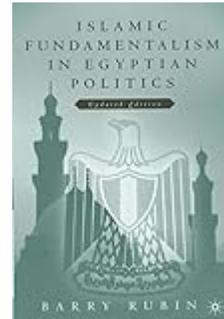**Barry Rubin.** *Islamic Fundamentalism in Egyptian Politics.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002. 178 pp. $89.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4039-6156-3; $31.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-4039-6074-0.

Reviewed by John T. Chalcraft (Edinburgh University)

Fundamentalism Updated

The aftermath of September 11, the occupation of Iraq, and the "war on terror" present a pertinent context for the publication of an updated edition of Barry Rubin's *Islamic Fundamentalism in Egyptian Politics.* Effective, scholarly analyses of Islamism and of groups (both governmental and non-governmental) that use terror as a tactic are surely a vital part of public debate and policy-making alike, particularly at a time when world leaders and governments continue the twentieth century tradition of "repeatedly and calamitously misjudg[ing] ... the ultimate consequences of their command decisions ... [revealing] an ignorance that has cost humanity a price in suffering beyond any measure."[1] Who better to give such an analysis than an author with a string of publications on U.S. foreign policy, the Arab/Israeli conflict, Iran, and Arab nationalism, an author who argued presciently in the first edition of the book in question–before the major confrontations of the 1990s–that Islamism in Egypt "lacks the capability to overthrow the government" (p. 1)?

The updated edition is not an extensive revision. The original text is left intact. Added on are a short preface, an extra chapter extending the argument of the first edition chronologically through the 1990s, and a new appendix containing an interesting extract from Ayman al-Zawahiri's *Knights Under the Prophet's Banner.*

The purpose of both editions is the same: "to identify and analyze the political positions of Egyptian Islamic fundamentalist movements and their chances for seizing power" (p. 3). As for the argument, both editions retain Rubin's serviceable, if crude, division of the "fundamentalists" into "four main forces, each demanding a more Islamic society": the pro-government mainstream clergy, the reformist Muslim Brotherhood, the *jam'iyat* (campus or neighborhood associations who do not focus on state power), and the *jama'at* "small, underground groups that seek a violent revolution" (p. 1). The first edition had already argued that Egypt's "fundamentalists" were dogged by deep internal divisions in doctrine and leadership, and that their more radical cadres lacked popularity among the Egyptian population. Absent a "systemic crisis," Rubin concluded in 1990, a revolution was unlikely (p. 153). In the updated edition Rubin argues that the Islamists' "revolutionary war" during the 1990s

was defeated because of "the government's clever multi-layered strategy; the strength of the regime's institutions and the security agencies' loyalty; the lack of popular support for the radicals; and divisions among the insurgent groups" (p. 156).

The most important contribution of the book is that it takes forward our understanding of what Olivier Roy and Gilles Kepel have noted as the failure of political Islam to take power nationally and thereby gives glimpses of the background to the internationalization of jihad and events such as September 11. Most significantly, Rubin stressed in the first edition the "inward-looking nature" of Egypt's "fundamentalists" (p. 123). In spite of hostile rhetoric directed at Israel and the US, Islamists were almost entirely focused on taking power in Egypt, believing that any conflict with external enemies would have to be postponed until after the revolution (p. 113). Rubin also shows that Egypt's Islamists showed little interest in pursuing "fundamentalist struggles in Syria and Jordan", were often lukewarm or even hostile towards the Islamic revolution in Iran, and they "neither have nor are seeking foreign patrons or models" (pp. 123-124). It is fascinating therefore to confront the question of how and why this inward-orientation was transformed and externalized, at least for certain important Egyptian figures, such as al-Zawahiri, who ultimately became an important figure in al-Qa'ida. Rubin shows–implicitly at least–that the domestic failure to take power was a part of this story.

A strength of the book lies in its attention to fractures and divisions within "fundamentalism" and in particular Rubin's insistence that the majority of the Egyptian population find the *jama'at*'s interpretation of Islam to be at odds with their own. Although hardly original, at least such a thesis resists the all-too-common Orientalist stereotyping of Islamic movements and populations as monolithic and inherently violent. Rubin, to his credit, more or less steers clear of the more obvious manifestations of the Orientalist vulgate. Rubin's divided "fundamentalists," further, at least get to speak through the author's quite effective use of quotations, and more especially through the appendix–even if the latter remains largely unanalyzed.

Still, the contribution to the literature is fairly modest. Others have covered similar ground. The book comes across less as a scholarly tome, and more as a factual handbook and chronicle of events–based largely on the press and various translated articles–which seeks to establish the limited, empirical thesis that Islamic "fundamentalists" in Egypt do not and will not pose a real revolutionary threat to the Mubarak regime. It is oriented to a general audience and perhaps most specifically, to policy-makers, above all in the United States.

Rubin makes remarkably little use of the substantial body of scholarship extant on Islamic revivalism. He engages to some extent with Gilles Kepel, Saad Eddin Ibrahim, and one or two others, but English and translated Arabic journalism make up the bulk of the footnotes and bibliography. The latter is weak, listing fewer than twenty-five books. Many important scholars–such as Ervand Abrahamian, Nazih Ayubi, Carrie Rosefsky Wickham, Olivier Roy, and Sami Zubaida–are simply ignored. Rubin's position in the larger scholarly conversation is therefore not clear, and at no point does he explain what he thinks is distinctive about his approach or his thesis. That the book ends without a conclusion of any kind is a symptom of this lack. The scholarly deficit extends to the absence of engagement with larger debates, even on themes central to the argument of the book: the state, regime stability, revolution, social protest, and terrorism. The author is apparently either innocent of or uninterested in such debates.

The lack of scholarship is sorely felt where terms central to the argument–"fundamentalism" and "terrorism," for example–are introduced and deployed throughout with a minimum of analysis or scholarly reference. Even Rubin's own work (he edited a volume called *The Politics of Terrorism* published in 1989) turns up scant analysis of what the term "terrorism" is supposed to mean.[2] The extensive literature on terrorism, and the vexed debate centering around the problem of "freedom fighters" and "terrorists" is not even addressed or referenced. Nonetheless, we hear throughout the volume of terrorism and terrorists, as if these were a special category of persons with a distinctive identity, practice, and worldview. Where Rubin quotes Islamists themselves on the deaths of innocents the picture is already blurred, but this receives no analysis (p. 177). It is further instructive that Islamists portray themselves as acting in self-defense (against the "aggression" of the government, for example), and, unsurprisingly, not as "terrorists." Parallels to the way the U.S. government justified defending itself against the "aggression" of the Soviet Union during the Cold War inevitably spring to mind, but no such analysis is possible where one group of actors are relegated to the catch-all category "terrorist". In this context, the Hollywood term "bad guys" would be no less useful. In Rubin's hands, the term "terrorist" is a blanket-term, a kind of mystifying shorthand, and it obscures rather than clarifies effective analysis of the dynamics of Islamism.

Rubin repeatedly invokes the blunt term "fundamentalism," in spite of his own useful emphasis on internal division among Islamists and his important point that Islamism is in part a movement of innovation rather than tradition (p. 152). The reader becomes increasingly uneasy that figures as diverse as the pro-government Shaykh of Al-Azhar and the committed militant al-Zawahiri are both somehow in the same category–"fundamentalist." That both men demand "a more Islamic society" (p. 1) is hardly sufficient basis for the use of this term, although scant further justification is offered. The heavy use of the term "fundamentalist" is therefore either misleading, because it conveys an impression of unity where none exists, or it is incoherent, because Rubin's argument leaves us in no doubt that the different Islamic movements are deeply and irreconcilably divided.

Rubin's message, now and previously, is that Islamists are not going to take power in Egypt anytime soon, and thus do not pose a threat to U.S. strategy in the Middle East. The larger concern for all is that U.S. policy-makers will see this (now as before) as an opportunity to use Islamists for their own ends.

[1]. Gabriel Kolko, *Century of War: Politics, Conflicts, and Society Since 1914* (New York: The New Press, 1994), p. 454

[2]. Barry Rubin ed., *The Politics of Terrorism: Terror as a State and Revolutionary Strategy* (Washington DC: Foreign Policy Institute, Johns Hopkins Institute, 1989). A reviewer noted "the absence of a sustained attempt to define terrorism" in this volume. See also E. Moxon-Browne's review of Michael Watson's edited collection *Contemporary Minor Nationalism, in* International Affairs_ 67, no.2 (April 1991): p. 332.

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