

**Beyond Borders: Colonial Encounters & Challenges of Religious Minorities
between Afghanistan, Central Asia, and Iran (19th–Early 20th Centuries)
Orient-Institut Istanbul, 16–17 October 2025**

October 16, 2025

10:00 – 10:30	Welcome: Christoph Neumann (OI)
	Introduction: Thomas Loy & Ariane Sadjed
10:30 – 11:15	Dawood Azami: “The Role and Legacy of Non-Muslim Communities in Afghanistan”
11:15 – 12:00	Ahmad Azizy: “Trade, Taxation, and the Fall of the Şüm: A Jewish Petition from Tashqurghan to Amir Amanullah Khan, 1919”
12:00 – 12:45	Sumaira Nawaz: “‘Prestige is such a delicate plan in the Eastern soil.’ Hindu and Sikh Voices in Sirāj ul-Akḥbār-e Afghāniye (1911-1918)” (online)
12:45 – 14:00	Lunch Break
14:00 – 14:45	Beatrice Penati: “Building a cotton mill in Tsarist-era Samarkand: on capitalism and antisemitism in Russian Turkestan”
14:45 – 15:30	Immanuel Rybakov: “Rafael Poteliakhoff – a first guild merchant, industrialist and patron”
15:30 – 16:00	Coffee Break
16:00 – 16:45	Ariane Sadjed: “From Subject to Citizen: Mobility and Identification between Iran, Central Asia and Jerusalem”
17:30	<i>Keynote Lecture</i> Jonathan Lee: “‘Sons of Adam, limbs of the same body’: non-Muslim communities' identity and survival strategies at the frontiers of Empires”
20:00	Dinner for conference participants

October 17, 2025

9:30 – 10:15	Thomas Loy: “Cross Border Connectivity. Jewish Central Asia in the 19/20 centuries”
10:15 – 11:00	Magnus Marsden: “The resilience of Afghan and Central Asia Jewish networks in the Karakul Trade: 1930-1979”
11:00 – 11:45	Jeanine Dagyeli: Networks of sheep business: The German Dürschmidt company in colonial Central Asia” (online)
11:45 – 13:00	Lunch Break
13:00 – 13:45	Roza Ashkenazi: “Fiction in the Reading Repertoire of Iranian Jews during the Qajar Dynasty (1795-1925)”
13:45 – 14:30	Christoph Hopp: “Hebrew Writings on the Jewish History of Herat (19th-21st Century)”
14:30 – 15:00	Coffee Break
15:00 – 15:30	(tbc) Sara Koplik & Osnat Gad: “Innovators and Risk Takers: A history of the Gad family in Afghanistan, Central Asia, and India” (online)
15:30 – 16:00	Closing Remarks

Abstracts and Participants

Roza Ashkenazi

Fiction in the Reading Repertoire of Iranian Jews during the Qajar Dynasty (1795-1925)

Jews have long lived in Iran. A distinctive feature of their culture was the creation of a written literary culture that combined Jewish religious foundations and Persian poetic form. Among the creators of the Jewish-Persian literary canon were Shahin (14th century) and Imrani (15th-16th centuries), who reworked important texts of Judaism into poetic poems. Later, these authors had successors who reworked other texts of the Tanakh.

Another important group of texts was Persian literature. The authors of this category of Judeo-Persian manuscripts can be divided into two groups: the famous authors whose works are the prominent examples of Persian literature, such as Nizami and Hafez, and the authors who wrote in a simpler language but who were popular among the common people, such as Safi Sabzavari. This paper will focus on the fiction that Jews in Iran read during the Qajar dynasty. During their reign, the Jews of Europe began to learn about the deplorable state of the communities in Iran and began to provide assistance to them. However, the Jews of Iran continued to be under pressure, such as a law prohibiting them from leaving Iran. The author of the paper will address questions such as: Why did Jews create their texts in the Persian literary tradition? Why did the Jews of Iran read and copy Persian literature written by Muslim authors, and what does this indicate about the identity of the Jews of Iran and their connections to Muslim Iranian culture?

Roza Ashkenazi works at the Institute for Linguistic Studies at the Russian Academy of Sciences. She completed her bachelor's and master's degrees at the Faculty of Oriental and African Studies at St. Petersburg State University. She studied Persian, Turkish, German, and Hebrew and the culture of the Middle East. For her masters studies, she worked with Judeo-Persian manuscripts. Her research was devoted to the Judeo-Persian illustrated manuscript with the text of Nizami's poem "Khosrow and Shirin". Roza has published two articles devoted to the study of the written heritage of the Jews of Iran. Research interests: Judeo-Persian literature, Judeo-Persian manuscripts, cultural dialogue between Jews and Muslims in the Middle East.

Dawood Azami

The Role and Legacy of Non-Muslim Communities in Afghanistan

This paper explores the role and legacy of non-Muslim communities from Afghanistan in a historical context starting with the establishment of the Durrani Empire (and modern Afghanistan) under Ahmad Shah Durrani in 1747. The paper, while relying mostly on primary sources from the 18th and 19th centuries discusses the life of various non-Muslim communities including Jews, Christians, Hindus and Sikhs in major Afghan cities such as Peshawar, Kabul, Kandahar and Herat and their interaction and relations with Muslim groups and political authorities. Among other activities, these communities were involved in trade with Iran, Central Asia and India as well as Europe. The paper also examines some of the major factors leading to the curtailment of cross-border movement and gradual migration of non-Muslim communities from Afghanistan and the surrounding region including the impact of the Great Game (rivalry between the Russian and British empires in the 19th and early 20th Centuries), foreign invasions, and internal conflicts, as well as climate change and economic hardship.

Dawood Azami is an award-winning senior journalist and academic. As a Multi-Media Editor in the BBC World Service (London), he leads a team of journalists in covering international news and current affairs. He is also an Associate Fellow at The International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), London, contributing to research and analysis of geopolitical and developmental issues.

Ahmad Azizy

Trade, Taxation, and the Fall of the Šūm: A Jewish Petition from Tashqurghan to Amir Amanullah Khan, 1919

This paper presents a detailed analysis of a 1919 petition by two Jewish merchants from Tashqurghan, Mūsā Yahūdī and Nasīm Yahūdī, addressed to Amir Amanullah Khan. A rare archival witness to the activities of Jewish merchants in Afghanistan, preserved in the National Archives in Kabul, the document illuminates how minority traders navigated the Afghan state amid regional upheavals, including the Bolshevik Revolution and the collapse of the Bukharan Šūm. Using a documentary and diplomatic approach, the study examines the petition's form, Persian chancery style, Judeo-Persian annotations, and detailed content on trade, taxation, and currency. The petition reveals the merchants' engagement with Afghanistan's bureaucracy, the limits and possibilities of minority petitions, and the entanglement of local commerce with transregional economic crises. By linking Afghan governance, Central Asian monetary instability, and Jewish communal identity, the paper situates minority experiences at the intersection of borders, trade, and state authority in the early 20th century.

Ahmad Azizy holds a PhD in Central Asian Studies from Humboldt Universität zu Berlin and is currently a postdoctoral researcher at the Oriental Institute of the Czech Academy of Sciences, working on the project *"The Jewish Triangle: Connections and Disruptions in Persianate Jewish Life during the 19th and 20th Centuries."* His research examines the history of Jewish communities in Afghanistan and Central Asia, alongside broader interests in literacy practices, oral and written communication, letter-writing cultures in Persianate and Turkic societies.

Jeanine Dagyeli

Networks of sheep business: The German Dürschmidt company in colonial Central Asia

In 1883, a German stringmaker in search of raw material settled in the old part of Tashkent. Building on local Tatar business contacts, he was to become one of the richest merchants in Russian Turkestan and beyond, focusing on sheep products and living animals. At the time of his early death in 1911, his business offices connected Turkestan, the Emirate of Bukhara, Siberia and the Volga region with markets in Europe, Africa and the Americas. Dürschmidt and similar entrepreneurs were in a peculiar legal and economic situation in Central Asia: On the one hand, they were foreigners in the Russian Empire who faced certain restrictions, on the other hand, they were part of a translocal European community that relied on networks of fellow countrymen (rarely women) to facilitate trade. Through the example of the Dürschmidt company, this presentation will discuss how colonial infrastructures intersected with older commercial networks and how business networks transformed from professional into national ones.

Jeanine Dagyeli is Assistant professor at the Department of Near Eastern Studies, University of Vienna and Research fellow at the Institute of Iranian Studies, Austrian Academy of Sciences. From 2019–2021 she was Assistant professor at the Department of Kazakh Language and Turkic Studies, Nazarbayev University, Astana. Since 2023 she is leading the ERC consolidator grant project: “Anthropogenic Environments in the Future Tense: Loss, Change, and Hope in Post-Soviet Industrial Landscapes.” Her main areas of research include History and Anthropology of Central Asia, Nature and Cultures, Labour, Illness, Death & Mourning, Oral-written continuum & Vernacular literatures of Central Asia.

Christoph Hopp

Hebrew Writings on the Jewish History of Herat (19th-21st Century)

By the late 1950s, the vast majority of the Jews of Afghanistan had resettled in Eretz Israel/Palestine. Only upon migrating did they begin to research their history. This research is an intriguing blend of primary and secondary sources, integrating oral traditions, personal memories, and historiography. The collection and retelling of folklore remained fundamental. It was pioneered by Zevulun Koort from the early 1950s onward, and continued by, among others, Zilpa Cohen. Both grew up in Herat. But, just as Koort’s and Cohen’s writings are primarily in Hebrew, much of the scholarship on Afghan-Jewish history is, until today, conducted in Hebrew. This talk provides a concise overview of this literature as it concerns the history of Herati Jewry, focusing on the representation of Jewish-Muslim relations. Moreover, the talk reflects on the parameters of its transnational character.

Christoph Hopp is a PhD candidate at the University of Potsdam. His PhD thesis studies the 19th- and 20th-century history of Semitic linguistics, focusing on Hebrew and Arabic and the discipline’s Middle Eastern context. His broader research interests lie in the historical and intellectual connections between the Middle East and Central Asia. Together with Thomas Loy and Zeev Levin, he is currently coediting the volume *The Jews of Central Asia: A Scholarly Anthology of Hebrew Research Translated into English*.

Sara Koplik and Osnat Gad

Innovators and Risk Takers: A brief history of the Gad family in Afghanistan, Central Asia, and India

This presentation will discuss the Gad family’s rare land ownership in Afghanistan, patterns of international trade, and a successful act of resistance against Soviet collectivization. Further, it will examine unusual childrearing and domestic practices that enabled boys to become independent merchants by early adolescence. Later, when the weight of restrictions against the Jewish community in Afghanistan became too great to tolerate, the family’s business connections and flexibility enabled them to successfully depart to India (Peshawar and Bombay) and later to Israel and the US. The skills and trades developed in Central Asia are still used today by their descendants.

Sara Koplik is the author of *A Political and Economic History of the Jews of Afghanistan* (Brill, 2015). She received her doctorate from the School of Oriental and African Studies in 2003, and is currently the director of the Aaron David Bram Hillel House at the University of New Mexico (USA).

Osnat Gad was born in Peshawar, Pakistan, to parents from Afghanistan. In the early 1980s, she established a firm specializing in importing precious gems. Her jewelry line is now carried in more than 200 stores, and she also runs e-commerce businesses. She has led the effort to restore Jewish sites in Kabul and Herat.

Jonathan Lee

“Sons of Adam, limbs of the same body”: non-Muslim communities' identity and survival strategies at the frontiers of Empires

From the early eighteenth century to the early 20th century the Indo-Persian and Central Asian borderlands underwent a dramatic change with the reorientation of the political, cultural and, in Afghanistan particularly, the ethnic balance of the region too. This presentation will give an overview of the historic context of this realignment, arguing that all the problems which arose cannot be ‘blamed’ solely on European Imperial policies.

It will then examine some of the challenges and survival strategies of what I will refer to as ‘non-Muslim communities’, with particular reference to Afghanistan’s Armenian community. Shah Mahmud Hanifi makes the point that commercial activity in the trans-Asian trade was founded on a symbiotic relationship between Muslims and non-Muslim communities, in particular Hindus from Shikapur (Hindkis), which was known as *hamsaya* (‘neighbours, literally ‘sharing the same shade’). This provided protection for non-Muslims and allowed a number of non-Muslim to hold high office. Armenians and Georgians were valued military personnel, hosted European explorers and acted as translators for British explorers.

One or two senior members of the Muhammadzai ruling elite even married Christian or Hindu women.

While non-Muslims lived under a degree of tension and faced social restrictions, state-sponsored persecution in Afghanistan was rare. Occasional acts of violence against non-Muslims were mostly initiated by non-state actors. However, on occasions wealthy Hindkis, as the primary source of loans and capital for commercial activity, were subject to periodical exactions during times of financial crisis or war. The involvement of Britain in Afghanistan’s affairs proved to be a two-edged sword. While Hindkis and Armenians profited financially from British occupations and hosting explorer, they were accused by some of divided loyalties. Yet in the last half of the nineteenth century the Armenians’ relationship with the Church Missionary Society was tolerated and some Muhammadzais sent their children to the missionary schools. Others sought medical assistance from the CMS hospital in Peshawar. At least two Muslim converts to Christianity lived with the Armenians in Kabul’s Bala Hisar and suffered no reprisals. Though the Armenians were eventually exiled by Amir ‘Abd al-Rahman Khan, it was not for religious reasons but due mainly to court intrigues and accusations of Malfeasance.

Non-Muslims in Afghanistan always lived with tension, but the presentation seeks to rebalance discourses which tends to portray non-Muslims as living in a culture of perpetual fear. It also points out the significant contribution these communities, particularly Armenian Christians, played in the evolution of modern Afghanistan.

Jonathan L. Lee is a British-born independent scholar who has conducted studies and carried out fieldwork in Afghanistan, Central Asia and northern Pakistan since 1972. His research covers social, dynastic, and political history; archaeological reconnaissance; and the study of religious and ethnic minorities. He also has an interest in cross-cultural encounters, Middle

Eastern history, and contextual Biblical studies. He is the author of several influential works, including *Afghanistan: A History from 1260 to the Present Day* (Reaktion Books, revised edition 2022), which provides a definitive survey of the country's political and cultural past, and *The Ancient Supremacy: Bukhara, Afghanistan and the Battle for Balkh, 1731–1901* (Brill, 1996), a pioneering study of regional power struggles in Central Asia. His current project, forthcoming with Edinburgh University Press, explores the history of Afghanistan's historic Armenian community. Dr Lee is a Fellow of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and the British Institute of Persian Studies. Now semi-retired, he resides in New Zealand, where he continues to research and write.

Thomas Loy

Cross Border Connectivity. Jewish Central Asia in the 19/20 centuries

Jewish trading networks historically linked Afghanistan and Iran with Russian Turkestan, connecting South Asia to Europe. This paper examines the Marv oasis as a key node in this Central Asian trade corridor. Located at the crossroads of Mashhad, Herat, and Bukhara, Marv became, in the late nineteenth century, an important center and new home for various Jewish groups. In the early twentieth century, Russian colonial and later Soviet policies restricted Jewish mobility in the region and brought an end to Marv's thriving Jewish community.

Drawing on archival sources, contemporary newspapers, and family histories, this study traces the trajectory of Jewish mercantile activity and culture in the Transcaspian region. It argues that Jewish cross-border trade networks and kinship ties persisted until the mid-1930s, when Afghan and Soviet policies closed borders and nationalized commerce. The paper further challenges rigid categorizations of Afghan, Bukharan, and Iranian Jewish identities, emphasizing their fluidity and interconnectedness.

Thomas Loy is a research fellow at Oriental Institute at the Czech Academy of Sciences.

His research interests include the history and making of modern Central Asia; Persephone literature and media in 20th century Central Asia and Afghanistan; and Jewish history and mobility in Central Asia. He is currently involved in the GACR project “The Jewish Triangle: Connections & Disruptions in Persianate Jewish Life during the 19th and 20th centuries” (<https://orient.cas.cz/cs/veda-a-vyzkum/vyzkumne-platformy/The-Jewish-triangle/>) and an OPJAK project on Afghan Refugees in Eastern Europe in the 1980s and 1990s.

Magnus Marsden

The resilience of Afghan and Central Asia Jewish networks in the Karakul Trade: 1930-1979

This paper explores attempts made by HBC to ‘modernise’ the organisation of the trade Karakul trade in South West and Central Asia in the post-war period. The empirical material presented illuminates close yet tense relationships established over several decades between HBC managers and employees, Central Asian skin merchants, pastoral communities, and Afghan state officials. It explores role of Central Asian merchant networks in the decades following World War II, brings attention to the emphasis that Fur Department managers in HBC placed on the need to ‘modernise’ the Karakul trade and documents the one-sided images such held of held of Central Asian and Afghan merchants. The paper also explores pressures brought to bear on the activities of independent skin merchants by the countries in which they

traded, especially in London. In the face of such pressures, however, merchants from Central Asia continued to play a globally central role in the Karakul fur trade throughout the period because they possessed skills – commercial, cultural and diplomatic – that HBC’s modernising managers lacked.

Magnus Marsden is an anthropologist whose specialises in the study of Muslim Asia and is currently Professor of Social Anthropology, Director of the Asia Centre and Head of the Anthropology Department at the University of Sussex. He completed his PhD in social anthropology at Trinity College, Cambridge. Before taking up a professorship at Sussex, he was a research fellow at the University of Cambridge and a Reader in Social Anthropology at SOAS. His recent publications include *Beyond the Silk Roads: Trade, Mobility and Geopolitics across Eurasia* (2021) and *Trading Worlds: Afghan Merchants across Modern Frontiers* (2016). In 2024, Marsden collaborated with Afghan photographer Moska Najib and other scholars in his research team on *Belonging Flexible: Non-Muslim migrants from Muslim Asia* a photography exhibition staged at the Brunei Gallery, SOAS, London.

Sumaira Nawaz

“Prestige is such a delicate plan in the Eastern soil”

Hindu and Sikh Voices in *Sirāj ul-Aḫbār-e Afghāniye* (1911-1918)

In 1911, the itinerant journalist and statesman Mahmud Tarzi launched Afghanistan’s foremost Persian-language newspaper, *Sirāj ul-Aḫbār*, to counter what he saw as prejudiced narratives regarding Afghan state and society circulating in cross-border press. Although existing scholarship has marked *Sirāj* as a tool of “nation-building,” Tarzi intended the newspaper to circulate among Persian-reading publics abroad, especially in colonial South Asia. The Anglo-Indian press regularly published reports of discrimination meted out to Sikhs and Hindus in Afghanistan, the constant threat of forced conversion, and desecration of non-Muslim sites of worship. To counter these allegations, Tarzi relied on the voices of Hindu and Sikh merchants and moneylenders who formed the backbone of the burgeoning Afghan economy. Hindu and Sikh community members of Kabul reminded South Asian readers that unlike the colonial state, the Afghan *amir* Habibullah accorded legal equality (*musāwāt*) to all his subjects. At a time when the issue of cow-slaughter and communal violence had gripped much of North India, Hindu and Sikh voices in *Sirāj* painted a picture of mutual respect and public welfare that furthered new visions of Afghanistan as a Muslim utopia (Green, 2011). My presentation offers a granular reading of how the “minority question” became a point of dense inter-journal polemics between *Sirāj* and the Anglo-Indian press, where non-Muslim actors articulated their status as “equal subjects” in response to currents of world-news. I show how these cross-border literary traffics created new possibilities of sovereignty and minority rights in everyday Afghan discourse.

Sumaira Nawaz is an advanced PhD candidate at McGill University’s Institute of Islamic Studies. Her doctoral thesis, “Globalizing Muslim Publics: Ottoman Reforms in Urdu and Persian Print-Worlds, 1876–1923,” explores the varied and even diverging articulations of the late Ottoman Empire’s modernizing campaigns among Muslim readers across Qajar Iran, Afghanistan, and colonial South Asia. She is interested in questions of constitutionalism, minority rights, and Shi’a-Sunni relations, that became subjects of Persian and Urdu inter-

journal polemics in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Sumaira's work is located at the intersection of global intellectual history, literary and media studies.

Beatrice Penati

Building a cotton mill in Tsarist-era Samarkand: on capitalism and antisemitism in Russian Turkestan

At the beginning of the 20th century, Pinkhas Abramov, a Bukharan Jewish entrepreneur from Samarkand, attempted to open a cotton spinning mill on the Dargom canal. Although he did not manage to do so before World War One and the Russian Revolution put an end to his efforts to gather the necessary capital, this attempt represents an important case study for the history of Bukharan Jewish business in Tsarist Turkestan. Pinkhas Abramov's project was not a casualty of the Russian authorities' prohibition to develop local industry in their Central Asian colonies: it confronted instead empire-wide antisemitism, combined with the specific legal and environmental conditions of Turkestan – from the confusion surrounding water rights, to the lack of cheap sources of energy. This paper relates Pinkhas Abramov's vicissitudes, from the acquisition of machinery and land, to his interaction with colonial and metropolitan authorities, to his travels for business and religious reasons. This story must be read against the background of the difference between the rights of Bukharan ('native') Jews in Turkestan and those of Jews in the European parts of the Russian Empire.

Beatrice Penati is Senior Lecturer in Russian and Eurasian History at the University of Liverpool (UK). Before 2017, she worked as Assistant Professor at Nazarbayev University (Astana, Kazakhstan) and was awarded post-doctoral fellowship by the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science and the British Academy. She has been researching aspects of the agricultural and environmental history of Central Asia under Tsarist and Soviet rule, as well as the history of taxation and economic policies, land rights, and resource usage. Her recent book, *Rural History of Soviet Central Asia* (Brill, 2025), is a systematic reconstruction of land reform and other agrarian policies in Uzbekistan during the 1920s, as well as their links to new irrigation and the expansion of the cotton sector.

Immanuel Rybakov

Rafael Poteliakhoff – a first guild merchant, industrialist and patron

This study of the life of Rafael Poteliakhoff shows the economic rise and fall of one of the most prominent members of the Bukharan-Jewish bourgeoisie, merchant of the first guild of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The author traces the chain of how a native of Bukhara makes his first deal in partnership with the merchant Shlomo Moussaieff, and later, having moved to Kokand, achieves great success in the sale of textiles and the cotton ginning industry.

Having become one of the richest Jews in Kokand, Rafael paid serious attention to charity and received the status of a hereditary honorary citizen. During the revolutionary events of 1918, he was elected as a member of the government of the Kokand Autonomous Region. Later Rafael was arrested by the Soviet authorities, but with the help of a brother, he was released and then moved to Europe. After losing his business empire Rafael Poteliakhoff settled in London, where he passed away.

Immanuel Rybakov is a researcher of the history and culture of the Bukharian Jews. He is an Adjunct Lecturer of Jewish Studies at Queens College (2010), City University of New York. Additionally, he is a committee member of the Bukharian Times community newspaper (2006), Board member of the Union of the Bukharian Jewish Writers, Poets and Journalists of the USA (2005), as well as Deputy Director of the Museum of the Bukharian Jewish heritage (2003).

Ariane Sadjed

From Subject to Citizen: Mobility and Identification between Iran, Central Asia and Jerusalem

Throughout the 19th and early 20th century, communities of Bukharan, Afghan and Iranian Jews merged in certain places across the Persian speaking regions in which they lived, due to similarities in language, culture, business or family ties. At the same time, mechanisms that led to the differentiation of communities and the creation of group boundaries, point to the strong role of locality in these processes. I will examine some of these shifting boundaries in relation to the emergence of documents of identification, such as passports or travel permits. While these documents became crucial for mobility and eventually also emigration, their actual use evaded the categorizations they displayed, highlighting the tension between imperial or state policies of identification on the one hand, and ambiguity and pragmatism among their users on the other. Examining the (im)possibilities of mobility as well as different phases of emigration will shed light on how Persianate Jews coped with regimes of colonial citizenship and the emergence of national identities.

Ariane Sadjed is deputy director of the Institute for Iranian Studies at the Austrian Academy of Sciences and head of the ERC-research group “Persianate Jews”, focused on archival research in Iran, Uzbekistan and Israel and connecting it with material from family archives and interview research (www.persianjews.org). Dr. Sadjed is the PI of the Austrian part of the FWF funded project “The Jewish Triangle: Connections & Disruptions” and currently conducting a long-term Oral History project with the Bukharan community in Vienna. Recent publications include “Iranian, Afghan or Central Asian” in *Central Asian Survey* (2024) and “(Re-)Covering a mutual language: Boundary Making among Central Asian Jewish Communities in Austria”, forthcoming in *History & Anthropology*.