

Opportunities and Constraints in Central and South Asia Trade Flows

Perspectives from Afghan Traders in Tajikistan

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[Abstract]

This report seeks to explore the significance of Afghan traders for Tajikistan's economy, documenting the specific commodities Afghans bring to and export from Tajikistan, and the routes along which these move. It also aims to document the key problems and barriers that Afghan traders living and working in Tajikistan see as most affecting their lives, and note some of the opportunities they envision for future trade projects.

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Introduction

This paper seeks to explore the significance of Afghan traders for Tajikistan's economy, documenting the specific commodities and products that Afghans bring to and export from Tajikistan, and the routes along which these move. It also aims to document the key problems and barriers that Afghan traders living and working in Tajikistan see as most affecting their lives, and note some of the opportunities they envision for future trade projects.

The paper is based primarily on over 20 conversations and interviews conducted with Afghan traders in Dushanbe, Khujand, and the Nizhniy Pyanj border post and surrounding villages in April 2010. These conversations were held mostly in the shops and offices of Afghan traders in the key markets in which they work, notably the 'Afghan bazaar' in Khujand, and the Satbarg, Farawan, Korvon, and Zilioni markets in Dushanbe. The interviews and research conducted in Pyanj were carried out with the assistance of mobile Afghan trader from Kunduz who I have known since 2005 and who was on a visit to Tajikistan in connection with his cement businesses during my fieldwork there; that research also involved talking with this man's Tajik business partners (*sharik*) in their village farm.

The paper also builds on and is informed by my longer-term research since 2005 on the lives of Afghan traders in Tajikistan and Afghanistan.¹ The project aims to assess the agency of these people in forging new ties of trust across the boundary that divides Afghanistan from the post-Soviet world, as well as assessing their modes of experiencing and reflecting upon the complex and divided world they inhabit as they move through it. Over the course of research visits to Afghanistan and Tajikistan in March 2008, December-January 2008/09, March-April 2009, August-September 2009, December-January 2009/10, I have established long-term relations with Afghan traders and their Tajik partners.

Methodologically, I have sought to explore these men's life as mobile traders in the different locations to which they travel, tracing their movements between Tajikistan and a wide variety of locations in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and staying as well as moving with them in these different locations. My work has included stays in Mazar-i Sharif with traders involved in the movement of commodities into both Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, with traders in Kunduz who I came to know as the joint owners of petrol pumps and who are now shopkeepers in small towns in Tajikistan, and with others whom I first met as gemstone dealers in the north eastern Afghanistan-Tajikistan border

¹ The project has received generous funding from the British Academy, the Nuffield Foundation, the Carey Trust, the University of Cambridge, Trinity College and SOAS.

post of Ishkasheim. Over the past five years I have observed important changes in these men's trading profiles: after the opening of the border bridge at Sher Khan Bandar many of my informants became involved in the transport and sale of cement to Tajikistan, often partners in companies (*shirkat*) that now employ 60 labourers to load and unload their trucks of cement per day, as well as Tajik and Afghan truck drivers.

The Traders

Afghan traders active in bringing goods to and selling commodities within Tajikistan hail from a very wide range of social backgrounds, conduct a diverse range of economic activities in Tajikistan at different scales, and inhabit varying legal categories in Tajikistan. The markers of difference amongst Afghan traders are all related to one another, and help to explain their varying activities as traders in the country.

In terms of regional and ethnic affiliation, Afghan traders working in Tajikistan hail from a very diverse range of localities and as would be expected identify with different ethnic identity markers, although those from Dari and Turkic language groups appear to be better represented than Pashtun-speakers. The men whom I talked to for example identified themselves as being Turkmen, Uzbek, Hazara, and Tajik, and hailed from most of Afghanistan's major cities (Kabul, Mazar-i Sharif, Herat, Kunduz). I also interviewed traders from Logar and Paghman, who were Pushtun yet spoke largely Dari, often having been born and brought up in Kabul. Importantly, many of the traders share living spaces and business interests with other people from Afghanistan who identify with ethnic identity markers different from their own.

The traders also inhabit a different range of legal categories in Tajikistan. These legal categories help to determine in important ways their economic activities within and beyond Tajikistan. I can identify three major groups. Firstly, a small proportion of the traders (2 out of the 20 interviewed) held Tajik citizenship. One of these men had lived in the country for over fifteen years; the other had been born in Dushanbe. These men's trading operations very significant operations: one man imported subsistence food goods from Eastern Europe and Turkey; the other bought cement from Afghan traders coming from Kunduz, and was also employed by an important bank in Tajikistan. Traders with such a relatively stable position in Tajikistan are often the representatives of major Iranian and Turkish food and soap producing companies. At the same time, and especially in Afghanistan, much critical

comment circulates about the type of agreements that such men might have made with Central Asian governments to secure their citizenship.

Secondly, a significant number of the traders I interviewed are refugees in Tajikistan. They hold refugee documents (*kart-i gurizondah*) in the country having registered with the UNHRC. These men often live with their families, having come to Tajikistan in the late 1990s. Some were given travel documents to resettle in Canada between 1999 and 2004 yet made the decision to stay in Tajikistan because of their large families and/or good businesses. Others have moved to Tajikistan more recently, after having faced problems of various types in Afghanistan, and seek to travel onwards to the West. One man I met, for example, was kidnapped in Mazaar and compelled to make a payment of over \$60,000 to the kidnap gang; he was also made to promise to pay the gang a further \$120,000 after they had released him. Instead, he sold the goods he owned in Mazaar (mobile telephones) and moved with his family to Tajikistan, where he located himself in the northern city of Khujand (police harassment being reported to be less there) and launched a small family business in the sale of Indian jewellery imported by Afghan merchants. He now runs five market stalls in different locations across the city: two of which are run by his young sons who have as yet been unable to attend school in Tajikistan and a further two by his sister's brother and her son. He was also joined in Khujand by his sister after her husband was killed in a suicide bomb outside the Indian embassy in Kabul: this woman's young sons work as porters and trolley pushers in the bazaar. Another trader I interviewed in Dushanbe had left Afghanistan two years previously because his brother fights with the British Army in Helmand, the Taliban are active in his village and insisted that he order his brother to return home or they would kill him, so he left with his family to Dushanbe.

Traders from Afghanistan who live in the country as refugees and who hold refugee cards are mostly involved in the purchasing of goods from more mobile Afghan merchants, which they then distribute and sell at varying scales – sometimes on a wholesale basis (such as flour in Dushanbe's bazaars), and others, like those discussed above, in more local bazaars.

The third category of Afghan traders includes those who travel frequently between Afghanistan and Tajikistan and hold work or *mehnat* visas. These visas are relatively easily if expensively obtained in Afghanistan (at the embassy in Kabul, and the consulates in Kunduz and Mazar); they may then be extended on a 6 month or sometimes even yearly basis in Dushanbe. These traders are often part of medium-sized companies registered in Afghanistan, which have a varying

number of partners (often between two and five partners).² Sometimes these companies are registered in Tajikistan, although, as I explore in greater detail below, undertaking the registration process is considered difficult by all the men I spoke to, and so many traders have now ceased to register their companies in the country.

Finally, in addition to such medium-sized trading operations I am aware of one major international company that might be said to fit a much more global and dispersed model of operations than the types of trade discussed above. The Alkozay Group of Companies is a multinational Afghan operation, with its headquarters is in Jebel Ali (UAE), where it refines and packages a wide variety of teas in loose and bag form for export across the world (all of the Central Asian states, Russia, the Caucasus, Europe and Canada). The company has also launched a cooking oil factory in Turkey, is involved in the hotel and residential sector in Afghanistan, and also plays a major role in the import of fuel to Afghanistan across the border at Termez. The company made its initial money by importing Korean-made cigarettes to Central Asian states shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union: the profits from this business allowed it to diversify to the extent that it has today. It is a very visible feature of the trading landscape in Tajikistan, advertising its products widely and aggressively across the country.

This section has illustrated the complexity and diversity of the trading structures and modes of trade deployed and created by Afghans in Tajikistan. Almost all of the traders introduced above may be described as ‘networked traders’ with a myriad of connections across Central Asia, Turkey, South Asia, Europe and even South East Asia. Yet the nature of the networks they are plugged into vary in significant ways, and this diversity, combined with their ability to adapt to changing political and economic conditions, is the basis of their success in trading ventures, but also the suspicion and sometimes hostility with which Afghans living in Tajikistan are viewed by host societies. Afghanistan, its trading routes, and major bazaars and cities are critical to the economic lives and activities of those traders who are able to travel between Afghanistan and Tajikistan. At the same time, as I explore in the following sections, many others use their connections with Afghans distributed across a wide range of other places to trade, yet bypass their products away from Afghanistan’s unstable cities and unsafe routes. The life histories of some of these people, indeed, indicate that they have traded in goods across Central Asia, including Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and often also Russia. My findings also suggest that for some of these Afghans movement between extra-Afghanistan locales is more important to their trading activities than

² On the structure and of such medium-size Afghan trading companies see Lister and Brown 2004.

those involving Afghanistan. I interviewed, for example, three traders in Dushanbe who had come to the city from Turkmenistan in July 2009. They had lived in the town of Charju (now Turkmenabat), and had traded across the Uzbekistan-Turkmenistan border in cotton oil. These men had good businesses in Turkmenistan, where they had married local women and with them established families. Yet they left the country because the government of Turkmenistan made their trading and family lives ‘difficult’, above all through imposing restrictions on their ability to own property and conduct business, as well as by constantly threatening them with deportation. Their lives and continued trading activities in Tajikistan suggest the emergence of a form of Afghan trading practice and even identity that is not merely ‘mobile’ and ‘networked’ but, rather, comparable to the emergence of other entrepreneurial trading minority communities elsewhere in the world.³ Thus, whilst calls to profit from Afghanistan’s location as a key ‘transit route’ between Central and South Asia might have political traction at an elite or high level, then, the life and economic strategies of some of Afghan traders depend as much on bypassing the homeland as profiting from new routes through it.

The Commodities

Afghan traders in Dushanbe are involved in the import and export of a very wide range of commodities, documented and analysed as follows:

- 1. Fruit and Vegetables:** There is a large market for winter fruit in Tajikistan. The opening of the Sher Khan Bandar Bridge has been central to facilitating the import to the country by Afghans of Pakistani tangerines. Traders are involved in transporting tangerines to Tajikistan, their sale in Dushanbe’s bazaars, and their distribution across the country: the recent opening of a bazaar at the departure point for transport heading towards the Gorno-Badakshan region, for instance, is now a major centre of Afghans selling tangerines to Pamiri shopkeepers. Afghan involvement in the trade of tangerines is having other spinoffs for Afghan businesses in the city, most especially the opening of an Afghan-owned luxury juice bar in the city centre.

The other two main vegetables that are traded by Afghans are early season tomatoes (March-April) from Afghanistan, and potatoes

³ In terms of identity formations, one of the characterising features of such communities is not only their complex relationship to host societies, but also their highly ambiguous relationship to ‘the homeland’ as both ‘not a place for life’ (as one young man from Mazar put it to me) and somewhere that’s significance pales in comparison to the smart Toyota cars they might drive up and down Dushanbe’s streets (as a man from Samaangan who five minutes previously told me he had no intention of ever returning to Afghanistan told me).

from Pakistan, especially the red variety favoured in Tajik kitchens. In addition, there is also some early season import of watermelons and husk melons, and in autumn a comparatively small trade in pomegranates from the southern city of Kandahar. Other items imported to Tajikistan from Afghanistan include green chillies, especially in the winter. Given the seasonality of all of these commodities, most Tajikistan-based traders are involved in the movement of other commodities during the tangerine ‘off season’, whilst a large number of traders who come to the city from Kabul to trade in tangerines in the winter months return to Kabul at the end of March to recommence their role in importing cement to Afghanistan and Tajikistan from Pakistan. For others, however, the summer months mean extended periods of being ‘out of work’ and having insufficient credit to finance further trade. The only vegetable that I have heard of being imported to Afghanistan from Tajikistan is lemons in the autumn months.⁴

- 2. Subsistence Food Items:** Afghan traders are critical to the importation to Tajikistan of subsistence food items. I was also told that the significance of Afghans to this sector has decreased in recent years: one trader, originally from Samangan, said that when he had come to Tajikistan in 1997, during the country’s civil war, Afghans were responsible for the import of 90% of the country’s basic food items, and that they continued to import up to 60% of such products today. Most importantly, Afghans are involved in the import of Kazakh wheat, which they also transport to flour mills in Tajikistan, and then sell and distribute in both wholesale and smaller scales to consumers in Tajikistan. At the end of the 1990s, I was told, Afghans had imported some Pakistani wheat to the country, yet the wheat was very dark in colour and not liked by Tajiks, meaning there is no market for Pakistani wheat to this day.

I also interviewed two Afghan traders who were involved in the import to and sale in Tajikistan of Chinese rice, which is consumed largely by Tajiks at weddings and other collective events in the form of *osh* or *plov*. Smaller amounts of Pakistani and Afghan rice are also imported by Afghans to Tajikistan, although, an Afghan shopkeeper in Dushanbe told me, this is mostly consumed by Afghans, Iranians and Pakistanis living in Dushanbe, rather than being an important feature in all of Tajikistan’s markets (I was unable to find Pakistani or Afghan rice in the bazaars of Khujand or Kulob for example, although have seen it for sale in Khorog where Tajiki traders buy it from Afghans at the ‘Afghan border ba-

⁴ Afghans are also involved in the import to Tajikistan of vegetable items from elsewhere in Central Asia. On the Shahrstan mountain pass between Khujand and Dushanbe, for example, I interviewed one Afghan trader who was in partnership with a Tajik trader and importing a container load of white Uzbek onions to Dushanbe.

zaars' (*bazaar-e mushtaraq*)). I was not able to find evidence of Afghan involvement in the import or making of pasta, the cheapest form of carbohydrate, in Tajikistan, although they do buy pasta to sell in their retail outlets, and an Afghan businessmen in Tashkent does own a factory making pasta in Taskhent.

In addition to key staple carbohydrates, Afghans also import large quantities of another basic food commodity in Tajikistan: vegetable cooking oil to the country. Cooking oil is mostly imported from three countries: Turkey (vegetable oil), Turkmenistan (cotton oil) and Malaysia (vegetable oil), and, as noted above, Afghan companies are now also involved in the production of vegetable oil in Turkey (e.g. Alkozay) and the UAE (e.g. Momin). Afghan traders, thus, are successful in this trade because of their connections to Afghan business associated in locations outside of Central Asia. Importantly, moreover, these trade networks point towards the ways in which the importance of Afghans to the region economy lies not merely in the movement of goods (i.e. as a middleman minority), but also in the domain of small-scale industrial production. In addition to cooking oil, I have also been told of Afghans with bread and biscuit factories in southern Kazakhstan near the border with Uzbekistan. The final basic food item imported by Afghans to Tajikistan is granulated sugar, imported from Poland, and again shipped by Afghan traders based in Poland and Austria.

Afghans are also involved in the import of more luxury consumables from Afghanistan, and, again, there is also a significant production dimension to these trades. Most notably, Coca Cola made in the Afghan factory at Bagram is now said to have 'flooded' the market by Tajik importers of soft drinks. Some Tajik-made vodka is also taken to Afghanistan, especially the brand Shohana, yet this is smuggled, and I have been unable to talk openly about this trade with the traders I interviewed. Finally, one Afghan trader I spoke to complemented his business in tangerines and chillies by importing flavoured milk made in Iran, which his brother in Tehran bought and transported to him.

Taken together, then, food items forms one of the largest sector of Afghan trading activities in Tajikistan, underscoring their importance to the country's economy, its relationship with international markets and countries, as well as their centrality to very import internal distribution mechanisms for markets within Tajikistan.

3. **Construction materials:** The most economically significant product moved across the Pyanj Bridge is cement. Most cement is bought by Afghan traders in the Pakistani Cherat cement factory,

transported to Kabul, repurchased by traders with offices at Sher Khan Bandar and then transported, sometimes by Tajik partners and sometimes by Afghans themselves, to Dushanbe and Qurghon Teppa.⁵ At the time of writing, in spite of the global economic recession, traders were relatively upbeat about the cement business in Tajikistan: the country's own cement is being entirely used in the building of the Roghun dam, meaning that significant quantities were required for private construction projects in the country. Some traders had imported cement made in the Afghan Pul-i Khumri factory, although said this had been unsuccessful as the bags were not durable enough to protect the cement on the road journey causing high levels of wastage.

The cement business has had a very quick and noticeable effect on the border in Afghanistan and the lives of traders in Kunduz. One informant who I have known since 2005, for example, is a Panjshiri living in Kunduz who was previously in the precious stone business: he bought rubies at the Afghan bazaar in Iskhashim and then transported to Kabul for sale to Sri Lankan merchants. Since the bridge opened at Sher Khan, however, he has not returned to Iskhashim, where, he jokes, his Tajik business partner is crying for him to return. Instead, his focus is on the cement business. During the summer and spring season his trading company (shirkat) jointly owned with another man from Kunduz is able to move between 7 and 10 trucks of cement across the bridge to Tajikistan per day. He employs about fifty Afghan labourers a day to load and unload the trucks, and a further or fifteen or so men from Kunduz to act as security guards at his warehouse and office, where he originally rented land from the government, but has now bought private land, constructed a large office (where he now mostly lives even employing a cook), and store room. During the winter, as with other traders, he sends Pakistani red potatoes and mandarins to Tajikistan's markets. As noted in the context of Afghanistan, the cement businesses is extremely competitive and the relations of those involved often highly conflictual: partnerships break with relative ease, and men with the capacity to launch major companies are widely accused of having made their money to enter the market through either the smuggling of heroin or corrupt practices within the state. The other main construction item that crosses the border is in the direction of Afghanistan: Tajik- and sometimes Uzbek-made *seekh-i gul* or steel poles made for house construction.

4. Clothes and Jewellery: Afghans also play a major role in the transport and sale in Tajikistan in the increasingly fashionable In-

⁵ On the mechanics of the import-export of cement between Afghanistan and Pakistan, see Lister and Karaev 2004.

dian, Pakistan and Iranian clothes. These include especially cotton shalwar kamiz made in India and Pakistan (mostly for women but increasingly also for men, the male shalwar kamiz are increasingly worn in Tajikistan by men who have returned from the Hajj to Mecca), good quality veils (made in Iran), sheepskin coats (sewn in Istalif Afghanistan), as well as smaller quantities of suits, shirts, ties and other 'western' clothes (made in Turkey and Italy). Some traders bring these clothes by the container load, whilst many more on travelling to Tajikistan to visit relatives or do other business bring three or so bags in the cars in which they travel, and then sell these to Afghan refugees who run shops in Dushanbe's Korvon bazaar.

Many of these clothing shops also sell relatively low priced Indian jewellery, which is also imported by Afghan traders. Some Chinese jewellery is also sold, which is largely brought into Tajikistan from Afghanistan, rather than China.

- 5. Household items:** A range of smaller Pakistani and Afghan-made goods are also imported into Tajikistan by Afghans, which are very important to people's domestic lives in Tajikistan. These include, most importantly, Pakistan-made candles and matches which are especially important in the many regions of Tajikistan that have poor electricity supplies (the Dushanbe bazaar for transport to the Pamirs is full of shops selling these items).

An item that Afghans seem to have started importing to Tajikistan more recently is the *deg-i bukhar*, or Afghan-style pressure cooker, made in the cities of Jalalabad and Mazar-i Sharif. These pressure cookers are increasingly becoming a sought after commodity for Tajik women who recognise their benefits for speedily cooking cheaper cuts of meat. Traders involved in the import of these, often also transport, sell and distribute other metal items made in Pakistan's Punjab province, especially *lotas* (water pots with portable basins used for washing the hands of guests), tea pots and some conventional cooking pots.

- 6. Soaps and Detergents:** Afghans are major players in the import to Tajikistan of a variety of kinds of soaps, detergents, washing powders and bars of soap for washing clothes favoured by people living in villages and towns with poor supplies of water. These products are mostly made in Turkey, Iran and central Russia, although I spoke to one trader whom imported a brand of Shampoo ("Hamburg") that was made in the Afghan city of Herat by a merchant based in Germany. As is the case with basic food items, there is indeed evidence that Afghans are establishing soap and cosmetic in-

dustries elsewhere: one brand of washing powder, “Pamir”, for example, is made by an Afghan company based in Indonesia, whilst Afghans are also involved in the production of beauty creams in the UAE. Studies of such small-scale industrial activity in a wide range of settings deserves further exploration, not least for the insights it would afford into the choices being made by Afghans about good places to work. Not all of these ‘Afghan’ products are successful, however: one trader I spoke to said he had imported to both Tajikistan and Afghanistan a brand of washing soap made by an Afghan trader in Central Russia, although the product had not been a success, and suffered from poor sales, which eventually forced him to bankrupt his company. Finally, Afghan traders with ties to Iran also often import high quality Iranian-made lavatory paper, as well as nappies. The extremely important role of Afghan traders as the importers and distributors of both multi-national and Iranian, Russian and Turkish brands, as well as themselves producers of hygiene products is significant for what it reveals about their participation in the reconfiguration of regional understandings of gender, social responsibility and citizenship, but also because of the insights it offers into the ways in which they have become ‘allied themselves to international public health goals through educational market campaigns and direct distribution franchises’ (Cross and Street 2010).

7. **Animal products:** Turkmen and Uzbek-speaking traders from the North Western provinces of Afghanistan (Balkh, Maimana, and Shiberghan) in addition to being involved in the above trades are also active in more trading items that have been long important to their economic activities and indeed identities over the past century: intestines (*ruda*) (which is imported to Mazar, made into sausage casing, and then exported to Germany), wool (of varying qualities collected from the Katalon region, especially districts of Mominobod, Shurobod, Khovaling, and Qurghon and used in making carpets in ‘factories’ owned by these men, their relatives or neighbours), skins (taken to Kabul and Karachi where it is processed into leather). On the course of my visit to the Pyanj Bridge I saw a lorry taking a load of skins to Afghanistan, although my informants suggested that such a load would only pass the bridge relatively infrequently, once per month perhaps. The traders involved in these items themselves also say that whilst they used to be able to make a good living solely in this business they now have to diversify to other products because of the declining world market in Afghan carpets (even most Afghan traders prefer to decorate their officers with machine-made carpets than Afghans ones) and the increasing use of synthetic materials for sausage casing. In addition, the barriers to this type of work are also high: Afghans report that

travel in Tajikistan's non urban centres is difficult as they are frequently stopped and made to pay bribes by the police; there have also been cases of such mobile Afghans being framed on drug smuggling charges.⁶

8. **Second Hand Clothing:** The market in second hand clothing in Dushanbe appears to have emerged and expanded over the course of the past six months or so (I noticed a mushrooming of second hand clothes shops in central parts of the city on this visit), perhaps due to the economic recession. Most of these clothes are imported by Afghans who purchase them in Karachi and then bring them into Tajikistan. I visited the main warehouses and wholesale market for second hand clothing, but was not able to find an Afghan trader willing to talk to me about the trade.

9. **Cigarettes:** The cigarette trade is undoubtedly one of the most lucrative for Afghan traders in Tajikistan and other Central Asian states. Some of the most popular brands of cigarettes smoked in Tajikistan and elsewhere in the region are distributed by Afghan trading companies, most notably Korean-made Pine, Zest and Esse cigarettes by the Alkozay Company. There are also smaller brands of cigarettes made in India and then distributed by Afghan traders who own companies based in Dubai imported to the country, such as the M1 cigarette distributed by Donish General Trading Company in Dubai. In addition to the legal and taxed movement of cigarettes across the bridge at Sher Khan Bandar, there is also large scale trade in the smuggling of cigarettes across the border both at Sher Khan Bandar and elsewhere along the border. This is made possible by frequent and significant bribes to high officials in the Tajik government, and on both sides of the border. Afghans with their own brands of cigarettes often import their goods to Afghanistan, offer them for sale, and leave smugglers to move them across the borders and benefit from the profits, although some are also said to pay significant sums of the profit made to major power holders within the Central Asian countries themselves.

10. **Used Cars.** One trader I interviewed imported second hand cars from Germany (purchased by an Afghan trader) which were then disassembled, freighted to Tajikistan and reassembled by Afghan mechanics in Dushanbe. There is also some involvement in the movement of spare parts. Most of these vehicles are sold in Tajikistan, and the main vehicles to enter Afghanistan via this route

⁶ Difficulty of access to and travel within rural areas are, of course, a marked feature of the experience of trading minorities in many different contexts and historical periods, see Reid 1998.

are luxury vehicles such as Range Rovers and Mercedes Jeeps, both highly sought after vehicles by Afghanistan's elite.

11. Skilled workers and artists: Some Afghan construction companies, especially those involved in the building of blocks of flats in Kabul that follow Russian designs, employ Tajik engineers, designers and workers, securing the working visas of these professionals that allow them to live and work in Kabul and elsewhere. Such work is seen as an attractive if dangerous in comparison to working in Russian cities. In addition, Afghan investors have been central to the expansion and internationalisation of the Tajik music industry: the UK-based Afghan company Qiyam Entertainment has organised concerts in Dushanbe, bringing Uzbek and Persian singers to Tajikistan from Uzbekistan, Iran, Afghanistan and the West, and it has also launched concerts involving singers from Tajikistan for Iranian and Afghan diasporic audiences in the UK, Canada, and the USA. As a result, Afghan entrepreneurs in the entertainment industry are playing a critical role in the expansion of national subjectivities and the forging of larger scale regional identities.

The Routes

As the above section on commodities suggests, Afghan traders are involved in the movement of goods along a wide range of different routes, many of which do not include Afghanistan itself.

- 1. Peshawar-Kabul-Kunduz-Sher Khan Bandar-Qurghon Teppa-Dushanbe:** This route is used largely for the transport into Tajikistan of cement and vegetables and into Afghanistan of the transport of metal poles for construction. Most traders hire Tajik transportation companies to move the cement from their warehouses at Sher Khan Bandar to destinations and warehouses in Tajikistan, although one trader based in Sher Khan I interviewed had recently bought a Mercedes truck for \$66,000 in Kabul for which he had made the official documents to allow it to carry a full load to Dushanbe: he had also arranged for the Afghan driver to have a six month Tajikistan working visa and paid \$200 for a flat in Dushanbe for him to stay at.
- 2. Bandar Abbas-Transit Iran-Transit Turkmenistan-Aqinah (Afghanistan/Turkmenistan border)-Sher Khan Bandar-Dushanbe:** This route was used by one Afghan trader I interviewed who was importing cigarettes to Tajikistan after Uzbekistan had refused to give permission for the transit of Tajikistan-destined goods through its territory in March 2010, underscoring the impor-

tance of Afghanistan's trading routes as alternatives and back roots for Tajikistan.

3. **International ports (especially Malaysia)-Bandar Abbas-Transit Iran-Transit Turkmenistan-Transit Uzbekistan-Denau-Dushanbe:** This route is used largely for cooking oil, Iranian soaps and cosmetics, Turkmen cotton cooking oil.
4. **Istanbul: Transit Iran-Transit Turkmenistan-Transit Uzbekistan-Denau-Dushanbe:** Turkish cooking oil and cosmetics.
5. **Uzbekistan-Tajikistan-Khujand-Dushanbe:** There is some evidence of Uzbek products moving across this border, although this could be more because of particularities of border issues at the time of research.
6. **Kazakhstan-Uzbekistan-Tajikistan:** Kazakh flour and pasta.
7. **Kazakhstan-Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan:** Kazakh four and pasta.
8. **Urumchi-Dushanbe (Air):** Mobile phones, jewellery.
9. **Urumchi-Pamir-Khorog-Dushanbe:** Tooth brushes.
10. **Europe-Ukraine-Kazakhstan-Uzbekistan-Tajikistan:** Used cars and spare parts, Polish Chrystal sugar.

Both the China routes mentioned above featured very infrequently in my interviews with Afghan traders: most remarked that it was not profitable to bring products across this border because of high Tajik import duties, some commented that Afghans were involved in the smuggling of small quantities of Chinese products into Tajikistan from Afghanistan. Likewise, traders cannot use the port in Karachi to transit goods through Afghanistan as Pakistan does not give permission to transit goods to Afghanistan that are produced outside Pakistan.

Institutional and other Barriers faced by traders

Of the formal interviews conducted, questions concerning the problems faced by Afghan traders working in Afghanistan were the most sensitive and difficult for the traders I spoke to. One man commented that the government of Tajikistan rules by force making any form of trade there difficult, especially for Afghans. Another, however, argued that Afghans faced exactly the same problems and opportunities as other traders in the country, and that these were created by them brea-

king the law or the general economic conditions as opposed to obstacles placed before traders. Such disagreements suggests the very different types of relationships that the Afghan traders I met have with the state and state officials in Tajikistan. The majority of respondents who engaged in this issue however either pointed towards or hinted of having to constantly negotiate major difficulties as traders.

1. Rent-seeking. The issue of the rent-seeking of both Afghan and Tajik officials came up in all of the interviews, although the specific nature and degree of this rent-seeking or its relative significance in the two different countries was difficult to ascertain. For example, one trader estimated that each Kamaz of carrying a load of cement from Nizhniy Pyanj to Dushanbe would have to pay to the Tajikistan traffic police approximately 150 Somoni (\$50), whilst another trader involved in the same business said that he could expect to pay rents of at least \$700 on the same route.

There are, of course, significant differences in the ways in which individual traders are treated at the border, depending on the relations they have with border officials. I have attended dinners in Kunduz, for example, when border officials have been guests in the houses of Afghan traders. One trader, from Afghan Badakshan, suggested that there might also be ethnic factors operating in determining how different traders were treated at the border. He claimed that he had no problems when bringing his container loads of clothes across the border, but that he did know that Pushtun-speaking Afghans were treated with less fairness, often being made to unload their containers, and pay bigger bribes (*rishwat*).

2. Visas and Official Permissions: Most traders suggested that the procurement and extension of Tajikistan work or trading visas was not a major problem for them. Some claimed procuring a visa involved the expenditure of very considerable amounts of money (up to \$1500) in Afghanistan, yet many also said that the extension of trade visas in Dushanbe had become far easier and faster over the past year, and with the help of a middleman or woman could be done in 1 day with an expenditure of \$250. The traders were also divided in their opinions regarding the issue of the work permit (*kard-i mehnati*) and company license: the former was said to involve an expenditure of about \$250 per year, whilst the latter a more complex process that involved showing the employment of a Tajik worker or partner and also the renting of both office and living space. More generally, one trader also complained that monies were often expended on securing the correct documents to allow for the export, import and transportation of goods, especially because of constantly changing legal requirements, the unavailability

of Tajik officers at their desks, and poor information about changes in legal requirements for the import and export of goods.

- 3. Security:** All traders who used the Afghanistan route commented that security on the road between Kunduz and Kabul had worsened over the course of the past year: one man claimed that he had been fired at by the Taliban whilst bringing a consignment of clothing. Most traders continue to travel between Afghanistan and Tajikistan by road, although the launch of a twice weekly flight by Kam Air between Dushanbe and Kabul in addition to the pre-existing Ariana flight makes travel between the countries safer from the view point of some traders: both of these flights were heavily booked when I flew in both directions in January 2010. At the same time, improved air services by Pamir Airlines between Kabul and Kunduz also means that traders can bypass the most dangerous part of the overland route between Kabul and Tajikistan. None of the cement traders cited security on the Kunduz road as posing them major problems: the Taliban did not target them and had caused them no problems, yet most traders with warehouses in Sher Khan Bandar do employ armed security guards at their offices and warehouses.

Concerns for personal safety, however, were of significant importance for traders from Mazar-i Sharif and Kabul. As noted above, one man had decided to close his significant mobile telephone business in Mazar-i Sharif having been kidnapped in his home town, whilst another trader involved in the transportation of goods to Afghan Badakshan had been forced to shift his trading activities to Tajikistan because of his brother's activities in Afghanistan

Finally, as is widely recognised, many traders do not bring goods such as cooking oil from Dubai via Karachi and Peshawar to Tajikistan both because of restrictions on transit goods through Pakistan but also because the conditions of the roads in Pakistan and the slow movement of vehicles across the Pakistan/Afghanistan border, where goods are also often stolen and destroyed. As a result, most traders prefer to bring the goods in sealed transit vehicles through Iran, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, even if this means negotiating the occasional closure of the Uzbekistan/Tajikistan border. As we have seen, this can be circumvented by bringing goods from Turkmenistan into Afghanistan at Aqinah and then transporting them by way of Mazar to Kunduz, again placing traders with access to Afghanistan at an advantage to local traders. Security, however, on the road between Mazaar and Aqchah is also said to have deteriorated over recent months, making trips by traders to the Aqinah border post, often a necessity in Afghanistan given hold-ups of goods at borders, potentially more difficult.

- 4. Tajikistan's Current Economic and Political Situation/Border closure with Uzbekistan:** A particular important issue at the time of research in March 2010 was the ongoing border dispute between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan concerning Tajikistan proposed Hydro-Electric plant in Roghun. The main border point between the two countries at Denau had been closed for several weeks leaving, I was told, up to 2000 loaded vehicles stranded there, and leading to the degradation of hundreds of tonnes of food items. As a result of this, many of the Afghans to whom I spoke had stopped their role in the import of goods and had opened retail outlets instead. At the same time, all of the traders commented that the buying power of Afghans had also been weakened by the building of the Roghun power dam and the requirement of Tajik citizens to buy shares in this. The closure of the border combined with the general economic situation in the country was leading some of the Afghans I spoke to reconsider their activities in Tajikistan. One man involved in the sale of soaps and detergents told me that the crisis had led him to decide that he would leave Tajikistan: he was considering moving either to Istanbul or Dubai to continue his trading activities. Another trader in flour and oil told me that he had decided to stay in the country for another four months, at which point, if things had not improved he intended to return to Moscow where he had lived as a trader for ten years before coming to Tajikistan.
- 5. Tajikistan Police:** As many of the Afghan traders I interviewed had experience of trading in other Central Asian countries, Iran and Pakistan they were able to make comparisons regarding their treatment by the state with other contexts. The question of police harassment was a focus of discussion in several conversations: traders with experience in Iran all claimed that they faced less problems with the Tajik as compared to Iranian police, although those who had worked in Russia (especially Moscow and Rostov where they owned soap businesses) claimed the Tajik police were more difficult to interact with than the Russian police. In spite of these comparisons, however, all the Afghans I spoke to claimed that their movement and living conditions were restricted by the complexity of their engagement with the Tajik police and that this was the most negative feature of their experience of life in the country. Most employ relatively expensive middlemen or women to secure the registration of their passports with the OVIR, whilst many preferred to make short trips to the country and stay in relatively expensive hotels rather than apartments because they felt more secure and protected from the police in hotels. One trader also commented that if a Tajik partner or debtor failed to repay his debts there was little legal help available in the retrieval of debts.

6. Consular Assistance: Several of the traders I met commented that the Afghan consulate in Dushanbe offered them less assistance than they would have liked in terms of the problems they faced with the Tajikistan state and in everyday matters such as the renewal of their Afghan passports and licenses. More generally, indeed, they refer to themselves as being '*besahib*' (without a master), which immediately puts them at a disadvantage in relationship to traders from other countries, especially Iran, the consular officials of which take the safety and security of their traders as being a high priority.

The Possibilities/Policy suggestions

As the above section suggests, many Afghan traders in Dushanbe today are concerned about their futures in the countries, and few talked of future possibilities with much conviction. One trader suggested, indeed, that many of the Afghans coming to Tajikistan were defaulters looking to escape those in their pursuit and earn a basic livelihood.

Some points for discussion that did emerge, however, included:

1. An improved and wider road to China via the Pamirs that would allow Afghan traders to bring Chinese goods to Afghanistan on a transit basis. The lack of facility for transit trade and the fact that only medium-sized vehicles could move along this road mean that at present the Chinese route was not a profitable one. Traders involved in the cement business were happy with the road being built with Japanese assistance between the Afghanistan/Tajikistan border and Kum Sangir.

Conclusion

Profiting from their connections to markets across the world, moments of instability within particular Central Asian countries such as Tajikistan, as well as their knowledge of local and international languages, trading routes, and commodity chains that have historically formed apart of the world they inhabit, Afghans are now a visible and established trading minority in Tajikistan, and, likely, elsewhere in Central Asia. It is difficult, indeed, to over estimate the importance of Afghan traders to supplying the markets of Tajikistan even if their significance to trade between Afghanistan and Tajikistan and each of the Central Asia states has decreased over the past ten years or so. Equally importantly, they are also playing an increasingly active role in the production of subsistence products include flour and soaps both in this region and elsewhere.

Afghans are not only central to the import to Tajikistan of subsistence food items and basic domestic commodities, they are also playing an active and critical role in responding to and themselves forging changes in cultural patterns of consumption in the country, as their role in the import of clothes and cosmetics from India, Pakistan and Iran as well as their significance to the internationalisation of Tajikistan's music industry suggests. Both academics and policy makers have written a great deal in recent years about the possibilities of greater regional coherence between parts of Asia once divided by cold war barriers, and the significance of these for the ongoing political instability of Afghanistan itself. In this paper I hope to have suggested how far the experiences and reflections of life on the move in Afghanistan and Central Asia by the men whose lives I have brought attention to explored will play a critical and perhaps longer lasting role in shaping the region's peoples attempts to address past grievances and forge future identity and economic projects than those emanating from international policy-makers. This, then, is a reason as much as of 'the economy' to take careful note of their complex and nuanced perceptions of life on the move across the Frontiers of South and Central Asia.

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