

Boston University College of Arts & Sciences
Department of Anthropology
232 Bay State Road
Boston, MA 02215



The Elahé Omidyar Mir-Djalali Postdoctoral Fellowship in Iranian Studies
University of Toronto
June 23, 2025

Dear Colleague,

It is with great pleasure that I write this letter in strong support of Dr. Mahtab Sirdani's application for *The Elahé Omidyar Mir-Djalali Postdoctoral Fellowship in Iranian Studies* at University of Toronto. Dr. Sirdani defended her dissertation successfully in early September 2024 and is poised to embark on more challenging and fulfilling academic responsibilities. I have been working closely with Mahtab since September of 2017 when she was admitted to the PhD Program in Anthropology. Over these many years I have been consistently impressed by her intellectual maturity and scholarly aptitude. Dr. Mahtab Sirdani is an exciting emerging scholar. Allow me to briefly expand on that.

Mahtab's area of research is highly timely and original, involving lives of pious Iranian immigrants in America. She focused on the impact of migration, exile and the changing cultural environments on devout Muslim women and their family, while at the same time exploring strategies immigrants use to adapt to and integrate in their new cultural surroundings. Members of her PhD committee were highly impressed by her multifaceted research project. While engaging with studies on piety, precarity and hope, she goes beyond utilitarian frameworks. As a young educated Iranian migrant herself, Mahtab Sirdani, was in an ideal position to relate to her interlocutors on several fronts, while at the same time maintaining the objective balance needed to conduct her research. She was well suited to conduct this research, for as a migrant herself, Mahtab came to the United States with her husband, and their infant daughter. Dr. Sirdani is fluent in Persian, her mother tongue, and that of her research communities, in addition to having fluency in Azari Turkish and English.

Having earned an MA degree in *Linguistics* in May of 2007 from Allameh Tabatabai University in Tehran, Iran, Mahtab pursued another MA degree in *Theological Studies: Religion, Literature and Cultures*, at Harvard Divinity School (2017) before coming to Boston University. Dr. Sirdani was well prepared to undertake her timely research on two Iranian religious communities in Boston and in Vancouver. Her research is particularly novel and unique in that it focuses attention on the Shi'i minority communities who have often been neglected not only by most studies that concentrate on Sunni Islam but also by other scholars of Iranian studies who have most often highlighted lives of non-religious Iranians. Her research highlights two communities that for all practical purposes are caught between a rock and a hard place. Anchoring her arguments within the broader existential anthropology, Dr. Sirdani has demonstrated how these two communities of pious Shi'i Iranians are determined to improve the quality of the lives of their members and followers, while enabling them to lead meaningful and productive lives in Islamophobic environments. Her project, further, is highly

relevant to the ongoing ethnic, racial and religious discourses in the US and Canada, and to the Iranian diasporic communities who are by and large disillusioned by the draconian policies of the Islamic Republic. While intellectually contributing to our knowledge of pious individuals' challenges of living as migrants, particularly those of *hijabi* women, in a secular culture, it also highlights how their paths towards stability and prosperity are uneven, unclear, and often hostile. Specifically, Dr. Sirdani explores the many ways in which membership in these religious communities leads to nuanced understanding of the multiplicity of experiencing hope and precarity.

Glancing through Dr. Mahtab Sirdani's impressive CV, I would like to point to her extensive teaching records, the number of grants she has received and the scholarly papers she has presented. While she was a PhD student at Boston University, and as she had just started her fieldwork within a pious Iranian community in Massachusetts, she participated in that community by teaching Persian to the young Iranian children of her interlocutors. She has continued doing so while in Vancouver. She is also an experienced Teaching Fellow, assisting professors with a wide variety of courses at Boston University. Most importantly, Mahtab Sirdani has taught her own courses independently at both Boston University and as Sessional Lecturer at the University of British Columbia. As one of my teaching assistants, frequently my students sang her praise by telling me how much they appreciated Mahtab's professional advising and her willingness to help them with their questions and issues.

Additionally, Dr. Mahtab Sirdani is an engaging and engaged young scholar. She is well versed in Persia literature and poetry, and while at UBC she has contributed to organizing sessions on contemporary Iranian literature. As her PhD supervisor, I have consistently enjoyed interacting with Mahtab and found her intellectually exciting, professionally well-informed, and personally delightful. I have no doubt that as *The Elahé Omidyar Mir-Djalali Postdoctoral Fellowship in Iranian Studies* at University of Toronto, Dr. Mahtab Sirdani's presence would be valuable to her and to the scholarly community of the fellows, and that you would find in her a highly informed, cordial and engaging scholar.

I could not be more enthusiastic about Dr. Mahtab Sirdani and firmly believe that her presence at your institution would be mutually beneficial and productive. I thank you for your consideration and look forward to being in touch. Please do not hesitate to contact me, should you have more questions.

Sincerely,

Shahla Haeri

Shahla Haeri
Emirate Professor of Anthropology
Boston University
232 Bay State Road,
Boston, MA 02215
617-435-9986
shaeri@bu.edu