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## CONGRESS

Middle East and Muslim Worlds  
Studies

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## Panel 46

## For a globalized history of epidemic phenomena in the Middle East (late 18th century to the present day)

For the present day, the epidemic phenomenon and its consequences in the Middle East constitute a booming historiographical field that remains to be explored. From the Jaffa plague during the Napoleonic expedition to Covid 19, the epidemics have changed the relationship of the Middle-Eastern populations to their territory, food, work, environment, but also to their dead (funeral practices). They have disrupted their means of supply and their sociability practices, to the point of creating lasting memory traumas, and consequently a renewal of piety and the rise of new forms of religiosity and ritual practices. Studied at different scales (local, regional, global), epidemic phenomena also occur in a social, economic, political, institutional, religious context specific to each State, although closely connected to the world space by the channels of dissemination of epidemics themselves (transport, pilgrimages, devotions, tourism), and through survival and supply techniques (exile, isolation in rural areas, confinement, black markets, etc.). In addition, there are the political uses to which epidemics have been subjected. Far from leading only to phenomena of excess mortality, desolation, social tensions and economic declines aggravated by periods of wars, epidemics have also played a catalytic role through significant medical and health progress, institutional and educational adaptations, as well as remarkable forms of resilience, adaptation and survival of societies. From a perspective of global and micro-global history, this workshop seeks to show to what extent the epidemic phenomenon constitutes a structuring parameter in the contemporary history of the Arab, Turkish and Iranian worlds.

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**Discussant :** Abi Habib Khoury Roula (USJ, CEMAM)

### Program

**Sari Hanafi (American University of Beirut)**

*Post-COVID-19 Sociology: an Arab perspective*

The surreal atmosphere of the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed fault lines in trust among human beings, among countries, between citizens and governments, and it is pushing us to raise big questions about ourselves, our social relationships, and life generally. And this crisis is not just limited to public and environmental health or the economy – what we are witnessing is a moment of truth regarding the crisis of late modernity and its capitalist system on a broad, overarching scale. This paper will propose a theorization of these crises, with special attention to the Arab world.

## **Amélie Neuve-Eglise (INALCO)**

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*The epidemic as a source of questioning the borders of the pure and the impure: the case of Covid-19 in Iran between religious, health and socio-political issues.*

Because of its origin attributed to geographic and religious otherness, but also because of the identification of its first Iranian home in Qom, a large holy city of the country, the appearance of the Covid-19 epidemic in Iran has contributed to placing the notions of purity (pākī) and impurity (nejāsāt) - considered both on a ritual and moral register - at the heart of the scholarly and popular religious debate. Through the examination of issues linked to these notions and how they have been formulated in this specific context - status of non-Muslims and the sacred space of shrines as a potential vector of contamination, relationship to the bodies of the sick and the dead, legality of the use of alcohol for health purposes - this communication invites us to think of how the epidemic contributes to reactivating, questioning, and even redefining what is pure and impure. An examination of how these notions relate to what falls under a «secular» health register as well as various socio-political issues will complete this reflection.

## **Dorothee Schmid (IFRI)**

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*The Covid-19 crisis: an opportunity for strategic recovery for Turkey by Tayyip Erdoğan*

The Covid-19 pandemic, which has claimed relatively few deaths in Turkey, has allowed President Tayyip Erdoğan and his team of advisers to regain control of foreign policy. Speeches on the matching of powers in the face of disease, enactment of humanitarian soft power, and promoting the qualities of the Turkish health and research system have supported the phantasmal power-building enterprise that the AKP pursues among its constituents. The hierarchy of alliances and external friendships has been updated: the difficulties of certain partners facing the epidemic have allowed openings (Italy, United States), negotiations have stiffened with weakened Russia, China has been promoted to a great partner. The intensification of military operations in Libya and the sustained pressure in the Aegean Sea demonstrated the willingness of Turkish officials to push their strategic advantage at a time where international relations are suspended. The call for the return of tourists in the summer of 2020, playing on the idea of the Turkish sanitary exception, completes this sequence of polishing the "Turkey brand", a modernized version of a national narrative aimed at consumer-oriented consumption, both internal and external.

## **Alexandre Toumarkine (INALCO)**

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*Days of anger in Turkey. The Istanbul Cholera Epidemic (1970).*

The Covid-19 pandemic has revived the memory of the epidemics in Turkey and a particular one of the last notable epidemics. It is a cholera pandemic that began in India in 1961 and affected, for a few months, two districts of the city of Istanbul in 1970, districts known to concentrate a strong immigration population, mainly originating from the Balkans. This epidemic only killed about fifty people but had a lasting impact on Turkish public opinion.

We will first examine how the international circulation of the virus was perceived in Turkey at the time, in particular in connection with the Middle East (Iran and Iraq were affected in 1965 and 1966), but also with the closure of Turkey's frontiers with bordering states, under pressure from the EEC, a closure that the Turkish Ministry of Health had tried to prevent by downplaying the nature of the epidemic. We will then examine the terms and actors of the national public debate that the epidemic and its management have sparked, against a backdrop of rural exodus and growing urbanization of Istanbul. We will focus on the discourse of politicians (one of the two districts is a bastion for the left opposition), on that of the medical workforce, and the chambers of architects and engineers.