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# A Review of "The House of Wisdom: How Arabic Science Saved Ancient Knowledge and Gave Us the Renaissance"

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useable conservative hero who opposed appeasement in British Prime Minister Winston Churchill. In offering this critique, however, this reviewer wants to underscore that this work is an essential starting point for any scholar seeking to understand the legacy of World War II in American society and culture.

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Al-Khalili, Jim
**The House of Wisdom: How Arabic Science Saved Ancient Knowledge and Gave Us the Renaissance**
New York: Penguin Press
336 pp., $29.95, ISBN 978-1-59420-279-7
Publication Date: March 2011

Jim al-Khalili's *The House of Wisdom* is the most recent example (and the second entitled *House of Wisdom*) of post-9/11 popular works that have tried to argue against the clash of civilizations rhetoric by emphasizing the Arabic foundations of the European Renaissance and the Scientific Revolution. Al-Khalili is a nuclear physicist by profession (and a highly accomplished one), and his passion for the history of science shines through in this very engaging narrative. One of the work's strengths is certainly al-Khalili's ability to bring the region and the science of this period alive for his readers, whether by relating anecdotes about the lives and travails of scientists and their patrons or by sharing his own childhood memories of living in Iraq and first learning about these historical figures. Another strength is the author's engagement with recent scholarship in the field, which allows al-Khalili to clearly show the ways in which Arabic science moved beyond Greek science to the point where it was the Latin West's engagement with the new Arabic science that gave rise to the Scientific Revolution. Nonetheless, *The House of Wisdom* suffers from a number of weaknesses common to such popular works, not least of which is the tendency to read modern scientific sensibilities back into the past.

The book is divided into sixteen chapters, many of which center on the life and works of specific individuals. For example, chapter 4 is on the great alchemist Jābir ibn Hayyān, whereas chapter 9 primarily focuses on the man known as the father of Arabic philosophy, al-Kindī. The first nine chapters focus on the period of the translation movement, of which six deal with science during the age of the Abbasid caliph, al-Ma'mūn (786–833). The next three chapters on Abū Bakr al-Rāzī ("The Medic"), Ibn al-Haytham ("The Physicist"), and Ibn Sīnā and al-Bīrūnī ("The Prince and the Pauper") complete the survey of the achievements of Arabic science during what has traditionally been deemed the golden age of Arabic science. A chapter is then devoted to the achievements of Andalusian scholars, followed by one chapter on developments in astronomy after 1100, otherwise seen as the beginning of the decline of Arabic science. The last two chapters deal with the decline of Arabic science (and the concomitant rise of European science through its acquisition of Arabic learning) and the current (poor) state of scientific research in the Islamic world and what can be (and is being) done to rectify it. Al-Khalili ends the book by expressing his firm belief that a "scientific renaissance" could take place again in the Islamic world, as long as the "political will" and an "understanding of the meaning of both academic freedom and the scientific method" exist—elements he maintains were ever present throughout the long history of premodern Arabic science (251).

Some of the weaknesses of the work are already evident in the structure itself. Al-Khalili devotes a majority of the chapters to the translation movement and the century following it, thus reinforcing traditional myths that Arabic science went into decline after 1100 (at one stage he even states unapologetically that, by the eleventh century, Arabic science had reached the "zenith . . . of [its] scientific achievement," 151). He rectifies this claim somewhat by devoting an entire chapter to post-1200 astronomical developments, which "provided Copernicus with the inspiration [and the actual mathematical tools] for his [heliocentric] astronomical models" (219), and with brief references to three individual scholars who worked after this period. Yet these latter examples are meant to show that "a drop in the volume of scientific output [did] not imply a drop in the quality of scholarship" (235). However, it is not entirely clear that there was a drop in the volume at all, if we go by the number of works composed in the post-1100 period (including those written in Persian and Ottoman Turkish). A good example here is of philosophy, which al-Khalili, in agreement with traditional narratives, believes declined in the post-Ghazālī period, when, in fact, the philosophical works composed between 1100 and 1350 were superior to those produced in the earlier period, at least quantitatively, if not also qualitatively.

*The House of Wisdom* also suffers extensively from the affliction A. I. Sabra famously called, "precursitis" (see his, "The Appropriation and Subsequent Naturalization of Greek Science in Medieval Islam: A Preliminary Statement," *History of Science* 25 (1987): 223–243, p. 224). On a number of occasions, premodern Arab authors are portrayed as having prefigured some important aspects of modern science. For example, al-Jāhith is claimed to have "propose[d] a rudimentary theory of Lamarckist evolution" (76); or al-Kindī is supposed to have posited an "idea . . . remarkably close to our current understanding of modern cosmology . . ., as described by Einstein's Theory of General Relativity" (133); or, my favorite, that "Ibn Khaldūn discovered a number of key economic notions several hundred years before their 'official' births, such as the virtues and necessity of a division of labour (before [Adam] Smith), the principle of labour value (before David Ricardo), a theory of population (before Thomas Malthus) and the role of the state in the economy (before John Maynard Keynes)" (237). A major problem with such an approach is that it debases not only the works of modern scientists, but also those of premodern Arabic scholars, for their entire corpus and intellectual achievement is reduced to the positing of a few nuggets of modern science.

Furthermore, this approach is premised on reading back modern sensibilities into premodern authors, which invariably misinterprets their projects and thought patterns. One of the hallmarks of the last few decades of scholarship in the history of science has been to treat science as a perfectly human endeavor, informed and structured by its local context. Thus, we are not supposed to ignore premodern scientists' engagement with the occult or religion. Rather, we should try to understand the role it plays in their science. Al-Khalili, however, is still

attached to an outdated understanding of the history and philosophy of science, which leads him to make many unfounded and outright inaccurate claims about premodern scientists. For example, he seeks to draw an arbitrary line between chemistry and alchemy within Jābir's works, failing to realize how Jābir's empirical investigations and experiments fit into his larger metaphysical alchemical philosophy. Similarly, he claims that the traditional Muslim invocation to God found at the beginning of al-Khwārizmī's book on algebra was due to his "not want[ing] to offend the caliph whose patronage he enjoyed" (111), completely overlooking the fact that more than a third of the text is devoted to calculating inheritances following the principles of Islamic law.

There are many more examples of al-Khalili's reading back modern scientific sensibilities into the past. I shall end my review by referring to just one more. As a theoretical physicist, al-Khalili is much attached to big science, which (often) relies heavily on state funding and large institutions. That is why much of the book covers the period of al-Ma'mūn and the House of Wisdom. Unfortunately, lacking any evidence, al-Khalili proceeds to place all scientific developments of the first half of the ninth century as somehow stemming from that institution and its patron, al-Ma'mūn. Not only is that vastly inaccurate, but it also belittles the patronage and production of scholarship outside of the caliphal court. Moreover, this fascination with caliphal personalities leads al-Khalili to make some outlandish claims, such as trying to classify the eccentric (and possibly schizophrenic) Fatimid Caliph al-Ḥākim's policies as understandable and "tolerant" (155) merely because he built a House of Wisdom, or, worse, claiming that all the great Andalusian scientists were "contemporaries" (190) who somehow worked for the enlightened Umayyad caliphs in their great library of Cordoba, when, in fact, the best physician (Ibn Zuhr), the best astronomers (al-Zarqālī and Ibn Bājja), and the best philosophers (Ibn Ṭufayl and Ibn Rushd) of Andalusia all lived during the time of the "anti-intellectual" Almoravids and Almohads (195).

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Herf, Jeffery
**Nazi Propaganda for the Arab World**
New Haven: Yale University Press
335 pp., $20.00, ISBN 978-0-300-16805-1
Publication Date: December 2010

Scholarly studies on relations between the Arab world and Nazi Germany first appeared soon after the Second World War. Since then, much has been written on the subject. However, in *Nazi Propaganda for the Arab World*, Jeffery Herf, a professor of modern European history at the University of Maryland, revisits the topic by using "underused and unused" (3) archival sources to analyze the effects of Nazi propaganda in the Middle East and North Africa.

Herf's goal is to transcend the "Eurocentric" (1) history of Nazism by analyzing the spread of Nazi propaganda, with its anti-Semitic agenda, in the Arab world in order to illuminate the collaboration of Nazi Germany, Arab nationalists, and Islamic ideologues that occurred from 1939 to 1945. To this end, the Nazis employed anti-Zionist and anti-Jewish propaganda as an instrument of war and diplomacy.

Herf explains that, when Germany began shortwave broadcasts to the Middle East in 1939, Berlin's goals were twofold: to gain influence in the Arab world and, thereby, undermine Allied forces in the region and to extend the Final Solution to the 700,000 Jews who lived in the Middle East. Herf emphasizes that anti-Semitism in the Arab world in the 1940s could not simply be explained by the pressures of Jewish immigration to Palestine or European imperialism in the Middle East (2). Nazi propagandists found their "soul mates" in the Arab world; Arab nationalists, Islamic radicals, and Nazis cooperated to produce propaganda that none could produce alone (4–5). Herf explains that Germans found that Islam offered a "point of entry" (46) for Nazi propaganda. The most important figure in this assessment was Hajj Amin al-Husseini, the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem. Herf hints that, without the Mufti and other Arab exiles in Berlin, it would not have been possible to disseminate Nazi propaganda successfully to the Arab world.

When the first broadcast went out to the Arab world, however, the Nazis faced one difficulty: how to define Semite. Adolf Hitler defined Semite to include Jews, Arabs, and other Middle Easterners. Nazi propagandists, Herf explains, had to redefine the term to exclude Arabs, Persians, and Turks. The Nazis also took advantage of Arab fears of Zionism, broadcasting that the Jews intended to establish a Jewish kingdom that extended from the Nile River to the Euphrates River (172). Surprisingly, the Nazis did not use *Mein Kampf* or *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* to spread their propaganda; instead, they used the Koran in their "religious talk" broadcasts and attempted to present Hitler as a Muslim savior who had come to kill the anti-Christ Jews (46). Contacts between radical Arab nationalists, Islamists, and Nazis were not a "clash of civilizations" but a meeting of "hearts and minds" (3).

However, the Germans knew that the success of their propaganda depended on military success in the Arab world. In January 1941, Hitler issued Directive No. 32, which stated that, after defeating of the Soviet Union, Germany would "utilize the Arabs" by occupying the Suez Canal and declaring its intention to liberate the Arabs (58). Herf concludes with a look at the long-term effects of Nazi propaganda on the Arab world and connects these effects to later radical Islamic movements.

Herf presents a well-written and researched work. *Nazi Propaganda for the Arab World* is intended for anyone interested in understanding the relationship between Nazis and Arabs during the Second World War. This work adds new perspective to Matthias Küntzel's argument in *Jihad and Jew-hatred: Islamism, Nazism and the Roots of 9/11* (Telos Press, 2007). Both Herf and Küntzel blame Muslim anti-Semitism on Germany. However, Herf's work is little more historical than that of Küntzel, who is a political scientist. Nonetheless, Herf, like Küntzel, overemphasizes the impact of Nazi propaganda in causing Islamists and radical Arab nationalists to become anti-Jewish. This exaggeration, which weakens Herf's thesis, ignores the long history of Muslim-Jewish relations, as well as the pressures of Zionism on the Arab world. Throughout the volume, Herf also maintains that Nazi propaganda motivated Islamists such as Hassan al-Banna, the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, and Sayyid Qutb, the Islamic extremist who inspired Osama Bin Laden. However, this assertion downplays the effects of the Islamic reform movements of the early twentieth century and overlooks the significance of reformers such as Rashid Rida. If one were to ignore these