The Rationality of Radical Islam

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Why do Islamist radicals engage in high-cost/risk activism that exposes them to arrest, repression, and even death? At a group level, it appears perfectly rational: zealous contention places enormous pressures on adversaries and increases the likelihood that the group will achieve its objective. Robert Pape's study of suicide terrorism provides some empirical evidence that extreme forms of activism do indeed produce concessions from opponents.1 Yet, although extreme tactics may be deployed as part of a logical, coherent, and rational strategy to maximize group goals, is it "rational" for the individual perpetrators? Why not free-ride off the efforts of others rather than jeopardize personal self-interest?

We argue that radical Islamic groups offer spiritual selective incentives to individuals who are concerned with the hereafter. Although some radical Islamists are compelled by economic incentives or personal psychological needs that may have nothing to do with religious conviction (the need for revenge against perceived oppressors, a need for a sense of empowerment, or a desire for prestige), religion matters for many. In cases where individuals take spirituality seriously, movement ideologies offer strategies for fulfilling divine duties and maximizing the prospects of salvation on judgment day. In essence, these ideologies serve as heuristic devices or templates that outline the path to salvation. Where individuals believe that the spiritual payoffs outweigh the


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negative consequences of strategies in the here and now, high-cost/risk activism is intelligible as a rational choice.

This article uses al-Muhajiroun as a case study to demonstrate the rationality of radical Islam. Based in the UK, with branches throughout the Muslim world, this movement supported al Qaeda; jihad against the United States in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia; terrorism against Israel; attacks against the United Nations; military coups against governments throughout the Muslim world; and the establishment of an Islamic state in Britain. After September 11, it garnered extraordinary media attention in the UK and raised serious concerns among governments combating Islamic terrorism. Although it was less radical than groups such as al Qaeda, al-Muhajiroun openly promoted an assortment of extremist causes and is a good example of high-cost/risk activism. The movement was formally disbanded in October 2004, but its activists continue to operate through two successor organizations: al-Ghuraba’ (the Strangers) and the Saviour Sect. Al-Muhajiroun’s leader and founder, Omar Bakri Mohammed, left the UK for Lebanon in August 2005 and was barred from returning as a result of the British government’s crackdown on Islamic extremism after the terrorist attacks on the tube system earlier in July.

The focus of this article is on how spiritual incentives inspire Islamic radicalism. As a result, it does not directly address why individuals initially chose al-Muhajiroun over more moderate Islamic organizations that require less sacrifice. Nor does it focus on the process of preference reordering. These are important issues and are addressed extensively by the first author in a separate publication, which points to the importance of social networks, low levels of prior religious knowledge, identity crises, negative experiences with moderate Islamic figures and organizations, the public outreach activities of al-Muhajiroun, and perceptions about the credibility of the movement’s leader as compared with moderate alternatives and radical rivals. All of these drew individuals into study circles, where they were socialized into the movement ideology.

For those who eventually accepted the ideology as “true Islam” (and this was heavily influenced by perceptions about the credibility of the movement leader as an interpreter of Islam rather than the superiority of al-Muhajiroun’s spiritual incentives relative to other groups), why did they engage in high-cost/risk activism? Why not simply continue taking lessons without graduating to riskier behaviors? In other words, why not free-ride off the sacrifice of others?

We argue that the choice to move to high-cost/risk activism can be understood as a rational decision if we take the content of the movement’s ideology seriously. Al-Muhajiroun’s ideology outlines an exclusive strategy to salvation, which entails a number of costly and risky behaviors. Any deviations

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2 For details on the dissolution, see Quintan Wiktorowicz, Radical Islam Rising: Muslim Extremism in the West (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 213–217.
3 Wiktorowicz, Radical Islam Rising.
4 See Wiktorowicz, Radical Islam Rising.
from this strategy mean that an individual will not enter Paradise, thus eroding tendencies toward free-riding. For those who accepted the movement ideology and sought salvation, a refusal to engage in high-cost/risk activism was tantamount to violating self-interest, because it meant that they would go to Hell.

Before proceeding, it is important to note limitations in conducting fieldwork on radical Islamic groups. The primary obstacle is access. Although surveys and large samples are preferable, they are rarely possible, given the secretive nature of these movements. As a result, one is left with small samples of respondents and ethnographic methods, if access is granted. In this study, the first author conducted thirty interviews (many tape-recorded) with movement leaders and activists and interacted with about one hundred other activists and movement “supporters.” In addition, he attended movement-only lessons, public study circles, demonstrations, and community events, and collected movement documents and audio/written materials, including leaflets, protest announcements, training books, taped lessons/talks, and press releases. Although this hardly represents a probability sample of individuals, publications, and activities, the fieldwork results offer rare empirical evidence that addresses individual rationality.

**Rational Radicalism?**

Most studies of the causes of Islamism offer a grievance-based explanation implicitly rooted in functionalist social psychology accounts of mass behavior, which view collective action as derived from exogenous structural strains, system disequilibrium, and concomitant pathologies (alienation, anomie, atomization, normative ambiguity, etc.) that create individual frustration and motivation for “deviant” social behavior. The model posits a linear causal relationship in which structural strains, such as modernization, industrialization, or an economic crisis, cause psychological discomfort, which, in turn, produces collective action. The implication is that participation is the result of “irrationality.”

The preponderance of research argues that the underlying impetus for Islamic activism derives from the crises produced by failed secular modernization projects in the Middle East. Rapid socioeconomic transformations and manipulated economic policies concentrated wealth among the Westernized

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elites, state bourgeoisie, and corrupt government officials. Large swaths of the population, in contrast, faced housing shortages, insufficient municipal services and infrastructure, rising prices, declining real wages, and unemployment. The professional classes and lumpen intelligentsia, in particular, faced blocked social mobility and relative deprivation as a result of economic malaise and widespread employment preferences that emphasized *wasta* (connections) above merit. The crises were compounded by the bitter Arab defeat in the 1967 war with Israel, the legacy of colonialism and cultural imperialism, and political repression. According to this perspective, individuals responded by seeking to re-anchor themselves through a religious idiom.

Rather than viewing Islamists as grievance-stricken reactionaries, recent research has reconceptualized Islamic activists as strategic thinkers engaged in cost–benefit calculations. Lisa Anderson, for example, observes that “the closer the movements were to the prospects of sharing power, the more pragmatic they appeared to be.” Empirical studies of the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan illustrate this point: the Brotherhood has demonstrated its willingness to sacrifice ideological ideals for political gains. And movement activists make strategic decisions about organizational resources and relationships:

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participation in political alliances,\textsuperscript{12} responses to economic liberalization,\textsuperscript{13} and intra-movement competition.\textsuperscript{14}

Even radical movements previously described as unflappable, ideological zealots trapped by rigid adherence to dogma are now analyzed as strategic thinkers. Shaul Mishal and Avraham Sela, for example, argue that Hamas strategically responds to changes in the political context.\textsuperscript{15} Prior to the al-Aqsa intifada in 2000, the growing popularity of the Palestinian–Israeli peace process challenged the viability of Hamas. Strict intransigence toward peace was likely to erode support from a population that sought an end to the economic and social hardships of occupation, thereby threatening the organizational survival of Hamas. In response, Hamas tactically adjusted its doctrine to accommodate the possibility of peace by framing it as a temporary pause in the jihad. Mohammed M. Hafez uses an implicit rational-actor model to explain Muslim rebellions in Algeria and Egypt during the 1990s. He contends that violence erupted as a response to “an ill-fated combination of institutional exclusion, on the one hand, and on the other, reactive and indiscriminate repression that threaten[ed] the organizational resources and personal lives of Islamists.”\textsuperscript{16} To defend themselves against regime repression, the Islamists went underground and formed exclusive organizations, leading to a process of encapsulation and radicalization. Stathis N. Kalyvas views the Islamist-led massacres that plagued Algeria in the 1990s as strategic assaults intended to deter civilian defections “in the context of a particular strategic conjuncture characterized by (a) fragmented and unstable rule over the civilian population, (b) mass civilian defections toward incumbents and (c) escalation of violence.”\textsuperscript{17} Several scholars have argued that the tactic of suicide bombing is rational in that it helps Islamic (and other) terrorist groups achieve their group goals.\textsuperscript{18} And Michael Doran conceptualizes al Qaeda as a rational actor, arguing that “when it comes to matters related to politics and war, al Qaeda maneuvers around its dogmas


with alacrity."\textsuperscript{19} In this understanding, "al Qaeda's long-term goals are set by its fervent devotion to a radical religious ideology, but in its short-term behavior, it is a rational political actor operating according to the dictates of realpolitik."\textsuperscript{20}

Although these studies represent a clear departure from caricatures of zealots narrowly driven by grievances, they tend to focus on the group as the unit of analysis. In other words, tactics and activism are viewed as rational in the sense that they are effective means for promoting group goals. But what about the individuals who actually engage in activism on behalf of the group? Why do individuals within these groups voluntarily agree to engage in personally risky actions? In research on Islamic extremism, there has been surprisingly little research at the individual level of analysis from a rational-actor perspective.

In addressing this lacuna, our starting point is the rational-choice emphasis on individual strategies designed to produce personal payoffs. The strategy (or action) is the best means for the actor to achieve her most desired outcome or preference, given available information. Rational choice theory does not provide an explanation of preference formation, but rather offers a framework for explaining strategy choices under a given set of stable, ordered preferences. Rationality is evaluated in terms of whether the strategy is intended to obtain an individual's primary preference, not according to whether the preference itself seems reasonable to the outside observer. In other words, we cannot judge an action as irrational simply because we do not agree with the studied actor's preference ordering. As long as the actor committing the action believes that she is seeking to optimize her top preference, the individual is acting in a rational manner.\textsuperscript{21}

So how does a rational-choice perspective help us understand the high-cost/risk activism of the activists in al-Muhajiroun and other radical Islamic groups? On the face of it, participation seems to defy the logic of collective action. Islamic radicals are, in essence, offering to produce collective goods that will benefit all Muslims: establishment of the Islamic state, expulsion of the United States from Muslim lands, divine justice, etc. This presents a classic collective action problem: why would individuals choose to contribute to the production of the collective good when they can free-ride off the efforts of others? This question is especially pertinent given the risks and costs associated with radical Islamic activism.

Rational-choice theory points to the use of selective incentives or side payments as means of inducing participation and overcoming the free-rider dilemma. These are benefits that individuals only accrue if they contribute to

\textsuperscript{20}Ibid., 182.
the collective good. Although early models of rational choice assumed that individuals were primarily interested in maximizing some wealth function, scholars have since expanded their view of human preferences. For example, rational-choice studies of voting behavior have focused on nontangible incentives to explain why an individual chooses to vote regardless of whether her vote is really likely to maximize the probability of producing a particular public policy outcome vis-a-vis the election. Voting is seen as providing nontangible psychological gratification for those who feel as though they are fulfilling their civic duty.

Most radical Islamic groups offer a nontangible spiritual incentive to attract participants: participation produces salvation on judgment day and entrance to Paradise in the hereafter. The difference among Islamic groups is over how the spiritual payoff should be pursued (that is, strategy). Each proffers its ideology as an “efficient” (and often exclusive) path to salvation, which serves as a heuristic device for indoctrinated activists to weigh the costs and benefits of certain actions and behaviors. A cornerstone of these ideological templates is that individuals must face high risks and costs because God demands this as a condition for the spiritual payoff. In other words, radical Islamists choose to face great personal risks and costs because otherwise they are not pursuing their self-interest. Just as importantly, because individuals are judged as individuals on judgment day according to whether they personally followed the commands of God, free-riding jeopardizes salvation.

In this sense, even seemingly altruistic behavior can be understood as rational self-interest. A study of Mother Teresa, for example, argues that:

While empathetic and self-sacrificial, Mother Teresa’s charity ... was not altruistic, that is, motivated strictly by the desire to benefit the recipient without expectation of external reward. “Works of love,” she laid down, “are always a means of becoming closer to God” (Mother Teresa 1985: 25). ... Closeeness to God, not the alleviation of human pain itself, was the preferred religious product. Indeed in Mother Teresa’s assessment, poverty, suffering, and death were positive occasions of divine contact and imitation.

This is not to argue that tangible selective incentives are irrelevant. Islamic groups in Egypt, for example, provide material incentives to attract supporters,

including jobs, health services, education, day care, and financial support. In Jordan, the Muslim Brotherhood’s charity network provides patronage employment and selective access to goods and services. Both Hamas and Hizballah provide social services and basic goods and services to communities and supporters. And there is evidence that at least some (although most likely a small minority) of those who joined the Armed Islamic Group in Algeria did so to obtain the economic benefits of insurgency, such as smuggling. The point is not to dismiss these material payoffs, but rather to highlight the importance of nontangible incentives as well. This is particularly important when considering radical Islamic groups that offer few tangible rewards but demand risky activities.

We argue that in the case of al-Muhajiroun, the perceived spiritual payoffs outweighed the risks and costs associated with activism for those who chose to participate. Indoctrinated individuals viewed activism and even risk itself as means to achieve salvation and entrance into Paradise. Guided by the movement ideology, participants viewed suffering and effort as a testament to the certitude of belief (assurance that they would achieve the spiritual payoffs). From this perspective, the strategy of high cost/risk is strategically rational.

**A Case Study: Al-Muhajiroun**

Omar Bakri Mohammed (known as OBM) launched al-Muhajiroun (AM) in the UK in 1996 after leaving Hizb uh-Tahrir. It subsequently became the most visible radical Islamic movement in the country and spread throughout the UK in a number of different cities and neighborhoods. AM also established branches in a variety of other countries, including Lebanon, Ireland, the United States, and Pakistan (this branch eventually claimed independence from the overall al-Muhajiroun movement), which were connected through cyberspace meetings, lectures, lessons, and public events.

After September 11, AM became a central focus in debates about political expression and national security in the UK because of its support for the use of violence. A core tenet of the movement was the use of military coups to establish Islamic states wherever there are Muslims, including Britain. It also condoned the use of violence against Western militaries operating in Muslim countries. AM activists encouraged Britons to fight for the Taliban against American-led forces in Afghanistan, and AM issued a statement supporting

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29 AM was originally formed in Saudi Arabia as a “cover” for Hizb uh-Tahrir activities during the 1980s, but OBM was forced to flee the country and settled in the UK.

jihad against coalition forces in Iraq in 2003.\textsuperscript{31} OBM and leaders in AM issued other controversial statements as well, including fatwas (jurisprudential opinions) condoning attacks against John Major and Tony Blair if they set foot in a Muslim country and a statement supporting the 1998 U.S. embassy bombings in Africa.\textsuperscript{32}

Perhaps the most contentious action came a year after September 11 when AM sponsored a conference titled “A Towering Day in History” at the Finsbury Park Mosque, reflecting upon the consequences of the attacks and the aftermath for Muslims. The advertising for the conference was framed in such a way that it implied a “celebratory tone,” and the press billed it as an event commemorating the triumph of September 11, which did not sit well with the public.\textsuperscript{33} Eight months later, reports indicated a possible connection between al-Muhajiroun and the British suicide bombers who killed three Israelis during an attack on Mike’s Place, a bar in Tel Aviv.\textsuperscript{34} This was followed by advertisement for a second September 11 event titled “The Magnificent 19” (referring to the nineteen hijackers), which was prevented from being held.

In the UK, there were 160 “formal members” known as hizbis (partisans). The small number reflects a selective induction process: individuals only became members after the leadership was convinced that they had fully internalized the movement ideology. As OBM explained, a member of the movement “is an identical copy of the way I think, and he has my adopted culture [ideology], and he teaches it to the people.”\textsuperscript{35} These activists were qualified to develop and teach others: they were authorized to give lessons and to speak to the public on behalf of the movement. As “life cells,” formal members were often sent to other countries to establish branches, indicating OBM’s confidence in their ideological internalization.

There were also 700 “students,” who took weekly lessons taught by OBM and the formal members. Although these students were not formal members, the vast majority participated in the array of movement activities and took on risk and cost on behalf of the cause. Some even held leadership positions. In the U.S. branch of the movement in the 1990s, for example, the al-Muhajiroun’s spokesperson was not actually a formal member. He did not attend the formation meeting that established the branch in 1996, and lived in Springfield,

\textsuperscript{31} Al-Muhajiroun, “Fight the Invaders vs. Stop the War,” 20 March 2003.

\textsuperscript{32} These statements were widely covered in the press and confirmed in the first author’s interviews with Omar Bakri in 2002.


\textsuperscript{35} First author’s interview with Omar Bakri Mohammed, London, December 2002.
Missouri, far away from the New York City branch headquarters and the movement leadership. To confuse matters further, many of the students referred to themselves as “members,” something the formal members encouraged to make students feel important. To make some distinctions, in this article we use the term “activist” to refer to both formal members as well as committed students who participated in risky activism. “Member” refers only to those committed activists who actually went through the formal membership process (the hizbis).

At the periphery of the movement, there were thousands of “contacts,” potential participants who attended a handful of lessons and events. These contacts were, in effect, sampling al-Muhajiroun’s activities to see whether they wanted to become more deeply involved. Although newspapers erroneously reported an estimated 7,000 al-Muhajiroun “members,” this number probably accurately represented the number of contacts. Alone, however, the number tells us very little, inasmuch as it is impossible to determine the level of commitment within this aggregate. Some contacts may have come to a single public event. Others may have indulged in deeper religious sampling and may have progressed toward becoming actual students.

Participation in the high-profile and contentious activism of the movement carried a number of costs and risks for activists, particularly in the post-September 11 period. There were enormous commitments of time and energy, including religious training, outreach projects, and public demonstrations. Activists sacrificed relationships with former friends, family, and the mainstream Muslim community. And they were subject to an assortment of laws related to terrorism, treason, public order, and inciting religious and racial hatred. Arrests were common, and activists were conscious that their participation risked legal consequences. At first glance, it appears that they were engaged in irrational behavior that threatened self-interest.

**Costs for the Committed Activist**

Gregory L. Wiltfang and Doug McAdam argue that in deciding whether to participate in activism, individuals are influenced by a subjective assessment of costs and risks. Risks are threats to an individual’s well-being, such as threats to employment or physical safety. Costs are factors associated with the demands of participation that require the sacrifice of other commitments or interests. According to rational-actor models, we expect that individuals are unlikely to participate in high-risk, high-cost activism unless there is an off-

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36 First author’s interview with this activist by phone, April 2003.
37 First author’s interviews with various activists, UK, March, June, and December 2002.
38 First author’s interview with Omar Bakri Mohammed, December 2002.
setting payoff. From this perspective, the behavior of AM activists appears irrational at first glance, given the dangers and sacrifices derived from belonging to the movement.

Perhaps one of the most important indicators of high cost is the time commitment, as demonstrated by the dizzying array of weekly activities. Although these activities were only required for formal members, committed students participated in them as well, thus incurring the general time costs. So although the activities detailed below are outlined in terms of formal-member requirements, they were attended by activists in general.

Members were required to attend a two-hour study session held by the local halaqah (circle) every week, unless they were excused because of traveling needs, sickness of a family member, an emergency, or permission of the leader.40 These circles were intensive, member-only religious lessons that revolved around the movement ideology, and students had to spend time preparing. Given the intensity of these sessions, a lack of preparation incurred the ire of OBM and social pressure from other participants, thereby discouraging consistent indolence.41 The overall tone at these lessons was captured in the movement bylaws: “Each member must understand that the Halaqah is a serious discussion and not a chat.”42 Although the halaqah sessions were only scheduled for two hours, many ran much longer. The first author attended a Thursday session at the movement’s headquarters that lasted from 9:00 p.m. until 1:30 a.m. Interviews with participants indicated that this particular lesson typically ran until 5:00 a.m.

Members were required to host at least one public study circle, which was advertised at the local mosque and in the movement newsletter; and there were numerous AM-sponsored public talks, tafsirs (explanations of Qur’anic verses), and community events, which were intended to draw interest from potential recruits.43 Although some of these activities were not “required,” all those interviewed stated that they tried to go to as many as possible, in some instances traveling with OBM throughout the country (usually during the evenings). The first author’s own participation at public talks and community events in London, Slough, and Luton indicated that this was indeed the case.

Every Saturday, members were required to set up a da’wa (propagation) stall in their local community from 12:00 p.m. until 5:00 p.m. In reality, these tended to start a bit later (usually a half hour or an hour late) but generally lasted at least four hours. They were held outside local tube stops, public libraries, municipal buildings, and other public locales. The stalls reflected an activist da’wa, which centered on raising public awareness about the plight of Muslims and responsibilities in defending the global umma (Muslim com-

40 Al-Muhajiroun, The Administration of al-Muhajiroun, no date.
41 This pressure was observed by the first author at a movement-only lesson in June 2002.
42 Al-Muhajiroun, Administration.
43 Ibid.
munity). Activists put up posters, chanted slogans, shouted through loud-speakers, and interacted with observers and passing pedestrians. In effect, these were small protest rallies, usually attended by about ten to twenty local activists.

Members also participated in weekly demonstrations that lasted approximately two hours. The particular topic of the protests varied from week to week, depending upon the “pressing issue” of the day, and they could be volatile events. At a rally outside the Pakistani embassy, protesters screamed “Musharaf, we are coming to kill you!” and chanted slogans, such as “Musharaf watch your back, Bin Laden coming back.” Other examples include demonstrations against the governments of Egypt, India, and Qatar. There were also a number of other required functions, including a monthly meeting of all members and special events (such as during Ramadan). In addition, the movement encouraged members to commit themselves to independent activities and community outreach (for example, following politics and news, studying the ideas of other movements, and promoting the movement ideology through interactions at work, school, and the mosque). This was based on movement principles about the necessity of action and outreach; and interviews indicated that movement members were dedicated to more than the bare minimum and voluntarily promoted the movement ideology in every aspect of their lives. One must also take into account routine Muslim rituals (prayer, fasting during Ramadan, etc.) and social interactions with other members, which often involved religious discussion, movement planning, and solidarity building. Considering that most members had jobs or were in school, this was an enormous sacrifice of time.

There was a set of disciplinary measures that provided sanctions for members who did not attend the required activities. For example, if on three separate occasions within a single year a member failed to attend the halaqah or monthly gatherings or refused to distribute movement materials or attend movement activities (without a good excuse), the disciplinary proceedings called for the “complete expulsion from all Halaqah and closed monthlies and exclusion from all Administrative procedures of Al-Muhajiroun (including informing him/her about Al-Muhajiroun activities) for a period specified by the Mu’tamad [the leader responsible for the country branch of the movement].” In some cases, an individual might have legitimately believed he or she had a valid excuse. If the leadership did not agree, however, the individual was temporarily excluded from all halaqahs and closed monthlies for a minimum period of one month. In this case, the leader could also levy a modest fine before readmitting the offender.

44 This event was tape-recorded by the first author.
45 Al-Muhajiroun, Administration.
46 Ibid.; first author’s interviews with leaders and other members, 2002.
47 Al-Muhajiroun, Administration.
48 Ibid.
These sanctions were for formal members alone; and although this implies the importance of sanctions in motivating action, as Mancur Olson argues for small group dynamics, the fact that activists who were not formal members participated in many of the risky and costly activities indicates that there must have been some other incentive.

To maintain the flexibility necessary for the frenetic schedule of movement activities, some activists chose less-lucrative employment opportunities (part-time jobs, for example), thus incurring a material cost. Members were also required to pay dues and donate a portion of their salary to the movement, because AM was self-funded. The donation was according to the individual's ability to pay (it generally seemed to follow the calculations used for Islamic charity).

Time commitments and the ideological views of the movement frequently produced social costs, the most important of which was related to family pressures. Almost uniformly, respondents in this study noted their parents' opposition to activism. Parents did not object to religious education per se, but they believed in a personal, apolitical Islam and set different goals, such as getting halal (religiously permitted) food in schools. Some concerned parents contacted Zaki Badawi, founder of the Muslim Council of Britain, and asked him to intervene after discovering their children's involvement. This kind of family opposition created social pressure not to participate.

Nonetheless, activists defied their parents and participated. As one respondent put it, "They warn you and say don't go with these people, but then they see you are firm and what can they do?" A Somali member reiterated this sentiment: "If the boys are convinced, the parents can't do much. They can tell them not to go, but they can't stop it."

One rather common way that activists attempted to avoid familial friction was by hiding their involvement. This, however, did not necessarily eliminate the social cost, because the ideology required propagation, leading to heated debates with family members. There is little evidence that traumatic altercations shattered families or created irreconcilable differences, but they certainly

49 In an effort to maintain its independence, AM relies solely on its membership for funding and has, at least according to one member, turned down some sizable donations, including one from the Iranian government.

50 For the typical concerns of Muslims in the UK, see Tariq Modood, "The Place of Muslims in British Secular Multiculturalism" in Nezar Al Sayyad and Manuel Castells, eds., Muslim Europe or Euro-Islam: Politics, Culture, and Citizenship in the Age of Globalization (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2002).


52 First author's interview with Hassan, London, June 2002. Note: for rank-and-file members, pseudonyms or other anonymous indicators are used to protect the privacy of respondents.


54 First author's interviews with Somali member, Kamal, and Mohammed (movement leader), London, June 2002.
produced tensions. One joiner recalled that because his father “stands with Union Jack,” they used to have rather heated discussions. Another recounted a story in which he shocked his extended family as they discussed the stand-off between Pakistan and India in 2002 by boldly declaring his support for nuclear war. This, he argued, was a religious obligation and for the sake of Islam. His father was a staunch supporter of Britain, and this created a great deal of consternation. These types of interactions indicate that although parental ignorance about participation may have softened family pressure, it was unlikely to eliminate the cost altogether.

**RISKY ACTIVISM**

All public displays of activism entail some risk, whether it is the possibility (even if remote) that a rally will degenerate into chaos or (in more extreme cases) result in death. One common measure of risk in studies of protest is the perceived possibility of arrest. By this measure, the personal risk for those involved in AM was high. Large numbers of movement activists were arrested, and each public event was seen as a risky venture in which police intervention and arrest (or at least threats of arrest) were possible. The risks became accentuated in the post-September 11 period because al-Muhajiroun was often accused of supporting terrorism. Arrests (or threats of arrest) frequently occurred at the da’wa stalls. It was not the act of protesting itself that raised risk but rather the presentation of grievances. Activists used “moral shock” to evoke emotional responses and elicit sympathy for the cause, whether it was the plight of Iraqis, the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories, or Indian repression in Kashmir. Pictures are more effective in generating visceral responses from observers, so AM activists used shocking pictures of mutilated and decapitated bodies. Pictures of malnourished or mutilated children were common because they evoked the most consistent emotional response, regardless of whether observers were Muslim. These pictures, more than anything else, drew the ire of police, who were frequently in attendance at the stall or were called in by local business owners and concerned citizens. Altercations with police over whether the pictures were “free speech” often led to arrests.

This was confirmed by observations at a da’wa stall outside a public library in London. About ten activists gathered around a display table and an easel adorned with grotesque pictures of the “oppressed”: mutilated bodies

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55 First author’s interview with Rajib, Slough, June 2002.
57 See, for example, Wilftang and McAdam, “The Costs and Risks of Social Activism,” 987–1010.
from the alleged Israeli “Jenin massacres” (the UN did not find any evidence to support the accusations).\textsuperscript{59} The pictures, to say the least, were shocking images—an old man with half his face missing, children with massive injuries, and bodies with organs exposed through the skin. The graphic nature of the pictures prompted a flood of calls to the police,\textsuperscript{60} and six officers responded and arrived at the stall about an hour after it opened. The protesters were told that they could continue their message verbally and use pictures of bombed buildings, but that they had to remove the pictures of the mutilations. A heated argument ensued. The demonstrators argued that they were merely showing “the truth” (facts that the Western media refused to publish) so that people would understand what was happening to Muslims worldwide. The police retorted that the pictures were offensive and that because they were being displayed in a public place, bystanders (including children) had no choice about exposure. The argument was impassioned, and the police threatened arrest. In this particular case, the pictures were taken down. AM activists cited the confrontation as another example of Western repression against Muslims. Interviews with various members of AM, a police officer at the scene, and eight participants at the stall indicated that this kind of altercation was common. Demonstrators were most frequently arrested under the Public Order Act, which provided wide latitude for police officers at the scene to determine whether it represented a public disturbance warranting arrest.\textsuperscript{61}

There are other instances in which activists faced risk because of the content of the message. In one example, two members were arrested under the Public Order Act at a protest against homosexuals, because of a leaflet entitled “Gay Today, Pedophile Tomorrow?” They were both convicted and fined £160.\textsuperscript{62} Another activist was arrested during a verbal tirade against Israel.\textsuperscript{63} In a famous case, Iftikhar Ali, a movement leader, was arrested after distributing leaflets quoting passages from the Qur'an in a context that authorities interpreted as a threat against the Jewish community. He was found guilty of inciting racial hatred (Jews are considered an ethnic group under UK law) and sentenced to a £3,000 fine, a £1,500 reimbursement cost, and 200 hours of community service.\textsuperscript{64} Several members lost employment as a result of their activism (religious discrimination is not currently covered by British law). And there was the ever-present risk of arrest under the new terrorism laws.


\textsuperscript{60} First author’s interview with the lead police officer at the scene, London, June 2002.

\textsuperscript{61} Ibid.; first author’s interviews with AM members, London, 2002.

\textsuperscript{62} First author’s interview with one of the arrested activists, London, June 2002.

\textsuperscript{63} First author’s interview with this activist, London, June 2002.

Anjem Choudary, the leader of the UK branch of AM, aptly summarized the risks and costs of participation:

Being part of al-Muhajiroun is not really the most prestigious thing. People don’t become a part and say “mashallah” [what God has willed, indicating a good omen] and go around saying I am a member of al-Muhajiroun because obviously we get attacked by the government and our members are arrested regularly at demonstrations and at stalls because they speak out openly and publicly about what they believe. They might get arrested because they talk about homosexuality or they might think he is a homophobe or think he is racist and anti-Semitic because he is talking about Palestine. We have had a number of prosecutions. You met Iftikhar Ali. He is the first person in this country to be arrested for incitement to religious hatred for quoting a verse from the text [Qur’an] which was considered to be racist. This has never happened before. It is a landmark decision and he is a member of our organization. If they join and stay that is because they believe in the cause, they believe in the struggle. We ask our members to interact with the culture and to go out regularly on talks and demonstrations, and they will attend weekly and monthly gatherings, and a fair amount of their time will be taken up. And obviously they will be asked to contribute financially as well, because we don’t receive any finances from the government. We contribute ourselves.65

In addition to the costs and risks of activism, there is an important question as to whether there would be a payoff in which the movement achieved its goals. Although AM may have affected the political views of some Muslims, its prospects for success in the UK were minimal, given that a primary stated goal was the establishment of an Islamic state in Britain. Even OBM recognized the futility: “Practically, it is not going to happen except in a Muslim country.”66

The sense that activism was against individual self-interest is deepened by the availability of other fundamentalist groups whose activities entailed fewer risks (and lower costs, in some cases), including Hizb uh-Tahrir, Jama’a Tabligh, and various reformist Salafi groups, such as those at the Brixton Mosque and Jam’i’at Ihyaa’ Minhaaj al-Sunnah. In fact, AM offered very few unique selective incentives. For example, solidarity incentives derived from group identity, social interactions, and religious activities were offered by other fundamentalist groups, including moderate movements. There were no material incentives, in the sense of magazines or concrete outputs available only to formal members. And other movements and groups offered similar purposive incentives because of their fervent religious missions. According to AM members themselves, all of the fundamentalist movements (moderate and radical, including AM) shared about 95 percent of the same religious precepts. So why take on the costs and risks? Without making a tautological argument (and implying that somehow radicals are deviants and psychologically disturbed

65 First author’s interview with Anjem Choudary, by phone, June 2002.
because they get a psychological payoff from engaging in risky behavior), the observer is left with the initial impression that this behavior violated the principle of self-interest and thus reflects the irrationality of zealotry.

**Spiritual Incentives and High-Cost/Risk Activism**

To make sense of why individuals would still participate in such activism, regardless of high costs/risks and the prospects for free-riding, one must address activist views of incentives and strategic assessments of utility. These were rooted in the movement ideology, which offered guidelines about what activists must do to achieve salvation. Deviations from the ideological prescriptions were interpreted as threats to an individual’s utility maximization and desire to be saved on judgment day.

The cornerstone of AM’s ideology was its particular understanding of *tawhid*—the oneness of God. *Tawhid* begins with the *shahada*, or testimony of faith that signals a conversion to Islam: “I testify that there is no God except Allah and that Mohammed is His messenger.” It defines God as the only true lord and sovereign of the universe worthy of worship. The Qur’an and *hadiths* (recorded traditions of the Prophet) are filled with dire warnings about the consequences for those who violate *tawhid* by ascribing partners to God (*shirk*) (in other words, polytheism):

Lo! Whoso ascribeth partners unto Him, for him Allah has forbidden Paradise. His abode is in the Fire. For evil-doers there will be no helpers (Qur’an 5:72).

Lo! Allah forgiveth not that a partner be ascribed Unto Him. He forgiveth (all) save that to who He will. Whoso ascribeth partners to Allah, he hath indeed invented a tremendous sin (Qur’an 4:48).

Although all Muslims accept the general principle of *tawhid*, there are differences over its precise meaning and application. Many Islamic fundamentalists, for example, reject traditional Sufi practices, such as praying at the tombs of saints, as examples of *shirk*. Even within the Islamic fundamentalist community there are differences. Some Islamic activists, for example, accept the possibility of working through democratic institutions, whereas others view adherence to man-made law as egregious *shirk*. What constitutes *shirk* is a matter of contention among Muslims.

For al-Muhajiroun activists, every action, decision, and behavior was seen as an act of worship if it was in accordance with divine law. Any deviation from the straight path of Islam, in contrast, represented a violation of *tawhid*. Those who adhered to *tawhid* gained entrance to Paradise; those who engaged in *shirk* would suffer the hellfires:

Tawheed prevents man from eternally remaining in the HellFire. The Prophet Mohammed (SAW) stated in an authentic report: Whoever dies and has so much as a mustard seed of faith in his heart shall enter al-Jannah [the garden of Paradise]. Faith here signifies a correct belief in Allah and His Messenger
Mohammed (SAW) and all that they instructed, commanded and prohibited for mankind.67

The calculus for individuals is clear: follow the divine rules and receive a spiritual payoff; remain deviant and suffer eternal consequences. But what are the divine rules and how does an individual Muslim identify proper adherence? Islamic movements offer religious interpretations represented in ideologies as guidelines to answer this question. These ideologies are, in essence, outlines of strategies for obtaining the spiritual payoff—what individuals must do to ensure salvation.

All Islamic fundamentalist groups base their proffered strategies on the model of the Prophet Mohammed—the Muslim exemplar whose path (Sunna) is considered the perfection of Islam in practice. There are divergences, however, over the specifics of the prophetic paradigm and its application in the contemporary context. Each group believes it is following the proper model and interpretation, and these differences matter in terms of the potential for salvation. The Prophet predicted that the Muslim community would fracture into sects after his death and warned his followers to remain focused on his example and the Qur’an for guidance: “I am leaving you two things and you will never go astray as long as you cling to them. They are the Book of Allah and my Sunnah.”68 Many fundamentalist groups believe that there is one correct understanding of the straight path of Islam; ipso facto, all others are deviations and will not receive divine reward. This thinking is based upon authentic hadiths, such as “And this Ummah will divide into seventy-three sects all of which except one will go to Hell and they are those who are upon what I and my Companions are upon.”69 Many groups consider themselves to be this “saved sect” (firqa al-najiyya) and therefore argue that their adherents will be saved on judgment day.

Al-Muhajiroun’s particular interpretation of the model and its relevance for salvation was aptly captured by Omar Bakri Mohammed:

The [prophetic] methodology is the only way. If I follow it, I remove the sin from my neck. The only way of accepting His command [God] is by following the methodology of the messenger of the Prophet Mohammed. So the Prophet he cultured society; he exposed man made law in society (commanding good and forbidding evil); and he sought support from those sincere [Muslims in the army] who accept Islam from him and give him power from the army. This is the only way we can remove the sin from our neck.70

OBM and other AM activists concluded that the only way for individuals to ensure personal salvation was to engage in these activities so as to “remove the

68 As quoted in Jam’i’at Ihyaa’ Minhaaj Al-Sunnah, A Brief Introduction to the Salafi Da’wah (Ipswich, UK: Jam’i’at Minhaaj Al-Sunnah, 1993), 5.
69 Ibid., 3.
70 First author’s interview with Omar Bakri Mohammed, December 2002.
sin” from their necks. Thus, regardless of the risks and costs, individuals had to promote a proper understanding of Islam (a radical interpretation that included support for jihad against the United States, Russia, Israel, and others); publicly denounce un-Islamic behavior (including democracy) through overt activism; and work to establish the Caliphate (Islamic state) by means of a military coup (even in the UK).

Al-Muhajiroun argued that because the Prophet accomplished these duties by working with a group, individual Muslims must do likewise to “remove the sin” from their necks and receive a payoff in the hereafter. The AM ideology distinguished between divine duties that can be fulfilled as an individual and those that can only be fulfilled by working with other Muslims. The central argument is that the Prophet and his companions worked as individuals when they addressed individuals, but formed collectivities when addressing society. The various divine duties of activism, in particular, were fulfilled by working as groups. For AM, this was reflected in Qur’an 3:104: “Let there rise from among you group(s) calling society to Islam, commanding society to do what Allah orders and to refrain from what He forbids and these (group(s)) are the ones who are successful” (AM translation).

The emergence of a group, however, is not enough to remove sin. Those who fail to participate remain sinful and thus are not part of the saved sect. More importantly for a rational-choice perspective, group membership or belonging alone does not produce the desired spiritual payoff. The group is merely a vehicle for fulfilling individual obligations, so individuals still must engage in the methodology and fulfill duties to remove the sin from their necks. As Omar Bakri explained:

If any one of them or some of them did a duty or engaged in any duty e.g. political struggle in any part of the world, it does not mean that all of them are rewarded for it, nor does it mean that all the members are fulfilling their duties, rather those who did it alone will be rewarded and will remove the sin from their necks whereas the others remain sinful if they did not fulfill their duties.71

This is because, as Omar Bakri argued, “Allah (swt) will account as individuals [on Judgment Day], not as an entity.”72 Where salvation on judgment day is a concern, this ideological precept essentially undermined the potential for free-riding within the group. Each individual had to engage in activism within the group, because he or she would not benefit from the work of others. Only active participants received the payoff. Anjem Choudary, the UK leader of al-Muhajiroun, nicely summarized the spiritual incentive for joining the movement: “The only benefit that they [the activists] have, which is a great benefit unto itself, is that they fulfill a duty and ultimately will be rewarded in the hereafter. We don’t pretend they are going to get anything apart from that.”73

71 Omar Bakri Mohammed, Questions and Answers, “Is the group an entity?” n.d.
72 Ibid.
73 First author’s interview with Anjem Choudary.
A refusal to replicate the model in terms of the method (working with a group) or the specific duties jeopardized an individual's status in the hereafter. In effect, such a refusal was a rejection of tawhid and thus evidence of apostasy.74

Within the mechanism of the group, individuals had to fulfill three primary divine duties: educate Muslims about proper Islam (i.e., the movement ideology), including exhortations to jihad; actively command good and prevent evil through overt (and controversial) activism; and struggle to establish an Islamic state through a military coup. First, individuals had to engage in tarbiya (culturing society in proper Islamic belief and behavior) and da'wa (propagation). For al-Muhajiroun, this necessitated lessons and activities to teach people about their divine duties and responsibilities as Muslims, according to movement precepts. An important component of this was promoting support for jihad against infidels in Muslim lands as an individual Muslim obligation: “Any aggression against any Muslim property or land by any Kuffar [unbelievers] or non-Muslim forces whether American, British or Jews of Israel makes Jihad (i.e. fighting) against them an obligation upon all Muslims.”75 This mandated armed struggles against the Russians in Chechnya; the United States in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia; India in Kashmir; Israel (both in the occupied territories and the state of Israel, which AM considered Muslim territory); and the United Nations (specifically in Iraq).76

Because tawhid demands the full application of divine law, al-Muhajiroun argued that all Muslims are obligated to fulfill the responsibility of jihad or risk jeopardizing salvation. Omar Bakri was explicit about this utility calculation at a conference titled “Terrorism and Osama Bin Laden” held in East London in 2000: “You all have an obligation to support the jihad. Or you will be punished on the Day of Judgment! You will get a reward for fighting. You must send your children to jihad.”77 Obviously, calling for such action amounted to support for terrorism and, in certain instances, even implied sedition when the call to jihad involved British interests, but the risks were acceptable for those who calculated costs and benefits in terms of the hereafter.

To save themselves and fulfill their duties toward jihad, AM activists practiced what they preached by providing not only verbal support but financial and physical assistance as well. AM openly raised money for jihads throughout the Muslim world, especially for Chechen rebels, jihadis in Kashmir, and Hamas in the Palestinian territories. Changes in anti-terrorism laws, however, made this fundraising illegal. Interviews with Omar Bakri indicate that financial sup-

74 Under many understandings of Islamic law, the ultimate sanction for an individual convicted of apostasy is death, although this is rarely enforced in practice.
75 Shari’ah Court of the UK (an al-Muhajiroun organization headed by Omar Bakri), “Fatwa against the Illegitimate State of Israel,” n.d.
77 Aaron Klein, “My Weekend with the Enemy,” The Jerusalem Post, 30 May 2000.
port for the struggles might still have occurred through charity front organizations, which raised money for general “charitable” purposes. A number of activists actually went to fight in the jihads, not as representatives of al-Muhajiroun as an organization but as individuals fulfilling their personal duty to God “to support their Muslim brothers and sisters.”

The second divine duty fulfilled through the group was the command to promote virtue and prevent vice (al-amr bi’l-ma’ruf wa’l-nahy ‘an al-munkar). Activism to fulfill this obligation was a required duty that must be fulfilled to follow tawhid and remain a Muslim. The movement cited the following hadith: “There is no prophet that Allah sent before me but he had supporters and companions who did what he said and obeyed his commands. After them there are many successors and they will say what they don’t do and do what Allah forbids. Whoever fights them with his hand is a believer, whoever fights them with his tongue is a believer, whoever fights them with his heart is a believer and if you do nothing you can’t claim you are a Muslim.” The punishment for those who failed to rise is the hellfires. The true believers and activists would receive eternal reward.

The third divine duty was to work for the reestablishment of the Caliphate (Islamic state). Once again, this duty was posited in terms of individual interest in removing sin to ensure personal salvation. Al-Muhajiroun argued that initially, after the collapse of the Caliphate in 1924, its reestablishment was a collective duty (fard kifaya), meaning an obligation that can be fulfilled by some on behalf of the umma. However, after a period of time without an Islamic state, “working to establish the Khilafah [Caliphate] [becomes] Fard [a divine duty] upon all Muslims (i.e., Fard Kifayah Muhattam) or a sufficient duty binding immediately without a time limit upon all Muslims and those who engage in it remove the sin and the burden on their necks until they accomplish the task. Whereas those who do not engage in working to establish the Khilafah nowadays are sinful [except for those exempted in sharia].”

For AM, the proper method for establishing the Islamic state was a military coup. As a result, activists contacted members of the military in an attempt to foment a military rebellion that would seize power and establish the Caliphate. Because the religious sources did not specify a particular locale for the Islamic state, Muslims were obligated to work to establish it wherever they lived, including the UK.

In terms of individual calculations, it is irrelevant whether the prospects were likely to succeed. Omar Bakri readily admitted that the establishment of an Islamic state in the UK was highly unlikely. But success did not matter, because individuals are judged on the basis of whether they worked to establish

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80 Omar Bakri Mohammed, Questions and Answers, “Are we obligated to work for the Khilafah?” n.d.
the Caliphate. In other words, salvation does not hinge upon whether activists actually succeeded in reaching stated movement goals; they are judged according to whether they worked toward these objectives. The duty is the effort and not the outcome of collective action. The Qur’an emphasizes that divine reward and punishment are meted out according to whether individuals “go forth in the cause of Islam” (that is, exert effort):

O ye who believe! What is the matter with you, that, when ye are asked to go forth in the cause of Allah, ye cling heavily to the earth? Do ye prefer the life of this world to the Hereafter? But little is the comfort of this life, as compared with the Hereafter. Unless ye go forth, He will punish you with a grievous penalty, and put others in your place; but Him ye would not harm in the least. For Allah hath power over all things (Qur’an 9:38–39).

When asked about whether a demonstration in front of the Indian embassy attracted much attention and support, Anjem Choudary could thus dismiss the importance of a large showing and media coverage as relatively irrelevant, because he “had fulfilled [his] duty to command good and forbid evil.”

Rational-choice studies of rebellion have argued that individuals assess the prospects for success when deciding whether to participate, but in the case of radical Islam, this outcome may be less important. At the individual level, the primary objective is not the establishment of an Islamic state or the success of a demonstration. These are only ways of fulfilling obligations to God, which, in turn, is the only way to achieve salvation. In terms of personal calculations, the very act of participation in itself produces the payoff in the hereafter.

Not only is high-cost/risk activism necessary to produce the desired outcome, but the act of suffering itself is viewed as a divine signal that the activist is on the right path and will achieve salvation as part of the saved sect. The Prophet initially suffered at the hands of the Quraysh (the dominant tribe in Mecca), yet continued to fulfill his obligations to God. AM activists emphasized that regardless of the difficulties, true believers speak out:

The Prophet [Mohammed] and all the Anbiyya [Prophets], all the Sahabas [Companions], they got tortured, they struggled, they went through pain. For what? Was it because they testified? It was because they implemented in action. The Lord said “Why do you say something that you do not do, you do not act upon?” When we see the Prophet Mohammed, and the Anbiyya, and the Sahabas, they struggled, they did da’wa, they commanded good and forbid evil, they exposed...

81 First author’s interview with Anjem Choudary.
the idolatry of the society, and they introduced the shahada. But no one is doing that today. This is an obligation that is upon every single Muslim when they see munkar [evil]. When they see evil and corruption, it becomes an obligation.83

This historical precedent was used for qiyas (reasoning by analogy), whereby hardships were interpreted as evidence that they were on the right path. In other words, what rational-actor models typically view as risks and costs associated with activism were in fact benefits to the AM participant who viewed them as confirmation of the correctness of belief:

Al-Muhajiroun says, “Look at the Prophet Mohammed, he went to Taif, and he got stones thrown at him.” I think why did he get stones thrown at him and we aren’t getting stones thrown at us? So when I see the police and they come to us and speak to us, I say “alhamdulillah [praise be to God], we are on the right path.” If they didn’t come to us and said we are very nice people, we are wrong, because Allah said in the Qur’an: the Jews and Christians will never be happy with you until you follow their way of life.84

Activists believed that if the authorities treated them well, it was a sign that they were on the wrong path. The Prophet was attacked by the authorities of his day. Obviously, he was on the straight path as the messenger of God, and the authorities were unbelievers. Drawing an analogy to the present, activists believed that if the police or government accommodated a movement, it was a sign of incorrect beliefs. This was reflected in AM’s disdain for the Muslim Council of Britain and scholars and movements throughout the Muslim world that cooperate with regimes. The ideology framed overtures and friendly gestures by the authorities as signs of an insidious plot to destroy the truth of Islam, based upon Qur’an 9:8: “Verily if the unbelievers have authority over you, they will not respect you any trust, agreement, or covenant. With their mouths they will have fair words in front of you but their hearts are averse from you and most of them are rebellious, betrayers, and wicked” (AM translation). As one respondent put it:

I feel good because I feel that [our way] is the only way, because the only way to be a good Muslim is like this—as long as someone is struggling and finds everything against him, then that person is on the right path. The only way to know that someone is really on the right path is, for example, that all the leaders are against him, all the government people are against him. And they don’t compromise. So as long as someone is trying and struggling then hopefully he is on the right path. The Prophet he was like that as well. Everyone was against him. He got kicked out of his home land, Mecca, and he had to go to Medina. So that is the way we look at it.85

In addition, respondents also maintained that suffering was part of a more general test of certitude and commitment. One activist argued that “it is a test

83 First author’s interview with Somali member.
84 Ibid.
85 First author’s interview with sixteen-year-old member, London, June 2002.
for everyone. And Allah even said that there will be a time when the majority of people will leave Islam or will neglect Islam, and that He will replace people with those who fulfill his command.”86 Others referred to an oft-quoted hadith as evidence of the test of will: “Hold all of you fast to the rope of Allah and do not separate yourselves.”

As a result, activists reveled in their tales of confrontation with the police as proof of their own beliefs and eventual salvation.87 Suffering was affirmation, and movement participants saw themselves as following in the Prophet’s shoes, in a way living his experience in modern times. The fact that the activists were condemned by the mainstream Muslim community furthered their conviction and certitude, because the Prophet and his companions were a minority in a sea of jahiliyya (disbelief). This produced quite a heady sense of purpose and certitude in a mission that was seen as providing activists with strategies for producing the spiritual payoff.

Comprehending radical Islam necessitates rendering individual decisions about participation and behaviors intelligible. Although recent work has shown that extremism is strategically rational at the group level, there is far less theorizing and data about the individual level of analysis. To address this, we have offered a rational-choice explanation that focuses on spiritual incentives. Radical Islamic movements offer an important spiritual incentive: join the group and engage in risky and costly activism and receive eternal salvation as part of the saved group.

This challenges perspectives that dismiss the possible usefulness of a rational-actor approach to Islamic activism. Roxanne Eueben, for example, argues that “even the most austere version of rational actor theory has very little to say about fundamentalism because, given its basic assumptions, it concludes only that fundamentalists have a revealed preference for fundamentalism.”88 But this kind of argument confuses religious methods with goals or interests. The preference is not for fundamentalism. Fundamentalism is a strategy or method for obtaining the preference of salvation as an end. It is a way of approaching religious interpretation that emphasizes literalism and strict adherence to tawhid. Activists follow this interpretive approach because they view it as an exclusive strategy for the pursuit of Paradise. If we recognize that value and instrumental rationalities are frequently related, radical Islamic activism becomes intelligible within a rational-actor framework.

We fully recognize that not everyone who participates in radical Islamic groups is driven by spiritual desires. It is folly to assume uniformity. In addition, there are almost certainly important differences between the utility calculations of leaders and those of followers and affiliates. This, of course, is open

86 First author’s interview with Islam (local leader), London, June 2002.
87 This was observed by the first author in several instances, including a large gathering of members prior to a lesson, where they swapped stories about confrontations with police.
to empirical investigation. Our point is to initiate a broader understanding of rational action in the study of radical Islam by emphasizing the role of beliefs and relationships among ideology, individual utility calculations, and behavior. If we accept that religion does matter, seemingly irrational behavior becomes understandable as a rational choice.