

Entering Critical Conversation:

Literary, Cultural, and Religious Studies in Dialogue between Tunisia and Germany

MECAM Short-Term Project, Tunis, 15–21 November 2026

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Abstract

Literary, cultural and religious studies continue to be shaped by asymmetrical structures of knowledge circulation between Arab and European academic contexts. While transregional initiatives have intensified in recent years, access to contemporary theoretical and methodological debates in German Arabic and Islamic Studies remains limited for Arabic-speaking students and scholars. This structural imbalance was articulated during the 2024 Rencontre Ibn Khaldun at the University of Tunis El Manar in cooperation with MECAM and the Arab German Young Academy of Sciences and Humanities (AGYA) and further discussed in the 2025 TRAFO – Blog for Transregional Research interview (Ben Amor / Junge). Both forums revealed a pronounced interest in sustained dialogue and an Arabic access to German debates in the humanities and vice versa.

The MECAM project *Entering Critical Conversation* addresses this gap through the Arabic translation of *Arabistik: Eine literatur- und kulturwissenschaftliche Einführung* (Albers et al. 2021) and through dialogical formats that transform translation into a site of epistemic negotiation. Rather than conceiving translation as mere transfer, the project approaches it as a critical method that enables shared conceptual work and reciprocal self-reflection. In line with MECAM's commitment to reconfiguring Euro-Mediterranean academic entanglements and AGYA's emphasis on interdisciplinary and transregional research, the project fosters multilingual infrastructures of exchange and contributes to a more equitable, critically engaged humanities landscape between Tunisia and Germany.

The short-term residency in Tunis (15–21 November 2026) is structured around three closely interrelated components: (1) a public presentation of the Arabic translation at Beit El Hikma, complemented by a critical response from a MECAM Fellow or former Fellow; (2) a workshop at the University of Tunis El Manar, organized in cooperation with MECAM and with the participation of MECAM Fellows, devoted to collaborative reflection on theories and methods in literary and cultural studies; and (3) a presentation of current research projects at MECAM by Dr. Assem Hefny and Dr. Christian Junge (CNMS, Marburg), addressing contemporary debates on civil status law in Egypt and Tunisia as well as interreligious dialogue and "empathetic neighbourhoods" in Germany within the framework of the LOEWE research centre DynaRel – Dynamiken des Religiösen. Conceived as mutually reinforcing formats, these activities position translation as a practice of shared epistemic negotiation and contribute to the consolidation of sustainable cooperation between MECAM, Tunisian academic institutions, and German Arabic and Islamic Studies.

Sub-Projects

1) Book Presentation at Beit El Hikma (18 November 2026)

The first component consists of a public presentation of the Arabic translation of *Arabistik: Eine literatur- und kulturwissenschaftliche Einführung* at Beit El Hikma. Originally authored by Yvonne

Albers, Ines Braune, Christian Junge, Felix Lang, and Friederike Pannewick, the volume has been translated by Anis Ben Amor, linguistically edited by Adel Sakhraoui as well as linguistically and academically edited by Assem Hefny (Philipps-Universität Marburg). The Arabic edition is published by Dar Zeinab. As the first comprehensive German textbook in Arabic Studies to appear in Arabic translation, it addresses a significant infrastructural gap in the field and opens access to contemporary theoretical and methodological debates.

The event will feature a critical response by a MECAM Fellow or former Fellow (e.g., Cyrine Kortas), situating the translation within current Tunisian discussions in literary and cultural studies. Rather than serving as a ceremonial book launch, the presentation is conceived as an analytical forum that foregrounds terminological choices, conceptual reconfigurations, and disciplinary tensions emerging in the process of translation. In doing so, it positions MECAM as a site for reflecting on the transregional circulation of theory and on the ways in which scholarly concepts are rearticulated within distinct academic and linguistic contexts.

2) Workshop at University of Tunis El Manar, (18–20 November 2026)

Hosted at the University of Tunis El Manar in cooperation with MECAM and AGYA, the three-day workshop brings together MA, PhD, and postdoctoral researchers from Tunisian institutions alongside MECAM Fellows. The workshop combines close readings of selected chapters from the Arabic translation of *Arabistik: Eine literatur- und kulturwissenschaftliche Einführung* with presentations of participants' own research projects. It is structured as a dialogical laboratory in which theoretical and methodological concepts are tested in relation to concrete case studies. Guiding questions include: How can debates in German Arabic Studies on philology, cultural theory, and postcolonial critique be productively recontextualized within Tunisian academic settings? Which conceptual and terminological negotiations prove particularly complex in Arabic? In what ways can translation function as a practice of critical self-positioning within the humanities?

MECAM Fellows and members will act as mentors, facilitating thematic working groups that connect textual analysis with participants' ongoing research. In this way, the workshop transforms the translated textbook into a dynamic instrument of collaborative inquiry and reinforces MECAM's role as a platform for sustained transregional exchange and methodological reflection.

3) Presentation of Research Projects at MECAM (16 November 2026)

The third component, hosted at the Merian Centre for Advanced Studies in the Maghreb (MECAM), is devoted to the presentation of current research projects at the Center for Near and Middle Eastern Studies (CNMS). The session brings into dialogue the work of Dr. Assem Hefny and Dr. Christian Junge, situating their respective projects within broader debates on religion, law, society, and cultural interaction.

Assem Hefny will present his research on "Civil Status Law in Egypt and Tunisia: Current Debates on the Interrelationship between Culture and Law." The project examines contemporary legal discussions on personal status legislation in both countries, addressing the entanglement of religious normativity, state regulation, and cultural practice. It forms part of a larger research framework and a forthcoming Arabic-language monograph.

Christian Junge will present his project "Empathetic Neighbourhoods? – Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Communities in Germany and Interreligious Dialogue after 2001." The project explores the conditions,

challenges, and horizons of interreligious communication in contemporary Germany, with particular attention to empathy as a social, religious, and discursive category. The presentation is embedded within the broader research framework of DynaRel – Dynamiken des Religiösen, a recently established LOEWE center entitled “Dynamiken des Religiösen: Ambivalente Nachbarschaften zwischen Judentum, Christentum und Islam in historischen und gegenwärtigen Konstellationen.”

Expected Impact

The project consolidates MECAM’s role as a mediator of Euro-Mediterranean scholarly exchange. It contributes to sustainable academic infrastructures by (1) introducing a foundational textbook in Arabic translation, (2) establishing shared conceptual vocabularies through collaborative workshops, and (3) placing current research projects at the CNMS in a transregional dialogue with Tunisian scholarly debates on law, religion, and society. Ultimately, Entering Critical Conversation seeks not merely to transfer knowledge but to foster reciprocal and multilingual intellectual engagement under conditions in which literary, cultural, and religious studies in Tunisia and Germany may encounter one another as partners in a shared, critically self-reflexive humanities space.