ideological and political framework?

The precipitating causes for this theoretical dissonance that exists within SMT is the general assumption that SMT emphasizes the rational character of social movement collective action (Wiktorowicz, 2004). The constant evocation of past formulations of SMT accentuates and sustains an enduring belief that all social movements foster strategic decisions that benefit a movements overall success under varying political structures. Wiktorowicz and others operationalize these dominant SMT paradigms by cross-fertilizing and entangling Islamic movement action with general formulations about how social movements organize the mobilization of resources within national contexts. In this orientation, social movements through various organizational forms are able to rationally “organize the manifestations of

collective action,” (Wiktorowicz 2004, p. 10) through the mobilization of resources within communication networks, political alliances, the division of labor, material and non-material incentives, and informal resources of mobilization that are embedded in the everyday life of the potential member (Wiktorowicz, 2004). Thus, once mobilized, these ‘manifestations’ facilitates movement action to rationally promote the movements framework(s) (Wiktorowicz, 2004).

Wiktorowicz’s application of resource mobilization theory (RMT) in demarcating all social movement action is not only analytically imposing but potentially misleading when applied to Islamic movement action. While RMT is conducive in explaining how social movements produce efficacious choices and actions within national contexts, it has proven to be less useful in explaining how movements within localized contexts are willing to share various forms of capital with transnational movements that are not ideologically aligned and can potentially compromise their position within the political structure. The case of the traditionalist transnational Tablighi Jamaat movement utilizing various ideologically and theologically opposing Islamic movements’ economic and social capital to institutionalize their movement in various settings across the United States and Europe is a testimony to the irrational actions and motivations of localized Islamic movements.

Progressive Islamic movement organizations not only dispense resources with fundamentalist movements but also members, institutions, and knowledge of the local setting. These directed actions allowed localized Islamic movements to compromise their own positions within the political hierarchy of the mosque institution and influence within the larger Muslim community. Although it is clear that RMT is able to explain why an established localized movement may share mobilizing structures with another similar transnational Islamic movement, it does not adequately convey why localized Islamic movements share mobilizing structures with transnational Islamic movements that have no warrant or implications for their own collective action frames.

Another rational mode of action Wiktorowicz addresses in SMT as foundational in Islamic movement research is the political process model. Wiktorowicz advocates that the modern Islamic movement is an active agent that configures strategic choices in response to “the opening and closing of political space and its institutional and substantive location” (Gamson and Meyer, 1996, p. 277). The active agent for SM theorists is one that will respond and navigate political opportunities rationally to maximize political space while preventing adversity (Wiktorowicz, 2004). This distorted characterization of Islamic movement action has failed to grasp the multidimensional disposition of localized Islamic movement action in response to the presence of transnational Islamic movements. It remains the case that the pervasive reality of localized Islamic movement action within national structures is often times not only irrational but also exposes movements to possible marginalization, repression, and movement extinction. Thus, why would progressive Islamic movements in the West indirectly aid the institutionalization of the Tablighi Jamaat movement in their mosque in the contemporary post 9-11 political context? Moreover, knowing that Western government agencies have systematically identified the Tablighi Movement as a fundamentalist movement in which members were potential recruits for more violent, radical Islamic movements (Pieri, 2015)?

Progressive movements incoherent policy to permit the Tablighi Jamaat to actively participate in their institutions complicates their own security within the political landscape, undermining their political alliances and access to mobilizing structures. This example challenges the way theorists can potentially look at the extent political opportunities impinge on domestic and transnational movement collective action leaving us with more questions than answers. Essentially, why would localized Islamic movements directly or indirectly 'support' a transnational Islamic movement's presence within their sphere of influence at the cost of their own structural position within society? Furthermore, potentially undermine further structural avenues for success in various political settings. Many theorists assume these irrational actions can be sufficiently explained through collective action frames that movements may sustain in variegated contexts.

Wiktorowicz and others identify the potential of framing perspectives in disentangling the theoretical vacuum that other paradigms were not able to sufficiently explain. Essentially, that movements are able to cultivate identities and homogenous discourse for collective action through "ideational factors, including social interaction, meaning, and culture" in order to address "how individual participants conceptualize themselves as a collectivity" (Wiktorowicz, 1994, p.15). While the nuanced intricacies of 'ideational factors' are crucial for social movement success, they are not sufficient in explaining the reflexive novelties of transnational Islamic movement success in various 'domestic' settings. This is particularly notable if we internalize the aims and objectives of David Snow and Robert Benford's three core framing tasks to illustrate they are not adequately sufficient in explaining the contradictory nature of domestic and transnational Islamic movement action, which permits movements with opposing frames, grievances, and ideologies to share vital resources and knowledge of the complex political landscape (Snow & Benford, 1988).

This paper does not reject the existence of a master frame in which Islamic movements may share in being a "Muslim" or a "practitioner of Islam." The master frame is undoubtedly an important ideational factor that allows adherents of the faith to artificially identify with one-another. However, this does not explain the ideologization of Islam once Islam is operationalized by movements to activate identities and motivate actors to form movements. Once Islamic movements formulate and construct an ideology, new frames emerge that are internally distinctive but formulated toward their socio-political and economic contexts. Thus, when we critically apply the three framing tasks set forth by Snow and Benford (1988) toward Islamic movement action, we find that framing processes are not adequate enough to explain how transnational Islamic movements find 'partners' in new socio-political contexts. While the ideologization of Islam produces divergent representations of Islamic movement action, transnational Islamic movements often align with domestic Islamic movements that have opposing frames, different solutions to the problems and various rationales to explain the collective action. These framing disputes are theoretically supposed to reify disagreements over meaning and therefore create division among and between Islamic movements. However, the opposite is true. Transnational Islamic movements often find interpersonal communities in new settings without internalizing selective frames that can potentially resonate with the Muslim "master frames" that traditionally align movements to find common mobilizing ideational factors.

While applying SMT perspectives to Islamic movements broke down the barriers of “isolation from the plethora of theoretical and conceptual developments that have emerged from research on social movements,” (Wiktorowicz, 2004, p.3) it did not provide the reader with any new conceptual mechanisms to understand the distinctiveness of transnational Islamic movement collectivities. This problem is exacerbated because SMT has traditionally only considered social movements under the tutelage of democratic societies in the West. Moreover, when SMT conceptual frameworks were applied to non-Western societies, the research primarily emphasized domestic social movements within national contexts. In order to comprehend Islamic social movement action in transnational settings we must expand SMT theoretical frameworks and develop the concept of SM spheres. However, we first need a fluid conception of Islamic social movements. We define Islamic movements as any collective group action with some relative degree of organization that seeks to promote a conception of Islam into the public sphere. This broad definition accommodates a variety of contemporary Islamic movements that emerge under an Islamic ethos including Jihadist Salafi’s in contemporary Iraq to Western Naqshabandi Sufi movements that promote Islamic morality and tradition.

### **Social Movement Spheres: The mosque and the Ummah**

SM spheres are a movement’s various forms of capital that it attains within a national context (authoritarian or democratic). The various forms of capital can include any and all forms of mobilizing structures, access to institutional avenues, political alliances, and member’s networks. However, Islamic movements SM spheres are bounded by two overarching and unassailable factors: the mosque and the imagined solidarities that exist between and among Muslims. For most Islamic movements, the mosque and the imagined solidarities they seek to construct among and between Muslims are both debilitating and integral for the Islamic movement’s success. Islamic movements generally incorporate the mosque and the imagined solidarities within their SM spheres because both are central to Islamic movement mobilization among the Muslim populace but also the ‘tradition’ they seek to mobilize. However, once these two variables are incorporated within the Islamic movement’s SM sphere they began to impose their own socio-historical and religious constraints on the movement’s ideological program. Thus, allowing SM spheres to predominate and control Islamic movement action. This explains why localized Islamic movements allow transnational Islamic movements to enter their SM sphere and usurp economic and social capital to institutionalize their movement. While the ‘mosque’ and the ‘Islamic imagined solidarities’ are not necessary for the perpetuation of SM spheres in various global contexts, at least one of the two is sufficient.

### **The Mosque**

The centrality of the mosque in Islamic movement analysis has often been under theorized in both the sociology of religion and SMT. The mosque institution has historically been the central foci of Muslim communities from the time of the prophet Muhammad until the present; fulfilling the religious, social, and political functions of the community. The mosque, as an active agent in influencing and constraining Muslim collective behavior is central to understanding

how SM spheres are constructed and perpetuated by Islamic movements in order to maintain a degree of legitimacy within the eyes of the Muslim community. In the contemporary context, the mosque apparatus has taken on two forms that are directly tied to the type of regime present in each context. The two types include authoritarian and non-authoritarian democratic regimes. Under Muslim authoritarian regimes, the mosque is primarily an open, 'free space' (Wiktorowicz, 2004) of worship with no one movement controlling the organizational structure and day to day operations of the mosque, as this responsibility is appropriated by the state.

In non-authoritarian regimes, the mosque institution is directly controlled by organizations and Islamic movements because the secular state does not generally interfere in mosque affairs. This development and redefinition of mosque/state relations has allowed movements to systematically control every aspect of the mosque apparatus. However, while a movement may have institutional control over the day to day administrative tasks in running the mosque, the mosque as a historical and religious entity has its own constraints on the 'believers.' In the Islamic legal tradition, the mosque is theoretically supposed to fulfill not only the spiritual functions for the believers but also the communal priorities that emerge for the community. It is not an accident that Prophet Muhammad's first political action when migrating to the city of Medina from Mecca was the construction of a mosque from where all the believers' sought refuge. The mosque was theorized in Islamic legal discourse as the property of the Ummah and no individual or movement could theoretically claim the mosque institution as their own.

This is important for our analysis because the mosque's social and political constraints on Islamic movement action are what allow the continuation of SM spheres in various contexts. Even though the mosque constraints can be debilitating and an eventually bring about the demise of a movement, the costs of not centering an Islamic movements platform on the mosque institution is a lot higher. Therefore, most Islamic movements will orient their social and political programs on the mosque institution to attain Islamic legitimacy within the larger community. This legal and cultural Islamic constraint allows transnational Islamic movements to institutionalize their movements in new settings usurping symbolic, social, and political capital needed to sustain and maintain movement success.

US based progressive Islamic movements like the Muslim Public Affairs Council, Council on American Islamic Relations, American Muslim Council, and Muslim American Society have all allowed the Tablighi movement to use their mosque and community centers to enter their SM spheres to recruit members from their congregations, have access to financial resources, and receive guidance in navigating their new social and political contexts. These organizations do not support the Tablighi ideological paradigms nor their religious prescriptions. The Tablighi's insistence on dressing in traditional Indo-Pakistani clothing, or conducting the Friday prayer in Arabic, discouraging social activism in the larger Muslim and non-Muslim Community, and encouraging members of various organizations to not vote in domestic and national elections ran counter to every policy that emerged from progressive Islamic organizations.

However, these organizations still allowed the Tablighi Jamaat to have a presence within their SM sphere. The Tablighi Jamaat were able with relatively no resources to successfully institutionalize their movement throughout the globe by working within various SM

spheres of variegated and often opposing Islamic movements to recruit members, spread their ideology, and navigate new political structures. The Tablighi Jamaat example demonstrates the ability of Islamic movements to move in and out of SM spheres in open democratic societies where the mosque institutions are directly controlled by an organization or Islamic movement (Piere 2015).

### **Imagined solidarities**

Another important component of the SM sphere is the imagined solidarities that exist between and among Muslims. One might ask how movements with two drastically different orientations and goals enter into one-another's movement sphere is dependent on what Bayat (2005) called the Islamic imagined solidarity which purports a global Muslim We-ness that is found in both Islamic legal theory but also conceptualized in Islamic jurisprudence as the ummah. The ummah is a legal notion in Islamic law which maintains that the world Muslim community is a brotherhood of believers of which each Muslim has an obligation to needs of the other. Theoretically speaking, no matter whether the Muslim is a Sufi, Hanbali, Shaafi, Maliki or even Wahhabi under Islamic law one cannot deny the other of their claim to an Islamic identity and belief. The legal and cultural constraint of this precept in Islam promotes and perpetuates the SM spheres to open up to all sorts of movements whether they support the original movement or not.

This totalizing narrative is reinforced by both subjective and objective repertoires that are supported by global economic transformations and the cultural and social impact of globalization which for the first time is allowing Islamic movements and Muslims in general to actualize and construct a truly global imagined community. No longer is the Ummah a tribal, racial, or even a national expression as its now reflective of a larger transnational moment. For the first time in history, a Muslim Bedouin in West Africa is a potential member of a movement that seeks to bring about political and social change across the transnational chain. Since Islamic movements seek to promote Islam in the public sphere, the importance of the Ummah takes precedence over other primordial identities, which allows Islamic movements to construct their objectives within an Islamic ethos. SM spheres are so constraining on Islamic movement action that movements will act irrationally to support the imagined solidarity even if that means movement extinction.

In September 2001, the Taliban Islamic movement was faced with a proposition from the United States and international community, either give up the protection of Al Qaeda to the United States or face war. For many academics and political analysts alike, this choice was quite simple for any rational political actor, especially the Taliban which actively sought legitimation and recognition from the international community. The Taliban refused and they were subsequently ousted out from formally holding state power in 2001. The question of why the Taliban movement would operate quite irrationally and give sanctuary to Al Qaeda knowing that the whole world was against them perplexed many. The best way to understand this irrational act is to understand the role SM spheres played in facilitating the presence of the Al Qaeda movement under Taliban rule.

The Taliban movement first emerged on the Afghan political scene in the mid-nineties as a Pushtun led Islamic inspired movement that sought to quell the violence that erupted between various Mujahedeen factions that were battling over control of Kabul. After Taliban's successive victories over the Northern Alliance and Al Qaeda unsuccessful stint in the Sudan, Al Qaeda sought the support of the Taliban (Keuhn & Linschoten, 2011). The Deobandi Taliban were not ideologically aligned with the Wahhabi- Salafi inspired Al Qaeda movement, in fact Al Qaeda under numerous edicts that emerged from their movement hierarchy denounced many Taliban practices that they saw as tribal custom. However, since the Taliban movement identified with the global Islamic ummah they felt obliged to aid their 'Muslim brethren' and allowed them to enter their SM sphere in order to provide them safe haven from what they perceived as a non-Muslim onslaught on Islam (Keuhn & Linschoten, 2011). Al Qaeda was able to utilize the protection and resources of the Taliban SM sphere to conduct their global activities and tragically attack various Western and Arab capitals to further inflame the global jihad against the West. Despite the fact the Taliban movement were primarily concerned with domestic imperatives that had nothing to do with Al Qaeda transnational dream of an Islamic caliphate, the Taliban SM sphere facilitated the growth and strength of Al Qaeda as a transnational movement even at its own detriment and movement demise.

## **Conclusion**

While SM spheres and their accompanying categories do not explain all Islamic social movement action they do help us theorize and think about how Islamic movement collective action is constructed and sustained. The theoretical cases provided indicate that SM spheres are necessary to explain the paradox of how transnational movements are able to span continents and find an interpersonal community in new settings without resources from the movement's nation of origin. While SM spheres are usually centered on the mosque institution and the imagined solidarities, both categories are not necessary to have the presence of SM spheres, as the examples provided show only one is enough to perpetuate the presence of SM spheres in various contexts.

Although SM spheres are vital to explain transnational movement action, it does not explain every Islamic movement collective action as movements that share spheres often end up fighting for resources and closing their spheres to other movements. But this usually happens only in mosques that are directly controlled by the movement or in SM spheres that contain weak imagined solidarities. There are possibly other factors that are pertinent to the construction of SM spheres that were not discussed including the type of movement organizations that are constructing and interacting in these spheres and the role of the political structure in determining how some SM spheres are organized and constructed. Also, scholars may want to see how SM spheres can be applied to movements that are not oriented around Islam including global religious movements like the Pentecostal movement and secular movements like the Global Justice movement.

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