

Conference Report:
State-building, Political Thought, and the Other
in Muslim Imperial Peripheries
(The Jerusalem Polonsky Academy at the Van Leer Jerusalem
Institute and The Martin Buber Society of Fellows at the
Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 27–28 June 2022)

Report by:

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On 27–28 June 2022, the international hybrid workshop “State-building, Political Thought, and the Other in Muslim Imperial Peripheries” took place in Jerusalem, at the Polonsky Academy at the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and on Zoom. The workshop was co-organized by Kerstin Hünefeld (Martin Buber Society of Fellows at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem) and Ekaterina Pukhovaia (Polonsky Academy at the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute). It brought together scholars working on non-dominant groups in the premodern and modern Middle East, their participation in state-building efforts, and the ways in which they were conceptualized by the state and dominant groups.

The idea of the conference arose out of the organizers’ interest in the comparative potential of the case of Zaydi Yemen—a peripheral state vis-à-vis Sunni counterparts, a state that for most of its history incorporated an important Jewish community, tribal populations, as well as non-Zaydi, Sunni populations, that is, all in all, a state challenging “Sunna-normativity” in its daily existence as well as its political and legal underpinnings. The resulting call for papers invited participants to consider the following questions:

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- How did Others (non-Muslims, non-mainstream Muslim sects, tribes, minority ethnic groups) contribute to the development of Muslim states and empires?
- How did Others conceptualize their interactions with Muslim polities?
- How did Muslim empires react to the presence of Others in their peripheries?
- How did different schools of Islamic law and political thought conceptualize their respective Others?

In response to this call, during the two days of the conference, fourteen participants from universities in Israel, Turkey, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and the USA presented papers that touched upon the themes of state-building, political thought, and the role of the Other in the Muslim world. Joining the workshop were experts in the Middle East's medieval, early modern, and contemporary history, including the history of Jews in the Middle East and Islamic legal history. The geography of the presentations covered regions as varied as Yemen, Turkey, Mongol (Ilkhanid) Iran, and Ottoman Turkey. A concert of traditional Middle Eastern music (oud and percussion) concluded the first day of the workshop.

On the first day of the conference, after brief opening remarks by the co-organizers, Meir Bar-Asher (Hebrew University of Jerusalem) chaired the first panel. Faika Çelik (Manisa Celal Bayar University) started by presenting her talk "The Roma in Late Ottoman and Early Republican Governmentality (1880s-1930s): An Analysis of Continuities and Rupture." In her presentation, Çelik argued that the attitudes of the central government towards the Roma wavered between the extreme points of tolerance and persecution. These shifts mapped onto ideological and institutional shifts that the core lands of the Ottoman Empire were undergoing in the transition from imperial formation to a nation-state. The second talk of the panel by Menashe Anzi (Ben Gurion University), titled "A Re-Examination of Mawza^c Exile in Yemen: Qasimid Yemen, The Indian Ocean, and the Jews," considered hitherto understudied Jewish and Muslim sources that shed light on Zaydi policies vis-à-vis Jews in Yemen. By analyzing these primary sources side by side, Anzi visualized the events of 1679 within the broader geopolitical history of the Red Sea and Indian Ocean region.

The second panel of the conference, chaired by Reuven Amitai (Hebrew University of Jerusalem), included two presentations that, though dealing with different historical and geographical contexts, had overlapping core themes. Edith Chen (University of Oxford), in her talk "Revenues and Patronage in the Ilkhanid Satellite States," inquired into the position of the Muslim population as a politically non-dominant group under Mongol rule in Iran. Positioning at the center of her presentation the paradox of how Mongol rule, commonly seen as a devastating episode in Central Asian history, could correlate with the golden age of Persian culture, she argued that the answer to this question should be sought in the dynamics between the central government and the tributary position of peripheral satellite states. Ekaterina Pukhovaia (Polonsky Academy at the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute) continued the theme of center-periphery relations in premodern states by discussing the role of tribal elites in early modern Yemeni politics. In her presentation "Zaydi Tribal

Leaders as ‘Partners of the Empire’ in Early Modern Ottoman Yemen,” she argued that the integration of Zaydi tribal shaykhs into administrative processes during the “Ottoman century” in Yemen reshaped local elite hierarchies and created a new pattern of tribal-state relations that continued to influence the Zaydi political system up to the late nineteenth century.

The final speaker of the day, Avi-ram Tzoreff (Polonsky Academy at the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute), introduced by Mirjam Lücking (Martin Buber Society of Fellows at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem), presented his research on how the Jewish community of Baghdad faced modernity. His presentation, titled “Between Tanzimat and Emancipation: Competing Discourses of Modernity in the Writings of R. Yosef Hayyim of Baghdad,” discussed different concepts of modernity Jews faced in nineteenth-century Iraq, ranging from a European emancipatory model offered by Christian missionaries to that of the Ottoman Tanzimat. We ended the first day with an informal roundtable to discuss common themes emerging from the papers.

The second day of the conference was opened by a panel chaired by Hannelies Koloska (Hebrew University of Jerusalem). Tom Fogel (Hebrew University of Jerusalem), in his presentation “The Politics of *Ziyāra* in Yemeni-Jewish Folktales,” spoke about the practice of grave visiting in and around the city of Ta‘izz in Yemen. His analysis focused on Jewish folktales from Yemen. It included a comparison of narratives about the visitations of two graves of historically unrelated personalities: the Jewish-Yemeni poet Shalom Shabazi (seventeenth/eighteenth century) and the thirteenth-century Sufi scholar Aḥmad b. Alwān. Through this comparative analysis, Fogel shed light on intra-Jewish dynamics, the interaction of Muslim and Jewish pilgrims at the local level, and the restrictive policies of the Zaydi state toward both Muslim and Jewish practices of *ziyāra*. The next speaker, Ed Hayes (Radboud University), in his talk “Excommunication, Execution, and Exile in the Early Islamic Empire: A Comparative Perspective,” presented case studies from the Umayyad and Abbasid periods that showed how both the ruling government and non-hegemonic Muslim groups, especially the Imami Shi‘a, included and excluded Others. He argued that the exclusion of Others was not an outcome of applied doctrine but rather served to design the groups’ respective institutions of authority. In the final talk of the conference, “Between Self and Other: Dhimmis, ‘Oppressors’ (*bughāt*), and ‘Sinners’ (*fusāq*) in Zaydi Jurisprudence (*fiqh*),” Kerstin Hünefeld (Martin Buber Society of Fellows at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem) gave an overview of how different groups of Others are conceptualized in one of the most influential works of Zaydi *fiqh*, the *Sharḥ al-Azhār*. She argued that approaches to the Other in Zaydi law were influenced by, at times, conflicting political and religious notions. She hypothesized that they might have been modified due to pragmatic purposes. She especially highlighted that when the revolutionary phase of the Zaydi imamate turned to established rule, the regime used the ambiguities of Zaydi *fiqh* to create a space in which cooperation with Sunni imperial powers in Yemen became ideologically possible.

Concluding the conference was a keynote-response by Luke Yarbrough (UCLA) titled “Islam and Empire, Inside and Out: What’s Distinctive here?” In his talk, he highlighted two lines of inquiry that connected the presentations. First, Yarbrough pointed out the shared perspective on the study of transitions between Muslim empires or from empires

to nation-states. He emphasized that all conference presentations considered how the conceptualization of dominant and non-dominant groups affected the definitions of the empires and states themselves. The second shared interest that Yarbrough identified among the participants was the study of peripheries not only as geographical phenomena but also as ideological (Imami Shi'a) and ethnic (the Roma) phenomena. Overall, he suggested that one of the major lines of future research that could result from the workshop was further study of conceptualizations of the Other to understand the respective Self. In the concluding discussion following the keynote, participants highlighted that another direction for future research could comprise the study of the form and the substance of being Muslim throughout premodern Muslim history, emphasizing the tribe/state relationship as a pronounced problem for Muslim states and, therefore, Islam altogether.