

EthnoScripts

ZEITSCHRIFT FÜR AKTUELLE
ETHNOLOGISCHE STUDIEN

The Fall of Kabul in 2021: Background, Effects, Resonance
Der Fall Kabuls 2021: Hintergründe, Effekte, Resonanzen

Volume 24 Issue 1 | 2022

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Beyond State-Centrism, Towards Acknowledging Relationality:
Understanding Afghanistan from an Inter-Asian Perspective

Ethnoscripts 2022 24 (1): 296-318

eISSN 2199-7942

Abstract

Scholars across the social sciences and humanities working on Afghanistan have in recent years sought to explore the country's dynamics in relation to an inter-Asia approach: that means, moving beyond the discrete study of subregions and focusing instead on connections, circulations, and comparisons within, across, and beyond Asian contexts. This approach has enabled interdisciplinary work on Asia to question taken-for-granted boundaries of nation states, culture areas, and large aggregate societies. It has also challenged the tendency of work in the field to revolve around comparisons between Asia and the West. The withdrawal of NATO forces from Afghanistan in 2021 and the return to power of the Taliban provides a moment to reflect critically on the implications of inter-Asian studies to the analysis of Afghanistan. Historians are increasingly recognising that Afghanistan criss-crosses cultural, political, and economic inter-Asian dynamics; and yet the country is still widely depicted as of marginal significance, both to Asia and to the wider world. This article builds on the inter-Asian studies literature and documents the role that a range of diverse networks comprising mobile people from Afghanistan play: in connecting the country to multiple regional contexts and in mediating the influence of the political trends in these on Afghanistan.

Publisher:

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<http://www.ethnologie.uni-hamburg.de>

eISSN: 2199-7942



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Beyond State-Centrism, Towards Acknowledging Relationality: Understanding Afghanistan from an Inter-Asian Perspective

Magnus Marsden

Introduction

In the wake of the return to power of the Taliban in Afghanistan in August 2021, commentators have argued that the current scenario can result in the country's integration in its immediate regional neighbourhood after decades of globalising international intervention (Devji 2021).¹ The extraction of Afghanistan from Western geopolitical projects and its reassertion within the dynamics of its own neighbourhood raises the possibility of a political settlement forged by local actors and sustainable economic development supported by China. Discussions of Afghanistan's place in 'the region' focus largely, however, on its relationship with Pakistan, leaving little scope for considering the enmeshment of the society within the multiple regional contexts of which it has historically been a part. In this sense, the 'regional approach' of today reproduces the prior notion of 'Af-Pak'.² Initially developed by US policy makers seeking an end to the presence of US forces in Afghanistan, the notion of 'Af-Pak' simplified and homogenised understandings of place and people in a region characterised precisely by its ethno-linguistic plurality (Marsden and Hopkins 2012).

This article explores Afghanistan's place in regional dynamics by way of an ethnographic exploration of historically durable long-distance networks comprising a mixture of traders, historic émigrés from Central Asia, politician-intellectuals, and students in madrasas and higher education institutions. The ethnographic material presented illustrates the ways in which these diverse and internally complex networks connect Afghanistan to multiple regional contexts. It shows how connections forged by mobile actors from Afghanistan have played an important role in carrying multiple political ideologies to Afghanistan and shaping the ways in which local communities receive political trends affecting the wider region. I focus in particular on networks arising from the neighbouring provinces of Badakhshan and Panjshir. This part of the country is often viewed through a narrow analytical lens that focuses on political elites, the factional conflicts that divide them, their dependence on international patronage, and their instrumental deployment of ethnic and religious identity markers in the pursuit of state power. Such

1 For an ethnographic approach to Afghanistan, see Monsutti (2021).

2 US policy makers used the term 'Af-Pak' from 2008 to refer to Afghanistan and Pakistan as a single theatre of operations in the 'War on Terror'.

an analytic lens, however, isolates this part of Afghanistan, and the country more generally, from its immediate regional contexts.

Another way in which Afghanistan has been isolated from its regional context is through uncritical use of the notion of ‘tribe’, a practice that has a colonial history (Bayly 2018; Hopkins 2009, 2020; Hanifi 2011; Manchanda 2020). The uncritical use of this category – often applied to identify seemingly unchanging social structures – facilitates explanations of political violence that elide discussion of the role played by wider geopolitical contexts. A parallel body of scholarship now emphasises the role that networks comprising mobile people from Afghanistan have played historically in shaping the country’s connections to other parts of Asia and the world beyond. Building on studies of ‘inter-Asia’ that document connections between Asia (for example, Ho 2017) but extending the ambit of these beyond the maritime connections of the Indian Ocean, this scholarship challenges depictions of Afghanistan’s exceptionality. It addresses, instead, the dynamism of transregional networks authored by actors tied to Afghanistan yet in collaboration with those from other settings. Historical studies of traders, intellectuals, and students have brought attention to Afghanistan’s dynamic identity formations, and analyses these in relationship to cultural and political developments in the wider region and world (for example, Crews 2015; Hanifi 2011; Marsden 2016, 2021; Nunan 2016; Wardaki 2021; Ziad 2021).

Inter-Asian approaches can also add nuance to the understanding of Afghanistan’s present-day political culture. The article argues that considering people whose modes of economic, familial, religious, or political life involve international mobility is necessary if the formation of Afghanistan’s relations with the wider region are to be understood in their full complexity. Notions such as that of ‘Af-Pak’ locate Taliban influence within predefined spaces and cultures. In contrast, by exploring specific networks connecting regions and acting as carriers of political and religious ideologies, I develop a more nuanced approach to understanding the Taliban’s political and cultural reach in the country. Specific and durable histories of interregional connections play a critical role in influencing the political and cultural dynamics of transregional arenas. Histories of interregional connection are not abstract: they arise, rather, from the activities of specific types of social formations, or what I refer to as mobile societies. Mobile societies are engaged in patterns of circular mobility, thereby enabling the interpenetration of the multiple contexts they connect.

Literature in the field of inter-Asian studies has shown that social formations identified as mobile societies play a significant role in shaping Afghanistan’s place in the wider region.³ Enseng Ho (2017: 907-8) defines mobile

3 An extensive body of work exists on Afghan refugees addressing the economic, humanitarian, and legal predicaments they face (for excellent work in this vein, see Monsutti 2008) and on their cultural adaptation to new contexts (for example, Olszewska 2015).

societies as ‘small, mobile, and less integrated’ social formations that have not traditionally been the focus of social scientists because of the emphasis placed in social theory on large-scale social and political aggregates. Mobile societies, he argues, are spatially dispersed and made up of individuals with multiple allegiances, loyalties, and identities; they are also often fashioned over decades if not centuries of movement, exchange, and interaction. The mobile societies I explore in this article are diverse in their nature and related to the territory of modern Afghanistan in varying ways. A network of traders engaged in the trade of various commodities, but especially gemstones, originates from a handful of villages in northern Afghanistan’s Panjshir valley; the stretched field of their circulatory mobility, however, crosses the country’s borders to neighbouring Pakistan and Tajikistan and beyond, to the gemstone markets of Russia, the Arabian Gulf, and Southeast Asia. Another mobile society I briefly discuss is Bukharan émigrés who identify with dispersal points in Central Asia that they left nearly a century ago in the context of the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. For this group, Afghanistan became a central aspect of their identities, citizenship practices, and activities in the twentieth century (Marsden 2021).

Both networks criss-cross multiple geographical scales. They connect neighbouring localities across Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Central Asia to one another, but they also bridge far-flung global contexts, ranging from the Arabian Gulf to Turkey and China. Because they work across historically connected regions rather than nation states – Badakhshan and Chitral, for example, form a transregional arena divided by the national boundaries of Tajikistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan – it is not helpful to think of these mobile societies as transnational; instead, they interleave local, regional, and global scales. The field of inter-Asian studies, then, stands to benefit from a deeper engagement with Afghanistan, a country in which regional, local, and global dynamics intersect with one another in an intense manner. A detailed consideration of the types of identities that emerge at the intersections of varying geographical scales enables a clearer understanding of the relationship between inter-Asian and global scales of thought and identity.

If the number of people involved in mobile societies is often small, and if they are often non-elite, then in what respects are they critical to understanding Afghanistan’s international relations? Recent work by anthropologists of various Asian borderlands presents practices, strategies, and tactics deployed by social actors – ranging from traders to borderland communities to state officials – to fashion neighbourly relations. Doing so has shone light on ‘everyday processes of neighbouring’, or ‘collective and individual efforts to manage evolving relations’ across international boundaries (Zhang and Saxer 2017: 12). Studies of mobile societies have demonstrated that networks fashion social institutions, ideas, and practices in collaboration with multiple groups, individuals, and entities based on relationships of trust. The cultural

versatility of those who form such societies enables them to play informal diplomatic roles (Lutfi et al. 2021) as has been the historical norm (Marsden et al. 2016). Transregional networks, from this viewpoint, are skilled and culturally versatile social formations uniquely positioned to cultivate and sustain trust-based relationships across political and cultural boundaries and thereby to shape wider geopolitical dynamics (Marsden 2021).⁴ Recognising the agency of mobile societies in managing transregional relationships enables an approach to Afghanistan's 'region' in which the perspectives of social actors are foregrounded rather than those of analysts or state officials.



Fig. 1. The Badakhshan and Panjshir provinces in north-eastern Afghanistan.

Map: Magnus Marsden.

The remainder of this article focuses on communities and individuals identifying with Badakhshan and Panjshir in north-east Afghanistan (Figure 1). It is based on long-term fieldwork conducted since 1995 to the connected regions of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Tajikistan. The article also draws on fieldwork conducted with migrant communities from Afghanistan in the former Soviet Union, China, the Gulf States, and Western Europe. A consid-

4 Discourses dating to the 'War on Terror' emphasise the security threats posed by mobile Muslims. Accordingly, Afghan 'transnational networks' are widely regarded as objects of suspicion, inevitably associated with either militancy or drug smuggling.

eration of the region from the perspective of the diverse and mobile social networks that criss-cross these contexts reveals a culturally complex arena interpenetrated within multiple Asian contexts and home to a political culture informed by diverse ideological influences.

Deoband, Pakistan, and beyond

The Deobandi school of Islamic thought has played an important role in the cultural and political dynamics of northern Afghanistan. Established in the town of Deoband in Uttar Pradesh, northern India, in 1866, the Deobandi madrasa promoted Islamic reformism (Osella and Osella 2013), calling Muslims to reject *bidai* ('un-Islamic innovations') and, instead, to follow Islamic teachings and principles. From the mid-1990s, Deobandi-trained ulama and institutions (especially madrasas) have also been central to the thinking and identity of the Taliban. As a result, many accounts focus on the close relationship between Pashtun ethnicity, Deobandi teachings, and political commitment towards the Taliban. In this section I argue, however, that in certain communities the Deobandi influence needs to be understood in relationship to transregional histories of connection more than in terms of ethnicity.

There have been important and major shifts over the past four decades, in particular in the ways in which people in Badakhshan, Panjshir, and connected locales have set to the task of being Muslim and thought about this aspect of their lives in relationship to the political. Religion across northern Afghanistan is far from a simple bastion of forms of Muslim identity fashioned in the context of the anti-Soviet jihad in the 1980s and the subsequent resistance struggle (*muqawmat*) against the Taliban in the 1990s; rather, it encompasses a fluid and dynamic spectrum of thought and behaviour. Religion intersects with ethnic identities and class positions, and, as I emphasise below, with transregional scales of thought and activity.

During the years in which I lived in a village in the northern district of Chitral in Pakistan in the late 1990s and early 2000s, I often travelled by minibus on a twelve-hour journey to Peshawar. As this was generally at the end of the summer vacation, my travelling companions tended to be young men from villages in Badakhshan returning to the Deobandi madrasas in Peshawar where they studied. They travelled from their villages to Chitral by way of Dorah Pass. At the time this was an important trading route for the resistance forces of Ahmad Shah Massoud who used it to bring supplies from Pakistan to the areas of Afghanistan under their control. The Deobandi madrasas where the young men studied were not homogeneously Pashtun in ethnic composition; they were also attended by men from northern Pakistan's diverse ethno-linguistic groups, including Khowar-speaking Chitrali Sunni Muslims. These Badakhshani religious students were embarking on trajectories of movement for religious education that were comparable to those of

earlier generations from the region, but on a significantly expanded scale. The institutions in which they studied taught a transformed expression of Deobandi Islam.

A key source of change in religious thought and identity in northern Afghanistan, then, is the education the men from this region received in Deobandi madrasas in Pakistan. ‘Deobandi’ refers to a *maslak* (school) of Islamic thought that arose in the Deobandi madrasas.⁵ In today’s context, Deobandi Islam is widely associated with the Taliban and seen as opposing local ways of being Muslim that are informed by Sufism, sometimes referred to as Islam’s mystical strain. In the first half of the twentieth century, however, local populations regarded students returning from Deobandi madrasas to northern Afghanistan not as bearers of conservative Islam but as carriers of dangerously modern influences from British India (Metcalf 2014). A friend of mine, from a village in a northern district of Badakhshan that lies close to the border with Tajikistan, reported how his grandfather had been designated a *kafir* (infidel) by traditional mullahs in his village when he started listening to the news on the radio after returning home from his studies in Deoband.

Deobandi thought stands in dynamic relationship with local, national, and geopolitical contexts and cannot be understood through the narrow national lens of Afghanistan-Pakistan relations alone. From 1947 onwards, a form of Deobandi thinking emerged in the specific context of Pakistan that was increasingly politically assertive; this form of Deobandi thought and identity drew rigid distinctions between different categories of Muslims based on their commitment to varying sects and schools of Islamic thought. Initially, this expression of Deobandi thought arose in disputes in Pakistan concerning the status of Ahmadi Muslims in the country’s constitution and political system (Jalal 2008). By the 1970s and 1980s, however, Deobandi thinking in Pakistan was influenced especially by forms of Muslim thought and identity promoted by proponents of jihad-centred Islam active in the region (often from or with ties to the Arabian Gulf), in the context of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. These trends did not necessarily shape Muslim identity in the communities in which Deobandi-trained scholars lived and worked. In the Chitral region of northern Pakistan, for example – a setting largely inhabited not by ethnic Pashtuns but by Khowar-speaking Sunni and Shi’a Ismaili Muslims – village and small-town Muslims critically engaged with Deobandi teachings rather than embracing them unthinkingly (Marsden 2005).

Forms of Islam taught in Pakistan’s Deobandi madrasas in the 1970s and onwards came to form an important aspect of religious thought and

5 Deobandi Islam arose from expressions of Sufism that are important across south and central Asia, notably the sober and sharia-minded Naqshbandiya *tariqa* (brotherhood).

identity in northern Afghanistan. Literature on the transnational reach of the Deoband in Afghanistan tends to focus on the role of the Pakistan state and the relationship between Deobandi madrasas and ethnic Pashtuns. Yet communities interact with the teachings of Deobandi Islam in relationship to local and regional dynamics rather than simply in terms of ethnic identity. The Taliban, a movement closely connected to Deobandi networks and modes of thinking, is now an important aspect of the religious and political environment of Badakhshan province, the population of which is predominantly made up of Sunni Muslim Farsi speakers (often identified as ethnically Tajik) but also home to substantial Uzbek-speaking communities.⁶

The history of the role played by Deobandi Islam in forging such forms of regional connectivity is complex and layered. At one level, as we have seen, men from Badakhshan studied in the Deoband College in north India during the first half of the twentieth century. Local communities associated such figures with bringing modern influences to the region's villages and regarded them sceptically. At another level, a more recent history of interaction between Badakhshan and Deobandi madrasas arose in Pakistan in the 1990s and 2000s. Families sent their young men to study in these madrasas that had emerged in Pakistan from the 1970s onwards. Madrasas in northern Pakistan provided not only religious instruction but also board and lodging to their *talib-e ilm* (students); this made them attractive to families in poorer mountain regions affected by drought (Marsden 2005). Beyond reducing household costs, having a son educated in a madrasa was also an avenue to increased status and prestige within the local village community. Drought regularly affects Badakhshan, and many of its villages are in mountainous regions that have sparse agricultural land. Villagers from Badakhshan were able to draw on the economic and social opportunities of Pakistan's Deobandi madrasas because of the region's historical connections with Chitral. Mountain passes crossing the Hindu Kush had connected Badakhshan and Chitral even before the latter's formal incorporation as a princely state in British India in 1895 (Kreutzmann 1998); during the Soviet invasion of 1978 they were important arteries of trade and mobility and continued to do so with the fragmentation of the Afghan state from 1992 onwards (Marsden 2008). Thus, the connections forged by mobile people across this transregional arena directed and channelled the emergence of support for the Taliban in Badakhshan and not simply those arising from an abstract 'Af-Pak' space.

Communities in Afghanistan received the forms of Deobandi Islam that emerged in Pakistan from the 1970s in different ways. During visits to Afghanistan after 2005, I came to appreciate that people in northern Afghanistan had very different experiences of madrasa education in Pakistan,

6 Badakhshan is also home to communities that speak various 'Pamiri' languages (notably Shughni and Wakhi) who identify religiously as Shi'i Ismaili Muslims; it is also home to Kyghiz Sunni Muslims. See Shahrani (2002).

differences that often reflected their particular regional (rather than ethnic) background. An example is a close friend, a Panjshiri man who was in his mid-twenties at the time. Brought up in Chitral during the 1980s and 1990s, where his father had owned and driven a vehicle, he returned to Afghanistan in 2003 together with his family. Two of his brothers served alongside the American forces as translators; one of them was killed in a Taliban-planted explosion in Jalalabad in 2008 and the other migrated to the US in the early 2010s having secured access to a visa resulting from his employment in the US forces. My friend's father rented vehicles to various international non-governmental organisations active in Kabul. The family lived a reasonably comfortable but in no sense lavish life, having managed to build a house on land in a part of eastern Kabul predominantly populated by Pashto-speakers. My friend studied in a madrasa in Peshawar, completing his learning in 2005 and earning the appellation *Qari*, a person trained in Quranic recitation. He told me the difficulties he had faced during the time in the madrasa. Farsi-speaking co-learners from Badakhshan had routinely accused him of spying for the Americans because of his Panjshiri background. Farsi speakers in the region generally consider Panjshir as being inherently opposed to the Taliban. Tensions between 'Panjshiris' and 'Badakhshis' also featured when he lived in Chitral. It was usual for young Panjshir and Badakhshi men to fight one another in the region's crowded settlement of Dumshoghor in which there was a concentration of families from northern Afghanistan. Sometimes such conflicts resulted in knifings and killings. When my friend completed his studies in Pakistan, he did seek employment in a religious institution; rather, he assisted his father expand his business activities, notably the sale of gemstones, especially emerald, mined in Panjshir.

During visits I made to the houses of friends from Badakhshan – both in Badakhshan and in Kabul – I often interacted with men who had been trained in the madrasas of northern Pakistan. Discussion inevitably turned to matters of faith and belief, my own religious convictions, and the role that Islam should play in the ordering of politics and of everyday life. Such interactions were different in important respects from those I had with my Panjshiri friend. For him, attending a Deobandi madrasa resulted in his acquisition of an important skill – the ability to recite the Qur'an – but not a change in thought and identity. The family of my friend embraced a flexible approach to religion's role in shaping their social relationships, daily life, and political positions.

Participation in Deobandi madrasas in Pakistan did not result inexorably in collective political and religious identities revolving around support for the Taliban. Communities and networks relate the teachings and experiences of life in madrasas to the political positions they adopt in varying ways. Shifts in the religious and political affiliations of villagers, as well as of political and religious authorities, arose over decades of interactions between

adjacent regions and in changing local, national, and geopolitical contexts. As I now explore, such shifts were informed by globally oriented movements of Islamic reform and purification as much as they were by those identifying with the Deobandi tradition.

Global Islam

Transformations of religious identity in northern Afghanistan have arisen not only in the context of an increasing degree of Deobandi-informed commitment to the Taliban. Organisations advocating for 'global Islam' are also active in the region. The term 'global Islam' is widely used by scholars to refer to 'the doctrines and practices promoted by transnational religious activists, organisations, and states during the era of modern globalization' (Green 2020: 1). Many of the most successful of such Islamic doctrines and practices emphasise forms of Muslim identity abstracted from, rather than bounded by, local or national cultures (Roy 2004).

The presence of novel trends of Islamic thought and identity in Panjshir and Badakhshan in particular and in the wider region more generally questions the region's depiction as a one-dimensional bastion of Muslim thought and identity opposed to those advocated by the Taliban (Osman 2014). Over the past two decades, various Islamic movements that emphasise the centrality of purist forms of sharia law to the making of a properly Islamic state have flourished in various settings across northern Afghanistan. These include, most notably, Hizb ut-Tahrir, a pan-Islamist organisation that advocates the establishment of a global Islamic caliphate by non-violent means, and Jami-at-ul Islah, an Islamist political party dating to the 1980s but officially registered in Kabul's Ministry of Justice in 2003 that seeks to Islamise society from the bottom up. Both organisations have attracted support, especially from younger people, in the upper villages of Panjshir and in families from these villages living in Afghanistan's cities.

The factors resulting in such trends vary from context to context. External actors also play a major role in support for such Islamist movements in Afghanistan (Zaman and Mohammadi 2014). At the same time, it is important to resist the temptation to locate these religious transformations in relationship to a single socio-economic cause or state actor (Hirschkind 1997). In Panjshir, for example, expressions of globally oriented forms of political Islam are especially visible in the valley's upper villages. Because of scarce land resources, villagers from these areas have long migrated to settings within and beyond Afghanistan to earn a livelihood. They are also known for their skills as traders. The forms of mobility in which they have been engaged over several decades means that it is helpful to analyse these traders as a 'mobile society'. Historically, people from this part of Panjshir engaged in barter trade of agricultural products (especially butter) and locally made

cloth (manufactured in Chitral) with the inhabitants of Nuristan and neighbouring Chitral. During the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, Panjshiris from these villages moved to Chitral in northern Pakistan where they established businesses, ranging from butcheries and bakeries to the hiring out of vehicles. In the 1990s, trading families from the region were key players in the import of foodstuffs, basic commodities, petrol, weapons, and ammunition from Russia, Central Asia, and China to northern Afghanistan. Several families invested the profits made in other spheres. Abdul Qadir Fitrat, for example, played a major role in establishing the Kabul Bank. A friend who was originally from a village in upper Panjshir but worked as taxi driver between Kabul and Kunduz often tried to persuade me to visit Fitrat in his Kabul office to ‘extract some money and open a branch of Kabul Bank in London’, as he would express it. Many more traders from this background are now active players in the transnational gemstone market. For the past half century, these have revolved around the Pakistani city of Peshawar, but now they stretch as far as Germany, India, Thailand, Japan, China, and the UAE. They deal with precious stones not only from Afghanistan but also from a number of Africa countries, Tajikistan, and South America (Marsden and Hopkins 2012). Participation in these networks has brought individuals and families into contact with multiple forms of Islam; it has also expanded the traders’ identity formations, connections with state officials, and imaginations in multiple respects.

During fieldwork in Pakistan, Tajikistan, and Afghanistan, I spent considerable time with traders from the upper villages of the Panjshir valley. Some of the most wealthy and influential traders in Tajikistan hail from these villages (Marsden 2016). In the 1990s, they played a critical role in supplying the anti-Taliban resistance fighters in northern Afghanistan with food and fuel. Many also maintained trading offices in Peshawar. In the 2000s, they imported foodstuffs to Tajikistan and opened factories in the country, producing sanitary products in collaboration with Turkish brands. The fact that they identified as Tajik did not protect them from attempts by Tajik state officials to extract bribes and ensure that state-favoured companies monopolised access to the market. Officials in Tajikistan compelled one trader, for instance, to abandon his extensive business activities in the country, leading him to move to the UAE and pursue different trading activities. Against this background, in which a shared ethnic identity between traders and state officials of Tajikistan did not result in personal or business security, individuals do not consider ‘being Tajik’ as a dominant factor in shaping relationships. For traders such as these, relationships of trust do not emerge seamlessly out of abstract and enduring forms of ethnicity or kinship. They arise, rather, in relation to specific transactions and are possible because of traders’ ability to navigate fraught (geo)political and economic contexts (Marsden 2021).

In Afghanistan, I visited traders who identified as Panjshiri in their offices at the Sher Khan Bandar border post with Tajikistan. These men regularly travelled to Tajikistan on business, where they enjoyed life in the freedom of post-Soviet Dushanbe but also interacted with Tajikistan citizens who were active in various movements of Islamic reform, including those that revolved around Sunni madrasas and organisations in the Iranian town of Zahedan (Dudoignon 2009). Reformist Muslims from Tajikistan also visited the Panjshiri traders in Kunduz. Participation in cross-border trading networks does not result in traders inevitably embracing reformist, global or political forms of Islam. Yet such forms of Islam do smooth over traders' relationships with one another across national boundaries and play an – albeit contested – role in establishing trust between traders from different backgrounds.

In some circumstances, activity in globally oriented movements of Islamic reform also resulted in participation by people in northern Afghanistan in the Taliban. The field of global Islam in the region is expansive, complex, and fluid. Global Islam is a field of thought, identity, and action within which different organisations and movements compete with one another for influence, support, and patronage (Green 2020); individuals elect to identify with different movements in relation to specific contexts. I conducted research in Kunduz between 2007 and 2010 and came to know several Panjshiri men who were concerned about the participation of younger members of their communities and families in Islamist organisations that they perceived as being opposed to the legacy of anti-Taliban resistance fighter Ahmad Shah Massoud. In the 1990s, the men I knew had all been aligned with the anti-Taliban forces led by Ahmad Shah Massoud. Now the younger members of these families seemed interested in Salafi forms of Islam.⁷ Others joined the Deobandi-affiliated organisation Tablighi Jama'at, a worldwide movement of Islamic preaching and religious purification established in 1926 in British India, and regularly went on preaching tours across Afghanistan and Pakistan. This was a source of consternation to their elders who questioned why these young men left their wives and children and spent time travelling in regions known as Taliban strongholds (Metcalf 2002). In Kunduz itself, the young men maintained diverse social lives and networks. They spent time with other committed Islamists who were ethnically Pashtun and took me to the houses of their friends affiliated to Sufi *tariqat* (brotherhoods).

An close Panjshiri friend in his early twenties, whom I had known since my stays in Chitral in the mid-1990s, was especially interested in Salafi teaching and scholarship. He was inspired by scholars in Egypt and Qatar and often spoke of the despair he felt at the behaviour of his fellow Panjshiris, especially those who held power, which showed that they were not 'serious' Muslims. Having worked as translator for the NATO forces in Kunduz for

7 These emphasise the need for Muslims to embrace Islam's first principles and reject what they regard as illegal innovations.

a while, he joined the Taliban and was killed by US forces in the winter of 2010. In his case, neither identifying as a Panjshiri nor being ideologically interested in Salafi Islam prevented his eventual embrace of the Taliban. In his active decision to participate with the Taliban, relationships of trust that he established with friends in Kunduz who were opposed to the international intervention proved to be more important than abstract forms of ethnic or religious identity.

In August 2021 the imams of mosques located in the upper reaches of the Panjshiri valley raised the Taliban flag rather than offering their support to the anti-Taliban National Resistance Front. The mosques had been influenced by the globally oriented Hizb ut-Tahrir. The Taliban minister of trade, appointed in September 2021, is a trader who hails from the same village as the formerly Tajikistan-based merchant introduced above. Such an appointment reflects the attempt by the Taliban to present itself as forming an 'inclusive' government. It also reflects the roles that internationally connected traders who are able to build relationships of trust play in the political and diplomatic dynamics of many nation states, especially those governed by 'strongmen' (Lutfi et al. 2021). Participation in trade has exposed families from the upper reaches of the Panjshir valley to various aspects of global Islam, especially over the past three decades. At the same time, these families have played a marginal role in Afghanistan's state institutions and lie on the fringes of the region's political elite. In this context, an alliance with the Taliban possibly provided them with the possibility of maintaining and potentially expanding their commercial activities and of gaining a foothold in the state. The traders' experiences, connections, and backgrounds are furthermore of value for Kabul's new leadership.

Intellectual activists: cultural and geographical imaginations

Northern Afghanistan's connection to regional and global contexts is not confined to diverse Islamist organisations and movements operating or active in the region. Understanding Afghanistan's political dynamics in relation to the competing authorities of state, tribe, and religious authority (Edwards 1995) overlooks the role that multiple political ideologies have on its political culture. More broadly, political ideologies are not merely a feature of elite discourse; they are layered within particular social contexts and inform identity formations important at the level of daily life. Mobile actors engaged in circulatory mobility play a central role in mediating Afghanistan's reception of such political ideologies.

The historical and sociological nature of the connections between Afghanistan and Central Asia are complex and little studied. In the 1920s, thousands fled the rise of the Bolsheviks in what had previously been the Emirate of Bukhara (Can 2020; Burton 1993; Monahan 2015) and settled in

the northern regions of Afghanistan (for example, Shalinsky 1993; Shahrani 2001), often eventually migrating elsewhere (Marsden 2021). Many settled into leading everyday lives as artisans, merchants, and farmers in villages across the region; others, especially those who had been officials in the Emirate of Bukhara, established close relations with Afghanistan's urban elites; yet others became active in movements of Islamic reform and modernisation important in Central Asia in the nineteenth and early twentieth century (Khalid 2007). In 1930, a *Basmachi*⁸ anti-Soviet campaigner, Ibrahim Beg, campaigned for the establishment of the independent state of Qataghan in north-eastern Afghanistan (Nunan 2016: 96). Emigré Bukharans also came to play a pivotal role in Afghanistan's economy and state institutions, establishing modern industries and serving in high-level state positions (Jalallar 2011). Their status within Afghanistan, however, remained a source of dispute and contest. State officials regularly referred to the émigrés as being 'from that other side of the river', a phrase that marginalised them based on the historic significance of the Amu Darya river to local conceptions of region, identity, and modern territorial boundaries (Edwards 1995). Against this backdrop, émigré families migrated further, especially to Turkey and the Arabian Peninsula but also to North America (notably the east coast of the United States). These far-flung communities maintained contact with one other and with families in Afghanistan through trade and familial relationships and so played an important role as carriers of cultural and political ideas, ranging from Turkish neo-Ottomanism to Saudi Wahhabism (Marsden 2021).

If the border between Afghanistan and the Soviet states of Central Asia was increasingly difficult to cross after the 1920s, ideas continued to percolate into northern Afghanistan. Most importantly, the emphasis placed by the Soviet Union on the achievement of ethno-national identity and autonomy as basis for economic and cultural progress and state-building (Hirsch 2005) shaped debates about the political salience of ethnic categories in Afghanistan. In the late nineteenth century, Emir Abdul Rahman Khan, who ruled Afghanistan between 1880 and 1901, explicitly embarked upon a programme of the 'Pashtunisation' of northern Afghanistan by resettling to it Pashto-speaking communities from the south of the country (Tapper 1983). At the very least, this policy reflected anxieties in Kabul about the contested identities of the region's populations, especially those who had migrated to it from 'the other side of the river'. Against this national and regional backdrop, a wide range of internally divided leftist organisations increasingly used ethnicity as a lens to analyse the inequalities of Afghanistan's state

8 *Basmachi* refers to an uprising against Russian/Soviet rule by Muslims of Central Asia.

and the country's political system.⁹ The governments of the late 1970s and 1980s sidelined these organisations. Individuals active within them, however, played a significant role in the country during the late 1980s – their leftist politics and ethnic backgrounds led to state officials deploying them as brokers between the government and northern anti-government mujahidin leaders (see Giustozzi 2005).

The rise to power of the mujahidin in 1992 marginalised but did not eliminate individuals and organisations advancing these leftist ideological influences. After the collapse of the Soviet-aligned government in 1992, many leftist figures from northern Afghanistan fled the country. In the context of life in exile, several published perspectives and analyses of past events and established diaspora organisations. Not one-dimensional in nature, these diaspora organisations played a role in shaping the ideologies and identities of mobile societies that emerged across Eurasia during this period. In Ukraine, for example, intellectual politicians interacted with a thriving merchant community of individuals and families identifying with Afghanistan that was made up of formerly leftist exiles and of newer migrants and refugees who had left Afghanistan over the past three decades. This community had close ties to Afghanistan that were regularly reaffirmed through visits and the collective mobilisation of resources in response to humanitarian crises; it was also connected to communities identifying with Afghanistan elsewhere in Eurasia, notably in Russia and Central Asia (Marsden 2016).

Other figures remained in Afghanistan and influenced the political dynamics, forging new alliances with the anti-Soviet mujahidin forces. Several aligned themselves with the leadership of Burhanuddin Rabbani, an Islamist leader from Badakhshan, and engaged in debates with the mujahidin about the structure of the state of Afghanistan. An example comes from a visit to a village in the lower reaches of the Panjshir valley in 2019. A friend introduced me to a man in his late sixties who had been active in leftist political movements in the 1970s and 1980s. The man had left Afghanistan in the 1970s for fear of imprisonment by the government of President Daud; he spent time in Iran and Pakistan, during which he fought alongside militants in Iraqi Kurdistan against the Iranian government. Indeed, villagers from Panjshir who were active in the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan visited him in Iran – a visit that some of them told me about separately, emphasising his influence in the opposition movement. After the collapse of the Soviet-supported government in 1992, he no longer feared persecution and returned to Afghanistan, where he worked as senior official in the government of President Rabbani for

9 In addition to the two fractions of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (Khalq and Parcham), several distinctive leftist organisations arose in the north of the country. See, for example, Nunan (2016: 103) on the Group of Labour (*gruh kar*) and the thinking of Tahir Badakhshi, a founder of the *Tajik Settam Mili*. See Ibrahimi (2012) on multiple Maoist organisations active and influential in northern Afghanistan.

several years. He then occupied various posts in the post-2001 governments before eventually returning to his village in Panjshir. During our visit, we sat with fellow villagers whose fathers had been active in the anti-Soviet mujahidin. In their company, he spoke about his opposition to Islamism. The men present listened attentively and respectfully to his ideas. Individuals such as him inform political debate and discussion in local contexts and in so doing ensure that the relationship of ethnic and religious identities are discussed in critical ways.

Newer and wider iterations of identity also arose in the context of debates about ethnicity stimulated by leftists and those with whom they interacted. Such debates contributed to discussions about the geographical boundaries of Afghanistan and the differential implications of these for particular regions and communities. Nunan noted that the political focus on Afghanistan's southern border has not been mirrored in discussions about northern Afghanistan. Whilst the 1921 Soviet-Afghan Friendship reserved the right for Afghanistan to reclaim territories to the north of the Amu Darya, in a renegotiated treaty in 1946 Kabul ceded all claims to Soviet lands because of the emphasis the government placed on "Pashtunistan" (Nunan 2016: 97). As a result of this decision, communities in the region which crossed the Amu Darya were cut off from relatives living in Soviet Central Asia.

Thinkers and activists within the country and beyond emphasised the ways in which the colonial processes that created Afghanistan's borders had severed northern Afghanistan from contiguous cultural contexts, especially in Central Asia and Iran. Proponents of this approach argued that the trans-regional histories and identities of communities in northern Afghanistan had gradually been erased because of colonial and postcolonial nation-building projects. Several years before the inception of Islamic State-Khorasan, people from northern Afghanistan who had occupied a range of positions within leftist and mujahidin organisations argued by way of scholarly seminars, political speeches, and publications for recognition of the region's historic position within a wider transregional context. Many identified this context as Khorasan, a term that historians use to refer to a region comprising the eastern part of Iran, the west and north of Afghanistan, and those parts of formerly Soviet Central Asia that lie on the southern banks of the Amu Darya. Most of the people with whom I interacted, however, deployed a broader usage that also included Persian-speaking regions of modern-day Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.¹⁰ The understanding of Khorasan as an imagined space arose, then, out of an interaction between northern Islamists and leftists who had campaigned for minority rights in the region from the 1960s onwards. Many proponents of this approach argued that the region's shared Islamic Hanafi tradition is the fundamental basis of a distinctly Khorasani culture.

10 On the shifting geography of Khorasan in the early modern period, see, for example, Noelle-Karimi (2014).

Others, however, argued for the need to recognise Khorasan's pre-Islamic history as the foundation of the people's geography and culture. Importantly, these alternative ways of thinking about territory and culture did not simply arise in 'diaspora communities' that were isolated and distanced from the political dynamics of Afghanistan. As we have seen, they were connected to longer histories of political and scholarly debate and discussion that were embedded within transregional ties, connections, and networks. More than only expressing narrow 'ethnic sentiment' or resulting from 'long-distance nationalism', the context of such ideas was actors participating within mobile societies connected both to Afghanistan and to regional and global contexts and informed by a history of debate about the relationship between identity, culture, territory, and the state.

Modern student networks

Most scholarly attention in the 2001-2021 period has focused on the strategies of key Kabul-based political figures from northern Afghanistan. Absent from many discussions has been either a consideration of the thinking and identities of newer generations of people from the region active in debates about the country. Asef Bayat (2013) coined the term 'post-Islamism' to refer to forms of political life in Muslim societies that arose in prominence during the late 1990s and 2000s. These did not reject the idea of a state informed by Islamic principles, but they also emphasised the significance of human rights discourses. In important respects, the discourses of human rights deployed by younger generations of educated people from north Afghanistan reflects the influence of regional debates and ideas about the form of Muslim politics and politics as much as they do a 'Western influence'. At the same time, however, Bayat's notion of post-Islamism itself does not take account of viewpoints that contest not only the role played by Islam in political life (Osella and Soares 2020) but also the relevance of human rights discourses more generally. These strands of thought and identity are evident in the ideas of individuals with experience in China who advance approaches that are critical of both Islam and human rights.

People with ties to families from northern Afghanistan that were active across the spectrum of Islamist and leftist politics are especially engaged active in the field today. Younger generations of men and women, especially from families with a history of political participation during the 1980s and 1990s in both the mujahidin and leftist movements, have sought and pursued new and different avenues of political thought and action. A limited number of younger people from such backgrounds have availed various opportunities to study in universities in Western Europe and North America. In many cases, however, individuals from this generation have attended higher education institutions neither in the West nor Pakistan but in countries in the region,

most notably, Turkey, Iran, and India, as well as Russia and, increasingly, China. Often studying for master's degrees in political science and international relations, students from northern Afghanistan have become fluent not only in the languages of Western philosophy, political science, and international relations but also in the ideas that inform the debates in various parts of Asia about the role played by religion in state and society. Conversant in the liberal ideas of the Iranian thinker Abdol Karim Soroush and in discussions in Turkey about the relationship between capitalism, the Refah Party, and nationalism, this newer generation has played an increasingly vocal role in debates in Afghanistan about Islam's role in the country's political system. Individuals from these backgrounds cultivated close relationships with influential figures from northern Afghanistan, writing speeches, composing politically informed poetry, and offering advice on matters of policy, strategy, and geopolitics.

Students from these backgrounds not only enrolled at higher education centres in the region's Muslim-majority countries. Some pursued scholarships that have arisen from bilateral ties between Afghanistan and China and Russia in particular, thus engaging with different types of Asian political contexts. An example emerges from a day I spent in Kabul's Shahr Naw neighbourhood in 2019 in the company of a man from northern Afghanistan who was in his early forties and the son of a former security official who had served in the government in the 1980s. The man had travelled to China in 2000 with a Chinese-funded scholarship that was awarded by the government of President Rabbani. Approximately 3,000 Afghans live in China, regularly travelling home as well as to settings in Asia and Europe where they engage in business. Leading lives characterised by circulatory mobility, they should be thought of not simply as migrants but, rather, as participants of a mobile society.

On his first trip to China to take up the scholarship, the man had travelled by helicopter from Panjshir to Tajikistan and then gradually made his way overland to his university in China, using a circuitous and complex route that passed through Kyrgyzstan. Since then he lives in China, where he married a local woman, studied for a PhD and engaged in various commercial ventures, including one that involved the provision of 'self-help' in relation to the principles of Eckhart Tolle (Tolle 2018). Together with a friend who arrived in China a year later, he told a gathering of men on the day I met him who were seated in the offices of an international business based in Kabul that the international intervention in Afghanistan was soon to become inconsequential to the West and its intensifying conflict with China. He argued with great conviction that this conflict with China would increasingly be fought in the realm of technology rather than on Afghanistan's soil. The Taliban and other religious militant groups, he argued, were pawns in a broader geopolitical conflict, pawns that were soon to be abandoned. His po-

litical message, however, was combined with an equally strong emphasis on the self-help coaching in which he engaged in China: he advised the gathered men to weaken their egos and live for the moment and in sensory alignment with the world around them. Part of complex, small, and geographically dispersed mobile societies, these mobile individuals play an important role in channelling ongoing circulations of people and ideas between Afghanistan and multiple contexts.

Conclusion

This article has considered the layered nature of northern Afghanistan's political culture and the role played by specific mobile societies and actors in incorporating political trends and ideologies important in neighbouring regions. I have focused in particular on mobile societies comprising traders, Central Asian émigrés, politician-intellectuals, and students of madrasas and higher education institutions. Several of the mobile societies I have explored comprise actors from across this range of types. By bringing attention to the perspectives offered by mobile actors, the article has sought to make broader contribution in two major ways.

First, it has suggested the significance of the concept of mobile society for understanding the complex political dynamics of northern Afghanistan. Challenging models of diaspora based on work in the West and theorised in relation to an idea of transnational community bifurcated between host and home societies, I have sought to bring attention to the importance of mobile, dispersed, and historically durable social formations to Afghanistan's international relations. Work on transnational networks tends to focus on their role in relationship to one or another sphere of activity, for example, commerce, religion, or politics. I have suggested, however, that mobile societies are often vectors for complex flows of political, cultural, and religious trends. Former politicians who fled Afghanistan in the 1990s and established livelihoods as long-distance traders in formerly Soviet contexts, for example, supported the activities of politician-intellectuals active in debates about the role of ethnicity in Afghanistan state's structures. It is unhelpful to locate forms of political ideology that emphasise ethnic identity or commitment to a Khorasani space as the products of dislocated diaspora communities or, more broadly, in terms of 'long-distance nationalism'. Instead, individuals involved in the creation and circulation of political ideologies are embedded in mobile societies shaped in relationship to circulatory patterns of mobility that criss-cross local, regional, and global scales of activity and identity.

Second, by focusing on the plurality of political ideology in northern Afghanistan and the relationship of these to inter-Asian connections, I have challenged approaches that depict narrow forms of ethnic, religious, and tribal identities as occupying a dominant position in the political thinking

and identities of people in the country. The political and religious fields of northern Afghanistan are multidimensional; they intersect with various political ideologies and are connected to developments in neighbouring contexts not merely because of state policies and strategies but as a result of the activities of myriad mobile societies. Multiple local, regional, and global histories of connection are layered within particular mobile societies active in the country. This is visible in the range of ideologies they espouse, the interactions between the diverse ideologies they mediate, and the identities and sensibilities these interactions play a role in fashioning. Internal diversity enables these mobile societies to respond to and endure within a fluid and changing geopolitical environment. In the context of a history characterised by state rupture, violent conflict, and international intervention, mobile societies can maintain their significance and relevance because of their internal plurality – adapting to new scenarios as they arise. The networks connecting Afghanistan to intersecting regional and global contexts will continue to play a vital role in shaping the country’s political culture. The specific ways in which they do so, and the outcomes in which this result, however, will reflect the alliances and relationships that are fashioned and the ongoing influence of shifting geopolitical dynamics.

Acknowledgements

The research upon which this article is based would not have been possible without funding from the Art and Humanities Research Council, United Kingdom, for the project entitled ‘The Afterlives of Urban Muslim Asia: Alternative Imaginaries of Society and Polity’ (Grant number AH/V004999/1). The article analyses data gathered in the context of research funded by the European Research Council under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme 669 132 – TRODITIES, ‘Yiwu Trust, Global Traders and Commodities in a Chinese International City’. It also builds on fieldwork conducted for a project entitled ‘Islam, Trade and Citizenship on the Frontiers of Central and South Asia’ that was funded by the Leverhulme Trust. I am grateful to Zalmay Nishat for his critical comments on an earlier version of the article, the anonymous reviewer, and the journal’s editors.

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