

UHH ∙ Faculty of Humanities
Edmund-Siemers-Allee 1 ∙ 20146 Hamburg

University of Toronto

Sidney Smith Hall, 100 St. George Street

Toronto, ON Canada, M5S 3G3



**Dr. Simon Theobald**

Maimonides Centre for Advanced Studies
Junior Research Fellow
Jungiusstraße 11
20355 Hamburg

Tel: +49 1573 5644 2

11 August 2022

Dear Professor Tavakoli-Targhi,

I am writing to apply for the exciting opportunity that has opened up for a Postdoctoral Fellowship in Iranian Studies for 2022-2023 at the Elahé Omidyar Mir-Djalali Institute.

A graduate of the Australian National University’s School of Archaeology and Anthropology, my thesis was based on fourteen months of ethnographic fieldwork in Mashhad, and I am currently looking for opportunities that will allow me the time and resources I need to finish preparing my PhD manuscript for publication as a book.

Much of the social scientific theorising on Iran since 1979 suggests that revolutionary idealism was largely extinguished on the battlefields of the 1980-88 war with Iraq, to be replaced by a functionalistic pragmatism. Contrary to this, and building on my original thesis, the draft of my manuscript argues that social lives in contemporary Mashhad continue to be inflected by a utopianism that is ‘refracted’ in the present, sometimes at greater intensities, sometimes more subtly. Each chapter of my thesis explored different expressions of these ‘utopian refractions’ as they were manifest in the quotidian lives of my middle-class interlocutors. This Arcadian social inheritance ensures that lives were interpreted not as inherently flawed and incomplete, but rather as potentially perfectible − a position that is markedly different from assumptions in Western moral philosophy, and more recently, anthropology, which see perfection as impossible.

I have begun work to refine the outline of the book proposal, removing two chapters of my thesis that did not add substantively to the main narrative, as well as re-writing those chapters that will remain in the final draft. I am in the process of contacting university presses, including the University of California Press, Duke, and Cornell, to ascertain their preliminary interest in the topic, and I have also begun the process of publishing parts of my thesis as journal articles.

One of these articles, forthcoming in *Critique of Anthropology*, will hopefully become the basis of Chapter Four of my book proposal. This chapter examines very specifically the tension between moral perfectionism and what I refer to as ‘ethical static’: moral perfectionism insists on an unerring commitment to a utopian moral stance, while ethical static recognises that the pursuit of an ethical life is a fragmentary quest, with multiple moral rubrics that can overlap. Drawing on examples from the 22nd of Bahman parade and my interlocutors’ response to it, the article explores what these oppositional frameworks reveal about the project of utopian governance in Iran. A second paper on the performance of the *salavāt* prayer as a sonic manifestation of a perfect public, and the ramifications this has for an anthropology of morality, is currently in its second round of revisions with *American Ethnologist,* and I aim to redraft it as Chapter Threeof my manuscript*.*

While revising my manuscript, I also opened a new path of research when I was fortunate enough to receive a postdoctoral research position (2021-2022) at the Maimonides Centre for Advanced Studies at the University of Hamburg. In this research, I seek to understand how religious Iranians associated with the most conservative aspects of piety in the Islamic Republic assess the moral dimensions of surety in the context of post-war Germany’s often sceptical social orders. This investigation, which builds on the work I did during my PhD thesis, demonstrates my ability to conduct independent research, and is therefore pivotal to my career aspiration and longer-term ambition of becoming a tenured scholar at a university in an anthropology, religious studies, or Iranian studies department.

If the Elahé Omidyar Mir-Djalali Institute were to support my application, they would be contributing to anthropological research that I believe is at the cutting edge of contemporary approaches to ethics, morality, and utopianism; one that takes a defiantly innovative approach to such issues, while also providing a radical new lens on political and social life in contemporary Iran. Given the persistent drumbeats of a potential conflict between the United States and Iran, work that contributes to a better understanding of life in the Islamic Republic is far more than an esoteric or peripheral pursuit, but rather one that has significant potential applications beyond academia as well.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,

Dr. Simon Theobald