



36th Levantine Heritage Foundation Zoom lecture with guest speaker Erik Blackthorne-O’Barr  
11 February 2025, 6.00 pm (UK time)

## “A Permanent Danger to All Her Neighbours”: Persia and the Cultural Politics of Cholera

In his 1874 *Bahâr-ı Dâniş Mukaddimesi*, the famed Young Ottoman writer and intellectual Namık Kemal compared the influence of Persian upon Turkish to “an epidemic disease”. Such terminology would later be reflected by the novelist Ahmet Mithat Efendi, then chairman of the Ottoman quarantine board, in his own discussions of Iran’s cultural influence upon Ottoman literature. But where did this terminology come from? This talk proposes that this metaphor drew from the real spread of cholera from Iran to the Ottoman Empire in the nineteenth century, and speculatively argues that the international cholera conferences - at which Ottoman and Iranian delegates debated responsibility for the disease and characterized each other as epidemiologically negligent - were also crucial sites for the articulation of cholera’s cultural politics. In addition to examining figures, like Ahmet Mithat and Malkum Khan, who crossed both literary and medical realms, I focus on the particular role that Levantine physicians such as Dr. Bartoletti (in the Ottoman Empire) and Dr. Tholozan (in Iran) played in shaping the later terms of cultural discourse. I conclude by tracing the lasting legacies of the conferences and the later roles of some of their prominent participants.

Booking essential: <https://erik-blackthorne-obarr-presentation.eventbrite.co.uk>

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Erik Blackthorne-O’Barr is a doctoral candidate at the Middle Eastern, South Asian and African Studies department at Columbia University in New York. He is currently writing his dissertation entitled “Persian Letters: Language, Politics, and Desire in the Late Ottoman Empire”, which examines how the notion of Iranian influence structured the project of Turkish language reform. Before coming to Columbia, he completed a Master’s degree in Turkish Studies at Sabancı University in Istanbul, and a Bachelor’s degree in the Near and Middle Eastern Civilizations department at the University of Toronto. He is the co-editor of *Levantine of the Ottoman World: Communities, Identities, and Cultures* (Ibn Haldun University Press, 2024) and his work has been published in *Kadim Dergisi* (2021), the *Journal of the Ottoman and Turkish Studies Association* (2021, 2022), and *Culture, Theory and Critique* (2024).