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Focus session 'Zaydi governance in Yemen between legal theory and political practice': introduction

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Focus session ‘Zaydi governance in Yemen between legal theory and political practice’

Introduction

The focus session ‘Zaydi governance in Yemen between legal theory and political practice’, a selection of papers from which are published in these *Proceedings*, was generously hosted by the 57th Seminar for Arabian Studies. The goal of the session was to explore the intersection of legal theory and political practice in the formation of Yemeni Zaydi political institutions. Central to this conversation was the figure of the Zaydi imam, particularly his role in formulating the legal framework of the pre-modern Zaydi state. Contributions stressed different aspects of this function. Ebrahim Mansoor’s article discusses how a fifteenth-century imam — Aḥmad Ibn al-Murtaḍā — shaped the Zaydi legal tradition for centuries to come through the composition of a legal work, *Kitāb al-Azhār*. Kerstin Hünefeld’s article demonstrates that in the nineteenth century debates on what could appear rather narrow topics — such as the question of the forced conversion of Jewish orphans — continued to rely on legal reasoning from previous centuries while also infusing the discussion with a politicized exploration of the nature of the Zaydi imamate. Papers read at the Seminar but not published in this volume touched on other dimensions of this theme. Johann Heiss and Eirik Hovden in their complementary papers discussed the theory and practice of selecting an imam through a close study of the manner of this selection (examination, *imtiḥān*) and people involved in decision-making. Clarck Membourou Moimecheme discussed how medieval Zaydi imams sought diplomatic relations with Mecca and Medina to affirm their position of leadership in Yemen.

All the published contributions shed light on an under-studied but transformative period of Yemen’s Zaydi history — the fifteenth to the sixteenth century. In this period, under the pressure of regional geopolitics and internal change, Zaydi imams and their supporters reformed the functioning of the imamate and updated the legal and political theories that underpinned it. This is particularly evident in the case of Aḥmad Ibn al-Murtaḍā, discussed by Ebrahim Mansoor, and of his grandson, imam Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn. The latter’s attempts to innovate the Zaydi political system through the appointment of an heir is discussed in Ekaterina Pukhovaia’s contribution. These transformations continued to influence the development of the Zaydi political system up to the twentieth century, as Kerstin Hünefeld shows.

Finally, all contributions highlighted the rich variety of sources available to the historian of Yemeni Zaydism, be it legal texts, histories, biographies, or documents. The close readings offered by the authors of the contributions to the focus session provide a wide-ranging view of the ways in which Zaydi legal thinking was influenced by political practice and vice versa.

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