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Foreword

It is my great pleasure to introduce this important book by Mohamad El-Merheb and Mehdi Berriah. This volume is based on a two-day workshop that took place in the splendid Paul Webley Wing of the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) and brought together colleagues from numerous countries in Europe, the US, Asia, and the Middle East. The workshop itself was a testament to scholarly mobility – though this was hampered somewhat by strike action on the other side of the Channel. Each contribution to this volume, and the way these contributions speak to one another, is a result of the discussions that we had during those days in London. This is true in particular for the clear chronological and thematic foci of this book that emerged during these exchanges.

Do we really need yet another book on the scholars, the '*ulamā'*', and thus yet another contribution to *ulamology*, one might ask? Yes, we do, precisely because the scholarly elite is so visible and was so crucial in textualising their recent and distant pasts – texts that form the backbone of how we study Middle Eastern history today and of the analytical categories that we use in this endeavour. It is thus necessary to continue to reflect on individual scholars and the group as a whole, in terms of internal stratification, the social contexts in which scholars were situated, the cultural practices of those belonging to this group, and so on. This is especially the case because the '*ulamā'*', on account of the many sources that we have for them, seem so deceptively transparent and easy to grasp. In consequence, the field of Middle Eastern history has sometimes used the term in a rather common-sensical way to slot practices, objects and attitudes into an ostensibly neat category of 'scholarly'.

One of those clichés that we see re-appearing over and over again when it comes to scholars and scholarly practices is that of medieval globetrotter-scholars steadily crisscrossing the lands in the pursuit of knowledge. This is where this book comes into its own, as it actually reflects on what this cliché meant in practice and thus raises questions on issues such as what social practices mobility entailed and who was mobile within the scholarly communities. It is exactly this kind of scholarship that is needed in order to move the field ahead by coming to a much better understanding of what we mean when talking about 'scholars' and their 'scholarly' practices. This book is a wonderful contribution to this ongoing debate.

Konrad Hirschler