

Political Science Dept.
12-05 Tory Building 11211 Saskatchewan Drive
Edmonton, Alberta, Canada T6G 2H4
kashfi@ualberta.ca

Dear Members of the Search Committee:

I enthusiastically submit my application for the Elahé Omidyar Mir-Djalali Postdoctoral Fellowship in Iranian Studies. I am currently a Ph.D. candidate and an instructor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Alberta. As a scholar with extensive and successful research and teaching records in Iranian studies, nationalism, ethnicity, and Middle East politics, I believe my research interests and expertise align with the content and skills required for this position.

I have an active research agenda on nationalism, particularly discursive and commemorative constructions of identity, and the rise of new populist nationalist movements on social media. I have also worked on Islamic political thought, with a particular emphasis on Muslim encounters with modernity. In my dissertation, which is set to be defended with a degree expected by January 2024, titled “The Discursive and Commemorative Construction of Shia Identity in Post-revolutionary Iran,” I examined how commemorative practices, religious holidays, and rituals are ‘reinvented’ and recast for political and ideological purposes to reinforce a particular narrative of national identity in post-Khomeini Iran. Specifically, I studied the Iranian state’s growing use of rituals, including notable commemorations such as the Arbacen Walk in Karbala and the Ghadir Walk in Tehran. These events, among others, showcase the processes by which the state ideologically appropriates a set of Shia practices with profound ritualistic and symbolic weight to ‘imagine’ and reconstruct a distinct Shia collective past and identity for Iranians. I used the critical postcolonial literature on identity formation as a theoretical framework and employed a triple methodology of discourse analysis, semi-structured interviews, and ethnographic research to answer my research question. This study is one of the first comprehensive and interdisciplinary studies of Iran’s state exploitation of Shia religious rituals that examines the state’s careful and systematic selection of a set of rites to use in its effort to promote the national culture it considered right for Iran. Focusing on the evolution of religious rites and symbols in the past five decades, this study tells the story of a society in its formation and the struggle between the official and the vernacular spheres over its identity.

So far, my research has resulted in several publications. I wrote “The Politics of Calendars: State Appropriations of the Contested Iranian Past” for a special issue on Constructions of Iranian Identity in the journal *Religions*. In this article, I argued that the choice of particular moments from a country’s past to be commemorated in calendars as national holidays and the manner in which the collective past is preserved and remembered both reflect and articulate a country’s vision of its identity. Furthermore, I argue that a country’s national calendar is

perhaps the most revealing site of collective memory, wherein a cycle of holidays and its associated rituals displays political maneuvering aimed at articulating a master narrative about the country's past and its national identity. In a subsequent article titled "The Politics of Street Names: Reconstructing Iran's Collective Memory," I extended my research on identity to explore the political use of commemorative street names. I argued that street names could be read as a mirror of the state project seeking to "correct" the long-lasting conflict over the meaning of national identity and its remembered collective memory. Streets and their names are contested spaces where different and contradictory versions of the past collide in the present, challenging, resisting, or even negating the official narrative of identity.

In a related article on ethnic politics in Iran, I examined a specific form of ethnic resentment, notably the use of sport as a medium to express repressed ethnic feelings. The article explores the role of a football club founded in Tabriz and supported by Azeri ethnic minorities in the construction, consolidation, and expression of Azeri minority identity in Iran. This sheds light on how an ostensibly neutral avenue like football can take on a political and cultural dimension in a politically restrictive environment. For many football fans, their club serves as the primary source of ethnocultural connection, providing the social setting and a set of symbolic processes and representations that sustain their distinct sense of identity. It offers fans an effective vehicle for a form of cultural resistance, celebrating an identity that contrasts with the dominant narrative of national identity.

As a part of my research on Muslim intellectual encounters with modernity and their evolving identity, I have also published a chapter in Bernd Reiter's Book *Constructing the Pluriverse: The Geopolitics of Knowledge*. Together with Amir Rasooli, I co-authored a pedagogical chapter in the book *Curriculum Theory and Pedagogy for Student Mobility*. Our chapter examines the lived justice experiences of students from the Global South in modern educational institutions. My forthcoming work includes an invited chapter in *Spirit and Defiance: Ali Shariati in Translation*. This chapter offers a comprehensive critical study, delving deep into the conceptualization of Iranian identity by Ali Shariati—a towering figure in the intellectual landscape of Iran. It analyzes both its historical roots and its implications for contemporary society.

As for future projects, I aim to examine the dynamic shift in the narrative and semantics of socio-political struggles in Iran, with a particular focus on the 2023 Women, Life, Freedom Movement. I use a discourse analysis approach to identify and understand the transformation in the language Iranians use to represent their fight for liberty. Interestingly, there has been an intriguing transition from a reluctance to term the struggles as a "revolution" and using other synonyms such as "subversion" or "uprising" instead to a more accepting and assertive usage of the term "revolution" during and following the 2023 Women, Life, Freedom Movement. The study draws its insights from a comprehensive analysis of social media postings, tv interviews, and online media articles, as well as in-depth interviews with participants involved in the period leading up to and during the 2023

movement to examine how and why the narrative and semantics of socio-political struggles underwent this transformation.

As a result of my engagement with the scholarship on Middle Eastern studies and Political Science, I have been honored with multiple research awards recently: three Makhzoumi Graduate Scholarships, a State of Kuwait Graduate Scholarship in Islamic Studies, and a Frank Peers Graduate Research Scholarship in Political Science. The Government of Alberta recognized my research with two Alberta Graduate Excellence Scholarships, and I also received a Graduate Student Research Award from the Association for Iranian Studies (AIS).

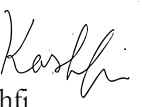
Last but not least, I believe that research, teaching, and mentoring can reach their full potential only if they are translated into activism and shared with the larger public and policymakers. My personal life, professional experience, and educational background have inspired and shaped my research agenda, teaching philosophy, and commitment to my community, students, and profession. They have helped me to recognize that a publicly relevant and accountable scholarship must respond to the needs of the communities in which we live, an endeavor that can be actualized by reflecting upon the experiences of underrepresented populations and the challenges they face. During my time at the University of Alberta, I have practiced this belief as an active member of my department, serving on several committees, working as an academic advisor to student organizations, and serving as an official mentor for Iranian undergraduate students. I also co-organized two academic conferences, *Imagining "Indigenous" and "Glocal" Democratic Socialism* and *Rethinking MENA and the Muslim World*, at the University of Alberta. Organizing these conferences was imperative to bridge the often-existing divide between academic insights and community needs. Through them, I sought to foster dialogue, ensuring that scholarly perspectives resonate with and address the pressing challenges faced by our diverse communities.

I have no doubts that the postdoctoral position at the Elahé Omidyar Mir-Djalali Institute of Iranian Studies at the University of Toronto would provide me with everything I need to pursue my academic career as a scholar of Iranian studies and to revise and prepare my dissertation for publication as a monograph. Thanks to your exemplary and dynamic academic environment, I believe that my time in your research center will undoubtedly be an asset for me in acquiring the required expertise and experience. I am fascinated by the broad spectrum of research projects that Professor Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi and others are conducting in the field of Iranian Studies, and I would be extremely excited to have the opportunity to be a part of and contribute to them. Moreover, the global reputation of the University of Toronto gives me great confidence in thriving in academic environments. The University of Toronto would undoubtedly provide me with all the resources I need to bridge the gap between where I am and where I aspire to be. I am decisively prepared to dedicate my time and effort to reaching this goal. I would be delighted to have this life-altering opportunity to be a part of

your academic community and to humbly learn from your eminent scholars in this thriving academic environment.

Thank you in advance for your time and consideration of my application. If you require any additional information, please do not hesitate to contact me at the address on the letterhead or at kashfi@ualberta.ca.

Warmly,


Ehsan Kashfi