In *Political Islam in Central Asia: The Challenge of Hizb ut-Tahrir*, Emmanuel Karagiannis applies the insights of social movement theory (SMT) to the emergence and popularity of Hizb ut-Tahrir in the five formerly Soviet republics of Central Asia. The book is based on exhaustive research, including nearly two years of fieldwork in Central Asia, about eighty interviews with relevant experts on three continents (including Hizb ut-Tahrir members), and numerous primary documents, including books and articles by Hizb ut-Tahrir and its members. The book's strength is Karagiannis's ability to integrate these diverse sources into a series of compelling narratives and useful comparisons. Its weaknesses include a lack of critical engagement with the theories it presents as well as its dependence on problematic assumptions, such as the inherent spiritualism of non-Western cultures.

Hizb ut-Tahrir (literally, ‘The Islamic Liberation Party’) is a non-sectarian, neo-fundamentalist Islamic party. It was founded in 1953 by Taqiuddin an-Nabhani, a Palestinian living in Jordan. Its goal is to establish a global Islamic State under the guidance of a new caliph. It seeks to do so not through violent revolution but through Islamizing target populations enough that they naturally agitate for revolutionary change. The party does not recognize any elected government as legitimate and rejects familiar modern ideologies, such as democracy, capitalism and nationalism. Hizb ut-Tahrir is a sharp departure from Islamist groups, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, that promote gradual reform and are willing to negotiate with existing regimes. Karagiannis calls attention to the party's consistency; Hizb ut-Tahrir's methods and ideals have not changed in over fifty-five years.

Although Karagiannis cannot confirm that al-Nabhani read Marx, Engels or Lenin (50), he notes the sympathies between Hizb ut-Tahrir's ideas and methods and those of the Soviet socialist reformers who reshaped Central Asia in the twentieth century. Hizb ut-Tahrir proclaims a utopian vision, promising to bring an end to inequality, injustice and imperialism; it emphasizes group well-being over individualism; and it rejects laissez-faire capitalism, promising full employment and an extensive social welfare infrastructure. Karagiannis notes that Hizb ut-Tahrir seems to have modelled itself after what Lenin called the ‘vanguard party’ (38), the party comprising informed activists who work to create the necessary consciousness in otherwise ignorant masses.

Karagiannis offers a clear retelling of the history of Islam in Central Asia since 1917 and the emergence of Hizb ut-Tahrir there. Islam, the dominant religion in Central Asia since the eighth or ninth century, was suppressed by the Soviet regime but remained an important source of identity and spiritual guidance for many Central Asians. Since independence, the region has experienced an Islamic renaissance. Hizb ut-Tahrir is only one of many organizations that have benefited from this renewed interest.
Hizb ut-Tahrir appears to have entered the region in the 1990s and, at the time of his research, had a membership that Karagiannis estimates at twenty-five thousand (58). The regimes of all five republics consider Hizb ut-Tahrir to be a security problem, have banned the party, and persecute its members. Beyond these similarities, however, the party’s fortunes differ depending on the republic. Hizb ut-Tahrir has the most members in Uzbekistan (the most populous republic), but it is also most severely repressed there, with thousands of alleged members and sympathizers in jail, where they face brutal treatment. In Kyrgyzstan repression is less severe, and some members of the ruling elite have even expressed support for the party. In Tajikistan, the only republic that allowed political parties based on religion to operate legally, Hizb ut-Tahrir competed with legal parties, most notably the Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan.* Whereas the IRPT negotiated with the ruling regime and pragmatically adjusted its ideology in response to changing circumstances, Hizb ut-Tahrir never changes its ideology. This rigidity has increased its appeal among the republic’s most devout Muslims. The situation in Kazakhstan was freer for a while, and the party was able to gather a considerable following there (particularly in southern, agricultural regions with a high proportion of ethnic Uzbeks). The permissive climate also encouraged the party to print much of the region’s propaganda there. In 2005, possibly in response to pressure from Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan shut down a Hizb ut-Tahrir printing house and banned the party.

After several chapters in which this fascinating history is skilfully summarized, the book’s narrative becomes more problematic. In his discussion of social movement theory (SMT), Karagiannis introduces four component theories (structural functionalism, resource mobilization theory, political process theory and framing theory), arguing that each provides useful but limited insight into Hizb ut-Tahrir’s trajectory in Central Asia. Although the explanations of the theories and their applications are clear, the discussion is superficial. For example, Karagiannis explains that structural functionalism views social movement organizations (SMOs) to be a symptom of a society out of balance, notes that Central Asia is a society in crisis, and concludes that therefore SMT helps explain Hizb ut-Tahrir’s popularity in Central Asia. These assertions create more questions than they answer. (What traits, exactly, define a society in crisis? By what mechanisms do these traits produce social movements? To what specific social crises does a party like Hizb ut-Tahrir respond?) Rather than carefully examine how this theory’s claims and implications are complicated by the Central Asian case, Karagiannis moves on quickly to the next theory. He never pauses long enough on any one theory to explore its account of how social phenomena serve as causes or emerge as effects.

* In August 2015, shortly before this review went to press, the IRPT was outlawed by the government of Tajikistan.
This superficial theorizing is relatively harmless. More problematic is the contention that Central Asians’ non-Western mentality, particularly their religiosity, best explains Hizb ut-Tahrir’s rise. After summarizing the material and political factors SMT suggests explain the party’s emergence, Karagiannis argues that the SMT account is incomplete because it does not address ideology. He decides that this neglect reflects a shortcoming of SMT, which was developed to explain ‘Western’ organizations, with their distinctively ‘rational’ decision makers (92). Karagiannis concludes that Hizb ut-Tahrir’s popularity in Central Asia must be understood with reference to Central Asians’ ‘deeply held religious beliefs and values’ (96) which are ‘deep-rooted in the collective subconsciousness due to the region’s long Islamic tradition’ (93). Although I do not doubt that the long history of Islam in the region (and Central Asians’ loyalty to the religion of their ancestors) is an important factor here, acknowledging this is a far cry from claiming Central Asians who support the party are being driven by their inherent spiritualism to act against their best interests. This argument is disappointing, particularly in that the book is otherwise full of evidence that political, economic, and indeed pragmatic concerns are critical to an understanding of the party’s success.

To summarize, many portions of this work will serve as a useful reference for students and instructors, but caution should be taken. The book offers some useful correctives to available accounts of jihadist groups in Central Asia, but some of its underlying assumptions remain problematic.

Noor O’Neill Borbieva
Indiana University-Purdue University Fort Wayne


With the Arab Spring we witness a turn in scholarly perspectives on the Middle East and North Africa that shifts the focus towards the aesthetic dimension of political culture. Lina Khatib’s book *Image Politics in the Middle East: The Role of the Image in Political Struggle* is an important contribution to this change in perspective. Unlike many recent works on visual culture in that region, Khatib’s book does not isolate the visual dynamics of the Arab revolts, but situates them within a broader framework of image politics in the Middle East. Khatib presents visual analyses from a range of countries during the last decade and provides analytical tools for examining different modalities of power associated with the image. With her programmatic opening sentence ‘Politics in the Middle East is now seen.’ (p. 1), she highlights the importance of acknowledging the agentive potential of images in structuring and changing power relations. Khatib offers more than a ‘snapshot of the role and dynamics of the image in processes of political struggle in the region’ (3) with her deep and situated insight.