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Book Reviews

Michael Cook. *A History of the Muslim World: From Its Origins to the Dawn of Modernity*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2024. Hardback. ISBN: 9780691236575. Pp. 960.

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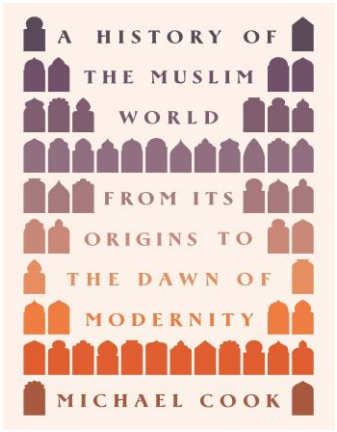

A History of the Muslim World offers a comprehensive and wide-ranging survey of Muslim history from the pre-Islamic period to the eighteenth century, encompassing nearly all regions and ruling dynasties from the Atlantic Ocean to the eastern Indian islands, and from Eastern Europe to South India, China, and sub-Saharan Africa. Its geographical and chronological scope is striking, and its ambition alone places it among the major works of global Islamic history. Structurally, the book comprises fifteen chapters arranged into three parts—more accurately, two main sections followed by an epilogue. The chapters are generally between 60 and 70 pages in length, with two exceptions: Chapter Two, which is approximately 35 pages, and Chapter Three, which extends to around 100 pages.

Part I opens with the pre-Islamic period, beginning with "The Middle East in Late Antiquity" before turning to the emergence of Islam in "Muḥammad." It then traces the development of the early caliphate from the seventh to the ninth centuries CE, covering the Umayyad and early Abbasid periods (Ch. 3), before examining the fragmentation of caliphal authority in "The Breakup of the Caliphate" across three regional chapters: the western (Ch. 4), eastern (Ch. 5), and central Muslim world (Ch. 6). By the close of Part I in the eleventh century CE, the Muslim world is portrayed as politically divided between multiple states and dynasties.

Part II, entitled "The Muslim World from the Eleventh Century to the Eighteenth," picks up the narrative of an era defined less by imperial unity than by political plurality. The first eight chapters of this section trace the histories of discrete dynasties and regions, including the Turks and the Mongols (Ch. 7), Iran and Central Asia (Ch. 8), the Turks in the medieval western Middle East (Ch. 9), the Ottoman Empire (Ch. 10), India (Ch. 11), the Indian Ocean world (Ch. 12), Africa (Ch. 13), and the Arab lands (Ch. 14). The

final chapter, "The Muslim World and the West" (Ch. 15), presented as an epilogue, offers a synoptic perspective on the long-term development of the Muslim world and its encounters with Western powers, situating these interactions within a broader context of colonial conflict, exchange, and competing worldviews.

Even a thousand pages would be insufficient to fully narrate a history extending over more than fifteen centuries and encompassing such a vast geographical expanse. Any attempt at such an ambitious synthesis necessarily presupposes encyclopedic erudition. Cook's mastery of a vast range of material, evident in his earlier works—notably *A Brief History of the Human Race* (2004) and *Ancient Religions, Modern Politics* (2014)—is likewise reflected here in the use of expansive and comparative analytical frameworks. This breadth of perspective enables sustained comparison not only within the Muslim world but also with developments in China, Europe, and other regions.

However, writing a history that spans such an extended period and such a vast geographical range requires, in addition to encyclopedic knowledge, a clear—whether implicit or explicit—conception of the principal forces shaping historical development, including politics, economics, social relations, geography, and culture. Throughout the book, Cook demonstrably operates with an informed understanding of the factors that contribute to the emergence and decline of states and dynasties, and these underlying assumptions are consistently reflected in his analyses, even when they are not formally or systematically articulated.

Given this implicit analytical framework, some readers might expect the author to draw these recurring insights together more explicitly or synthetically. The book, however, does not pursue such an approach. Rather than formulating a stated theory or philosophy of history that integrates these factors into a unified explanatory model, Cook remains focused on historical narration and analysis. Overall, this mode of presentation privileges narrative coherence and historical breadth over conceptual consolidation. Despite the wealth of case studies—each ample enough to invite broader reflection on its contents—he leaves any systematic generalization or interpretive synthesis about the rise and fall of states, dynasties, and civilizations to the reader's own synthesis or, one may hope, to a future work devoted explicitly to that task.

One of the book's notable strengths lies in Cook's ability to move effectively between micro- and macro-level analysis. He often begins with what initially appears to be a marginal anecdote and uses it to pose a fundamental historical question, as in his discussion of the al-Fijār War (p. 4), where a seemingly minor episode becomes the basis for a broader reflection on the absence of the state and the conditions of political authority. This method—explicitly described as "broad outlines with close-ups, zooming in and out." (p. xx)—creates a dynamic interplay between fine-grained detail and large-scale structural patterns, allowing the narrative to move fluidly between individual events and overarching historical processes.

Cook states explicitly that his systematic attention is directed towards two central concerns: "the making and unmaking of states, and really major cultural shifts that affect large populations" (p. xx). Despite this political-historical focus, his training in Islamic intellectual history is evident throughout the book, surfacing repeatedly and extending his analysis beyond his stated priorities. The emphasis on major cultural shifts creates space for the appearance of figures such as al-Bīrūnī (d. 440/1048), Rūmī (d. 672/1273), Ibn Baṭṭūṭah (d. 779/1368), Ibn Khaldūn (d. 808/1406), and al-Sirhindī (d. 1624), who are introduced in varying contexts related to the relationship between religious and political authority. The book as a whole nevertheless remains firmly anchored in political history, understood in an expansive sense that encompasses processes of state formation, religious transformation, intercommunal relations, institutional developments, military organization, and administrative structures; the occasional introduction of major intellectual figures and cultural references functions to situate the reader more securely within each specific historical moment.

Within this broadly political and historically grounded approach, Ibn Khaldūn's theory of *'aṣabiyyah* and state formation occupies a central place. Cook repeatedly engages the Khaldunian model, identifying instances in which particular dynasties conform to its expectations, moments where it proves analytically insufficient, and cases in which historical developments diverge from it altogether. Alongside this sustained analytical reference runs a pronounced political sensibility, evident in close attention to struggles over succession, the deployment and positioning of armies, the appointment of governors, and the strategic logic of territorial control. Taken together, these discussions yield a rich set of insights into the practical mechanics of power and governance, reinforcing the book's overarching emphasis on political processes.

Alongside the Khaldunian framework for understanding the relationship between religion, politics, and society, nature occupies a central place in the author's analysis of the emergence, expansion, and limits of states. From the outset, he contrasts deserts, mountains, steppes, and oceans with regions endowed with sufficient resources to sustain state formation or that would become arenas of competition between neighbouring powers. Geography and climate thus function as recurring explanatory factors, shaping patterns of conquest, constraining imperial expansion, and influencing the uneven spread of Islam. This perspective is particularly evident in his treatment of Southeast Asia, the Indian Ocean world, and sub-Saharan Africa, where he highlights the interplay between environmental conditions, religious diffusion, preexisting cultural formations, and political structures.

Indeed, the book repeatedly points to a range of elements that prove decisive in processes of state formation and disintegration. Among these are geographical location and climate; the availability of resources that sustain political authority or attract external intervention; internal policies that promote social cohesion or contribute to political fragmentation; and the nature of relations among a state's constituent groups. Such a narrative, and

the articulation of these factors in the book's many case studies, may invite readers to reflect on how their interplay shaped the emergence, expansion, and collapse of states—a line of inquiry Cook does not pursue systematically. However, what some readers may perceive as an excess of description and a lack of analysis can instead be understood as a deliberate choice that encourages the reader's analytical involvement.

Another aspect worth noting relates to the organization of the material and to the way the narrative is shaped and presented. Stylistically, the book combines analytical density with an often vivid and metaphorical language that does not always enhance clarity. Expressions such as "flexing one's muscles" and references to "planning another meal" to describe violent raids or to nineteenth-century British literary figures like "the Walrus and the Carpenter" add personality to the narrative and reveal more about Cook and his imagined audience. However, they tell us less about the subject itself and can blur analytical precision or pose interpretive challenges. The prose is highly compressed and information-dense, frequently relying on pronouns and elliptical references, a style that demands sustained effort from the reader and at times impedes accessibility.

The organization of the material by period and region provides a broad horizontal framework that situates events within their contemporaneous contexts; however, it also fragments the histories of individual regions, requiring readers to reconstruct coherent trajectories across multiple chapters. Moreover, the depth of treatment varies unevenly with the availability of sources. Although Cook openly acknowledges this limitation and proceeds cautiously where evidence is sparse, relying on comparative analysis and contextual reasoning, the resulting imbalance remains noticeable.

The book is accompanied by twenty-eight maps corresponding to different geographical regions and historical moments. These maps are particularly helpful in orienting the reader to the geographical areas under discussion, especially given the frequent transitions from one region to another in a work that, as noted, covers the history and geography of much of the Muslim world. However, the decision to place all of these maps at the beginning of the book makes them less accessible and weakens their connection to the narrative. Had the maps been distributed across the chapters in accordance with their respective contexts, they would have been more effective in linking historical events to their geographical settings in the reader's mind.

Despite its length and density, the book leaves the reader intellectually unsatisfied in the most productive sense—stimulated rather than exhausted, and encouraged to pursue further inquiry. Specialists will inevitably contest certain interpretations, note the necessarily selective treatment of their own areas of expertise, or point to more recent scholarship. Cook's decision to minimize footnotes and to omit explicit source citations may also limit the book's utility in some academic contexts, and the absence of annotated bibliographies at the end of each chapter is a missed opportunity that could have facilitated further research and mitigated some of these concerns.

Nevertheless, these reservations are outweighed by the work's considerable strengths. By offering clear, well-organized foundational information across an exceptionally wide geographical and historical range, the book functions as an invaluable gateway to regions beyond the reader's immediate specialization, fostering comparative reflection and situating specialized knowledge within a broader and more integrated historical landscape. Even with its limitations, the book stands as a major synthetic achievement that invites—rather than forecloses—continued historical and theoretical reflection and remains an indispensable resource for understanding the Muslim world in its global dimensions.

Naser Dumairieh*

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Rashid b. Ali Al-Balushi. *Khuliqa al-Insān Bāḥithan* (*Humans are Created as Researchers*). Oman: AlKhalil bin Ahmed AlFarahidi Center for Arabic Studies and Humanities, University of Nizwa, 2025. ISBN: 9-78-57-99969-978. Pp. 228.

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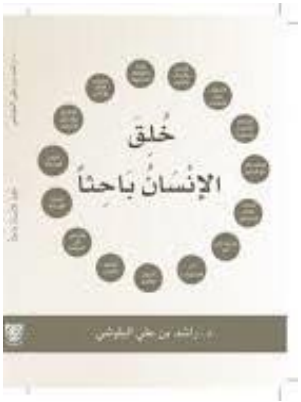

In this book, Rashid Al-Balushi argues that human beings are created with a built-in drive to inquire, and that learning and researching are two parts of the same natural process. In the introduction, he begins by presenting different interpretations of the Qur'ānic verse (23:14). While commentators argue that the difference between humans and other creatures lies in the soul, the author argues that it lies in the intellect and provides evidence for this. This distinction supports the central claim that Allah endowed humans with both the ability and the duty to seek the truth, a quality that distinguishes them from other creatures, such as angels and animals. While angels follow without being tested, humans are unique in their capacity to choose, question, and take responsibility for their choices, which makes them eligible for being rewarded and held accountable by Allah. The book also maintains that when humans sincerely exercise this divine gift of inquiry, they are guided towards recognizing Allah's existence.

Chapter One, divided into six sections, connects the idea of humans being created as researchers to language acquisition. In the first section, Al-Baludhi interprets the Qur'ānic story of Adam (peace be on him) being taught "all the names" as evidence of the centrality of language in human uniqueness. "All names," therefore, are presented as all languages and all disciplines. Section two discusses the nature of language and how the first five to six years of a

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