“Seeking Refuge beyond Europe. New perspectives on European Refugees, Migrants and Exilees in the Middle East and North Africa, 19th-20th centuries”

Call for Articles in English and French language for a special Issue of Diasporas.Circulations, Migrations, Histoire (to be published in 2025), edited by Alex Lamprou and Esther Möller

The special issue „Seeking Refuge beyond Europe. New perspectives on European Refugees, Migrants and Exilees in the Middle East and North Africa, 19th-20th centuries” aims at investigating the societies of the Middle East and North Africa as spaces of arrival, transit and settlement for refugees from Europe in the late 19th and 20th centuries.

In the light of current arrivals of refugees from MENA and beyond in Europe, historiography of the last 20 years has started to highlight the presence of Arab migrants in European countries as well as their political and social engagement there since the late 19th century. However, the fact that Europeans where themselves fleeing to the Middle East and North Africa in this period has only recently attracted the interest of historians. The dissolution of the Ottoman Empire in the Balkans and the Caucasus, the two World Wars, the Jewish migration to Palestine and the creation of the state of Israel, the postwar decolonization constitute some of the turning points in this history of displacement, migration and exile that connects the MENA region to Europe. It seems worthwhile to deepen this question further and to explore the arrival of refugees from Europe in the Middle East and North Africa and their interaction with the civil societies, but also the state institutions in these countries. A comparative perspective both in terms of space and of time seems particularly promising as it asks for the points in common and the differences between the different countries in MENA as well as the evolution of their refugee, settlement and migration policies over time. In this regard, the respective role of the late Ottoman, national and colonial governmental structures will be of particular interest in order to understand the different political factors at stake for the interactions between refugees and the local societies.

By exploring these research questions, the special issue seeks to contribute to different fields of research.

- First of all, it is conceived in dialogue with the historiography on expatriate communities which had been present in the Middle East and North Africa often since some generations, such as the Greek, Italien or French communities in Egypt or Tunis. Adding refugees to this picture helps to differentiate the different categories at stake (migrants, refugees, diaspora) as well as the blurring boundaries between them.
• Second, this research focus contributes to the historiography on humanitarian organizations in the Middle East, being from international, national or local origin. Integrating European refugees into their field of action shows that there were not only Western aid givers on the one side and Arab aid recievers on the other, but that there were humanitarian actors and beneficiaries on all sides.

• Third, this research adds new perspectives to the historiography on displacement and forced migration in the Arab world and on Arab, in particular Palestinian, refugees in the Middle East, by showing that Arab societies and state structures had been confronted by other refugees earlier or at the same time and that the question of refugees or migration has never been an affair of inter-Arab relations only, but of European-Arab relations at large. It seems thus important to integrate refugees from Europe into the larger question of the transformation of refugee and migration policies in the Middle East and North Africa between colonialism, anti-colonial nationalism and international relations in the late 19th and 20th centuries. As a result, this research promises new insights into European as well as modern Middle Eastern and North African history.

• Fourth, the special issue thereby contributes to colonial and postcolonial history more generally, as the figure of the ‘European/Western’ as a refugee in the (semi-)colonial world challenges established colonial hierarchies. Moreover, colonial entanglements and postcolonial challenges can be studied in the humanitarian discourses and practices towards European, non-European, or “in-between”-refugee populations / in the MENA or in the (former) colonialized world more broadly.

We invite applications with titles, abstracts and short CVs should to be sent by April 15, 2024 to lamprou@staff.uni-marburg.de and esther.moeller@cmb.hu-berlin.de. Selected candidates will then have to send their articles by September 30, 2024.