



4th Levantine Heritage Foundation Zoom lecture gathering with guest speaker Houssine Alloul  
17 February 2021, 6pm (UK time)

### **Belgium and the Ottoman Empire: 'Transnationals' and Diplomacy in an Age of Global Capital.**

Today Belgium is a postcolonial and post-industrial state with only a minor stake in global trade and financial markets. But some 150 years ago the newly independent kingdom was an international economic heavyweight, exporting steel, weapons, machines and capital to nearly all corners of the world. One place that attracted the attention of this nation of heavy industry was the rapidly changing Ottoman Empire. There, Belgian interests morphed from those of petty traders and merchant-bankers to the large-scale infrastructural projects overseen by venture capitalists in the major cities of the empire. On the eve of the First World War an intricate complex of investments worth millions of francs and spanning railways, mines, public utilities, and the imperial sovereign debt connected both polities.

Retracing the commerce-finance nexus that united empire and kingdom, this talk proposes a different reading of the 'diplomacies' that lurked behind it. Instead of only asking how diplomacy benefited capital, it considers the ways diplomacy was (re)shaped by and made subordinate to the imperatives of trade, industry and finance. The private interests that Belgian (and later Ottoman) entrepreneurs pursued deeply influenced the ways in which the 'bilateral' was conceived (foreign policy), enacted (foreign decision making), and became 'embodied' (diplomats). The relations that tied two so ostensibly dissimilar partners were mediated through the interests of capital and changed the perceptions, behaviours, and attitudes of Belgian and Ottoman state and non-state elites. Belgian diplomats became financiers, and financiers became diplomats. Levantine merchants entered the Ottoman diplomatic apparatus, and imperial bureaucrats built investment portfolios. Amplifying the complex sets of shifting transnational class alliances – between high officials, Palace dignitaries, MPs, diplomats, engineers, and bankers – that informed the ebb and flow of formal diplomacies between Brussels and Istanbul, the history of Euro-Ottoman competition and collaboration appears distinct from the familiar geo-political and economic picture pitting the Ottomans against the 'Great Powers'.



25th National holiday organized by L'Orient in honour of HIM the Sultan. Anniversary of the accession of HIM the Sultan in Brussels, August 31, 1903.



Houssine Alloul is an Assistant Professor of Modern Global History at the University of Amsterdam. He specializes in international history with a focus on Modern Europe and the Later Ottoman Empire. His research interests include diplomatic and consular networks, Belgian finance capital, Leopoldian expansionism, and European travel in Ottoman lands. He has held fellowships at Boğaziçi University (FWO), Columbia University (Fulbright), and the Leibniz Institute of European History in Mainz. His research has appeared in the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, *European History Review* and *Journal of Belgian History*. He edited (with Edhem Eldem and Henk de Smaele) *To Kill A Sultan: A Transnational History of the Attempt on Abdülhamid II (1905)*. He is currently working on a book manuscript on the relations between the Kingdom of Belgium and the Ottoman Empire, with a special focus on the intertwining of small power diplomacy, the global expansion of Belgian capital and transnational sociabilities.

**Booking essential:** <https://houssine-alloul-presentation.eventbrite.co.uk>

Please support these events by becoming a sponsor. We provide these talks for free to members as part of our mission to preserve and promote the research and public understanding of Levantine heritage. Sponsoring the talks helps cover the LHF's costs in arranging these talks in central London. For sponsorship packages, please contact [chairman@levantineheritage.com](mailto:chairman@levantineheritage.com). All sponsors will be recognised at events and on our website.