



13 August 2022

Screening Committee
The Elahé Omidyar Mir-Djalali Postdoctoral Fellowship in Iranian Studies
University of Toronto.
Toronto, ONT

Dear Colleagues:

It is my pleasure to write on behalf of Dr. Shuan Karim, who is applying for the Elahé Omidyar Mir-Djalali postdoctoral fellowship in Iranian Studies. To anticipate my ultimate assessment, I thoroughly endorse Dr. Karim's candidacy for this fellowship as I feel that he has all the traits and qualities you are looking for, and then some. He is a fine young scholar who has already made important contributions to Iranian studies, specifically the study and analysis of modern Iranian languages, through his dissertation and his related research products to date. There is every indication that these contributions will continue in the years to come and I foresee that he will eventually be the leading authority on the history and linguistic development of the modern Iranian languages.

What gives me the confidence to make this bold prediction is that Dr. Karim has all the elements needed: a strong background and training both in historical linguistic theory and methodology and in the tools and methods of synchronic linguistic analysis, a deep knowledge of the languages—both ancient and modern—and cultures and history of his geographic and linguistic area of interest, and a sharp inquisitive mind that reveals his theoretical, historical, and typologically oriented acumen.

Dr. Karim just recently received his Ph.D., successfully defending his dissertation "The synchrony and diachrony of New Western Iranian nominal morphosyntax". The dissertation is a descriptive, typological, theoretical, and historical exploration of the internal structure of the noun phrase — a noun together with various modifiers such as adjectives and possessives — and its relation to other aspects of grammatical structure across the modern Iranian languages. It is a significant and important study that advances our understanding of the history and analysis of a complex structure in a complex cluster of languages, a true tour de force in terms of its coverage of languages and the light it sheds on both the theoretical side and the historical side. Dr. Karim deals with a wide range of data with comfort and ease, finding generalizations and patterns that help to make sense of the data. Moreover, he keeps the speech communities and the human dimension to linguistic history in mind, and is sensitive to those aspects of historical development that were caused by contact among different groups of speakers of related and in some instances, unrelated, languages.

I was Dr. Karim's primary academic advisor for all of his time in the Ph.D. program in Linguistics here at The Ohio State University. During those five+ years, he was a student in a half-dozen classes I taught, including introductory graduate-level classes and advanced research seminars on different aspects of historical linguistics and language contact, and advanced classes in highly relevant ancient languages (especially Sanskrit and Avestan). I also supervised both of his required Qualifying Research Papers, and various publications and conference presentations

emerging from his research, and oversaw his Ph.D. Candidacy Exams and most recently his dissertation.

When Dr. Karim visited here at Ohio State in the winter of 2016 as a prospective graduate student, we were very interested in him, based on his fine undergraduate record, and the potential he showed for deep, important, and serious research on Iranian languages, and on the various communities that constitute the speaker base for these languages. He did exemplary work here on all dimensions, and has already begun to realize the great promise we saw in him years ago.

Dr. Karim has shown himself to be an excellent linguist, essentially functioning as a junior colleague rather than a student per se. While engaged in a rigorous course of study with a large number of language, methodology, and theory classes, he nonetheless found the time, somehow, to produce a serious research paper that has just been published in the premier journal of Middle Eastern studies (*Journal of the American Oriental Society*), to give an impressive number of presentations at major (national and international) conferences, including some area studies meetings—showing the breadth of his interests and his reach—and to develop several additional publishable papers, in particular two conference proceedings papers (already accepted). Moreover, he was even invited to contribute a chapter to the *Oxford Handbook of Kurdish Linguistics*, a rare recognition for so junior a scholar; that invitation led to an interesting and well-researched chapter that solves several long-standing problems of analysis and history regarding Iranian prepositions and the analysis of constructions involving the incorporation of prepositions into verbs to form complex verbal structures (rather like English *to mine under something* ==> *undermine something*). These papers taken together treat a number of topics in the typological assessment and historical development of various aspects of modern Iranian languages, having to do largely with the way grammatical relations between nouns and verbs are indicated, what linguists call “morphosyntax”, and are based on fieldwork and extensive library and on-line archival work mining existing grammatical descriptions for key data from numerous modern languages. These papers fed into his dissertation—a series of inter-related studies of the internal structure of the modern Iranian noun phrase—so that he was able to produce a fine piece of work for the dissertation and defend it in a rigorous two-hour oral exam.

Since coming to Ohio State, Dr. Karim has embarked on an ambitious program of study and research analyzing the morphosyntax of the Indo-Iranian branch of the Indo-European family, and especially the broad swath of Iranian languages in Western, South, and Central Asia. He has undertaken as well the study of languages and language groups of the Middle East that have interacted with Iranian, broadening his understanding of Semitic through the study of Syriac and Akkadian and expanding his knowledge base for Indo-Iranian through further study of Sanskrit (building on his undergraduate work on the language), but also adding Avestan as well as both Old and Middle Persian to his range of expertise. In fact, his knowledge of Iranian languages is particularly impressive and extends well beyond languages he has studied formally. That is, his various research projects — especially those I allude to above — have been based on a nearly exhaustive coverage of available grammatical resources on modern Iranian languages, and he has augmented this research with fieldwork sessions on various Iranian languages, e.g. most recently Shabaki, when speakers have become available to him. This track record shows that he is a self-starter, a rare young scholar who functions at a high level of research accomplishment and who will bring his enthusiasm for research to any department he comes to be associated with, whether Linguistics, Near Eastern Cultures, or even International Studies.

Dr. Karim’s approach to research is characterized by empirical rigor, careful attention to the data, and an uncanny ability to ferret out the data that is critical to nailing down a particular analysis, along with a deep concern for the theoretical payoff associated with an analysis, especially for historical linguistics and its complementary counterpart in linguistic typology.

Dr. Karim's plans for his postdoctoral fellowship year focus on developing his dissertation into a research monograph that can be published by a major publisher in our field. I have supervised nearly 50 dissertations in my career and am the editor-in-chief for a book series with Brill, one of several leading publishing houses in linguistics, so I know what makes for a publishable dissertation, and Dr. Karim's dissertation is definitely one such work. It needs revision and reorganization to be less dissertation-like, and there are new studies and new data that he needs to take into consideration in the revision process, but I am convinced that this research will find a welcome home with a publisher such as Cambridge University Press, Oxford University Press, de Gruyter Mouton, or John Benjamins, all leading outlets that any linguist would be proud to publish with (as, indeed, I have).

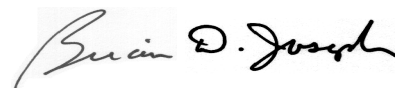
While the dissertation revision will be his primary focus for the coming year, Dr. Karim has no shortage of interesting projects planned for the next several years. Among his longer-range goals is a full description of Shabaki. This project is especially important because Shabaki is currently under siege, both figuratively and literally. Many speakers today are refugees living away from the language's homeland, so that the language's chances for sustainability are severely limited. Moreover, on the political front, Shabaki has long been the target of governmental Arabization efforts, and this is leading to a diminished number of speakers. Dr. Karim is sensitive to these issues of cultural and political subjugation and recognizes the key role that language documentation can play in ameliorating such a difficult situation; language can be a point of ethnic pride as well as a crucial sign of cultural identity, so that, as he well recognizes, documentation is one way in which the speakers of a minority and displaced language can have their voices heard.

On a personal level, Dr. Karim is friendly and approachable, always willing to share his knowledge with interested parties. He will make an excellent colleague.

In short, in Dr. Shuan Karim, you would be giving an opportunity to an interesting, knowledgeable, inquisitive, intelligent, dedicated, and diligent scholar who has enormous potential as an academic and as a humanist. As I have said, within the next two decades, he is likely to emerge as the leading Iranian language scholar in the West. The opportunity for him to develop as a researcher in a stimulating atmosphere will not only benefit him, but in the long run will benefit our field enormously too.

I thus give him my highest possible recommendation without any hesitation whatsoever. I urge your committee to give Dr. Shuan Karim's application its most careful consideration, as he is an outstanding candidate who will contribute much to Iranian studies.

Sincerely yours,



BRIAN D. JOSEPH

Distinguished University Professor of Linguistics, and
The Kenneth E. Naylor Professor of South Slavic Linguistics
Past President (2019), Linguistic Society of America
Member, Academia Europaea (elected 2021)
Member, American Philosophical Society (elected 2019)
Fellow, Linguistic Society of America (elected 2010)
Fellow, American Association for the Advancement of Science (elected 2007)
Fellow, American Academy of Arts and Sciences (elected 2004)
Former Editor (2002-2008), *Language. Journal of the Linguistic Society of America*