

Director's Address 2022

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The year 2022 has enabled the OIB to become more active again in many areas than was possible in the previous 2 years because of the pandemic and the port explosion. Nevertheless, the economic crisis in Lebanon persists, and the inflation of the national currency has continued to preoccupy the country, including the staff at the Institute. Yet, one gets the impression that today far more people in the country can again participate in social life. In 2022, for example, the streets filled up again, which had sometimes been empty because of gasoline and diesel shortages. Academic and cultural life has also enjoyed a welcome upswing. Some of the international guests we were able to invite to the OIB in 2022 were delighted to personally view the situation on the ground. The Lebanese are particularly pleased when visitors come from abroad and are not scared off by the negative headlines that continue to dominate the media. In addition to working on specific scientific projects and the often long-term publication projects, it has increasingly become a task of the OIB to be a gateway to international contacts for our younger Lebanese colleagues, as travel is less a matter of course than it used to be.

The beginning of 2022 was positive for the OIB, when it built on the momentum from the OIB's 60th-anniversary celebrations in December 2021. Over the subsequent months, we were finally able to implement many long-term projects. Then, in the fall, there was a change in the directorate, which resulted in the phasing out of the "Relationships" research profile. All of these factors resulted in diverse activities with many exciting encounters, findings, and insights, some of which are presented here, in the hopes of increasing your curiosity about the Annual Report.

On the rather cold days at the beginning of February, we experienced the opening of a photo exhibition with pictures by Mahmoud Dabdoub on the life of Arab students in the former GDR, accompanied by a film screening on the work of Sudanese directors in the former Eastern Bloc.

The Turkish medical historian Yesim İslil Ülman introduced the lecture activities of the Orient Institut. She reported on the vaccination practices in the Ottoman Empire as part of the activities of the Medical School at Galatasaray and its modernisation strategy. The stimulus for this, of course, was the topical theme of the worldwide pandemic and its control, but the lecture went far beyond that in many historical details.

Then, at the first, more extensive workshop after the jubilee of the previous year with numerous researchers, we took a closer look at ongoing ethical discourses in Islamic intellectual history. In particular, we focused on the role of typologies of human characters in Islamic ethical discourses. Bilal Orfali from the American University of Beirut (AUB) as well as our former fellow scholar Enrico Boccacini and Fatih Ermis from the OIB were responsible for organizing this workshop.

At the end of March, the distinguished scholar Tarif Khalidi gave a lecture on the biographical tradition in premodern Arabic literature. This laid the groundwork for the central event of the ERC-funded project LAWHA (Lebanon's Art World at Home and Abroad), the Moving Biography summer school. Thus everyone was well prepared when the Summer School started in June.

Another Summer School, held in Wittenberg and Berlin, allowed OIB researchers to improve their skills in reading and analyzing Ottoman sources available in manuscript form. It was gratifying to have this means of broad cooperation between the Islamic institutes in Germany and research institutions in Lebanon, such as the IFPO. In cooperation with the IFPO and the ERC project "Dream" as well as the AUB, the workshop "Revolt in(g) Collapse. Protest and Everyday Adjustments in Contemporary Lebanon", organised by Pierre France (OIB), examined Lebanon's current situation from very different angles. June was also the appropriate time for two events on Arab music. Our fellow scholar Rosy Beyhoun introduced us to the multifaceted connections between music and politics in 20th- and early 21st-century Lebanon. The Arab Music Archiving and Research (AMAR) Foundation commemorated the legacy of the traditional Oud-builder, Albert Mansour, with a film screening and performance.

Then, in the summer of the same year, a workshop was held on a decidedly anthropological theme. Researchers from Europe, the United States, and the Arab world discussed "Reckoning with God: Divine-Human Relations after the Arab Spring" for 2 days, from 30 June–1 July 2022. The workshop was initiated by fellow scholar Joud Alkorani from Radboud University in Nijmegen (The Netherlands). Yasmin Moll (University of Michigan) presented the public keynote lecture entitled "Can There Be a Godly Ethnography? Islamic Anthropology, Decolonisation, and the Ethnographic Stance". This workshop emphasised that the image of God in many Muslim-majority societies has changed following the events of the Arab Spring; the question of theodicy has become more relevant in the region.

At the Beirut site, the first half of the year concluded with another workshop coordinated by our fellow scholar, Hussein Ibrahim, which took place in cooperation with the Ludwig Maximilian University in Munich and was dedicated to the multifaceted reception of the Muslim philosopher Avicenna. Only a few days later, the office of the OIB in Cairo once again became active, after having successfully filled the position of an OIB representative locally with Dr Yasmin Amin in April. Thus, on 26–27 July 2022, a kick-off workshop took place in the DAAD building, in which we have also rented our two offices, on the framework topic of the Cairo Office "The Interdependence of Humans, Religion, and the Environment". This theme will be continued at three conferences in 2022 and 2023. The workshop was dedicated primarily to the religious perspective and particularly to the approach of a theology of coexistence. The Program Officer for the activities, Ahmed Abd-Elsalam, opened the workshop. There followed the keynote address by Mohamed Habash, who spoke on the brotherhood of religions in the teachings on divine and human matters.

The end of September saw the farewell conference of Professor Birgit Schäbler, Director at the OIB from 2017–2022. It was dedicated to the theme of "Labors of Love, Trials of Friendship: Challenges of Modern Social Relationships". Thus, the multiyear institute profile "Relationships" found a worthy conclusion. Mrs. Schäbler was thanked on behalf of the President of the Max Weber Foundation for her work in times of numerous crises. A convivial evening concluded her 5-year directorship, with some of her fellow scientists and scholars presenting her with a piece of moon rock.

Thereupon, the leadership of OIB passed to me for 9 months, until the arrival of Professor Jens Hanssen in July 2023; the office of Vice-Director was assumed on a transitional basis by the long-time Head of the Library, Dr Hans-Peter Pökel.

In October, during the visit of a group of scholars active in interreligious dialog, we discussed the topic of religious pluralism in Lebanon and in Germany. Ziad Fahed of Notre Dame University explained the theological foundations that – despite the complicated political situation – can inspire the actions of Christian actors, and Elie El-Hindy, Executive Director of the Adyan Foundation, drew a very vivid picture of the strengths and weaknesses of the political system in Lebanon, emphasizing that a reorganisation of the system that fails to take the various religions and denominations into account would be practically impossible to implement. Thanks to Aydin Süer's contribution, the situation of Islam in Germany could also be related to this.

The same month, we had hosting Christoph Günther from the University of Mainz as a guest. He spoke on the topic: "Mere Desolation? On Daesh's Iconoclasm". (Daesh is more commonly known in German as the terrorist organisation ISIS). He elaborated on the destruction of the Nuri Mosque in Mosul (2017) and other symbolic sites aimed at erasing collective memory.

At the end of November, Christian Mauder from the University of Bergen spoke about the negotiation of different identities in late Mamluk court culture in the learned sessions of the ruler Sultan Qanisawh al-Ghawri (r. 1501–1516), using the topics of gender, law, and exegesis to illustrate the multifaceted connections between society and academia as well as the historical positioning of the ruler vis-à-vis foreign policy rivals. December was marked by the second event of the Cairo Office, which took place in Alexandria on the topic of "Religion, Religiosity, and Society". This was a large conference following the first smaller workshop in the summer, led off by the Egyptian writer and intellectual Abdul Jawad Yassin with a keynote lecture in which he asked at what point religion and religiosity had first become a problem for societies. One focus of the following days, which brought together more than 40 scholars from Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco, Tunisia, Oman, Iraq, Germany, and The Netherlands, was the contribution of religions to the transformation of contemporary societies.

At the last evening event of the year, in Beirut, Tine Gade, the author of the book "Sunni City", led a discussion on the Sunni character of Tripoli, Lebanon's second-largest city, its current situation, and future prospects. A workshop on Quranic manuscripts in their respective artistic contexts, organised by Alya Karame, who started working at OIB in April of that year, gathered high-level experts at OIB.

On the question of the materiality of the Qur'an, it became clear that the book-shaped Qur'an gained in importance especially in the Mamluk period and that the Qur'an as an object thus acquired a special sacrality.

Numerous scholars and fellows came to the Institute in 2022. Three Hans-Robert Roemer Fellows also temporarily became part of the research community at OIB. Mahmood Makvand and Qodratullah Qorbani from Kharazmi University joined us from Iran, and Sebastian Günther from the University of Göttingen visited in the early fall.

More intensive cooperation is planned with the Leibniz Center for Modern Oriental Studies (ZMO), the MENA Study Center of the Maecenata Foundation, and the Catholic Academy in Berlin, beginning in November 2022. This will take place in Berlin in the fall of each year and will be dedicated to a topic of interest from the perspective of political science and religious studies. The OIB joined the cooperation, which has existed for years, in 2022. The topic of the kick-off in November 2022 was "Women against Violence against Women: Turkey, North Africa, Iran".

In December, we agreed on an intensified cooperation with the University of Balamand in the field of Digital Humanities. We also largely completed the planning for a cooperation to hold a conference on the "Religious Other in Quranic Exegesis" with the IDEO (Institut dominicain d'études orientales) in Cairo, in May 2023.

A trip to the book fair in Sharja and to the Mohammed Bin Rashid Library in Dubai as well as to the National Heritage Center in Abu Dhabi revealed to the leadership of the OIB that German institutions that are academically and journalistically active in the Arab world should become more involved in the Arab-Persian Gulf region. The importance of intellectual life, spurred on by the founding of numerous universities and libraries, is clearly shifting to this region.

A very practical new development also deserves mention here: Given the worldwide energy crisis, which affects the OIB as well, we decided to install a solar panel system on the roof of the Institute to be prepared should the supply situation deteriorate again. The installation of the solar system and its smooth functioning required that numerous power lines within the Institute's historic building be renewed.

All past and future activities would be inconceivable without the staff of the Orient Institute Beirut. I want to express my sincere thanks to all of them in these times of transition and new beginnings. I owe a special debt of gratitude to my deputy during the transition period, Hans-Peter Pökel, who has magnificently supported the OIB and me personally. I wish you a fruitful and enjoyable reading of this Annual Report, which visually takes up the theme of trees and thus refers not the least to the enduring, albeit distressed, beauty of the country's natural surroundings. It represents the traditional symbol of hope – the hope Lebanon continues to need, even in times of reawakened cultural and academic life.