

## Introduction

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### “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

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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”<sup>1</sup> 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

<sup>1</sup> 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

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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

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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.<sup>2</sup> Each of these traditions within social movement theory is empirically and conceptually rich and they all have insightful things to say

<sup>2</sup> For some of the best known examples of scholarly work drawn from (1) the “political process” approach, (2) the “resource mobilization” track, (3) the “cultural turn” and (4) the “networks” perspective, see: (1) William Gamson, *The strategy of social protest* (Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing, 1975), Charles Tilly, *From mobilization to revolution* (London: Longman Higher Education Press, 1978), Doug McAdam, *Political process and the development of Black insurgency, 1930–1970* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1982), Sidney Tarrow, *Democracy and disorder: protest and politics in Italy, 1965–1975* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1989), Sidney Tarrow, *Power in movement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) or Donatella Della Porta, *Social movements, political violence and the state* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); (2) John McCarthy and Meyer Zald, “Resource mobilization and social movements: a partial theory” *American Journal of Sociology* (Vol. 82, No. 6, 1977), pp. 1212–41 and John McCarty and Mayer Zald, “The resource mobilization research program: progress, challenge and transformation” in Joseph Berger and Morris Zelditch Jr. (eds.), *New directions in contemporary sociological theory* (New York: Rowan and Littlefield Publishers, 2002); (3) David Snow and Robert Benford, “Ideology, frame resonance and participant mobilization” in Bert Klandermans, et al. (eds.), *From structure to action: comparing social movement research across cultures* (New York: JAI Press, 1988), James Jasper, “The emotions of protest: affective and reactive emotions in and around social movements” *Sociological Forum* (Vol. 13, No. 3, 1998), pp. 397–424; Jeff Goodwin, James Jasper and Francesco Polletta (eds.), *Passionate politics: emotions and social movements* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2000) or James Jasper, “Emotions and social movements: twenty years of theory and research” *Annual Review of Sociology* (Vol. 37, 2011), pp. 285–303; (4) Doug McAdam and Ronnelle Paulsen, “Specifying the relationship between social ties and activism” *American Journal of Sociology* (Vol. 99, No. 3, 1993), Mario Diani, “Social movements and social capital: a network perspective on movement outcomes” *Mobilization* (Vol. 2, No. 2, 1997), pp. 129–47 and Mario Diani and Doug McAdam (eds.), *Social movement analysis: the network perspective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

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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.<sup>3</sup> 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

<sup>3</sup> See: Roger Gould, *Insurgent identities: class, community and protest in Paris from 1848 to the Commune* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), Dingxin Zhao, "Ecologies of social movements: student mobilization during the 1989 prodemocracy movement in Beijing" *American Journal of Sociology* (Vol. 103, No. 6, 1998), pp. 1493–529, William Sewell Jr., "Space in contentious politics" in Ronald Aminzade et al. (eds.) *Silence and voice in the study of contentious politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), Charles Tilly, "Spaces of contention" *Mobilization: An International Quarterly* (Vol. 5, No. 2, 2000), pp. 135–59.



geographers. 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.<sup>4</sup>

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,

<sup>4</sup> See: Byron Miller, *Geography and social movements: comparing antinuclear activism in the Boston area* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), Deborah Martin and Byron Miller, “Space and contentious politics” *Mobilization: an International Quarterly* (Vol. 8, No. 2, 2003), pp. 143–56, Paul Routledge, *Terrains of resistance: nonviolent social movements and the contestation of place in India* (Westport: Praeger, 1993), Deborah Martin, “‘Place-framing’ as place-making: constituting a neighbourhood for organising and activism” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* (Vol. 93, No. 3, 2003), pp. 730–50 and Walter Nicholls, “The urban question revisited: the importance of cities for social movements” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* (Vol. 32, No. 4, 2008), pp. 841–59. Other noteworthy works by geographers on contentious politics include: Helga Leitner, Eric Sheppard and Kristin Sziarto, “The spatialities of contentious politics” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* (Vol. 33, No. 2, 2008) and Walter Nicholls, “Place, networks, space: theorising the geographies of social movements” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* (Vol. 34, No. 1, 2008), pp. 78–93 and Walter Nicholls, Justin Beaumont and Byron Miller (eds.), *Spaces of contention: spatialities and social movements* (London: Ashgate, 2013).

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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.<sup>5</sup>

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,”<sup>6</sup> 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

<sup>5</sup> See: Henri Lefebvre, *The production of space* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1991 [1974]), Henri Lefebvre, *Le droit à la ville: espace et politique* (Paris, Economica Anthropos, 2001 [1968]), David Harvey, “The right to the city” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* (Vol. 27, No. 4, 2003) and Manuel Castells, *The city and the grassroots: a cross-cultural theory of urban social movements* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1983).

<sup>6</sup> Chris Pickvance, “From urban social movements to urban movements: a review and introduction to a symposium on urban movements” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* (Vol. 27, No. 1, 2003), p. 104. See also: Margit Mayer and Julie-Anne Boudreau, “Social movements in urban politics: trends in research and practice” in Peter John et al. (eds.), *The Oxford handbook of urban politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) and Walter Nicholls, “The urban question revisited: the importance of cities for social movements” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* (Vol. 32, No. 4, 2008), pp. 841–59.