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Abdurrahman Ali El-Hajji. *Al-Tārīkh al-Andalusī: Min al-Fath al-Islāmī ḥattā Suqūṭ Gharnāṭa* (*The Andalusian History: from the Beginning until the End of Granada*⁽¹⁾). A.H. 92-897/A.D. 711-1492. Damascus: Dār al-Qalam, 1981, 605 pp.

In his *Al-Tārīkh al-Andalusī*, based on a number of Muslim historiographic sources, the Iraqi historian specialized in al-Andalus Abdurrahman Ali El-Hajji (1935–2021) relates, in a chronological order, the different military and political events and social changes al-Andalus went through from the Muslim conquest in 711 to the fall of Granada, the last Muslim stronghold in Iberia, in 1492. Each of the eight chapters of the book is dedicated to a particular era or series of major events in the history of al-Andalus.

The first chapter deals with the Muslim conquest of Iberia. El-Hajji provides a detailed account of the military campaigns led by the Muslim army in the Iberian Peninsula, starting from 711, the year its forces crossed the Strait of Gibraltar advancing northward, until 714. According to him, Muslims were able to conquer all, or almost all, of Iberia in nearly four years because they were driven by their strong religious beliefs.⁽²⁾ He argues that “If the Muslim army adhered to a different creed, with its enemies being that superior in terms of number and military equipment, such a conquest would not have taken place.”⁽³⁾

According to the “official” version of the conquest, an Umayyad army made up of Arab and Berber forces and led on the whole by the Arab military commander Mūsā ibn Nuṣayr (640–c. 716) and his Berber (or perhaps, Persian, or even Arab) *mawlā*, or client, and right-hand general Ṭāriq ibn Ziyād (d. 720) invaded, circa 711, the Iberian Peninsula. In a few years, the Muslim army took Iberia, reaching as far north as the Bay of Biscay.

In his own account of these events, El-Hajji relegates to the background the historically evidenced – or at least academically maintained – conflict of interest between Mūsā and Ṭāriq. According to what is considered by most researchers the earliest Arabic source on Muslim Iberia but whose author is anonymous, *Akhbār Majmū‘a fī Fath al-Andalus*, when he first landed on the Peninsula and learned of the conquest thus far achieved by Ṭāriq, an infuriated Mūsā envied him and decided to lead his own raids on other parts of Iberia.⁽⁴⁾ Later on, when the two men met in what is now Talavera de la Reina, about seventy-five kilometers west of Toledo, Ṭāriq was harshly scolded and even whipped by his former master.⁽⁵⁾ Furthermore, if we are to believe *Akhbār Majmū‘a*, a skirmish broke out between the two men over some booty; the Berber soldier had found a golden table, which he hid from his superior.⁽⁶⁾ Eventually, both patron and *mawlā* were summoned by the Umayyad caliph in Damascus as a punitive measure.

The author of *Al-Tārīkh al-Andalusī* argues that, with an exceptionally honorable track record of military exploits under his name, Mūsā ibn Nuṣayr could not have been just another

(1) As translated in the book.

(2) *Al-Tārīkh al-Andalusī*, 122.

(3) *Ibid.*

(4) *Akhbār Majmū‘a fī Fath al-Andalus wa-Dhikr Umarā’ihā Raḥimahum Allah wa-l-Ḥurūb al-Wāqi‘a bihā Baynahum*. Ed. Ibrahim Elabyari. Cairo: Dār al-Kitāb al-Maṣrī; Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-Lubnānī, 1989, 15.

(5) *Ibid.*, 18-19.

(6) *Ibid.*, 19.

military “*arriviste*” in need of competing with soldiers under his command. According to the Iraqi historian, the Arab general was motivated, instead, by his determination to spread the true Word of God all over non-Muslim territory.⁽⁷⁾ For El-Hajji, “all that has been said on this topic and all that has been expressed in this regard cannot stand truly objective historical criticism,”⁽⁸⁾ a statement that reflects his blatantly selective approach to Arabic sources; at the same time that he rejects the credibility of *Akhbār Majmū‘a* regarding the antagonism between Mūsā and Ṭāriq, he heavily draws on information from this very text to construct his own version of the conquest.

In the second chapter of *Al-Tārīkh*, which is dedicated to the period spanning from 714 to 755, El-Hajji discusses the raids conducted by the Muslim army beyond the Pyrenees and how, within Iberia itself, Muslims had already settled and established a functioning political, administrative and judicial system. During this period, al-Andalus was governed most of the time by the nearly-sovereign state of North Africa, or at times directly by the Umayyad caliphate from Damascus. As its capital, the successive *wālīs* or governors of al-Andalus elected at first Seville then Córdoba towards the end of this post-conquest era.

In this part of his work, El-Hajji clearly downplays the political and military chaos al-Andalus underwent during this phase of its evolution. Ethnic conflict took place between the Arab settlers and the Berbers, whom they treated as their inferiors in terms of social status. A Berber rebellion erupted against Arab domination in 739 in North Africa and moved to al-Andalus. Furthermore, the nefarious Mashriqi legacy of *‘aṣabiyya*, a form of tribal chauvinism, brought into opposition different Arab factions and led to civil strife in al-Andalus. It is only in 743 that stability seems to have been restored to al-Andalus at the hands of a new army sent all the way from Egypt and Ifrīqiya by order of the Umayyad caliph in Damascus.

Ignoring these facts, El-Hajji describes the Muslim conquerors and early settlers as “godly men,” who sought first and foremost to establish a just and prosperous political and social system in Iberia, based on the teachings of Islam.⁽⁹⁾ He argues that, impressed by the virtuous behaviour of the Muslims and being treated by them justly, non-Muslim Iberians “entered Allah’s religion in crowds.”⁽¹⁰⁾ This mass conversion to Islam led according to him to a certain social harmony within al-Andalus.

The third chapter of *Al-Tārīkh* addresses the period between 755 and 929, during which al-Andalus – by then an *imāra* (principality) mainly thanks to the efforts of Abd al-Rahman I (731–788) – witnessed prosperity and stability, if not for the attacks it suffered at the hands of the armies of the newly created Christian states in northern Spain and from the Franks. This stability was also disturbed by a number of internal troubles, which the author qualifies as “limited.”⁽¹¹⁾

According to him, the Visigoths were able to constitute a threat to al-Andalus’s existence because, during the first half of the eighth century, Muslim conquering forces failed to chase all Visigothic military resistance out of the peninsula. He believes that during the era of the

(7) *Al-Tārīkh*, 87.

(8) *Ibid.*, 86.

(9) *Ibid.*, 211-212.

(10) *Ibid.*, 144.

(11) *Al-Tārīkh*, 280.

imāra, al-Andalus was a safe haven for Iberian non-Muslims, who enjoyed “justice and fair policy, and whose rights and liberties were guaranteed.”⁽¹²⁾ As to al-Andalus’s foreign policy during this time, the Iraqi historian argues that it was characterized by a constant commitment to the treaties al-Andalus negotiated with parties from both the Muslim and non-Muslim worlds.

For the sake of the creation then consolidation of an Umayyad *dawla* or state in the Iberian Peninsula, Abd al-Rahman I, who reigned over al-Andalus from 756 until his death, fought many enemies on many a front. In addition to his constant efforts to quell the still rampant *‘aṣabiyya* on the internal front, he had to deal with serious political dissidents, especially the leader of a mutiny from 769 to 777 by the name of Shaqna, as well as get rid of some of his own male kin whom he considered a menace to the throne, and among whom he ended up killing two of his nephews. El-Hajji deliberately disregards the Umayyad emir’s brutal ways of neutralizing political competition throughout his three decades of rule. This selective narrative falls, again, within the idealizing portrayal of the Muslim Andalusí political and military leaders adopted by the author of *Al-Tārīkh al-Andalusī*.

El-Hajji, who is clearly influenced by the triumphalist Muslim accounts he draws on but never actually questions and probably by his own religious beliefs, tends to adopt a subjective approach to presenting and interpreting certain historical facts in his *Al-Tārīkh*. For instance, in the course of discussing the Martyrs of Córdoba, a movement that saw, in mid-ninth-century Córdoba, almost fifty Christians sentenced to death by Muslim authorities, under the fourth Umayyad emir of Córdoba Abd al-Rahman II (r. 822–852), for blaspheming against the Prophet, the Iraqi historian states that “This happened in a time when Muslim policy in al-Andalus – and other parts of the Muslim world – was based on justice and equality in treating non-Muslim groups. They enjoyed freedom, and their religious and personal matters were never interfered with, in a fashion that never existed nor will exist outside of the Muslim world.”⁽¹³⁾

Dubbed *‘Ahd al-Khilāfa (The Era of the Caliphate)*, the fourth chapter of this book discusses the period starting from 929, the point at which the last of the emirs of Córdoba Abd al-Rahman III (891–929) founded the caliphate, until the fall of the latter in 1009. El-Hajji maintains that, in light of the declining state of the Abbasid caliphate and the rise of the Fatimid threat on the other side of the Mediterranean, al-Andalus, gaining remarkably in military, economic and political strength, saw the emergence of the Umayyad caliphate of Córdoba. However, its successive caliphs had to crush a number of mutinies and face many Norman military attacks, among other dangers. In general terms though al-Andalus “enjoyed during this era strength, prosperity and stability.”⁽¹⁴⁾

The Iraqi specialist of al-Andalus provides no account of the ascent to power of the ‘Āmirids, the descendants and clients of the house of the *ḥājib* (chamberlain) Muḥammad ibn Abī ‘Āmir al-Manṣūr (938–1002), who was the de facto ruler of the caliphate of Córdoba from 978 until his death. In actuality, al-Manṣūr usurped caliphal powers from the legitimate Umayyad caliph Hishām II (966–1013), whom he sequestered in near-captivity and restricted from appearing in public. El-Hajji, who dedicates only a few lines to the emergence of the ‘Āmirid line of rulers, without mentioning the events leading to it, gives the simplistic

(12) *Ibid.*, 284.

(13) *Ibid.*, 243.

(14) *Al-Tārīkh*, 314.

explanation that “He [al-Manṣūr] could take the power for himself.”⁽¹⁵⁾ Moreover, he states that “I consider the ‘Āmirid *dawla* – in this research – to be an extension of the caliphate, as it ruled in its name and under its umbrella.”⁽¹⁶⁾

The fifth chapter of the book at hand, *‘Ahd al-Ṭawā’if* (*The Era of the Taifas*), discusses the political events that led to the fall of the caliphate and emergence of the taifas, the twenty or so relatively smaller Muslim kingdoms located in different parts of the Iberian Peninsula. El-Hajji believes that the *fitna*, the civil strife that gave rise to the formation of the taifas,⁽¹⁷⁾ and the ensuing disunity and animosity among the petty kings were consequences of the Andalusī Muslims going astray from the straight path of Islam.⁽¹⁸⁾ However, the inherent will within the *umma*, the Muslim community at large, to reunite manifested itself in the Almoravids joining forces with the taifas to fight the armies of the Christian kingdoms of Leon, Castile and Aragon. The Iraqi historian provides in this chapter a detailed account of the battle of Sagrajas or *al-Zallāqa* (1086).

In this part of *Al-Tārīkh*, its author approaches the Almoravid taking of al-Andalus in a way that minimizes its belligerent aspect. The end result is a historical account that passes over important details regarding the deposition and exile of the petty kings ‘Abd Allāh b. Buluggīn (1056–after 1090), the last ruler of the taifa of Granada, and Muḥammad b. ‘Abbād al-Mu’tamid (1040–1095), the third and last ‘Abbādid ruler of the taifa of Seville. The latter’s family in particular was, according to Muslim sources, persecuted by the Almoravids, who exiled them, in 1091, definitively to Aghmat, a desolate village to the south of the Almoravid capital of Marrakesh.

‘Ahd al-Murābiṭīn (*The Era of the Almoravids*), the sixth chapter of *Al-Tārīkh*, presents an overview of the Almoravid dynasty, which originated in Berber North Africa around 1040, and the *jihād* or holy war fought by its armies against the Christians in al-Andalus. According to El-Hajji, in the battles of Uclés (1108), Zaragoza (1110), Cutanda (1120) and others, the Almoravids were motivated solely by their will to preserve Islam and protect the Muslims of al-Andalus.⁽¹⁹⁾ The Iraqi historian points out the fact that, during their rule of al-Andalus from 1092 to 1134, the Almoravids appointed the *wālīs* from among themselves, whereas the judges remained Andalusī. The Almoravids would have also promoted the arts, sciences and literature in al-Andalus.

The seventh chapter tackles the Almohad rule over al-Andalus from 1145 to 1223. According to El-Hajji the Almohads, who inherited the Almoravid state and policies, took it upon themselves to guard the Islamic civilization in the region and protect Islam in al-Andalus.⁽²⁰⁾ However, their *jihād* in the Iberian Peninsula, aiming essentially at preventing

(15) *Ibid.*, 299.

(16) *Ibid.*, 299-300.

(17) Also termed, out of anti-Berber sentiment, *al-fitna al-barbariyya* (“the Berber civil strife”) by certain Muslim chroniclers, such as Ibn Ḥayyān al-Qurṭubī (d. 1076), a contemporary historian from Córdoba whose one of two major works, *Al-Matīn*, is a large history that crucially comprises an account of the taifa period up until about the mid eleventh century. *Al-Matīn* survived only through excerpts contained mostly in later similarly voluminous history *Al-Dhakhīra fī Maḥāsini Ahl al-Jazīra* by a poet and historian named Ibn Bassām al-Shantarīnī (from Santarém) (d. 1147). The term *al-fitna al-barbariyya* is indeed reused by Ibn Bassām in his *Dhakhīra* (Ed. Ihsan Abbas. Beirut: Dār al-Thaqāfa. I/1: 282; I/2: 576, 578).

(18) *Al-Tārīkh*, 399.

(19) *Al-Tārīkh*, 443.

(20) *Ibid.*, 457.

any further military expansion conducted by the armies of Castile, Aragon and the crusaders among other enemies, was affected greatly by the weakness of the Almohad state in the Maghreb. Having to deal with the Marinids, another competing Berber dynasty which rose to power in the west of the Maghreb, the Almohads lost the decisive battle of Las Navas de Tolosa (1212), of which a detailed account is given in this chapter. Gradually, al-Andalus was reduced to only the kingdom of Granada.

The author of *Al-Tārīkh* seldom makes mention of the several conflicts opposing the different Arab and Berber dynasties that were, at one point or another in time, politically involved in al-Andalus, such as the Almoravid and Almohad wars against their fellow Muslims in al-Andalus, or the Almoravid-Almohad conflict itself, which dates back to the mid-twelfth century and eventually led to the Almohads replacing the Almoravids as a ruling dynasty both in the Maghrib and al-Andalus. By the same token, the Iraqi historian leaves unexplained the Marinid dynasty's opposition to the Almohad empire, which resulted in the former overthrowing and succeeding the latter in 1244. It is as though out of a sense of Islamic nationalism that El-Hajji practices throughout his book the dismissal of these and other conflictual political and military events that influenced majorly the course of al-Andalus's evolution.

The last chapter of *Al-Tārīkh* is dedicated to the Naṣrid kingdom of Granada. El-Hajji explains the crucial role played by the Naṣrids, an Andalusī Arab dynasty, in the maintaining, from 1238 to 1492, of Granada. According to him the latter became a safe haven for all Andalusī Muslims fleeing a systemic extermination at the hands of the Christians through what he deems to be another type of "crusades" within Iberia.⁽²¹⁾ The Iraqi historian believes that, becoming a hub for literature, the arts and sciences, Granada was the culmination of Western Islamic intellectual progress. Geo-strategically though, Granada kept receding in the face of increasing military and diplomatic pressure from a more powerful Christian Spain. An account is given in this chapter of the military and political events which led to the fall of Granada. El-Hajji admits that one of the major factors leading to the end of Granada and thus of Muslim rule in the Iberian Peninsula was the internal conflicts that consumed al-Andalus from within.⁽²²⁾

Subscribing to the Arab-Islamic romanticizing narrative of al-Andalus, which tends to portray it as a Muslim paradise lost to Europe and Christendom by the end of the fifteenth century, the author of *Al-Tārīkh* does not shy away from expressing irredentist claims on many an occasion to modern-day Spain and Portugal. He thus wonders "Whether it is not right to borrow from our authors and scholars – may God have mercy on them and reward them –, who possessed shrewdness and discernment, their ways and say what they used to say when al-Andalus was mentioned: May God bring it back to Islam."⁽²³⁾ Playing with the rhyming Arabic words *mafqūd* (lost) and *mardūd* (returned, restored), he asks the question: "Will it [al-Andalus] remain 'paradise lost' or become paradise restored?"⁽²⁴⁾

Al-Tārīkh al-andalusī is one of the most influential modern Arabic works on the history of al-Andalus. Through it and other books, El-Hajji has contributed to the fashioning of the contemporary historical discourse surrounding al-Andalus in the Arab world. A member of

(21) *Ibid.*, 529.

(22) *Al-Tārīkh*, 560.

(23) *Ibid.*, 578.

(24) *Ibid.*, 444.

the Arab conservative intelligentsia, he presents Islam as almost the sole driving force behind the political and military events that shaped the destiny of Muslim Iberia from the beginning of the conquest to the end of the Reconquista. Although such a fatalist theory remains highly debatable, as it discards to a great extent the human volition involved in the making and unmaking of al-Andalus, it does not detract from the historian's masterful command of Muslim sources on al-Andalus, which is successfully demonstrated throughout the six hundred pages of the book at hand.

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