

Symposium “Oriental Studies Without Iranian Studies: Possibility or Impossibility?” Held in Vienna

From Examining Iran’s Place in Oriental Studies to Rethinking the Very Concept of the “East”

The academic symposium “**Oriental Studies Without Iranian Studies: Possible or Impossible?**”, organized by the **Iranian Wisdom House in Vienna**, was held on Friday, September 4, 2026 (13 Shahrivar 1405), at the Avicenna Hall.

The symposium brought together and engaged a group of professors and researchers in the fields of Oriental Studies, Iranian Studies, philosophy, Islamic studies, and cultural studies. The academic chair of the symposium was **Professor Rüdiger Lohlker**, a renowned Austrian Islamicist and scholar.

The main objective of the symposium was to provide a space for an academic, open, and critical dialogue on the concept of the “East,” the epistemic maps of Oriental Studies, and the place of Iran and Iranian Studies in the formation, development, and future of the field.

The central question of the symposium was whether it is possible to speak of “Oriental Studies” or “Eastern Studies” without giving serious consideration to Iran and its historical, linguistic, cultural, philosophical, and civilizational heritage, both in the pre-Islamic and Islamic periods. And if Iran is removed from, or marginalized within, this map, what consequences would this have for our understanding of the history and structure of Eastern civilizations?

At the same time, the discussions ultimately went beyond the initial question and reached a more fundamental one: **What is the “East” itself, and on what basis has the map of the East that we have today in academic studies been constructed?**

Presentation of Views Received from Seven Leading Experts: Is Oriental Studies Without Iranian Studies Possible?

The first major section of the symposium was devoted to a presentation by **Dr. Viktor Florian Szabó**, a postdoctoral researcher in Iranian Studies at the University of Erfurt, Germany.

Szabó presented the findings of a qualitative and comparative study on the position of Iranian Studies within Oriental Studies. The study was conducted under the academic supervision of **Dr. Reza Gholami**, Associate Professor at the Institute for Humanities and Cultural Studies in Tehran and Head of the Iranian House of Wisdom in Vienna.

According to Szabó, the study independently collected and examined the views of seven prominent international figures in the fields of Iranian Studies, philosophy, Islamic studies, mythology, literature, and cultural studies, without the participants being informed of the responses given by the others.

The research data were collected, translated, and compiled in three languages—Persian, English, and German—and examined using the method of “**directed content analysis**.”

At the beginning of his presentation, Szabó emphasized that the purpose of the study was not to prove a political or ideological position, but rather to raise a methodological question within the field of comparative civilizational studies: **Which civilizational elements have played a constitutive and foundational role in shaping the intellectual map of the East, and which elements have been marginalized within that map?**

Seven Experts, Three Central Questions

The seven experts examined in the study were:

- **Dr. Seyyed Hossein Nasr**, University Professor of Islamic Studies at George Washington University;
- **Professor Ian Almond**, Professor of World Literature at Georgia State University;
- **Dr. Nosratollah Rastegar**, retired Iranian Studies scholar at the Austrian Academy of Sciences;
- **Dr. Gholamreza A‘vani**, philosopher and former President of the Iranian Institute of Philosophy;
- **Professor Rüdiger Lohker**, retired Islamicist at the University of Vienna;
- **Dr. Zhaleh Amouzgar**, Iranian Studies scholar, mythologist, and permanent member of the Academy of Persian Language and Literature;
- **Dr. Reza Gholami**, Professor of Political Philosophy and Civilizational Studies.

Szabó explained the study’s three main questions to the audience:

First: To what extent is Iranian Studies situated at the heart and center of Eastern Studies?

Second: Is it possible to properly understand significant parts of the East—particularly the Middle East, Central Asia, India, and Anatolia—without taking Iranian heritage into account?

Third: What gaps and shortcomings does neglecting Iran create in our understanding of the history, culture, thought, and civilizational transformations of the East?

Iran as a “Connecting Core,” Not a Peripheral Region

An examination of the responses of the seven experts showed that, despite significant differences in their areas of expertise and theoretical perspectives, there was considerable convergence regarding the historical and civilizational role of Iran in the formation of, and connections among, different parts of the East.

Seyyed Hossein Nasr

Professor **Seyyed Hossein Nasr** considers the position of Iranian Studies within Eastern Studies to be fundamental, both in the pre-Islamic and Islamic periods.

According to Szabó's report of Nasr's views, the study of some regions of the Far East may be possible to a certain extent without Iranian Studies. However, understanding the Middle East, Central Asia, and particularly India without taking Iranian heritage into account would involve profound gaps.

Ian Almond

Professor **Ian Almond**, from the perspective of comparative literature, distinguished between “Iran” and “Persia.” Referring to the relationship between **Hafez and Goethe**, he drew attention to the position of Persian culture and literature in the history of Europe's encounter with Iran.

At the same time, he warned against the danger of romanticizing Iran. He argued that focusing on the classical image of “Persia” can marginalize the complexities of contemporary Iran, including ethnic diversity, modernity, and social tensions, thereby producing a homogenized image of Iran.

Nosratollah Rastegar

Dr. **Nosratollah Rastegar** regards Iranian Studies as the “hard core” of Eastern Studies and as one of the points of intersection between classical and modern Oriental Studies.

Szabó highlighted three main dimensions of Rastegar's argument: the role of ancient Iranian languages in the comparative study of Indo-European languages; the continuity of the Iranian plateau as a civilizational and communicative crossroads; and Iran's role in the formation and transmission of religious and intellectual traditions, including Zoroastrian, Manichaean, and Mazdakite traditions.

Gholamreza A'vani

Professor **Gholamreza A'vani**, from the perspective of the history of philosophy and science, emphasized Iran's role in the history of thought.

Drawing on Greek sources, he highlighted the place of the Iranian Magi in the history of wisdom and also emphasized Iran's role in preserving, transmitting, and reinterpreting the classical philosophical heritage.

In this context, attention was also given to the presence of Greek philosophers in Sasanian Iran and to the role of scholarly centers such as **Gundeshapur** in the transmission and transformation of knowledge in the ancient world and subsequently in the Islamic world.

Rüdiger Lohlker

Professor **Rüdiger Lohlker** focused on the post-Mongol period, particularly the Timurid era.

He described the **"Persian-speaking world"** as one of the vital and connecting centers of thought in the East—a world that transcends today's political borders and extends from Iran through Central Asia and the Indian subcontinent.

According to him, there existed a transregional network of thinkers, mystics, and philosophers whose understanding would remain incomplete without taking the Iranian and Persian tradition into account.

Zhaleh Amouzgar

Professor **Zhaleh Amouzgar**, adopting a mythological, historical, and text-centered approach, presented Iran as one of the important settings for interaction among different civilizations.

Referring to certain similarities and structural connections between Iranian myths and the myths of other civilizations, she emphasized the existence of a complex network of cultural connections in the ancient world.

Amouzgar also emphasized the position of the concept of **"wisdom"** in ancient Iranian texts and warned that reducing Iran to the realms of myth and mysticism obscures the rational and conceptual layers of the Iranian tradition.

Reza Gholami

Dr. **Reza Gholami**, in his response, likewise presented Iran not as a peripheral region but as one of the central and generative centers of civilization and thought.

He described Iran as one of the foundational centers in the formation of human civilization and, referring to archaeological evidence—including **Shahr-e Sukhteh** and the discoveries at **Susa**—emphasized the independent role of the Iranian plateau in the formation of civilization.

Gholami also emphasized the extensive role of Iranians in the production and transmission of science and thought during the Islamic period, as well as the importance of Iranian Studies as an “**epistemological-critical node**” for preventing reductionism in the understanding of the East.

From “Deficiency” to “Structural Impossibility”

In the second part of Szabó’s presentation, the question was raised as to whether understanding major parts of the East without Iranian Studies is merely difficult and incomplete, or whether in some areas it involves what could fundamentally be described as a “**structural impossibility**.”

According to Szabó’s analysis, all seven respondents, though with varying degrees of emphasis, stressed that understanding many regions of the East—particularly Central Asia, India, Anatolia, and parts of the Islamic world—would face serious shortcomings without attention to Iranian heritage.

Within this framework, Iran is regarded not merely as one subject among other subjects in Oriental Studies, but in many cases as an “**intervening variable**” and a “**connecting core**” between different civilizational spheres.

The concept of the “**Persianate world**” in the works of Marshall Hodgson, Iran’s scholarly and cultural networks, the role of the Silk Road, the connection between Gundeshapur and the scientific transformations of the Islamic world, and transnational networks of Persian intellectual life were among the themes addressed in this section.

Epistemic Gaps Resulting from the Exclusion of Iran

Szabó then examined the consequences of excluding Iran from certain Orientalist narratives.

One of the most important concerns raised was the danger of reducing Islamic civilization to a civilization that was exclusively Arab and of diminishing the contribution of Iran and other non-Arab regions to the development of science, philosophy, literature, and scholarly institutions in the Islamic world.

Within this framework, emphasis was placed on the role of Iranians in the rational and transmitted sciences, the position of Iranian scholarly centers, and the role of the Persian tradition in the transformation of Islamic thought.

Lohlker also warned against portraying the post-Mongol period as a period of **“stagnation in Islamic thought”** and emphasized the need to revisit the philosophical and mystical works of this period.

An Important Methodological Caveat

At the conclusion of his presentation, Szabó emphasized an important limitation of the study: all seven experts selected had already accepted the importance of Iran within Eastern Studies.

Therefore, the findings cannot be regarded as representing a consensus across the entire field of Oriental Studies.

In Szabó's words, the study demonstrates **“convergence within an intellectual group,”** rather than a consensus representing all competing perspectives.

He emphasized that the next stage of such research should include dialogue with scholars who hold critical views regarding the centrality of Iran within Eastern Studies.

In his conclusion, Szabó highlighted four principal areas of convergence among the responses:

1. The varying centrality of Iran depending on the region and historical period;
2. Iran's mediating and connecting role within the civilizational network of the East;
3. The epistemological cost of excluding or marginalizing Iran;
4. The constructive tension between two forms of ideological critique: the critique of romanticizing Iran and the critique of its political and ideological exclusion.

“The Ontology of the East” and Seven Questions for Redrawing the Map of Oriental Studies

The symposium continued with a presentation by **Dr. Reza Gholami**, Head of the Iranian House of Wisdom in Vienna and Professor of Political Philosophy and Cultural and Civilizational Studies, entitled **“The Ontology of the East: Seven Questions for Rethinking the Map of Oriental Studies.”**

Gholami's presentation differed from Szabó's in that while Szabó's research primarily asked where Iran is situated within the existing map of Eastern Studies, Gholami took a step backward and made the map itself the subject of inquiry: **How was this map formed? What conception and ontology of the East does it rest upon? And does it fundamentally require redesign?**

Point of Departure: The East Is Not a Homogeneous Whole

Gholami began his presentation with a methodological warning: viewing the East as a single and homogeneous world is a fundamental error.

According to him, the East is a vast and plural space of cultures, civilizations, languages, religions, rituals, intellectual traditions, and historical experiences, and Iran, the Arab world, India, Central Asia, Anatolia, and East Asia cannot be reduced to a single culture or identity.

Yet Gholami moved from this very plurality to a deeper question: **If the East is so diverse, why have different cultures throughout history been placed under a single name—“the East”?**

He proposed the possibility of an **“invisible umbrella,”** not in the sense that there exists a single Eastern culture or identity, but as a hypothesis concerning the existence of some deeper semantic horizon that might connect certain of these traditions in their approaches to humanity, nature, society, ethics, meaning, and the sacred.

Gholami emphasized that he was presenting this idea not as a definitive conclusion, but as a question for comparative research and academic dialogue.

Seven Questions for Reconsidering the Map of Oriental Studies

First Question: What Kind of Reality Is the East?

Gholami asked whether the “East” is a historical and cultural reality that exists independently of the way we describe it, or whether part of its meaning has been formed through its encounter with the “West.”

He moved away from the dichotomy between “**independent reality**” and “**pure construction**” and suggested that the East can be understood as a complex, historical, and multilayered reality whose possible unity, if it exists, lies at the level of a shared semantic horizon rather than a homogeneous culture.

Second Question: What Lies Beneath the Cultural Diversity of the East?

The second question was whether, beneath this vast diversity, it is possible to identify similarities in ways of viewing the world without speaking of a unified “**Eastern worldview.**”

According to Gholami, the answer to this question should be established through historical and comparative research, rather than through predetermined assumptions.

Third Question: How Have the Different Easts Been Connected to One Another?

Gholami considered this question particularly important.

According to him, the history of the East has often been narrated through the lens of its relationship with the West, while relations among Eastern cultures themselves have received less attention.

He referred to Iran’s centuries-long interactions with India, Central Asia, the Arab world, and Anatolia, as well as the movement of ideas, religions, languages, literature, sciences, and artistic forms among these regions.

In this context, he spoke of a kind of “**inequality of attention**”: Which Eastern traditions have been placed at the center, and which traditions have been pushed to the margins?

Fourth Question: Where Is the Boundary Between Discovering the East and Constructing the East?

Gholami asked whether Oriental Studies merely discovers a pre-existing reality or whether it also participates in constructing particular images of the East through concepts, classifications, and representations.

He considered both processes possible and emphasized that the scientific character of Oriental Studies cannot simply be reduced to the personal neutrality of individual researchers.

In his view, the robustness of an academic field depends on the transparency of its assumptions, strong methodologies, openness to criticism, diversity of perspectives, and capacity for self-correction.

Fifth Question: How Does the West See the East, and Why Does It Seek to Know It?

Reza Gholami distinguished between two types of motivations for knowledge: a form of knowledge that may be connected to superiority, control, and maintaining distance from the Other, and a form of knowledge that seeks better understanding, dialogue, interaction, and coexistence.

He emphasized that neither side of this dichotomy alone can explain the entire history of Oriental Studies, but the purpose of knowledge can influence the structure of knowledge itself.

Therefore, according to him, Oriental Studies should ask, in addition to **“What is the East?”**, other questions as well: **Who studies the East? From what perspective? And for what purpose?**

Sixth Question: How Did Oriental Studies Itself Take Shape?

Dr. Gholami distinguished between two histories: the long history of Eastern cultures and civilizations and the history of Oriental Studies as an academic and institutional field.

According to him, Oriental Studies emerged within specific political, intellectual, economic, colonial, and institutional circumstances.

At the same time, he emphasized the need to avoid reducing Oriental Studies to colonialism and power. He argued that a balanced approach should both recognize the contribution of the field's scholarly methods and achievements and examine the impact of power structures and historical circumstances on its formation.

Seventh Question: What Does All of This Mean for the Map of Oriental Studies?

Gholami regarded this question as the point of intersection of the previous six questions.

If the East is assumed to be a homogeneous whole, the map of Oriental Studies simplifies its diversity.

If the East is understood as a collection of entirely separate cultures, its historical and civilizational connections disappear.

But if the East is understood as a diverse network of cultures and civilizations, with differences, connections, exchanges, and perhaps certain shared horizons, then the map of Eastern Studies must also become more complex, multilayered, and dynamic.

Gholami condensed his central argument into the following proposition:

“The ontology of the East, the way we view the East, and the purpose of knowing the East are three important forces that shape the map of Oriental Studies.”

Iranian Studies: Not Merely a Component, but a Factor That Calls the Map into Question

In the final section of his presentation, Reza Gholami examined the relationship between Iranian Studies and Oriental Studies from a different perspective.

According to him, the central question should not simply be **“Where does Iranian Studies fit within Oriental Studies?”**, because this question may already presuppose the existing map of Oriental Studies.

The deeper question is:

“What does Iran tell us about the very idea of the East?”

Gholami emphasized that Iran is not merely an **“Eastern subject,”** but one of the great historical centers of philosophy, literature, language, religion, art, science, and civilizational experience, which for centuries has interacted with India, Central Asia, the Arab world, Anatolia, and other civilizational spheres.

For this reason, he attributed two roles to Iranian Studies:

First, it is an essential field for understanding a significant part of the East;

Second, and in his view even more importantly, it has the capacity to **question and rearrange the very map of Oriental Studies**.

From this perspective, Iranian Studies can demonstrate that the East is not homogeneous, that Eastern cultures have developed through long processes of exchange and mutual influence, and that the simple “**East–West**” dichotomy is insufficient to explain the actual history of civilizations.

Gholami described this relationship as reciprocal: the ontology of the East affects the position of Iranian Studies within the map of Eastern Studies, but a deeper understanding of Iran can also transform our conception of the East and, consequently, the map of Oriental Studies itself.

An Invitation to Redraw the Map, Not Merely to Find a Place on It

At the conclusion, Gholami emphasized that the seven questions raised in his presentation were not closed or definitive answers, but could serve as the starting point for a broader dialogue among researchers in different fields.

According to him, the task today may not simply be to find new answers about the East, but to rethink the very questions through which the East has been studied over the centuries.

Within this framework, Iranian Studies can play a role that goes beyond that of a specialized academic discipline: it can constitute a scholarly intervention aimed at rethinking the map of Eastern Studies.

Gholami emphasized that the future of Iranian Studies may lie not merely in finding a place within the existing map, but in actively participating in **redrawing that map**—a map in which civilizational diversity, intra-Eastern interactions, mutual cultural influence, differences in ways of viewing the world, and the possibility of knowledge aimed at understanding, dialogue, and coexistence are taken into consideration alongside a critical examination of power and epistemic assumptions.

Iranian Studies: An Indispensable Link in Understanding the East

The symposium continued with a presentation by **Professor Nosratollah Rastegar**, a distinguished scholar of Iranian Studies and one of the influential figures in the formation and continuation of Iranian Studies in Austria, on the relationship between Iranian Studies and Oriental Studies.

Before the beginning of his lecture, the symposium chair, **Professor Rüdiger Lohlker**, referred to him as one of the “**founding fathers of Iranian Studies in Austria**” and mentioned his recent German translation of the second half of Ferdowsi’s *Shahnameh*.

Rastegar began his remarks by expressing his appreciation for the Cultural Representation of Iran in Austria and stated that, after many years of insufficient attention to Iranian Studies, the Cultural Representation’s attention to Iranian Studies and investment in this field was commendable.

He then referred to three recent books published by the Iranian House of Wisdom in Vienna in the field of Iranian Studies and praised these books for their contribution to strengthening Iranian Studies.

The Central Question: How Is Oriental Studies Without Iranian Studies Possible?

The central theme of Rastegar’s remarks was a simple but fundamental question: **How can Oriental Studies be taught at universities without the serious presence and sustained teaching of Iranian Studies?**

From his perspective, answering this question without taking Iran’s historical and cultural position into account is difficult.

Throughout history, Iran has not merely been one of the subjects of Eastern Studies; it has played a role in the formation and transformation of many political, cultural, literary, and intellectual domains of the Eastern world.

To explain this point, Rastegar referred to major empires such as the **Ottoman Empire** and the **Mughal Empire in India**.

According to him, it is impossible to properly study the history of these empires while ignoring the Persian language and culture, because Persian was for centuries one of the major administrative, bureaucratic, and literary languages in these territories, and many rulers and

political and cultural elites in these regions had direct connections with the Persian language and literature.

From this perspective, Iranian Studies is not a secondary field for understanding a large part of the history of the East, but rather part of the infrastructure of historical and cultural understanding itself.

An Experience of Trying to Keep Iranian Studies Alive

Another part of Rastegar's remarks focused on his personal experience of preserving and expanding the teaching of Iranian Studies in Austria.

He explained that the Austrian Academy of Sciences has focused primarily on research activities and has not been primarily responsible for university teaching.

Nevertheless, in order to ensure the continuation of Iranian Studies education at the University of Vienna, he taught for many years under limited conditions and for very modest remuneration. At one point, he taught only one day a week—on Fridays.

This part of his remarks demonstrated that preserving an academic discipline does not always depend solely on its scholarly importance and that it sometimes also requires the personal efforts and persistence of individual researchers.

Rastegar also referred to the Iranian community living in Austria and stated that the presence of a considerable number of Iranians and their younger generations could itself constitute a reason for universities to pay greater attention to teaching the language, history, and culture of Iran.

In his view, the children of Iranian families in Europe should also be able to study the language and historical culture of their families and homeland in an academic and scholarly environment.

Criticism of the Marginalization of Iranian Studies

Rastegar went on to criticize the situation in some university departments of Oriental Studies, stating that in certain cases a major share of resources, funding, and scholarly attention is

devoted to fields such as Turkology and Arabic Studies, while Iranian Studies is either marginalized or incorporated into broader fields.

From his perspective, incorporating Iranian Studies into a broader category can have serious consequences for the study of Iran's history and culture if it results in the loss of its academic and educational independence.

He also spoke of his efforts to invite Iranian Studies professors and researchers from other countries, particularly Germany. These efforts were undertaken with the aim of preserving the continuity of Iranian Studies teaching and research at the University of Vienna, but were not subsequently pursued.

Iranian Studies Is Not Merely the Study of Iran

Overall, Rastegar's remarks can be understood as a defense of an important principle: **understanding the East without understanding Iran will, in many fields, be incomplete and one-sided.**

His argument was not limited to the importance of the Persian language or the history of Iran; rather, it rested on the broad extent of the influence and presence of Iranian culture across different parts of the Eastern world.

From the Ottoman Empire in the west to the Indian subcontinent in the east, the Persian language and Iranian culture were, for long periods, part of the networks of political, literary, and intellectual communication in these regions.

For this reason, from Rastegar's perspective, Iranian Studies should not be regarded within the structure of Oriental Studies as a peripheral or merely specialized subject alongside other fields.

In many cases, the discipline is essential for understanding historical connections among Eastern civilizations and for properly understanding the political, cultural, and intellectual transformations of the region.

Professor Rastegar's remarks ultimately once again highlighted the symposium's fundamental question: **If a significant part of the history and culture of the East is connected to the Persian language and Iranian heritage, can we speak of "Oriental Studies" while excluding Iranian Studies from it?**

Conclusion

Oriental Studies Without Iranian Studies Is Impossible: Professor Lohlker's Strong Criticism of Those Responsible for the Administration of Oriental Studies in Vienna

Professor **Rüdiger Lohlker**, chair of the symposium "**Oriental Studies Without Iranian Studies: Possible or Impossible?**", in his closing address emphasized that Iran and the Persian language are the beating heart and cultural language of the Islamic world. He described the neglect of Persian sources in contemporary historical research—for example, in the study of Safavid history—as unscientific and meaningless.

To demonstrate the enormous extent of Iranian cultural influence, he referred to remarkable historical evidence, including the existence of a Persian-speaking community in sixteenth-century Thailand, the role of translations of Persian astronomical texts in the reform of the Chinese calendar, the influence of the mystical teachings of **Abd al-Rahman Jami** at the court of the Chinese Empire, and the discovery of Persian inscriptions in the **Great Mosque of Xi'an**, demonstrating the extension of Iranian culture to the far end of the Silk Road.

Lohlker, stating the key phrase that "**speaking of the East without taking the Persian language and Iran into account is impossible**," compared the current situation of Austrian universities with German universities, which have several active chairs in Iranian Studies.

He noted that the neglect of this field in Austrian universities occurs despite the fact that Austria is heir to the legacy of prominent figures such as **Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall**, who, through his German translation of Hafez's *Divan*, inspired **Goethe**, the great European poet.

Professor Lohlker referred to his unsuccessful efforts over previous decades to establish an Iranian Studies program at the University of Vienna. He spoke of unfulfilled promises by Austrian university and government officials and stated that, despite successful negotiations with the Iranian side and their declared readiness to provide comprehensive support, the then-president of the University of Vienna ultimately refused to implement the project.

Expressing little hope that conditions would improve over the coming decade, he described the current teaching of Persian and Iranian Studies at the university's Institute of Oriental Studies as limited and merely "**showcase**" in nature.

In conclusion, Professor Lohlker ended his speech with the famous Latin phrase "**Ex oriente lux**" ("Light comes from the East") and called on researchers to remain optimistic about the position and continued influence of Iranian culture and civilization despite the lack of support from the academic system.

The symposium was accompanied by questions and answers from the audience, and these questions continued even after the formal conclusion of the event. It was a gathering whose central theme was the fundamental necessity of **redrawing the scholarly and epistemic map of Oriental Studies**.

The discussions demonstrated that a comprehensive understanding of the “**East**” requires moving beyond untested assumptions and recognizing Iran’s actual position as a key center and connecting element within the network of civilizational interactions across Asia.

In this respect, Iranian Studies is not merely seeking to secure a share within the existing structure. Rather, as a critical discipline, it questions existing frameworks and seeks to establish its authentic position within a new, pluralistic, and self-critical scholarly map.