

## WORKSHOP PROGRAM

### CULTURAL EXCHANGE AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT IN THE 21ST CENTURY: NAVIGATING EAST-WEST RELATIONS

FACULTY OF EDUCATION,  
FREE UNIVERSITY OF BOLZANO-BOZEN,  
12-13 JUNE, 2026

FRIDAY, 12 JUNE 2026  
MORNING SESSION

**9 :00 Reception of participants and opening of the workshop, welcome address by Annemarie Profanter, Faculty of Education, Free University of Bolzano-Bozen.**

***CLUSTER 1: MIGRATION, CULTURAL DIVERSITY, AND URBAN GOVERNANCE***

**MODERATOR: ANNEMARIE PROFANTER, STEPHANIE RYAN CATE**

**9:10 – 9:30 OMAR BORTOLAZZI**, Associate Professor of Political Science and Graduate Program Director of the Master of Arts in International Affairs at the American University in Dubai, UAE

**Title:** *Reconceptualizing Transit States: Migration Governance, Mobility Infrastructures, and the Arab Gulf*

**Abstract:** The concept of the 'transit state' is a blurred and politicized notion, traditionally characterized by its role as a temporary stop for migrants en route to more desirable destinations. While scholarly attention has revealed the conceptual imprecision of this category, arguing that transit is a contingent positionality within dynamic migration regimes, the Arab Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states have historically been excluded from this analytical framework, framed instead as paradigmatic labour destinations. This paper argues that by overcoming the limitations of methodological nationalism and applying a dynamic mobility-systems lens, the GCC must be reconceptualized as a strategic transit-through-destination zone. The core argument rests on the finding that transit in the Gulf is characterized by legalized transience. Migrants enter through formal legal channels but are held in a condition of enforced temporariness driven by institutional design, primarily the kafāla (sponsorship) system. This architecture precludes settlement and structurally incentivizes onward movement or stepwise international migration. This strategic positioning is reinforced across three interconnected dimensions: First, domestic stabilization strategies require dualized labour markets that embed a flexible, temporary migrant workforce to maintain citizen cohesion. Second, the GCC leverages its position as a major labour recipient through migration diplomacy, utilizing labour management as an indirect form of foreign policy to secure strategic objectives and consolidate ruling power. Third, the transit state model can be extended to energy geopolitics, as the institutional logic governing labour circulation and hydrocarbon flow is shared: managing global movements while minimizing domestic social and political costs. Recent policy developments, such as the introduction of long-term residency

schemes (e.g., the Golden Visa), represent a selective recalibration aimed at talent retention. However, these instruments fundamentally embed new dynamics of tiered inclusion, monetizing privileged residency while retaining the structural segmentation between citizens and non-nationals, thus upholding the system of "permanent temporariness". Ultimately, this analysis challenges rigid state typologies and demonstrates how the GCC's mobility regime functions as a stress test for state authority, revealing institutional fragility in local societies confronted with the fleeting, non-integrative nature of transit.

### **9:30 - 9:45 DISCUSSION**

**9:45 – 10:05 GENNARO ERRICHELLO**, Assistant Professor of Social Development and Policy, Habib University, Karachi, Pakistan

**Title:** *A Decolonial Perspective on Migration and Integration. Migrant Associations in the Arab Gulf*

**Abstract:** The concept of coloniality of power, developed by Anibal Quijano, refers to the enduring structures of domination established during colonialism that continue to shape contemporary global inequalities. It highlights how global capitalism is intertwined with a racialised hierarchy that positions Western societies as superior and others as inferior. Historically rooted in colonial divisions of labour, where colonised populations were relegated to unpaid or devalued work, these hierarchies persist in contemporary economic and social relations structured along racial lines. In response, decolonial thinkers such as Walter D. Mignolo argue for a form of critique that emerges not after colonialism, but alongside it, as a continuous mode of resistance embedded within modernity itself. Unlike postcolonial theory, which is often grounded in European intellectual traditions, decolonial thought draws on the lived experiences and epistemologies of the Global South. Central to this approach is the notion of epistemic disobedience, which calls for a refusal to think exclusively within Western frameworks of knowledge and instead promotes epistemic delinking which means engaging alternative histories, languages, and worldviews to imagine forms of social transformation beyond Western modernity. Applied to migration, a decolonial perspective challenges dominant interpretations that frame migration as an individual and economically driven choice. Instead, it situates migration within broader historical and structural forces, including colonial legacies, global inequalities, and geopolitical hierarchies. It also problematises the concept of integration, often rooted in Eurocentric assumptions, by showing how it reproduces racialised distinctions between “hosts” and “migrants,” while reinforcing the normative boundaries of the nation-state. This paper examines migrant associations in the Arab Gulf countries, which are characterised by hierarchical social structures, racialisation, and institutionalised exclusion, through a decolonial lens. It argues that, despite migrants’ formally temporary status, forms of integration and belonging are produced and enacted in everyday life, rather than derived from state-led policies. Focusing on the Pakistan Association Dubai (PAD), the paper explores how migrant-led institutions function as spaces of socialisation, participation, and collective identity formation. While operating under state regulation, the PAD also fosters practices of inclusion that move beyond rigid categories of race, ethnicity, and nationality. The paper, therefore, rethinks integration from a decolonial perspective, highlighting the role of migrant associations in articulating alternative forms of belonging, identity, and participation, grounded in the lived experiences and narratives of migrants themselves.

### **10:05 – 10:20 DISCUSSION**

### **10:20 – 10:50 COFFEE BREAK**

**10:50 – 11:10 FROILAN MALIT JR**, PhD candidate at SOAS University of London, UK

**Title:** *(De)legitimizing the Host State? Understanding the Fluidity of Migrant Associations' Community Practices in the Gulf*

**Abstract:** How do host states manage migrant associations in the Gulf? Despite their centrality, relevance, and implications, international migration politics scholars have yet to critically and historically recenter the complex role of migrant associations in (de)legitimizing host states' migration management practices. Using the case of Filipino Social Club (formerly known as the Filipino Community) in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), I offer the following argument: firstly, I argue that despite its relatively 'democratic' operations prior to the COVID19 pandemic, migrant associations have structurally co-produced and become incorporated into the host states' autocratic migration management processes, thus impacting their everyday organizing processes. Secondly, the autocratic turn in migration management control has not only centralized host state control but also developed tiered migration management procedures. Rather than viewing civil society actors-including migrant associations-as 'dead,' I demonstrate how migrant associations have increasingly adopted a much more 'fluid' affiliations with the host state, given the complex political, economic, and social pressures (i.e, Arab Spring) embedded within the political economy of migration in the Gulf. Methodologically, I employ both archival and secondary sources, including government, policy, and newspaper publications, to trace the evolution and transformation of migrant associations in the UAE. Ultimately, the study contributes to empirical and theoretical debates on migration management, migration regimes, and Gulf migration studies by featuring the central yet understudied role of migrant associations in (de)legitimizing and co-producing host states' migration regime processes.

**11:10 – 11:25 DISCUSSION**

**11:25 – 11:45 CANAN ÇETIN**, Lecturer at Eskişehir Osmangazi University, Eskişehir, Turkey

**Title:** *Governing the invisible: How authoritarian data monopolies trigger everyday bordering in Turkish neighborhoods?*

**Abstract:** Contemporary urban studies typically examine migration governance through macro level policies and Western centric rational planning models. This perspective, however, frequently overlooks how boundaries shift from the geopolitical edges of a nation state directly into the heart of daily neighborhood life. Drawing on the theory of everyday bordering conceptualized by Nira Yuval Davis, this research explores how borders are continuously reconstructed within local micropolitics. The study achieves this by focusing on the unique elected neighborhood leader in Türkiye known as the 'muhtar'. Historically and socially, these leaders once stood as the direct interlocutors for citizens and the sole representatives of the state within the neighborhood. People would immediately consult them when renting a house, trying to understand the social fabric of a street, applying to a social aid, seeking the best school or teacher for their children, or even looking for local employment opportunities. The institution served as a center of trust where all critical information regarding daily life was gathered and shared, weaving the very fabric of urban solidarity. Nevertheless, as the central state digitized population registries, these neighborhood heads were systematically deprived of formal access to demographic data and pushed into a state of strategic information scarcity. At this exact juncture, the paper poses a fundamental research question exploring how authoritarianism fueled by the monopolization of information impacts migrant acceptance and where local neighborhood leaders(muhtars) stand within this transformation. Based on in depth qualitative interviews with sixty-six muhtars across socio spatially segregated neighborhoods in the city of Eskişehir, this investigation examines the monopolization of knowledge as an instrument of authoritarian centralization. Leaving these

leaders officially unaware of who moves into their jurisdictions does not destroy their local power. On the contrary, deprived of official records, they establish informal intelligence networks relying on local shopkeepers, real estate agents and street gossip to monitor migrant mobility, thereby transforming into highly arbitrary everyday border guards. Fieldwork findings demonstrate that outsourcing border control to these local actors creates intensely subjective filters in the processes of social inclusion and exclusion. Weakened against the state due to this knowledge monopoly, the neighborhood head returns to the street and reestablishes authority by categorizing people not according to their legal status but through affective economies of deservingness and cultural proximity. While upper class migrants in affluent central districts experience an invisible inclusion, Middle Eastern migrants in impoverished semi peripheral areas face the harsh everyday bordering practices of local actors striving to protect urban resources amid intense socioeconomic competition. Moving away from Western centric ideas of formal integration, this paper argues that urban governance in this specific context is profoundly informal, affective and horizontally enforced. Authoritarianism resulting from the centralization of information finds social acceptance and compliance through informal gatekeeping mechanisms rather than facing resistance at the neighborhood level. The everyday bordering practices of these local gatekeepers are not mere administrative flaws. They are active processes used to defend local identity, control cultural exchange and bypass the data monopoly of the authoritarian state right on the street level.

**11:45 – 12:00 DISCUSSION**

**12:00 – 13:30 LUNCH BREAK**

#### AFTERNOON SESSION

#### ***CLUSTER 2 : EDUCATION, INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE, KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION, CULTURAL EXCHANGE AND HUMAN RESOURCES***

MODERATOR: GENNARO ERRICHELLO

**13:30 – 13:50 HEND T. ALSUDAIRY**, Professor of English Literature and Assistant Dean of Admission at Alfaisal University, KSA

**Title:** *A Review of the Woman Presentation in Selective Saudi Folktales*

**Abstract:** The role of women in folktales is very important, and it reflects different aspects of life on different levels. Good and evil which are two facts in life are discussed in the tales through different female presentations so is the culture, religion and taboos. The woman in these tales exposes sometimes man's fear of her power, intelligence or cunning. The tales take the listener deeper into past decades or centuries exposing the codes which help the woman survive and prevail. The paper will shed light on women's presentation either as messenger of love and peace or presenter of evil and bad deeds. In this journey, the paper will endeavor to dive deep into the different types of presentation and the patriarchal society this woman lived in and managed to establish her important role within it.

**13:50 – 14:05 DISCUSSION**

**14:05 – 14:25 ANNEMARIE PROFANTER**, Associate Professor, Faculty of Education, Free University of Bolzano-Bozen, Italy and **RYAN CATE GIBSON**, Holistic Performance Group, Huntsville, USA

**Title:** *Between Imported Models and Lived Realities: Rethinking Knowledge and Belonging in Western-Modeled Universities in Oman*

**Abstract:** The aspiration to “build a knowledge society” has become a defining feature of contemporary educational development discourse in the Middle East, particularly within the Gulf. Central to this vision has been the rapid expansion of private higher education institutions, especially in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. While these institutions are often framed as vehicles for innovation, global competitiveness, and human capital development, less attention has been paid to the academic backgrounds and preparedness of the students they enroll. This paper shifts the analytical lens from institutional growth to student trajectories, examining the prior educational experiences, skill levels, and transitional challenges of students entering private universities in Saudi Arabia. Drawing on case studies from Dhofar University in Salalah and Prince Mohammad Bin Fahd University in the Eastern Province, the study explores how diverse academic foundations—ranging from public secondary education to international and private schooling—shape student readiness for English-medium, outcomes-based higher education environments. The paper critically engages with the tension between neo-liberal educational models and local educational realities. While private universities often adopt Western-oriented curricula and pedagogies, incoming students may not have been equally prepared for these approaches, leading to gaps in critical thinking, language proficiency, and independent learning skills. These disparities raise important questions about access, equity, and the actual capacity of private higher education to fulfill its promise as a driver of societal transformation. By foregrounding student academic backgrounds, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of private higher education in Saudi Arabia and Oman—not merely as a structural or ideological shift, but as a lived educational experience shaped by the intersection of policy, culture, and prior learning.

**14:25 – 14:40 DISCUSSION**

**14:40 – 15:10 COFFEE BREAK**

**15:10 – 15:30 ELENA MAESTRI**, Professor of History and Institutions of the Muslim World at the Faculty of Political and Social Sciences of the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore in Milan, Italy

**Title:** *Arabic Coffee in History and Culture: Pathways of Interaction between East and West. The Arabian Gahwa in a “Global Gulf”*

**Abstract:** This paper will start by tracing the history of Arabic coffee spreading from the Arabian Peninsula to the Levant and Europe, bridging borders and creating pathways of interaction between cultures, a process emphasizing how trade from the Gulf to Central Europe shaped relations in the 16 century, giving Venice a prominent role. The study combines theoretical frameworks with empirical analysis based on fieldwork in Gulf Arab countries, and through some Italian archives. The approach is interdisciplinary, as it integrates history, cultural anthropology, sociology, economics and globalization studies, to examine the spread of coffee and its significant impact on specific traditions for several peoples. Against a backdrop of intense trade relations established by Venice through mercantile sea and land routes connecting India, Arabia, the Mediterranean, Italy, and the rest of Europe, coffee emerges among the various exotic goods. "Coffee cultures" developed between East and West; the beverage adapted to local tastes in each country, while expressing shared human values connected with social life. In our century, the Arabian gahwa is undoubtedly reconfirmed as one of the most vibrant coffee cultures at the global level, as it was inscribed on the UNESCO representative list of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2015. The analysis will focus on the gahwa as the symbol of Arab identity, values, traditions and

openness to "the other". Rituals and habits associated with it still play a significant role in contemporary Gulf Arab societies among nationals, while new forms of interaction are emerging in the cosmopolitan urban environments of the Gulf, where "global coffee" is challenging the gahwa. And yet, the latter has also started being delocalized, as it operates at the intersection of culture and economy within the "Global Gulf" (heritage and cultural festivals, hotels, museums, events). The transformation of a local ritual into a branded product that gains economic value through international trade and tourism is a reality. This will also shed light on the investment programmes supporting local coffee producers in Saudi Arabia, within the framework of agricultural sustainable development and economic diversification programs. New business and trade opportunities emerge, as well as new cultural bridges between East and West.

#### **15:30 – 15:45 DISCUSSION**

**15:45 – 16:05 AL TALEI RAFIAH, Independent Scholar, Oman**

**Title:** *Securitizing the Public Sphere: War, Expression, and State–Society Dynamics in the Gulf*

**Abstract:** This paper examines how recent military escalation involving Iran and Gulf states has reshaped the public sphere in the Gulf, with a particular focus on freedom of expression, public discourse, and state–society relations. Situated within the broader framework of cultural exchange, governance, and knowledge production, the study argues that geopolitical crises not only alter political dynamics but also profoundly reconfigure the boundaries of permissible expression and public participation. Drawing on theories of securitization and the public sphere, the paper explores how external threats are framed within Gulf societies and how these narratives intersect with cultural, political, and institutional structures. In times of heightened military tension, the public sphere tends to contract as national security discourses become dominant. Governments, supported by segments of society, may justify increased regulation of media, digital platforms, and public expression in the name of stability and collective security. As a result, dissenting or critical voices are often marginalized, while self-censorship becomes more prevalent across both traditional and digital spaces. At the same time, the paper highlights a parallel process of discursive reconfiguration rather than simple repression. Crises serve as moments of intensified nation-building, where expressions of loyalty, solidarity, and collective identity are amplified. In this sense, the public sphere does not disappear but is reshaped to privilege certain forms of expression—particularly those aligned with state narratives—while constraining others. This dynamic reflects a broader pattern in which the boundaries between governance, cultural identity, and public discourse become increasingly blurred. Importantly, the Gulf context provides a distinctive case for examining these processes. Unlike Western-centric models of the public sphere, where contestation is often seen as central, public discourse in the Gulf is shaped by different historical trajectories, political structures, and cultural norms. The paper therefore contributes to ongoing debates on de-centering dominant theories of the public sphere by situating Gulf societies within their own socio-political and cultural frameworks. By linking conflict, governance, and public expression, this study contributes to the workshop’s broader theme of navigating East–West relations, highlighting how global crises intersect with local cultural and political realities. It ultimately raises critical questions about the long-term implications of crisis-driven transformations in the public sphere, particularly whether temporary restrictions and shifts in discourse become normalized features of governance beyond periods of conflict.

#### **16:05 – 16:20 DISCUSSION**

**16:20 – 16:40 AL FASSI AJWAD HATOON**, Associate Professor in History, Women’s History, Middle Eastern Studies, Honorary Fellow of Arabic and Middle Eastern Studies, University of Manchester, UK

**Title:** *The Decolonializing of Arabian History*

**Abstract:** The study of ancient history is still heavily influenced, if not dominated, by Orientalist discourse. Although studies and critiques of Orientalism have been very vocal in the past decades, their effect on the discipline has been very little. History of the “East” has been for a long time presented from a purely Eurocentric perspective. One key problematic in writing non-Western history is in narrating and speaking for oneself. Within the debate of Orientalism, two concepts will be revised and deconstructed in this paper that burden the studies of ancient history and Arabia with so many baggage, a geographical and historical. The geographical is the term used to mark the region of Western Asia and North Africa calling it instead; ‘Near East’ and ‘Middle East’. The second is related to the dating system that uses the birth of Christ as the focal point that divides two historical periods to mark what is commonly known as the time when Christ was born as time zero, and the time before he was living resulting in cutting history in illogical parts counting the years descending before the birth of Christs BC and ascending after his birth to say AD. Both terms will be questioned, analysed and replaced. To achieve that goal, it was necessary to re-set the frame of reference and the system of elementary definitions of our history writing. That task requires the adoption of alternative terminologies that will speak volumes for our independent time and place of ancient Arabia’s history; however, it haunts us in its modern history too.

**16:40 – 16:55 DISCUSSION**

**16:55 – 17:00 CLOSING REMARKS OF THE FIRST DAY OF THE WORKSHOP**

## DAY 2

**SATURDAY, 13 JUNE 2026**

**MORNING SESSION**

**9:00–9:10 Welcome Note**

**CLUSTER 3 : POLITICAL ECONOMY, SUSTAINABILITY, AND GLOBAL INTERCONNECTIONS**

**MODERATOR: ELENA MAESTRI**

**9:10 - 9:30 ASUTAY MEHMET**, Professor of Middle Eastern and Islamic Political Economy & Finance, Director, Durham Centre for Islamic Economics and Finance, Durham University Business School, UK

**Title:** *Political Economy of Sustainable Development: Islamic moral economy logic vs market logics*

**Abstract:** This paper develops a critical political economy framework to explore the tensions between sustainable development as articulated within dominant market logics and its re-grounding through *Islamic Moral Economy (IME)*, *Islamic Political Economy (IPE)*, and *Islamic Applied Ethics (IAE)*. It argues that despite its normative aspirations, contemporary sustainable

development remains structurally embedded in neoliberal market rationality, privileging efficiency, commodification, and capital accumulation over distributive justice, ecological balance, and moral accountability. This produces a paradox wherein sustainability is subsumed within financialisation processes, exemplified by ESG commodification, green capitalism, and market-based environmental governance. Against this backdrop, the paper advances IME as a tawhīdic (complementarity among stakeholders for unity) moral-economic ontology that redefines sustainability by prioritising *‘adl* (justice), *maṣlaha* (social welfare), and *rizq* (divinely ordained provision), to constitute an ontologically driven embedded economy, thereby challenging the scarcity-driven epistemology of neoclassical economics. Extending this, IPE is mobilised to expose the structural power relations, institutional hegemonies, and global asymmetries that reproduce unsustainable development patterns, particularly in the Global South. It highlights how capitalist development paradigms perpetuate ecological degradation and socio-economic exclusion through unequal exchange, resource extraction, and financial dependency. Crucially, the paper introduces the *iqtisād* framework as a foundational organising principle of Islamic economic reasoning, signifying balance, moderation, and proportionality in the allocation, distribution, and consumption of resources. As an ontological and epistemic counterpoint to both excess (*isrāf*) and deprivation, *iqtisād* reframes sustainable development as a dynamic equilibrium among human needs, social justice, and ecological limits by essentialising equity and tawhidic justice among stakeholders. It thus provides a normative anchor for resisting extractivist growth models and for advancing sufficiency-oriented, need-based economic structures that align material activity with moral purpose, as *iqtisad* constraints economic activity with re-generative capacity thereby de-growth is even a possible policy. In parallel, the paper develops *iḥsānī governance* as a higher-order ethical and institutional paradigm that transcends procedural and compliance-based governance models. Rooted in the Qur’ānic principle of *iḥsān* (moral excellence and benevolence to sustain equilibrium in the society), this framework embeds virtue, intentionality, and moral consciousness into governance structures, extending beyond *‘adl* (justice) towards excellence in socio-economic conduct by essentialising equilibrium among the stakeholders. *Iḥsānī governance* reconfigures institutional behaviour by internalising accountability (*taqwā*), fostering trust-based socio-economic relations, and prioritising long-term collective well-being over short-term gains, and equity over efficiency. In this sense, governance is not merely regulatory but transformative, aligning economic action with ethical purpose and spiritual responsibility. The paper further operationalises these critiques through the IAE, proposing a praxis-oriented framework for embedding ethical intentionality (*niyyah*), social justice, and ecological stewardship into policy and institutional design. This includes reconfiguring financial systems towards risk-sharing, prohibiting exploitative accumulation (*kanz*), and advancing participatory governance rooted in moral accountability, *iqtisād*-based balance, and *iḥsānī* principles. In doing so, the study conceptualises sustainable development not as an extension of market efficiency but as a morally embedded, justice-oriented, balanced, and excellence-driven process of socio-economic transformation. By synthesising IME, IPE, IAA, the *iqtisād* framework, and *iḥsānī governance*, the paper contributes a civilisationally grounded alternative to dominant development discourse, offering both a theoretical critique and a normative blueprint for reimagining sustainability beyond the confines of market logics.

### **9:30 – 9:45 DISCUSSION**

**09:45 – 10:05 BEZEN COSKUN**, Associate Professor of International Relations at TED University and Coordinator of the Izmir Policy Center, Turkey

**Title:** *Competing to Mediate: Gulf States vs Türkiye in Mediat*

**Abstract:** Since the 2000s, Turkey has been among the leading countries seeking to mediate in conflicts in the Middle East and Africa. Turkish foreign policymakers have presented Türkiye as a

reliable mediator, offering an alternative to the West. In the post-2010 period, Ankara has gradually institutionalised its mediation efforts and mediation diplomacy. Türkiye mediated nuclear negotiations between the West and Iran in 2010, initiated the Ankara Communique between Somalia and Somaliland, initiated mediation between Qatar and Saudi Arabia in 2017, between Sudan and Ethiopia in 2021, and between Ethiopia and Somaliland in 2024. Türkiye has also been involved in mediation efforts for Black Sea Grain Deal between Ukraine and Russia. While Türkiye has been establishing itself as a regional mediator, Qatar and Oman have appeared as popular mediators and stabilisers of the Middle East. Qatar is involved in facilitating the United States-Taliban deal to end two decades of conflict in Afghanistan. Qatar has also been involved in the Sudanese conflict as a key mediator, facilitating dialogue between the Houthis and the Yemeni government. Besides Qatar, Oman has shone as a neutral, discreet and trusted mediator in the region with its involvement in the most recent US-Iran talks. In this study, the diplomatic efforts of Türkiye, Qatar, and Oman as regional mediators are analysed comparatively.

#### **10:05 – 10:20 DISCUSSION**

**10:20 – 10:40 IMANE EZZEHOANY, Ph.D. candidate, University of Cagliari, Italy**

**Title:** *China-North Africa Relations in the Era of the Belt and Road Initiative: Morocco as a Case Study*

**Abstract:** North Africa occupies a strategic position in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Economic and investment opportunities, along with proximity to European and African markets, are the main driving factors for the People's Republic of China (PRC). Conversely, North African countries perceive China as an alternative economic model and a key political partner. In this broader regional context, Morocco serves as a case study of this partnership. As Beijing seeks to expand its global influence and Rabat aims to establish itself as a regional hub, their bilateral relationship continues to develop, characterized by major trade agreements, infrastructure projects, and diplomatic initiatives. This paper analyzes relations between China and North African countries within the framework of the BRI, with a particular focus on Morocco, to explore the opportunities and challenges arising from China's presence in the region.

#### **10:40-10:55 DISCUSSION**

**10:55 – 11:30 AL-HARBI BADRIA, KSA.**

**Title:** *Special Event: Arabic Coffee: Rituals and Symbols*

**11:30 – 11:50 ALI AKAAK, Fulbright Visiting Scholar, University of Arizona (UoA), USA, Assistant Professor of Business and Tourism, University of Technology and Applied Sciences (UTAS), Sultanate of Oman**

**Title:** *Tourism as Cultural Diplomacy: Sustainable Tourism and East–West Cultural Exchange in Oman*

**Abstract:** In the twenty-first century, tourism has emerged as one of the most significant mechanisms of cultural exchange between societies. As global mobility expands and travel becomes increasingly experience-oriented, tourism is no longer merely an economic activity but also a platform for intercultural dialogue, identity negotiation, and mutual understanding across regions. Through direct encounters between visitors and host communities, tourism facilitates interpersonal engagement that can challenge stereotypes, reshape perceptions, and foster more nuanced understandings between cultures. In this context, tourism increasingly shapes contemporary East–West relations, particularly through authentic cultural experiences, nature-

based tourism, and community-centered interactions that enable deeper engagement with local ways of life. This paper examines how tourism narratives, destination branding, and visitor experiences mediate cultural exchange between Western travelers and Middle Eastern societies. Particular attention is given to tourism as a form of informal cultural diplomacy, in which travel experiences help shape perceptions beyond formal political or diplomatic channels. The case of Oman provides a particularly relevant context for examining these dynamics. Historically positioned at the intersection of major maritime trade routes connecting East Africa, South Asia, and the Arabian Peninsula, Oman has long served as a cultural crossroads. In contemporary tourism development, the country has adopted a distinctive model emphasizing authenticity, sustainability, and low-density tourism, encouraging meaningful engagement with local culture and landscapes rather than large-scale mass tourism. Drawing on tourism development strategies under Oman Vision 2040, alongside broader global trends toward sustainable and experience-based tourism, the paper explores how tourism encounters can reshape Western perceptions of the Middle East while simultaneously enabling local communities to represent their cultural heritage, social values, and environmental stewardship on their own terms. By highlighting Oman as a strategic case study, the research illustrates how smaller destinations can leverage cultural heritage, environmental assets, and responsible tourism practices to promote balanced cultural exchange and strengthen international understanding. Ultimately, the study contributes to broader debates on cultural representation, knowledge production, and the role of tourism in shaping contemporary global relations. It demonstrates how tourism can function as a bridge between societies, fostering dialogue, mutual learning, and shared narratives in an increasingly interconnected world.

#### **11:50 – 12:05 DISCUSSION**

**12:05 – 12:25 ALSOUD AMJAD**, postdoctoral researcher at the Columbia Global Center in Amman, affiliated with Columbia University, USA, Amman, Jordan

**Title:** *Cumulative Social Capital and Voluntary Return Decisions among Syrian Refugees in Jordan*

**Abstract:** This paper examines how cumulative social capital shapes voluntary return decisions among Syrian refugees in Jordan using a mixed methods research design developed during doctoral research at Columbia University. Moving beyond static or single dimensional understandings of social capital the study conceptualizes cumulative social capital as a dynamic multilayered process evolving across temporal and spatial contexts including pre displacement Syria displacement in Jordan and transnational social fields linking refugees to host societies origin communities and wider networks. The study adopts a sequential explanatory mixed methods approach combining quantitative survey data from 384 Syrian refugees with 20 in depth qualitative interviews conducted in urban and semi urban areas in Jordan. The quantitative component constructs a composite index of cumulative social capital capturing bonding bridging and linking dimensions over time including family networks community relations institutional trust and transnational connections. Logistic regression models assess the relationship between cumulative social capital and intentions toward voluntary return. The qualitative component contextualizes quantitative findings by exploring how refugees understand return not simply as geographic movement but as a socially embedded morally charged decision shaped by dignity security future aspirations and obligations toward family and community. Findings indicate that higher cumulative social capital does not uniformly increase return likelihood. Instead different configurations generate divergent outcomes while strong institutional and transnational ties in host contexts often reduce return intentions persistent social obligations and symbolic attachments to places of origin may sustain return aspirations despite ongoing insecurity. Situating voluntary return within debates on mobility post conflict reconstruction and local agency the paper challenges policy assumptions equating return with successful reintegration or development. It argues return decisions are better understood as

outcomes of uneven power relations knowledge asymmetries and historically rooted social networks shaped by displacement and postcolonial governance regimes in the Middle East. The study contributes an empirically grounded framework for understanding how social capital accumulates transforms and conditions human agency under protracted displacement. These insights inform migration scholarship and critically engage contemporary return policy debates

**12:25 – 12:40 DISCUSSION**

**12:40 – 13:00 CONCLUDING REMARKS AND SUGGESTIONS; DISCUSSION OF THE PUBLICATION**

**13:00 – 14:00 LUNCH BREAK**

**14 :30 – 19 :30 CULTURAL EVENT AND SOCIAL DINNER**