

Muslim Rebels

*Kharijites and the Politics
of Extremism in Egypt*

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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 pre-emptive 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

out, however, good Muslims were not only expected to reject the kind of terrorist violence displayed on September 11; they were also supposed to agree with the administration's broader war on terrorism. Politically, good Muslims, at home and abroad, were *with* the United States, not against it; culturally, they believed in freedom, tolerance, and open markets.²¹ Good Muslims were also, according to *The 9/11 Commission Report*, supposed to "distinguish politics from religion."²² Not surprising, the moral judgment of "good" voiced by administration officials, and many public commentators, reflected American ideals and concerns. And when American and other Western observers tried to account for the radical impulse that made a bad Muslim bad, they also often resorted to explanations that suited the Western historical imagination. President Bush, along with many others, commonly attributed the al-Qa'ida attack to a hatred of America's freedom and democracy.²³

A more sophisticated but no less Western-centric explanation was offered by Paul Berman in his much reviewed book *Terror and Liberalism*. For Berman, the Muslim extremists who carried out the attacks on September 11 were influenced by two distinct cultural sources: "the Arab past and the Western present."²⁴ Although both played a part in shaping Osama bin Laden and al-Qa'ida members, along with their radical precursors such as Sayyid Qutb, it was the West that interested Berman the most:

I don't mean to deny or ignore for one minute the authentically Muslim and local roots of bin Laden's enterprise and of the many other Arab and Islamic terrorist organizations of recent times. Still, an amazing number of the Arab and Muslim terrorists do turn out to have second and even primary identities as Westerners. It's good to glance eastward, and at the history of the Arab and Muslim world from hundreds of years ago. But in trying to make sense of these people's very strange behavior, we ought to glance westward, too—not just at Western politics and policies, but at literature and philosophy, at the deepest of Western ideas, not just now but in the past, and in the long-ago past. In the West, we do have our own customs and traditions, some of which are perfectly horrible.²⁵

Viewed one way, this appears to be a simple recognition of the West's own violent past. But here the Western past serves as a lesson about the threat of current Muslim extremism. What could one possibly learn about Muslim extremists by understanding a custom or tradition of the West? The extremists, according to Berman, both envied and feared the West. They had experienced it firsthand, living and studying there. Moreover, they themselves learned from the West, borrowing one of its political ideas to use to their own

advantage—totalitarianism. The totalitarianism of which Berman writes is the same totalitarianism that gave rise to fascism and anti-Semitism in Europe and that led to a long and bitterly fought world war. It also contributed to anarchist trends in European history, including those that shaped post-World War Two political sympathies among the left.

By connecting Islamist extremism with totalitarianism, Berman tries to show that the fanatical ideas expressed by the September 11 terrorists and their willingness to sacrifice themselves for the glory of the cause are not strange phenomena after all. Indeed, this radical movement is all too familiar: “This is not exotic. This is the totalitarian cult of death. *This* is the terrible thing that got underway more than eighty years ago.”²⁶ Berman’s interpretation of Muslim extremists as Muslim totalitarians may or may not be good history, but it is certainly an effective mythic narrative for his audience. He reawakens a Western tradition that resonates with Western sensibilities and that contains a plan of action: Americans know what must be done in the face of totalitarian aggression; they met this challenge before on the battlefields of Europe, and they learned the hard way the consequences of not addressing the problem early in its development. Berman, then, essentializes Muslim extremists for a Western-American audience: he cast bad Muslims into a cultural mold that made sense to Americans, just as the Kharijites made sense to Egyptians. His leap of cultural interpretation, however, begs several questions. Is it possible to engage, meaningfully, in the culture-talk of a culture different from one’s own? And if so, what are the conditions and limitations of such cultural interchange?

These are not simply theoretical questions, since cross-cultural normative statements about Islam have grown commonplace in the West. Islamist extremism is just one among many issues, such as the fight against communism, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the place of women in Muslim societies, that has over the years inspired Westerners to borrow the moral language of Islam in order to influence either Muslim or non-Muslim opinion or both. And this trend in cross-cultural moral discourse will no doubt increase as Muslim populations in the West grow and as the international struggle against Islamist extremism intensifies. In fact, globalization has already led to the merging and blurring of cultural discourses. The recent case of Muslim girls wearing head scarves in French schools is a case in point. Despite protest from Muslim and non-Muslim citizens, the French government passed a law, which was to take effect at the start of the 2004–2005 school year, banning the wearing of religious symbols, including Muslim head scarves, in public schools. Before the first day of classes, two French journalists were taken hostage in Iraq, and one of the demands for their

release was that the law be rescinded. Secular state officials responded to this situation by “focusing on the criminality of hostage-taking under Islam and explaining why the law should not be seen as anti-Islam.” Representatives of France’s Muslim population—a population that was largely viewed as unassimilated into French society—came to the support of the government, claiming that the law was a domestic affair.²⁷

This international incident resulted in a secular government deploying the moral language of the Islamic tradition and a minority Muslim community asserting its commitment to the democratic process. But there is a distinction to be made here. Although French Muslims may speak as both citizens and Muslims, the French government has no such dual capacity. Participation in the discourse of a tradition, whether a religious or political one, requires authenticity, a quality that insiders automatically possess to some degree and outsiders typically do not. This point is important to our understanding of the discourse at work in Egypt, for some non-Muslim scholars have fallen into patterns of anti-extremist rhetoric involving the Kharijites. In textbooks and academic articles, written after the emergence of Islamist extremism in the 1950s, scholars made comparative references that link Islamists with the Kharijites.²⁸ Some presented Kharijism as evidence of the deep roots of radicalism in Islamic history, and as a zealot-like tendency to which modern Muslims sometimes return; others viewed it as a behavioral option that Muslims either adopt or inadvertently fall into. Both understandings suggest that Kharijism is, in some sense, an explanation for Islamist extremism. A few writers even charged specific groups with being Kharijites. Interesting enough, the Kharijites were also introduced into post-September 11 discussions about Islamic extremism in the United States—not in a sustained way, but a few commentators drew connections between the perpetrators and the medieval Kharijites.²⁹

Such comparative references participate, intentionally or not, in the insider ethical-political discourse, the Muslim culture-talk, surrounding Islamist extremism; and they do so, typically, for what might appear to be legitimate, sympathetic reasons: to identify and isolate a minority group of bad Muslims that are distinct from the Muslim majority. Those writing from outside the tradition, however, lack the authenticity that is vital to an active engagement with the discourse of reinvented Islam. Simply by virtue of their insider status, Muslims are empowered to interpret and shape their tradition. They also, in their everyday lives, interact with the tradition as a living reality that must be understood and applied in particular social, economic, and political circumstances. Thus a Muslim may accept the essentialist definition of a Kharijite, but this definition becomes a point of departure, not the end point,

for further participation in the ongoing discourse. Egyptian Muslims, then, unlike sympathetic outsiders, can take an essentialist symbol such as the Kharijites—a symbol that supposedly anathematized religious rebellion and upheld the status quo—and transform it into a tool to critique the political establishment.

Outsiders have also, with the best of intentions, seen a potential within the Islamic tradition that the Muslim imagination has not seen. One scholar, for example, has written of the Kharijites as a possible developmental model:

Concepts of democracy very much like those in modern political systems can be found in the earliest period in Islamic history in the ideas of the Kharijite sect, which broke off from mainstream Islam in the seventh century over the latter's refusal to agree to the Kharijite tenet that the successors to the Prophet Muhammad had to be elected by the community.³⁰

While the Kharijite view of election to the Caliphate was more open than what became standard Sunni policy, the Kharijite sect is not remembered in Islamic sources as a proto-democratic movement that battled for a more “progressive politics” in seventh-century Arabia. More important, the image of the Kharijites was not reinvented in modern Egypt for its progressive potential. In fact, the Kharijites as a traditional anti-model of militant Islam have been cast as impediments to democracy in Egypt and the Middle East. Only a handful of leftist historians—dilettantes whose cultural inspiration was more revolutionary Marxism than Islam—viewed the Kharijites as a positive model of change.³¹

If we wish to understand the causes and consequences of Islamic extremism, we must listen carefully to authentic Muslim discourses, discourses that reflect a native understanding of the political and cultural struggles at play. Scholars, journalists, and policy analysts have already made important contributions to our knowledge of the historical and ideological roots of Islamist extremism, especially as it relates to September 11. And Egypt has figured prominently in these studies.³² Egyptian Islamists, starting with the Society of Muslim Brothers, have long been models of activism throughout the Islamic world; and the ideas espoused by leaders of this organization, particularly Hasan al-Banna and Sayyid Qutb, have shaped both moderate and militant thought. One such militant was the blind Egyptian cleric, ‘Umar ‘Abd al-Rahman, who provided the religious ruling (*fatwa*) that inspired Sadat’s assassins, and whom the Federal Court in New York convicted in 1995 for conspiring in the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center and a later unsuccessful plot to destroy various Manhattan landmarks. Two of al-Rahman’s

sons went on to join the al-Qa'ida operation in Afghanistan. Egyptian Islamists have also been influential in the Saudi education system, where Osama bin Laden received his initial schooling. Bin Laden learned a great deal from the Islamist tradition in Egypt, particularly from the work of Sayyid Qutb. Bin Laden's cause also benefited from Egyptian volunteers, who traveled to Afghanistan to wage *jihād* against Soviet aggression. Some of these volunteers stayed on, following the Soviet defeat, to join al-Qa'ida; a select few went on to participate in terrorist missions against the United States. A former Egyptian army officer, Ali Muhammad, led the Nairobi portion of the African embassy bombings in 1998. Bin Laden's second in command in Afghanistan, and his most trusted advisor, was Ayman al-Zawahiri, an Egyptian medical doctor and former leader of Egyptian Islamic Jihad.

Egypt, then, has contributed to a shocking and dangerous pattern of Islamist extremism, both at home and abroad. But this pattern of extremism has been matched by determined efforts to oppose Islamist violence that is equally deserving of our attention. As a nation, Egypt has lived with extremism since the 1950s. It knows the consequences of terrorism, having suffered serious slumps in its economy and threats to the nation's political liberties—issues the United States has also had to face. Egypt has also waged its own dual-front battle against Muslim radicals, deploying both the martial might of the state and the moral authority of its culture to counter the threat. And in this half-century fight, Egyptians have learned something about the nature of Islamic extremism. Indeed, after the September 11 attacks, the Egyptian Prime Minister, Atef Ebeid, offered to share his country's knowledge of terrorism:

The U.S. and U.K., including human-rights groups, have, in the past, been calling on us to give these terrorists their 'human rights.' You can give them all the human rights they deserve until they kill you. After these horrible crimes committed in New York and Virginia, maybe Western countries should begin to think of Egypt's own fight against terror as their new model.³³

That terrorism must be met with a strong hand and a willingness to overlook breaches of human rights is certainly one "lesson" to learn from Egypt's historical experience with Islamist violence. But there are also other lessons—about the desire for stability and trust, about the moral limits of authoritarian rule, about anxiety-ridden modernity, about the search for modern identity, and about the ambivalence of culture—all of which are reflected in the discourse surrounding Islamist violence that developed over the years. Attention

to this discourse may not prevent further acts of Islamist extremism. It will, however, humanize the Muslim effort to deal with this problem and lay a firmer groundwork for future cross-cultural understanding.

Chapter 1 explores the historical, literary process by which the early Kharijites were transformed into a mythic symbol of rebellion. Its purpose is to show the constructed nature of the Kharijites in the classical Islamic tradition. Although it is possible to outline the operation of modern uses of the Kharijite image in Egypt without such background, the power of reinvented tradition can only be fully appreciated if one has an understanding of the narrative continuum of which it is a part. In chapters 2 and 3, I map out the modern context in which Egyptians began to introduce the Kharijites into their political discourse. During the 1950s and 1960s, Egypt seemed poised to realize the Arab socialist ideal of development promised by Gamal Addul Nasser's revolutionary movement. The most vocal and organized opposition to this ideal was the Society of Muslim Brothers, which offered a developmental model rooted in Islamic rather than Western culture. For Nasser and the Egyptians who placed their hopes in him, the Society's Islamist agenda represented an impediment to political, economic, and social progress; and the political violence to which members of the Society sometimes resorted posed an intolerable threat to the stability and success of the nation. Recourse to the Kharijite image was part of the intellectual response, largely state-driven, to challenge the extremists. Traditional and religious in its character, this image served an ostensibly modern and secular purpose: the legitimacy of Nasser's state.

Chapter 4 covers the political discourse about Islamist extremism during the Sadat years. Sadat established his reputation as president by steering a course away from the policies of his predecessor. His distinctive legacy was his economic and political opening to the West, which was preceded by an opening of Egyptian society. The Islamist trend, which Nasser viewed as a threat and systematically oppressed, was embraced by Sadat in a symbolic marriage of convenience. The honeymoon period, however, was short lived, for Sadat was no more prepared to institute Islamist social and political demands than Nasser had been. Discourse on extremism during this period bears the distinct markings of the political negotiations underway between Islamists and the state; and the Kharijites were a tool for the claims of both the authorities and Islamists. The final chapter treats the political discourse on extremism in the 1980s and 1990s, a time when Egyptians began to explore the causes of extremism in more critical and nuanced ways. Indeed, Egyptians seemed to develop a self-conscious understanding that Islamist

violence was a complex problem for which Egyptian society in general must take responsibility, including the state. As a result, Kharijism was transformed from a traditional anti-model of rebellion into a symptom of much that had gone wrong with the difficult historical transition to modernity. Taken together, these chapters highlight the dynamic and integral role of Islam in Egypt's political culture.

I

Origins and Legacy of the Kharijites

An opinion piece in the semi-official Egyptian daily *al-Ahram*, on 15 February 1993, argued that those who compare violent Islamic groups with the Kharijites “leap over history and disregard its objective circumstances.”¹ The events that gave rise to the Kharijites, the article claimed, were particular to that historical period and have not been repeated since, and it therefore follows that Kharijite ideas could not have reemerged among modern extremists. This was not the typical view of the Kharijites that most readers expected to find in the pages of *al-Ahram*, which probably explains the title of the commentary, “Origins of Extremist Thought: A Contrasting View.” Since the 1960s, *al-Ahram*, along with other Egyptian newspapers and periodicals, had published countless opinion columns and news articles that mentioned or discussed the Kharijites in connection with radical Islamist activities. As a result, Egyptians had no doubt come to assume that the first sectarian movement in Islamic history was relevant, if not essential, to understanding the spasmodic religious violence that befell their country.

Thus, when the opinion expressed in the article advised writers and preachers to avoid evoking the Kharijites to confront radicalized Muslim youth, it was working against the grain of popular religious culture in Egypt. It was also working against the grain of both the religious authorities who informed popular opinion and the secular political order that cynically turned to Islamic ideas and symbols when it was convenient and salutary. Even many Egyptian

Islamists who defended militant tactics, and who themselves were sometimes tainted by the Kharijite label, regarded the Kharijites as a persistent force in Islamic history and a potential threat to modern Muslim society.

Behind this widespread perception of Kharijite influence stands the authority of the Islamic tradition. No mere invention of modern establishment functionaries, the symbol of the Kharijites is firmly rooted in the Islamic past. Its meaning for Muslims, however, extends beyond the time of its original referent, into both the pre- and post-history of the movement. In short, it is transhistorical. This is a function of the nature of tradition and the complex of symbols, codes, and styles that carry it along through time. One of the distinctive features of a tradition is that the past is never really in the past. Believers always encounter their tradition in an eternal present, but they do so by interacting with what has been passed on from previous generations—accepting, adapting, or rejecting. It is this ongoing process that defines tradition and that engenders in its members a sense of what Edward Shils calls “the presentness of the past.”² Moreover, those who participate in a tradition never experience the past as an undifferentiated whole. Their sense of the presentness of the past is always of a particular past, one with a distinctive cast of characters, ideology, and ways of dealing with sociocultural constants, such as legitimacy, authority, and rebellion. It is through these particulars that a tradition creates continuity between past, present, and future, thereby maintaining identity through periods of change.

The Kharijites are one such particular in the Islamic tradition. They represent, or were fashioned to represent, an attitude toward authority and violence that the ascendant Sunni orthodox wanted to preserve as a negative paradigm. Islam, like other religious traditions, provides its adherents with moral and ideological guidance; and it does so, like other religious traditions, through positive and negative models that evolved out of its mythic time of origin. Muhammad, for example, is the paradigm of human virtue for Muslims. And his career as Prophet and communal leader, including the reigns of his immediate successors, the four rightly guided caliphs, marks the limits of Islam’s idealized past—a past that has become a battlefield for modern Muslims with diverse educational backgrounds and differing attitudes toward a politicized Islam. The Kharijites emerged during this same mythic time frame, and their influence in the political and theological life of the nascent cult has ensured their place in both critical and religious accounts of early Islamic history.

To understand the impact of the Kharijites on the discourse of a politicized Islam in modern-day Egypt, we first need to explore the medieval origins of the movement and its traditional image. The intent of this historical detour

is not to fix the “true” nature of the Kharijites and then proceed to compare and contrast it with modern radicals. This is the work of modern Muslim thinkers who are the object of our study in later chapters. Rather, the purpose here is to establish why and how modern Muslim thinkers are able to evoke and use the image of the Kharijites. In part, the answer lies in our earlier discussion of tradition: individuals find themselves recipients of a theology/ideology that was ordered in, and is sanctioned by, the past. However, the “givenness” with which a tradition is received by later generations masks the fact that it did not spring from a founder’s mouth fully formed. It required interpretation and codification. Put differently, the particulars of a tradition, such as those of the Kharijites in Islam, were made particular by a historical and historicizing process that is the very basis of the tradition. It is to this process in medieval Islam that we now turn.

Events and Meaning of Siffin

The traditional story line on the Kharijites begins with the battle of Siffin in 657, one of the culminating events of the first civil war that originated with the murder of the third caliph ‘Uthman (656). Accused of nepotism and unfair fiscal policies, ‘Uthman was besieged in his house in Mecca by disaffected Kufans and Egyptians who, after failing to convince him of his errors, broke down his door and slaughtered him. Following his death, ‘Ali was elected caliph, but Mu‘awiya, the governor of Syria and cousin of ‘Uthman, refused to give ‘Ali his allegiance until his relative’s murderers were brought to justice. ‘Ali could not accommodate this demand, as Mu‘awiya seems to have known, because the support for his Caliphate, in part, came from those who had opposed and killed ‘Uthman. Making no claims on the Caliphate himself, Mu‘awiya was content initially to play the role of spoiler, confident of both the public reaction to his demand for justice and revenge, and the strength of the forces that he commanded as governor of a frontline province. The dispute between the two sides simmered for some time, coming to a head only after ‘Ali put down another faction who opposed his rule—a Meccan force led by Talha, Zubayr, and ‘A’isha, which was defeated at the battle of the camel. When the battle was joined at Siffin, neither side put on an impressive display of military prowess. In fact, it was the inconclusive results of the confrontation, both on and off the battlefield, that set the stage for the Kharijite rebellion.

After months of skirmishing and negotiating, ‘Ali’s forces, composed primarily of Kufan and Meccan fighters, gained the advantage. Concerned

that they might be defeated, the Syrians reputedly thought of a ruse that would stem the offensive: they raised Qur'ans on their lances, thereby calling for peace, which seems to have been the major concern of both sides from the start. The fighting ceased, and it was agreed that an arbiter appointed from each side would meet to work things out, although precisely what kind of agreement these arbiters were empowered to reach seems to have remained vague. The essential stipulation was that the Qur'an would serve as final judge, hence the symbolic significance of Qur'ans on lances. In the course of the arbitration process, a document was drawn up that slighted 'Ali by not recognizing him as commander of the faithful (*amir al-mu'minin*). It also contained a reference to an additional standard of judgment, the *sunna* (tradition) of the Prophet. When the contents of the document were made known, a group of 'Ali's forces who had previously agreed to arbitration demanded that 'Ali renounce his decision to arbitrate and resume fighting the Syrians. When 'Ali did not comply, they turned against him and withdrew from his camp. Based on their rejection of the criteria for mediation established in the document, they took as their watchword "There is no judgment but God's" (*la hukm illa li-llah*). The initial band of protesters retreated to a site called Harura', where they were later joined by other defectors. The men among this force, which had separated itself from 'Ali's troops, were variously referred to as Muhakkima because of their slogan or Haruriyya because of their first camp. The more generic name by which they were to be known was Kharijites, literally "those who went out" or more figuratively "those who rebelled."

From Harura', the band of protesters proceeded to a site along the Tigris called Nahrawan, where their numbers supposedly increased as more fighters became disaffected with the outcome of the arbitration. Having rejected the authority of both 'Ali and Mu'awiya, the Kharijites began to commit a series of bloody attacks against fellow Muslims who refused to demonstrate agreement with their views. Although initially more concerned with Mu'awiya and his troops, 'Ali was eventually forced to move against the Kharijites at Nahrawan in 658. The rebel forces suffered a severe defeat, but they were not stamped out. Their remnants took to the desert from where they launched guerrilla-like raids. 'Ali himself was killed at the hands of a Kharijite in 661. His successor, Mu'awiya, the first of the Umayyad caliphs, suppressed numerous Kharijite uprisings during his reign (661–680), but he, too, could not put an end to the movement. Under various leaders, and with the support of different disenfranchised groups, rebellions continued throughout the Umayyad period (661–750) and into the Abbasid period. Shortly after their formation at the battle of Siffin, the Kharijites began to fracture into subgroups that differed

on matters of moral and theological principle and methods of protest. The most violent of these groups, the Azariqa, named after its leader Nafi' b. Azraq, regarded those who did not take up arms in its cause as unbelievers. These unbelievers, so defined because of their opposition to the Azariqa, were subject to death, as were their wives and children, and their property was subject to forfeiture. In addition to the Azariqa, Muslim theologians cite the names of some twenty different subgroups among the Kharijites. By the ninth century, Kharijite bands had been all but eliminated from the central Islamic lands. Only scattered communities of Ibadiyya, so-called moderate Kharijites, survived.³

This is the traditional line on Kharijite origins or, at least, one version of it. Muslim sources transmit different accounts, with slight variations in the order of events at Siffin and Harura', though the outcome remains much unchanged. Although Western scholars have at their disposal a number of sources that relate material about Siffin, they have been frustrated with the content. There is, for example, a wealth of information about the size and composition of the forces that faced off on the battlefield and about the fighting itself. But little is said about the identity and motivation of those who became known as Kharijites. Why, for instance, did this group of people suddenly change their minds about arbitration? What is the meaning of the slogan that they shouted out when they rebelled? Were they identifiable by tribe, clan, or some other common alliance before Siffin? What kind of social, political, or economic considerations factored into their decision to rebel? In other words, the kinds of questions that a modern historian would raise about any group of rebels are, for the most part, left unanswered in the traditional sources. Not surprisingly, the fact that the sources are rather mute on these questions has not stopped scholars from reading answers into what information is available.

The history of Western criticism on the early Kharijites shares a common methodological division with modern research on Islamist groups. Scholars often split on whether to portray the motivation for rebellion as political or religious. This reflects, in part, a cultural bias of Western scholarship, which tends to view society, all societies, in categories of church and state, sacred and secular; it is also a function of the separation between religion and state that emerged in the early Islamic polity and that has come to be reflected in the ideological distinction between the ideal and the real Muslim society.⁴ The first major treatise on the Kharijites appeared in the form of a German doctoral dissertation, submitted in 1884 by R. E. Brunnow.⁵ His analysis of Kharijite identity wavers back and forth between the spiritual and political aspects of the movement. The Kharijite reaction to events at Siffin, Brunnow claims,

demonstrated a religious response to a perceived injustice. Thus what distinguished those who “went out” from those who remained was “a high degree of religious zeal.”⁶ But, despite this emphasis on religion, Brunnow classifies the Kharijites as a political group. For him, their interest in the question of succession meant that they, along with the Umayyads and Shi’a, “were essentially political in nature and totally different from later theological sects.”⁷

In a review of Brunnow’s work, Julius Wellhausen, the famous Old Testament scholar and Arabist, takes the author to task for portraying the Kharijites as a political party.⁸ His own account of the Kharijites, published some twenty years later, argues for the spiritual character of those who became Kharijites.⁹ He does this by focusing on the *qurra’* or Qur’an readers who comprised a large portion of the early seceders. These *qurra’*, Wellhausen claims, were ultra-pietists who had no interest in politics per se. Their commitment to God was stronger than their loyalty to tribe or nation. So, according to Wellhausen, when the community strayed into sin, when during arbitration Muslims supplanted God’s judgment for their own, the Qur’an readers turned against the community, thereby becoming Kharijites. The Qur’an readers also figured prominently in several other Western interpretations of the Kharijites, but not because of their religious zeal.

Contrary to most historians, M. A. Shaban traces the word *qurra’* to a different root, translating it as “villagers” instead of Qur’an readers.¹⁰ He maintains that these villagers were parvenu tribesmen who had risen during the reign of ‘Umar, the second caliph, only to see their socioeconomic status threatened by ‘Uthman’s new policies. They had viewed ‘Ali as someone favorable to their interests, someone similar to ‘Umar. But their hopes were shattered by ‘Ali’s decision to arbitrate, especially after he put himself on equal footing with Mu’awiya, a first cousin of their original nemesis, ‘Uthman. The Kharijites rebelled, then, because they believed their position in society had been jeopardized, not because they were pious zealots. A similar socioeconomic analysis underscores Martin Hinds’s portrayal of the Kharijites. For Hinds, the *qurra’* were in fact Qur’an readers, but their protest stemmed from much the same set of circumstances outlined by Shaban.¹¹ Where he differs from Shaban is in his interpretation of the slogan “There is no judgment but God’s.” According to Hinds, this phrase expressed a religious protest, but in form only. The intent behind it was the socioeconomic status of the Qur’an readers. Thus Hinds attributes the seeming religious complaint of the Qur’an readers to a polemical maneuver, one that many Western scholars regard as commonplace among both medieval and modern Muslim thinkers: the tendency to cloak social, economic, and political issues in religious garb.

It has been difficult to reach a scholarly consensus about the motives of the Kharijites at Siffin because the people and events of early Islam in general lie hidden beneath layers of finely sifted tradition. The battle of Siffin took place in mid-seventh century (657). The sources that inform us of this date, however, are part of a corpus of historical works whose first tentative steps date to the mid-ninth century. To be sure, evidence of a written tradition predates this period, but it is scattered at best. Oral accounts form the raw material from which early history was written, but little is known of the transmission process and changes almost certainly occurred. The lateness of the compilation of our historical sources means that many social, political, and religious issues were encountered, and in some cases settled, by the time they were written about. The result is a back-reading of more refined theological/ideological views into the narrative stream of early Islamic history. Thus the early historical record probably reveals more about the attitudes and concerns of those living in the late eighth- and ninth-century Islamic polity than those living in the seventh-century polity.¹²

What we know about the early Kharijites, then, is what later medieval historians and traditionists (i.e., those who collected and passed on stories about Muhammad and his companions) decided was important; and their decisions about what to maintain and what to filter out of the accounts that reached them no doubt reflects the biases of an emergent Sunni orthodoxy. This goes a long way toward explaining the opacity of the sources: historical origins have been hidden behind polemical image. For this reason, the harshest critics write off the first hundred and fifty years of Islamic history found in Muslim sources as tedious and unreliable, an Islamic Heilsgeschichte driven by theological point-making rather than by historical accuracy.¹³ Whether the historiographic situation is as bleak as this need not detain us here; scholars will be debating the matter for a long time to come. Instead, we must examine the polemic that the tradition has to offer, for this is what informs modern conceptions of the Kharijites.

The remainder of this chapter looks at the signs of this polemic in Muslim theological and historical sources. No attempt will be made to draw conclusions about the origins and fate of the historical Kharijites. The focus here is on the way the Kharijites have been presented in the tradition, the way that their ideas and practices have been framed by and for the dominant Sunni vision of Islam. At the outset, it is important to recognize that the blending of religion and rule in early Islam created a logical association in the Muslim intellectual tradition: "Orthodoxy meant the acceptance of the existing order, heresy or apostasy, its criticism or rejection."¹⁴ Images of the Kharijites in the classical tradition often reflect this axiom of early Sunni

ideology and lay the groundwork for the revival of Kharijism in the religious discourse of modern Egypt.

Proto-Origins of Rebellion

According to the Islamic tradition, knowledge about the Kharijites, about the dangers of Muslim extremists, predated the historical rise of the movement at Siffin. No less a figure than the Prophet Muhammad is said to have foretold of the civil discord that the rebels would sow. Preserved in the sunna of the Prophet—the practice and extra-qur’anic sayings of Muhammad collected into written form beginning in the latter half of the ninth century—are a number of reports or *hadiths* in which Muhammad not only seems to predict the emergence of the Kharijites but also calls on Muslims to eliminate them. The literary context of these hadith reports clearly indicates that Muhammad himself never mentioned the Kharijites by name. That was left to his companions who testify to the Kharijite-content of his comments. Despite the obvious gloss placed on Muhammad’s statements, these hadith were and are commonly understood to refer to those who revolted against the caliph ‘Ali at Siffin some thirty years after the death of Muhammad. In part, the popular acceptance of this material reflects the authority of Muhammad, the man in the tradition. But it is equally true that such anti-Kharijite hadith no doubt had strong appeal among later Sunnis who had emerged as the “orthodox” sect by overcoming “heterodox” opponents: Shi’ites and Kharijites.

A frequently cited hadith is one traced back to Sahl b. Hunaif. When asked if he ever heard Muhammad say anything about the Kharijites, Sahl replied:

I heard [Muhammad] saying while pointing his hand towards Iraq: “There will emerge from [Iraq] a people who will recite the Qur’an but it will not go beyond their throats, and they will stray from Islam as an arrow strays from the animal [at which it is shot].”¹⁵

The analogy of an arrow straying from an animal (or gaming animal) appears in several hadith on the Kharijites, with different surrounding content. It is a regional expression used euphemistically to convey the superficial nature of Kharijite faith. That is, though conversant with the Qur’an, they did not take it past their throats and into their hearts, which presumably explains why they strayed and rebelled.

Another hadith transmitted by Sahl attributes to Muhammad a geographic reference similar to the one above: “There would arise from out of the

East a people with shaven heads.”¹⁶ As is typical, the statement lacks specific identifiers, but there is also an *ex post facto* ring of truth about it. Siffin, where the Kharijites first appeared, was located in Iraq, in an eastward direction from Muhammad’s location in western central Arabia; so, too, were the cities of Kufa and Basra, major strongholds of the Kharijites during the Umayyad period. In addition, some Kharijites were known to have adopted ascetic practices, such as extended periods of intense prayer and shaving one’s head.

Other reports ascribe to Muhammad both descriptive and prescriptive comments about the future Kharijites. ‘Ali, the man who first fought the Kharijites and was later killed by one seeking revenge for the defeat at Nahrawan, is the source of the following statement made by Muhammad:

During the final days there will appear some young foolish people who will say good things but their faith will not go beyond their throats, and they will go out from their religion as an arrow passes through an animal. So, wherever you find them, kill them, for whoever kills them shall be rewarded on the Day of Resurrection.¹⁷

Here we have another variant of the report passed down by Sahl, a common feature of hadith material. To this widely transmitted analogy, ‘Ali provides additional information that, conveniently, justifies the very actions that he and later caliphs would take. Similar support for dealing with the Kharijites harshly is confirmed by other hadiths. One witness, for example, reports that Muhammad said that “a group would secede itself [from the community] when there was dissension among Muslims. Of the two groups [that existed at the time] the one nearer to the truth would kill them.”¹⁸ Again, the details here are lacking, but the error and fate of the seceders is made abundantly clear. And this fate matches the suppression of the Kharijites under the Umayyads and Abbasids.

One hadith recounts an occasion on which Muhammad suggested that one of his contemporaries—identified either as Dhu’l-Khuwaisira al-Tamimi or a man with a full beard, inset eyes, protruding forehead, and shaven head—was the Ur-figure from whom the Kharijites evolved. As reported, the incident occurred when someone challenged Muhammad over a particular division of the spoils. Following Muhammad’s decision about the distribution, a man reputedly approached the Prophet and told him that he had not acted in a just manner. In response, Muhammad defended his decision and then made a foreboding announcement:

From this very person’s lineage there will appear a people who will recite the Qur’an, but it will not go beyond their throat; they will kill the followers of Islam and spare the idol worshippers.¹⁹

This hadith weaves together a number of themes passed on in other accounts of the Kharijites. It also provides additional information that appears predictive of the Kharijites. In the sources, the tribal name of Tamim, Dhu'l-Khuwaisira's tribal affiliation, is linked to a number of early Kharijites. Many of the Qur'an readers who abandoned 'Ali's forces, for example, were said to come from Tamim.²⁰ There is also historical evidence that links Tamim tribesmen and Kharijites in acts of rebellion, such as the overthrow of the governor of Basra in 684.²¹ Thus, although not all Kharijites were tribesmen of Tamim, the numbers were probably significant enough to make the tribal connection feasible. As for taking the lives of Muslims and sparing nonbelievers, this behavior, too, came to typify the violent zealotry with which the Kharijites confronted the Muslim establishment.

Muhammad's insights into the future sectarian composition of the Muslim community were not limited to the Kharijites. According to the tradition, he foresaw the multiplicity of political and theological splits that would occur in the several centuries following his death. A famous hadith attributed to him lays out the numerical divisions of all the major religions in the vicinity of the Arabian Peninsula. "The Magians," Muhammad reportedly said, "are divided into seventy sects, the Jews into seventy-one, the Christians into seventy-two and the Muslims into seventy-three." Most versions of the hadith claim that only one sect would be saved, while the rest would die; a liberal variant reads that only one will perish, while the rest will be saved. This widely transmitted hadith provided the crude framework around which many Muslim heresiographers constructed their analyses of orthodoxy and heterodoxy.²² Muslim sects were multiplied and manipulated to come up with an exact count of seventy-three. The vague wording of the hadith also allowed Muhammad's imprimatur to validate a number of divergent and competing orthodoxies. Thus Shi'ites and Kharijites wrote their own heresiographies in which they cast themselves as the one "saved sect" and condemned all others to perdition.

The need to put anachronistic ideas and positions into the mouth of Muhammad reflects a later stage in the evolutionary development of the sunna and the legal tradition, a time when Islamic authority began to win out over pre-Islamic custom. The pre-Islamic past, however, could assume an authority of its own as long as it was the past of (Abrahamic) monotheism and not Arab tribalism. Muhammad, for example, established his prophetic authority in the Qur'an by locating himself at the end point in the line of monotheistic prophets; and Muhammad's biographer, Ibn Ishaq, traced the Muslim Prophet's genealogy back to Adam, linking Islam's "perfect man" with the first man. Given the legitimating authority invested in the past, it is

not surprising that sectarianism in general and the Kharijites in particular became subjects of further historical back-projection. After all, if the Kharijites could be placed into the thoughts of Muhammad, if a contemporary of Muhammad could be identified as the forefather of the Kharijites, then surely the movement's genealogy could be traced to its mythic, Adamic origins. We find an interesting case of this in the heresiographic work of the medieval Muslim scholar al-Shahrastani (d. 1153).²³

Of the genres of Islamic literature, heresiography preserves perhaps the most systematic and tendentious portrayals of the Kharijites. Of the more famous heresiographers, such as al-Ash'ari (d. 935), al-Baghdadi (d. 1037), and Ibn Hazm (d. 1064), al-Shahrastani is commonly regarded the least polemical. He also comes relatively late in the development of the genre, which means that he had greater opportunity to refine the accounts of sectarianism found in the works of his predecessors. The body of his *Book of Sects and Divisions* contains much the same information provided by other heresiographers; this is to be expected since he borrowed heavily from other sources, notably al-Ash'ari and Ka'bi (d. 931).²⁴ His series of five introductions, however, presents a historical and philosophical explanation for the rise of sectarianism that is unique. It is his view of sectarian history that interests us here.

He begins, as many heresiographers do, by reciting the hadith about Islam being divided into seventy-three sects. This hadith is then connected or, at least, juxtaposed with a story/commentary drawn from Jewish and Christian sources. The story is about Iblis, the devil, and his role in the creation of doubt and discord. According to al-Shahrastani's unnamed sources, which he quotes at length, Iblis introduced doubt into the world when he refused God's command to bow down before Adam. This act of pride, which was the first doubt, gave rise to seven other doubts; and these seven doubts, al-Shahrastani claims, are the root of all false beliefs. Thus he writes that "every doubt that befell the offspring of Adam occurred because of the deception of the accursed devil and the temptations arising from his doubts."²⁵ For al-Shahrastani, then, these doubts form the deep structure of human history. Heretical groups, such as the Kharijites, are not mere epiphenomena of the seven doubts. Instead, they are part of a causative chain of sectarian formation, set in motion by Iblis but extending throughout prophetic history. Those who challenged the authority of Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad "all imitated the first cursed one [the devil] in the manifestation of his doubts."²⁶

This pattern of error and doubt, al-Shahrastani maintains, reemerges in each prophetic generation because of a human tendency to reject the command of those sent by God, a tendency which itself was engendered by Iblis. Al-Shahrastani focuses only on those errors that arose following Muhammad's

call to prophecy, associating each of the major sects with its respective primal doubt. He traces the Kharijites to the third doubt introduced by Iblis: Why did God command the devil to obey Adam and make obeisance to him? To prove the existential link between the third primal doubt and the formation of the Kharijites, al-Shahrastani adduces two passages that, in his estimation, demonstrate the same sentiment of error. The first is the slogan adopted by the early Kharijites, "There is no judgment but God's." The second is a qur'anic citation (15:33), which quotes the devil as saying to God, "I would never bow myself before a mortal whom Thou hast created of a clay of mud molded."²⁷ For al-Shahrastani, just as the latter statement indicates a refusal to obey a lawful command of God, so the former indicates a refusal to follow a lawful human command. Both, he believes, exhibit the error of excessive pride, of unrestrained independence, of the failure to obey.

Another stage in al-Shahrastani's deterministic account of the formation of the Kharijites (and all Muslim sects) is his claim that, at the beginning of every prophet's era, there are harbingers of heresy. That is, not only do the errors of Iblis arise during each prophet's life, but they arise twice, once at the beginning and once at the end. The earlier manifestation of error is the precursor, and seeming immediate cause, of the actual later heretical movement. In the case of the Kharijites, their rebellion was foreshadowed by the actions of Dhu'l-Khuwaisira al-Tamimi. The man's questioning of Muhammad's division of the spoils was, al-Shahrastani argues, a clear example of rebelling against the Prophet. This point leads al-Shahrastani to draw a historical parallel that makes the label "Kharijite" applicable at the time of Muhammad:

If someone who opposes the rightful leader (*imam*) becomes a Kharijite, then it is only proper that someone who opposes the rightful messenger should be called a Kharijite?²⁸

In other words, if those who criticized 'Ali are called Kharijites, then the name should equally apply to Dhu'l-Khuwaisira who criticized the Prophet. Al-Shahrastani ends his proto-historical discussion of the Kharijites at this point in the introduction. But his final word on Kharijite identity comes in a separate chapter that rehashes the social and theological disputes over which the (Muslim) Kharijites split into subsects. He opens the chapter with a sweeping definition of a Kharijite that encourages Muslims to view the sect as a transhistorical phenomenon:

Whoever rebels against the rightful leader agreed upon by the community is called a Kharijite, whether this rebellion occurred at the

time of the companions against the rightly guided leaders, or against their beneficent successors and the leaders of any time.²⁹

What is at work in this definition is an attempt to decoct the essence of a Kharijite, to identify what makes someone a Kharijite in all times and places. For al-Shahrastani, the particular events at Siffin appear to have little to do with the essential nature of the Kharijites. Or, put differently, the events at Siffin are merely one particular manifestation of a universal phenomenon that unfolds throughout history—illegitimate rebellion. Kharijism, then, according to al-Shahrastani, denotes the act of rebellion itself, without reference to the reason or basis for the act. As we will see, al-Shahrastani's definition received a good deal of attention from modern Egyptian Muslim thinkers who believed they were witnessing another historical unfolding of Kharijism, or at least wished others to believe it.

To arrive at his highly abstract and transhistorical notion of the Kharijites, al-Shahrastani started from the same point of departure as other here-siographers: the Islamic tradition's historical experience of the Kharijites that began at Siffin. Indeed, it was this experience that gave impetus to the tradition's construction of Kharijite proto-origins. The history of the Kharijites after their defeat at Nahrawan is one of rebellion and infighting. Waves of rebellion threatened the unity of the empire, while infighting led to the formation of numerous subgroups. Extending knowledge of the historical Kharijites into the pre-Kharijite past was one way of gaining intellectual control over the kind of beliefs and actions that the carriers of the tradition wished to proscribe—intellectual control being one of the softer means by which the Sunnis maintained their power and authority. Thus the development within the tradition of Kharijite proto-origins reflects an effort to order and Islamize the past in the name of Sunni orthodoxy.

Sins of the Ruler, Sins of the Ruled

What were the beliefs and practices attributed to the Kharijites that Sunni authorities felt compelled to suppress? In his definition, al-Shahrastani highlighted what has come to be perhaps the fundamental marker of Kharijism, rebellion against legitimate rulership. But he derived this universal definition from the particular set of ideas and actions that reputedly characterized Kharijite uprisings in different locales and eras. We see evidence of this on the page following his universal definition of a Kharijite, on which he offers a more historically informed assessment of all Kharijite sects, one

clearly rooted in the events and aftermath of Siffin. “Common to them all,” according to al-Shahrastani, “is dissociation from ‘Uthman and ‘Ali. . . . They hold, too, that those who commit grave sins are unbelievers, and that rebellion against an imam who opposes sunna is a duty and an obligation.” Similar synoptic descriptions of Kharijite sects are provided by other heresiographers. Relying on the opinion of al-Ash‘ari, his mentor, al-Baghdadi asserts that all Kharijites were united by a belief in denouncing ‘Ali and ‘Uthman, the two arbiters at Siffin, and all those who accepted the outcome of the arbitration; in labeling grave sinners as apostates; and in the obligation to rebel against an unjust ruler.³⁰ Ibn Hazm, the Andalusian theologian, characterizes Kharijites as people who believe in rejecting the arbitration at Siffin, damning sinners, rebelling against unrighteous leaders, the punishment of eternal hell fire for grave sinners and the legitimacy of a non-Qurayshi caliph.³¹ It is interesting to note that al-Shahrastani’s universal definition of a Kharijite could readily be inferred from any of the above accounts of Kharijite belief and practice. Heresiographers, then, seemed in agreement that, despite the splits that occurred among Kharijites over theological and practical issues, the various sects were united by a core of ideas. And many of these ideas touched directly on political affairs, on the role and function of the Muslim ruler.

In the framework of Islamic thought, the Kharijites are intimately linked to debates over political authority. Historically, the question of who has the right to rule the Muslim community was first raised upon the death of Muhammad in 632. But Islamic tradition, as well as Western scholarship, traces the origins of Islamic political theory to the challenges raised by the Kharijites, initially against ‘Ali and Mu‘awiya and subsequently against all non-Kharijite leadership. Of course, the first Kharijites were more interested in acting than propounding ideas, much like their major opponents, the caliphs, whose political turf they threatened. Later Kharijite thinkers, however, articulated a number of interconnected political and religious doctrines that legitimated the rebellious actions of their ancestors and that the Sunni tradition came to portray as untenable and dangerous. Of these doctrines, the most volatile was that a caliph could be and should be deposed, if he failed to follow and enforce the teachings laid out in the Qur’an. This position was based in part on a loose reading of a number of verses in the Qur’an, such as 5:48, which reads “Whoso judges not according to what God has sent down, they are the unbelievers.”³² Any deviation from the straight path by a caliph required the immediate intervention of the Muslim community. Muslims, in the eyes of the Kharijites, had a sacred mandate to call a caliph to account for his errors and demand that he repent. And, in theory, the Kharijites allowed only two possible outcomes in such circumstances. If the offending caliph recognized

the error of his ways, his rule continued; if he failed to respond properly to corrective advice, then his rule was terminated. Hence the rebellion against 'Ali when he maintained the error of arbitration.

Kharijite political theory differed from that of other early Islamic factions in that it refused to accord the office of caliph, the Caliphate, special protective status. This is true for several reasons. First, Kharijites did not regard the Caliphate as the *sine quo non* of Muslim society. Kharijite sects did elect leaders who were given the title of caliph or imam, but the office itself was thought to be expendable. All that was required for good Islamic order, according to the Kharijite view, was the application of the *shari'a* or Islamic law. As long as believers could legitimately live under the *shari'a* and resolve their disputes amicably, there was no need for someone to oversee them.³³ Both Sunnis and Shi'ites, by contrast, held that the Caliphate or Imamate was divinely sanctioned and, therefore, a social and moral necessity, though they had arrived at this conclusion for vastly different reasons. For Sunnis, the caliph, the successor of Muhammad, was neither a divine nor especially pious individual; his status derived from the sacredness of the office, which had the responsibility, even if at times only symbolic, of enforcing the *shari'a*. For Shi'ites, the imam was an infallible, God-ordained figure whose divine guidance was essential to the Muslim community; he lent authority to his office, the Imamate, because he carried on the "mantle of the Prophet," representing God's proof (*hujja*) on earth.

The second distinctive feature of Kharijite political theory relates to the qualifications of the caliph. Unlike the Sunnis who restricted election to the tribe of Quraysh, Muhammad's tribe, and the Shi'ites who traced the line of imams down through 'Ali and his descendants, the Kharijites placed no conditions regarding birth or divine descent. Kharijites maintained that any Muslim—any Kharijite Muslim—could become caliph as long as he was of sound mind and character. Their egalitarian principle of election is said to be expressed in the prophetic hadith that they often invoked: "Obey whoever is put in authority over you, even if he is a crop-nosed Ethiopian slave."³⁴ Once elected, a Kharijite leader enjoyed the respect and obedience of his peers. But his status, the equivalent of first among equals, did not make him immune from moral scrutiny. Kharijite thought stipulated the overthrow and possible murder of a caliph if he was judged to be an unbeliever or infidel (*kafir*), and a caliph could be so judged if he was found to have committed a grave sin (*kabira*). Thus the authority of a caliph to lead and rule over his fellow Muslims "depended on his moral and religious probity."³⁵ And determining whether a caliph committed a grave sin, whether he crossed the line of moral and religious probity was an interpretive matter, for it required translating his

political, economic, and social policies into the ethical-legal language of Islam. Here is where Kharijite moral theology bled into political theory with grave repercussions for both ruler and ruled.

Prior to its usage by the Kharijites, the term “unbelief” (*kufir*) was reserved for non-Muslims who lay outside the boundaries of the Muslim community. By pronouncing ‘Ali and the Umayyad caliphs unbelievers (*takfir*), the Kharijites introduced this notion into the discourse and social life of early Islam. Moreover, because Kharijite egalitarianism made no distinction between ruler and ruled, all Muslims were subject to the same judgment and punishment as the caliph, which meant that any Muslim could be condemned as an unbeliever. This effectively divided a hitherto united faith community into two distinct and antagonistic factions: true Muslims made up of Kharijites and pseudo-Muslims who had rejected Kharijite Islam.³⁶ (It was for this reason that the idea of an unbeliever underwent a transformation within mainstream Sunni theological discussions. In addition to referring to infidels or non-Muslims, the word came to have the connotation of heretic or heterodox believer.³⁷) But it was the means by which some Kharijites determined the factional categories into which their fellow Muslims fit that became the hallmark of Kharijite extremism. Kharijites were known to accost people and test their (Kharijite) Muslim bona fides by asking them their opinions about ‘Ali, ‘Uthman, Mu‘awiya, and the arbitration process. An incorrect response resulted in death (*isti‘rad*). No one was exempt from this religious vetting or its consequences. In some cases, the women and children of those judged to be unbelievers were also killed. Indeed, one of the theological issues over which Kharijites debated and divided was the legality or illegality of taking the lives of women and children. The most militant among the Kharijites, the Azariqa, followers of Nafi‘ b. Azraq, believed this was permissible. They also considered anyone outside of their own group an unbeliever by definition. Separation from sinful society, a *hijra* or migration to the true community of Muslims, was part of Azariqa doctrine. So when they came across someone outside their camp who said he was a Muslim, they would immediately kill him, but someone claiming to be a Jew, Christian, or Magian was spared. The Azariqa seemed to reserve their rage for an inner-directed Islamic battle: cleansing Muslim ranks, a trait that came to define the Kharijites as a whole.

It was the faith (*iman*) of other Muslims that Kharijites deemed insufficient and in need of reform. They reached this conclusion based not so much on what their fellow Muslims professed as on how they acted or failed to act. In other words, works were considered an essential component of faith in Kharijite theology. Such a position did not lead inexorably to extremist ideas or activities. However, when combined with a narrow, inflexible view of sin

and its consequences, the insistence that works are required for salvation contributed to the larger theological calculus of militancy. For the Kharijites, works negatively affected one's faith when the works were major sins; and major sins put one outside the body of believers because they allowed no interpretive leeway whereby one could remain a faithful Muslim and a major sinner at the same time. The Kharijites, like all Muslims, viewed religion in communal terms. As the Qur'an itself suggests, prophets are sent to communities, and salvation is achieved within a community. But Kharijites went further than other Muslims by holding to a vision of the perfect community of believers, which is captured in their claim that Muslims constitute "the People of Paradise" (*ahl al-janna*), while others are "the People of Hell" (*ahl al-nar*). Inclusion of a grave sinner into the pure community of Muslims would, according to Kharijite reasoning, jeopardize the future reward of all Muslims.³⁸

Reacting to the practical social consequences of the Kharijite view of sin, other Islamic factions—Mu'tazilites, Shi'ites, Murji'ites, and Sunnis—rejected the notion of excluding the grave sinner from the community of Muslims, although with varying degrees of theological leniency. The Mu'tazilites, for example, though socially tolerant of grave sinners in this world, agreed with the Kharijites that such sinners would eventually be condemned to hell in the next. The most liberal of the factions, the Murji'ites, refrained from making any moral decisions about their fellow Muslims, preferring instead to "defer" to God's judgment in the next world; and one Murji'ite subject went so far as to claim that sin ultimately did no harm to believers who were sincere in their faith.³⁹ In contrast to the maximalist requirements of faith demanded by the Kharijites, the Sunnis advocated a minimalist approach, siding on this matter with the Murji'ites. For the most part, they separated works from faith. Thus, according to the reasoning of the Sunni theologian al-Ash'ari, a sinner could maintain his membership in the community of Muslim believers because he is "a believer by reason of his faith, a sinner by reason of his sin and grave fault."⁴⁰

The very language chosen by al-Ash'ari and other Sunni theologians to describe the Muslim community demonstrates that conditions for membership were nominal:

It is our opinion that we ought not to declare a single one of the people of the *qiblah* an infidel for a sin of which he is guilty, such as fornication or theft or the drinking of wine, as the [Kharijites] hold, thinking that such people are infidels.⁴¹

The phrase "people of the *qiblah*" refers to those who share the same direction of prayer, indicating that rather than purity from sin, a simple outward

sign of assent was sufficient for inclusion within the Muslim community. But, though willing to overlook sin, al-Ash'ari was not willing to allow believers to deny the ethical authority that established what was and was not sinful: "we believe that he who commits any of these mortal sins . . . presumptuously declaring it lawful and not acknowledging that it is forbidden is an infidel."⁴² Moreover, unlike some Murji'ites, Sunnis did not absolve the sinner, grave or otherwise, from the effects of sin. In the end, Sunnis concluded that rewards and punishments for one's actions would be settled in the hereafter, while a simple avowal of faith sufficed for good standing in the Muslim community.

Of course, the primary figures for whom this latitudinarian theology was developed were the caliphs. It was their putative sins, specifically those of 'Uthman, 'Ali, and Mu'awiya, along with the Kharijite reaction to them, that forced more moderate voices to take a stand. In the end, moderation won out. Al-Ash'ari summed up the Sunni policy toward the caliph in the following way:

[W]e regard it as an error on anybody's part to approve "going out" [rebellng] against [the caliphs] when they have clearly abandoned rectitude; and we believe in abstinence from "going out" [rebellng] against them with the sword, and abstinence from fighting in civil commotions (fitnah).⁴³

Thus, as portrayed in traditional Sunni theological sources, the contrast between the Kharijites and orthodox Muslims could not be more striking. Although the Kharijites preferred to cut off the head of the Islamic body politic rather than tolerate a deviant leader, the Sunni orthodox settled for a religiously sanctioned realpolitik. Although the Kharijites chose to lead the Muslim community into social unrest and possible anarchy rather than compromise their purist ideology, the Sunni orthodox opted for accommodation and social stability.⁴⁴ To the Kharijite demand for piety and purity, the Sunni response was moderation and communal unity. Nowhere is this latter point more evident than with respect to the issue of prayer.

Sunni tradition conceded that the Kharijites surpassed other Muslims in their dedication to and intensity of prayer. But along with this concession came the warning that enthusiasm may lead to excess, that piety and purity can be taken too far. This was certainly how Sunnis viewed the Kharijite refusal to pray behind non-Kharijite Muslims whose moral failings supposedly nullified the physical state of purity required by the ritual. The Sunni answer to this act of pious hauteur was that "Prayer behind every faithful man, be he of good or of bad behavior, is valid."⁴⁵ The social image of the Kharijites was that they were incapable of living alongside anyone whose

beliefs differed from their own. Sunnis, by contrast, made diversity of views a doctrine of faith: “Difference of opinion in the community is a token of divine mercy.”⁴⁶

The line, then, between Kharijite belief and practice and that of the Sunnis was very clearly drawn in Sunni sources. That the line was sometimes drawn at the expense of historical accuracy should come as no surprise. Sunni writers, after all, had a mandate to distinguish between orthodoxy and heterodoxy, and the rhetoric of orthodoxy—no matter whose orthodoxy—entailed a degree of heavy-handedness. This explains why the Kharijites were presented in the sources as a coherent, identifiable group, why attempts were made to sum up the essential nature of the Kharijites. It was easier to aim one’s critical eye at a single, stationary target with a distinctive set of behavioral and ideological characteristics than deal with the complexity of a fractured and amorphous movement. Moreover, a very effective way to ensure that the profile was distinctive was to portray the most radical faction of the Kharijites, the Azariqa, as representative of the sect as a whole. The cause of Sunni orthodoxy was better served, that is, the public was dissuaded from associating or sympathizing with Kharijite rebellions, the more frightening and dangerous the Kharijites appeared. Viewed historically, such an image of the Kharijites also provided a retrospective, theological legitimation for the martial actions that successive caliphs had taken against Kharijite uprisings. In short, under the pen of Sunni propagandists, the Kharijites became a foil for celebrating the triumph and supremacy of Sunnism. Not just the sum of its factional parts, Kharijism was portrayed as the epitome of what the Muslim community had come to reject. Interesting enough, the negative symbolism surrounding the Kharijites was not limited to the Sunni tradition. It also played an important role in the self-understanding of the Ibadiyya, the moderate branch of the Kharijites.

The Case of the Ibadiyya

The Ibadiyya emerged, in 684, when the eponymous founder of the faction, ‘Abdullah b. Ibad al-Murri al-Tamimi, a Basran Kharijite, broke away from the Kharijite leader Nafi’ b. Azraq over his extremist treatment of other Muslims. Ibn Ibad remains a nebulous figure in Ibadi history.⁴⁷ Although he is mentioned as the founder of the sect, Ibadi writers pay scant attention to him. Far more important to the formation of Ibadi theology, especially as it is distinguished from that of the Kharijites, are Abu Bilal Mirdas and Jabir b. Zayd al-Azdi. Abu Bilal prefigures Ibn Ibad in the Ibadi historical record. He was a

survivor of Nahrawan who went on to become the center of the moderate faction of the Kharijites (i.e., proto-Ibadiyya) in Basra. He is regarded as the spiritual father of the sect and one of its first leaders (imams) because it is to his example that they trace their moderation: he rejected religiously justified murder (*isti'rad*), negotiated with the Umayyads, concentrated on peaceful propagation of the faith (*da'wa*), and adopted a quietist position vis-à-vis his opponents. A campaign against the Kharijites provoked Abu Bilal to revolt. He was killed in 680, and Ibn Ibad succeeded him. Jabir b. Zayd, who succeeded Ibn Ibad as leader of the Ibadis, was an eminent Ibadi scholar, referred to as the source of teaching (*asl al-madhhab*). Following in the footsteps of Abu Bilal, he took to task the extremist Kharijites who shed the blood of fellow Muslims. Moreover, his willingness to condemn certain behavior as radical put the Ibadis in good stead with the (Sunni) Umayyad governor of Iraq, al-Hajjaj ibn Yusuf, who permitted the sect to prosper, at least for a time.

The fundamental principles of the Ibadiyya read like an anti-Azariqa creed. According to Ibadi teachings, non-Kharijite Muslims are accepted as legitimate members of the Muslim community, and therefore they cannot be killed. Other penalties that the Azariqa inflicted on fellow Muslims are also rejected. For example, Ibadis maintain that the property of Muslims cannot be confiscated as spoils and that women and children cannot be killed or taken captive. Rejected, too, is the idea that believers are obligated to separate from the Muslim community when the ruler is a sinful tyrant. Under such circumstances, Ibadis advise dissimulation of faith (*taqiyya*) and caution.⁴⁸ Ibadis permit marriage with non-Kharijite Muslims and prayer behind them. In contrast to the negative model of the Azariqa, the Ibadis hold up the Muhakkima, those who first raised the protest against 'Ali with their slogan "There is no judgment but God's." Conspicuously absent from much of Ibadi positive theology is the name "Kharijites."

Although non-Ibadi authorities agree on categorizing the Ibadis as a subset of the Kharijites, the Ibadi tradition itself is equivocal about its relationship with the Kharijites. As indicated above, the Ibadis were said to have arisen in response to the more extreme Kharijites, namely, the Azariqa. Given that the Kharijites formed prior to the militant activism of Ibn Azraq, and that Ibadis wanted to distance themselves ideologically from this radical faction, one might expect Ibadi thinkers to play up the purity of Kharijism prior to the advent of Ibn Azraq, to distinguish between orthodox Kharijites and heterodox ones. Some Ibadi authorities did precisely this, using for example the label "unjust Kharijites" (*Khawarij al-jawr*) to describe Azariqa belief and practice.⁴⁹ Others, however, attempted to disassociate the Ibadis from the larger sectarian

rubric of the Kharijites—no easy task since the Ibadi myth of origin overlapped with that of the Kharijites and, for that matter, with the Azariqite extremists whom they condemned. For these latter authorities, the concern appears to have been that the Kharijites had become identified with the characteristics of the Azariqa or, more accurately, that the name “Kharijites” had become so identified, much as it had in the Sunni tradition. So, to save the Ibadis from being tainted by the extremist behavior of some of their brethren and, *a fortiori*, the name that had come to symbolize this behavior, Ibadi propagandists had to recast the genealogical and historical relationship between the Kharijites and the Ibadis.

The work of the twelfth-century Omani scholar Abu ‘Abdullah Muhammad b. Sa’id al-Azdi al-Qalhati provides some measure of the interpretive lengths to which an Ibadi writer had to go in order to cast off the burden of the Kharijites. His *al-Kashf wa’l-bayan* is thought to be one of the earliest surviving Ibadi sources.⁵⁰ Part theological treatise, part heresiography, the *Kashf* mirrors the form and function of tendentious writing found in competing Sunni works. In fact, al-Qalhati is thought to have relied on al-Shahrastani’s *Milal* for some of his material.⁵¹ What did al-Qalhati have to say about the Kharijites? Initially, it seems, very little. The first section of the *Kashf* rehashes the early history of the Caliphate leading up to the events at Siffin. Particular emphasis is placed on the sins of the caliph ‘Uthman, which justified his murder, and the eventual continuation of ‘Uthman’s deviant behavior by ‘Ali. It is tempting to say that the *Kashf* offers a reading of this period from the perspective of the Kharijites. After all, who other than a Kharijite would legitimize dissent against ‘Uthman and ‘Ali and valorize those who rebelled at Siffin as “the best companions and leaders of the Muslims, their legists, Qur’an readers and scholars.”⁵² The problem, however, is that al-Qalhati never mentions the Kharijites throughout his entire narration of these events. Those who protested against ‘Ali at Siffin he speaks of as “the Muslims,” a reference favored by other Ibadi writers;⁵³ and once these “Muslims” left Siffin to gather at the site of Nahrawan, he gives them the name “people of Nahrawan” (*ahl al-Nahrawan*).⁵⁴ Thus al-Qalhati champions the views and actions of that group of protesters who formally emerged at Siffin, but he avoids identifying them by the very name that they reputedly earned for “going out” from other Muslims—Kharijites.

Despite appearances, al-Qalhati did not completely deny the existence of the Kharijites. He was merely cautious about the context in which to introduce them, and, for him, the right context was a discussion of Islamic sects. This occurs in the second section of the *Kashf*, in which he provides an Ibadi heresiography structured around the prophetic hadith of the seventy-three

sects. Al-Qalhati, then, relegated the Kharijites to a place where it was appropriate to deal with them as heterodox Muslims, as one of the unsaved sects of Islam. But, unlike other sects that could be dismissed out of hand as heterodox, the Kharijites required more attention. For the orthodox mantle that al-Qalhati traces down through the generations of Muslims—what he calls “the people of rectitude” (*ahl al-istiqaama*)—at one time rested with the Kharijites. The matter becomes even more complex when the tactic is to link the Ibadis, the one saved sect (*firqa najiyya*), with the lineage of the people of rectitude without admitting an intermediate stage of Kharijite influence. The only solution to such a dilemma was interpretive legerdemain, of which al-Qalhati was an obvious master.

The circumstances surrounding ‘Uthman’s death, according to al-Qalhati, created three main divisions in Islam: the people of rectitude, who were responsible for ‘Uthman’s murder; the Shikak, or Doubtters composed of those who opposed both ‘Uthman and his murderers; and the ‘Uthmaniyya, or those who continued to support the deceased caliph and sought revenge for his murder. Later, the events at Siffin led to a further split within the Muslim community, from which emerged four main sectarian divisions: the Shi’ites, the Kharijites, the ‘Uthmaniyya, and the Shikak. Of these four, it is clear that al-Qalhati regarded the Kharijites as the orthodox remnant, at least ostensibly. It is also clear, based on his description of the Kharijites in this section, that they are identical with those whom he earlier referred to as “the Muslims” and “the people of Nahrawan.” For al-Qalhati, the Kharijites lost this identification as a result of the divisions that developed within the Kharijite sect itself. Specifically, Kharijite purity came to an end when Nafi’ b. Azraq

separated from [the Kharijites], dissolving their importance. He divided their community, opposed their authority and turned away from their belief, issuing commands with which Muslims and the people of rectitude differed.⁵⁵

This action destabilized the community of Muslims and led eventually to the formation of sixteen different Kharijite sects, only one of which remained the people of rectitude. The border, then, separating orthodoxy from heterodoxy, which had set the Kharijites apart from the other three major sects, now passed through the Kharijites.

Even with this dramatic cleavage in the Kharijite sect, some portion of the Kharijites would, logically, continue to be the legitimate representative of orthodox Islam. Al-Qalhati admits as much by his use of the phrase “the kinds of Kharijites who are not the people of rectitude” to capture the fifteen wayward Kharijite subsects, those that followed the path of Ibn Azraq.⁵⁶

However, the remaining orthodox Kharijites who are the people of rectitude do not in fact continue to be Kharijites in al-Qalhati's heresiographic schema. Instead, after he shifts them around in an interpretive shell game that essentially transfers to them the sole mantle of orthodoxy, he renames them the Ibadis. His first move is to cast the Ibadis as the original Kharijite sect, along with the Wahbiyya, the followers of the first "Kharijite" caliph, 'Abdullah b. Wahb al-Rasibi. Then he maintains that the Kharijites as a group moved away from the pure origins of their faith after the emergence of the Azariqa, leaving only the Ibadis with the legitimate title of the people of rectitude. Meanwhile, the practices that al-Qalhati had established as characteristics of the heterodox Kharijites (= the Azariqa) come to be equated with all Kharijites, making it possible for him to speak of a distinctive heterodox Kharijite doctrine, much like Sunni authorities. By the end of the work, al-Qalhati has relegated the Kharijites to the company of other erring sects, such as the Mu'tazila, Qadariyya, Sifatiyya, Jahmiyya, Riwaqid, and Shi'a. And he feels confident enough about his reconfiguration of Islamic sectarianism to cite a chain of transmission for the Ibadi school with no reference to the Kharijites.⁵⁷

As an example of the genre, al-Qalhati's *Kashf* fulfills the purpose of any heresiography: to portray a given sectarian group as the legitimate inheritor of Muhammad's authority and to demonstrate the error of others. Of equal importance to the Ibadis was avoiding association with the Kharijites, the sect that came to epitomize Muslim violence and rebellion. The Ibadi tradition offers its own reason for the anti-Kharijite polemic that it espouses. The "orthodox" Ibadis, as al-Qalhati points out, were the first to recognize and refute the depraved doctrines of the Kharijites.⁵⁸ Although perhaps satisfying for internal consumption, this explanation does not recognize that it was the name "Kharijite" more than the sect's origins and doctrines from which the Ibadis tried to distance themselves. And the Kharijite name had been anathematized by Sunni polemicists. As al-Qalhati's *Kashf* shows, the Ibadis also contributed to the process of making the name "Kharijites" synonymous with intolerance, murder, and mayhem.⁵⁹ With much of the discussion here focusing on rhetoric and propaganda, it is important to remember that al-Qalhati and his Sunni theologian counterparts did not create the negative image of the Kharijites ex nihilo. There were in fact groups of (Kharijite) Muslims whose actions and ideas threatened the then-existing Islamic leadership and the greater community; and this threat, not surprisingly, provoked both military and intellectual responses. Thus, at first, the negative image of the Kharijites may have accurately reflected the ideological content of the referent groups. At some later point, the image took on a life of its own, no longer merely representing what the historical Kharijites meant for Sunni

orthodoxy but projecting onto others, onto non-Kharijite others, that representation. We shift now to look at how the Kharijites were used in the sources as a propaganda weapon in the arsenal of Sunni ideology.

Kharijites as Rebels, Rebels as Kharijites

Western scholars have pointed out that the name “Kharijites” was not exclusively applied in Muslim historical sources to individuals or groups who held to Kharijite doctrine.⁶⁰ By the Abbasid period (750–1250), it seems, Kharijite was often used simply to denote a rebel, someone who raised his sword, symbolically or otherwise, against caliphal or local authorities. The dating here is important, for it suggests that over time the original ideological content of the name gave way to other meanings. This is particularly true for the eastern provinces that initially were far removed from the political and cultural center of the early Caliphate. In one such province, Sistan, C. E. Bosworth notes

Kharijism succeeded in transforming itself from a movement with its roots in the politico-religious vicissitudes of the early Arab Caliphate into one with some local foundations and with a concern about such grievances as excessive taxation and unjust tax-collectors. Because of this successful transformation, Sistan, in the early ‘Abbasid period was virtually the sole major region of the east where Kharijism retained something of its earlier vitality and following.⁶¹

One does not need to travel as far east as Sistan or chronologically very far into the Abbasid period to find examples of this transformation of Kharijism, as Bosworth himself demonstrates in one of the volumes that he translated in al-Tabari’s *History* series. In a brief passage from the year 806, a man, one Sayf b. Bakr from the tribe of ‘Abd al-Qays, is described in the Arabic text as a Kharijite (*khariji*) who revolted and was subsequently killed by an agent of the reigning caliph Harun al-Rashid. In his translation, Bosworth renders the name “Kharijite” simply as “rebel,” noting that in the context the name was “used in a general sense.”⁶² When Kharijite had developed this “general sense” and whether it has anything to do specifically with the transformation that Kharijism underwent in Sistan are questions that Bosworth does not address. We will return to the implications of his translation later, but for now we need to look at the latitude exhibited in the usage of the name.

The eleventh-century Nestorian Bishop Elijah of Nisibis, for instance, made a translation decision analogous to that of Bosworth. In his history of

the world, written in both Syriac and Arabic, Elijah used the Arabic *khariji* to capture the Syriac word “rebel.”⁶³ What makes this case so intriguing is that the rebellious events that Elijah was describing took place in the year 365/66, some three hundred years before the emergence of the Kharijites at Siffin. So generalized (corrupted?), then, had the original meaning of the name become by the eleventh century that a Christian historian could insert it into an earlier era, and a non-Arabian context, seemingly without fear of having committed an anachronism.⁶⁴

The name “Kharijite” or one of its known equivalents—Haruri or Muhakimma—commonly appears in Muslim historical sources in ways that both identify and condemn rebellious acts, or, more accurately, condemn by identifying. An incident involving the governor of Basra, Ubaydallah b. Ziyad, in the early Umayyad period (ca. 680), highlights the latter situation. After a man had openly defied a command of Ibn Ziyad, he was ordered to be brought before the governor. A heated exchange led to Ibn Ziyad inflicting a severe beating on him. In the course of the beating, the man reached out for a nearby sword, whereupon Ibn Ziyad responded by saying: “Did you become one of the Haruri [Kharijites] today? If so, you have made yourself subject to punishment and thus killing you is permitted.”⁶⁵ The surrounding text gives no hint that the man was in fact a Kharijite and offers no explanation of the legitimacy or illegitimacy of the charge. Several points about this incident, however, require emphasis: first, the readiness with which the name came to mind when violence was shown toward authority; and second, the logical connection between being labeled a Haruri or Kharijite and being worthy of punishment, of death.

The first point is reinforced in another story of plotting and assassination. In the year 700, a group of men from the tribe of ‘Awf b. Ka‘b b. Sa‘d gathered to seek revenge for the murder of one of their tribe, Bukayr b. Wishah, the former governor of Khurasan. The man responsible for murdering Bukayr, Buhir b. Warqa’ al-Suraymi, was in Khurasan when one of the plotters fell on him and stabbed him. Having witnessed the assault on Buhir, those in the immediate vicinity shouted out “A Kharijite!” The assassin failed in his mission and was himself killed. Some time later, this scene was played out again. A second assassin who had insinuated himself into Buhir’s entourage attacked Buhir with a knife. And, again, the people shouted out “A Kharijite!”⁶⁶ As with the previous example, there are insufficient details to understand fully what the name means in this context. Were the people predisposed to view such assaults as those committed by the Kharijites? Were the people merely saying that the assassin was a generic rebel? Were they equating the assassin with a branch of the Ur-rebels from Siffin? Or is the introduction of the name into this story a typological gloss, a way that Sunni traditionists rhetorically

identified the bad guys? That Kharijites could make easy scapegoats is clear from a different account of murder, one that has its roots in the politico-religious intrigue that was the Abbasid revolution. After the first Abbasid ruler, Abu al-'Abbas, was installed (ca. 749), questions were raised about the loyalty of Abu Salama, the man who held the office of wazir and who had previously opposed Abu al-'Abbas's claim to be Commander of the Faithful. A plan was set in motion, with the connivance of Abu al-'Abbas, to eliminate Abu Salama as a potential threat. Once the murder was carried out, one source relates, "They then said that the Kharijites had killed him."⁶⁷

Despite the ambiguity surrounding these cases, they do share a common factor. The determination to label someone a Kharijite stemmed from the violent acts that were committed, not a set of beliefs that could be attributed to the actors. In some cases, the identity of the murderous actors remained unknown to those who brought up the name "Kharijite"; in others, the name was affixed to people who, although known to their accusers, never seemingly expressed beliefs for which the Kharijites were infamous. Acts of rebellion, then, were sufficient to evoke the name Kharijite. But this is not the same as saying that a Kharijite came to be the equivalent of a rebel. Before taking this step, we need to ask what kind of rebel? Was it the kind of rebel, as Bosworth argues, who no longer had ties to "the politico-religious vicissitudes of the early Caliphate"? And without these ties, was it the kind of rebel for whom the Sunni theological judgment of heterodox Muslim would apply? The question is rather moot since the surviving sources were written, for the most part, by the winners of the ideological contestation over Muslim orthodoxy, that is, by Sunnis; and Sunni identity, like the identity of any orthodoxy, rested largely on negative rhetoric, on defining themselves over and against their theological and political opponents. The Kharijites were one of those vying with the Sunnis for power, which means that their presence in the sources can never be totally generic or neutral. Read retrospectively, any reference to a Kharijite rebellion is in some sense charged with negative symbolism and is therefore pro-Sunni. Thus, when Bosworth translated "Kharijite" as "rebel," he divested the word of the heterodox connotations that it had earned at the hands of Sunni propagandists.

One possible way of justifying the translation would be to argue that Kharijism may have started out as a exclusivist religiopolitical movement, but it evolved into a social model of rebellion. That is, various disaffected peoples linked up with the Kharijites, literally or figuratively, at various times and places, to express their own particular discontent because the Kharijites provided a culturally recognized form of protest. Put differently, the Kharijites

were both a model of and a model for rebellion. Accounts of Kharijite uprisings confirm as much. For despite the ideological and social purity that heresiographers claimed was characteristic of the sect, the Kharijites apparently compromised themselves on numerous occasions, joining forces with the unwashed in order to oppose the ruling authorities. For instance, some who fought under the banner of Kharijism were paid mercenaries.⁶⁸ For other putative Kharijites, loyalty to their particular leaders seemed to outweigh any commitment to a greater godly cause.⁶⁹ This is in keeping with the notion that regional bands of protesters with designated leaders and a particular set of concerns either associated themselves with Kharijite groups or rebelled in the name of Kharijism.⁷⁰ Viewed in this light, Kharijism, in its social reality, was more of a loose-fitting garment of protest that could be donned or cast off as the circumstances warranted. Perhaps this is the best explanation for someone like Shabath b. Rib'i who over the course of his life reputedly moved from Shi'ism to Kharijism to Shi'ism and back again.⁷¹ Shi'ism, after all, was a competing form of protest alongside Kharijism. Such cases of dubious ideological purity lend credence to Bernard Lewis's observation about the nature of sectarianism in Islam, where religion and state are regarded as inseparable:

Whenever a group of men sought to challenge and to change the existing order, they made their teachings a theology and their instrument a sect, as naturally and as inevitably as their modern western counterparts make ideologies and political parties.⁷²

The contrast between the Kharijism presented in theological sources and actual historical examples of Kharijite rebellion is not altogether surprising. Theologians were in the business of arranging Islamic society into neat idealized categories—according to attitudes, beliefs, and doctrines. Such theoretical constructs fostered the sense that everyone was accounted for, that everyone fit somewhere within Islam's great chain of being. In other words, theological works were intended to order and control intellectually what was in truth a rather messy historical picture. The cases referred to above show how blurred a genre Kharijism probably was. The problem, however, is that these glimpses into the social reality of Kharijism are the exception not the rule. Rather than cut through the idealized view of Kharijism served up by Islamic theology, historical sources present layers of mystification all their own. Scholars who wish to test the argument that Kharijism was a social model of rebellion are faced more often than not with finely sifted accounts that make Kharijite history read like a series of patterned events. The letter of the Kharijite leader al-Mustawrid b. 'Ullifah to the Umayyad governor of

al-Mada'in, Simak b. 'Ubayd, typifies the interpretive difficulties. It adduces a number of reasons for rebelling, but they are general in nature:

On behalf of our people, we take revenge for oppressive judgment, suspension of divine ordinances, and the monopolization of the spoils. We call you to the Book of God, the example of His Prophet, and the rule of Abu Bakr and 'Umar; and to disavow 'Uthman and 'Ali for their innovations in religion and their departure from the judgment of the Book. If you accept, you will have regained your senses. If you don't accept, we can provide no more excuses for you and will declare war.⁷³

The themes of this letter, if not the exact phrasing, are repeated by numerous Kharijite figures in both the Umayyad and Abbasid periods. They hover above the events like clouds blocking our view of the social and political reality. There are only so many times that one can come across a Kharijite leader making a canned platform speech or dictating a form letter before one realizes that one is not getting the full story. Did these Kharijites all, coincidentally, want the same thing? Did they all memorize the same Kharijite catechism? Did they all follow the accepted form for expressing dissent? Or did the historical sifting process have a tendency to harmonize expressions of Kharijism/rebellion?

Although these speeches and letters offer little to go on, most cases of Kharijite rebellion are even less informative. The sources are replete with brief accounts of one or several Kharijites rebelling. These accounts, too, follow patterns. For example, someone goes out from the community proclaiming "Judgment belongs only to God." The phrase itself—the Kharijite watchword—seemingly identifies the actor, but we are provided with no specific reason or context for such a revolt. Or we are told that a certain Kharijite revolted against a certain local leader, but the story goes no further. All these people may indeed have been ideologically committed Kharijites, or they may have been Kharijites in the generic sense of rebels, or the two types may have been indistinguishable at the time. To claim that one such event is clearly a case in which Kharijite means rebel, as Bosworth did, is to suggest that one has seen behind the historical patterns; and this leads logically to comparing similar events. If the entire edifice of Kharijism is not to crumble, and it should not, then a means must be devised for analyzing these patterns. To date, no method has proven up to the task.⁷⁴ In the end, the historical tradition leaves the reader to marvel at the intensity with which Kharijism seems to have taken hold of Muslims in the first several centuries of Islam. The sheer number of rebellious episodes attributed to the Kharijites underscores the

challenges—social, religious, and political—that Muslim authorities must have faced.

For our purposes, we need only draw attention to the fact that Kharijism was a complex social and religious movement whose roots lie in the partisan conflict of the first civil war (656–661), and whose rebellious and violent actions left their mark on the early Islamic polity and the history of Islamic thought. Notwithstanding historical critical questions about the motives of those identified as Kharijites in early historical sources, Kharijism has an unequivocal legacy in the Islamic tradition, one that cannot be easily reduced to that of pure rebellion. Like generic rebels everywhere, the Kharijites embody anti-establishment attitudes and behavior. But unlike a more universal notion of rebels, the image of the Kharijites is that they never rise up to defend a just cause or to denounce an unjust ruler.⁷⁵ They always separate themselves from both leaders and fellow Muslims who are worthy of respect, and they always kill those who truly deserve better. Most important, despite wearing their faith on their sleeves, they never really represent the principles of Islam for which they claim to fight. Though wrapping themselves in the mantle of religious devotion, Kharijite rebellions are more reflective of an unfounded pious self-righteousness and a fanatical commitment to an unrealistic and unobtainable social purity. In a very real sense, the Kharijites represent within the Islamic tradition all that the dominant Sunni majority came to reject, morally, politically, socially, and theologically. As has been suggested throughout this analysis, the image of the Kharijites is, in large part, the result of a Sunni-controlled vision of the Islamic past. And, for this reason, one must expect that the lessons to be learned from the past will be Sunni lessons, and they will come at the expense of Sunni opponents such as the Kharijites. We have already discussed the none-too-subtle lesson about Kharijism that al-Shahrastani attempted to teach in his heresiographic work. Other medieval thinkers also saw the Kharijites as a heuristic device that could communicate an important message about moderation in religion and respect for established authority.

The following story, which appears in numerous sources, notably those offering advice to rulers, demonstrates the extent to which the Kharijites were used as a foil for legitimating caliphal power and authority. It involves the actions of the Abbasid caliph al-Hadi during an encounter with a lone Kharijite who had been brought before him after being taken prisoner. The account as related by Mas'udi, in *The Meadows of Gold* (*Muruj al-dhahab*), is included under the heading “An Example of His Bravery” and seems to serve as a parable for the wise ruler. A brief character description informs the reader that while al-Hadi was known for being “hard-hearted, ill-tempered, [and]

stubborn,” he was also “well-bred, strong, brave, and generous.”⁷⁶ Then the following story is related with no accompanying commentary:

Ibrahim was actually with al-Hadi, who at the time was mounted on a donkey in a garden named after him in Baghdad, when the caliph was informed that a Kharijite had been captured. Al-Hadi ordered that the man be brought before him. As the Kharijite drew near, he grabbed a sword from one of the guards and continued toward al-Hadi. “I drew back,” said Ibrahim, “and so did those around me.” Al-Hadi remained motionless on the donkey, but when the Kharijite was almost upon him, the caliph shouted, “Cut off his head!” Though no one was behind him, the Kharijite was distracted and looked away. Al-Hadi then leapt upon him, knocking him to the ground; he seized the sword from his hand and sliced off his head. Ibrahim said, “We feared al-Hadi more than we feared the Kharijite, but, by God, he did not blame us for abandoning him. And from that day, he never rode his donkey and he always carried his sword.”⁷⁷

Whether apocryphal or not, the story is replete with symbolism and lessons to be learned for both ruler and ruled. First, there is the image of the rabid Kharijite who, seemingly unprovoked, takes hold of a sword and tries to attack the ruler. No explanation is offered for the Kharijite’s behavior because none was thought necessary. He was, after all, a Kharijite, a member of an extremist movement known for rebelling with sword in hand. Second, we have the reaction of those around al-Hadi. Their fear and revulsion are symbolic of the response of the masses to the threat of the Kharijites. Symbolic, too, is their inability to defend themselves or Islam effectively without the leadership of the caliph. Their only saving quality is that they feared al-Hadi more than the Kharijite, as they should given the caliph’s demonstration of power. But the underlying message for the masses is clear: people who live with such fears need the constant guidance and strong hand of the caliph. Finally, we have the hero of the tale, al-Hadi, whose calm and certitude won out over the Kharijite rebel. Unlike the Kharijite, who relied on uncontrolled violence to achieve his goal, al-Hadi employed his wisdom and guile. Of course, the caliph also resorted to violence to dispatch his attacker, but his use of force is presented as controlled and in self-defense. Thus the character of al-Hadi as embodied in the story serves as a model for caliphs. Like al-Hadi, caliphs may find it necessary to be hard-hearted and vicious when dealing with rebels like the Kharijites, but they must also be generous and liberal with those who, though feckless, are loyal. Moreover, all rulers could learn from al-Hadi the importance of a strong defense, for “from that day, he . . . always

carried his sword." From this encounter with one Kharijite, then, any caliph could take away a formula for dealing with all Kharijites, all rebels: wisdom and strength can overcome violent opposition.

Al-Hadi's confrontation with a Kharijite rebel was recounted in early Islamic sources for the benefit of other Muslims, particularly Muslim leaders. That Kharijism could be a cross-cultural morality tale is evident in the writing of the North African rabbi Sa'adiah (d. 942), the tenth-century Jewish scholar who served as the Gaon or dean of the Babylonian academy. Conversant in several Semitic languages, Sa'adiah Gaon translated the Bible and halakhic works into Arabic. He was one of the first rabbis to adopt a secular science approach to biblical exegesis (*peshat*), one that promoted historical, linguistic, and literary analysis of the text.⁷⁸ It was this same method that Sa'adiah brought to bear on the so-called Karaite Jewish heresy that had arisen in the mid-eighth century under the leadership of Anan ben David. Karaism split with rabbinic Judaism over its rejection of the oral tradition, allowing only the authority of the written Torah, hence the common reference to Karaites as scripturalists.⁷⁹ Sa'adiah Gaon addressed the errors of Karaism by attacking what was widely perceived as their naive literalism. In his role as defender of rabbinic Judaism, he sought to portray Karaites as enemies of the orthodox Jewish faith, which brings us to the Kharijite connection. In one of his works, he accuses Anan of being a Kharijite; and in another, he adopts the names Kharijites and *ahl al-jama'a*, the Sunni phrase meaning community, to juxtapose, polemically, Karaism and rabbinic Judaism.⁸⁰ Here the concept of Kharijism, in its Sunni formulation as the epitome of sectarian heterodoxy, has been brought into a Jewish debate to lend support to the religious establishment by symbolically anathematizing the Karaite opposition. So fixed in the Islamic tradition had the antagonism between Kharijism and Sunni orthodoxy become that its meaning could influence the interpretive maneuvers of a medieval Jewish scholar familiar with the religious language of Islam.

That Kharijites were a driving force in the early development of Islam, and in medieval Muslim representations of that period, is evident from the materials presented thus far. But their dominant impact on early Muslim life and thought did not continue throughout the course of Islamic history. By the mid-to-late tenth century, Kharijite uprisings had waned, although the eastern provinces still experienced isolated episodes. By this time, too, Ibadi communities in Oman and North Africa had established themselves as viable political and military entities, examples of self-sustaining minority religious communities that existed throughout the empire. Their Kharijite loyalty, however, was

expressed in historical and ideological terms, not active challenges to the Abbasid Caliphate in Baghdad. For the ruling authorities, the more pressing threat, replacing the Kharijites, was the Rafidites, an extremist Shi'i sect. Their violent tactics, like those of the Kharijites before them, were regarded by most Muslims, Shi'a and Sunni alike, as dangerous to the integrity of the Muslim community and, therefore, un-Islamic. Whether it was due to the fact that the Kharijites had disappeared or that they had lost their dissident appeal, later scholars did not view them in the same obsessive way that earlier Muslim thinkers had.

The famous historian and social thinker Ibn Khaldun (d. 1403), for example, had comparatively little to say about the Kharijites. They were, for him, a historical movement that had a limited impact on the larger issue with which he concerned himself in his classic work the *Muqaddimah*. Ibn Khaldun's real interest was the factors contributing to the ebb and flow of civilizations, particularly Islam. A successful civilization, according to Ibn Khaldun, required two forces: *'asabiyya* or a kind of group solidarity based on either blood, alliance, or clientship; and religion, which unites everyone under the same belief and, thereby, serves to enhance the ties of group solidarity.⁸¹ The decline and fall of a civilization, he maintained, is heralded by signs of weakness, such as division and infighting. The ebb of the Islamic civilization did not occur till the Abbasid period, which explains why Ibn Khaldun could be so dismissive of the Kharijites. They had emerged much earlier, when Islam was at its strongest phase of development, when it was bent on conquest and institution building. Assessing the political situation at the time of the Umayyads, he writes,

no dissension made itself felt over the whole period of (the Arab Muslim dynasty), except for the disturbances of the Kharijites, who were willing to die for their heresy. That (however) had nothing to do with royal authority and (political) leadership, and they were not successful, because they were up against a strong group feeling [*'asabiyya*].⁸²

Written in the late-fourteenth century, the *Muqaddimah* reflects an intellectual and political climate in which the Kharijites no longer had relevancy. More important, unlike previous Muslim writers, Ibn Khaldun had the historical advantage of knowing that the Kharijites had indeed faded from the forefront of Islamic civilization, surviving in historical memory.

The place of the Kharijites in the Islamic tradition was fixed by the conscious efforts of medieval Muslim scholars who established and passed on what came to be orthodox Sunni Islam, an orthodoxy that cast the Kharijites

in the role of heterodox rebels. The introduction of this traditional image of the Kharijites into the political and religious discourse of modern Egypt required a similar conscious effort on the part of thinkers who found the image relevant to the Egyptian condition. What was this condition? Beginning in the 1940s and continuing into the 1990s, Egypt experienced numerous episodic outbursts of religiously justified violence. The goal of this violence, according to the radicalized Islamists who perpetrated it, was to destabilize, if not overthrow, the political system in Egypt, which moderate and radical Islamists alike regarded as corrupt and un-Islamic. The choice of victims reflected the political nature of Islamist militancy; the dead and injured were for the most part government officials and state employees, individuals who in one capacity or another represented the public face of the ruling regime.

In later phases of Islamist violence, Egyptian civilians and foreign tourists were also attacked and killed, but militants continued to see these operations as attempts to undermine the domestic and international reputation of Egypt and hence the legitimacy of the modern state. The Egyptian government adopted a two-pronged approach to these attacks: first, it attempted to destroy the infrastructure of militant Islamist groups through mass arrests and selective executions. Second, it embarked on an official propaganda campaign designed to condemn these groups in the public eye. In official pronouncements and the popular media, the militants were variously described as criminals, terrorists, and social deviants, but the characterization that proved most controversial and divisive was Kharijites. It is to the political culture in which the Kharijite image was first evoked in Egypt that we now turn.

If Ibn Khaldun could survey the modern Islamic scene in Egypt, it would no doubt surprise him to learn that the reverberations of Kharijism echo into the twentieth century, that modern Muslim activists are often accused of being neo-Kharijites. It might also surprise him to learn that his writing receives more attention from non-Muslim thinkers than from Muslim thinkers. In an odd way, these two phenomena converge in the debate over modern Islam in Egypt. Sometimes referred to as the Weber of Islam, Ibn Khaldun wrote from the perspective of an early modern social scientist, not a theologian or establishment ideologue. This has made his insights of special value for modern Western scholars who like to think that his work reflects an unvarnished, insider's view of Islam. By contrast, Islamists largely ignore him, preferring instead those works that transmit the kind of idealized version of Islam that Ibn Khaldun shunned. Whereas Ibn Khaldun sought to extract useful patterns from a comparative study of history, Islamists hold up as a model a particular Islamic period, that of the Prophet Muhammad and the first four caliphs. It is

the patterns established by Muhammad that they wish to recreate and follow—spiritually, socially and politically—in their modern lives.

Most Islamists do not naively live in the past, as critics often argue, but they do speak to the times in which they live through the language and ideas of an idealized past. The general trend among Islamists to go forward by looking back creates a rhetorical mode that is foreign to secularists and many modernist Muslims, not to mention Western observers. But it is quite familiar to traditionalists or conservatives who tend to see the modern world through eyes trained in the classics of medieval Islamic learning. Despite their many differences, traditionalists and Islamists share important common ground in the Islamic culture of Egypt. They both imbue the past with an authority that is absolute and that serves their own interests. For they claim to be the modern inheritors of that authority, the ones who decide how the past, and which aspects of the past, is to be interpreted in the modern world. The Kharijites are one aspect of the past that was given new life, at least initially, by establishment-oriented traditionalists. The specific factors that led to this revived interest in the Kharijites will be traced out in the following chapters.

In the brief lines remaining, more must be said about the traditional image of the Kharijites and the way that image was tapped by modern thinkers.

We began this chapter by citing the *al-Ahram* opinion column that spoke out against resorting to the label Kharijite when describing Muslim youth. At first glance, it might seem that this opinion was intended to defend Islamism and its proponents against unjust accusations. Sympathy for Islamist beliefs and goals, however, is not the impetus behind it. The real concern is to prevent the indiscriminate use and manipulation of the foundational stage of Islam, a time that, so the author believes, is so exceptional in Islamic history that it is inappropriate and disrespectful to take its “sacred stories” and apply them in other historical contexts. In effect, the author wants to cordon off this sacred historical ground in order to save Muslims from judging one another according to unobtainable ideals. His agenda, then, if realized, would disarm both the ‘ulama’, who often wield the label “Kharijite,” and the Muslim youth, who stand accused of Kharijism and who wield rhetorical weapons of their own.

Given the importance of Muhammad and his early followers in the religious life of modern Muslims, the opinions expressed in the article were not likely to change many minds. Egyptian Muslims may not always approve of the manner in which the debate about the role of Islam in Egypt takes place. But to give up the terms of the debate simply because they are highly charged would require sacrificing much of the tradition. After all, these early sacred

stories do little good for modern Muslims if they cannot be made relevant to their lives. Indeed, it is the circulation and use of these stories across generations of Muslims, both to inspire and criticize one another, that keep the tradition alive. Although perhaps well intentioned, the article's concern about interpretive abuse of the sacred past glosses several fundamental points about the nature of tradition that should guide our analysis. First, the past never arrives in the present unmediated. Modern Egyptian thinkers could only evoke the Kharijites as a ready-made negative symbol to employ against Islamists because of the efforts of medieval scholars, as we have learned. Second, sacred stories, symbols, and ideals are subject to continuous regeneration and reinterpretation. Once awakened, Kharijism could be used to further not only traditional but also nontraditional, nonestablishment ideas, as we shall see.