

JOINT LECTURE SERIES

Hubs, networks and trajectories

The making of global cooperation in the humanities in Istanbul and beyond

The Great Games of Pandemics.
Sanitary Internationalism in the
Middle East and North Africa,
1792-1942

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Speaker

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Discussant



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Online
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The international sanitary councils in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) were one of the earliest, longest lasting and relatively successful instances of global north-south public health cooperation in history. Jointly established by European, American and local historical actors in Tangier, Tunis, Alexandria, and Constantinople/Istanbul from the late eighteenth century onward, these (proto-)institutional structures of power formed unprecedented and unparalleled epidemiological networks at the crossroads of continents. They fought pandemics from below, rather than through top-tier intergovernmental gatherings and conventions, and obtained more concrete results at a time even when the international sanitary conferences were at a loss. The global northern and southern sanitarians (diplomats, physicians, functionaries, merchants, medical administrators, scientists, engineers, and others) collectively strategised against waves of epidemics and pandemics from at least the 1790s through until the 1940s.

Ozan Ozavci's presentation will offer an exploratory introduction to how the councils in MENA came into existence and why it is crucial to consider their work as the onset of sanitary internationalism. Drawing on the findings of his ERC COOPERATION project from archives in Europe, North America, MENA and Russia, he will argue that rather than top-down Great Power imposition on MENA polities alone, it was the reciprocal interest calculations that prompted these decentralised, more dynamic and yet largely overlooked forms of transimperial cooperation in pursuit of health security. Yet, all along, the councils had to overcome the familiar barriers to collective action such as Orientalist and racial prejudices, economic and financial considerations, as well as religious and nationalist backlashes within a multi-polar, imperial world.

Ozan Özavcı is Associate Professor of Transimperial History at Utrecht University, co-convenor of the Lausanne Project and principal investigator of the ERC CoG COOPERATION project. In addition to several book chapters and articles published in leading historical journals, he is the author of three monographs, most notably *Dangerous Gifts: Imperialism, Security, and Civil Wars in the Levant, 1798–1864* (OUP, 2021). He is also the co-editor of three volumes, among them *Securing Empire: Imperial Cooperation and Competition in the Nineteenth Century* (Bloomsbury, 2024, together with Beatrice de Graaf and Erik de Lange), and co-author of a graphic novel on peace-making in the early twentieth century. He is currently working on a fourth monograph on the making of global north-south public health cooperation.