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Comparing Fundamentalisms: A Social Movement Theory Approach

David Romney

In the last forty years, the emergence of a number of Islamist and Jewish fundamentalist groups has resulted in a number of comparative studies that try to explain this phenomenon (e.g., Antoun and Hegland 1987; Sivan and Friedman 1990). Although scholars have argued varying reasons for this recent religious resurgence, most have recognized the importance of the 1967 Israeli War (Six-Day War) to both Jewish and Islamist fundamentalist movements. Some of these scholars see the religious resurgence following this war as a continuation of religious sentiments expressed by pre-1967 Zionist and fundamentalist Islamic groups rather than as a new movement (Davis 1987, 149-52). Others, while stressing the importance of previous Islamic revivalism, note the 1967 war marked a turning point for both Islamist and Jewish groups (Esposito 2005, 160–65). Some also see global trends that unite not just Islamist and Jewish fundamentalist groups but all fundamentalist groups (Keddie 1998). Others take a different tack, claiming Islamic and Jewish fundamentalist movements are actually quite different from each other and only superficially mirror each other. For instance, Hunter asserts that when compared to Islamic fundamentalism, Jewish fundamentalism focuses more on the possibility of future failures and the importance of preventing these failures rather than on past grievances or experiences (1993, 31–32). In spite of this research, two basic questions about Islamism and Jewish fundamentalism remain unanswered: 1) What effect has the 1967 War had on the Islamist and Jewish fundamentalist movements, and 2) Do these movements mirror each other or have they developed independently?

Using a social movement theory (SMT) approach, I will argue that post-1967 Jewish and Islamic fundamentalist movements mirror each other in a number of crucial
ways. According to SMT, individual political desires are translated into group-based social movements through the presence of appropriate social movement organizations (SMOs; Wiktorowicz 2004). As outlined by Robinson (2004), the presence and use of three factors can enhance the viability of an SMO: changes in political opportunity structures, effective mobilizing structures, and correct cultural framing. Robinson and Wiktorowicz have shown how Islamist activist groups can be analyzed under a social movement theory framework, but aside from Munson (2008), no one has applied this framework to explain Jewish activist groups. In this paper, I will show post-1967 fundamentalist Jewish movements, like their Islamist counterparts, can be better understood through SMT. By applying SMT, three ideas are made apparent: 1) The political opportunity structures for both Islamist and Jewish fundamentalist groups changed as a result of the 1967 war, stimulating the appearance of new SMOs on both sides after this war, 2) SMOs of both sides have used similar mobilizing structures since the 1967 war, and 3) since the 1967 War, SMOs of both sides have used cultural framing to address three similar issues: unfaithful coreligionists, the status of the land of Palestine, and past failures or tragedies.

I will use a purposefully broad definition of fundamentalism for this study. For the purposes of this paper, I define religious fundamentalist groups as those striving for religious orthodoxy. Although this definition is not specific, it allows me to look broadly at different fundamentalist movements. In this study, I will focus on examples from the fundamentalist movements of Hamas, Gush Emunim, and Kach, all of which conform to this definition of fundamentalism.

The 1967 Israeli War changed the political opportunity structures for Islamist and Jewish fundamentalist movements. For this study, changes in political opportunity structures are defined according to Robinson’s definition: political changes that alter the opportunities available for an SMO (2004, 123). For Islamist movements, the capture of the occupied territories in the 1967 War was such a change. The failure of the Arab forces in this war and Israel’s occupation of the Gaza strip and the West Bank led Palestinians to depend less on foreign sources of organization for their nationalistic movements, because foreign powers were forced to loosen their hold on parts of Palestine. Up until the 1967 War, resistance against Israel by the Palestinians consisted of fedayeen (suicide squads) attacks from Egypt or other states; however, as a result of the 1967 War, Israel began to occupy the areas where these attacks had originated (Tessler 1994, 399-464). Israel was able to rid these areas of many fedayeen fighters, but they were unsuccessful in getting rid of all of them. Over time, this neglect led to the emergence of many Palestinian activist groups, now more effective, because they have been operating inside Israeli-controlled territory.

For Jewish fundamentalist movements, the same event—the gain of territory after the 1967 War—changed political opportunity structures by allowing these movements to pursue their goal of incorporating Judea and Samaria in the state of Israel.
Some groups, particularly the revisionist Zionists led by Jabotinsky, expressed their desire early on to bring all of historical Palestine within the borders of the modern Israeli state. Before the 1967 War this goal was impossible to achieve. There were two main reasons the 1967 War changed this situation. First, after the war, the ownership of Judea and Samaria was a reality, not a dream (at least as far as the Israelis were concerned). Fulfilling these territorial desires was, therefore, a physical possibility. Second, many secular and religious Jews, not just fundamentalist groups, supported territorial expansion immediately following the 1967 War. As Sprinzak outlines, immediately following this war, Israeli politics were dominated by two camps: the maximalists (those who advocated territorial expansion, believing the occupied territories helped Israel better defend itself) and the minimalists (those who believed territorial compromise with the Arabs would help better secure the state of Israel) (1999, 115-16). Some of these maximalists wanted to spur settler movement into the West Bank for religious reasons. Kahane, who drew from Jabotinsky’s ideology in explaining the religious justification for expansion, is perhaps the most famous religious maximalist from this time period (191). However, other maximalists wanted to expand for security reasons. They felt gaining this territory would provide the state of Israel with a buffer zone that would keep them safe from future attacks. This reasoning, although opposed by the minimalists who could not “ignore the implications of having become an occupying power,” attracted secular and fundamentalist Jews, lending a broad support base to the settler movement (Oz 1983, 133). For these two reasons, territorial gains after the 1967 war changed the opportunities available to Jewish fundamentalist groups.

Since 1967, Islamist and Jewish fundamentalist groups have also used similar mobilizing structures, defined as networks, which enhance the ability of an SMO to recruit new members. In the years following the 1967 war, a huge spike in mosque construction and the creation of al-mujamma’ al-Islami—an “Islamic collective” that eventually oversaw 40 percent of the mosques in Gaza strip as well as a university (Robinson 1997, 137)—formed an extensive mobilizing structure the Muslim Brotherhood and later Hamas used to recruit new members. As outlined by Robinson, the 1973 establishment of the mujamma’ in the Gaza strip was, in part, a response to the secular nationalism of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and, in part, a result of changes following the 1967 War (136-47). Seeing the success the PLO had achieved in mobilizing activists through grassroots movements at Palestinian universities, the Muslim Brotherhood in Gaza wanted similar organizations that would promote nationalistic ideology with an Islamist tinge. Because of the failure of secular governments during the 1967 War and increasing dissatisfaction of citizens, the mujamma’s message was in some ways more palatable to the increasingly religious society. Evidences of this increasing religious fervor included doubling the number of mosques in the Gaza strip, a rise in the popularity of religious literature, and the establishment
of a number of Islamic universities for teaching Islamic law (136). According to Abu-Amr, mosques were the most important tools in recruiting (1993, 7-8). The Muslim Brotherhood, through the mujamma’, also ran libraries, social clubs, and other social organizations that endeared the population to Hamas. In the mosques, protected from Israeli interference out of a respect for religion, is where they recruited members by disseminating their ideas after the daily prayer services (1993, 8). By channeling the society’s religious fervor in a political direction, and by organizing several institutions under the centralized al-mujamma’ al-islami, the Muslim Brotherhood, and later Hamas, gained an audience for their message.

Similarly, after the 1967 War, the yeshivot (schools for Talmudic study) in Israel played a crucial role in the formation and recruitment efforts of the Jewish fundamentalist group Gush Emunim. One yeshiva in particular, Yeshivat Merkaz ha-Rav, has been important throughout Gush Emunim’s history. In May 1967, just three weeks before the 1967 War, Rabbi Zvi Yehudah Kook powerfully declared his frustration at the fact the Jews did not yet hold all of Biblical Israel, stating, “Where is our Hebron—are we forgetting it? Where is our Shechem? Are we forgetting it? And where is our Jericho—are we forgetting it? And where is the eastern bank of the Jordan” (Segev 2007, 181)? When, after the war, Israel gained the exact cities Rabbi Kook had mentioned in his speech, many of his followers saw Israel’s victory as a miracle. Some of the students from the Yeshiva, led by Rabbi Moshe Levinger, were inspired by this “miracle” to found Kiryat Arba, a settlement located just on the outskirts of Hebron. Kiryat Arba was the first settlement of what would later be called the Gush Emunim movement. Although the Gush Emunim movement would not be officially established until 1974, when the Yom Kippur War helped its movement gain more steam, its roots are found in the reaction of Yeshivat Merkaz ha-Rav to the 1967 War.

This yeshivah continued to be the primary means of recruitment as the movement progressed, and other yeshivot also began to support Gush Emunim. Like al-mujamma’ al-islami, the yeshivot combined both religious and social services into one institution. The students there grow up together and spend time with the same teachers, developing social ties equivalent to those developed in the social clubs and mosques of the mujamma’. Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook took advantage of these close associations between students to encourage them to join the settlements, forming the ideologically devoted core that the movement needed during this formative stage (Sprinzak 1991, 125). During the period between the 1967 War and the formal organization of Gush Emunim, other yeshivot began to join by providing support, particularly the yeshivah of the Bnei Akiva movement. Even after 1974, when formal organizations were created to help with recruitment, the youth of Merkaz ha-Rav still continued to play an important role, inspiring others to join the movement (126).

Cultural framing, the last similarity between Islamist and Jewish fundamentalist movements I will address, is perhaps the most interesting of the three. In SMT,
cultural framing is an assemblage of tools through which we interpret the world around us (Wiktorowicz 2004, 15). According to Robinson, these tools are most effective when condensed into a pithy, "bumper sticker" statement; statements like these allow potential members to easily understand and either identify with or reject an SMO’s ideological leanings (Robinson 2004, 116–17). The religious rhetoric Islamist and Jewish fundamentalist groups used to address certain issues conforms to this description. Particularly, after the 1967 War, Islamist movements and Jewish fundamentalist movements began to use similar cultural framing devices to when approaching three topics: less faithful coreligionists, the status of the land of Palestine, and past failures or tragedies.

After 1967, fundamentalist groups on both sides increasingly demonize their less pious coreligionists, accusing them of undermining their righteous plans. According to Esposito (2005, 166), the issue of less faithful coreligionists is important for Islamist groups for two reasons: 1) They believe it is necessary to institute Sharia law before a government is considered legitimate, and 2) They believe jihad is incumbent upon all Muslims. In order for these two goals to be accomplished, Muslims in these fundamentalist groups need the help of other Muslims. For this reason, some of these groups have asserted that coreligionists who do not support Sharia law or jihad against unbelievers are the same as atheists or infidels. However, unlike Jewish fundamentalists, those deemed infidels are often government leaders rather than those leaning or of another political party. For instance, Hamas has often criticized Fatah, the main faction of the PLO, with these terms. Because Hamas criticizes Fatah with respect to an increasingly popular religious viewpoint (as already outlined, Gazans are becoming increasingly religious at this point in time), this term reverberates well with the population.

Jewish fundamentalist groups tend to demonize their less faithful coreligionists in a similar manner. For Jewish fundamentalists, the issue of less faithful coreligionists is important because they believe that immoral actions by secular Jews will delay the coming of the Messiah. These fundamentalists also blame the continuation of the Arab-Israeli conflict on the seculars, thinking that removing the secular Jews will allow God to fulfill the promises made to the Jews in the Hebrew Bible. A quote from Benjamin Ze’ev Kahane, son of Rabbi Meir Kahane, illustrates the intensity with which those on the Jewish side express these convictions:

The problem is not the Arabs—the problem is the Jews. The truth, the way we look at it, is that there has never been an Arab problem. We could have solved that problem in forty-eight hours, if only we wanted to. The real war is not with Arabs but with the Hellenized Jews. All the blood shed by Arab terrorism is "as if" shed by the Arabs; the people really responsible for the bloodshed are Jews scared by the Gentiles and attached to distorted Western ideas. (Sprinzak 1999, 264–65)
Here, the out-group being criticized is not, as is often the case, the Arabs; rather, it is secular Jews, who are not dedicated to the in-group's idea of what it means to be a "righteous" Jew, who receive the criticism.

Similar sentiments are expressed by those who apply the term "self-hating Jew" to others. This term has a long history of use: Herzl used it to describe those opposed to Zionism; some applied it to Jews in America, Germany, and other Western countries when the expansion of Hitler's power and the persecution of the Jews in other countries threatened Jews as a people; and politicians have used it to describe those who oppose Israeli policy (Finlay 2005, 11-15). Following the 1967 War, it has been used by Jewish fundamentalists to describe secular Jews, and because of its long history of use and its relation to the holocaust, it has easily become a "bumper sticker" term. A usage example of the term is found in a statement by Rabbi Meir Kahane, a fundamentalist who established the Jewish Defense League in 1968 following the 1967 War. He used this term to describe Jewish leftists when he wrote that Israel is "crawling with... Hebrew speaking goyim [non-Jews] whose self-hate... drives them to reject Judaism" (Paine 1994, 13). More recently, Ariel Sharon has used this term to describe the left when the Oslo peace process threatened the settler movement to the West Bank, saying, "Terrible self-hate engulfs us... Our leaders talk to Arafat about disarming Jews and dismantling Jewish settlements" (Finlay 2005, 15). The use of this term helps other like-minded Jews to quickly view fundamentalists in a positive light. Therefore, both Jewish and Islamist fundamentalist groups used pejoratives as a cultural frame to attract new members who opposed less faithful coreligionists.

After the 1967 War, both Islamists and Jewish fundamentalists also began to use cultural frames when discussing the land of Israel or Palestine. Before the 1967 War, Palestinian claims to the land of Palestine were based on previous land ownership. This is still the main reason Palestinians want to return to Palestine; many still keep the keys to the homes they had to leave after the 1948 war, a symbolic reminder of their ownership rights. However, after the territorial gains by Israel during the 1967 War caused Islamic soul-searching and increased religiosity, Hamas began to emphasize all of Israel belonged to the Muslims by religious mandate. They did this by using a well-known Islamic concept of waqf (a religious endowment), usually consisting of property or buildings given by Muslims to the community. Giving one's land as a waqf is equivalent to donating it to God. After the 1967 War, Hamas began to declare: "Palestine is a waqf," a unique application of this religious term (Robinson 2004, 130-31). Although using the term in this manner is historically inaccurate, it was still effective insofar that it added a religious flavor to the traditional Palestinian right of return.

Similarly, Jewish fundamentalist groups have used religious cultural frames when discussing the occupied territories. They did this by using biblical names and stories in their attempts to get people to move into settlements. For instance, the
leaders of Gush Emunim and the leaders of other fundamentalist groups call the West Bank by its biblical names, Judea and Samaria. Also, present day ads for the settlements often make reference to famous stories from the Bible, implying the settlers are a continuation of a holy tradition. Since these groups and other like-minded people considered the victory in the 1967 War a miracle, using Biblical names like these reminds potential members of the spiritual nature of the 1967 victory, thereby framing the current settler movement in a similar manner.

Lastly, Islamists and Jewish fundamentalists have both used cultural frames when addressing how to overcome past failures or tragedies. For many Arabs, their loss in the 1967 War marked their biggest failure in recent history. According to Esposito, many Islamists blame recent Muslim failures, including the loss in 1967, on a decline in religiosity (2005, 160-62). Therefore, religious frames during this time period were effective for reaching out to those disaffected with the status quo. For Islamists, and particularly Hamas, the greatest such frame has been that “Islam is the solution.” Robinson cites this slogan as the most popular slogan among modern Islamist movements in the Middle East, noting this specific phrase and its sentiments appear in Hamas’s 1988 charter (2004, 130-31). Again, using a religious cultural frame proves useful in attracting new members.

Jewish fundamentalist groups, on the other hand, have used the slogan “never again” when addressing this issue. This is perhaps their most effective frame since the Holocaust left such a large impact on Israel. This term was actually used before 1967; it was popularized after the 1948 War as a deliberate attempt by the government to wipe away the image of the “Holocaust Jew” (Almog 2000). Because these efforts by the government still affect Jewish perceptions today, this frame resonates particularly well with potential members. For this reason, Kahane uses this phrase as the title of one of his books, which outlines the need for American Jews to rise up against those fighting the state of Israel rather than being passive in this fight (1971).

Looking at these examples, we see SMT is particularly useful for evaluating Jewish fundamentalist movements. By applying SMT in this study, we also see Jewish fundamentalist movements are quite similar to Islamist fundamentalist movements. Lastly, through application of SMT, we see a common explanation for the recent resurgence, namely the changes in political opportunity structures, an effective use of mobilizing structures, and a correct use of cultural frames since the 1967 war have together caused the recent increase in the number of Islamist and Jewish fundamentalist groups.

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