

**Muslim Rebels:
Kharijites and the Politics of
Extremism in Egypt**

JEFFREY T. KENNEY

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Oxford University Press, Inc., publishes works that further
Oxford University's objective of excellence
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Oxford New York
Auckland Cape Town Dar es Salaam Hong Kong Karachi
Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Nairobi
New Delhi Shanghai Taipei Toronto

With offices in
Argentina Austria Brazil Chile Czech Republic France Greece
Guatemala Hungary Italy Japan Poland Portugal Singapore
South Korea Switzerland Thailand Turkey Ukraine Vietnam

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Published by Oxford University Press, Inc.
198 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10016
www.oup.com

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Kenney, Jeffrey T. (Jeffrey Thomas), 1954–

Muslim rebels : Kharijites and the politics of extremism in Egypt / Jeffrey T. Kenney.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13 978-0-19-513169-7

ISBN 0-19-513169-X

1. Kharijites—History. 2. Islamic fundamentalism—Egypt. 3. Islam and
politics—Egypt—History—20th century. 4. Egypt—Politics and
government—20th century. I. Title.

BP195.K4K46 2006

297.8'3—dc22 2006003677

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in the United States of America
on acid-free paper

To Lauren . . . who changed everything.

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Acknowledgments

This book has had a long gestation period, and I have accumulated many professional and personal debts along the way. I would like to thank Amanda Porterfield for introducing me to my editor at Oxford University Press, Cynthia Read. Amanda's friendly encouragement got the process started, and Cynthia's interest and patient reminders ("Any news on the manuscript?") helped me bring it to a close. Two readers deserve special thanks. Jim Piscatori and Bill Shepard took the time to read and comment on the entire manuscript; their insightful remarks have improved the final product in ways too numerous to mention. The flaws that remain are entirely my own. For their assistance in passing along material, both medieval and modern, I would like to thank Juan Campo, Chase Robinson and Michael Cook. In Cairo, I benefited from the help of many people: Akram Kadr made the city a more friendly place; Fahmy Huweidy generously loaned me an illegal book; workers in the Xerox room at AUC provided unsolicited opinions; and the booksellers of Cairo patiently shared their knowledge.

Finally, I would especially like to thank family and friends whose support made this book possible. Susan Hahn read and commented on an early version of the manuscript; she did not see the book through to the end, but much of her is still in it. Terrie Kenney provided quiet inspiration from the sidelines. Lauren

Kenney made the world a nicer place. I wish Ruth and Frank were here to see it.

I am grateful for the research funding I received from two institutions: Indiana University–Purdue University, Indianapolis, and DePauw University.

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A Note on Transliteration

I have adopted a simplified version of the transliteration system employed by the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, one that indicates the Arabic ‘ayn (‘) and hamza (‘) but omits other diacritical marks. Instead of the phonetically accurate Khawarij, I have relied on the spelling most prevalent in academic writing: Kharijites. I have also, in keeping with trends in the writing of Middle East history (both classical and modern), adopted the neologism “Kharijism” to capture the phenomenon of the movement(s) as a whole.

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Introduction

This book is a study of the discourse surrounding Islamist violence in Egypt from the 1950s to the 1990s. Its analytic focus is the emergence and evolution of discursive references to the Kharijites, a seventh-century militant Muslim sect, as a way to denounce religiously justified violence and those who resort to it. My interest in this topic began while I was a graduate student in Cairo during the early 1980s, not long after Islamic Jihad had assassinated Egyptian President Anwar Sadat but significantly before al-Qa'ida carried out its now infamous September 11, 2001, attacks on New York City and Washington, D.C. Familiar with the historical role of the Kharijites, I was surprised to find the sect so prominently cited in both the popular press and books about religion and politics in modern Egypt. The Kharijites, it seems, despite their centuries-long absence from the historical stage, were very much alive in the minds of Egyptians. And as I was to discover, concern about the importance of historical symbols such as the Kharijites in the public discourse of Muslim societies was very much alive in the minds of scholars.

Any first-year student of Islam has heard or read about the Kharijites. An overview of their activities and ideas is an essential feature of introductory textbooks on Islam, and they are a recurring subject of discussion in more specialized works on the first several centuries of Islamic history. Historically, the importance of the Kharijites lies in the challenge they posed to Muslim ruling authorities throughout the Umayyad period and into the Abbasid and in

the political and theological debates to which the movement gave rise. Assured of their own religious purity, the Kharijites judged other Muslims—those outside the Kharijite fold—as unworthy of the name Muslim and set about creating, through violence, an ideal community of the saved. The Kharijites emerged out of the period of Islamic history known as the first civil war or *fitna* (656–661 C.E.), a time marked by the murders of the third and fourth caliphs, ‘Uthman and ‘Ali, the first killed by (Egyptian) Muslims disaffected with his socioeconomic reforms and the second by a Kharijite seeking revenge. It is out of this same political maelstrom that the two major expressions of Islam, Sunni and Shi’a, began to take shape. Based on the image of the sect fostered by the Islamic tradition, the name “Kharijite” summarily defines a Muslim as an overly pious zealot whose actions and ideas lie beyond the pale of normative Islam. Modern Egyptians, then, saw in the Kharijites a traditionally sanctioned anti-model of rebellion—one that provided a means of critiquing and, ideally, controlling outbursts of Islamist violence.

The capacity of the Kharijites to serve this purpose is a function of the mythic structure of the Islamic tradition and the interpretive play of this structure in different historical contexts. The mythic image of the Kharijites was constructed by medieval thinkers more concerned with establishing and preserving a system of authority than with accurately telling history. Hence, in early sources, the name “Kharijite” came to denote both the original group that protested against the caliph ‘Ali and *anyone* who rebelled against a leader or his appointed representatives. The myth of the Kharijites communicates a moral lesson on the limits of protest against authority: a good Muslim may not rebel against a legitimate ruler. In the Sunni tradition, however, authority is not just something to obey. According to another mythic strand, it must be earned, since a caliph or political leader is obliged to protect and uphold the law of God. And still another myth empowers Muslims to act against any wrongdoing they encounter in the world (with their hands, tongues, or hearts), including the wrongdoing of the caliph. Despite the potential tension between them, each of these myths is, by definition, true. But they are truths reflective of different times and circumstances that have become part of the tradition’s collective memory.

Their continued existence together poses a problem only for modern historians who tend to isolate one element from the narrative structure in the desire to create coherence out of the historical record, and for those who wish to remythologize.¹

The contestation between Islamists and successive Egyptian regimes over political power and authority brought all these myths, and others, to the fore.

But the political and cultural world of mid-twentieth-century Egypt forced them into new configurations. From its first appearance in Egypt, discourse about the Kharijites differed markedly from that found in classical sources. Whereas in the medieval period the label Kharijite could be applied to *anyone* who rebelled against the legitimate ruler, in modern Egypt it was reserved exclusively for Islamists. Medieval writers tended to gloss the motivation for rebellion behind the all-encompassing phenomena of Kharijism, while modern Egyptian commentators distinguished between religiously motivated militants (= Kharijites) and others engaged in political violence. The historical contrast here reflects medieval versus modern attitudes toward religion and politics. Institutionally, the classical Islamic world witnessed the emergence of separate spheres of authority, a class of religious-legal scholars (*'ulama'*) and the political office of the caliph (the Caliphate). Culturally, however, religion and politics continued to blend in Muslim thinking. In modern Egypt, the myth of the Kharijites was rationalized to suit the framework of the scientific nation-state, where the secular holds sway over religion, or at least where this issue is being worked out.² This is not to say that Egyptian intellectuals adopted a secular outlook identical to that of the West. They had, however, since the nineteenth century, wrestled with “how to be Muslim and modern,” and this included debate about the proper relationship between religion and politics. Islamist attempts to (re-) Islamize society and politics rekindled that debate, and militant outbursts made the Islamist agenda impossible to ignore.

Why is Islam's mythic history, including the Kharijites, relevant to the development of modern Egypt? Here a parallel case may help clarify the issues at work. In his study of the intellectual and cultural ferment leading up to the 1979 Iranian revolution, Roy Mottahedeh observed that “[a]ny consensus on the meaning of the Iranian past has been torn up by the deeply felt disagreement among Iranians over the meaning of the Iranian present.”³ His point was that the past had become the battleground on which modern Iranians fought out their differences, and because their differences were so profound, what had been points of historical agreement were now subjects of intense dispute. That the religious past could play such a formative role in thinking about current issues is not surprising. After all, students of history are well aware of the continuous reinvention of tradition, which maintains the relevancy and plausibility of a cultural worldview over time. However, as Iranians, Egyptians, and Muslims of other modern nations have resorted to the Islamic past to meet the challenges of modernity, serious questions have been raised about whether their thinking is truly modern. The concern, of course, is that religious thought is not compatible with building a progressive

civil society and instituting democratic rule, that religion and politics do not mix. Thus the Western developmental model, which equates modernization with secularization, casts a long shadow of suspicion on the Islamic idiom that has characterized Muslim political discourse.

The discourse under examination in this work, then, contributes to ongoing scholarly efforts to analyze the creative potential of the Islamic idiom. The lines of debate on this matter are clear. Those who look favorably upon the potential of reinvented tradition have argued that through it Muslims are empowered to negotiate an authentic path to progress. Instead of following the modernization-equals-secularization model of development dominant in the West, Muslims, are said to accommodate social change by interpreting modernity through the lens of tradition.⁴ Critics, by contrast, have maintained that notions of reinvented Islam obscure the universal processes of modernization and secularization that are buffeting Muslim societies behind a cloud of eternal essences. The result is that progress is impeded because Muslims, and some Western analysts, mistakenly see an unchanging Islam, rather than the underlying processes, as the driving force of activism and change.⁵ As I will argue in the following chapters, reinvented Kharijism in Egypt has, at different times, fit the assessments offered by both proponents and critics. But a word here about my own analytic assumptions is in order before continuing.

First, while the Islamic idiom is rooted in past social and historical experiences, it is the present context that drives the application and understanding of the idiom.⁶ This observation is true across time. Early believers were reacting to their environment, just as modern believers are. But the experiences of early believers, including their differences, became codified as normative, which accounts for the mythic tension in the collective memory of the tradition noted above. The general point about the ambivalence of religion, then, is actually a point about the dichotomous uses to which adherents put their tradition in all times and places.⁷ Second, given that believers and their understanding of tradition are historically grounded, essentialist thinking is never as narrowly essentialist as critics maintain. No matter how insistent a believer may be about a given God-ordained truth and its universal application, that truth has been selected and interpreted under particular historical circumstances. And the task of scholars is to unpack this idealized interpretive process. All this is consistent with the operation of reinvented tradition mentioned earlier, but it stills leaves open the challenge posed by those critical of essentialist discourse: Does it obscure the social, economic, and political forces that shape a historical context behind ambiguous, otherworldly language? My answer is that it certainly can, and it sometimes does, but the same must be said of any cultural discourse. Essentialist rhetoric such

as the kind that has developed surrounding the Kharijites may appear simplistic to academics who prefer reasoning grounded in social and historical facts, not myths, but it has profound meaning and consequences. Moreover, it is not restricted to Muslim societies or the developing world. In the West, secular discourse on democracy, liberty, and the free-market system is also subject to ahistorical, essentializing trends because developed nations are in just as much need of the cultural authenticity that essentialism confers as those nations trying to catch up. Essentialism is part of the “culture-talk,” to borrow Ernest Gellner’s term,⁸ that drives discourse in a society . . . any society. Specifically, it is a way of identifying or defining something across time, and definitions are basic to communication.

If my comments here suggest that I am blurring an already blurry subject behind some postmodern commitment to the relative merits of all meta-narratives, let me be clear. Communicating through a symbolic language such as the Islamic idiom is replete with problems, not least of which are the restrictions it places on those outside the cultural fold. But participants in a national public discourse need not become full-fledged historicists, acknowledging the modern basis of their cultural idiom and the context in which they are applying it, in order to communicate meaningfully. More important to successful communication are the social and political conditions that govern it, and the conditions in Egypt have not always been conducive to honest and open public debate. Known for its long-standing commitment to corporatism and (mild) authoritarianism, the Egyptian state has never made freedom of expression, political or otherwise, a high priority. During those periods when state-restrictions on public expression were eased, however, discourse on the Kharijites has tended to be richer and more dynamic. That the creative potential of reinvented tradition in Egypt was linked to intellectual and political openness should come as no surprise. The same could be said of the potential impact of culture-talk in any society. Of course, it does not follow that in order for such discourse to be meaningful it must occur in a democratic institutional structure. People living under restrictive or oppressive circumstances commonly find ways to express their anger at and opposition to those in positions of power, even if it is only a quiet form of subversion.⁹ Still, conditions do matter, and intrusive state-controls in Egypt have inhibited the free-flow of ideas and led to increasing popular dependence on the Islamic idiom. What this means is that the degree, and kind, of importance this idiom currently possesses for public communication is not simply a “natural” expression of Muslim society but rather a historical point in the trajectory of a nation.¹⁰

Numerous factors, starting in the nineteenth century and continuing to the present, have contributed to the rising importance of the Islamic idiom in

Egypt: opposition to imperialism and the related emphasis on cultural uniqueness by nationalist movements, government attempts to secure popular support by nationalizing religion, the challenge of Islamists, and the fluctuating role of al-Azhar in public life. Many of these themes will be taken up later in the book, but for now we need only indicate how the communicative form of the Islamic idiom—with its traditional authority and orthodox-based reasoning—was able to substitute for the unfulfilled promise of Egypt's modern political system. Pointing us in the right direction is Talal Asad's analysis of the deliberations of religious scholars as they work their way toward orthodoxy:

It is too often forgotten that the process of determining orthodoxy in conditions of change and contest includes attempts at achieving discursive coherence, at representing the present within an authoritative narrative that includes positive evaluations of past events and persons. Because such authority is a collaborative achievement between narrator and audience, the former cannot speak in total freedom: there are conceptual and institutional conditions that must be attended to if discourses are to be persuasive.¹¹

For Asad, the orthodoxy reached by a body of 'ulama' is a collaborative effort, something to be negotiated; and the authorities who express it are bound by recognized rules. Negotiating orthodoxy, of course, is not the same thing as achieving a democratic consensus; but in the absence of a rule-bound political system, it provides a protective cultural penumbra in which meaningful exchange and debate can take place. The Islamic idiom in Egypt creates this cultural space for communication, though the range of participants is far more diverse. It includes official religious scholars, state functionaries, politicians, Islamists, secularists, and intellectuals of various persuasions. Scholars have tried to type the range of opinions that have emerged in modern Muslim societies such as Egypt, but it has proven a difficult and elusive task for reasons that speak to the shifting ground of history and the identities that are being forged on this shifting ground. First, it is not only religious positions that are being categorized by a typology; political views are also part of the mix because what is commonly measured are people's attitudes toward modernity, development, and the kind of polity in which they wish to live. So categories such as traditional, neo-traditional, radical Islamism, modern, and secular reflect both religious and ideological positions.¹² Second, as noted above, Muslim societies are in a state of social and political flux brought about by modernity, and Islamic culture provides the symbolic ground on which the future is contested.¹³ This means that two identities, the religious and the political, are in a

state of motion and contestation. Moreover, whether Muslims *qua* Muslims can possess separate religious and political identities is part of the debate.

Thus the “orthodoxy” under negotiation in Egypt is not religious per se but more broadly political-cultural. Indeed, the Islamic idiom reflects this complex cultural reality, for it is as much a product of new, secular-based knowledge as it is of traditional religious knowledge; and it is found in settings not conventionally associated with Islamic authority. In the preface to his seminal study of the radical trend in the Muslim Middle East, Emmanuel Sivan wrote of his experiences in the bookstalls of Cairo, where he found modern Muslims searching for practical life guidance in classical commentaries. Struck by the “living reality” of the past for these readers, Sivan set out to understand “the transformation of medieval theology into modern Muslim politics.”¹⁴ Yet, while the bookstalls of Cairo provide one kind of insight into this transformation, another vantage point of discovery is that of popular magazine racks, where the dynamic between tradition and modernity reaches full disclosure. At these sites, readers will not find the multi-volume Qur’an commentary of the medieval scholar al-Tabari, but they can purchase a single-volume abridgement of his wisdom decocted for the busy masses. And this pocket-commentary mixes with very different genres: modern periodicals, romance novels, journalistic exposés, Islamist booklets, weight training manuals, political commentary, film guides, *fatwa* collections, horoscopes, and science journals. Foreign information is also available, as Egyptian daily newspapers and weekly magazines share space with *Le Monde*, *Die Zeit*, *The International Herald Tribune*, *The Economist*, *Time*, *Elle*, and *Vogue*. Traditional knowledge is part of this complex cultural array, but it is competing for space and the attention of readers. It is also blurring and fusing with knowledge bases with which it appears to be at odds. For those seeking life guidance at these magazine racks—microcosms of Egypt’s complex culture—tradition has been re-invented for modern, if not postmodern, consumption.

Among the various symbols that inform the Islamic idiom in Egypt, Kharijism raises some of the most sensitive questions about modern Muslim identity because it explicitly evokes the dichotomy of good Muslim versus bad Muslim. It also directly connects this religious identity with a political one. A Kharijite is not only a misguided believer but a dangerous citizen as well. Here we are at the most basic level of an essentialist Islamic current that equates an early example of Muslim rebellion with one presently threatening Egyptian society: a bad Muslim is a bad Muslim for all time. A symbolic name such as Kharijites holds special communicative power because it carries with it an authority to act: “An epithet assigns substance doubly, for in stating the character of the object it at the same time contains an implicit program of

action with regard to the object, thus serving as a motive.”¹⁵ The presence of Kharijites in the Muslim community, according to the Islamic historical record, authorizes Muslims to act to eliminate them, to remove this threat to the well-being of the community.

The chapters that follow will examine the motives of those who have leveled the accusation of Kharijism at Islamists in Egypt and those who participated in the wider cultural debate about this accusation. My intent is neither to defend the integrity of the Egyptian state against extremist predation nor to apologize for the radicals by historicizing and thus debunking the accuracy of the label Kharijite attached to them. Rather, it is to explore the power of discourse to shape historical events and understanding and the power of events to shape discourse. An underlying assumption of this project is that “[t]he political struggle to impose a definition on an action and to make it stick is frequently at least as important as the action per se.”¹⁶ The Egyptian struggle to define Islamist militants as Kharijites was part of the national effort to work through the Weberian axiom that the modern state “is a human community that (successfully) claims the *monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force* within a given territory.”¹⁷ The debates that ensued in Egypt over the Kharijites were not evidence of Egyptian indifference to Islamist violence or indecision about the need for a strong state. Quite the contrary: the vast majority of Egyptians were quick to reject the extremists and support the state. But at the same time, people were concerned about the kind of state that they were affirming in their rejection of Islamist radicals, and they recognized that political violence occurs in a context for which the state itself must take some measure of responsibility.

What an analysis of accusations of Kharijism clearly shows is that Egyptians grew increasingly sophisticated in their use of culture-talk to identify problems of state legitimacy and efficiency, especially in the areas of political participation and economic development. These problems are common throughout the Middle East, where integration into the modern world of nation-states and the global economy has proven more challenging and less satisfying than regional leaders and their populations initially anticipated it to be.¹⁸ Identifying problems related to modernization is certainly not the same as offering solutions—a point that materialist critics of culture-talk have rightly emphasized.¹⁹ However, substantive solutions have in fact been expressed within the culture-talk related to Islamist extremism, and these solutions reflect some of the same materialist understandings of modern Egyptian (and Middle Eastern) society that critics claim are key to development.

Egypt, of course, is not the only country to experience Islamist violence. Other Muslim nations have had to deal with the challenge of militant Islamist

movements. And now the problem has reached global proportions, with the emergence of a transnational group of jihadists who received their initial training in a CIA-backed proxy war against the Soviets in Afghanistan and then went on to attack American interests around the world, including symbolic centers of power within the United States itself.²⁰ Although the events of September 11, 2001, lie beyond the focus of this book, the response they generated in the United States has important parallels with our study of Egypt.

Soon after September 11, 2001, the United States government declared war on terrorism, sending its troops first to Afghanistan to bring the perpetrators of September 11 to justice and then to Iraq to wage a purported preemptive war against future terrorist acts. A war-like footing also emerged in the United States as the National Guard took control of security at many of the nation's airports and the President warned American citizens to be alert in their daily lives to further acts of terror. Indeed, the government eventually established a color-coded alert system that, like the daily pollution index and pollen count, advises people about the level of danger connected with public activity. In addition to these practical steps taken to confront Islamic extremism, Americans embarked on a search for knowledge about Muslims and Islam. Demand for books on Islam increased dramatically; even the Qur'an became a popular seller. Media coverage of Islam and Muslim societies also grew as Americans tried to understand the religious and political motives of the hijackers.

Thus the American response to September 11, much like the Egyptian reaction to its problem with extremism, has been a classical combination of power and knowledge. In theory, knowledge is supposed to inform the exercise of power. But the political pressures caused by such a dramatic historical event push a state to react militarily first, based on limited knowledge, and then the national culture follows up by filling in the intellectual gaps. As a result, the knowledge that is eventually produced has a tendency to legitimize the power that has already been demonstrated by the state. We are still too close to the events of September 11, too engaged in the war on terror, to make a final judgment about whether power will ultimately subvert American knowledge about Islamic extremism. Some interesting comparative patterns have emerged, however, patterns that confirm the normative role of culture and the cultural past in public discourse on extremism.

Like state functionaries in Egypt, Americans officials, with President George W. Bush in the lead, were quick to make a distinction between good Muslims and bad Muslims. This observation played well with a public that did not want the fight against terrorism turned into a religious war. As it turned