



Study of Religion
UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

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Letter of recommendation for Elmira Alihosseini

To Whom It May Concern,

I am thrilled to be able to support Elmira Alihosseini's application for an Elahé Omidyar Mir-Djalali Dissertation Completion Fellowship for 2022-2023. A scholar of great promise, Elmira is in the final stages of dissertation-writing. She joined the University of Toronto four years ago, escaping from Trump's travel ban. Concerned that she would not be able to return to the United States after her research stay in Iran, and in light of her holding PR status in Canada, she decided to apply to transfer from Johns Hopkins University to the University of Toronto. We welcomed her enthusiastically. Along with Prof. Michael Lambek, I have had the pleasure of serving as Elmira's co-supervisor in the Department of Anthropology since 2018. Elmira has done excellent fieldwork in Iran and to date has completed four chapter drafts. She still needs write her Introduction and Conclusion and plans to defend her dissertation in January 2023.

Elmira's research focuses on Afghan refugees in Iran. Her work offers a careful historical analysis of how different "refugee" figures came to be in Iran and pays close attention to religious geographies of migration, particularly the history of taking sanctuary at shrines. Elmira did fieldwork in Mashhad, Iran, for more than 12 months. Her research unfolded against a backdrop of political upheaval (including widespread protests in January 2020 after the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corp accidentally shot down a Boeing shortly after takeoff from Tehran's Airport). This was followed by the COVID-19 crisis. Despite the difficult circumstances, Elmira managed

to complete an impressive amount of research, both ethnographic and archival, and built strong relations of trust with her interlocutors. Her research promise was recognized by the Wenner Gren Foundation which awarded her a prestigious Dissertation Fieldwork Grant, and she has begun presenting on her research at different international conferences.

Elmira's chapter drafts have all been excellent and are beautifully written. Her work offers a nuanced account of the life of refugees in the Global South, tracing the constant back-and-forth between movement and stagnation. Her work is ethnographically attuned to the conundrums of everyday life but also weaves in historical context. It offers critical insight into the question what it is like to be a refugee in a non-Western host nation, and how different regimes of migration enable, direct, and delimit movement across borders. Most of her work sticks closely to key interlocutors, following them on their travels across borders and into the imaginative realms they inhabit and create. I find her work exceptionally nuanced, rich, and thought-provoking.

In addition her excellent academic promise, Elmira has an impressive record of leadership and community involvement. She has been involved in various registers with different NGOs and social activist groups, working with Afghan migrants and refugees living in Iran. She has worked as a teacher, giving courses to unregistered children unable to attend public schools in Iran, and she has taught and organized literacy courses for their mothers. She has also worked with a group of Afghan youth to create a phone application that provides legal and educational advice to migrants and collects and archives accounts of discrimination and harassment against them, and she has helped organize photo exhibitions about Afghan child labourers. In Toronto, in March 2019, Elmira helped organize an event on the topic of Afghan refugee women's poetry, as part of a collaboration between the University of Toronto and University College London. She also presented at this event and exhibited photographs from the Golshahr neighbourhood, taken by her interlocutors there. All this is to say that Elmira is not only interested in academic output but also deeply invested in public-facing scholarship and in giving back to the communities she has worked with.

Elmira is one her way to becoming a leading scholar of Iran and in refugee studies. Her research is extremely timely and urgent. She deserves every support possible.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'A. Mittermaier', with a stylized, flowing script.

Amira Mittermaier
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University of Toronto