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In memoriam Hichem Djait

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Introduction

The idea that writing/depiction represents an impression of reality, which is itself irretrievable and that writing/depiction is thus in fact interpretation, not a faithful reflection of the original subject has long preoccupied historians, who have drawn attention to the difficulties associated with sources and to the extent to which they reflect “historical fact”. For their part, historians of early Islam have also grappled with the problem of sources in the historiography of this period, with efforts to underline the importance of this issue steadily increasing from the nineteenth century onwards. At that time, in the context of the expansion of the European colonialist project across much of the globe (including the Arabic-speaking regions) and the ensuing political, military, and cultural clashes, there emerged among Muslims the idea of a “return to true Islam”. Many saw in this idea a useful recipe for resisting colonial expansion, solving what was seen as the problem of “backwardness”, keeping up with the march of progress, and dealing with the fractures to Arab-Islamic identity caused by these shocks. The early period of Islamic history thus regained its central place in the concerns of both intellectuals and researchers as well as wider Arab public opinion. It was also an important reference point in the project of creating a new Arab-Islamic identity. The result of these efforts was the historical construct of a “golden age”, imbued with an aura of perfection and holiness. This construct, or historical imaginary, was also and continues to be used as a discursive tool to defend Islam from those Orientalists who argued that it was the Muslims’ religion that had held back the development of their societies. The most prominent of these was the French philosopher Ernest Renan (1823–1892), who gave his famous lecture *L’islam et la science* at the Sorbonne on 29th March 1883. This then elicited a response from Ǧamāl ad-Dīn al-Afġānī (1838–1897), which represented a qualitative shift towards apologetics in Arab–Islamic discourse.

Nevertheless, there were thinkers who were alive to the necessity of using a rationalist framework to analyse events. Thus, for example, Qusṭanṭīn Zurayq (1909–2000) offered some profound reflections on the relationship between the past and the present in his 1959 book *Naḥnu wa-t-tārīḥ*, in which he also warned of the dangers of wallowing in nostalgia. Similarly, the Lebanese journalist and intellectual Farah Anṭūn (1874–1922) advocated for the necessity of subjecting the early period of Islamic history to a process of rigorous scientific re-examination and effecting a complete break with the past as a prerequisite for keeping

up with the pace of civilisational change. Likewise, we can discern both intellectual courage and a powerful critical acumen in the 1926 book *Fī š-šī'r al-ġāhilī*, by the Egyptian writer and intellectual Taha Hussein (1889–1973), who was investigated by the authorities because of the content of this work. In Iraq, a historical school emerged that was distinguished by the critical nature of its output. Notable figures from this school include: Šāliḥ Aḥmad al-‘Alī (1918–2003), whose 2001 book *Dawlat ar-rasūl fī l-Madīna* offered a study of the institutions and organising structures of social life in the early Islamic period; Ġawād ‘Alī (1907–1987), who, in his 1958 book *Tārīḥ al-‘arab qabla l-islām*, offered an introduction to pre-Islamic history, which had previously been largely excluded from the history books, with the majority of what had been written being dominated by mythology; and ‘Abd al-‘Azīz ad-Dūrī (1919–2010), whose 1948 book *Tārīḥ al-‘Irāq al-iqtisādī fī l-qarn ar-rābi‘ al-ḥiġrī* was a foundational work of economic history in the Islamic sphere. Thereafter there followed a succession of works examining the economic, financial, and institutional structures especially of the Abbasid era, and this at time when interest in economic history was still in its infancy in European universities. We should also mention here Tarif Khalidi (b. 1938), who moved the focus to the history of ideas among the Arabs, as in his 1994 book *Arabic historical thought*. From the Maghreb, the key name that stands out is that of the Tunisian historian and intellectual Hichem Djaït (1935–2021). The present volume is a collection of readings and critical reviews of Djaït’s various works, both regarding their content and the methodologies which underpin them.

Hichem Djaït was born in Tunis in 1935 to a prominent local family. His paternal grandfather, Yūsuf (1830–1915), held a number of ministerial positions, including that of prime minister, which the latter held in 1908, during the reign of Naceur Bey (reigned 1906–1922). Djaït’s uncle, Muḥammad ‘Abd al-‘Azīz (1886–1970), held the position of *Šayḥ al-islām* from 1945 to 1956 and was simultaneously minister of justice from 1947. The latter was also a key figure in the establishment of a civil code, announced on 13th August 1956 by the then prime minister and later president of the republic, Habib Bourguiba (1903–2000, president 1957–1987).

Hichem Djaït studied at the Collège Sadiki in Tunis, and completed his university education at the Sorbonne in Paris, where he wrote his doctorate under the supervision of the French Orientalist Claude Cahen on the emergence of the city of Kufa during the first century after the Hijra. He defended his thesis in

1981 and published it as a book in French in 1986,¹ with a later entry on the same topic in the *Encyclopedia of Islam*.²

Djaït taught at various universities in France and Tunisia, starting in the University of Zaytouna before he took up a post teaching early Islamic history in the history department at the University of Tunis. During this time, Djaït published several studies of the foundational period of Islamic history, through which he sought to offer a critical and unsanctimonious reading of Arab history.³ This was perhaps also the motive underlying his broaching of a topic considered taboo by all but a very few earlier historians (such as Taha Hussein, for example), namely the Islamic civil strife (*al-fitna*), the topic of a 1989 book that he published in French,⁴ with an Arabic translation in 1991,⁵ which has since been reprinted numerous times with considerable engagement from specialists. Djaït chose to investigate the topic of civil and religious strife in the context of those fateful events in the foundational period of Islamic history, thereby undermining the deep-seated idea of the “rightly-guided caliphs” in the Muslim imagination, while also working to highlight the repercussions up to the present day of the political instrumentalisation of this moment in history.

His three-volume work *Fī s-sīra an-nabawiyya*⁶ is the outcome of a scholarly endeavour that lasted for more than a decade,⁷ in which he took on the task of excising from the biography of the Prophet Muhammad all the myths and falsehoods that it had accumulated over the years, thus freeing it of the prevailing notions which had gradually developed in people’s minds into certain facts that could be neither challenged nor questioned. Djaït’s intellectual endeavour begins in the first volume of *as-Sīra* with an investigation of revelation and prophecy – quintessentially metaphysical topics – which he subjects to a rationalist historical

¹ Djaït, *al-Kūfa*.

² Djaït, “al-Kūfa”.

³ See <https://lapresse.tn/82301/hichem-djait-historien-anthropologue-et-islamologue-a-la-presse-il-faut-siffler-la-fin-de-la-recreation/>. Accessed 28/09/2022.

⁴ Djaït, *La grande discorde*.

⁵ Djaït, *al-Fitna*.

⁶ The three volumes are: *al-Waḥy wa-l-Qur’ān wa-n-nubuwwa* (‘revelation, the Quran, and prophecy’), published in 1999; *Tārīḥiyyat ad-da’wa l-muḥammadiyya fī Makka* (‘the historicity of the Muhammadan mission in Mecca’), published in 2007; and *Masīrat Muḥammad fī l-Madīna wa-ntiṣār al-islām* (‘Muhammad’s career in Medina and the victory of Islam’), published in 2015. This third volume of *as-Sīra* was originally written and published in French as *La vie de Muhammad. Le parcours du Prophète à Médine et le triomphe de l’Islam* in 2012 – the 2015 Arabic edition is a translation of the French original. The entire three-volume work has also been translated into English, as *The life of Muhammad*, published in 2014.

⁷ See Djaït, *al-Waḥy*, p. 7.

analysis, taking the view that in an investigation of this sort, the principal source must be the Quran. There were a range of different reactions to and evaluations of this work in the scholarly community, some of which can be seen in the contributions to the present volume.

Djaït's work on early Islamic history did not only deal with the Arabian Peninsula and the Middle East. He also wrote a number of articles on the beginnings of Islam in the region now referred to as the Maghreb. These were later collected and published in book form.⁸ His various writings on early Islamic history, as well as his debates with European Orientalists and his critical response to their scholarly output, are the topics that are investigated in the contributions to the present work. There are, however, numerous publications by Djaït which are outside the scope of this collection, which deals with early Islamic history only; he was also deeply engaged in contemporary intellectual and political issues, and although he was not actively involved with any political party, he often expressed opinions that were opposed to political power in his native Tunisia, leading to various restrictions being imposed upon him.⁹ As well as having given numerous interviews in the print and broadcast media, Djaït has produced many articles and books in which he presents his opinions on, for example, the relationship between religion and the state,¹⁰ or the issue of Islamic identity and the future of the Arabs,¹¹ or the topic of Europe and Islam.¹²

In the present volume our focus is on Djaït's publications on early Islamic history. We begin with the question of sources and Djaït's methodology in working with them. **Hayet Amamou's** chapter, entitled "Djaït on early Islamic history – Arab-Islamic primary sources and the writings of Orientalists", provides a detailed analysis of this topic, in which she shows that, whichever topic in early Islamic history Djaït addresses (be it the issue of settlement and urbanisation, civil strife, prophetic biography, or the history of the Islamic West), he always makes use of Arab-Islamic written sources (the Quran, as well as works of biography, of the Prophet and others, exegesis, military and general history, geneal-

⁸ Djaït, *Ta'sīs al-ġarb al-islāmī*.

⁹ Ibn Mīlād, *Ġadal al-huwiyya*, pp. 16–17, 27–28.

¹⁰ Djaït, "La religion et la politique".

¹¹ Djaït, *Personnalité*. For the translation into Arabic, see Djaït, *aš-Šaḥsiyya*.

¹² Djaït, *L'Europe et l'Islam*. For the translation into Arabic see Djaït, *Ūrubbā wa-l-islām*. Two further important publications that should be mentioned here, both of which analyse and discuss Djaït's contributions as an intellectual and man of culture to the issues of the day, based on a collection of articles, are: Bilqaziz, *at-Tārīḥ wa-t-taqaddum*; Ibn Mīlād, *Ġadal al-huwiyya*. See also in the appendix (pp. 175–203) the expanded bibliography of works by Hichem Djaït, prepared by Luṭfi Ibn Mīlād.

ogy, geography, economics), approaching them with a powerful critical sense. This approach allows him to disentangle the competing narratives and analyse, discuss, and compare them in different sources, so as to ascertain which of them is correct, and what is erroneous, or anachronistic, or the result of projection. Amamou's chapter also makes clear that Djaït does not make exclusive use of written sources; he also draws on the archaeological record via the publications of archaeologists, making use in his historical work of archaeological survey reports and findings from excavations. Amamou also shows that Djaït was just as well acquainted with the work of Orientalists and their arguments concerning early Islamic history as he was of the primary sources: his writings frequently critically engage with the claims made by European Orientalists, sometimes agreeing with their arguments, and in other instances pointing out methodological errors or unsound conclusions. The chapter concludes that, in addition to having this powerful critical sense, Djaït stressed the importance of acquiring intuitive convictions and of cultivating a sense of intimacy between historians and their topic.

Following this chapter, which looks in general terms at Djaït's approach to sources, we move on to a consideration of his three-volume work *as-Sīra*, to which the majority of the present volume is devoted. In his chapter "Observations on Djaït's *Revelation, the Quran and Prophecy*" **Moncef Ben Abdeljelil** discusses three fundamental issues raised in the first volume of *as-Sīra*. The first of these concerns Djaït's affirmation of the indisputable primacy of the Quran *qua* holy book. In this connection, Ben Abdeljelil makes clear the importance of the link between the revelation and the Quran in Djaït's thinking, pointing out that without this link the revelation could not be accepted as such, and the Quran would not constitute a holy book. The second issue relates to the interpretation of the phenomenon of the Muhammadan revelation. Here, Ben Abdeljelil analyses Djaït's view that the Quran is the only historical source that can legitimately be used in order to understand the phenomenon of the revelation and the conditions that made it possible for it to begin and continue. He also explains the guiding principle of Djaït's study of the phenomenon of revelation, which consists of three elements. First, the Quran is considered an authentic document, contemporary with the period of prophecy, and is the only source to be used in an investigation of the revelation, prophecy and the Quran itself. Second, the data is to be taken at face value and analysed as far as possible – nothing more. In other words, researchers in this field should attend to what any religion says about itself. Third, any record produced a century after the event it describes has little historical credibility. Thus, in the study of the revelation, prophecy and the Quran should not rely on works of history or biography or hadith. The third fundamental

issue that Ben Abdeljelil considers is Djait's thorough acceptance of the reality of Muhammad's prophethood. In this connection he discusses Djait's views on a number of issues connected with Muhammad's prophethood, including visions and revelation during sleep, the role of Gabriel, and the story of the cave.

In "Hichem Djait on the Quran as a source for early Islamic history", **Nader Hammami** shows that the question of sources in the historiography of early Islam and the life of Muhammad was a constant concern in Djait's thinking, and is what led him to develop an approach in which the Quranic text was the fundamental source for the historiography of the emergence of Islam. Although there were some researchers who declared their use of this approach in their research prior to Djait, the latter committed to it as a methodological choice in his various publications, grounding its use with extensive discussion. Hammami discusses this approach in the light of recent works in the field of Quranic studies, especially in the Anglo-Saxon context, which argues for a late date for the composition of the Quran, namely in the eighth and ninth centuries CE, thereby bringing into question the issue of its contemporaneity with the life of Muhammad. Hammami shows that Djait was selective in the use he made of the Orientalists' research results, sometimes adopting views that supported his own stance, such as Nöldeke's chronology of the Quran, which supports the idea of the contemporaneity of the Quran with the period of prophecy, while also dismissing other important studies on the history of the Quranic codices, such as the work of Arthur Jeffery on the ancient codices.

Hammadi Messaoudi's chapter "Hichem Djait – Between the obligations of the historical method and the power of the sacred" examines Djait's decision to use the Quran as a source and his commitment to a particular methodological approach. In this contribution, Messaoudi attempts to answer two important questions. First, to what extent can a sacred text (here the Quran) be used as a historiographical source? Second, is Djait capable of freeing himself from the power of the sacred in his work? By means of a far-reaching analysis, Messaoudi shows that the Quran is a text that is linguistically highly creative, with numerous passages that are based on highly imaginative symbols, myths and metaphors. He also shows that while it is eminently suitable as a devotional text, the same cannot be said for its status as a historical document. His analysis views Djait as occupying a middle space between the historical method and the power of the sacred, with a methodology that attempts to combine "an intuitive sensibility with an inquisitive rationalism". Against this background, Messaoudi shows that Djait treats his source (the Quran in his case) totally uncritically, despite the fact that his rationalist methodology would permit doubt in also this instance. However, as

Messaoudi shows, Djait's religious convictions mean that he is powerless in the face of the sacred and prevent him from consistently implementing his rationalist methodology.

This conflict between faith and reason has led to various types of confusion, as outlined by **Mustapha Alaoui** in his chapter "On the confusion of faith, science, and humanism in Hichem Djait's *Fī s-sīra an-nabawiyya*". In this contribution, Alaoui discusses the methodological confusion to be found in Djait's *as-Sīra*, which results from his attempt to alternate between a religious perspective and the methods of the natural, social, and human sciences in his analysis of the events that took place in the life of the Prophet. By carefully analysing several examples from *as-Sīra*, in which Djait employs concepts from physics and other natural sciences, as well as from psychology, anthropology, and comparative religions, Alaoui highlights the various contradictions that arise from this methodological confusion, discussing problems at the level of both theory and methodology. He concludes that Djait's *as-Sīra* is fundamentally based on religious faith and Islamic theology, and cannot therefore be considered a work of rationalist history on the life of the Prophet.

In her chapter "On Djait and modern prophetic biography", **Soumaya Louhichi** first surveys selected examples from different eras of modern Arabic intellectual production on the topic of prophetic biography, as well as Djait's own production on this topic in the form of *as-Sīra*. Secondly, via the methodology of situating the text in its context, and by means of representative examples, she defines the various different stages through which the text of prophetic biographies has passed and discusses the characteristics that this text (including Djait's) has acquired at each stage. The article also presents key advances in philosophy and the study of religions as regards the issue of religion in general, and of revelation in particular, the latter topic being one of three focuses of the first volume of *as-Sīra*, along with prophecy and the Quran. This enables us to understand which elements of these new ideas Djait adopts for his study of prophetic biography. The chapter ends with an attempt to re-evaluate Djait's biography of Muhammad in the light of the aforementioned modern intellectual production on this topic, and to situate it in the context of postmodernist discourse.

Mohamed Said's chapter "An analysis of Djait's research into written sources for the history of Africa before the fifteenth century CE" differs from the others in that it looks at another of Djait's works – one that is less well known, despite its importance – namely an article presenting the written sources for the history of Africa prior to the fifteenth century CE. This article forms part of a large collective work organised by UNESCO on the history of the African continent. In it,

Djaït surveys the most significant sources for the history of Africa, after situating present-day Tunisia (known in past centuries as Ifrīqiya) within the context of the wider history of the continent, which he covers from prehistoric times up to the fifteenth century CE. In his paper, Said presents the issues discussed by Djaït, the most important of which is the heterogeneity of sources (both in terms of quantity and type) throughout the lengthy period covered in Djaït's article, as well as the issue of periodisation, within this enormous geographical space, characterised by great ethnic and cultural diversity. Djaït divides the period covered into three historical epochs, the first being antiquity, that is, from the earliest times up to 622 CE, the second being the first Islamic era from 622 until 1050 CE, and the third being the second Islamic age from 1050 to 1450 CE.

Mohamed Kharrat's chapter takes a holistic look at Djaït's various writings, exploring the common theme outlined in the title "Elites and extraordinary personalities in Hichem Djaït's reading of Islamic history – The example of the Prophet Muhammad". With the help of numerous examples drawn from Djaït's work, Kharrat shows how Djaït tends to focus on charismatic personalities – whether tribal elites, or religious and political figures – and on their central and active role in history. Kharrat focuses in his chapter on the picture Djaït paints in his books of the personality of Muhammad. He shows by means of numerous examples that Djaït, through the choices he makes and his celebration of elites, tends to search for what might be called the "epic soul", and seeks especially to establish the idea of Muhammad as a unique personality. Muhammad is thus presented in the form of a hero, not merely in virtue of his being a prophet, but also as a warrior and statesman. Muhammad's personality in Djaït's history represents the ideal of an individual who is superior on the level of intellect, manners, and charisma. In Kharrat's estimation, Djaït was torn between a desire to rationalise traditional narratives and demystify the biography of Muhammad on the one hand, and, on the other, to rehabilitate the Prophet from the Orientalist readings of his character, which distorted his image and sought to erase his genius. Kharrat concludes that Djaït is a defender of the history of individuals, and situates him within a Marxist reading of history, in which individuals are the makers of history.

In the final chapter "On the terminology relating to tribal elites in early Islam – Competition and social status", **Mondher Sakly** looks at the issue of the titles given to members of elites in the tribal society from which the Prophet Muhammad emerged. He shows the importance of examining these titles in dictionaries, biographies, and other sources, in order to appreciate the semantic differences between these titles and to understand the dynamic of competition that lies behind them.