Research Report

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The Transformation of Afghanistan's Commercial Networks Post 2021: Perspectives from the Region[1]

PROFESSOR MAGNUS MARSDEN

School of Global Studies, University of Sussex

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INTRODUCTION

This report explores transformations in Afghanistan's position in transregional dynamics from the perspective of the ground level up. A great deal has been written in academic and policy circles in recent years on the role played by regional actors in Afghanistan dynamics; the vast majority of this work focuses exclusively on the level of the state.[2] The problem with such state-centric approaches is that they do not explore the experiences, strategies and tactics of non-state actors from Afghanistan who are mobile across a complex and transregional scale. It is important that such social actors and the forms of agency they exhibit are considered in discussions of regional and transregional dynamics, however. Non-state actors who are across transregional arenas play important roles in shaping the dynamics of such settings.[3] The networks they form exert

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[2] See, for example, Weinbaum, M. G. (2021). 'Afghanistan and the great powers in regional geopolitics, economics and security'. In *The Great Power Competition Volume 1: Regional Perspectives on Peace and Security* (pp. 413-430). Cham: Springer International Publishing.

[3] Yolaçan, S. (2019). Azeri networks through thick and thin: West Asian politics from a diasporic eye. *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 10(1), 36-47; Marsden, M., & Henig, D. (2019). Muslim circulations and networks in West Asia: Ethnographic perspectives on transregional connectivity. *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 10(1), 11-21.

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influence on communities, as well as states and their officials. Non-state mobile actors also play an important role as opinion formers and economic agents. Their connections to officials across multiple states also enables them to play the role of 'informal' or 'everyday' diplomats.

This report arises out of fieldwork conducted by the author with mobile people from Afghanistan whose lives and activities range across multiple yet connected Asian contexts. The fieldwork upon which the report is based was conducted in Uzbekistan (April 2022 and August 2022), Tajikistan (August 2022), Kazakhstan (May 2022), and Turkey (August 2023 and October 2023). It also builds on the author's prior research on mobile Afghans living in these settings as well as Russia and China.[4]

The report is made-up of two parts. The first part provides regional background and context, emphasising the impact of the international intervention in Afghanistan on the country's trading networks and the relationship of these to the wider region. The second section focuses in particular on the role played by Afghan merchants and traders in Turkey.[5] It emphasises in particular the role these traders play in forging connections between Afghanistan and multiple settings across the wider region and providing the social infrastructure for Afghan community life in the country.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT: THE GLOBAL WAR ON TERROR AND AFGHANISTAN'S COMMERCIAL NETWORKS

Discussions on the role played by regional connectivity in the economic development of countries along the so-called "Silk Road" reached a fever pitch during the twenty-year Global War on Terror (GWOT). The same period, however, saw increasing attempts to rigidify national borders and restrict mobility across them. These paradoxes shaped local experiences of mobility in the borderlands of South and Central Asia during the years of the GWOT and are continuing to have profound effects on the social, economic and political dynamics of this complex transregional arena.

GWOT imposed restrictions on transregional mobility and the forms of social interactions with which they were enlaced. States across the region increasingly depicted cross-border activities as a security risk and depicted mobile persons as threatening. Projects of "border security" - often supported by international

[4] For discussions of earlier fieldwork see Marsden, M. 2016. *Trading Worlds: Afghan Merchants across Modern Frontiers*. New York: Oxford University Press and Marsden, M. 2021. *Beyond the Silk Roads: Trade, Mobility and Geopolitics across Eurasia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[5] Following Massoumi (2022), 'Afghan' is used in this report to 'describe a geographic and civic identity, not an ethnic one.' See Massoumi, M. 2022. 'Soundwaves of dissent: resistance through Persianate cultural production in Afghanistan'. *Iranian Studies* 55(3): 697-718.

organisations - were ubiquitous.[6] A fence was constructed along parts of the Afghanistan and Pakistan boundary. "Border markets" were opened at various points along the border of Afghanistan and Tajikistan in order to enable cross-border trade and social exchange yet only under the watchful eye of officials.[7] All the while, militants active in the Taliban's war against the NATO-supported government in Kabul found their way across mountain passes, often paying local strongmen in northern Afghanistan taxes for the ability of doing so.[8] Fixed and rigid borders coexisted with more localised forms of control over territory in a manner reminiscent of the hybrid forms of government important for life in the region from the colonial era onwards.[9]

While restrictive border policies constrained regional mobility, major powers paradoxically promoted ambitious "regional connectivity" projects in the same period as an economic panacea, reflecting the competing impulses shaping the GWOT era. Cross-border trade facilitated by improved infrastructures was a policy formula presented locally and internationally as the solution to Afghanistan's instability. Local elites, including President Ashraf Ghani, embraced the idea of Afghanistan's being a hub of transregional trade. Formal projects of "regional connectivity" - from Hilary Clinton's "the New Silk Road" to China's "Belt and Road Initiative" - promoting infrastructural development and "people to people exchange" flourished in the neoliberal environment fashioned by the GWOT. Utopian visions of regional connectivity driven by economists and security officials also shaped depictions of the region's history and culture. Popular scholarship on Afghanistan and Central Asia emphasised the region's civilisation as having arisen though interactions between East and West in the era of the Silk Road.[10]

People living across the region experienced these paradoxical policy developments in contrasting ways. Villagers living on neighbouring sides of colonial-era borders found it increasingly difficult to meet one another and maintain kin ties. Yet traders in a hot seat of the GWOT - Afghanistan - benefitted from a massive influx of foreign capital into Kabul. Transporters moved truckloads of construction materials and fruits between Iran, Central Asia's post-Soviet successor states, and Pakistan. Infrastructural developments - bridges, new and old - eased the work of transnational nexuses of transporters, government officials, local strongmen, armed militants and smugglers who moved the fuel and shipped the hardware of the GWOT.[11]

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[6] Jones, Reece. "Geopolitical boundary narratives, the global war on terror and border fencing in India." Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers 34.3 (2009): 290-304.
[7] Marsden, M and B.D. Hopkins. 2012. *Fragments of the Afghan Frontier*. Columbia: Columbia University Press.
[8] Giustozzi, Antonio, and Dominique Orsini. 2009. "Centre–periphery relations in Afghanistan: Badakhshan between patrimonialism and institution-building." *Central Asian Survey* 28 (1): 1-16.
[9] Hopkins, B. D. 2020. *Ruling the savage periphery: Frontier governance and the making of the modern state*. Cambridge, MA. Harvard University Press.
[10] Starr, S. F., & Cornell, S. E. 2018. *The Long Game on the Silk Road: US and EU Strategy for Central Asia and the Caucasus*. Rowman & Littlefield.
[11] Marsden, M. 2016. Trading Worlds. Karrar, H. H., & Mostowlansky, T. (2020). The Belt and Road as Political Technology: Power and Economy in Pakistan and Tajikistan. *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space 38*(5): 834-839.

Economic activities have important social, political and cultural implications. Increasingly capitalised Afghan commercial networks extended their reach, economically, socially, and geographically and in the process forged new markets and scales of regional connections. Doing business with Central Asia, for example, required Afghan traders to find trustable local partners. Afghans had lived as exiles and used trade as a survival strategy across the Central Asian Republics since the collapse of both Afghanistan and the Soviet Union in 1992. After 2001, having knowledge of local conditions and state structures, small-scale market traders from Afghanistan living in Central Asia became important middlemen between Afghan merchants and local state officials.

Afghanistan's merchants successfully managed flows of capital, commodities and commercial personnel along increasingly complex routes. Wholesale markets in Moscow and St Pittsburgh, Kyiv and Odesa, and Minsk and Almaty were the nodes of a thriving range of networks comprising Afghan traders, exiles, and refugees. Commercial centres such as the "international trade city" of Yiwu in China saw Afghan merchants open trading offices that sent commodities across the world and invest capital available to them in restaurants, hotels and leisure facilities.[12] In the Arabian Gulf, Afghan merchants emerged as major players in the import-export trade, as well as a range of business activities widely held to be related to money laundering.[13]

The fragile political situation in Afghanistan alongside the increasing intensity of conflict between the country's government and the Taliban meant that the country's savvy merchants as well as the government officials with whom they worked invested in homes, permits and passports in countries whose authorities also had a keen eye for GWOT cash. Citizens of Afghanistan ranked alongside those of Iraq in the list of the most numerous foreign buyers of property in Turkey, for example. By 2021, Dubai and Istanbul rather than Peshawar or Mashhad let alone Chitral and Khorog were the cities in which Afghanistan's merchants opened offices, bought property, and stationed their families.

GWOT transformed the socio-commercial geographies of intersecting regions of Central, South and West Asia. The concurrent flows of capital and processes of bordering brought some previously distant regions closer to one another as they created a distance between neighbours. GWOT narrowed the scope of human mobility across historically connected and adjacent regions of South, Central and West Asia in major ways. As a result, the prolonged war reduced the potential for social, cultural and economic interpenetrations

[12] Marsden, M., & Ibañez-Tirado, D. 2018. Afghanistan's cosmopolitan trading networks: A view from Yiwu, China. In *Challenging Cosmopolitanism*. Edinburgh University Press.

[13] Marsden, M. (2018). Beyond Bukhara: Trade, identity and interregional exchange across Asia. *History and Anthropology*, 29(sup1): S84-S100.

across national borders and thereby furnished the ground for further inter-regional tensions and conflicts, at both the local and national levels. All this is a far cry from the promise of improved connectivity and regional prosperity made during the GWOT.

AFGHANS TRADERS, MERCHANTS AND MOBILE ACTORS IN TURKEY

The return to power of the Taliban in 2021 has had considerable implications for Afghanistan's transregional trading relations, the composition of its commercial personnel, as well as the nature of activities and geographical distribution of Afghan merchants. This section explores these transformations primarily by way of a consideration of the activities of mobile Afghans, especially merchants, living in Turkey. As will become clear, however, these actors work across multiple contexts in the wider region, play an active role in forging transregional connections and deploy diplomatic skills in navigating between complex and unfolding geopolitical dynamics.

Afghanistan and Turkey: A history of connection mediated by migration

Scholarly and journalistic work on Afghans in Turkey focusses on refugees and undocumented migrant labourers. Yet the role played by migration and mobility in mediating relationships between the countries is of historical importance.[14] During the Ottoman period, Istanbul was an important staging point on the routes that Central Asian pilgrims took to Mecca. During the Ottoman era, Istanbul was home to Sufi lodges (*takiyakhana*) that housed pilgrims from a range of settings across Central Asia, including Afghanistan. Many such pilgrims combined trade with pilgrimage and spent prolonged periods of time in the city.[15] In the final decades of the Ottoman period, new types of migration between the empire and Afghanistan emerged. Afghanistan's ruling authorities increasingly elected to send students from the country to cities in Turkey for specialist training and education. Scholars have explored the importance of exchanges mediated by elite Afghan families to the development of state structures and ideas of national identity in Afghanistan.[16] Between the 1920s and 1940s, there was also large-scale mobility between Central Asia and Turkey in which Afghanistan played a prominent role: Muslim communities from Central Asia and Xinjiang fled their home regions to Turkey often via Afghanistan.[17]

[14] Kuschminder, Katie. "Afghan refugee journeys: onwards migration decision-making in Greece and Turkey." Journal of refugee studies 31.4 (2018): 566-587.
[15] Smith, Grace Martin. 'The Özbek Tekkes of Istanbul'. Der Islam 57(1) (1980): 130–9.
[16] Senzil Nawid "Tarzi and the Emergence of Afghan Nationalism: Formation of a Nationalist Ideology" (2009)
[17] Thum, Rian and Kashgary, H.A.G.A. 'The Turkistanis of Mecca: community histories of periphery and center', Asian Ethnicities (2020).

In the 1950s, a wide range of communities - especially those broadly identifying as 'Turkestani' and comprising speakers of Uzbek, Turkmen, Kazakh, Kyrgyz and Uyghur - relocated from the cities in Afghanistan in which they had found temporary home to Turkey. Another sizeable wave of migration occurred in the context of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in the 1979. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan led thousands of families who spoke Turkic languages and often identified themselves as emigres from Central Asia fleeing war and seeking refuge in refugee camps in Pakistan. From 1983 onwards, the Turkish government actively resettled tens of thousands of refugees from Afghanistan living in Pakistan. Most, though by no mean all, of these were speakers of Turkic languages. The government of Turkey settled the majority in rural Turkey, notably Ovakent in Hatay and Tokat on the Anatolian plateau.[18] A community of Kyrgyz pastoralists originally from Afghanistan's Pamir plateau was also relocated from Pakistan to the Van region of eastern Turkey.[19] These communities gradually established themselves in the country, pursuing economic activities such as livestock farming, but also, increasingly, textile and carpet manufacture. In connection with the trade in textiles and carpets, families moved from rural areas to Istanbul, especially to a neighbourhood in the European side of the city (Zeytinburnu) that was the home of the wave of migrants from Central Asia and Xinjiang in the 1940s and 1950s. Over their decades of residence in Turkey, these communities sought to locate themselves within Turkey's cultural environment by identifying as 'Turk-Afghans', a term often used in the multiple associations and community centres (*darnak*) they formed in Istanbul and elsewhere.

In the 1990s, agreements between the mujahidin government of Afghanistan and the Turkish authorities also saw several cohorts of students moving to Turkey. Many moved from Turkey and sought asylum in Europe. Some, however, based themselves in Turkey permanently. During this period and after, Turkey's importance as a transit route for people seeking to enter Europe in order to claim asylum grew in significance. The emergence of this form of mobility saw Afghans of a wider range of backgrounds spending time in the country, and often living in neighbourhoods of Istanbul depicted at the time as sites of illegality and criminality, notably Aksaray.

In the 2000s, increasing numbers of Afghans, especially form the country's northern provinces of Balkh, Sar-e Pul, Kunduz, Baghlan, and Shiberghan, travelled irregularly to Turkey not to move to Europe but to find work and send remittances to their families. Young men of such backgrounds were employed in a range of low paid jobs in the services and construction sectors of the country's cities. Increasingly, irregular migrants

[18] Naby, E. (1984). The Uzbeks in Afghanistan. Central Asian Survey, 3(1), 1-21.
[19] Kreutzmann, H. (2003). Ethnic minorities and marginality in the Pamirian Knot: survival of Wakhi and Kirghiz in a harsh environment and global contexts. Geographical Journal, 169(3), 215-235.

also were employed as shepherds and agricultural workers in rural areas.

In the same period, Turkey became an increasingly accessible destination for Afghan families. Initially, Afghan families who had been living elsewhere in Iran, often in increasingly tenuous economic and legal circumstances, moved to Turkey. Families who had lived in Iran since the early 1980s, for example, employed people smugglers to assist their relocation to Turkey. They established small-scale textile workshops, often in Zeytinburnu but also smaller Anatolian cities such as Konya and Aksaray. Having entered the country illegally, they lived without documents and faced difficulties in accessing health care and education. Some families were able to regularise their status in the country by working with community associations established by Afghans long resident in the country who had relationships with local officials.

Wealthier Afghan families who had lived for decades as refugees in countries across the region also moved to Turkey in the 2010s. Carpet manufacturers and traders who had lived in Pakistan from the 1980s yet had been unable to secure citizenship in the country and were frequently the target of repetitive cycles of monitoring and deportation by the country's authorities often decided to move to Turkey. Families of such backgrounds often invested in houses and businesses in Istanbul and were able to apply for visas and later citizenship on this basis. These families' shift to Turkey was eased by their being Turkmen, meaning they were able to speak Turkish and often also had relatives in Turkey who had migrated to the country in the 1980s.

After the mid-2010s, the character of migration by people from Afghanistan to Turkey changed once again.[20] Turkish legislation now enabled individuals and families to secure residency permits and even nationality if they invested in the country. This resulted in wealthier and middle-class Afghan families moving to Turkey in the context of the announcement in 2014 of the drawdown of international forces in Afghanistan and the growing insecurity in the country. Wealthier families settled in Istanbul, especially in one of the city's newly developed suburban neighbourhoods, Belikduzu. Families with access to less capital settled in provincial cities in which they could afford to buy or rent suitable properties. Afghan families became increasingly dispersed across Turkey. The ethno-linguistic backgrounds of these new families were more diverse than previous waves, comprising an increasing proportion of Persian-speaking Tajiks and Hazaras. Ethnically mixed Afghan communities established themselves in provincial cities such as Konya in Anatolia, as well as smaller industrial towns in the west of the country, notably Cerkezkoy. In these cities and towns, Afghans often lived in specific neighbourhoods and in close proximity to one

[20] Foschini, F., & Bjelica, J. (2017). Afghan asylum seekers in Italy: A place of temporary respite. Afghanistan Analysts Network, 13.

another, opening small businesses and community centres. The increasingly visible presence of Afghan communities in provincial towns in Turkey arose in the same years as the far larger movement to the country of refugees fleeing the conflict in Syria.

Another transregional migratory trajectory added further complexity to the composition of Afghan communities in Turkey in the 2010s. The Arabian peninsular, especially the UAE and Saudi Arabia, has been home to sizeable communities of Afghans, especially since the 1970s. Many Afghans in the region worked in low paid jobs, while others often ran successful businesses. Businesses run by Afghans in Saudi Arabia rarely complied with legislation and required them instead to build relationships of trust with the locals who acted as the sponsors of their visas. Business owners feared either their capital being appropriated by their sponsors or their assets being confiscated by the state. In order to minimise such risks, those in a position to do so bought property in Turkey and secured access to residency.[21] Initially, Afghans preferred to live in Saudi Arabia, given its conservative religious culture and the comparatively cheaper cost of living. After the introduction of a new tax on foreigners in 2018, merchants of this background increasingly moved their families to Turkey while maintaining their businesses in Saudi Arabia. Many of these merchants were originally refugees from Central Asia to Afghanistan and speakers of Farsi, Turkmen and Uzbek.

After 2021 and the return to power of the Taliban, Turkey also became the country of residence for a broad cross-section of Afghanistan's political elite. Afghan politicians had moved their families to Turkey from the 2010s onwards. Residing legally in the country had enabled their children to attend Turkish schools and enrol in private universities. Political figures from Afghanistan joined their families in the wake of the return to power of the Taliban.

In the 2010s and onwards, Turkey also assumed an increasingly important role for Afghanistan's globally dispersed diaspora. Families living in Europe (especially Germany, the UK and Sweden) increasingly opted to invest their savings in properties in the country. Their motivation to do so often arose from a combination of Turkey's liberal approach to monitoring international currency flows and their desire to have a base in a country in which they enjoyed spending time due to its climate and culture. Owning a property in Turkey also enabled diasporic Afghan families to spend time with relatives who had left Afghanistan but were unable to move to Europe. Many diaspora families visit Turkey for short visits, yet others settled in the country and opened businesses, mostly in Istanbul, especially in the restaurant sector, which expanded dramatically in the context of the increasing levels of migration from Afghanistan from 2015 onwards.

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[21] Marsden, M. (2018). Beyond Bukhara: Trade, identity and interregional exchange across Asia. History and Anthropology, 29(sup1), S84-S100.

After 2021, Turkey's increasingly harsh treatment of undocumented migrants made migration to the country from Afghanistan considerably more difficult if not impossible. Furthermore, individuals living and working in Turkey increasingly became the target of scrutiny by the police, who raided businesses suspected of employing irregular migrants and established checkpoints in and around the areas of cities with a known concentration of migrants. Even individuals and families who had studied in the country and legally acquired residency permits increasingly feared the prospect of their permission to stay in the country being withdrawn at the point of the expiry of their residency permits. Individuals and families with such fears included those who had fled Afghanistan in 2001. After 2021, he government of Turkey essentially made applying for most types of visas in Afghanistan impossible, essentially closing routes to family reunions. In this new context, deportation of Afghans by the Turkish authorities to Iran and from there to Afghanistan has become an increasingly regular and often violent scenario. Individuals and families seek to avoid deportation and interaction with security officials by limiting their movements to daily travel between home and their places of work.[22]

Necessarily brief and schematic, the above overview of key moments, themes and aspects in migration between Afghanistan and Turkey reveals the historic durability of connections forged through human mobility, and their circular and complex rather than one-directional nature. Equally important to recognise is the degree to which Turkey has become a home or a base for families and communities that have already spent decades living outside of Afghanistan. As a result, Turkey is an intersecting point for a unique cross-section of social groups of mobile Afghans and a therefore site of particular importance for transregional dynamics.

Transnational Commodity Merchants negotiating multiple geopolitical transformations

Turkey has become an increasingly important node for Afghans whose patterns of mobility stretch across the wider transregional contexts in which the country is located. Turkey is important not only to the economic activities of traders and merchants from Afghanistan, but also to labourers, as well as cultural and political elites. In what follows, I focus on the range of commercial activities in which merchants based in Turkey are engaged, explore how they have adjusted their activities in the context of the return to power of the Taliban and geopolitical transformations on a wider scale. I first explore key activities of Afghans in Turkey before addressing the wider implications of these activities for understanding their role in Afghanistan by way of an exploration of case studies of two merchants active in long distance trade in Turkey.

[22] See also Network, A. A., & Foschini, F. (2022). Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: No good options for Afghans travelling to and from Turkey.

TRADERS AND MERCHANTS

Turkey occupies a distinct role in the activities of transregional networks of Afghan trade and commerce. Afghans living in other settings in the wider region are principally engaged in the import and export of commodities. In many contexts, Afghan merchants oversee the import to Afghanistan of commodities from the countries in which they are based. For instance, Afghan traders in Central Asia export foodstuffs (especially pulses, wheat, and cooking oil) to Afghanistan, while also importing agricultural products (for example onions and potatoes) from Afghanistan to the region. Afghans in Central Asia also leverage Afghanistan's status as a transit route between South and Central Asia, overseeing, for instance, the import of citrus fruits from Pakistan. Besides being engaged in the trade between Afghanistan and the countries in which they live, however, Afghan traders often play an important role as middleman traders with third countries. For example, Afghan commodity traders based in the UAE play a major role in the import to Dubai of textiles manufactured in Korea and China and the re-export of these to buyers in Africa, Europe and Central Asia. Established communities of Afghan commodity traders in the Arabian Peninsular, Central Asia and beyond have historically enabled newer migrants to these contexts to invest their capital in established domains of economic activity. As a result, Afghan trading communities are often socially and economically dynamic incorporating and absorbing new waves of migrants and challenging the economic activities of these in established fields.

The situation facing Afghan traders and merchants in Turkey, however, is different in important respects. On the one hand, given Turkey's status as a globally important manufacturing economy, the country has strict custom and taxation regulations over the import of many commodity types. As a result, there are relatively few avenues for Afghan traders living in Turkey to become active in the import of commodities. Those opportunities that do exist, for example the import of long-grained rice, often require merchants to work in close interaction with cross-border smugglers. While some merchants are engaged in such activities, for those without established connections the risks to capital and also personal safety are considered too great. On the other hand, given their expertise in the field of commodity trade, Afghan merchants elsewhere are able to compete with local merchants. In Central Asia, for instance, the international connections of Afghans, knowledge of how to move goods and money across borders, and ability to establish lines of credit with international suppliers all enabled them to achieve a competitive advantage over local traders. By contrast, many Afghan traders remark that 'everyone in Turkey knows how to trade' meaning it is impossible for Afghans to enter the fields of commodity trade in which they have expertise.

Given the differences between Turkey and other contexts in which Afghans traders live and work their activities in the country do not follow the pattern of elsewhere. Rather than investing in trading firms, large-

scale Afghan merchants based in Turkey often use the country as a base in which to invest capital in property and station their families. Many traders based in the Arabian peninsular purchase houses and commercial properties in Turkey, safeguarding their capital, while also providing an avenue for residency permits and citizenship. Merchants maintain their commodity trading operations in the UAE and the Gulf while moving their families to Turkey. Turkey is regarded positively by traders in terms of the opportunities life in the country offers for the upbringing and education of children and young adults. By contrast, other countries in which merchants live, especially in the Arabian Pensinsula, schools and universities are not only expensive but also often refuse admission to foreigners. Schools and universities in Turkey are regarded as being both accessible and affordable. Importantly, Turkey is also regarded as a country in which it is possible to educate girls and young women both to high standards and in an environment that is unlilkely to affect their moral reputation within the community. For these reasons, many Afghan traders and merchants have chosen to station their families in Turkey and treat the country as a site of cultural and social reproduction rather than economic activity per se.

Most importantly, Afghan merchants who moved to Turkey sought to use their commercial knowledge to establish themselves in the manufacturing sector. Afghan traders with a long history of involvement in the manufacture and trade of handwoven carpets, for instance, were amongst the first to move to Turkey. Several became active in the import of thread to Turkey from China. Others invested capital in establishing factories producing machine-made carpets in Turkey, subsequently exporting these products to contexts in which they also had established trading businesses, notably Saudi Arabia. In addition to carpets, Afghans with a history of involvement in manufacture also established both small workshops and larger scale factories producing clothing in Turkey. Across the clothing and carpet businesses, merchants were able to employ migrants from Afghanistan to work for them, thereby also reducing their costs.

Merchants from Afghanistan have sought to use Turkey as a base from which to be engaged in international trade yet their ability to do so has been curtailed in important respects by the economic situation of Afghanistan. Afghan traders were involved in the export of commodities, especially foodstuffs, clothing and furniture from Turkey to Afghanistan. In the context of Afghanistan economic collapse following 2021, traders reported a rapid decline in this type of activity. The higher costs of products made in Turkey in comparison to those made in other countries (especially China) meant the market for them in Afghanistan declined significantly after 2021.

In the context of the decline in direct trade between Turkey and Afghanistan, Afghan merchants in Turkey have sought to pursue commercial niches that have arisen in the context of Turkey's shifting geopolitical position. Traders with experience of working in Central Asia, for example, are able to deploy their connections to political and business elites in those countries to import particular materials to Turkey.

Merchants of Turkmen background for example are involved in the import to Turkey of petroleum related products to Turkey from Turkmenistan. In the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and the neutral role that Turkey has taken in relation to the conflict, Afghan traders with expertise in playing middlemen roles in long-distance trade have sought to leverage their residency in Turkey and to use it as a basis for involvement in the import-export trade. Traders, for example, import commodities to Turkey and then re-export these to Russia, enabling manufacturing firms to circumvent international sanctions on Russia. Afghan merchants trade in heavy machinery, machine parts and fertilisers in this manner.

COMMERCIAL SERVICES PERSONNEL

In addition to merchants and traders engaged in long-distance trade, Afghans also play an important role in providing a range of services to communities from Afghanistan living in Turkey. Such commercial actors play a role in providing the infrastructure for Afghan communities living in Turkey. They also provide services critical to community formation and the reproduction of collective identity.

Commercial actors from Afghanistan provide a variety of services to their compatriots living in the country. The most important routes used by Afghans to gain access to Turkish residency permits has been renting and purchasing property. In the years leading up to 2021, citizens of Afghanistan were amongst the most frequent international buyers of property in Turkey.[23] Afghans settled in Turkey and fluent in Turkish, established estate agencies (*rahnamai mahmulot*) across the country. Estate agencies from Afghanistan facilitated Afghans seeking to identify suitable properties. They were also able to mediate relationships between Afghan buyers, vendors, lawyers and government officials, overseeing important legal processes and also providing translation services.

Another service provided by commercial personnel from Afghanistan to their compatriots is informal money exchange services known as *hawala*. Exchange agents from Afghanistan remit the earnings of workers in Turkey to their families in Afghanistan. They also play a crucial role in delivering money to families living in the country sent by relatives in the wider diaspora, especially from Europe and North America. Exchange agents also play a role in the movement and safeguarding of cash connected to the activities of people smugglers. This an activity that is the focus of increasing attention by Turkey's security forces and as a result many commercial actors involved in currency exchange and transfer are closing their businesses.

[23] Levent Kenez August 18th 2021, 'Afghans second among foreign nationals acquiring Turkish citizenship through real estate purchases', *Nordic Monitor*.

Afghans with experience in commerce have also opened restaurants in major cities in the country, especially Istanbul. Prior to 2021, most such restaurants provided affordable meals and also often money exchange services to transient migrants from Afghanistan passing through Afghanistan en-route to Europe. The relocation of middle class and elite Afghans to Istanbul from Afghanistan in the period leading up to and during 2021, has made restaurants catering to wealthier families from the country increasingly lucrative. A man I know, for example, has owned and run a large restaurant in a Chinese commercial city for nearly two decades. The restaurant in China is popular amongst Afghan traders visiting from Afghanistan and various contexts in which they live in diaspora, Muslim merchants from South Asia and the Middle East, and also local Chinese families. In 2020, having realised Istanbul's significance as a site of Afghan diasporic life, he decided to open a restaurant in city. While his restaurant in China has to generate a wide customer base to survive, the restaurant in Istanbul is able to make a profit by solely catering to Afghan families. The restaurant also meets the broader social needs of Afghans living in Turkey. Middle class families use the restaurant to hold important familial and collective events, and also to gather socially over the weekend. Indeed, rather than being an eatery, the owner has arranged for a musician from Afghanistan who fled to Turkey from Afghanistan in 2021 to perform live music on most evenings. A similar restaurant in the same neighbourhood was opened around the same time by a businessman who had spent over thirty years living in Saudi Arabia until the situation for foreigners in the country became increasingly complex from 2017.

While not engaged in large-scale trade, such commercial actors do play a critical role in the creation and maintenance of the forms of social infrastructure that enable Afghan forms of social and cultural life in Turkey. Settings such as restaurants play a critical role in the social and cultural reproduction of Afghan families, communities and networks. The importance of informal spaces to everyday life and community formation is particularly important in Turkey today given both the current situation in Afghanistan and the increasing hostility experienced by Afghans in public space in Turkey. As a man in the western city of Cerkezkoy remarked to me, 'it's better to eat at home than go to a restaurant and be looked at badly or asked where you are from'. Moreover, the role of social institutions such as restaurants is added with further importance given the extent to which political divisions amongst Afghans have made attempts to forge community institutions catering to new arrivals in the country fraught. There have been attempts to establish formerly community associations (*anjoman*) by recently arrived Afghan exiles and migrants in Istanbul. Yet political conflicts and tensions arising from the previous twenty years frustrate such efforts. In this context, informal social institutions and spaces play a critical role in facilitating the building and maintaining of social relationships amongst Afghans living in Turkey.

POLITICAL AND CULTURAL ELITES

The period of international intervention in Afghanistan produced a type of actors in the country who were

engaged in economic activities yet not in the manner of the country's diverse merchant communities. The forms of neoliberal economy that emerged in Afghanistan during this period criss-crossed, as in many other contexts, the boundary between state employment and participation in commerce in fluid and complex ways. Afghanistan's political elites used various financial instruments to invest outside of the country money raised in the country through a variety of practices often referred to as 'corruption'. Much such investment focused on Dubai's property market, yet politicians and government officials also invested in Turkish property. Turkey was also regarded by politically active families as a secure country to which to move family members in the context of political violence in Afghanistan. A powerful political figure known to the author, for example, bought an apartment block comprising six apartments in Ankara, selling five of these to family members and government and military officials close to him. This arrangement enabled the families of political and government officials in Afghanistan to live in Turkey in close proximity to one another. After the return to power of the Taliban, the politically active men joined their families who had been living in the apartments since the mid-2010s.

Politicians who have moved to Turkey from Afghanistan, however, maintain in multiple respects their transregional connections. Many own property in Dubai, a city to which they travel regularly. Others have second wives and children in Iran. Still more are active in political organisations connected to the resistance against the Taliban that are active in Tajikistan, and spend considerable time in Dushanbe. The mobility and geographical reach of these families is not limited to Afghanistan's immediate region, however. Many have also been able to relocate to Canada and the USA, while others have arranged marriages for their children with families from their communities living in such settings. Politically active families often opt to find ways for their children to move to North America because it is difficult for even educated and well-resourced young people from Afghanistan to find reputable and well-paid employment in Turkey.

The movement of politicians and former government officials from Afghanistan to Turkey is a source of much discussion and debate amongst the broader Afghan society in the country. Former government officials, for instance, often referred to colloquially by a range of people including merchants and labourers as 'traitors' (*khoyin*) are said to have invested tens of thousands and in particular cases millions of dollars in Istanbul. Far from openly associating their businesses with Afghanistan, for example, by employing migrants from the country living in Turkey, such actors tend instead to invest in well-established businesses managed by locals, and, increasingly in franchises owned by major multi-national corporations. I was taken to one neighbourhood in Istanbul, for example, in which amongst the businesses owned by former political elites of Afghanistan included the franchise of a multi-national fast-food chain, two large shisha lounges and restaurants, and a local fast-food restaurant. I was told by two journalists who had fled from Afghanistan to Turkey in 2021 that the former officials who had bought these businesses had all occupied key positions in local and national government or sat as elected officials in Afghanistan's parliament. The perception

amongst Afghanistan's from poorer, and often rural, backgrounds that members of the elite living in Turkey are corrupt feeds into rumours about their purportedly having transferred the criminal activities in which they were engaged in Afghanistan to Turkey. One man told me, for example, that a powerful political figure in Afghanistan runs a kidnap syndicate in Istanbul which targets in particular Afghans visiting Turkey from Europe and North America with the aim of investing their capital. Said to be naïve and in need of trustworthy friends who know Turkish and have information about the country's regulations, such people easily fall victims to the seasoned tactics of Afghanistan's criminals. It is important to bring attention to such discourses because they point towards the acute nature of the political, economic and social tensions important amongst people from Afghanistan living in Turkey. Such tensions are often expressed in discourses that distinguishes powerful political elite from the country's poor, rather than dwelling on differences of ethno-linguistic identity.

Case Study (1): Haji X

Haji X is a merchant from northern Afghanistan who is currently based in Istanbul. Ethnically Turkmen, Haji X emigrated in the 1980s from Afghanistan to Pakistan as a young child. He lived with his family for several years in a refugee camp on the frontier of the Punjab and what was then Pakistan's North West Frontier Province. Having reached his late teens, Haji X travelled to the Saudi Arabian city of Jeddah where he lived and conducted petty trade for several months before returning to Pakistan. In the mid-1990s, Haji X moved to Uzbekistan and later Turkmenistan. In Central Asia, Haji X was active in the cross-border trade between both Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan and Afghanistan. During this period, he established connections with local officials in both countries - these connections enabled him to trade in commodities across their borders with Afghanistan. By the early 2000s, Haji X had established himself in the trade between Afghanistan and Central Asia, securing access to the visas and relevant documents that enabled him to do so.

In the 2000s, Haji X moved along with his family to Dubai. While profitable, conducting trade in the former Soviet Central Asian countries was also complex and high risk. Haji X often faced threats from the security forces of the countries in which he lived, as is the case for many Afghan merchants; as a result, he did not feel comfortable living with his family in Turkmenistan.[24] In Dubai, like other traders following trajectories similar to his own, Haji X imported goods to Dubai and arranged for the re-export and shipment to Turkmenistan.[25] He was able to be successful in this 'middleman' role because of the connections he had cultivated with senior officials in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.[26] Haji X also became involved in the trade in

[24] Marsden, M. 2016. *Trading Worlds: Afghan Merchants across Modern Frontiers*. New York: Oxford University Press.
[25] Marsden, M. 2021. *Beyond the Silk Roads: Mobility, Commerce and Geopolitics across Eurasia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
[26] Curtin, Philip. 1984. *Cross-Cultural Trade in World History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

cigarettes made in an East Asian country: he exported these to the UAE and re-exported them Afghanistan. Traders in Afghanistan would purchase the cigarettes from Haji X and smuggle them across the country's northern borders to Central Asia, an activity in which Haji X says he was not involved.

Having established a wide portfolio of business activities, and in the context of an improved security environment, Haji X decided to return to the Afghan city of Mazar-e Sharif with his family in 2007. It was the first time he had been permanently based in Afghanistan since fleeing at the onset of the Russian invasion in 1979. Travelling regularly to Dubai, and maintaining contact with officials in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan both through regular cross-border travel, and by way of their consuls in Mazar-e Sharif, Haji X also became involved in the import to Afghanistan of fuel from Turkmenistan. In Mazar-e Sharif Haji X cultivated the connections with local figures of power and authority, notably the provincial Governor, required to be engaged in this type of business.[27] During this period, a close member of Haji X's family was elected as the representative of their home region to the country's parliament in Kabul.

After the USA began to withdraw forces from Afghanistan in 2014, the security situating in the country became increasingly acute. In the context of merchants being threatened by kidnap gangs in particular, Haji X returned to Dubai with his family; his brother moved to Istanbul, where he bought a house and secured access to residency permits for his immediate family members. As with other Dubai-based merchants, a problem faced by Haji X in the UAE was his inability to secure access to long-term residency permits let alone citizenship. In addition, changes in Dubai's taxation law in 2018 resulted in the city's declining status as a centre for regional commodity traders. While Haji X largely oversaw the movement of goods in transit between UAE and Turkmenistan meaning his activities were not affected in an especially acute way by these changes, the evolving nature of the UAE's economy combined with his family's impermanent residency status in the country led him to rethink their long term prospects in Dubai. In 2016, Haji decided to buy a property in Istanbul in which his family would live, while he and his son oversaw their company's trading activities in Dubai.

Moving to Turkey was important for the family. It enabled them a path to securing citizenship in a country other than Afghanistan and meant that his daughters would be able to benefit from an affordable university education, an aspiration they shared with Haji X. From 2019, Haji X spent increasing time in Istanbul, where he had several close family members with whom he enjoyed spending time in the modern area of Istanbul in which he owned a family home. Haji X's major business interests remained centred, however, in Dubai. He also continued to play an active role in the middleman trade in goods between the UAE and the Central Asian Republics.

[27] Giustozzi, A. 2009. *Empires of Mud: Wars and Warlords in Afghanistan*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Haji X's commercial activities have been shaped over several decades by multiple regional and global contexts, including Central Asia and the wider post-Soviet world, Afghanistan, the Arabian peninsular, and Turkey. The return to power of the Taliban in Afghanistan was an event that had important implications for Haji X's activities. It was not, however, the most consequential of events or geopolitical processes affecting the forms of commercial activities in which he was involved during the period, however. Haji X was satisfied that he had brought his family to Turkey, telling me that he wanted his daughters to study and to lead meaningful lives. He was proud that his elder daughter had a driving license and drove him around Istanbul during his visits to the city from Dubai. Meanwhile, his elder daughter was studying in a well-reputed university and wished to become a lawyer or computer scientists, career goals that Haji X fully supported.

Haji X's views about the Taliban are ambiguous, however. On the one hand, he recognised that his daughters would not have been able to go to school or university if they had remained in the country. On the other hand, however, he regularly emphasises the difficulties that he and other merchants faced while doing business in the country in the post-2001 period. 'Whatever businesses I did', he told me, 'I needed to have relationships with the 'big people' (*kalaanhaa*), and pay them money. Otherwise it was impossible. They made a lot of money from the country and the people are tired of them. Now it is good that those 'big people' are living outside of the country.' From the perspective of Haji X, after the return to power of the Taliban, the trade across the border between Afghanistan and the Central Asian Republics became a lot more straightforward. While traders were required to pay taxes to the Taliban authorities, the need to pay 'fees' to multiple power brokers had ceased or at least noticeably diminished. In 2022, indeed, Haji X travelled to Afghanistan, spending a week in his home in Mazar-e Sharif. He wanted to check up on his trading activities, which he had entrusted to one of his relatives. Haji X told me that he had been received well by Taliban officials who had encouraged him to return to Mazar-e Sharif and invest in the city. While generally positive about his interactions with Taliban officials, Haji X emphasised his lack of trust in the country's long-term economic and political situation. He was invited on several occasions to work alongside a major Turkish company active in Afghanistan yet refused to do so telling me the risks and difficulties of working with Taliban were too great.

The return to power of the Taliban did not have major ramifications for Haji X's commercial activities. By the time of his move to Turkey, a great deal of the commercial activities in which he was involved revolved around Turkmenistan and were mediated through his company in Dubai. Haji X was also considering the prospect of becoming active in the trade between Central Asia and Turkey. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 had more tangible consequences for Haji X's commercial activities and plans than the return to power of the Taliban in Afghanistan. According to Haji X and other traders, sanctions on Russian goods imposed by Western countries after 2022 resulted in Afghanistan playing an increasing role as a transit

corridor between the formerly Soviet Central Asian economies and Pakistan. According to Haji X, Russian products, including foodstuffs such as cooking oil, were increasingly exported from Uzbekistan to Pakistan by way of Afghanistan. The sanctions had also resulted in increased trade in iron between Central and South Asia, a commodity that Haji X's company also had experiences of dealing in during the 1990s. According to Haji X, the trade in such goods had resulted in the main border crossing of Hairatan becoming exceptionally busy, although tensions between Pakistan and Afghanistan in 2023 undoubtedly also resulted in problems for merchants involved in such activities.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent sanction regime also opened up new scales of transregional commercial activity for Haji X and his family. Haji X's nephew, for instance, also lives in Istanbul, where he manages a separate trading company. Before the return to power of the Taliban in 2021, the company had been involved in the export of goods from Turkey to Afghanistan. After 2021, however, the economic crisis brought about by Taliban rule resulted in the market for such goods in Afghanistan collapsing. In the wake of this collapse, Haji X's brother and nephew had increasingly turned their attention to the trade in goods, especially fertiliser, between Turkmenistan and Turkey, importing. By 2022, the company had become increasingly involved in the export of fertiliser sourced in Turkmenistan to Ukraine, and they were also beginning to source fertiliser in Egypt. The trade in fertiliser with Ukraine was especially complex because insurance companies were rarely willing to cover goods being transported across the Black Sea between Istanbul and Ukraine. The trade was also high risk because of the volatile situation in Ukraine and its impact on companies in the country. On the day I met with Haji X's nephew in Istanbul, for example, he was awaiting news about a shipment of fertiliser he had sent from Istanbul to Ukraine. They were willing to play a part in such forms of high-risk trade, they told me, because of their long history of trading in Afghanistan.

The return to power of the Taliban has had a wide range of impacts upon the commercial activities of merchants such as Haji X. At the same time, however, the globalisation and capitalisation of Afghan merchant networks that was unleashed during the years of the international intervention in Afghanistan has meant that many traders from the country are commercially insulated from the economic and political situation in Afghanistan.

Haji X evaluates transformations in the political system of Afghanistan through a more complex lens than that relating to his own commercial interests alone. Connected to merchants from Afghanistan working across multiple regional contexts and engaged with local officials in each of these countries, means that figures such as Haji X play an important role as opinion formers. As a result, a consideration of the viewpoints expressed by such merchants offers further layers to understanding the political environment of post-2021 Afghanistan.

Haji views the Taliban ambiguously. At the general level, he is opposed to Taliban policies concerning the education of women and girls arguing these impose unnecessary restrictions on the educational aspirations of women and girls. Indeed, Haji X often says his decision to live in Turkey was driven by his desire for his own daughters to benefit from a university education.

Haji X, however, also assesses the Taliban in relationship to his ethno-linguistic identity as a Turkmen. Like many Turkmens living in Afghanistan, Haji X is descended from a family that moved to Afghanistan in the context of the Bolshevik revolution and the expansion of Soviet control across Central Asia.[28] The family's decision to leave Afghanistan for Pakistan in the early 1980s was informed by their experience of the effects of Russian control earlier in the century. Haji's father was keen that his sons would be recruited in neither the Afghan Army nor the mujahidin. Many Turkmen families settled in Pakistan and subsequently Saudi Arabia. In Pakistan, in particular, families sought education for their children in religious colleges, many of which teach the Deobandi curriculum, the 'school' (*maslak*) of Islamic thought most closely associated with the Taliban.[29] At the state level, Turkmenistan was one of the few countries that recognised the Taliban as a legitimate government during their first period of rule. As a result, Afghanistan's small Turkmen community enjoyed relatively positive relationships with the Taliban during its first period of government. After 2010, the Taliban's expansion across north-western Afghanistan resulted in villages and communities comprising Turkmens directly experiencing their mode of governance. As a result, after 2021, individuals of Turkmen background occupied relatively influential positions in the Taliban's administration in northern Afghanistan, even if the movement's leadership as a whole remained largely Pashtun. Against this political and historical context, traders such as Haji X are in a strong position to cultivate relationships with Taliban figures. Building such connections enables merchants such as him to have access to markets in Afghanistan and to move goods across the country's border posts. Indeed, members of Haji X's extended family based in Istanbul have also been invited to events organised by major Taliban officials during their visits to Turkey. In such meetings, Taliban officials seek to encourage figures of commercial and political influence based in Turkey to return to Afghanistan. Haji X was unwilling to attend such events because he seeks to maintain a public distance from politicians, yet encourages his brother to do so in order to maintain and build relevant connections.

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[28] Shalinsky, A. 1993. *Long Years of Exile: Central Asian Refugees in Afghanistan and Pakistan*. University Press of America. Hahrani, N. 2001. 'Pining for Bukhara in Afghanistan: Poetics and Politics of Exilic Identity and Emotions'. In Timur Kocaoglu (ed.), *Reform Movements and Revolutions in Turkistan 1900–1924: Studies in Honour of Osman Khoja*, pp. 369–91. Haarlem, Netherlands: SOTA.

[29] Metcalf, B. 2002. 'Traditionalist' Islamic Activism: Deoband, Tablighis, and Talibs'. ISIM paper, 1:24.

An especially important concern for communities living in the northwest of Afghanistan - the region from which Haji X hails - has been the shortage of water both for drinking and agricultural activity. Over the course of 2022, one of the major projects embraced by the Taliban has been the creation of a large irrigation channel (referred to as Qosh Teppa) which siphons water from the Amu Darya (the Oxus). The Qosh Tepa project has drawn criticism from Uzbekistan as a result of the effects officials say it will have on the country's access to water. The Taliban have projected the large infrastructural development as indicating their ability to bring real change to the region's people.[30] Inside and beyond Afghanistan, the project has also been the subject of criticism by political actors from the north of the country who argue that the Taliban are settling Pashtuns from the south of the country and also Pakistan on the lands likely to be irrigated by the cannel.[31] Such forms of resettlement - referred to by some scholars as a form of 'internal colonialism' - are widely regarded as a modern-day version of attempts in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century to weaken the influence of ethnically Uzbek, Turkmen and Tajik groups in the north through the resettlement of Pashtun.[32]

Haji X is well aware of the complexity of debates about Qosh Tepa and the project's implications for the political dynamics of northern Afghanistan and its wider transregional relationships. From Haji X's perspective, however, an important result of Qosh Tepa will be the provision of water to communities in a part of Afghanistan that has faced water scarcity for decades. Haji X is of the opinion that the project was not completed during the previous administration because corrupt politicians from northern Afghanistan entered into agreements with political leaders in Uzbekistan to oppose the building of a cannel in Afghanistan's parliament. For Haji X, the largely wholescale departure of such politicians and opinion formers from northern Afghanistan has enabled the Taliban to advance the building of the Qosh Tepa regardless of the positions taken by officials in neighbouring countries. For Haji X, then, the building of the channel is a 'service' (*khidmat*) enacted by the Taliban to the people of the region, and one that reflects local priorities and needs rather than those of the international community or the country's neighbours. In this sense, while being personally in favour of the education of women and girls, Haji X argues that if locals overwhelming support the building of Qosh Tepa this is not the case regarding their attitudes towards education. 'I was educated until class 6', he once told me, 'my father was not interested in education and told me not to go to school but to do business and earn money. Turkmen families in Afghanistan are like this. They are not interested in education let alone sending their girls to school.'

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[30] Duffy, S. April 19th, 2023. 'What Afghanistan's Qosh Tepa Canal Means for Central Asia', *The Diplomat*. Shih, G. Aug 20th, 2023. 'Taliban bringing water to Afghanistan's parched plains via massive canal', *The Washington Post*.
[31] Ghosh, A. 30th August, 2023. Is a 'Demographic Shift Underway in northern Afghanistan?', Vivekanada International Foundation.
[32] Tapper, N. 1973. The Advent of Pashtūn māldārs in north-western Afghanistan. *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 36(1), 55-79.

A close consideration of the activities and thinking of individual merchants such as Haji X is important. It offers detailed insights into the role played by merchants in Afghanistan's political and economic transregional dynamics. While keen to distance themselves from politicians and state officials in and beyond Afghanistan, merchants such as Haji X are connected through kin and commerce to figures of influence across the region. This enables them to engage in complex forms of long-distance trade, but also to develop a close understanding of transregional dynamics. As a result, Haji X and figures similarly positioned to him are also opinion formers whose views and political positions are rarely discussed in accounts of Afghanistan's political culture.

Case Study (2): Mr Y.

Not all merchants based in Turkey are publicly willing to think about the Taliban pragmatically, however. Mr Y is also a merchant from Afghanistan based in Istanbul since the mid-2000s. Mr Y is from a politically influential and ethnically Uzbek family in Afghanistan. His father was influential in the pro-Soviet government of the 1980s. Mr Y left Afghanistan in the early 1990s on a scholarship to Uzbekistan where he spent several years. Rather than becoming directly active in business, however, Mr Y studied at university and later spent time working in the institution in which he had trained as a teacher. After the defeat of the Taliban in 2001, Mr Y returned to Afghanistan and engaged in various trading activities until, eventually, being commissioned by a group of powerful merchants and politicians who were establishing a large-scale business that would import oil into the country from Turkmenistan. Having established the group's role in the import of fuel to Afghanistan, Mr Y moved to Turkey in 2010, where he bought a property, relocated his family, and was employed in a senior position in a Turkish company. After some years, however, he had to leave his job in order to deal with family issues in Afghanistan, having returned to the country he found it difficult to get a job, despite his education, skills and past activity - a situation he said arose from the difficulties non-Turks found in securing employment in the Turkish job market.

In light of his experiences, Mr Y decided that he should focus on developing his own independent business. As with Haji X's business activities, Mr Y's trading activities had been directly affected by Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the neutral stance taken by Turkey in relation to the conflict. Mr Y engaged in the trade in specialist mechanical goods between Eastern Europe, Southeast Asia and Russia. Turkey's neutrality made it possible for him to source goods in eastern Europe and southeast Asia for import to Tukey before arranging their onward shipment to buyers in Russia. The experience he had gained working for a major Turkish company enabled him to handle the logistical dimensions of the business without expending large amounts of capital on renting warehouse space.

Mr Y was also seeking to enter the trade in Turkish commodities, exporting machine-made carpets made in the country to Canada. The trade in carpets would involve him purchasing carpets from Afghan merchants in Turkey and selling them to people from Afghanistan living in Turkey who run business across the country. Mr Y hoped in addition that by commencing trade with Canada it may also provide him and his family the opportunity to relocate to the country. While Mr Y has established successful businesses in Turkey and his children have all been educated in the country, he is concerned that hardening attitudes towards foreigners in the country and the difficulties of securing access to employment without access to social networks will make life challenging for his children in the future.

In contrast, to Haji X, Mr Y told me that despite his experience of working in the country, and the availability of various opportunities, he had no interest in recommencing work in Afghanistan. He had been approached by Turkish companies seeking to undertake major projects in Afghanistan yet refused to entertain engaging in such activities. While Haji x deployed a pragmatic approach to working in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan, Mr Y argued that he would be unwilling to work in the country on moral grounds. He asked me how a person such as him who supported women's education could work in a country that didn't allow women and girls to be educated.

CONCLUSION

Exploring mobile actors from Afghanistan including merchants and traders, cultural and political elites, as well as workers and refugees, brings to attention the country's enmeshment in a wider and transregional context. The human networks created by the groups of actors explored in the report play a critical role in bridging different parts of a transregional context that is increasingly affected by geopolitical tensions. These are skilled and culturally astute social actors able to mediate a wide variety of relationships of importance to Afghanistan and the wider region. Traders mediate relationship between Taliban-controlled Afghanistan, neighbouring states, and local populations. Smaller scale businesspeople play a critical role in the provision of social institutions at which diaspora Afghans gather and play a part in processes of community building. By contrast, attempts by the country's political elites to form inclusive communities in Turkey are rarely successful. Currency transfer agents mediate relationships between workers in Turkey and the communities in Afghanistan from which they hail. They also facilitate the support of refugees in Turkey by diaspora communities in the west.

The forms of mediation to which the report has brought attention, however, are currently being directly affected by the immigration policies of Turkey, the EU and countries such as the UK. The pressure being brought upon mobile Afghans by these policies have the potential of damaging livelihoods in Afghanistan

and leading to further political instability in the country. They also risk undermining the forms of community being forged by Afghans of diverse backgrounds living in Turkey. Rather than using blunt policy instruments, the focus should instead lie on developing modes of supporting human infrastructures to enable historically durable yet changing forms of transregional connection. Such transregional connections result in positive outcomes for people across the region. They can be encouraged through the development of specific policies in fields including but not limited to those of trade and commerce, immigration and residency, cultural institutions and migration for education.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Professor Magnus Marsden is Professor of Social Anthropology at the University of Sussex and Director of the Sussex Asia Centre. He is a specialist in Muslim Asia with a broad interest in anthropological and historical debates about religion, globalisation and identity and has conducted extensive fieldwork in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and worked on ethnographic projects in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Ukraine and China. His publications include the books Beyond the silk roads: trade, mobility and geopolitics across Eurasia (2021, Cambridge University Press), Trading worlds: Afghan merchants across modern frontiers (2016, Hurst and Company), Fragments of the Afghan frontier (2011, Oxford University Press) and Living Islam: Muslim religious experience in Pakistan's North-West Frontier (2005, Cambridge University Press). Beyond his scholarly work, he also often write essays for wider readerships. Recent blogs have been published by Cambridge University Press, Edinburgh University Press, and Hurst and Co.. Professor Marsden has also written essays on political violence, Muslim-Jewish relations, and the historical imagination of Afghanistan for The Conversation. The *Afterlives of Urban Muslim Asia* project is his second collaboration with Afghan photographer Moska Najib with the aim of stimulating public debate and discussion about Afghanistan and its relationship to the world.

Further information on the *Afterlives of Urban Muslim Asia* can be found at the project's website The Afterlives of Urban Muslim Asia: Alternative Imaginaries of Society and Polity : Research highlights : ... : School of Global Studies : University of Sussex

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Sussex Asia Centre
University of Sussex
Arts C, Falmer
Brighton, BN1 9SJ
United Kingdom

www.sussex.ac.uk/sussexasiacentre/
T: +44 (0)1273 606755
E: M.Marsden@sussex.ac.uk

@SussexAsia

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