

**Press Release**

**20 April 2020**

## **Imagining Futures – Dealing with Disparity**

**Merian Centre for Advanced Studies in the Maghreb (MECAM) to be established at the Université de Tunis**

**The Merian Centre for Advanced Studies in the Maghreb (MECAM) will be established this year in Tunis. The centre is a joint endeavour of seven German and Tunisian Universities and research institutions: The University of Marburg, the University of Tunis, Leipzig University, the GIGA German Institute of Global and Area Studies in Hamburg and the Berlin-based Forum Transregionale Studien, the University of Sfax, and the Institut Tunisien des Études Stratégiques (ITES).**

“The developments in Tunisia and other countries of the Maghreb pose important questions that are our questions, too: What is the future of democracy and the rule of law, of mobility and migration? How can public goods and resources be made accessible for the benefit of all people? How are religious and ethnic conflicts and social disparities negotiated in view of the idea and practice of citizenship?” asks Rachid Ouassa, Professor of Politics of the Middle East at the University of Marburg and Director of MECAM. “Tunisia is the only country in the region with a successful transition to democracy”, declares Habib Sidhom, President of the University of Tunis. He adds: “Academic freedom, freedom of opinion and freedom of the press as well as civil society commitment create a fertile ground for critical research.” With its excellent Higher Education institutions and its central position in the Maghreb – the west of the Arab world, North Africa and Southern Europe – Tunis is an “ideal place and a laboratory for collaborative work engaging colleagues from different countries and disciplines on questions of common concern,” adds Ouassa.

The overall issue defined as “Imagining Futures: Dealing with Disparity” represents the keystone of MECAM’s research on the (re)negotiation of complex social and political processes after the “Arab Spring.” MECAM aims at analysing these processes against the backdrop of disparities and inequalities that divide and connect both the Maghreb and the neighbouring regions traditionally and currently. For so doing, five thematic research clusters will be established and identified as Inequality & Mobility, Memory & Justice, Aesthetics & Cultural Practice, Resources & Sustainability, and Identities & Beliefs.

In parallel with the creation of Merian Centre for Advanced Studies in the Maghreb (MECAM), an international centre for interdisciplinary research and academic exchange will equally be established. It will be hosted in one of the institutions affiliated to the University of Tunis and will also have branches and cooperation partners in Casablanca/Morocco and Beirut/Lebanon. MECAM research work is coordinated by the University of Marburg. It is supported by a consortium of renowned Tunisian and German research institutions, namely the University of Marburg, Université de Tunis, University of Leipzig, the GIGA German Institute of Global and Area Studies in Hamburg, the Forum Transregionale Studien in Berlin, the Institut Tunisien des Études Stratégiques (ITES) in Tunis, and the University of Sfax. The Federal Ministry of Education and Research of Germany sponsors the establishment of the International Centre for Research in the Humanities and Social Sciences, with a budget of 1.7 million Euros during the first three years. The Tunisian partners will offer complementary resources.

MECAM will establish a fellowship programme in Tunis in the aim of bringing together scholars from the Maghreb, Europe, the Middle East and beyond to a welcoming, constraint-free environment so that they can work on a selected research project among the above-mentioned thematic research clusters. The fellows will be offered excellent working conditions for research and debate. MECAM intends to hold seminars and workshops, as well as academies in different places in and outside of the region. The fellowship programme will be supplemented by mobility grants for research stays in Germany for the benefit of scholars from Tunisia, the Maghreb, and other Arab countries. The “Rencontres Ibn Khaldun” are conceived as a series of special events seeking to highlight the work of MECAM. Communication techniques through open access publications and other forms of knowledge transfer and translation among the academic community and to other target audiences will be of particular interest. For its work, MECAM can rely on the expertise, the existing formats and networks of the partner institutions in Tunis, Marburg, Sfax, Berlin, Hamburg and Leipzig.

The Maria Sibylla Merian Centres for Advanced Studies are international research centres promoting the internationalization of the humanities, cultural and social sciences; they are sponsored by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research of Germany. The Merian Centres are located at scientific institutions of the host country and are set up and operated by German research institutions in partnership with the respective host institution. Research centres of this type have already been set up in India, Mexico, Brazil and Ghana. The centres are named after the naturalist and artist Maria Sibylla Merian (1647-1717).

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