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State Building in the Middle East

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Keywords

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Abstract

This review examines state building in the Middle East from a long-term, historical perspective. The Middle East's early transition to settled agriculture meant the region was home to many of the most sophisticated and best-developed states in the ancient world. As Middle Eastern states emerged from Late Antiquity, their fiscal and bureaucratic capacity enabled institutional forms not possible in Europe, including reliance on slave soldiers for the state military elite as well as state control of land that could be distributed to state servants in the form of temporary, revocable land grants. Because a landed gentry did not emerge as an influence-wielding social class in the Middle East until a relatively late date, religious elites—who served as important providers of public goods as a result of their control of Islamic charitable foundations—became key intermediaries between state and society. Core features of the institutions of Islam's classical period largely persisted until the decline of the Ottoman Empire with implications for the nation-state forms to follow.

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INTRODUCTION

This article reviews the literature on the emergence and development of states in the Middle East. Influential historical work on the creation of Middle Eastern states has focused on the impact of European colonialism in the construction of the region's modern states (e.g., Fromkin 1989, Rogan 2015). Such an approach emphasizes the role of European powers in drawing the region's borders in the wake of World War I, a narrative that has come to dominate both scholarly and journalistic accounts of Middle Eastern state formation. Scholars have also provided critical insights into how colonial rule influenced the creation of state capacity across Middle Eastern states (e.g., Anderson 1986, Migdal 1988, Charrad 2001).

Accounts that focus on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries provide an important narrative for the proximate influences on Middle Eastern state development but tend to de-emphasize the long history of state building in the Middle East prior to the modern era, as well as the conditions under which the Middle East came to be vulnerable to European colonialism in the first place. And because European colonialism was endogenous to the relative weakness of Middle Eastern states, it is difficult to cleanly identify the causal influence of European colonialism on postcolonial outcomes in the Middle East.

I argue that early agricultural transition meant that the Middle East was home to many of the most sophisticated and best-developed states in the ancient world. As Middle Eastern states emerged from Late Antiquity, their fiscal and bureaucratic capacity enabled institutional forms not possible in Europe, including reliance on slave soldiers for the state military elite as well as state control of land that could be distributed in the form of temporary land grants. Because a landed gentry did not emerge as an influence-wielding social class in the Middle East until a relatively late date, religious elites—who became providers of public goods through their control of Islamic charitable foundations—became key intermediaries between state and society. These core institutions of Islam's classical period largely persisted for hundreds of years with implications for the nation-state forms to follow.

Notably absent from my review is discussion of the causal impact of the Muslim religious doctrine on Middle Eastern state formation. One vein of scholarship suggests that the Christian West was able to effectively separate religion and state whereas Muslim societies were not suitable for such a division (Lewis 1993).[1] This assumption has been vigorously challenged, however, by scholars who have suggested that throughout Middle Eastern history there has been a marked differentiation between state and religion. One reason for this debate is that scholars disagree about how much weight to assign to the earliest days of Islam's rise versus the long history of state–society relations to follow. Lapidus (1996), for example, argues not only that is there no single "Islamic" model for relations between states and religious institutions, but that since relatively early in the history of Islam most Middle Eastern societies have been characterized by institutional differentiation between state and religion. Indeed, scholars have suggested that the bifurcation of sovereignty into religious and political spheres has been a general feature of Middle Eastern states since the tenth century (Lapidus 1975, Arjomand 2010, Berkey 2010).[2]

[1] These scholars emphasize that in early Islam, the caliphate provided both religious and political leadership, where authority derived from the caliph's role as the head of the Islamic community. Lewis (1993, p. 4) suggests that "in classical Islamic history there could be no clash between the pope and emperor, since the caliph, the titular head of the Islamic state and community, combined in himself both political and religious—though not spiritual—authority. There could be neither conflict nor cooperation, neither separation nor association between church and state, since the governing institution of Islam combined both functions."

[2] The relationship between the Church and kings in Western Europe has also been the subject of considerable scholarly discussion. The boundaries of secular and ecclesiastical jurisdiction have been highly contested, not just in the Middle Ages

POLITICAL GEOGRAPHY AND THE LEGACY OF EARLY STATEHOOD

Two features of Middle Eastern political geography make it unique among world regions. The first is its favorability to agricultural cultivation—particularly as reflected in the region's fertile river basins of Egypt and Mesopotamia—creating the conditions for the Middle East's early historical transition to settled agriculture. The second defining feature is the existence of vast areas of low agricultural productivity, typically deserts, alongside these regions of rich agricultural surplus.

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Autocracy and Early State Development

Near Eastern societies gave rise to the world's earliest cities, states, and bureaucracies, developing agricultural techniques that took a millennium to spread to Western Europe (Putterman 2014). It is not surprising that many of the world's earliest agricultural societies developed in the great river basins of the world. Wittfogel (1957) famously argued that hydraulic civilizations, or civilizations that developed large-scale irrigation systems necessary for agriculture and flood control of rivers, were more likely to develop dominant political institutions. As a result, hydraulic societies were thought to have institutions that were highly centralized and authoritarian.

Archaeological evidence associated with the hydraulic-civilizations argument is mixed and generally believed to be inconclusive (Carneiro 1970). Yet scholars of political and economic development frequently revisit the idea that the modes of agricultural production—with their roots in a region's geography—have had an impact on state forms. For example, Kennedy (1981) argues that in the Middle East agricultural-sector demands, such as irrigation technologies, required constant labor and an associated high level of political organization. Haber (2012) hypothesizes that societies where agriculture was fed by irrigation had higher barriers to entry and less egalitarian distributions of wealth than did societies with rain-fed agriculture.

Although the empirical evidence linking agricultural form and regime type is mixed, there is a broad consensus that most successful premodern societies tended toward centralized and autocratic state forms. Ober (2015), for example, argues that the political institutions of classical Greece—including its relative egalitarianism and property right guarantees—were rare in the ancient world and set Greece apart from its contemporaries. As Ober (2015) puts it, the "premodern normal" was a situation of political domination where people lived under the rule of autocrats who often made claims of divine authorization for their rule. The "natural state" described by North et al. (2012) is autocratic, nepotistic, and capable of generating violence.

Scholars have used the timing of the Neolithic Revolution—the historical transition from foraging to farming—as a source of exogenous variation in precolonial state development (Hariri 2012, 2015; Olsson & Paik 2013, 2016). Olsson & Paik (2013) suggest that communities that adopted Neolithic agriculture earlier than others have weaker institutions and relatively underperforming economies today because they tended to develop autocratic societies imbued with social inequality and pervasive rent seeking, whereas later adopters were more likely to have egalitarian societies with stronger private property rights. According to Olsson & Paik (2016), members of societies that adopted agriculture early also value obedience more and feel less in control of their lives, suggesting the possibility of a long-lasting cultural impact of agricultural development and its associated state forms.

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but to the present day (Grzymala-Busse 2015). Medieval conflicts over papal interference in royal power were typically rooted in the belief that both the Church and kings derived their authority, at least in part, from God (Black 1992). Scholars have long struggled to determine if explicitly Islamic religious thought was more or less dominant than that of Catholic Christian thought in medieval Europe (Watt 2000 [1968], p. 72).

Hariri (2012, 2015) argues for a different causal pathway by which early agriculture impacted democracy and development. Hariri (2012) finds that old states—those that took up settled agriculture relatively early—were able to influence both whether European colonization took place and the intensity of the colonial experience if it did occur. In this setting, exposure to colonial institutions provided a key pathway by which democracy-enhancing institutions might be transmitted to a society. Extending and amplifying this argument, Hariri (2015) argues that Middle Eastern states experienced relatively little European colonialism compared to other world regions and thus were more likely to see traditional authority structures persist. One reason for this, according to Hariri (2015), is that Middle Eastern colonialism tended to entail less direct colonial settlement than other regions as well as more indirect forms of European rule.

Desert Peripheries and the Nomad "Paradox"

Kennedy (2010, p. 283) writes that the defining feature of human geography for what has become the Muslim world, and that which distinguishes it from Europe, India, and China, is "the presence of large numbers of nomadic or transhumant peoples" in deserts near areas of settled agriculture, where the "impact of the nomads has been enormous—sometimes destructive, sometimes leading to the formation of major states and empires." Kennedy argues that truly nomadic peoples have traditionally lived in just three major geographical areas—the deserts of Arabia and Syria, the steppes of Central Asia, and the Sahara Desert of Africa. It is significant that all three of these areas border the core regions of the Middle East.

The existence of a desert periphery has created for the agricultural heartlands and cities of the Middle East a constant potential for social disorder. Plunder of sedentary populations was a main economic resource for nomadic groups (von Grunebaum 2008 [1970], p. 19). As a result, bedouin were seen as potentially "destructive elements" that had to be driven off from time to time (Mottahedeh 2001, p. 176). And because a weakly ruled or rulerless town might be vulnerable to attack from peripheral people, citizens of Middle Eastern communities highly valued political leadership as protection from external predation (Mottahedeh 2001, pp. 176–77). The increased value of strong governance to urban residents and settled agriculturalists may have allowed Middle Eastern rulers to credibly point to outside threats when negotiating with their citizenries.

How have resource-poor, nomadic peoples succeeded in military invasions against more robust and established states? The noted Arab historian of the Middle Ages, Ibn Khaldun, famously theorized that the high levels of social solidarity that characterized nomadic peoples allowed relatively small numbers of warriors to sweep into Middle Eastern cities to establish their own political dynasties (only to be themselves replaced once they became settled into urban life). Turchin (2009) notes that nomadic frontiers have often served as the launch point for the creation of large empires. Kennedy (2002, pp. 17–20) puts forward what he calls the nomad paradox as the answer to the puzzle of nomadic military success. Wealthy premodern states, endowed with more advanced bureaucracies and reliable supply chains, have enjoyed military superiority over nomadic peoples; however, nomadic warriors—despite lacking state structures—have high mobility with strong horsemanship skills, high levels of resistance to hardship, and competent leaders chosen for their abilities and not their high-born status. This combination of factors turned out to be particularly valuable during the period of time when mounted archery was a dominant mode of warfare.

The rise and spread of Islam itself has been described by some as a function of the nomadic advantage in warfare. The Arab-Muslim armies, which conquered large parts of West Asia and North Africa, arose from a region characterized by a relatively poor agricultural ecology. Why did Islam spread where and when it did? Scholars have pointed to the relative weakness of neighboring

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empires at the time of Islam's rise. For example, Donner (1981, p. 8) notes "the fortuitous weakness of the Byzantines and Sassanians just when the Muslims began their expansion." Michalopoulos et al. (2010) argues that pre-Islamic regions with more unequal land distribution—like desert areas—were more likely to become Muslim because the presence of trade opportunities conferred differential opportunities for gains. To mitigate trade disruptions and secure access to trade networks, the rich made concessions toward the poor, resulting in forms of income redistribution that were core to the institutions promulgated under Islam.

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PRE-ISLAMIC INFLUENCES ON "MUSLIM" GOVERNANCE

What has come to be known as Muslim governance, as practiced during Islam's classical period, reflects a mix of pre-Islamic and other factors that, together, evolved with the growth and spread of the Muslim religion. Historians have focused on the influence of the structures of imperial states—such as the Byzantine and Sassanian Empires—that preceded the introduction of Islam.[3] This suggests that the state institutions of Late Antiquity—as well as contemporaneous Hellenistic and Persian ideas about good governance—carried over into the Islamic period.[4]

Inherited Institutions of Late Antiquity

A number of institutions associated with the states of Late Antiquity were transferred, to a greater or lesser extent, into the classical Islamic period. Such institutional transfer was evident in the nature and scope of state bureaucracy and in the methods by which economic transactions took place. Morony (1984) observes a tendency among historians to exaggerate the difference between Islamic civilization and the civilizations of classical antiquity. He finds, however, that when examining state forms from 300 to 600 CE, "the changes taking place in western Asia made the culture of this region look more and more 'Islamic'" (Morony 1984, p. 3).

Some of the most obvious institutional inheritances were associated with bureaucratic structures of the states conquered by the Arab armies, particularly the administrative structures of the dominant pre-Islamic empires of the Middle East. These bureaucracies proved to be crucial for the functioning of the early Islamic state. For example, the Arab conquests "left untouched the circulation of Byzantine and Persian money" (von Grunebaum 2008 [1970], p. 75).[5] This was especially significant because the Arab armies of the Umayyad period were paid stipends for their service in minted coin (Kennedy 2001, p. 88). Kennedy (2010, p. 283) provides the following summary:

> The Islamic world inherited and maintained a system of public finances, a system with no parallel in the West, where public taxation had collapsed with the Roman empire. Governments collected money and paid salaries in cash . . . . [T]he fiscal role of the state ensured the continued vitality of urban life in the Islamic Middle East when it effectively disappeared in north-west Europe and the Byzantine empire.

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[3]Indeed, it has been suggested that the Islamic conquests encouraged forms of civilizational unification between the former Byzantine and Sassanian Empires, which had previously been locked in a military stalemate (Kristo-Nagy 2016).

[4]Historians have emphasized that the early Muslim state was a product of the political and religious world of the Late Antique Middle East (Robinson 2010). Indeed, Morony (1984, p. 526) has suggested that what came to be known as Islamic civilization might better be thought of as the regional culture of the Middle East, where Muslim practices served as a bridge between Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages.

[5]Eventually, the fifth Umayyad Caliph, Abd al-Malik ibn Marwan, issued Islamic currency to be used in Muslim lands, taking the place of silver Sassanian and gold and copper Byzantine coins.

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This perspective supports the view that state forms were much more persistent in the Middle East than in other parts of the post-Roman world, particularly Western Europe.

The inherited Greek, Coptic, and Persian bureaucracies were still widely used for administration (von Grunebaum 2008 [1970], p. 75; Kadi 2014). According to Bray (2010, p. 385), administrative secretaries "carried on the culture of the old imperial bureaucracies with little change," although they were eventually required to become proficient in Arabic and the study of Islam. The bureaucratic ranks drew heavily from religious minorities, including Coptic Christians, although the bureaucratic class did convert to Islam over time (Arjomand 2010, p. 253). Bureaucratic institutions eventually adapted and were rationalized in a way consistent with the Muslim religion (Morony 1984, p. 18), particularly in the legal sphere. State law—which dealt typically with issues like crime and taxation—came to stand alongside Islamic law in a system of legislation under the authority of the sultan (Brett 2010, p. 571).

A somewhat less literal institutional inheritance relates to the transfer of tribal practices and norms. Lapidus (2014, p. 25) argues that tribe–empire relations have their roots in pre-Islamic Middle Eastern history, beginning with the Neolithic transition. Crone (1986, p. 64) suggests that tribe and state exist as alternative forms of social organization. Although tribes—and their reliance on actual or fictive kinship ties—have been the modal solution to the problem of social control, Crone (1986, p. 69) sees states as uniquely powerful and organizationally superior to tribal structures. Yet despite this superiority, Crone (1986) concludes that the tribal values of the Arabs were able to transcend the context in which they arose to shape Islamic societies and states to the present. Hallaq (2010, pp. 152–53), similarly, sees the influence of tribal society on Middle Eastern state forms. He writes that the leaders of the Muslim Middle East were required to act within the tribal social fabric that they inherited, a tribal heritage that reflected a "cumulative history of past action and specific manners of conduct."

Pre-Islamic Theories of State

The main institutional forms of the pre-Islamic empires of the Middle East became key components of the early Islamic state (Morony 1984, p. 511). Less concrete, but perhaps even more impactful, were the ideas of governance that were carried forward from Late Antiquity into the classical period of Islam. The transfer of ideas took place through the circulation of administrative handbooks and other forms of advice literature regarding governance (Morony 1984, p. 510).

Middle Eastern societies have historically drawn from a rich and varied set of cultural models for state organization and rulership. This is probably, at least in part, because of the size of the Middle East and its location at the center of Afro-Eurasia. The legacy of Hellenistic thought has long been considered an important influence on political thought in the Middle East. Von Grunebaum (2008 [1970], p. 96) argues, for example, that "the leading spirits of medieval Islam never lost the sense that intellectually they belonged to the Greek West."

According to Bulliet (2010), a hallmark of Hellenism was an openness to the wide variety of ideas and religious beliefs found within the vast swath of territory that had been conquered by Alexander the Great in the fourth century BCE. This included the areas between the Nile and the Indus Rivers as well as Western Europe and parts of North Africa. For Bulliet (2010, p. 213), "Iranian models of imperial government" were also part of the Hellenistic tradition. In this interpretation, the millennium that preceded Islam witnessed the "coexistence of myriad religious communities within an intricately interconnected Hellenistic cultural zone" (Bulliet 2010, p. 217). Imperial secretaries emphasized "Persian and Hellenistic wisdom and their own privileged position as intermediaries between the ruler and the ruled" (Bray 2010, p. 389). Prominent texts in statecraft from the period tended to draw on Greco-Persian political wisdom (Bray 2010, p. 385) as well

as Indian and pre-Islamic Arabian political thought (Gutas 1981). According to Arjomand (2010, p. 227), "the imported Persian literature on statecraft was easily absorbed into the public law of the caliphate and Muslim monarchies, and shaped the medieval Muslim conception of government."

One avenue by which cultural exchange took place during the Abbasid dynasty, for example, was through court secretaries. Among the most prominent was Ibn al-Muqaffa, a Persian convert to Islam, who was "a translator from Middle Persian of Iranian political history, of Graeco-Persian, Iranian and Indian wisdom literature" (Bray 2010, p. 386). Ibn al-Muqaffa's use of early Persian statecraft literature provided instruction in areas where the Koran offered less guidance, such as regulation of the relationships between the ruler and his subjects, viziers, and counselors (Arjomand 2010, p. 227). London (2008) provides a well-developed articulation of Ibn al-Muqaffa's strategy, where fables were one important medium by which secretaries might influence rulers. The writings of Ibn al-Muqaffa reflected a trend toward cultural expansion and the eventual integration of Persian, Arabic, Zoroastrian, and Islamic ideas into early Abbasid political thought (London 2016). Ultimately much, but not all, of the pre-Islamic and Persian guidance was replicated in the Abbasid period, as Muslim leaders chose those components of the governance repertoire they deemed best suited to their needs and purposes (Yavari 2014, p. 35).

Persian ideas of governance represented another form of continuity connecting pre-Islamic to Islamic governance. Some of the transmitted wisdom literature described how historically agricultural societies maintained a prosperous economy through effective and fair institutions. In such a setting, economic prosperity required irrigation infrastructure, security, and stable governance (Darling 2002). Providing justice was essential to success, as a failure to do so damaged the state in both political and economic terms (Darling 2002). Indeed, it was believed that maintenance of the "circle of justice" undergirded the system of prosperity for the agrarian states of the Middle East (Darling 2002, London 2011). In other words, justice was a precondition for generating the forms of agricultural production that ensured prosperity for people and king alike. Particularly resonant have been ideas of kings as guarantors of justice where the prosperity of the sovereign, soldiers, tax collectors, and cultivators of the land was interlinked and dependent on stability of the broader social system (London 2011).[6]

STATE INSTITUTIONS OF ISLAM'S CLASSICAL PERIOD

The state structures that predominated during Islam's classical period reflected the institutional and intellectual inheritances of the pre-Muslim Middle East as well as innovations in governance that took place during and after the Arab conquests. Forms of institutional and intellectual continuity included both the bureaucratic legacy of the states conquered by the Arab armies and the pre-Islamic ideas about governance that were carried over into the Islamic classical period. New institutions that emerged following the Arab conquests were tasked with the goal of maintaining political order.

Despite tremendous diversity in forms and styles of rule across Muslim polities, some threads of commonality might be identified. The first is the widespread use of slave soldiers as the backbone of the military elite. The second is state control over agricultural land. One byproduct of these two key institutions is that religious elites emerged as a counterbalance to the centralized power of the state (Blaydes & Chaney 2016). Chaney (2013) describes how exogenous variation in economic conditions created opportunities for greater or lesser religious power vis-à-vis the sultan.

[6]Not surprisingly, Muslim political histories tended to emphasize the importance of maintaining social equilibrium as a key responsibility of government (Mottahedeh 2001, p. 179).

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Slave Soldiers and State Control of Agricultural Land

In the early years of Islamic statehood, members of the military appeared on registers where being listed entitled them to shares of state revenue (Kennedy 2001, p. 59). Inherited Byzantine and Sassanian bureaucracies implemented this system (Kennedy 2001, p. 61). From early on, then, payment for military service in the Muslim Middle East differed from that which took place in Western Europe. According to Kennedy (2001, p. 88), "unlike their contemporaries in the West, soldiers of the Caliphs were never given land grants in lieu of salaries."

A major innovation of statecraft introduced during the Abbasid period was the use of foreign slave soldiers (i.e., *mamluk*s) as the elite backbone of the military. What precipitated the recruitment of foreign soldiers? It is thought that when the Abbasids were unable to recruit a sufficient number of soldiers in the wake of internecine fighting, the sultanate turned to slave soldiers recruited from Central Asia. Eventually this foreign, military caste came to dominate the regime. The superior bureaucratic and financial position of the Muslim rulers allowed them to import the military support that they needed rather than to develop a system of feudalism where a king ceded land—and political power—to local lords (Crone 1999, Blaydes & Chaney 2013).[7]

After introduction by the Abbasids in the ninth century, the use of slave soldiers spread across the Middle East and, indeed, became a defining feature of the region's politics for hundreds of years (Crone 2003 [1980]). Local populations rarely served in the armed elite ranks, in part because they lacked the horsemanship and ruggedness characteristic of individuals drawn from areas like the Caucasus and the steppes of present-day Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kazakhstan. Though typically well trained and generously paid, *mamluk*s were unable to transform themselves into a hereditary landed baronage, at least in part because they could not transmit *mamluk* status to their offspring (Finer 1997, p. 676; Fukuyama 2011, p. 218; Irwin 1986, p. 8).

There existed, by design, a social and physical disconnect between the slave soldiers and local society. Because the slave soldiers had foreign roots, links between local elites and the military power structure were weak. And the fact that the military continually replaced itself with new recruits from Central Asia prevented the "local loyalties through marriage, commercial ventures and land purchase" that might otherwise have occurred (Kennedy 2004, pp. 10–11). Kennedy (2004, p. 11) suggests that the slave soldiers were "outsiders entirely reliant on the state not just for cash but for their very survival."

Closely linked to the slave soldier complex was the system of temporary grants to tax agricultural land (i.e., *iqta*) that came to serve as the key method of payment for the elite military slaves. The *iqta* system was first introduced in mid-tenth-century Iraq, eventually spreading to Iran, Afghanistan, Syria, and Egypt (Tsugitaka 1997). Although there were multiple forms of *iqta*, at its core it was typically assignment of tax rights to a parcel of land in return for military service. Ownership of the land was not transferred to the *iqta* holder but remained with the state. Because the *iqta* could not be inherited or sold, it did not invest the military elite with land in a way comparable to the European fief (Crone 2003 [1980], p. 87; Finer 1997, p. 674). Thus, whereas Europe's landed gentry resembled Olson's (1993) "stationary bandit" at the local level, individual *iqta* holders in Middle Eastern societies had little incentive to provide public goods to the localities assigned to them.[8]

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[7]Maintaining military slaves was a costly proposition, forcing a large percentage of state resources into a human capital investment that required constant renewal (Blaydes & Chaney 2013).

[8]In this sense, the incentives for investment in agricultural land may have been misaligned. Although the sultan (and more broadly the ruling elite) might be viewed as a "stationary bandit," individual *iqta* holders who acted as his servants and agents were, to a greater extent, "roving bandits" owing to the nonhereditary nature of land and frequent rotation of land grant locations.

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At various points in time, *iqta* holders sought to make the land assignments hereditary, but Middle Eastern states resisted this, redistributing the *iqta* frequently and maintaining the bureaucratic assessment of the taxes with the state (Wickham 1985, p. 177). There were lapses in the strength of the state (Wickham 1985, p. 177), but the overarching theme was state power where the *iqta* was revocable and uninheritable (von Grunebaum 2008 [1970], p. 145). Though not an investment in a particular holding of land, the *iqta*—as a fiscal device—gave soldiers a vested interest in the regime (Brett 2010, p. 556). For most parts of what is the Middle East today, unlike almost any other world region, "almost all the land belonged directly to the state" (Wickham 1985, p. 179). Indeed, Crone (2003 [1980], p. 87) argues Islam became unique among civilizations for the extent to which government service was disassociated from land ownership.

Islamic Legal Institutions of the Classical Period

In order to pay for the elite soldiers who were the core of the Middle Eastern militaries (and to reduce their incentive to rebel), Middle Eastern rulers assigned control over government-owned land to slave soldiers as compensation. Land and political power remained highly centralized and even members of the elite had a difficult time ensuring that their wealth would not be subject to predation by the state. In such a context, there emerged a need for opportunities to shelter wealth for those able to accumulate capital. The Islamic charitable trust (i.e., *waqf*) emerged as an institution that would allow wealth holders to protect assets from predation and enjoy some control over how their assets would be divvied up upon their death, given the constraints associated with Islamic inheritance laws.

The charitable trusts were under the jurisdiction of Islamic religious leaders, who were able to channel resources toward public goods that the state did not provide. These charitable trusts took a variety of forms, including schools, rest houses for pilgrims, public baths, water fountains, and hospitals. Kuran (2001) argues that the charitable trust, as an economic institution, benefited the Middle Eastern state because it served as a credible-commitment device aimed at providing the owners of land and other immovable assets economic security in return for investments in public goods. Yet, Kuran (2001, 2004, 2011) argues that the *waqf* immobilized assets in static perpetuity, creating significant inefficiencies. Because the founder of the *waqf* designated a particular purpose for the pious foundation at the time of its creation, rigidities built into this mandate became dysfunctional over time. Blaydes & Chaney (2016) view the growing usage of the *waqf* as the result of a political bargain struck between religious leaders, who emerged as a politically influential group in the wake of the introduction of slave armies, and rulers backed by these armies.

Through control of the provision of public goods, the religious elite served as a key intermediary between state and societal interests. And by harnessing the power of the citizenry, the religious elite was well positioned to ensure that Middle Eastern sultans would suffer meaningful consequences should they choose to prey on the charitable trusts. During the medieval period, riots in the towns and cities of the Middle East were a "means of resisting the higher authorities and preserving the political autonomy of the populace" (Petry 2012, p. 27). Religious elites played a central role as "go-betweens and legitimators of the crowd's anger" (Burke 1998, p. 28). Chaney (2013) finds that religious leaders in Mamluk Egypt were able to coordinate revolts most effectively during exogenous economic shocks.

TURKS, MONGOLS, AND THE STEPPE WARRIOR STATE

The boundaries between the Christian and Muslim worlds were, more or less, stable from the late eighth century until the eleventh century, with emphasis on defending existing boundaries rather

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THE CRUSADES

The Crusader States of the Levant were created in the wake of the Holy Land Crusades, which began in 1096 CE. Although crusader mobilization has been empirically associated with several meaningful political developments in Europe (Blaydes & Paik 2016), it is less clear that the waves of crusader invasion had as large an impact on the Middle East. Christie (2014, p. 4), for example, argues that the impact of the Crusades on the Middle East was quite limited. Von Grunebaum (2008 [1970], p. 199) argues that whereas the Arabs provided many cultural goods to the Latin West, Arab societies received far fewer cultural transfers. If there was any significant impact on the long-term political trajectory of Middle Eastern states, it may have been in the evolution of the concept of *jihad*. According to Hillenbrand (1999, p. 108), the idea of *jihad* became salient in response to the religious fanaticism of Christian crusaders.

than extending areas of control (Hillenbrand 1999, p. 93; Bosworth 2010, p. 21). Beginning in the eleventh century, however, the Middle East witnessed external interventions that influenced the trajectory of state building. At this point, "the influx of fresh barbarians," particularly Turkic peoples from Central Asia, "altered the balance of society," resulting in a new period of state formation and political organization (Brett 2010, p. 549). The Mongol invasions of the thirteenth century, in particular, have been described by historians as a political and economic "watershed" for the Islamic world (Manz 2010, p. 128). Another form of external intervention, which we do not discuss in detail, is the creation of the Crusader States of the Levant (see sidebar titled The Crusades).

"Alien" rule, or authority over a collective by an individual or group that does not belong to that collective, has long been a feature of human history (Hechter 2013, p. 6). Under a variety of circumstances, members of solidary groups have come to accept forms of foreign domination, reluctant to engage in collective action against it. Alien rule was not unusual to the populations of the Middle East. Subjected to various imperial governments, the Arab conquests, and eventual military rule by foreign slave soldiers, alien rule would seem the norm, rather than the exception.

Turkic Invasions and the Rise of the Seljuk State

The rise and eventual political dominance of Turkic regimes was a major development in the history of state building in the Middle East. Although these Turkic groups did not derive from a single tribe, they spoke various Turkic languages and primarily had their roots in the steppes of Central Asia (Berkey 2010, p. 48). The most significant of these groups were the Seljuks, who eventually controlled a far-reaching dynasty that dominated much of Anatolia, the Levant, Mesopotamia, and Persia as well as large parts of Central Asia.

Why and how did Turkic groups come to control the most important Middle Eastern states? Early Turkic incursions began as small-scale nomadic invasions in search of pasture. This was possible because the border between the Turkic peoples of Central Asia and the ancient Iranian civilization of Islam's eastern frontier had never been a "hard-and-fast boundary" (Bosworth 2010, p. 24), despite being quite stable. Eventually, however, vulnerable populations in border areas began to retrench, ceding more and more land to Turkic invaders (Leiser 2010, p. 303). Muslim sultans may have also been vulnerable to external invasion. The relatively brittle institutional arrangements of the classical period—particularly reliance on foreign slave soldiers—may have made Muslim dynasties vulnerable to attack (Blaydes & Chaney 2013). Relatedly, nomadic warriors

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of the Central Asian steppes enjoyed a unique military advantage over their rivals during the period when stirrups and mounted archery were effective fighting techniques—from approximately the ninth to the sixteenth century (Kennedy 2010, p. 289).

One might think that the rise of Central Asian regimes would obviate the need to continue importing slave soldiers for military service. Yet the Turkic regimes of the Middle East, too, became dependent on slave soldiers (Kennedy 2010, p. 284). In 1087 CE, the noted Seljuk vizier Nizam al-Mulk offered the *iqta* to military officers. Seljuk state philosophy was that "the empire, together with the subjects, belongs to the Sultan" and that *iqta* holders were merely protectors of the land, not land owners (von Grunebaum 2008 [1970], p. 155). In other words, the twin pillars of regime reliance on foreigners for the military elite and state ownership of agricultural land were carried over into the Seljuk period.

Nizam al-Mulk was also credited with introducing one of the most impactful innovations of Seljuk rule, in this case related to increasing institutionalization of religious life (Brett 2010, p. 556). Most of the Turks at the time of the Turkic incursions and migrations were already superficially Muslims, although conversion to Islam continued to take place over time (Leiser 2010, p. 303). These Turkic dynasties eventually came to be considered "enthusiastic" Sunni regimes, which sought to regularize religious life through the establishment of the Islamic religious school (i.e., *madrasa*), which eventually became commonplace in the cities of the Muslim Middle East (Berkey 2010, pp. 51–52). According to Harding (2010, p. 424), the *madrasa*s of Iran and Central Asia were particularly important centers of both religious and scientific learning. Scholars have argued that the rise of the *madrasa* and associated Sunni "Revival" led to "circumscribing the parameters of permitted thought and behavior . . . giving greater force to the consensus of the jurists and the scholarly elite" (Berkey 2010, p. 51). Chaney (2016) argues that because *madrasa* education placed a premium on religious knowledge over other forms of learning, a greater focus on religious education may have led to a decrease in scientific production in the Islamic world.

The rise of Turkic dynasties brought these newly Muslim Turkic-speaking peoples into conversation about the nature of Islamic political authority (Harding 2010, p. 425). Turkic conceptions of kingship tended to consider political authority a "divine gift to the founder of the state" (Arjomand 2010, p. 237). Indeed, the "idealized picture of the ruler was a recurrent theme" in the Seljuk period (Guo 2010, p. 454). Von Grunebaum (2008 [1970], p. 171) argues that the rise of the Seljuks reoriented political thought in the Middle East away from its Hellenistic and Mediterranean roots toward Central Asia.

Mongol Invasions and Migration

The Mongol invasions have been described as a turning point not only in the history of the Middle East but in the history of Eurasia (Manz 2010, p. 128). Bosworth (2010, p. 75) writes that with the appearance of the Mongols "a totally new phase of Islamic history begins." Mongol invasions and migration brought huge numbers of steppe people into Middle Eastern lands. According to one account, the Mongols led 850,000 people, along with 3–5 million horses and an additional 17 million sheep, into the Middle East from Central Asia (Darling 2013). In addition to the massive population transfers that took place, Mongol invasion tactics often destroyed city walls and military fortifications and resulted in population dislocations within settled areas, including enslavement and forced labor of skilled craftsmen in Mongol workshops (Manz 2010, p. 133).

Mongol rule also influenced norms of statecraft. Barfield (1990, p. 165), for example, argues that Mongol tendencies toward hierarchical social structures made acceptance of status differences more natural. Indeed, scholars have suggested that prevailing forms of class distinction from

the pre-Islamic period were highly consistent with Mongol notions of social division (Arjomand 2010, p. 249). Manz (2010, p. 167) argues that Mongol rule marks an end of the classical period of Arab-Muslim culture and a promotion, instead, of "Persian traditions combined with cultural borrowing to create new Persian styles increasingly distinct from Arab culture." Blaydes et al. (2016) find empirical evidence consistent with this claim; across multiple thematic areas of focus within Muslim advice literature, there appears to be a historical tendency toward a "re-traditionalization" of political thought, which begins around the time of the Turkic and Mongol invasions.

All of this suggests that steppe migration on the part of both Turkic and Mongol peoples "transformed the economic, social and political conditions of much of the eastern Islamic world" (Marlow 1997, p. 132). The result was a "symbiosis" (Bosworth 2010, p. 21) of Persian and Arabic traditions with Turkic and Mongol influences in terms of governmental traditions. As the style of rule became increasingly distinct from Arab culture (Brett 2010, p. 552), Persian notions of kingship, influenced by Mongol thinking, inaugurated a new form of political authority (Manz 2010, p. 168). The new "mixed culture" that developed under the Mongols set the stage for the rise of the great empires of the Islamic world, which emerged in the early modern period (Manz 2010, p. 168). The development of the Ottoman Empire, which exercised some form of rule over virtually all of the Middle East other than Iran, was critically important from the perspective of state formation in the Middle East.

FROM IMPERIAL STATE BUILDING TO NATION-STATE

When and how did the reign of steppe warriors come to an end? Kennedy (2002, p. 210) argues that the increasing range and mobility of gunpowder weapons led to a decline in the military advantages of steppe warriors, as artillery of this type could be produced only in settled societies with strong organizational tendencies. Major conquest movements slowed by the sixteenth century, and the Ottoman Empire emerged as a centralized state that was able to defeat or incorporate tribal groups across the Middle East. Although the Ottoman Empire underwent a series of institutional reforms over the many years of its reign, its core institutions were heavily influenced by those of previous Middle Eastern states (Lapidus 2014). The most important of these institutional inheritances included centralized bureaucracies that managed assigning tax rights of state-held land to members of the military elite and continued use of slave soldiers.[9] Members of the clerical elite increasingly became part of a state-administered religious establishment that was deployed to interface with the citizenry on issues of societal concern.

Yet these institutional features did not appear to create the conditions for robust economic development. Low levels of executive constraint (Blaydes & Chaney 2013) combined with predominantly state ownership of land may have hindered productive investment. In addition, the relatively strong role played by religious elites may have hurt scientific innovation (Chaney 2016) and discouraged the cultivation of human capital (Blaydes & Chaney 2016). Eventually, the Middle East began to fall behind Western Europe in terms of economic development (Kuran 2011). The economic weakness of Middle Eastern states translated into political weakness. The decline and eventual dissolution of the Ottoman Empire set the stage for the creation of the nation-states of the contemporary Middle East.

[9]The trajectory of the Safavid Empire in Persia is considered to have been similar on some key institutional dimensions. Slave soldiers served a centralized imperial administration. The Safavids also used the *iqta* as payment for military service. *Iqta* holders included both slave soldiers and other military elites.

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Ottoman State Institutions

The Ottoman dynasty created the largest and longest-lasting of the Turkic regimes. Barkey (1994) argues that although the Western European state is often considered the model for state formation, the Ottoman Empire provides an alternative path to state making. While European states were subjugating rebellious groups with violence, the Ottoman managed competing demands through negotiation and successfully preempted rebellion through bargaining and incorporation of challengers into state structures.

How and why were the Ottoman able to effectively incorporate the varied interests of diverse peoples across the empire? The answer relates to the relatively high degree of centralization of political authority enjoyed by the Ottoman sultan. Only the state conferred power (Barkey 1994, p. 33), and, as a result, state institutions had the capacity to absorb and co-opt a variety of distant and unruly challengers. Absolute authority sat with the sultan, assisted by the grand vizier and his accompanying bureaucracy; there was no representative body, as in Western Europe, that was required to deliberate over policy or approve state actions (Fieldhouse 2006, p. 4).

The Ottoman also employed slave soldiers, who were recruited through forced tribute of male children on the part of Christian subjects of the empire. These children were converted to Islam and trained to be servants of the state, often at the highest levels of the military. Although these slave soldiers did not make up the only military elite within the Ottoman Empire, they represented a servant elite "characterized by its utter lack of autonomy" (Barkey 1994, p. 33). These individuals had no independent basis of power or wealth, acquiring both exclusively through state channels (Barkey 1994).

The Ottoman also made use of a land grant system thought to be an institutional descendent of the *iqta* (Wickham 1985, p. 180). Because agricultural land was state controlled, the empire allotted the right to tax revenue from that land in return for military or other service. Barkey (1994, p. 36) writes that the constant rotation of officials on land discouraged the development of robust relationships between landlord and tenant. As a result, the prevailing relationship between land and elites within the Ottoman Empire was very different from the norm in Western Europe; "in marked contrast to the position of the nobility within feudalism, such grants were neither heritable, nor did they connote any rights of jurisdiction over the direct producers, and the revenues attached to them were set by the sultan's treasury" (Bromley 1994, pp. 38–39). The issue of heritability of land and title, as well as the nature of property ownership, became an area of struggle within the empire between the state and the elite.

Colonial Encroachment and Ottoman Decline

How and why did European states become the colonial powers of the world, rather than the states of the Middle East? The weakening economic strength of the Middle East contributed to the region's vulnerability to colonial forces. Kuran (2011) suggests that by 1750 CE, the Middle East was falling behind Western Europe in living standards and purchasing power.[10] Owen (1981) estimates that at the end of the eighteenth century, the public revenue of the Ottoman Empire was only one-fifth that of the British state. Irwin (2010a, p. 16) argues that by 1800 CE, the Middle East was economically weaker than Western Europe and "vulnerable to penetration by it" as a

[10]Although Kuran (2011) points to the legal institutions associated with Islam (e.g., the *waqf*) as a fundamental hindrance to commercial life and economic productivity, Blaydes & Chaney (2016) argue that prevailing interpretations of Islamic law are not independent predictors of economic stagnation but are themselves outcomes associated with political economy institutions and patterns of elite bargaining.

result of difficulty innovating, a relatively weak civil society, and absence of resistance to unjust authority. Bromley (1994, p. 50) suggests that "the fundamental causes of Ottoman decline derived from the internal, tributary structure of society."

Yet the internal economic and political vulnerabilities of the Ottoman Empire were accentuated by Western European economic dynamism and colonial expansion (Bromley 1994, p. 50). Rising nodes of political strength in Europe, for example, began to block the ability of the Ottoman to accumulate capital from expansion campaigns. Efforts at what might be considered defensive modernization sought to reproduce some aspects of the Western European institutional environment, such as the formation of a landed class as well as attempts at bolstering territorial integrity. According to Bromley (1994, p. 59), encouragement of private property and of the market were seen as central. The Ottoman Land Law of 1858 represented a turning point in Ottoman agrarian history. After 1858, agricultural land could be owned, which had the effect of "the creation of truly vast estates in the Middle East" (Gerber 1987, p. 72).

Despite attempts at institutional upgrading, the growing industrial strength of Western Europe ultimately led to economic domination of the Middle East (Lewis 1994, pp. 28–29). Bromley (1994, p. 19) writes, "capitalism developed in the West and conquered the rest of the world . . . Islamic empires stagnated, declined and were overrun." Europe's economic advantages translated into forms of political control. For example, attempts to modernize Egypt's infrastructure and public services in the nineteenth century generated debts owed to the British that provided cover for an eventual British invasion and occupation. Ottoman military defeat in World War I revealed the region's vulnerability to European military power, spurring adoption of more modern European institutions in a bid to regain political power (Lapidus 2014, p. 518). Fieldhouse (2006, p. 3) suggests that "so long as Istanbul retained its imperial control no new state system in the region was possible." The decline of the Ottoman Empire, then, set the stage for the period of modern nation-state formation in the Middle East.

As states were constituted (and reconstituted) in the wake of World War I, three key factors associated with the region's historical legacy were core features of the institutional inheritance. First, Middle Eastern states of the twentieth century inherited a legacy of dynastic rule undergirded by a powerful, urban-based military elite rather than by a rural gentry whose interests were organized in representative institutions such as parliaments. Second, the relatively late development of private ownership of agricultural land limited the political power and moral authority of the landholding class and may have also increased societal acceptance of state control of productive resources. Finally, although the historical states of the region typically provided security and social order to the societies they ruled, public goods were usually provided by religious institutions operating through the *waqf* system. The importance to society of the services provided by the *waqf*s generated bargaining leverage for the religious elites who governed those institutions.

CONCLUSIONS

This review article takes a long view of state building in the Middle East by exploring early state structures to understand the development of political authority in the region.[11] From a long-run perspective, states in the Middle East have been relatively strong with high capacity compared

[11]New research on Middle Eastern states suggests promising areas of future research. Patel (2015) examines the rise and fall of states in the Middle East with the goal of understanding both how they came to be and, if they no longer persist, how they died. Ahram & Lust (2016) describe an international consensus about the "immutability of international borders, the impossibility of state death and the impermissibility of state birth" and its impact on political and humanitarian crises related to the Middle Eastern state.

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to those in many other parts of the world, particularly Western Europe. The historical states of the Middle East, many of which had the benefit of earlier and more robust transitions to settled agriculture, had tendencies toward centralization with impressive fiscal administrations and bureaucratic apparatuses. Because of the primitive nature of communication during this time and the high costs of travel (e.g., Stasavage 2010), these areas were not centralized in the modern sense (von Grunebaum 2008 [1970]). Yet compared to their peers, Middle Eastern states were relatively high capacity and centralized for their time.

In its classical form, the Middle Eastern state of the medieval period was able to engage in relatively costly forms of elite military institutionalization, including the import and training of slave soldiers who made up the backbone of the army. Middle Eastern states also tended to control agricultural landholdings in a manner that discouraged the emergence of a propertied elite.[12] One side effect of these institutional arrangements was that wealth holders sought shelter from state predation through the establishment of Islamic religious endowments, an institution that increased the societal influence of religious elites. I argue that the institutional descendants of Islam's classical period persisted until the nineteenth century, influencing how and why European political and economic predation in the Middle East began.

How does Middle Eastern state formation compare to state formation in other world regions? The experience of European state formation provides an important comparative case. Emerging from Late Antiquity, European polities were poor and weak compared to their counterparts in the Middle East. Whether this resulted from the way the western Roman Empire collapsed (Stasavage 2016) or from the relative resilience of state structures in the Middle East compared to Europe (Crone 1999), the net result was a fragmentation of political power associated with the institutions of feudalism (Blaydes & Chaney 2013). In Europe "the state was starved of funds and collapsed," but this did not occur in Byzantium, Persia, or the Arab states of the Middle East (Wickham 1985, p. 172). In other words, despite challenges and cycles of replacement, in the Middle East, "the state *itself* did not go away" (Wickham 1985, p. 172); this contrasts with the contemporaneous decline of state structures in Western Europe (Stasavage 2016). The collapse of the state in Western Europe may have been key for the production of the growth-enhancing institutions that eventually led Europe to enjoy economic advantages relative to other world regions.[13] Likewise, the relative wealth and persistence of the state in the Middle East may have hurt its long-term prospects for economic development insofar as the institutional environment favored the state and its servants rather than cultivation of an autonomous and indigenous influence-wielding class.

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[12]This is not to say that state ownership of agricultural land in the Middle East was an inevitable consequence of the region's historically strong state structures; forms of more individualized land ownership enjoyed historical precedent in the region as well (Bagnall 1995). Yet, a relatively high level of state strength would seem to be a precondition for state ownership of land.

[13]How and why did Western Europe come to re-establish state forms out of the shared and overlapping forms of sovereignty associated with medieval feudalism? Blaydes & Paik (2016) argue that the rise of Islam—and the associated mobilization of men and resources for the Holy Land Crusades—may have contributed to both the decline of feudal landholding and the rise of centralized taxation capacity in Western Europe. The arc of state building in the Middle East that I propose, then, suggests relative continuity of state forms over a very long period of time, in contrast to Western Europe, where the state had to be rebuilt following a period of overlapping and nonexclusive forms of sovereign authority associated with the feudal complex.

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