

Transnational Irish and Islamic Movements

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A Comparison of Transnational Irish and Islamic Movements

Transnational political Islamic movements have garnered the attention of the world. Debate as to the exceptionality of these movements has been heated, and the question of whether the religious aspect of these counter-hegemonic movements is causal or coincidental is an open question. Although comparisons of transnational religious movements exist,[1] in order to determine the effect of the religious nature of the movement, a comparison to a secular transnational movement is called for. Some authors[2] have sought to compare transnational Islam in its radical form to secular totalitarian ideologies such as Marxism and National Socialism, which have also manifested transnationally. Such an analysis will also prove insufficient for an understanding of political Islam more generally, given the inapplicability of the logic of radical movements to more general social movements.

Instead, what is needed is an analysis of a situation in which the principal distinction is the existence and nature of religion in relation to a transnational movement. The comparison that will best highlight the effect of the Islamic (and more generally religious) element is that of the transnational Irish Republican Movement and Hezbollah. I will begin by analyzing the historical development, circumstance, and nature of both organizations in order to justify the comparison. Subsequently, I will deduce a general impact associated with the presence of Islam in the context of a political religion. Finally I will examine the applicability of that impact in relation to the specific mechanisms at play. In this manner I will determine how Islam as a political religion has an impact on transnational social movements.

First, it is important to establish the legitimacy of the comparison. In this respect I will show that with the exception of religion (in both composition of, and centrality to, the organization) the movements represent the most similar cases. To begin, both movements have consisted of essentially ethnically homogenous people who perceived themselves as oppressed by a foreign power with respect to territory. The vast majority of members of Hezbollah are Lebanese Shi'ites[3] and the organization was originally formed in opposition to the Israeli occupation of Lebanon.[4] The transnational Irish movement, which has been exemplified by different organizations throughout history, has always been principally Irish Catholics, including their Diaspora throughout the commonwealth after the middle of the 19th century.[5] Furthermore, the movement has been manifestly opposed to continued English presence in Hibernia, manifesting in several rebellions, the independence of southern Ireland, and later, the violence associated with the Provisional Irish Republican Army and associated movements near the end of the 20th century.

Historically, the transnational Irish movement was largely supported by its dispersed Diaspora in the context of a rapidly globalizing world. The laying of the first transatlantic cable and the development of steam ships greatly increased the ability of Irish emigrants in the western hemisphere to provide support to their counterparts operating in the territory associated with the movement.[6] Similarly, Hezbollah has taken advantage of recent technological advances that facilitate global cooperation in order to mobilize its wide Diaspora for the provision of its operational funds and political support.[7] In this way the Western hemisphere and the friendly Diasporas established there provided a logistical zone for both the IRA[8] and Hezbollah,[9] while their primary operational zone was territorially linked and across the Atlantic.

The primary differentiating factor between the two movements is therefore the religious aspect. Hezbollah is a transnational Islamist movement, since its manifesto identifies itself as "the sons of the *umma*"[10], and it had

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previously sought the creation of an Islamic state before becoming involved in Lebanese politics. The Irish movement has also varied in its transcendental nature, but according to Michael Collins (who was then Chairman of the Provisional Government of the Irish Free State):

“Our idea was to have some sort of *world-wide Irish federation*, each separate part working through the government and in accordance with the laws of the country where it had its being, but *all joined by common ties of blood and race*”[11] (emphasis mine).

Furthermore, in terms of marginalization, we can see analogies in the perceived dehumanization[12] of both communities internationally, during the period of their greatest mobilization.[13]

It seems therefore that these two movements are similar in scope, circumstance, motivation, and method, with the exception of the religious element. Hans Mol advances the view that religion holds an exceptional position with respect to the formation of identity, stating that “the family constructs identity, religion sacralizes it”. [14] His argument delineates the importance of religious symbol-systems in shaping the cultural context and expectations of its members, while legitimizing norms and action and endowing the community with rigid boundaries.[15] Contrasting the radical Islamism of Hezbollah with the Gaelic revivalism[16] of 19th and early 20th century Ireland, we can see the context shaping forces as essentially being nationalistic vs. religious. If we accept Mol’s argument, then we agree with Sayyid Qutb’s belief that “the bonds of ideology and belief are more sturdy than those of patriotism based upon region”[17], because the religion shapes and reinforces identity through rituals and boundaries.

It is difficult to quantitatively measure the strength of identity, nor can we fully compare the two given that neither have run their course, but it seems that both have been capable enough in identity construction to promote multi-generational diaspora support.[18] However, in examining specifics of identity construction and involvement in the transnational community, it does seem as though elements of religious context shaping were pertinent to the Irish movement. The Fenian Brotherhood and Irish Republican Brotherhood both organized themselves as quasi-religious fraternal brotherhoods in a way similar to College fraternities, but were modelled on the French conspiratorial organizations of the 1830’s and 40’s.[19] These oath-bound organizations, although organized around secular interests, myths, and activity, incorporated elements of ritual and border construction as core elements of their operational methods.

These kinds of organizations make the communal acceptance of symbol-systems and rituals the distinguishing factor between those within the group and those outside. This contributes to rigid and exclusionary borders, but borders that may be transcended through participation in the established rituals. This is different from more religious context shaping because the secular symbol-systems do not tie belief to ritual, and therefore have a divisive disjunction which limits their potential. That is to say, there is nothing specific that unites Irish nationalism to the specific oaths of its associated brotherhoods, whereas Shia Islam is defined by a belief structure that motivates specific rituals. Therefore there is an essential link between the symbol-system and the belief structure that unites spatially and temporally disparate believers in a way arbitrary systems are incapable of. To put the organizational difference succinctly: Irish nationalism has had to rely on parallel mobilizing structures because no structure is inherent in its set of beliefs. By contrast, Hezbollah exists within an existing symbol-system that is necessitated by its belief structure. To a certain degree, Hezbollah has co-opted, rather than created, its cultural context.

What does this entail? Essentially, that Hezbollah is constructed within and able to emphasize and mobilize selected parts of the Shi’ite legacy. Whereas Irish separatist movements mobilized informal networks, relying on case-by-case activism and the maintenance of a network of small informal institutions over time,[20] Hezbollah has demonstrated a remarkable ability to insert itself wherever there is a population of Lebanese Shi’ite expatriates.[21] Hezbollah integrates itself with the Diaspora community, drawing on the legitimizing factors of its social programs and services to justify itself as a recipient of *zakat* (a religious tithe given to charity)[22] to even moderate community members.[23]

In this way it is able to mobilize general Islamic principles and practices for its specific territorial goals, instrumentalizing the transnational aspect of Islam. In addition to *zakat*, which is formally included in Islam as one of

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its five pillars, Hezbollah makes enormous use out of the *hawala* system.[24] The *hawala* system is an informal value transfer system (IVTS), which is not intrinsically Islamic but is a legacy of Arabic heritage and has been constructed largely around ethnic and religious lines. It is a system that allows the transfer of funds between disparate groups without any records, using dealers known as *hawaladars*. [25] It is important to note that the vast majority of activity that occurs through *hawala* is legitimate, as it is often the only method of transferring funds in certain countries and is the established banking system in several cultures.[26] However, because of the close cultural correlation between Hezbollah and *hawaladars*, they are able to use them in order to launder money easily and across large distances.

By comparison, even though the Irish were successful in mobilizing significant manpower and resources towards the struggle against the British, the involvement of tacit support outside of Ireland was minimal. That is to say, there is little evidence of those who were not directly involved in the Irish Brotherhood or other Fenian movements contributing to the fight. As such, rather than a pre-existing cultural context, the Irish transnational movement relied almost exclusively on first generation migrants (of whom there were many) interacting with local Irish nationalist organizations in order to sustain the movement.[27]

In conclusion, the effect of the religious nature of Hezbollah has been to provide it with a wider cultural context and linkages to unincorporated elements of society. The nature of the movement in the religious context makes it part of a wider phenomenon, with historical legacies that necessitate certain rituals and behaviours. Whereas the Irish transnational movement creates symbol-systems in order to mobilize widely held beliefs, political Islamic movements mobilize widely practised symbol-systems in order to act on beliefs that fall within the purview of that structure.

Although religious ideology is not necessary to the sacralization of identity, without it the sacralization is limited to those who have already become involved in the organization. This means that while Irish transnationalism is capable of sustaining momentum, it can only do so through continued direct involvement. This means that the movement will require constant stimulation (through oppression fuelling resistance organizations, for example) in order to continue to exist. This has been observed in the wake of the second wave of the Irish transnational movement (which resulted in the Republic of Ireland), where many Irish nationalist organizations were disbanded and connections between Diasporas and nationalists deteriorated until there was “practically no personal contact” between Irish-Americans and Irish political leaders.[28] Essentially, Irish insurgents at the end of the 20th century had no cultural legacies left to them from their antecedents and were forced to build their symbol-systems from scratch.

By contrast, because it is built into an existing and pervasive system, political Islam has huge cultural heritage to call on and that cultural heritage will survive any individual movement. The politically religious nature of a movement therefore serves to link temporally as well as spatially disparate groups, empowering the cultural context of the movement and providing a friendly milieu in which to operate. Although it has yet to be seen, the persistence of political Islamic movements will confirm the superiority of religious sacralization and prove conclusively that “the bonds of ideology and belief are more sturdy than those of patriotism based upon region”. [29]

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