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Elahé Omidyar Mir-Djalali Institute of Iranian Studies
Grants Committee
University of Toronto

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I am very pleased to write in strong support of Mehdi Mousavi's application for the Elahé Omidyar Mir-Djalali Dissertation Completion Fellowship. Mr. Mousavi is a deeply committed scholar of Iranian history with a particular interest in the Qajar period. He is within a year of finishing his dissertation, which focuses on Franco-Iranian relations from the late eighteenth through the early twentieth centuries (though its full chronological scope is actually broader than that). A dissertation-completion fellowship would be of immense value in helping him conclude a project that makes a very significant contribution to the commercial, diplomatic, and cultural history of Qajar Iran in the time of European imperialism.

I have known Mr. Mousavi since he entered our History PhD program at the University of Delaware in Fall 2017. He took a seminar I teach on the history of empires, in which he revealed himself adept at discussing imperial dynamics in many different places and periods, and later did an independent study with me titled "France, Empire, and Commerce from Louis XIV to Napoleon III," where he developed his knowledge of the finer points of French political economy and expansionist thought and practice over the *longue durée*. I now serve on his dissertation committee.

Whereas Mr. Mousavi's dissertation advisor, Rudi Matthee, is, of course, a specialist in Iranian history, I approach his topic as a scholar of "overseas France." From my vantage point, Mousavi's project is poised to make an important contribution to our understanding of French imperial practices in the long nineteenth century. When he began his dissertation research, one of his premises was that French designs on Iran have often been overshadowed by the machinations of other powers, notably Russia and Britain. He long ago convinced me that France's commercial ambitions as well as its cultural influence in Iran merit much closer attention. Since 2017, however, we have seen more work being published on Franco-Iranian connections in particular periods, most notably perhaps in Susan Mohkberi's book *The Persian Mirror* (2019), which focuses on the seventeenth century, and Junko Takeda's *Iran and a French Empire of Trade* (2020), which covers the period from 1700 to 1808. Publications like these have, as I see it, primed the field and set things up nicely for Mousavi's work, whose center of gravity lies in the nineteenth century.

The salience of Mousavi's research is underscored even more strongly by the publication in 2021 of David Todd's *A Velvet Empire: French Informal Imperialism in the Nineteenth Century*, which I consider to be one of the most significant new books on French imperialism in quite some time. To put it briefly, Todd argues that while historians of Britain have long been


accustomed to labeling non-territorial forms of British dominance in the nineteenth century “informal imperialism,” scholars of France have never embraced that term and as a result have missed the extent of French imperial activity in the period after the fall of Napoleon I. Todd’s book does not even mention Iran, yet it provides an enormously convenient frame within which Mousavi can situate his research. For example, Todd sees the aims of “informal empire” not simply in economic terms, as scholars of British imperialism often tended to do, but in cultural terms as well—a sort of mixture of commerce, capital, and culture.

These ideas dovetail extremely well with what Mousavi is able to illustrate through his research. We see the repeated efforts of different French administrations to initiate or develop commercial relations with Iran, but also a pattern of cultural influence-seeking (through the extension of education and French language acquisition, for example) that only increases in the mid- to late nineteenth century—paralleling the case of Egypt, which Todd does explore in his book. Mousavi’s research, as I see it, also fits well with Todd’s observation that modernizing regimes in Asia often sought out French collaboration when France was under the rule of authoritarian regimes like that of Napoleon III.

My point, then, is that above and beyond what a specialist in Iranian history may see in Mousavi’s work, his deep familiarity with his topic will allow him to address historians of France and its empire, as well as nineteenth-century empire more generally. His dissertation, especially (I believe) the chapters focused on the mid- to later nineteenth century, will therefore make a truly original contribution to a literature that is attracting increasing interest at the moment.

I cannot conclude without noting that Mr. Mousavi’s progress toward his degree has been hampered by circumstances well beyond his control. Nonetheless he has remained productive and committed to his scholarship through all the difficulties he has faced, as seen in the well-researched and carefully argued article he published in *Iranian Studies* in 2021 about French commercial policy in Iran from 1815 to 1848, and in another article about ‘Abbas Mirza. At this moment in time, however, Mousavi’s priority is his dissertation, and he is in a perfect position to make use of a one-year completion fellowship. I believe he would be an exceptionally worthy recipient of this fellowship and I offer my highest recommendation.

Sincerely,



Owen White
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