

***The Balzan Seminar  
for the Study of the Formation, Maintenance,  
and Failure of States in Muslim Societies***

**Michael Cook**

**2019 Balzan Prize for Islamic Studies**

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The proposed theme of this project, *The Formation, Maintenance, and Failure of States in Muslim Societies*, will focus on the pre-modern period, but will include the nineteenth century where appropriate. The basic idea would be to examine the respective roles of Islamic and non-Islamic values in the process over time and space, together with the roles of more material resources and obstacles, and the interactions between all these elements. There will be two main phases to the project.

In the first phase, a core group of able young scholars will be assembled to work on relevant questions and look at them in a wider comparative perspective. A mix of advanced graduate students, postdocs, and holders of entry-level positions, they would number from eight to twelve. International in character, they would be recruited by advertising the opportunity widely and selecting the best applications. If visa problems require the staging of events outside the United States, a European university may be chosen as a venue. The successful applicants would be chosen for the promise of their work, also with a view to covering as wide a range of Muslim history as possible in terms of both time and space. In this phase, the scholars would meet twice as a group. The purpose of the first meeting would be for them to get to know each

other, exchange and discuss their current written work, and develop a shared (or at least overlapping) perspective on the issues. In advance of the second meeting, each core member would be obligated to submit a draft giving a synthetic account of the ways in which they see the issues playing out in the broad region and time of their research. The agenda of the meeting would be to discuss these papers and begin planning the second phase.

In the second phase, the core group would constitute the backbone for a series of conferences, each with a focus on a particular segment of Muslim history. The relevant members of the group would have a prominent role in designing and organizing the particular conference covering their field of expertise. In contrast to the first phase, other scholars working in the field in question would be invited to participate, not least senior scholars. Each conference would be devoted to a different region of the Muslim world, with the exception of the last, which might serve as a summation. As many as five of these conferences could be organized.

In terms of publication, the central idea would not be to publish the papers of the individual conferences, but rather revised versions of the papers written by the members of the core group for the second meeting of the first phase. These papers would be revised in light of the second phase conferences, and would comprise the backbone of the volume. A limited number of papers by the senior scholars who will have attended the conferences could be added. Collaboration with a major academic press, such as Cambridge University Press, will be sought at an early stage.

Another feature of the project will be a book review workshop. When a young scholar has completed a draft of a first book, a limited number of experts in the field will be brought in to spend a day or half a day discussing the draft with the author (and with each other). The author will then revise the draft in light of the suggestions made by the experts. This could be done for books on topics relevant to the proposal, perhaps in cooperation with a major academic press.