The Official Endowment between Ethical Incentive and Paradigmatic Employment: A Study of Israeli Jewish Writings on the Crusader Era

MOHAMMED AMEZZIAN[*]

Abstract

The growth of endowment institutions and charitable activities witnessed significant expansion during political transitions in the Levant, Iraq, and Egypt. Notably, this trend became more pronounced following the post-Crusades with the Zengid, Ayyubid, and Mamlūk states. These institutions and charitable endeavours became a focal point for many Jewish scholars and Israelis who devoted considerable scholarly attention to understanding the religious, social, and political dimensions of this phenomenon. This paper posits the fundamental hypothesis that these scholarly inquiries were influenced by religious and political considerations, thereby shaping Jewish memory. This memory, in turn, contributes to a reinterpretation of the region's history, leaning more towards a politically biased agenda than an objective pursuit of knowledge. Within this context, the paper seeks to unravel the paradigmatic approach that scrutinizes the ethical motivations behind charitable works, alleging that those in charge manipulated them for propaganda and political objectives to secure personal gains. To examine this hypothesis, the paper delves into the ideological foundations underpinning this skewed interpretation. It critically evaluates a selection of research conducted by a cohort of historians within a broad spectrum of Jewish scholars who share a similar methodological approach and arrive at analogous conclusions.

Keywords

endowment, charity, Jewish memory, Zengid state, Ayyubid state, bias.

Introduction

The history of Islamic civilization unfolds a dynamic engagement of political figures occupying various positions within the political and administrative hierarchy in the realm of charitable endeavours. This phenomenon is notably pronounced during historical epochs marked by political turbulence and civilizational challenges, specifically in the Levant to the east and Egypt to the west during the era of the Crusades,

---

[*] Professor of Islamic Political Thought, College of Sharia, Qatar University, Qatar.

spanning two centuries and forming the central theme of this study. Amidst this extended period, these regions witnessed intense conflicts with the Crusader invasion and subsequent upheavals, fundamentally altering the political landscape. This era also witnessed the ascendancy of resistance political forces, such as the Zengid and Ayyubid dynasties, followed by the emergence of the Mamlūk state.

Within this intricate tapestry of religious and political conflicts, there arose an unprecedented proliferation of charity and endowment-based educational institutions. This surge symbolized a cultural renaissance, signifying a societal initiative with a clear strategic vision aimed at restoring the historical role of emerging Sunni political powers in the region. Although this movement reflected a state of comprehensive mobilization involving all actors at social and political levels, the ruling political elite played the most significant role in leading this movement, as reflected in their substantial contribution to endowment institutions compared to other segments of society.

The focus of this paper is to explore the intensive presence of this endowment activity during the Crusader period in contemporary Israeli Jewish studies. Jewish narratives frequently prioritize pragmatic motives over religious or moral considerations. Adopting a critical reading perspective, this paper discusses the hypothesis of paradigmatic employment present in Jewish writings, with a particular focus on Israeli perspectives. It underscores the distortive trend in analysing data sourced from Arab historical accounts.

Israeli Jewish Studies and Research Focus

The examples explored in this study illustrate a strong connection between Jewish writings on this subject and Jewish collective memory. These writings convey a shared awareness among Jewish writers, often offering stereotypical interpretations with a discernible revisionist tendency. This is particularly evident in the examination of past events, specifically pertaining to the religious, social, cultural, and economic history of the Islamic East region during the Crusader era. The impact of these studies is palpable in their organizational strength and academic excellence. Jewish and Israeli researchers engaged in this process are strategically positioned within governmental research institutions and centres, both within and outside Israel.

Area of Research Focus

The geographical focus of these scholars is not arbitrary; their research centres on the Levant and Egypt, particularly in relation to Jerusalem as the symbolic cradle. Their investigations are intricately tied to the era of cultural resurgence in the region; marked by the Zengid, Ayyubid, and

Mamlūk states—key Sunni political powers that significantly affected the fate of Jerusalem during the Crusades.

One of the pioneering figures in the field of research exploring the intersections of Jewish life and Islamic societies is Shelomo Goitein (1900-1985), a distinguished Jewish ethnographer and German historian renowned for his comprehensive encyclopedia on Jewish life in Islamic societies.[1] This pioneering research interest extends to a new generation of Israeli historians who have dedicated their research to ancient and medieval Jewish history, Middle Eastern history, and the intricate relationships between Jews and Arab Islamic societies.

Among these scholars, Yehoshua Frenkel stands out as a particularly brilliant mind, blending diverse scientific interests that traverse both Jewish and Islamic studies. Serving as a professor of Middle Eastern history at the University of Haifa, Frenkel held academic positions in esteemed research centres, including the Department of Israeli Studies and the Department of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies. His research focuses on a broad spectrum of topics, such as popular culture, Islamic literature, societal practices, and social history in Egypt and Syria, with a particular emphasis on the Mamlūk era. Frenkel has made significant contributions through various studies exploring embassies, diplomacy, *jihād*, endowments, and charitable works during the Mamlūk era. His extensive works delve into Egyptian-Ottoman-Mamlūk history, the impact of the Crusades on the Levant region, the role of Jews in Islamic societies, and their interactions with Muslims, as well as the contributions of Muslim scholars and travellers. This multifaceted approach underscores Frenkel's influential role in shaping our understanding of the historical dynamics in the Middle East.[2]

Another distinguished figure within this academic group is Miriam Frenkel, affiliated with the Department of Jewish History and Contemporary Judaism at the Hebrew University in occupied Jerusalem. She emerges as an active participant in numerous local and international research centres that specialize in Jewish history and relations. Miriam Frenkel's research predominantly centres on the intricate exploration of social, religious, cultural, and economic facets of Jewish life within Islamic medieval societies. Her focused areas of study include the Jewish presence in regions such as Egypt, Syria, and Palestine and extend to other areas like Morocco. Through her scholarly pursuits, Frenkel

---

[1] Shelomo Dov Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society: The Jewish Communities of the Arab World as Portrayed in the Documents of Cairo Geniza*, 6 vols. (Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1967-1993).

[2] https://haifa.academia.edu/YFrenkel.

contributes significantly to the understanding of the historical dynamics shaping Jewish experiences in diverse Islamic societies.[3]

Within the same university, another noteworthy historian is Ruth Roded, affiliated with the Department of Islam and Middle Eastern History. Her research endeavours centre around the social and cultural history of the Middle East, with a particular emphasis on women and gender issues. Roded has authored numerous research papers exploring women's roles in Islam and the lived experiences of women in Islamic societies. Beyond gender studies, she has also contributed to the field of religious history and comparative religions, making notable research contributions to historical *waqf* experiences and Ottoman studies.[4]

Additionally, Miriam Hoexter, based in the Department of Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies at the same university, holds the position of professor in Islamic and Middle Eastern studies. Her scholarly pursuits are primarily dedicated to investigating the history of charitable and endowment work in Islamic societies. Hoexter's research sheds light on the historical dimensions of philanthropy and endowments within the context of Islamic societies, contributing valuable insights to this field of study.

At the Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, the noteworthy figure of Daniella Talmon-Heller comes to the forefront. As a distinguished professor specializing in pre-modern Middle Eastern history within the Department of Middle Eastern Studies, Talmon-Heller has made significant contributions to historical studies. Her extensive research portfolio encompasses various facets of Islamic and Jewish religious life in the Levant and Fatimid Egypt. Additionally, she has delved into the exploration of holy places and shrines in the region, shedding light on their historical significance. Furthermore, Talmon-Heller's research extends to the study of charitable works, specifically focusing on the Zengid and Ayyubid endowments in the Syrian region. Her scholarly investigations provide insights into the impact of the Crusades and the charitable initiatives undertaken during this period.[5]

A noteworthy academic figure with a keen interest in Islamic history is historian Amy Singer. She initiated her academic career in the Department of Middle Eastern and African History at Tel Aviv University before transitioning to Brandeis University, which is supported by the Jewish community in the United States. Singer's scholarly pursuits

---

[3] https://huji.academia.edu/MiriamFrenkel.

[4] https://huji.academia.edu/RuthRoded.

[5] https://bgu.academia.edu/DaniellaTalmonHeller.

concentrate on Ottoman religious, social, political, and economic history, with a particular emphasis on Palestinian-Ottoman relations. She has distinguished herself through her scholarly writings on endowments and charitable works in Islamic societies. Her contributions to the understanding of the historical dimensions of philanthropy and endowments have garnered recognition, earning her awards of appreciation in this field. Through her research, Singer has enriched our comprehension of the intricate tapestry of Islamic history, particularly within the Ottoman context.[6]

At Bar-Ilan University, Yaacov Lev is a prominent figure in the Department of Middle Eastern History. Renowned as one of the most prolific Israeli historians, his extensive body of work spans various dimensions, encompassing the religious, social, political, administrative, economic, and military history of medieval Islamic societies, with a particular focus on Egypt, Syria, and Palestine during the Crusader era. Lev has authored numerous papers delving into topics such as endowments and charitable works, Islam and Judaism, city studies, cultural analyses, the status of non-Muslims in Islamic societies, wars, prisons and society, the role of women in Islamic societies, and the relationships between scholars and authority. His comprehensive research portfolio also includes studies that meticulously analyse the experiences of rule under the Fatimid, Zengid, and Ayyubid dynasties, along with specific attention to Ismāʿīlīs.[7]

Also among the names that will be mentioned repeatedly in this study is Andrew Ehrenkreutz, a Polish Jew who pursued his higher education at the University of London under the supervision of Bernard Lewis, a leading figure in the Jewish revisionist school. Ehrenkreutz later served as a professor of Middle Eastern history at the University of Michigan. Notably, his research centred on the Islamic economic history of the region, earning him recognition for his work. Ehrenkreutz gained fame for his book on Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Ayyūbī (d. 1193 CE), in which he articulated negative and biased positions, as will be further discussed below in this study. His perspectives, influenced by the Jewish revisionist school, add a distinctive dimension to the exploration of historical narratives related to the Islamic world.

The Zionist Background of Israeli Writings

Israeli and Jewish research in this field often centres on emphasizing the deep-rooted nature of Jewish presence in the region. The narrative

---

[6] https://brandeis.academia.edu/AmySinger.

[7] https://independent.academia.edu/YaacovLev.

suggests that Jews were a significant social, scientific, and economic force, wielding broad influence. While one purpose of these documentary studies may be to preserve Jewish memory concerning Middle Eastern history, this paper argues that another perspective posits a more controversial intention—to potentially erase the memory of the indigenous people of the land by distorting their history. This distortion could involve asserting the primacy of the Jewish presence and claiming historical rights to the region. Therefore, Jewish historical writings follow a dual trajectory, affirming the deep-rootedness of Jewish presence while concurrently engaging in the potential falsification of Islamic history. This duality accounts for the substantial volume of research undertaken by prominent Israeli writers and Jews more broadly. Their investigations span the religious, social, cultural, economic, and political history of the region, as well as the dynamics of Jewish-Islamic relations during pre-modern Islamic history.

The reoccupation of Jerusalem involves distorting the social, political, and military history of the region by stripping historical narratives of their symbolic significance. This distortion aims to reshape the collective consciousness of the region's population and mislead global public opinion regarding its political and social history. I argue that the prevailing methodology guiding much of the research in this domain aligns with efforts to Judaize the region's history, erasing its Arab-Islamic identity and facilitating the political integration of the Zionist occupation within a Middle Eastern geography devoid of national and religious identity.

It is crucial to emphasize that this biased perspective is not universally applicable to all Israeli and Jewish scholars. Evidence exists of a distinguished cohort of Jewish intellectuals, whose scholarly works reflect academic integrity, actively opposing Zionist and Jewish fundamentalist racism.[8] This critical tradition provides a valuable avenue for unearthing biases among Jewish and Israeli writers influenced by racist Zionist ideology. Moreover, this bias is underscored by the fact that such research is not solely driven by the intellectual curiosity of individual researchers but is systematically produced by specialized research centres operating within a strategic vision aimed at consolidating and perpetuating the occupation. This strategic direction is manifested in the objectives outlined on the official websites of the universities and research centres listed below.

---

[8] Daphna Levit, *Wrestling with Zionism: Jewish Voices of Dissent* (Northampton, MA, Interlink Books 2020).

The methodological limitations apparent in the studied sample are evident in its prejudiced judgements, arbitrary interpretations, and erroneous generalizations. These shared characteristics warrant the classification of these works as stereotypical writings, as they perpetuate a negative and recurring stereotypical image. This persistent portrayal cannot be solely attributed to interpretive errors, misunderstandings, or a lack of evidence; rather, it appears to be a result of a systematic distortion process. This interpretation gains significant support from the insights presented by the Israeli author Israel Shahak in his analysis of shared religious and cognitive traditions between Zionist ideology and Jewish orthodoxy. In his critical work, Shahak elaborates on this tendency of distortion, asserting its deep roots in Jewish sources, particularly the Talmud. In elucidating this tendency, he highlights the combination of prevarication with prejudice.[9] He delves into the concept of "orthodoxy and interpretation,"[10] examining the historical practices of Jewish rabbis throughout their religious, social, and political history. Shahak points to the manipulation of sacred texts, whether in relation to Jewish beliefs or their interactions with non-Jews. According to this analysis, these methods are not only present in historical contexts but are actively embraced by Zionist ideology across various facets, particularly in its promotion of extreme racism.

The question at hand revolves around the extent to which Israeli universities and research centres can remain unaffected by the influence of Jewish ideology and religious traditions. In reality, Israeli universities, where a significant number of the referenced researchers in this study are affiliated, position themselves as intellectual spaces committed to revitalizing Jewish memory and affirming Zionist ideology to assert Jewish historical existence in the region. The Department of Jewish History at the Hebrew University declares on its official page that it engages in existential questions such as: How did we get here? Who are our ancestors? Who were their ancestors? Is it true that in every generation, they rise against us to destroy us? Where did our ancestors live in the Middle Ages? What is Zionism. . . ?[11] The Faculty of Jewish Studies at Bar-Ilan University, incorporating the Department of Middle Eastern Studies to which Yaacov Lev is affiliated, declares on its official website that it serves as a fitting platform for comprehending the

---

[9] Israel Shahak, *Jewish History, Jewish Religion: The Weight of Three Thousand Years* (London: Pluto Press, 2005), 16.

[10] Ibid., 30.

[11] "Department of Jewish History and Contemporary Jewry," accessed October 27, 2022, https://en.jewish-history.huji.ac.il/.

challenges posed by the Muslim population to the State of Israel and its future.[12] According to this motto, the involvement of Hebrew universities in developing their understanding of the region serves a political agenda aimed at supporting and ensuring the continuity of Israeli presence within a hostile environment. Thus, the research centres focus on training experts in specific fields with the aim of employing them as researchers in the government, intelligence, academia, business, education, and military. Moreover, the Milton Center affiliated with the Hebrew University in Jerusalem defines its mission as developing cutting-edge research and applying it for the benefit of Jewish communities worldwide. It aims to educate future leaders among scholars and prominent practitioners in all areas and forms of Jewish education, committing to encouraging strong connections between diverse Jewish ideologies and religious currents in its educational activities.[13]

The slogans representing the strategic approach of Israeli universities and research centres, as outlined, indeed suggest a departure from a neutral academic environment. Instead, they appear to shape the awareness of Israeli researchers, aligning them with Zionist goals and its racial agenda. From the standpoint of the state's logic, this strategic choice is deemed entirely logical. According to the Italian scholar Giovanni Bottero, the "reason of the state" revolves around three key pillars: knowing the appropriate means to establish, maintain, and expand the state. However, Bottero contends that the most crucial pillar is not the establishment or expansion of the state but the preservation of its existence from annihilation.[14] This is exactly what applies to the Israeli case. Hence, as an artificial state lacking historical legitimacy and facing the challenge of its continued existence, ethical considerations have no value. The reason of the state itself is a functional and non-normative concept. From a political perspective, nothing is surprising about practising deception in a Machiavellian manner as a necessity for the survival of the state. However, when scientific research engages in justifying this deception, it becomes a mere tool for legitimizing the systematic falsification practised by the occupation of the region's history and the memory of its people.

---

[12] "The Department of Middle East Studies at Bar-Ilan University," accessed October 27, 2022, https://middle-east.biu.ac.il/en.

[13] The Melton Centre for Jewish Education, accessed October 27, 2022, https://www.linkedin.com/company/the-melton-centre-for-jewish-education/

[14] Robert Bireley, *Botero: The Reason of State* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 4.

The Stereotypical Writing and Systematic Distortions

The field of studying the religious, social, political, and economic history of the Middle East during the Islamic period is vast and includes numerous prominent figures, both within and outside the Jewish academic community. The complexity and breadth of this scholarly landscape make it challenging to comprehensively explore within the constraints of this limited space. The purpose of focusing on the sample in this study is to draw the attention of the Arab reader to the leadership of Israeli historians and researchers, as well as Jewish scholars in general, in this sensitive field related to the memory of the peoples of the region. Most of these academics have become known for their biased and negative positions towards the studied experiences, even if they did not hide their admiration for them. The names that will be highlighted in this study revolve around three individuals known for their rich contributions to this field: Yaacov Lev, Andrew Ehrenkreutz, and Yehoshua Frenkel. The selection of this sample is justified by the thematic unity shared in the study, as well as the adoption of closely aligned interpretative approaches, leading to generally similar outcomes, with some variation in the degree of interpretation and distortion.

Israeli historians have extensively explored educational and charitable endowments, particularly in the Levant region and Egypt. However, their writings tend to lean towards casting doubt on the religious and ethical motivations behind these charitable activities or downplaying their significance. Instead, they often emphasize self-interest and political considerations. A prevailing argument suggests that the fear of confiscation or tax evasion was one of the primary motivations driving these endowments. According to Selim Argun, this claim assumes that political history is nothing more than a prolonged narrative of injustices corresponding to the duration of endowment activities, and Islamic societies have not known justice for the past 1,300 years.[15] On the other hand, the more prevalent and biased explanation leans towards a hypothesis that aligns with conspiracy theories rather than scientific inquiry. This hypothesis suggests that charitable endowments were politically manipulated to legitimize political hegemony and consolidate power in the hands of ruling families. No doubt reducing the rich and diverse history of charitable activities to such a simplistic and stereotypical image makes this explanation

---

[15] Selim Argun, "Elite Configurations and Clusters of Power: The Ulema, Waqf, and Ottoman State (1789-1839)," (PhD diss., Institute of Islamic Studies, McGill University, 2013), 147.

condescending to history. As Ruth Roded notes, charitable institutions, with their complex and varied histories, challenge such broad and vague generalizations.[16]

In my estimation, the true nature of the intensive charitable activity that characterized Islamic civilization cannot be comprehended in isolation from the nurturing cultural environment in which religion formed its foundational basis. This insight was pointed out by Amy Singer, who argued that charitable giving constituted a fundamental aspect of Islamic doctrine and practices from the early Islamic era to the present day, deeply rooted in religious teachings and values as expressed in the Qurʾān and Prophetic traditions.[17] In an environment steeped in a culture of generosity and altruism, it is intuitively expected that religious motives should be primary in explaining this social phenomenon. This viewpoint appears reasonable, particularly when examining the specific case of the political awakening in the Levant region, where charitable work became a tool for social and economic mobilization to support the *jihād* movement against the Crusader invasion. The heroic charitable actions during this period are extensively documented in Arab historical sources, emphasizing the moral and religious motives that inspired successive political leaders during this period. However, some Jewish and Israeli authors influenced by Zionist ideology frequently adopted a method of questioning the integrity of Muslim historians as a means to cast doubt on the integrity of the political leadership itself, as will be discussed in the section on critical notes. Because of this biased approach, their writings typically focused on removing any ethical virtue from the Sunni political forces involved in liberating the land from Crusader colonization. These authors stigmatized them as opportunistic and manipulative, accusing them of exploiting charitable works and endowment institutions for political gains that ostensibly served the interests of ruling families. The centrality of this claim to the thesis of Israeli writers will be the primary focus of our coming discussion.

This traditional narrative, seeking to discredit historical figures by presuming malicious intent, continues to be a notable characteristic of many academic researches originating from Israeli research centres and Jewish scholars in general. Through this interpretative lens that scrutinizes intentions, these authors provided a historical account of

---

[16] Ruth Roded, "The Waqf and the Social Elite of Aleppo in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries," *Turcica Journal* 22 (1988): 91.

[17] Amy Singer, "Giving Practices in Islamic Societies," *Social Research* 80, no. 2 (2013): 341.

events that they deemed as evidence but divorced from its original context agreed upon by primary sources. While this stereotypical portrayal remains consistent and repeats to varying degrees, the focus and examination of evidence may differ from one author to another.

Yaakov Lev: Political Manipulation of Charitable Acts

Within this context of distortion, Yaacov Lev stands out for his prolific work and controversial interpretations. Lev focused on monitoring the political exploitation of charitable activities and endowments in many of his studies covering various political experiences across Islamic history. Based on the numerous pieces of evidence he provided, he believes that acts of charity, such as *zakāh*, almsgiving, bequests, and endowments, were efficiently used on religious and political occasions.

In a meticulous examination of these occasions, Lev presents an extensive amount of data that he reinterprets to support his hypothesis about the political manipulation of charitable activities. While the author acknowledges personal piety as one of the motives behind acts of charity, he argues that these actions were also influenced by political considerations, particularly when it comes to acts of charity performed by rulers, women of ruling families, administrators, princes, and their entourages.[18] However, despite the seemingly balanced judgement, the overall context of his research leans towards emphasizing political rather than ethical motives. This inclination is explicitly affirmed in a dedicated section where he highlights the political deployment of charitable work as a tool manipulated by those in power to serve political goals.[19]

The vast amount of activities enumerated by the author, which entirely encompasses political, administrative, and religious functions carried out by state institutions, was not considered as manifestations symbolizing the presence of the state and its functional performance. Instead, the author worked persistently to adapt them, insisting that they are mere propaganda mechanisms used by the ruling authority to gain the trust of both the elite and the public.[20] Within the scope of this guided study, the author approached historical data as a means of revealing political accountability. He utilized this data to evaluate the motivations underlying charitable endeavours and donations within a vast political landscape that spans both time and geography. The

---

[18] Yaacov Lev, "The Ethics and Practice of Islamic Medieval Charity History," *Compass Journal* 5, no. 2 (2007): 607.

[19] Lev, *Charity, Endowments, and Charitable Institutions in Medieval Islam* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2005), 39.

[20] Lev, "Ethics and Practice of Islamic Medieval Charity History," 608.

analysis culminated in striking generalizations asserting the enduring prevalence of these practices—from the early Islamic era to the era of Ottoman rule—in various cities and regions.

According to the author, when the Fatimids first entered Egypt, they chose the old mosque in Fusṭāṭ as the site for distributing alms due to its religious significance, being considered the most revered mosque in Egypt. This event was distinctly political, aiming to display the benevolence of the new regime and gain public trust. This policy would later become a widespread official tradition, he claims. During official occasions such as the circumcision of the king's sons and the naming of the heir to the throne, alms were distributed, and material and financial rewards were given to garner popular support for the ruler and his new successor, targeting both the public and the elite. Even during Ramaḍān, this promotional effort extended its reach. In the evenings of Ramaḍān, when food distribution and *iftār* took place at the old mosque in Fusṭāṭ, acts of charity and piety were deliberately portrayed as symbols of political valour. This pattern persisted in other sacred months, notably during the *ḥajj* season, where alms given to impoverished children and orphans were intertwined with political messaging. This opportunistic approach also surfaced during events meant to display the ruler's sense of justice, including the scrutiny of complaints, addressing grievances, restoring seized funds and property, and releasing prisoners, regardless of their prior criminal convictions. According to the author, this particular action exemplified the politicization of criminal justice for promotional purposes, serving as a showcase of the ruler's perceived mercy. This political employment extends to events that exemplify the ruler's compassion and concern for his people, encompassing initiatives like tax exemptions, debt pardons, infrastructure maintenance and restoration, sewer repairs, provision of supplies to hospitals, sponsoring circumcision ceremonies for children, and efforts to combat high prices. However, this promotional effort gains heightened activity during religious holiday festivals, the commemoration of the Prophet's birthday, and the birthdays of rulers, fostering a flourishing environment for charitable activities. Regarding the numerous sacrificial offerings and substantial donations made by rulers, these acts assumed a symbolic significance, serving as a conduit for conveying sanctity and blessings from the Fatimid Imam to the broader public. Even during challenging times and crises faced by the population, the distribution of funds and essential supplies emerged as a pivotal strategy to garner support for rulers and regimes. The irony lies in his perspective that the impoverished were among the least recipients of these charitable acts. Meagre assistance was extended to them during festivals featuring food,

showcasing a blending of religious objectives with political considerations. Furthermore, he posits that resources allocated to endowment institutions in the Middle Islamic Ages frequently reached groups and individuals who did not necessarily require such support.[21] In contrast to these broad ideological generalizations, other research sheds light on a frequently overlooked aspect. It reveals that a significant portion of impoverished students and even emancipated slaves managed to access high-quality free education. This educational opportunity not only enabled them to attain wealth and a luxurious lifestyle but also facilitated their active contribution to social mobility and successful integration into professional and administrative spheres.[22]

Although his broad statements lack support from documented statistical data disclosing purported political affiliations, Lev confidently transformed them into a general principle governing all charitable activities, endowment institutions, and charitable organizations. Within the framework of this generalization, he offered a comparable array of data concerning charitable activities during the reigns of the Abbasids in Baghdad, the Ghaznavids in Iran, the Mamlūks in Egypt, and the Zengids and Ayyubids in Syria and Egypt. These instances were characterized as echoes of the Fatimid experience. In parallel, in his discussion of jihadist campaigns as well, he interpreted the adoption of specific symbols linked to the Zengid and Ayyubid dynasties as a form of political exploitation for propaganda. According to his analysis, this utilization aimed to bolster the legitimacy of these ruling dynasties in their confrontation with Crusader forces.

The motivation behind this expansive generalization across diverse historical and geographical contexts might stem from a desire to establish a negative stereotypical image, portraying Islamic social and political history as in constant conflict with its religious and ethical principles. While scepticism about the religious motivations behind *jihād* echoes traditional orientalist claims, the crux of this argument, frequently underscored by Israeli academics and, more broadly, Jewish scholars, revolves around the application of the pragmatic utilization hypothesis concerning the sanctity of *jihād* and endowment resources. The objective is to undermine the heroic image cultivated by Arab sources and numerous Western studies of the individuals who spearheaded the *jihād* and resisted the Crusader expansion.

---

[21] Lev, *Charity, Endowments, and Charitable Institutions*, 40-46.

[22] Atta Muhammad, "The Public Spheres in Medieval Islamic Societies: A Case Study of Marshall Hodgson's *The Venture of Islam*," *Islamic Studies* 61, no. 2 (2022): 161, https://doi.org/10.52541/isiri.v61i2.2014.

Regarding Nūr al-Dīn al-Zankī (d. 1174 CE), Lev encapsulates his valiant jihadist history against the Crusaders during his rule, characterizing it as a preserved mentality operating within closed ideological frameworks, "Nur aI-Din adopted the ideology of the Holy War and manipulated it for political ends."[23] Concerning Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn, the author reiterates a desire to emphasize the alleged opportunistic motivations underlying Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn's portrayal as a hero of *jihād*. He claims that Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn's achievements in the war against the Crusaders were modest and exaggerated. Furthermore, the author suggests that Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn's minister, al-Qāḍī al-Fāḍil (d. 1200 CE), fell short in his attempt to leverage the idea of "holy war" to secure his master's legitimacy. Furthermore, he was not inventive in his propaganda for Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn, instead replicating the same propaganda used by his predecessor, Nūr al-Dīn. Even when Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn conquered Jerusalem and subsequently described himself as the Mahdī and the Messiah,[24] the author suggests that he used the concept of *jihād* as a religious cover to justify his expansionist wars against his fellow Muslim neighbours rather than against the Crusaders.[25]

This historical narrative entails a compilation of accusations aimed at political leaders who governed over consecutive historical periods. These accusations will be echoed in other writings utilized in this study. The initial observation regarding this study's sample is the resemblance in the conclusions drawn. This resemblance prompts a call for attention to shared methodological errors, especially concerning unfounded generalizations, inconsistencies in explanations regarding the motivating factors behind virtuous deeds, and manipulation of historical sources, as detailed in the section on critical notes.

Andrew Ehrenkreutz: Destroying Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn's Avatar

Recognizing the imperative need for reform within Islamic society, the Zengid and Ayyubid sultans, followed by the Mamlūks, embraced a cohesive policy. This strategy was centred on establishing charitable endowment institutions, especially educational ones, and providing support to Sunni schools of jurisprudence. This consistent policy became a hallmark of Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn's rule, evident in Syria, Egypt, and Palestine following its liberation from the Crusaders.

According to Anne-Marie Eddy, Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn adhered to the legacy of Nūr al-Dīn al-Zankī by actively opposing various forms of religious

---

[23] Yaacov Lev, *Saladin in Egypt* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 9.
[24] Ibid., 107.
[25] Ibid., 106.

heresies. He focused on cultivating an elite group of scholars whose backing was essential for restoring Muslim unity, preparing for *jihād*, and fortifying the Sunni doctrine in educational institutions and religious functions.[26] This approach extended to Palestine, where Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn sought to cleanse it of Crusader influences and revive the Islamic presence, exemplified by the numerous endowments he established in Jerusalem.[27] Upon reclaiming Egypt from the Fatimids, Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn shifted his efforts towards promoting Sunni Islam and supporting Sunni scholars, evident through the establishment of numerous Sunni and Sufi schools.[28]

Despite Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn's reform policy effectively addressing the challenges of his time and his notable success in achieving reform and military objectives, his heroic history underwent deliberate revisionist scrutiny. In this revisionist context, Ehrenkreutz presented a distorted interpretation of historical events to serve his thesis, emphasizing the pragmatism of reformist Islamic symbols while stripping them of any religious or moral virtue.

In dedication to this stereotypical image, the author reduces the successful *jihād* campaign led by Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn against the Crusaders to the employment of this victory to enhance his political power and the status of the ruling dynasty. It seems that the author's primary focus was an endeavour to undermine the symbolism crafted by both Arabic and Western historical sources around the persona of Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn. As a diligent scholar well versed in Western accounts documenting Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn, he differentiated between hostile studies, characterized by bitter hatred, and those acknowledging the figure's moral and military virtues.[29] Although he positioned himself as a neutral critic between these two perspectives, the evidence we will explore, as indicated by his explicit statements, implies that he may have fallen short of this neutrality, with his words reflecting an underlying animosity.

The author initially commended the distinguished historical study conducted by the renowned British orientalist and historian Stanley Lane-Poole, titled *Saladin and the Fall of the Kingdom of Jerusalem.* He regarded it as the most famous European book about Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn and expressed deep admiration for the high scientific and professional

---

[26] Anne-Marie Eddé, *Saladin* (Paris: Flammarion, 2016), 463-64.

[27] Ibid., 476.

[28] Nathan Hofer, *The Popularization of Sufism in Ayyubid and Mamlūk Egypt, 1173-1325* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 39.

[29] Andrew S. Ehrenkreutz, *Saladin* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1972), 4.

methodology demonstrated by Lane-Poole. This included a comprehensive use of all available Eastern and Western materials and sources, ranging from textual and archaeological evidence to written and numismatic sources.[30] According to the author, one notable outcome of this work is that it became a standard reference for subsequent scholars writing about the heroic story of Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn, contributing to the reinforcement of the enduring image of the sultan.[31]

Ehrenkreutz seeks to reshape this enthusiastic perception, which was promoted by Lane-Poole and earlier Muslim scholars. He aims to challenge the stereotypical portrayal that confines Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn's identity solely to his military triumphs against the Crusaders. The author contends that reducing Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn to his military accomplishments overlooks other crucial facets of his political and military life. According to Ehrenkreutz, the entirety of Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn's character is best understood through his pursuit of establishing the rule of the Ayyubid dynasty—an inspirational idea that fuelled his political ambitions.[32] However, the author's perspective appears biased, as he remains confined to stereotypical explanations aligned with those of his colleagues in the Jewish historical school.

Because this image contradicts the reality of the autobiographical accounts found in historical writings, which highlight Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn as a model of a virtuous ruler, there is a need to concoct justifications that can be presented as counter-evidence to cast doubt on the consensus of historians. With this justificatory tendency, there are no fixed historical truths; all facts become fluid, multifaceted, and subject to opposing interpretations, even if they appear imaginative or trivial. In this dynamic historical lens, variances in priorities among rulers are construed as evidence of power struggles. The quest for political unity is reinterpreted as a guise for power usurpation, and military tactics are framed as indicators of excessive opportunism. The outcome of a lost battle is portrayed as evidence of betrayal while fortifying military fronts is depicted as evidence of political recklessness. This assortment of arbitrary interpretations would be considered unequivocally inaccurate in the realm of scholarly research adhering to rigorous documentation rules. Nevertheless, the author intentionally presents these examples without compromise. Here are instances supporting this fabrication.

---

[30] Ibid., 4.

[31] Ibid., 5.

[32] Ehrenkreutz, *Saladin*, 234.

According to Sunni scholars and political leaders, the Fatimid Caliphate was perceived as a threat to the territories of the Abbasid Caliphate. Following centuries of conflict, putting an end to Fatimid rule became a primary objective for Nūr al-Dīn al-Zankī and the military leaders dispatched to Egypt. Upon ascending to a position of power, Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn directed his efforts towards establishing a network of Sunni schools. He endowed these institutions with properties, real estate, workshops, and dedicated shops to ensure a stable income. Additionally, he appointed a select group of distinguished scholars, Sufi individuals, and students of knowledge to enhance the educational environment.[33] This strategic approach enabled Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn to advance the cause of Sunni Islam, while concurrently dismantling the Fatimid state along with its associated administrative and educational structures.[34]

Despite Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn achieving this significant historic feat in alignment with the Sunni political agenda, Ehrenkreutz contends that Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn was, in reality, a pragmatic individual motivated by personal power ambitions. He managed to portray himself successfully as an exemplary leader dedicated to the cause of Islamic unity.[35]

After Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn successfully reclaimed Egypt from the Fatimids, his foremost concern was to reestablish Sunni influence in the region, intending to make it a central stronghold for launching *jihād* against the Crusaders. This ambitious project demanded a substantial budget to support endowments, as well as the reconstruction of administrative, security, and military structures. Interestingly, this emphasis on financing the Egyptian front stood in contrast to Nūr al-Dīn al-Zankī's assessment, who advocated prioritizing the Syrian front for the same purpose. Rather than interpreting this divergence in prioritization between the two leaders as a legitimate difference in strategic focus, the author sees it as evidence of Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn's opportunism. According to Ehrenkreutz, Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn allegedly sacrificed the Zengids, the Fatimids, and the Ismā'īlī movement ruthlessly to satisfy his immediate personal ambitions. Ehrenkreutz contends that Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn lacked any genuine moral or ideological motivation, presenting him as a pragmatic figure driven solely by personal gain.[36]

---

[33] Yehoshua Frenkel, "Political and Social Aspects of Islamic Religious Endowments (*awqāf*): Saladin in Cairo (1169-73) and Jerusalem (1187-93)," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 62, no. 1 (1999): 3.

[34] Hofer, *Popularization of Sufism*, 39.

[35] Ehrenkreutz, *Saladin*, 97.

[36] Ibid., 234.

After the death of Nūr al-Dīn al-Zankī, Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn organized his historic visit to Syria to unify all Sunni political forces under a unified leadership, leveraging their unity against the Crusader threat. While historians considered the achievement of unity between the Egyptian and Syrian fronts a historic accomplishment, reflecting Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn's political acumen, Ehrenkreutz interprets this achievement as evidence that he was a usurper of power.[37] However, this assertion starkly contradicts the conclusions drawn by unbiased historians who perceive Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn as an extension of the reform project instigated by Nūr al-Dīn al-Zankī.[38] They consider his policies during his governance of Syria as a replication of the political strategy devised by his predecessors.[39]

The Battle of Ḥiṭṭīn stands unanimously recognized by historians as a pivotal moment in the resistance against the Crusader threat. Despite the acknowledged strategic importance of Jerusalem for both Muslims and Crusaders, Ehrenkreutz holds a unique perspective on Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn's strategic choices. According to him, Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn's emphasis on liberating Jerusalem rather than the city of Tyre is seen as a calculated tactic. He argues that this strategy allowed Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn to gain substantial benefits from the relatively effortless conquest of the holy city, earning him the esteemed title of the defender of the Prophet's city. This, according to the author, once again exposes the true motives behind Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn's continuous campaigns, his remarkable pursuit of power, and the reinforcement of Ayyubid rule.[40]

Following the capture of Jerusalem during the Third Crusade, the Crusaders fortified their military presence in the city of Tyre. Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn's inability to resist the campaign and reclaim the city led the author to interpret this as revealing his true intentions. According to the author, Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn's failure exposed his underlying political ambitions centred on the Ayyubid family. The author suggests that Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn's men and military leaders, cognizant of his record of accomplishment, perceived his actions as geared solely towards enhancing his authority and expanding his influence.[41] While the issue here revolves around the fluctuating balance of power, the author overlooks an objective analysis of the reasons for defeat, reducing it to an accusation of political leadership's moral decay. He attributes setbacks against the Third

---

[37] Lev, *Saladin in Egypt*, 107.

[38] Jonathan Phillips, *The Life and Legend of the Sultan Saladin* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019), 110.

[39] Hofer, *Popularization of Sufism*, 41.

[40] Ehrenkreutz, *Saladin*, 204.

[41] Ibid., 208.

Crusade to political and material selfishness, dismissing the moral and religious qualities of Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn.[42]

The autobiography of Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn reveals that he lived his entire political life moving between tents pitched on the outskirts of the Crusader camp. While this jihadist act immortalized him in the historical memory, akin to other heroes who led their people towards independence, his historical legacy, as Ehrenkreutz imagines, was nothing "more than a record of unscrupulous schemes and campaigns aimed at personal and family."[43] This inverted logic, as per Ehrenkreutz's interpretation, holds Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn accountable for the continuation of the Crusades after his death simply because he failed to resist them.[44] While such a conclusion may be deemed offensive in scholarly research, the author explicitly stated in the conclusion of his book that he had a clear and defined goal: "It is hoped that this study may in some measure serve as an antidote to the still prevalent vulgarization of Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn's career, returning to him the true historical interest he so richly deserves."[45] This final message to readers reveals the author's true motivations—to challenge prevailing beliefs rather than present a neutral history of a man's life.

Yehoshua Frenkel and Charity Motivations: Employment or Integration?

The Previous examples exhibit a pattern of academic writing characterized by extreme distortions. In contrast, the works of Yehoshua Frenkel embrace a more open and nuanced methodological approach. While not entirely breaking free from the influence of the distorting tradition, he embraces a more expansive methodological perspective. Frenkel boasts an extensive scholarly record dedicated to investigating the political and social dimensions of religious endowments, as well as the motivations behind acts of charity and almsgiving in medieval Islamic societies. He exhibits exceptional skill in examining these motivations by drawing on a range of sources, including textual sources, jurists' writings, archaeological inscriptions, historical records, autobiographies, and folk stories. Undoubtedly, his reliance on these sources, which reflect the nature of the religious and social culture prevalent in these societies, has allowed him to understand this

---

[42] Ibid., 238.

[43] Ibid., 237.

[44] Ibid., 235.

[45] Ibid., 238.

phenomenon, which, as he states, reflects the religious ethics that make virtue, generosity, and giving evidence of noble customs and traditions.[46]

This systematic reading, attempting to understand the culture of donation within its psychological and spiritual context, led him to assert that Muslims' engagement in charitable deeds is a result of their adherence to the teachings of the Qur'ān and Prophetic traditions. These teachings promise rewards in the afterlife, attainment of paradise, expiation of sins, repentance from wrongdoing, and purification from transgressions. The core religious motivations are evident in Islamic elegies, inscriptions on tombstones, narratives capturing farewell moments on deathbeds, recorded bequests, and endowment documents.[47] Beyond the religious incentives, which revolve around the belief in salvation in the afterlife, the author recognizes a robust presence of charitable acts in public life, celebratory occasions, and consistent support for diverse social and professional groups.[48]

Following this objective diagnosis of the motives behind donation and charity, the author presents indicators suggesting the existence of other motives beyond religious ones, including social and political motivations. While the idea, in principle, is valid and not inherently objectionable, the author's interpretation of these dimensions tends to shift from integration to contradiction. From the perspective of Islamic jurisprudence, it is well established that there is no prohibition against having multiple intentions and purposes motivating acts of charity. When the intention is for the sake of God, it does not diminish the merit if it also benefits relatives or contributes to the public good. However, the author appears to confuse these two aspects, and this confusion could be either an intentional distortion or a misunderstanding. Given the author's expertise and extensive experience with Islamic heritage literature, coupled with certain explicit signals, intentional distortion seems more probable than a simple misunderstanding, as the following examples will illustrate.

In his examination of the motivations driving the Mamlūk elites to donate their wealth to the poor, the author suggests that the faith-based perspective, emphasizing the role of piety in motivating charitable deeds, may be excessively idealistic and divorced from reality. The practical evidence supporting this argument is grounded in the

---

[46] Yehoshua Frenkel, "Piety and Charity in Late Medieval Egypt and Syria," in *Charity and Giving in Monotheistic Religions*, ed. Miriam Frenkel and Yaacov Lev (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2009), 179.

[47] Ibid., 180-83.

[48] Ibid., 183.

observation that, in practice, most beneficiaries of charitable institutions were members of the Mamlūk elite. They utilized endowment deeds as a legal tool to structure financial relationships within the family, ensuring income and economic support for relatives and others.[49] This explanation lacks persuasiveness as it uses family endowments as evidence to question the idealistic religious motives of the endowers. The concept of prioritizing assistance to close relatives is a valid perspective and does not detract from the good intentions of the endowers and their ethical ideals.

The author proposes that religious motives behind endowments apply to both the public and rulers. However, he contends that rulers have mastered the art of manipulating charitable donations, employing these funds for political advantages.[50] To substantiate this claim, the author references the study by Yaacov Lev discussed earlier. This reliance on Lev's study indicates the author's endorsement of a biased perspective that has not been subject to critical examination. Merging religious motives for charity with an inclination to manipulate them introduces a contradiction, as manipulation runs counter to the essence of religious motives and undermines their fundamental pillar—the intention to draw closer to God.

The author highlights several factors as evidence of the underlying motives behind the proliferation of endowments within the Mamlūk Sultanate. These factors include the extensive use of coercive measures to extract money and resources from the civilian population, the military class's enthusiasm for marking Mamlūk structures with signs of their endowed properties, and commemorative inscriptions immortalizing the names of founders. The author contends that these actions serve broader objectives, including emphasizing the political presence of the ruling aristocratic class, perpetuating the renown of the Mamlūks, promoting the Sultanate's ideology as an enduring, generous, and just power, and working towards ensuring its continued governance.[51] Once more, the author succumbs to stereotypical generalizations that fail to differentiate between legal and illegal actions, as well as between various forms of injustice and charity.

In his examination of the political and social dimensions of Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn's religious endowments in Cairo and Jerusalem, the author interprets the seizure of Armenian properties and the Armenian Church in Egypt as a reward for his soldiers' support. This, in turn, allowed Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn to

---

[49] Ibid., 188.

[50] Ibid., 194.

[51] Ibid., 197-98.

expand his financial authority and allocate more resources to his army and supporters.[52] Once again, the author provides an explanation that lacks clarity in distinguishing between actions undertaken for the state's interests, which may be justifiable, and those benefiting the ruler, his soldiers, and supporters personally. This presents a potential misrepresentation of Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn's integrity. Indeed, it is apparent from the political context that these seizures took place in the aftermath of the decline of Fatimid rule and the weakening of their military power, with Armenians being a component of this power. This action aligned with the interests of the state rather than solely serving the personal interests of the ruling elite.

Finally, the three models presented among Jewish academics share a closely aligned methodological vision, explaining their consistent findings and interpretations despite their diverse areas of focus and interest. This alignment, in my view, is not arbitrary but rather a consequence of the congruence in the methodological framework that shapes these studies and directs their objectives. It is crucial to provide some critical observations to highlight common features in terms of methodological approaches and conclusions.

Critical Notes

These consistent narratives share a tendentious nature, varying in the degree of distortion from one character to another. However, these critical observations should not overshadow the merits inherent in these studies, which hold significant value in terms of their scientific, cognitive, and methodological contributions, particularly for Arab readers. It is noteworthy that their aim extends beyond influencing Arab academic opinion to contribute to the broader global academic discourse.

Undoubtedly, one of the most notable advantages of these studies is their ability to direct the attention of Arab readers towards relatively unfamiliar research areas in Arabic writings. They closely align with religious anthropology, examining the role of religion in the public life of pre-modern Islamic societies. Indeed, this characteristic is prevalent in the works of Israeli historians who delve into the religious and social history of Islam at large. However, it is particularly notable in the book titled *The Public Sphere in Muslim Societies*,[53] a collective work

---

[52] Frenkel, "Political and Social Aspects of Islamic Religious Endowments," 10.

[53] Miriam Hoexter, Shmuel Eisenstadt, and Nehemia Levtzion, *The Public Sphere in Muslim Societies* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2002).

distinguished by its objectivity and the avoidance of preconceived judgements.

From this specific perspective, and notwithstanding any reservations that may be identified, these studies serve objectives that lie at the heart of scientific pursuits, often lacking in numerous Arab studies. These works liberate themselves from the confines of traditional narratives that merely recount historical events. Instead, they delve deeper into comprehending the profound impact Islam has had on various dimensions of Islamic societies culturally, socially, economically, and politically. There is no doubt that these writings have succeeded in highlighting these aspects to an extent that makes the Arab reader look at them with a mix of admiration and anger. As much as they satisfy their scientific curiosity and arouse enthusiasm for their rich history, they also challenge their knowledge-based and emotional convictions by raising doubts and questions about this history.

The second notable advantage lies in the diversification of sources that these studies leverage, showcasing their adeptness in seamlessly navigating between Islamic heritage sources and contemporary Western studies. This flexibility affords researchers in pursuit of truth an expansive opportunity to traverse knowledge across two worlds and historical periods that may present conflicts, yet this conflict serves as much as an opportunity as it does a challenge. The divergence in perspectives, ideological conflicts, and even methodological approaches can be a source of enrichment. Scientific curiosity may open up new horizons that are not easily accessible when confined within the religious heritage and cultural legacy of the researcher. This feature may be one of the primary reasons for the growing interest in this type of nuanced Islamic studies, leading to their prevalence in Western universities and research centres. Meanwhile, the majority of Arab studies find themselves in a marginal position in global culture, with a somewhat subdued presence in the intense global discourse surrounding Islam and Muslims.

In their utilization of Islamic sources, these studies distinguish themselves with a scientific imagination that extends beyond conventional historical sources. They encompass a wide range of silent documents that have often been overlooked by traditional Arab studies. These include archaeological inscriptions, coins, tombstones, memorials, and advertising inscriptions affixed to the facades of endowment structures such as mosques, schools, Qur'ānic and ḥadīth centres, Sufi lodges, mausoleums, and even hospitals. These structures retain on their walls signs and advertisements bearing the names of their founders. This urban and written heritage is, in itself, a tangible record narrating, in

silence, the stories of both founders and beneficiaries. It portrays scenes of social warmth under the shelter of those who lived in prosperity and those who were in need, both equally sharing the same roof of comfort and modesty. It preserves a history rich in the traditions of generosity and giving, revealing a record filled with the gatherings of scholars, ascetics, and strangers. Undoubtedly, the implications of the place's prestige and the weight of history serve as sources of inspiration, arousing the curiosity of discerning researchers to explore what these remnants may reveal. The acquisition of this feature is likely one of the reasons that render these studies tempting sources, unveiling aspects that perhaps remained unspoken in traditional sources. With this in mind, I believe that Arab readers are compelled to acknowledge the pioneering role of these studies, regardless of their preferences or dislikes. However, these studies could have gained more prominence in this research field were it not for their biased nature, which tarnishes their academic reputation and diminishes their scientific credibility.

Regarding the reasons for this bias and its manifestations in knowledge, the debate has deep roots in the legacy of orientalist works that influence these studies. In light of this, the discussion here will be limited to some methodological features and typical interpretations shared by these studies, without delving into generalities that may not have significant weight in understanding their specific characteristics.

Directed Criticism and Misguided Generalizations

The critical nature that sets these writings apart could have positioned them as leading research if they adhered to neutrality and objectivity. In contrast to eulogistic writing, which lacks depth in knowledge content, repeats scholarly material, and produces superficial cognitive outputs, critical writings excel in capturing the attention of researchers and prompting reflection on past mistakes that led to the failure of Islamic societies and their exclusion from the realm of civilizational progress. However, when negative phenomena are exaggerated to create a false stereotypical image, critical work transforms into a tool for the systematic distortion of historical facts, and its results become misleading to global opinion.

In this specific context, previous studies present a plethora of historical narratives, encompassing a wide range of events, facts, and occasions that have been distorted and manipulated to create a stereotypical image deeply rooted in negativity. According to this logic, every official charitable act is deemed a promotional act. Within this troubled imagination, reason resigns and evidence proofs are disregarded, paving the way for the trial of intentions and blurring the

line between claimants and virtuous individuals. This excessive inclination towards accusation, bordering on obsession, almost entirely ignores human considerations and political virtues, stripping the benevolent of their kindness, piety, and righteousness. Mercy has no room in this interpretation that exclusively focuses on the darker aspects of history. Religious and national events, as well as celebrations, are reduced to their utilitarian dimensions. The only element prevalent in this interpretative reading is the trading of power-holders and the elite in the marketplace of political propaganda, exploiting humanitarian virtues.

From this biased perspective, critical thinking surpasses the logic employed by religious minds and the ethical function of framing political performance together. Regardless of the expected errors in this performance, which are conceivable, nothing justifies this inclination towards incorrect and contrary generalizations regarding the complex nature of Islamic endowment networks. Charitable endowments in the Islamic experience were oriented towards public welfare, offering basic free services such as health and education to all social strata. These endowments extended beyond basic needs to encompass recreational services, with scholars writing about endowments for the enjoyment of the nightingale's song or the peacock's colour.[54] Undoubtedly, this expansion into complementary services did not neglect endowments aimed at serving the poor and meeting their social and religious needs, as they were more deserving of charity and kindness. Socially, there were endowments for orphans, feeding the poor, caring for the mentally disabled, compensating household maids, marrying poor individuals, endowments for divorced and widowed women, as well as those for angry spouses, breastfeeding infants, and burials for the deceased. There were also endowments specifically for securing some religious services, like ḥajj.[55] The widespread existence of these endowment practices specifically directed towards the poor, along with their simultaneous benefit from general endowment services, undermines the misleading simplistic image that alleges the neglect of the poor as evidence of the politicization of endowments and their use for propaganda purposes.

This critical perspective finds reinforcement in studies suggesting that individuals from the ruling elite, assisting those situated at the

---

[54] Orwa Sabri, "The Rulings on Animal Endowments in Islamic Jurisprudence," *Journal of College of Sharia and Islamic Studies* 37, no. 2 (2020): 97, https://doi.org/10.29117/jcsis .2020.0243

[55] Aḥmad al-Raysūnī, *al-Waqf al-Islāmī Majālātuhu wa Abʿāduh* (Cairo: Dār al-Kalimah li 'l-Nashr wa 'l-Tawzīʿ, 2014), 30-46.

social periphery in fulfilling fundamental human needs, engaged in charitable endeavours on a personal level rather than in an official capacity as rulers. Undoubtedly, the involvement of individuals in activities beyond the realm of official political administration stands as a compelling argument challenging the hypothesis of political employment.[56]

Conflicting Results

Many of the preceding writings exhibit a confusing and inconsistent argumentative structure. In his examination of Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn, Ehrenkreutz clearly outlined his objective: to dismantle the iconic image perpetuated by Islamic historical sources and many Western writings about the "noble portrait of the Sultan."[57] Initially presenting himself as a neutral critic who aimed to mediate between adulation and animosity discourses, he deviated from this principle throughout the pages of his book.

While expressing considerable admiration for the methodological rigour and scholarly professionalism characterizing some Western studies portraying a positive image of Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn, the majority of his focus centred on refuting this image without offering any methodological criticism justifying the critique of the results of those studies. Contrary to the reader's expectation of a balanced analysis, his efforts, as demonstrated by the previous evidence, emphasized portraying Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn as a pragmatic figure who reduced his jihadist career to consolidating the foundations of Ayyubid rule. The author failed to see more than a record of a series of schemes and campaigns that he described as conscienceless, aiming, in his view, at personal and familial aggrandizement.

As for writings that delved into the exploration of motives behind charitable and endowment activities, they proved to be confusing and led to contradictory results. While Yehoshua demonstrated precision in understanding motives within their religious and ethical context, he aligned with Ehrenkreutz's thesis, which leans towards political gains outweighing religious and ethical principles. The author concluded from his extensive discussions that personal religious motives, specifically the desire to draw closer to God in accordance with the requirements of Islamic *sharīʿah*, are the most explicit. However, social and political motives remain less clear.[58] Nevertheless, this significant conclusion is

---

[56] Hoexter, Eisenstadt, and Levtzion, *Public Spheres in Medieval Islamic Societies*, 158.

[57] Ehrenkreutz, *Saladin*, 9.

[58] Frenkel, "Political and Social Aspects of Islamic Religious Endowment," 201.

contradicted by the author's claim of manipulative intentions within charitable activities for political purposes.

This conflicted stance repeats itself with Yaacov Lev. He affirms that the primary motive behind continuing to pray for the benefactors for salvation in the afterlife and drawing closer to God was the main driver behind charity and almsgiving. This is a central concept in Islam, and it imparts a sense of religious sanctity to charity. According to him, this meaning remained consistent. Regardless of an individual's position in society, charity remains a means of communication with God. While he acknowledges that charitable endeavours may, in certain instances, harbour political or social objectives, he emphasizes that the intrinsic religious meaning consistently underlies these benevolent actions.[59] The author is unmistakably cognizant of the enduring and consistent role of internal religious motives as the primary driving force behind individuals engaging in charitable acts. This critical realization sharply contradicts any assertions of manipulating charity, employing it as a guise for political propaganda, or serving personal interests, particularly those related to family members.

The coexistence of genuine goodwill and the manipulation of charitable acts for unethical purposes is inherently contradictory, as the latter undermines the integrity of the former. It is argued that a person cannot genuinely embody both ethical principles and opportunistic motives simultaneously. However, what these authors may fail to grasp is the possibility of combining three distinct motives—faith-based, social, and political—without compromising ethical considerations. Having multiple intentions that concurrently benefit the individual, society, and the state is not inherently problematic. Acts of benevolence can encompass these diverse motivations. In the realm of private endowments, where the welfare of relatives takes precedence, such actions are inherently religious, as prioritizing close kin is inherent in benevolent acts. Similarly, in official endowments, ruling authorities leverage public interest to legitimize their rule, considering this objective as one of the fundamental pillars of legitimacy.

The question here is: How do we explain this duality in which admiration is mixed with condemnation, and what is the purpose behind it initially? The most likely answer is that, as much as these writings have demonstrated their scholarly competence in diagnosing the charitable endowment phenomenon, they have failed in testing integrity and impartiality by seeking to empty these endowments of their ethical purposes and reduce them to their utilitarian dimensions.

---

[59] Lev, *Charity, Endowments, and Charitable Institutions*, 159.

Manipulation of Historical Sources

The aforementioned observation extends to the utilization of historical sources. On one hand, written and archaeological sources constitute the primary raw material in the literature these writings rely upon, yet they face criticism for perceived bias. On the other hand, the Jewish critical writings present a distorted and contrary image to that presented by Arab sources about the political figures who led the era. Lev undertook a comprehensive exploration of Arab historical sources. The objective was to unravel the rationale guiding Muslim historians in defining the criteria for political legitimacy.[60] In this inductive context, he meticulously compiled an exhaustive inventory of works focused on public welfare. This effort showcased a sophisticated grasp of the virtuous ruler's image as perceived by Muslim scholars and a deep awareness of the legitimacy criteria embodied by rulers and documented by historians.

Muslim historians perceive a virtuous ruler as one committed to shouldering the burdens of *jihād* against the Crusaders and safeguarding the principles of Sunni Islam. A prime example of such virtue is exemplified in Nūr al-Dīn al-Zankī, as articulated by Ibn ʿAsākir (d. 1176 CE). Nūr al-Dīn's virtuous qualities, as outlined by Ibn ʿAsākir, include his benevolence towards the poor, orphans, and the righteous. Nūr al-Dīn established endowment hospitals catering to the sick and mentally ill, extended support to the Qurʾān teachers, founded schools of jurisprudence, and utilized religious endowments and educational institutions as tools for implementing the state's religious policies. Furthermore, he actively supported his soldiers and took care of the families of those who sacrificed their lives in *jihād*.[61] Lev's primary hypothesis, central to their thesis, revolves around the pragmatic political use of charitable works. This hypothesis leads to the questioning of the credibility of historical sources, with the author accusing Muslim historians of bias and positing that they may have been sympathetic to the political leaders whose history they documented. This critical stance suggests scepticism about the objectivity and impartiality of historical accounts, particularly in relation to the portrayal of political figures and their actions. According to him, Ibn ʿAsākir, who created the typical image of the virtuous king embodied in the person of Nūr al-Dīn al-Zankī, did so because of Nūr al-Dīn's encouragement for him to complete his historical encyclopedia.[62] It is

---

[60] Ibid., 46-53.

[61] Ibid., 46.

[62] Lev, *Saladin in Egypt*, 9.

worth noting that the author was not the originator of such preconceived judgments; he traces this perspective back to his predecessor, Israeli writer Emmanuel Sivan, a professor of history at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem's Institute for Policy and Strategy Research. Sivan elucidated how later historians created the image sanctifying Nūr al-Dīn Zankī as a symbol of *jihād* in the thirteenth century CE.[63]

In Lev's claims, which often involve stereotypical generalizations, there is a prevailing belief that the formulation created by Ibn ʿAsākir for the model of the virtuous ruler is one that subsequent historians, including Ibn al-Athīr (d. 1233 CE), Bahāʾ al-Dīn b. Shaddād (d. 1235 CE), Abū Shāmah (d. 1267 CE), Ibn Wāṣil (d. 1298 CE), and others in the Mamlūk era, have followed without introducing significant new details.[64]

According to the writer, a similar pattern repeats itself in the historiography of Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn. Despite numerous sources discussing Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn's ascent to power in Egypt, these accounts largely draw from the writings of a specific and limited group comprising Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn's companions and admirers. Notable among them are al-Qāḍī al-Fāḍil, ʿImād al-Dīn al-Iṣfahānī (d. 1201 CE), and Ibn Shaddād. These historians, who held a deep admiration for Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn, authored their works after his death, influenced by his later accomplishments. Consequently, they portrayed Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn as a heroic figure of *jihād*, reshaping events from the early stages of his life and imposing censorship to align with his later fame.[65] Regarding the historian Abū Shāmah, the writer asserts that he exhibited selectivity in his work, leaning towards accepting accounts from those who were admirers or supporters of Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn.[66] This implies a potential bias in Abū Shāmah's historical narrative, suggesting that he may have favoured perspectives that aligned with a positive view of Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn, possibly from those who held deep admiration for him or were sympathetic to his cause. However, Lev's perspective involves questioning not only the good intentions of the rulers but also the efficacy of their charitable works. He suggests that these rulers might have prioritized religious and cultural needs over assisting the poor and providing social welfare services. Consequently, he argues that their charitable endeavours were not primarily intended to alleviate poverty and social misery but may

---

[63] Ibid., 106.

[64] Lev, *Charity, Endowments, and Charitable Institutions*, 47.

[65] Lev, *Saladin in Egypt*, 1.

[66] Ibid., 43.

have served broader political or cultural agendas.[67] This critical stance challenges the conventional view of rulers serving the public good as a criterion for good governance.

This phenomenon becomes particularly conspicuous in Ehrenkreutz's examination of Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn. Because the negative image he painted of this historical figure stands in contrast to the data presented by Arab historical sources, the easy choice is to cast doubt on the credibility of these sources by questioning the integrity of Muslim historians. This is done simply because they depicted Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn as the ideal Muslim ruler who understands the principles of righteous governance.[68]

The discernible negative stance towards the positive image presented by historical sources of rulers underscores a deep-seated influence of European political traditions, notably shaped by Machiavelli's perspective. Operating under the premise that there is one law governing a prince's behaviour—characterized by cunning and deception—these writers tend to dismiss everything articulated by Muslim historians about the "virtuous ruler" as a mere illusion. In summary, these writings offer a caricatured portrayal of cunning rulers and sycophantic historians. They present an image that oversimplifies the entire history of Islamic rule, reducing it to a narrative primarily focused on political deception.

Conclusion

Historical evidence substantiates that Muslim rulers, particularly those facing the Crusades, adeptly employed endowments to bolster *jihād* and resist Crusader expansion. However, critical assessments of these activities in relation to ruling powers adopt an approach that intertwines attraction with contempt. These critical writings distinguish themselves through their exceptional critical analysis and comprehensive coverage of literature, marking a significant advantage. However, they provide misleading and biased explanations, conjuring a false image of a history rich in positive events and facts that succeeded in altering the course of history in favour of the region's people. While the issue of political use of endowments is plausible and requires well-documented study to avoid generalizations, its effects remain relative. Official endowments have strongly contributed to supporting charitable work and fostering its growth, especially during periods of political transition and cultural shocks.

---

[67] Lev, *Charity, Endowments, and Charitable Institutions*, 160.

[68] Ehrenkreutz, *Saladin*, 3.

Certainly, the traditional methodological errors inherent in these biased studies expose them to numerous pitfalls that diminish their scientific value. However, this does not imply a complete failure in achieving their goals. They have undeniably succeeded in influencing a significant portion of global public opinion, evident in their acceptance among a group of researchers who share similar views or cite them, whether in good faith or due to difficulties in engaging with original sources. Nevertheless, this success does not absolve them from the responsibility of violating standards of integrity. This transgression not only harms the subject of study by perpetuating cognitive distortions in the name of scientific research but also tarnishes the reputation of the researchers themselves, who compromise their scientific credibility for the sake of the political agenda of the universities and research centres they represent.

* * *