

BOOK REVIEWS

JEFFREY T. KENNEY, *Muslim Rebels: Kharijites and the Politics of Extremism in Egypt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006). Pp. 234. \$45.00 cloth.

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In *Muslim Rebels*, Jeffrey Kenney tracks usage of the label “Kharijite” to give his book on Islamic extremism in Egypt (1950s–90s) a focus that many similar works lack. By tracking how this term was used and its meaning renegotiated, he gives readers insight into state–Islamic politics and the socioeconomic challenges facing Egypt during this period. (This review will use Kenney’s terminology: the anglicized “Kharijites” instead of “Khawarij,” as well as “Kharijism.”)

Kenney sets his main topic—the manipulation and contestation of the symbolic term Kharijite—against the evolution of violent Islamism in 20th-century Egyptian history and discourse. He argues that, although the Egyptian government attempted to use Kharijism to discredit Islamic groups, the ensuing debate highlighted political oppression and led to criticism of the state. Kenney demonstrates how—in the Egyptian case—the battles of the present are fought through various interpretations of an often idealized past; however, the uses and interpretations of elements from the past are firmly situated in a contemporary and continually changing framework. He aims to add to attempts “to analyze the creative potential of the Islamic idiom” (p. 6) and also to “explore the power of discourse to shape historical events and understanding and the power of events to shape discourse” (p. 10).

At the outset, Kenney argues that non-Muslims should not “borrow the moral language of Islam” (p. 13) to argue that a given law or practice is for or against Islam, to classify Muslims as “good” or “bad,” or to give structure to analyses of Islamic violence. First, non-Muslims are not authentic participants in Islamic discourse. Second, given the Egyptian government’s failure to stop the growth of Islamism with the label Kharijite, ideological deployment of Islamic terms by those with less Islamic authority is likely to fail. He argues that non-Muslim scholars and governments should instead pay attention to “authentic” discourses in the Muslim world and how they are used by various groups to gain cultural or political power.

The main section of the book addresses five periods in history: the classical period (when usage of the term was solidified), the 1940s and 1950s (when the Muslim Brothers and Nasser’s Free Officers first clashed), the 1960s (when accusations of Kharijism first appeared in response to Sayyid Qutb), the 1970s (when Sadat’s state and Islamists contested the meaning of the term Kharijite), and the 1980s and 1990s (when Egyptian focus on the causes of Islamism turned Kharijism into a critique of the state’s failings).

His first chapter examines how the term “Kharijite” developed into an antimodel for violent rebellion. The original Kharijites left ‘Ali’s forces at the battle of Siffin (657) because he agreed to arbitration instead of letting God decide the outcome on the battlefield. Kenney traces the role played by various Kharijite groups in disputes over who should exercise political power and explains how these groups and their ideas were portrayed in mainstream Islamic

literature. Beginning in the Abbasid period (750–1250), Kharijite was used in a broader sense to apply to anyone who rebelled against “legitimate” authority. The symbolic term Kharijite has since been linked primarily to those who engage in violence instead of those who adhere to specifically Kharijite ideologies.

Chapter 2 gives an overview of Nasser’s attempts to subordinate religion to his form of state and outlines the emergence and ideology of the Muslim Brothers, who are placed in the context of early 20th-century Islamic modernists. Kharijite was first used in modern Egypt by Nasser’s government and its agents to combat the popular influence of the Muslim Brotherhood. Kenney argues that individuals accusing the brotherhood of Kharijism were endeavoring to distract the Egyptian public from their justifications for violence. Because these debates occurred as independent Egyptian political organizations and principles were forming, Kenney asserts that accusations of Kharijism were both part of the nation-building project and a sign that this process was not yet finished, especially regarding the relationship between politics and religion. Kenney argues that Nasser’s programs furthered his goal of international eminence instead of solving the socioeconomic problems of his people and that these programs did not provide sufficient ideological “moral glue” (p. 66). In contrast, the Muslim Brotherhood had a strong ideology and popular support and aimed to incorporate its Islamic values into Egypt’s state and society. Nasser attempted to keep both the Muslim Brotherhood and al-Azhar’s ‘ulama’ subservient to the state, yet he succeeded only with the latter.

Chapter 3 discusses how “Kharijite” was used by the Egyptian state to condemn the Muslim Brotherhood beginning in 1965, the year in which ideologue Sayyid Qutb and others were arrested for antigovernment plotting. Kenney divides his discussion of the gradually increasing use of Kharijism to combat Qutb’s *Ma‘alim fi al-Tariq* (Signposts along the Road) into three areas of discourse. First, a series of articles—including one by Shaykh al-Azhar Hasan Ma‘mum—in the popular weekly magazine *Akhir Sa‘a* condemned the entire Muslim Brotherhood for threatening social order and well-being without discussing why it was upset with the status quo. This issue of the magazine, somewhat confusingly, did not explicitly refer to Kharijism but only to terrorism (pp. 98, 102–103). Second, the response of “official Islam” came as a review of Qutb’s *Signposts in Minbar al-Islam*, the journal of the Supreme Council of Islamic Affairs. This review explicitly equates Qutb and the Muslim Brotherhood with Kharijism and brands them as adherents to an illegitimate, violent form of Islamic practice. Finally, Kenney discusses a book of essays published by the Supreme Council of Islamic Affairs entitled *Ra’y al-Din fi Ikhwan al-Shaytan* (The Opinion of Religion Concerning the Brothers of Satan). Kenney argues that the use of Kharijism by the shaykhs writing in this book is typical of the way religious authorities deploy Islamic principles to structure a complicated world.

Use of Kharijism changed in the 1970s under Sadat as Egyptians began to debate the underlying causes of Islamist discontent, as discussed in Chapter 4. Kharijism featured in struggles between moderate and radical sections of the Muslim Brotherhood, especially after the fallout from Qutb’s execution in 1966. Hasan al-Hudaybi, leader of the Muslim Brotherhood at this time, wrote a work entitled *Du‘ah . . . La Qudah* (Preachers . . . Not Judges), in which he uses the label Kharijite to attack radicals, conceding that the state was justified in its oppression of the group. However, he also highlights and criticizes the oppressive regime that led the radicals to engage in violence in the name of Islam (as well as supportive religious officials).

The book peaks with Kenney’s discussion of three subsequent radical Islamist organizations: the Jama‘at al-Fanniyya al-‘Askariyya (Technical Military Group), led by Salih Sirriya; the Jama‘at al-Muslimin, a.k.a. al-Takfir wa-l-Hijra (Excommunication and Emigration), the group led by Ahmed Shukri Mustafa that kidnapped and killed Muhammed Hussein al-Dhahabi; and the Jihad group that assassinated Sadat. Kenney analyzes ideological works by Sirriya and

Jihad writers Muhammad ‘Abd al-Salam Faraj and ‘Umar ‘Abd al-Rahman, as well as criticisms of violence from al-Dhahabi and Muslim Brotherhood writers Mustafa Hilmi and Salim al-Bahnasawi. The debate between moderate and radical strains of Islam spread to al-Azhar after courtroom testimony of Islamist Shaykh Salah Abu Isma‘il—who argued that because Sadat unapologetically blocked Islamic laws, he could be killed—sparked refutations from five al-Azhar shaykhs. Although intolerance of violent groups remained high, their actions, writings, and courtroom testimonies underscored the failings of Egypt’s leadership and its increased dependence on religious legitimacy.

Kenney’s fifth chapter examines the role of Kharijism in furthering political and social debates in the 1980s and 1990s. The label Kharijite still benefitted the state (justifying its oppressive measures), yet debates about its use highlighted the socioeconomic and political problems confronting the country. Prison memoirs written by Islamists and others stress the extreme oppression of the regime, press articles describe the anger and resentment of young Egyptians, and academics like Saad Eddin Ibrahim link economic discontent with extremism. This led many to see Islamist extremists not only as “victimizers” but also as “victims” of problems that society as a whole must work to solve (p. 158). Kenney also analyzes works by Muhammad Sa‘id al-‘Ashmawi, who uses Kharijism to argue that contemporary political Islam is un-Islamic, and Yusuf al-Qaradawi, who argues against violence yet once again highlights the social problems, especially oppression of Islam, that lead youth to join extremist groups. Kenney concludes that the Luxor attacks demonstrated that violence is a useless and unproductive path for Islamists; they will win the population over as long as they can continue to point out social and political problems under the current government.

Kenney’s book is an interesting read that I recommend to both scholars and students. The book provides a thorough overview of the development of violent Islamic groups in 20th-century Egypt, linking these groups to both the Islamic modernists of the early 20th century and the political leaders that they opposed in subsequent years. His well-written and insightful summary of these movements may not contain much new information, but it introduces these events on a level that is ideal for undergraduate Islamic-thought courses. His discussions of Muslim politics, types of Islamic authority (pp. 96–97), and the use of symbolic language in discourse contribute further to this book’s usefulness as a teaching text.

In Chapter 3, Kenney intriguingly introduces his discussion of the first references to Kharijism with a very brief (half of page 97) discussion of the various forms and venues in which official and semi-official responses to Islamic violence appeared. A detailed discussion of these different arenas of discourse would have added to the book’s analysis and consolidated subsequent isolated references in readers’ minds. Furthermore, explicitly dividing Chapter 3 into arenas of discourse that are not fully developed draws attention to the small number of examples of each type (one work in each category) in the initial period of analysis, especially when compared to the larger number of works discussed in Chapters 4 and 5. Elsewhere in Chapter 3 (pp. 98–99 and thereafter), he also briefly discusses types of rhetorical techniques used alongside or instead of references to Kharijism. It would have been interesting to see these developed more systematically as well.

These criticisms are minor, however, and do not diminish the book’s appeal. *Muslim Rebels* demonstrates how rhetorical use of Kharijism is linked to the changing context of violent Islamism in 20th-century Egypt. Kenney’s summary of the history of Egyptian extremist groups is comprehensive and nuanced. His bibliography and extensive endnotes include references to many key works on the groups under discussion. His analysis of the use of Kharijism is innovative, persuasive, and well supported, even if I would have preferred greater depth in the initial analysis. This is a fascinating book, and I wholeheartedly recommend it to students and academics alike.