

## Deadly Clerics

*Deadly Clerics* explains why some Muslim clerics adopt the ideology of militant jihadism while most do not. The book explores multiple pathways of cleric radicalization and shows that the interplay of academic, religious, and political institutions has influenced the rise of modern jihadism through a mechanism of blocked ambition. As long as clerics' academic ambitions remain attainable, they are unlikely to espouse violent jihad. Clerics who are forced out of academia are more likely to turn to jihad for two reasons: jihadist ideas are attractive to those who see the system as turning against them, and preaching a jihad ideology can help these outsider clerics attract supporters and funds. The book draws on evidence from various sources, including large-scale statistical analysis of texts and network data obtained from the Internet, case studies of clerics' lives, and ethnographic participant observations at sites in Cairo, Egypt.

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## *Blocked Ambition and the Paths to Jihad*

RICHARD A. NIELSEN

*Massachusetts Institute of Technology*



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## Acknowledgments

This is a book about jihadists as academics. It tells stories of scholars experiencing the benefits and constraints of academia, relying on their scholarly networks to get ahead or finding them unequal to the task, of academic success and failure, and the ways that the disappointment of having one's academic ambitions blocked can push some people to embrace violent ideas and urge heinous actions. I do not mean this by way of analogy. Jihadist clerics are not "like" academics, but rather they *are* academics, although their academic personalities are often overshadowed by the dreadful consequences of their ideas. Writing about networks of scholars in Islamic legal academia has forced me to repeatedly contemplate my own academic networks and recognize just how fortunate I have been. Without the people thanked here, and many more that I'm sure I have failed to recall, it would not have been possible for me to write this book.

While I was a Mormon missionary in Alaska, I spent many hours at the house of an elderly man named Gene Rutledge who had little interest in religion but was willing to talk to me if I would help him organize his papers – a lifetime of snippets from a career spent in science, including a role in the Manhattan Project. The last time I saw him, in 2004, he told me, "When you write your first book, send me a copy." At the time, I merely smiled politely. It wasn't until years later that I realized he had been right: inevitably I was going to try to write a book. The confidence implicit in his request carried me through some of the self-doubt of writing, for which I am deeply grateful. I looked him up some years ago and found his obituary in a local Anchorage newspaper. I wish I could have written more quickly so that I could have sent this book to him before his passing.

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**Note on Arabic transliteration:** Throughout, I use *International Journal of Middle East Studies* standards for transliteration. Accordingly, I use “ʿ” for *ayin* (a voiced pharyngeal fricative) and “ʔ” for *hamza* (a glottal stop). I do not include these diacritics for proper names of people.

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