

Preface

This edited volume is the outcome of an intensive phase of academic collaboration between a group of Early Career Researchers from different social science disciplines in Tunisia starting in September 2021. The spark for this collaboration was provided by the Merian Centre for Advanced Studies in the Maghreb (MECAM), founded in Tunis as an initiative of the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) in cooperation with the University of Tunis in 2020. MECAM convened five Interdisciplinary Fellow Groups (IFG). In autumn 2021, Leipzig University was engaged to address and investigate *Inequality and Mobility* (IFG II) in contemporary Tunisia. Seven doctoral and post-doctoral fellows – with a shared interest in this topic – relocated to Tunis for three months to advance their individual research projects and to engage in an innovative format of collective learning and exchange. Bringing together researchers from North African, European and American institutions, and across the disciplines of anthropology, political science, sociology, geography and urbanism, the Fellow Group provided a laboratory for translation from the outset, both in a linguistic and in a more figurative sense. It was thus not only the frequent switching between the group's three working languages – English, French and Arabic – but also the transposition of methodological and conceptual approaches from one disciplinary tradition or body of scholarship to another that defined both the unique challenge and richness of this academic exchange and collaboration.

From the first meeting, this Fellow Group extended its invitation to Tunisian and foreign researchers based in Tunis, defining itself as the core of an evolving and open network of academic collaboration. Beyond the MECAM fellows, diverse Tunisian and Tunisia-based researchers joined the weekly seminars, thematic workshops and collaborative research excursions that opened spaces for collective reflection on *Inequality and Mobility* a decade after the 2011 revolution. The expectation was for each researcher to come with a new or on-going empirical research project, to share different iterations of it, and to advance and develop it over the course of the collaborative endeavor. Overcoming the often highly individualized nature of social science research – particularly at the doctoral stage, where single authorship is obligatory – the goal was to share not only the findings, but also the at times messy processes and practices of 'actually doing research'. For instance, a postdoctoral and doctoral researcher invited the group to their

field sites in Siliana, a rural governorate in Tunisia's interior where questions of resource scarcity and water governance have become central challenges for local development. Others shared their on-going research on urban (im)mobility through research excursions with students from Tunisian institutions (University of Tunis, ISTEUB); seminars at different Tunisian universities (Université of Tunis, Sousse, and Sfax); or online associating Tunisian and foreign institutions and researchers; or through public events such as book discussions and film screenings (e.g. in cooperation with International Alert, or the Tunis art gallery Le Central). Such collaborative and experimental forms of 'doing research' in Tunisia favored urgent discussions about the politics of knowledge production on and in Tunisia, especially under the rapidly changing post-revolutionary conditions (Bendana 2017; Dakhliia 2023). Rather than assuming that a mere location change – in this case to Tunis – can guarantee a decentering of dominant modes of knowledge production, the Fellow Group became a space for critical reflection on the structural inequalities inherent to research practices that favor extraction and perpetuate the dominance of the Western academy (Sukkarieh/Tannok 2019).

This edited volume is but one of the diverse outputs from the experimental research collaboration in Tunisia. It offers a collection of original empirical research – ethnographic, qualitative and quantitative – conducted mainly between 2020 and 2023, including an intensive workshop in Nabeul in June 2022, and subsequently presented at the Insaniyyat Conference at Manouba University in Tunis in September 2022.

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