

## State Formation and State Decline in the Near and Middle East



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## Content

Introduction .....	1
NORMAN YOFFEE	
<i>The Evolution of Fragility: The Resistible Rise and Irresistible Fall of Early States</i> .....	5
WALTER SOMMERFELD	
<i>Umweltzerstörung und ökologische Krisen im Alten Orient</i> .....	15
DANIEL T. POTTS	
<i>Material Foundations of Early States</i> .....	51
HELENE SADER	
<i>The Formation and Decline of the Aramaean States in Iron Age Syria</i> .....	61
BRUCE ROUTLEDGE	
<i>Conditions of State Formation at the Edges of Empires: the Case of Iron Age Moab</i> .....	77
CHRISTA SCHÄFER-LICHTENBERGER	
<i>Ethnicity and State Formation in the Levant during the Early Iron Age</i> .....	99
JOSEF WIESEHÖFER	
<i>The Role of Lingua Francas and Communication Networks in the Process of Empire-Building: The Persian Empire</i> .....	121
RAINER KESSLER	
<i>Political Elites in Ancient Judah: Continuity and Change</i> .....	135
WIM RAVEN	
<i>The first Arabic Empire and Modern Scholarship, 622–661</i> .....	145
AFAF H. RAHIM AND PRECIOUS ZIKHALI	
<i>Cooperation over Trans-Boundary Water Resources Management in the Middle East</i> .....	159
PETER SLUGLETT	
<i>Still in the Wilderness? Iraq in 2015</i> .....	175
Short Bios of Authors .....	199



# State Formation and State Decline in the Near and Middle East

## Introduction

Discussing state formation and state decline in the year 2015, while uncontrollable forces tear apart the Arab territorial states, evokes a strange feeling of hopelessness and despondency. In the Near East, some of the earliest state formations of humanity took place; in the 5000 years of its history, a plethora of examples can be found giving witness to state building, continuity of empires and state decline.

The present upheaval is the result of decade long policies of repression, ignorance, and fears: Arab regimes exploited Western fears of instability, and Western policies preferred stability in pursuit of its economic interests over human rights. The popular revolt of the “Arab street” in quest of political participation beginning in 2011 has led to new power constellations in which new political and/or military actors are rising and gaining ground. The Near Eastern states which were carved out of the Ottoman Empire in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century as a result of World War I and the colonial practice seem to be doomed in their current form; the chaos in some Arab countries, the civil war and the vain negotiations indicate the beginning of massive state declines in the Near East. The idea of a nation or society bound together by common values, traditions and practices in a kind of social contract seems to become obsolete.

So, the current situation in the Near East places us right in the heart of the subject of this book: the genesis and fall of states. In academia up to date, research has limited itself either to the historical aspects of state formation and decline, or the current processes of uprisings, the so called Arab Spring. In a region with such profound historical awareness as the Near East, history carries its consequences into the present, and vice versa: Current zones of conflict cannot be understood without an in depth understanding of the historical roots of certain conflicts. Out of this insight, the idea was formed to bring scholars together to discuss these trans-temporal and trans-regional interdependencies. The conference on State Formation and State Decline in the Near and Middle East Past and Present took place in Marburg in March 24–27, 2010, some time before the beginning of the Arab Spring. It aimed at contrasting the research from a broad variety of academic fields in an interdisciplinary way, such as Ancient Near Eastern languages, archeology, geology, biblical studies, religious studies, political science, sociology, economics, and Islamic history.

One of the most important material preconditions for state formation and decline is the accumulation of resources and their distribution. The architecture of power structures, the stratifications of societies, the crystallization of urban centers of power and the rise and fall of ruling elites are dependent of these resources and their availability. The geographical position of states also influences their geostrategic role and power in the regional and international context: Factors such as topography and geography, water management, the role of natural resources and the modern rentier states, environment and climate change, all of these have their impact on power relations.

The role of local elites constitutes one of the most important social factors in state formation and continuity. The question of ethnicity rivals other markers of identity such as clans, tribes, and religious communities. The development and building of vassal states and their relation with empires constitutes another focus, concentrating on the inner conditions of state formation. Also cultural factors like language and religion play an important role in state building and decline.

The original conference was organized by the Center for Near and Middle Eastern Studies and the Faculty for Protestant Theology of the Philipps-Universität Marburg. The participants discussed the three main pivotal axes material prerequisites, social factors and cultural circumstances<sup>1</sup>. In the following we will list the program as it had taken place:

## I Material Prerequisites

1. *Erkenntnisse der Geoarchäologie zur Siedlungs- und Umweltentwicklung im Nahen und Mittleren Osten*; Jürgen Wunderlich, Goethe-Universität Frankfurt
2. *The Formation and Decline of the Aramaean States in Iron Age Syria*; Helene Sader\*, American University of Beirut
3. *Water Resource Management and Inter-state Conflicts in the Contemporary Middle East*; Afaf Rahim\*, Philipps-Universität Marburg
4. *Material Foundations of Early States*; Dan Potts\*, University of Sydney
5. *Ölrente, Ressourcen und Kapital in der arabischen Welt*; Rachid Ouaiassa, Philipps-Universität Marburg
6. *Environmental Factors for the Decline of Early States in Mesopotamia*; Walter Sommerfeld\*, Philipps-Universität Marburg
7. *Reconstructing the Fluvial Landscape of Early Islamic Greater Mesopotamia*; Peter Verkinderen, Nederlands-Vlaams Instituut Cairo

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<sup>1</sup> The original titles were left in this list; the topics marked with an asterix (\*) have their contributions published in this volume.



## II Social Factors

8. *Political Elites in Ancient Judah: Continuity and Change*; Rainer Kessler\*, Philipps-Universität Marburg
9. *Continuity and Change of Political Elites in Post-Colonial Middle East*; Martin Beck, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Amman
10. *Ethnizität und Staatenbildung zu Beginn der Eisenzeit in der Levante*; Christa Schäfer-Lichtenberger\*, Kirchliche Hochschule Bethel, Bielefeld
11. *The Role of Ethnic and Sectarian Groups in Modern Iraq<sup>2</sup>*; Peter Sluglett\*, University of Utah
12. *Veränderung der Kräfteverhältnisse im östlichen Mittelmeer – Dynamik und Struktur des 1. Weltreiches (Assyrien)*; Eva Cancik-Kirschbaum, Freie Universität Berlin
13. *Conditions of State Formation at the Fringe of Empires (Moab)*; Bruce Routledge\*, University of Liverpool
14. *The Effect of the Coming of Islamic Rule on the Agricultural Landscapes of the Fertile Crescent*; Hugh Kennedy, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London

## III Cultural Factors

15. *Die Rolle von Verkehrssprache und Kommunikationsnetzen bei der Bildung von Großreichen*; Josef Wiesehöfer\*, Christian-Albrechts-Universität zu Kiel
16. *The Arabic Language as a Marker of Identity: Arab Nationalism in Retrospective*; Amal Ghazal, Dalhousie University, Halifax
17. *The First Arab Empire (632–660 CE) in Modern Scholarship*; Wim Raven\*, Philipps-Universität Marburg
18. *The Islamic Revolution in Iran: Between State Decline and State Formation*; Christoph Werner, Philipps-Universität Marburg

Furthermore, there were two lectures for the general public:

19. *The Evolution of Fragility: The Resistible Rise and Irresistible Fall of Early States*; Norman Yoffee\*, University of Michigan
20. *Der Nahe Osten als post-osmanische Ruine und Brennpunkt internationaler Interessen*; Udo Steinbach, Philipps-Universität Marburg

As mentioned before, the events on the real political scene had their impact on academia, also. In the process of collecting the contributions, the Arab Spring became

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<sup>2</sup> This contribution was published elsewhere; for the present volume, the author contributed a new article.

top issue, and analysts of the present situation were busy publishing elsewhere. The present volume gathers most of the presentations given during the 2010 conference focussing on the historical analyses. Out of this reason, we present the contributions in a chronological order.

We would like to thank the Fritz Thyssen Stiftung for financing the conference; furthermore, our thanks go to all the participants to this volume for their patience and collaboration. Last but not least we thank Ms Christina Fischer for her fantastic layout work.

Marburg, June 2015

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Walter Sommerfeld  
Rainer Kessler