**Department of Anthropology**

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June 15, 2025

To: Search Committee, Program in Iranian Studies, University of Toronto

Re: Letter of Reference for Dr. Mahtab Sirdani

Fr: Robert W. Hefner, Professor of Anthropology and Global Affairs, Boston University

Dear Colleagues:

Dr. Mahtab Sirdani is applying for an appointment in the Program in Iranian Studies at the University of Toronto, and she has asked me to provide a letter of reference in support of her application. Dr. Sirdani defended her thesis in September of 2024. I was the third reader on her committee, and thus never served as her primary advisor. However, I had her in two courses, both of which she excelled in; I also served on her examination committee and spoke with her at length about her research and career plans. I went on to read her thesis on Iranian immigrants in Boston, MA and Vancouver, Canada, and I found the thesis both original and deeply interesting. I am a scholar of Islam and religion generally, and have spent most of my career working on Muslim culture and politics in Southeast Asia. However, I have also done some smaller-scale research on Muslims in Europe and the U.S., and thus I brought a keen personal inteerest to my reading of Dr. Sirdani’s thesis. It is on the basis of this experience, then, that I write this letter of reference, and I do so enthusiastically.

Dr. Sirdani was a consistently hard working and thoughtful student. Even on complex theoretical topics, she writes with clarity and insight, and, no less impressive, is able to link her topical interests and research to important theoretical trends in sociocultural anthropology and immigration studies. Her dissertation also is original in that it includes an extensive reflection on her own positionality as an Iranian migrant to North America doing research on Muslims and social integration in Canada and the United States. I found this reflexive application of her own life history to her study of Iranian migrants in the U.S. highly interesting and theoretically engaging.

In terms of her broader theoretical emphases, Dr. Sirdani applies what she describes as an “existential-phenomenological approach” to her field methologies and her research. The latter draws heavily and effectively on the work of the Harvard-based anthropologist, Micahael Jackson, and emphasizes engagement with her interlocutor’s life experiences and narrative accounts, rather than great traditions or longstanding discursive traditions as such. A key concern in this existential anthropological tradition is instead the exploration of life experiences and aspirational hope among her interlocutors. As Sirdani writes, “my primary interest lay in the personal stories and lived experiences of individuals…. My interest was not in the ways they defined their religious identities or in the mere performance of rituals.” While highlighting first person experiences, Dr. Sirdani’s extensive connections in the immigrant community allowed her to explore “the diversity among Iranian migrant groups and their practices” – a diversity that Dr. Sirdani shows extends to the highly varied ways in which Iranian immigrants do or do not highlight Islamic values and practices in integrating into North American society. The population on which her study focused were for the most part not affluent Iranians, but they were well educated and – unlike many previous studies of Iranians in North America – were for the most part religiously oriented. They also imagined their futures in a way that, to quote Dr. Sirdani again, anticipated a “better future, anchored in Islamic ethics and the pursuit of a virtuous life.” As this quote indicates, Dr. Sirdani’s research and theoretical interests are deeply rooted too in the anthropology of ethics, one that engages both lived experiences and “the precariousness and instability of life” (dissertation, p. 45). Her studies develop this theoretical project by way of vividely written and narratively moving accounts of the life experiences of individual migrants with whom Dr. Sirdani formed extended and deeply moving ties. Her exploration of personal histories also succeeds in demonstrating that a “life grounded in Islamic principles can vary widely, challging the notion of monolithic religious existence” (thesis p. 62-63).

I do not have any first hand experience with Dr. Sirdani as a teacher. However to judge by her incisive writing style, her clarity and insight in her discussion and defense of her thesis, and her ability to think across disciplines and sub-disciplines my expectation is that she will be an excellent professor indeed. Her manner with student and faculty is also thoughtful and engaging in a manner that speaks to her ability to work with people of varied personal and professional backgrounds.

In short, Dr. Sirdani has distinguished herself here in the Department as a fine scholar and first-rate writer. She is highly deserving of a position in the academy, and I hope that you would give her application a serious and positive evaluation.

With best regards,

Robert W. (Bob) Hefner

Professor of Anthropology and Global Affairs