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## **Book Review: Hawa, S. The erasure of Arab political identity: Colonialism and violence. Milton Park: Routledge, 2017**

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**Hawa, S. *The Erasure of Arab Political Identity: Colonialism and Violence.*  
Milton Park: Routledge, 2017.**

Salam Hawa's book is a historical excursus of Arab political identity that sheds a new light on those who have contributed to establishing the Islamic community, or *umma*.

Her book is formed of seven chapters. In chapter 1, Hawa poses the historical basis of the book. By observing the current situation in the Arab world, she aims at reconstructing "the origins of Arab political identity, rooted in the events that took place following the death of the Prophet [Muhammad] in the first half of the seventh century" (p. 2). This historical review is necessary because, in order to understand the present, it is essential to comprehend "the historical narrative that led to the current definition of 'Arab' and 'Muslim', and how the two have come to be entwined in a morass of political struggles, violence and destruction" (p. 2). The premise of her analysis relies on the links between the Wahhabi Salafist movement and Western powers, especially the United States. This alliance, which Hawa identifies between the Wahhabi ideology and the American Evangelical movement in the United States, was and is justified on the grounds of a sort of *mission civilisatrice* by adhering "to a world view that does not tolerate alterity, *otherness*; they are incapable of distinguishing between *self* and *not-self*, and consequently reject the possibility that an alternative viewpoint may exist" (p. 3, original emphasis). This alliance relies on the idea of *difference* as a threat to their own existence; "for them [Wahhabis and the United States] the other is not a subject, but an *other*, an object to be feared, and with whom they are bound to enter into a struggle for life or death, the *either/or* view of human relations perceives not middle ground, does not allow for dialogue or understanding, since the *other* is not even considered human, but an entity to be conquered, exploited, degraded or annihilated" (p. 3, original emphasis). Hawa advocates for a new way of conceiving of Arabs and Muslims that should include the cultural dimension in sharp contrast to "the Wahhabis' bid to destroy the history of the entire region [which] illustrates their intent to eliminate traces of the historical *context* of the religion, and therewith make it impossible for future generations to 'imagine' an *alternate* historical discourse" (p. 5, original emphasis).

Chapter 2 is an in-depth analysis of Arab history in order to illustrate cultural and political practices and customs of Arabs prior to the revelation of the Qur'an. For Hawa, in the West and in the Arab world it is very common to conflate Arabs with Islam without considering that being Arab does not necessarily mean being Muslim. She argues that some Arabs linked their origins "to the birth of the religion" (p. 12). In this chapter, she discusses the need to reconstruct Arab history in light of this sort of prejudice that conditions the way in which Arabs are perceived and perceive themselves. To pursue this goal, she analyzes historical and archaeological evidence to demonstrate "that by the time Islam was 'instituted', there already existed what Friedrich Meinecke called a *Kulturnation*, an Arab cultural nation that led to the establishment of a political nation (*Staatnation*). The Arab cultural nation was based on a shared geographic location, common languages, common ethos and a common way of life that evolved over many centuries" (p. 12). The shared Arab culture represented an element that fostered the cohesiveness of the local population, even though fragmented and segmented in terms of pre-Islamic religion, social class and tribes.

Chapter 3 revolves around the concept of *Jahiliyyah*, which is often associated with the Age of Ignorance, the age before the advent of Islam. Hawa reconsiders this concept to show that it has to be understood not as ignorance but as "moral and economic degradation of Arab life prior to revelation, witnessed in frequent fratricidal wars and breaking *peace pacts*" (p. 7, original emphasis). In this chapter, she discusses the socio-political structures of Mecca and Medina which led Arabs to "wars against their kith and kin" (p. 36). This was

exemplified by the disagreement over succession that occurred soon after the death of the prophet Muhammad.

In chapter 4, she analyzes the historical events that led to fragmentation among Arabs, thus favouring the rule of the Umayyads. The chapter focuses on Mu'awiya, the first caliph of this dynasty, who broke the peace pact in order to adopt his idea based "on a divide-and-conquer strategy to maintain control over their captive populations (Arab and non-Arab)" (p. 63). For Hawa, the Umayyads' political strategy ended up breaking the harmony within the community of believers (*umma*) and the state. The success of the First Muslim Empire, under the rule of the first three *Rashidun* caliphs, was linked to "friendship between the conquerors and the conquered, but the Umayyads' adoption of a kingship model broke the pact with Arab 'believers', leading to them feeling alienated as they rejected the 'trappings' of 'imperial' identity" (p. 8, original emphasis).

In chapter 5, Hawa discusses the evolution and dynamics that led the Abbasid dynasty to wield power. She focused on how the division between Arabs and Persians, which characterized the Umayyad period, disappeared and they joined efforts to give rise to the Abbasid Empire (750-1258 CE). In detail, this chapter exemplifies the burgeoning role of Islam in the public sphere. As she wrote: "it was under the Abbasids that Islam became directly associated with political power, supplanting Arab culture and replacing it with religious edicts devoid of all cultural relevance" (p. 8). Thus the Abbasid Empire was characterized by the prominent role of Islamic laws which replaced secular laws of the Umayyad period, and as she contends the difference between these two empires relied on "a system that exchanged discrimination by ethnicity to one by religion" (p. 87). There was a sort of 'de-Arabisation' of the caliphate and of the prominent role of Islam as a religious and political driving principle of the organization of the empire. This period, as Hawa argues, was also important because it led to the institutionalization of *ijmā'* (consensus) which became one of the sources of Islamic jurisprudence. It happened under the rule of Abbasids when al-Shāfi'ī "aligned the interpretation of the 'revealed sources' with human reasoning" (p. 93). By comparing the Umayyad and the Abbasid empires, Hawa argues that by creating a division between Arabs and Persians and replacing the secular law with Islamic law, both dynasties tended to "eliminate, sublimate and crush the principles of Arab political identity" (p. 107).

Chapter 6 explores the period after the decline of the Abbasid Empire and the establishment of the Turkic dynasties, namely Mamluk and Ottoman. The main aspect that emerges from this chapter is that Arab political identity was to a certain extent thrown away by the Turkic people, who tried to set the basis for their rule and empire which, especially with the Ottomans, lasted for centuries and extended to different continents. Hawa argues that the Mamluk dynasty "altered the letter and the spirit of religious laws. The sultanate introduced Turkish culture and customs in Arab lands, established two distinct legal systems: religious and civil" (p. 8). However, in these mutated social, economic, and political circumstances, "Arabs continued their attachment to their cultural identity, but experienced literary and scientific stagnation" (p. 8). The decline of the Abbasids led to the prominent role of Turkic people who put their "own Turkish stamp on a vast territory that spanned three continents. In spite of their rulers' conversion to Islam, they had little if any cultural kinship with the Arabs and were quick to establish Turkish as the language of administration" (p. 116).

Chapter 7 discusses the impact of the end of the First World War and the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire and the growing presence of Western powers in the Middle East with Britain, France and the United States that tried to safeguard their own interests in the region. Hawa is critically engaged with demonstrating that recent studies have shed a new light on the interests of Western powers in the Middle East. In particular, she

argues that “in dividing Arab lands, the Western powers sought to intentionally erode the political identity that united the population, an erosion they reinforced by selecting minority religious groups to rule each divided territory” (p. 9). This strategy represented an effective way that could inhibit the development of Arab national unity. However, recent studies have concluded that “the Arabs adapted their self-view to what can only be called trans-national Arab identity which has potential of one day turning into a state” (p. 9). In particular, Hawa emphasises the role that the United States “played in the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire, the ties it built with the Saudi-Wahhabi alliance and the pressure it placed on Britain to found the Jewish State of Israel” (p. 169).

In conclusion, Hawa’s book is an enlightening revision of the historical roots, events and dynamics of Arab political identity and its intricacies and potentialities in light of historical events that appeared to inhibit the cohesiveness of the Arabs. In particular, she sheds a new light on the U.S.-Saudi alliance that she argues relies on “an aspiration to empire that aligns the interest of both parties; it may also explain the active erasing of ancient monuments, religions and communities in the region” (p. 169).

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