Mohamad El-Merheb, *Political Thought in the Mamluk Period: The Unnecessary Caliphate* (Edinburgh, 2022). Pp. vii, 216.

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El-Merheb's work revolves around five compilations by Mamluk authors: Ibn Jamāʿah, al-Qarafī, al-Subkī, Ibn Ṭalḥah, and an anonymous Sufi author. He opens with a critical review of past scholarship on the "Constitutional Organization of Islam" (Gibb): a popular historical theoretical frame that he tags a *longue durée* view of Islamic political jurisdiction, which is actually an essentialist and unhistorical approach. As early as the tenth century, Muslim jurists were aware that the utopian ideal of a united Muslim *ummah* was unrealistic. Al-Ashʿarī opens his heresiography with the historical evaluation "the first thing that divided the Muslims was their disagreement regarding the community's leadership *(imāmah)*".[1]

Chapter 1, "Reading Islamic Political Thought," provides a critical review of studies on the institution of the caliphate. To illuminate the deficiency of the research, El-Merheb opens with a fresh view, drawn by a comparison of the fourteenth-century European political theory of Marsilius of Padua with the study of Islamic constitutional writings of Ibn Jamāʿah. He criticizes the legal lineage that several Western scholars have (incorrectly) reconstructed. At this juncture he highlights, inter alia, the important place that should be assigned to al-Jūwaynī (419–78/1028–85). Based upon his reading of the primary sources, El-Merheb disagrees with the interpretation of the caliphate's history advocated by Mona Hassan and disapproves of studies about the post-1258 Islamic political theory by Ann Lambton, in particular.

El-Merheb turns next to a Persian "mirror for princes" attributed to al-Ghazālī. I believe that we should differentiate between this text and the Arabic title that is accredited to the great scholar. This pseudo-Ghazālī circulated among Mamluk readers, who did not question its authenticity. Summarizing the state of the art, El-Merheb argues that the prevailing *longue durée* research method into the basic principles and law of the "Islamic state" has resulted in limited success. In its place, he offers a contextualizing interpretation of the political thinkers, drawn against the background of their distinctive intellectual and empirical worlds, their social, cultural, and political contexts. Such a historian identifies the political language of the texts he investigates. A survey of the Ashrafīyah Library serves to parse this working method. This institution illuminates the importance of the governing military elite in the educational

[1] Abū al-Ḥasan ʿAlī al-Ashʿarī, *Maqālāt al-Islāmīyīn,* ed. Hellmut Ritter (Wiesbaden, 1400/1980), 2 (ll. 3–4).

DOI: 10.6082/35ht-df95. (https://doi.org/10.6082/35ht-df95)
DOI of Vol. XXV: 10.6082/msr25. See https://doi.org/10.6082/msr2022 to download the full volume or individual articles.

and religious spheres. The religious establishment relied on the patronage of military officers. The complier of the Arabic pseudo-Ghazālī articulated his constitutional theory under the shade of their canopy.

Chapter 2 deals with Ibn Jamāʿah, a Shafiʿi jurist whose theory of rulership, legitimacy, and power attracted scholarly attention as early as 1868.[2] Resembling al-Subkī, Ibn Jamāʿah was an observer-participant, a man of the pen who occupied legal-administrative positions. El-Merheb analyses *Drafting Ordinances towards Running the Affairs of the People of Islam,* certainly Ibn Jamāʿah's best known work. Highlighting the originality of this compilation, he examines it as a political and constitutional text *(tadbīr),* as well as an administrative guide *(taḥrīr),* while taking into consideration the compiler's political position.

Although the term *tadbīr* itself is not used in the Quran, the present tense of its verbal form *yudabbiru* is repeated four times: Sūrat Yūnus (10:3 and 31); Sūrat al-Raʿd (13:2); and Sūrat al-Sajadah (32:5). In these verses, the Quran informs the believers that the Lord created the Heavens and he directs the affair *(yudabbiru al-amra). Dabbara amran* signifies "he executed an affair with consideration." *Dabbara al-bilāda* means "he conducted the affairs of the country." This meaning of the root v*d.b.r.* (to guide, to lead) can be traced in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Syriac. It resembles the Greek *oikonomia* (management of the house).[3] In the Middle Islamic Period, books entitled *tadbīr* dealt with politics, economy, and ethics *(akhlāq).*[4] It has been claimed that the earliest title on these topics is *Sulūk al-mālik,* a book attributed to Aḥmad Ibn Abī al-Rabīʿ (presumably died 227/842). Yet, this early date should be rejected. Jirjī Zaydān suggests the early Mamluk period, a date that indeed seems more plausible.[5]

El-Merheb turns next to examine the jihad manuals composed by Ibn Jamāʿah. Also cataloged as *furūsīyah* and military guides, these two short booklets are closely related to the compiler's political world view and his administrative duties. In line with the Islamic "mirror for princes," these works display the importance of just government. El-Merheb here offers fresh insight into the study of middle Islamic-period political writings. This is followed with critical remarks on past scholarly studies of Ibn Jamāʿah's *taḥrīr/tadbīr.* According to El-Merheb's interpretation, Ibn

[2] Alfred von Kremer, *Geschichte der herrschenden Ideen des Islams: der Gottesbegriff, die Prophetie und Staatsidee* (Leipzig, 1868), 416.

[3] W. Heffening, "Tadbīr," *Encyclopaedia of Islam,* 2nd ed.

[4] Hellmut Ritter, "Ein Arabisches Handbuch der Handelswissenschaft" (Phil. Diss., Bonn, 1914); Claude Cahen, "A propos et autour d'"Ein arabisches Handbuch der Handelswissenschaft,'" *Oriens* 15 (1962): 168.

[5] Frédéric Bauden and Antonella Ghersetti, "L'Art de servir son monarque: Le Kitāb Waṣāyā Aflāṭūn al-ḥakīm fī ḫidmat al-mulūk, édition critique et traduction précédées d'une introduction," *Arabica* 54, no. 3 (2007): 298.

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Jamāʿah legitimates the coercive imamate. Being a Qurayshite is not a prerequisite qualification for one who aspires to hold the position of sultan. He then surveys Shāfiʿ ibn ʿAlī's *History* (Bibliothèque Nationale MS Arabe 839).

Chapter 3 is based on deep investigation of two manuscripts that articulate a Sufi position on political power and authority: (1) Tāj al-Dīn Ibn Ḥamawīyah's *Al-Siyāsah al-mulūkīyah* and (2) the anonymous (not al-Khiḍr) *Miṣbāḥ al-hidāyah fī ṭarīq al-imāmah,* a treatise that represents an early attempt to set down a juristic interpretation in the light of Baybars' successful Abbasid restoration.[6] The author examines the close relations between the ruling military aristocracy and *al-ṣūfīyah*. Their play in the political arena is narrated in contemporary chronicles. The *Miṣbāḥ* is a Sufi political treatise that validates the rule of a non-Qurayshite imam. Its anonymous author departs from earlier Sunni political theory, a turn that can be identified in writings of Muslim scholars who lived under the early Saljuqs. Moreover, it is an additional example of the reception of Persian scholarly works in Ayyubid and Mamluk Syria and Egypt.

Chapter 4 concentrates on two jurists, Kamāl al-Dīn Ibn Ṭalḥah al-Wazīr al-Nuṣaybī al-Shāfiʿī (582–652/1186–1254)[7] and Shihāb al-Dīn Aḥmad Qarāfī al-Mālikī (626–84/1228–85). Their literary production is, according to El-Merheb, representative or archetypical of Sunni constitutional jurisdiction in thirteenth-century Syria and Egypt. He provides a condensed account of these works and their political-administrative contexts. While analyzing Ibn Ṭalḥah's text, he refers to other works in this genre, highlighting their place in the genealogy of advice-to-the-ruler literature, although he refrains from cataloguing this book as belonging to the *Fürstenspiegel* library.

Recent years have seen a growing interest in Mamluk historical narratology. Chapter 5 dwells upon this topic. This is in line with the author's working thesis that the "Political thought of the Mamluk period should be studied in conjunction with the historical writing." The first case study examines al-Subkī's biography of Ibn ʿAbd al-Salām, who is portrayed in the Mamluk sources as an exemplary model. These texts are used to emphasize the methodology of contextualism. Reading a political text requires the reader's acquaintanceship with the historiography and with the prevailing conventions that governed the political discourse of the time. The author outlines Shafiʿi political thought.[8] This

[6] Mustafa Banister, *The Abbasid Caliphate of Cairo (1261–1517): Out of the Shadows* (Edinburgh, 2021), 231–32.

[7] For his contribution to occultism see "Al-Durr al-munaẓẓam fī al-sirr (al-ism) al-aʿẓam," National Library of Israel MSS Yahuda 471 (fol. 367) and 482.

[8] Cf. Michael Winter, "Inter-madhhab competition in Mamluk Damascus: al-Tarsusi's counsel for the Turkish Sultans," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 25 (David Ayalon Memorial Volume 2001): 195–211.

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is followed by a concise study of al-Subkī's *The Restorer of Favors,* which is characterized as "a source of political thought that clearly upholds Shāfiʿī's constitutional concerns for the rule of law and limited government."

Mohamad El-Merheb's book opens a new path in the study of Islamic constitutional theory. By adding new genres he enlarges the data sources that historians of Sunni political thought may draw upon. He provides fresh analysis and calls out commonly accepted paradigms, such as Lambton's and Crone's well-received interpretations of Islamic government.

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