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Mobile Life on the Frontiers of *Crossroads Asia*

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Mobile Life on the Frontiers of *Crossroads Asia*¹

Magnus Marsden*

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1. Introduction

Today the Afghan-Pakistan Frontier is depicted as the world's premier place of violence and lawlessness, an incubator of chaos and radicalism which threatens the stability of all who come into contact with it. The very titles of some works suggest reductionist visions of this arena as being one-dimensionally defined by the past and future 'militancy' of its peoples, for example Joshua White's *Pakistan's Islamist Frontier* (2008). More sophisticated yet equally problematic conceptualizations of the Frontier's cultural and political make-up also exist. One seeks to elide the Frontier's political and cultural heterogeneity by depicting its inhabitants as part of a homogenous group occupying a singular space: the term 'Af-Pak' ignores the multiple self-identifications nurtured by the region's inhabitants. It also renders insignificant the very different types of modernizing processes the region's states have unleashed on local populations. A second mode of representing this space characterizes the Frontier as a 'non-place', a chaotic buffer zone situated between the 'real' regions of South and Central Asia. This reading of the Frontier traces its genealogy to the imperial ideas of British India and the so-called 'Great Game' it purportedly played with Russia for supremacy of Inner Asia. It has been energized by recent popular studies, most especially Rory Stewart's revealingly entitled *The places in between* (2006). Such caricatures of the Frontier as a vacuum-like 'non-space' resurface in policy circles, notably under the guise of the "ungoverned territory" – a concept carefully dissected recently by Conrad Schetter (2010).

The aim of the project which we are here to launch today is to create a more dynamic, nuanced and sophisticated understanding of this space. Such an understanding offers not only a picture of greater complexity of the space itself, but also the imprint on it of the various forms of moral and political agency enacted by its inhabitants, and the multiple networks of relationships within which these peoples' lives are entwined.

There has been a tendency in particular to overlook the lived connectedness of life across the former Cold War boundaries of South and Central Asia. Commentators have preferred to focus on ties between South Asia and the Middle East or the Gulf. This is partly because *Crossroads Asia* lies at the 'fringes of the intellectual frameworks known as "area studies"' (van Schendel 2002: 647). As a result, few scholars considered the connections between societies on the peripheries of South and Central Asia, the ways in which these illuminate the nature political and religious dynamics unfolding across these spaces, or the thinking and self-understanding of their peoples. The work of those who have – many of whom are gathered here today - has revealed the wider significance to the region's polities of 'identifications, hybrid identities, diasporic existences, minorities, and marginal communities' (Navaro-Yashin 2002: 74). Yet all too often this body of work has been treated by non-specialists and policy makers alike as being about a remote if not inconsequential region that is home to many 'minorities' yet few communities – social, geographic, or religious – of central importance to the region's political future.

The new scale of thinking epitomized in the idea of *Crossroads Asia* brings into focus, rather, how different parts of South and Central Asia as well as the Middle East interact with one another, influencing the lives of millions, even if the communities themselves described from the national

view of things appear as minorities. We have heard a great deal in recent years, for example, about 'global Islam', 'the piety movement', Islamization, "transnationalism". Yet considerations of the mobile lives of people in *Crossroads Asia* point equally to the importance of understanding more local, intimate, contextual and material forms of connectivity, as well as the lived and experienced geographies these are entwined with. Both such connections and alternative geographies are related in complex ways to people's identities, intellectual lives and political and economic circumstances. They are made and enacted in particular and richly experienced contexts, themselves in need of greater investigation and analysis. These contexts range from village paths, to bazaars, petrol pumps, mosques, the guesthouses of politicians, *madrassas*, apartment blocks, hotels, Soviet-era spas and "places of relaxation" (*istorohatgah*), and even, God Forbid, discos. These are sites, moreover, where men and women exert considerable effort, and deploy sensitive processes of moral and ethical judgment, to establish relations and forms of intimacy that cut-across boundaries of ethnicity, sect, political identifications, ideology and nation. While some of these relations and the settings in which they are enacted and cultivated are founded on the unifying principles of, many others speak as much to local understandings of and ideologies about the centrality of humanity (*insaniyat*) to a person's attempts to live wisely and well.

One impulse for the re-alignment in scholarly interest towards *Crossroads Asia* and the particular people and contexts that make it, is growing global political and economic significance: "Greater Central Asia", according to Canfield, is currently enjoying a "new centrality ... in the affairs of the world" (Canfield 2010: 1). Yet there are good reasons to resist the temptation of seeking to establish a new scholarly region, be it *Crossroads Asia* or Greater Central Asia. Scholars involved in attempts made after the collapse of the Soviet Union to fashion the study of a Turko-Persian culture area, soon recognized how far the assumption that the ideological differences that marked people, communities and states on different sides of the Cold War could be simply papered over by pre-modern cultural commonalities was an inherently problematic one. In today's context, there is also the added risk of academics using as an analytical device a concept – regional cooperation – that is important to the livelihoods of many of the region's people. Ideas and practice framed in relationship to the notion of 'regional cooperation' are firmly entangled in the political economies of the societies and people we are studying. In today's context, moreover, it is also important to be mindful of Presanjit Duara's argument that the very idea of "region" is historically tied to 'imperial attempts to create economic blocs in which colonies or subordinate territories were promised self-governing status and other concessions, and sometimes were even constituted as nominally sovereign nation-states, although they remained militarily in the thrall of the metropole' (Duara 2010: 966).

2. Tunnels: Changing Political Contexts

My own interest in *Crossroads Asia* developed during the course of research in villages and small towns of the Chitral region in northern Pakistan between 1995 and 2007. Chitral is home to about 400,000 Khowar-speaking people who identify themselves as being either Sunni or Shi'a Ismaili Muslims. Most if not all Chitralis define themselves in contrast to the predominantly Pashtu-speaking populations of what is now officially Pakistan's Khyber-Pukhtunkhwah province: Chitralis say that

they are polite and civilized in comparison to Pashtuns, and that their language - Khowar - is closely related to Farsi, making it sweet and poetic (*shirin*) unlike the hard or *sakht* Pashto. Much anthropological work has focused on the “Punjabization” of Pakistan’s national culture (Jaffrelot 2002). Yet during my time in Chitral I heard more people reflecting on their historic and cultural connections to a wider Farsi-speaking world. The “Farsization” of Chitrali culture (*chitraro saqafat*) was often discussed, and especially evident, according to my informants, in the increasing use of Persian words and concepts in local poetic and musical traditions.

Many Chitralis ranging from Khowar-language poets, musicians and local intellectuals to some of Chitral’s Sunni and Ismai’li religious authorities who are active in the teaching of Persian language religious texts, play an active role in the mapping of their region in relationship to a wider extra-national Persianate world. Unsurprisingly, the re-naming of the Frontier province as “Khyber-Pukhtunkhwah” is considered by some - although by no means all - Chitralis as reflecting an attempt by regional elites to map their region as part of a homogenous Pashtun political space. Such totalizing understandings of the relationship between space and culture have, indeed, shaped the thinking of those seeking to shape regional dynamics from outside: hawks in the US media and military, for example, have written that Chitral’s people are heirs to a ‘tribal idea of hospitality’, which both compelled them to host Bin Laden and accept his largesse.² The making of such assertions about a people who actually distinguish themselves from Pashtuns and the so-called moral code of Pashtunwali indicates the continuing lack of understanding of this region’s cultural heterogeneity, and its political significance.

Chitralis, however, are actively engaged not only in the production of alternative geographical imaginaries, but also of spatial arenas that are lived and experienced. The past decade in Chitral, as across *Crossroads Asia*, has seen the completion of major infrastructural projects that have changed peoples world, and the connections and ties of these to myriad points and spaces beyond. Until 2009 all land routes to Chitral were cut-off by snow between November and May. During these months, travelers to and from the region were compelled to travel by way of a dangerous overland route through eastern Afghanistan or to try their luck with the unreliable airplane service between Chitral and Peshawar. Today, however, a tunnel that connects Chitral to “down Pakistan” (*aff Pakistan*) is complete. During my stays in Chitral, Chitralis identified themselves as being either “for the tunnel” (*lowari belik*) and “against the tunnel” (*nobelik*). Some argued the tunnel would lead to an influx of Pashto-speakers who would buy local land and marry Chitrali girls. Others said that this scenario was being peddled by local nexus of merchant-politicians who made high profits from the sale of basic food items to Chitral during the winter months, and who wished to maintain these price differentials and their stranglehold on local politics.

The tunnel’s completion, however, is now exciting debate about connections with points beyond Pakistan, both within Chitral and in the neighbouring Afghan province of Badakshan. It has also spawned new geographic imaginaries. These debates – raised by villagers, for example, in mosques on the occasion of their MP’s yearly visit from Kabul to their village in Badakshan - concern along which of the region’s valleys a road connecting Chitral to both Tajikistan and Afghanistan’s

² According to Daniel Benjamins (2007) who ‘tracked Bin Laden during the Clinton administration’ and is now ‘of’ the Brookings Institute, Chitralis have ‘a code of hospitality for guests and they have probably gotten [sic] a fair amount of money from Bin Laden’,

Badakshan province should be built. As Professor Kreutzmann has shown for the past, Chitral is not some mountain cul de sac, princely-state addendum to the 'real' Pushtun Frontier of British India, or home to a politically insignificant ethnic minority (Kreutzmann 1998). It is, rather, a connective point between worlds, the significance of which waxes and wanes historically, and cannot be understood if looked at merely through the simplifying political lenses of majority and minority communities.

In what ways do Chitralis and the wider region's inhabitants themselves perceive, act within and seek to understand this geo-politically divided and culturally discontinuous space?

3. BBC: Badakshan, Badakshan, Chitral

I want to explore these questions now by considering three mobile fragments of *Crossroad Asia* that I have encountered during my work there: kinship ties between Chitralis and Badakshi Afghans; Chitrali experience of modern employment in both Tajikistan and Afghanistan; and the circulatory lives of Afghan traders in Chitral, northern Afghanistan and Tajikistan. Rather than seeking to show how all these ties come together to fashion a region, I hope to bring attention to the forms of skill and aptitude they require from those who seek to benefit from them, and the perils, often unexpected, involved in moving across this world.

From the 1980s onwards, Chitral was a home, safe haven (*sukoono zharagh* or *joy-e aman*), temporary base, way-station, place of rest, and trading entrepôt, for thousands of refugees, migrant labourers, sojourners, mujahidin commanders and fighters, travelers and traders from Afghanistan and Tajikistan. Far from provoking the emergence of de-cultural and avowedly religious forms of Muslim identity in the region, these mobile people facilitated a wide range of older and newer forms of interchange and interaction between these spaces and their populations. They also contributed to the re-mapping of Chitral within part of a wider trans-regional space. This space was forged through the lived and intimate coexistence of Afghan and Tajik incomers with Khowar-speaking peoples. Chitralis shared their homes, engaged in conversations, and sought out the incomers as their friends. They interacted with Badakshi Afghans, for example, who, having been trained as border guards during the government of Dr Najib in the 1980s, had experience of work and education in the Soviet world. This was a world from which Chitral had itself been decisively geographically cut off from since the mid 1930s. Indeed, from the 1970s onwards – as scholars such as Humeira Iqtidar have shown – the cooptation of leftist political platforms by Islamic parties and movements meant that knowledge about the socialist world seeped very irregularly into contexts such as Chitral, despite its proximity to the Soviet Union.³ Such interactions were inevitably coloured by suspicion and hostility: Badakshis who brought their animals for sale in Chitral, claim that Chitralis refused to allow them access to grazing pastures en route, purportedly with the aim not merely of preserving scarce grazing land, but also of ensuring that the Afghan beasts (*mal*) would be emaciated on their arrival in Peshawar and thus unable to command a high price in its meat market. Today villagers in Badakshan joke that it is the Chitralis who are bringing their animals for sale in Afghanistan.

³ E.g. Humeiar Iqtidar "Jama'at-e-Islami Pakistan: Learning from The Left" in Naveeda Khan ed., *Beyond Crisis: Re-evaluating Pakistan*, Routledge, 2010.

The presence of these people in Chitral's villages also led, however, to the re-activation of kin ties between relatives who are dispersed across all of these three countries yet who had not directly interacted with one another for seventy years. Many Chitralis I know are aware of their families' transregional pasts, and of their kin ties to communities in neighbouring regions of both Afghanistan and Tajikistan. Afghans and Tajiks in Chitral, thus, were not merely greeted as refugees or displaced persons in the villages to which they travelled. They were, rather, greeted by Chitralis in relation to social categories that are shared by all of the region's peoples: they were relations (*rishtadar* or *khesh tabor*), lords (*lal*), serfs or peasants (*chirmuzh* or *dehqan*), descendents of the prophet (*seyyid*), followers of particular Islam men of spirituality (*murids*), and nobleman (*adamzada*). Important signs of equivalence or mutually recognizable symbols also exist that assisted people in seeing something of home away from home. In both Badakshan and Chitral, for example, the ability for a man of influence to symbolically demonstrate his authority by sitting under the cool shade (*chargh* or *sayah*) of the Chinar, a tree whose roots materialize the man's deep genealogy, is a way in which power and distinction is enacted.

Many Badakshis came to Chitral from Afghanistan in the first decades of the twentieth century. Some fled having been forced to join Amir Abdur Rahman Khan's army. Others came to Chitral after they had left the Soviet Union for Afghanistan, only to be moved on by the Afghan state. These Badakshis who settled in Chitral were gradually incorporated into the region's fluid yet also hierarchical system of status hierarchy. Some of these incomers, those from noble backgrounds, were presented with gifts of land (*mehrabani zameen*) by the Mehtar of Chitral and his British patrons. Others became the serfs (*chirmuzh*) and servants (*khanazad*) of Chitrali gentry (*adamzada*) families. Still more requested villagers to give them land on the basis of their being *seyyids*, or descendents of the Prophet. These histories are lived and remembered across the region today, as I now illustrate.

In the context of this past, the narration of histories of transregional mobility is a matter of extreme sensitivity. Some deny that their ancestors were from Afghanistan at all. In recent years, such people have benefited from the opportunities for social mobility provided to Chitralis by raising literacy levels, employment in the local wing of the Pakistan army (the Chitral Scouts) and police, and labor migration to Pakistan's cities. They have built impressive houses on land overlooking not only the homes of their parents but also of their onetime lords. For families such as these, the reactivation of memories of familial connections to Afghanistan has the capacity to undo their active attempts to transform their families' place in Chitral's shifting system of status and descent. Nevertheless, such people might also make semi-secret visits to their ancestral villages to meet their relatives, collect debts (*qarz*, *wam*) from Afghans, and enquire into the possibility of inheriting land left by their forefathers.

Men and women from relatively high-status backgrounds who claim descent from noble families that were once influential in the court of Badakshan, in contrast, often talk about their Afghan kin. Muhsin, a Sunni Chitrali man in his mid-thirties, told me how his grandfather was a landlord who had come to Chitral from Badakshan after having had a dispute with one of the *mirs* or ruler of Badakshan. His grandfather was apparently welcomed to Chitral by the Mehtar or ruler of the time, who gave him land and arranged for his marriage to a local girl. As a child, Muhsin often traveled to Badakshan in order to visit his relatives; during the course of these visits, he also learned to speak

Dari. In Chitral, however, Muhsin and all his brothers say they are Chitrali, speak Khowar, and have married Chitrali women. Even for men such as Muhsin, being connected to Badakshan and Afghanistan is not a simple or neutral dimension of daily life. Some Chitralis refer to his family as being 'Kabuli' – the term used by most Chitralis to refer to people from modern-day Afghanistan. Thus, when Muhsin sought to marry the daughter of one of his neighbours he was told not bother asking for an engagement – the very idea of their daughter marrying a Kabuli was out of the question. Eventually Muhsin eloped with the girl.

In the context of the post-September 11th decade, the nature of these ties has changed again. Today, Chitralis with Afghan connections travel to Afghanistan and seek the hospitality (*mehmon-dosti*) of their relatives and friends there. Muhsin's brother, Sajjad, for example, travelled to Kabul in 2003. While there, he contacted a family that a one-time Chitral-based Badakshani friend of his had informed him were his close relatives. Sajjad stayed with the family for a month or so, seeking also to establish a mechanical workshop. Eventually, however, he left Kabul having been warned that if he was suspected of being Pakistani he may be kidnapped for ransom, as some other Chitrali sojourners to Kabul have been. Sajjad discovered that his Kabuli family had left their ancestral village Badakshan in the 1970s, and gone on to serve in the security apparatus of the Afghan state during the 1980s. One of them, indeed, had even flown a fighter jet during much of that decade, until he was shot down by a stinger missile fired by a mujahidin fighter from his own village.

As Heonik Kweon has recently argued in relationship to South Korea and Vietnam, family relations were a "vital aspect of the political control and ideological oppression during the cold war". In *Crossroads Asia*, as in South Korea and Vietnam, creative kinship practices that articulate with people's livelihood strategies, are playing a critical role in the decomposition of colonial and cold war era divisions. As Sajjad and Muhsin's story illustrates, these processes of decomposition problematize taken-for-granted ethnic and national boundaries, and those informed by ideology as well. Given the violence of the past, and, indeed, of the present, it is hardly surprising that this process of decomposition are shot through with ambiguities, tensions and anxieties that raise concerns and questions surrounding the loyalty of new found kin.

4. Modern Mobile Muslims

Having observed such changing forms of relatedness in Chitral's villages, I became interested in tracing these ties as well as the people involved in them after 2001, and the major changes in the region's political economy that this led to. As I followed these networks – tracking down, with the help of Chitrali friends, Afghans I had known in Chitral who had returned to Afghanistan after 2003 – I also travelled to Tajikistan, a country to which many Afghans also travel for trade. I will explore these networks later, but want briefly to comment upon the development of Chitralis forms of transregional mobility after 2001.

Since 2001, Chitralis have been involved in a wide and complex range of forms of mobility involving Afghanistan. As we have seen, some Chitralis began to work as electricians, plumbers and builders in

Kabul. Others worked as petrol pump attendees in and around the city of Jalalabad. More travelled to Afghanistan to buy medicine to smuggle back into Chitral. Some of these made enough profit to migrate to Dubai and the UAE, where they work there as crane drivers: mobility in *Crossroads Asia* feeds into its wider integration into the Indian Ocean world. Others were arrested by Afghan authorities, and accused of terrorism before being released and sent home.

What I want to focus on now, however, is a more self-consciously 'modern' class of transregional actor. Over the past couple of years young Chitrali men in their early twenties – to whom I taught English when they were aged four and five – have started to work in Kabul as accountants and managers with major international financial companies. In addition, older men work as development managers in the region's NGOs. Such forms of labour mobility are intimately connected to transformations in the region's political economy. Yet they also offer insights into the relationship between mobility and the transmission of ideas about forms of collective and individual selfhood or identity that are not local, national, nor abstract and global, but better described as transregional.

During the Afghan jihad in the 1980s and the Northern Alliance's conflict with the Taliban, Chitral's small elite of traders profited greatly from the sale and smuggling of food and fuel items to and from northern Afghanistan. Their activities as border traders set off important socio-economic dynamics within Chitral. Those involved in cross-border smuggling often deployed their new wealth with political aims, standing for election as local councilors, for example. Others used their profits to pursue court cases and wrestle land from their neighbours and the state. These people's economic activities, also stimulated transformations in local attitudes towards morally proper forms of economic life. In Chitral, direct forms of exchange are judged according to local normative standards as being morally ambivalent at best –in the 1990s my friends would resist all attempts by their elder brothers to turn them into lowly shopkeepers. Men from 'honorable' (*khandani*) or gentry families, however, traded with Afghans: while they were also said by their fellow villagers to be profiting from 'dishonorable' practices, and putting the reputation of their aristocratic family pedigrees at stake. 'My relatives were very angry', one man told me, 'because I made money selling paraffin and potatoes that I bought from Afghan traders: 'what type of a lord are you if you are now potato seller?', they would ask me'.

The closure of trading routes between Chitral and Badakshan after 2001 on the grounds of security (Taliban forces had attacked Northern Alliance territory across this border in 1999) limited these trading possibilities immediately. By July 2003, the only Afghans living permanently in Chitral were families from the upper villages of Panjshir who owned butcher shops and bakeries. These men and their shops had made possible important changes in consumption patterns and ritual cycles throughout Chitral: they supplying the cakes and sweets consumed at hitherto unmarked events such as birthdays, which were now being celebrated by a class of NGO employees. Chitrali shopkeepers, complained by 2003 that in the absence of Afghans, the bazaar was 'empty' (*khali*). It also became more difficult although not impossible for villagers from Badakshan to walk to Chitral in summer to work as seasonal labourers.

Yet even in the context of the imposition of apparently rigid boundaries, connections across *Crossroads Asia* have an uncanny ability to reappear. The previous brisk trade in precious stones, food, fuel, guns and drugs between Chitral and Badakshan declined rapidly as most Afghan traders

chose the newly built roads connecting northern Afghanistan to Kabul and Peshawar. International non-governmental organizations, especially the Aga Khan Development Network, active in Chitral since 1983, also downsized in Chitral. Yet they expanded their operations in Tajikistan and Afghanistan. Chitrali men were ideal candidates for posts opening in these countries: well-educated, having worked in development agencies in Chitral and been brought up with Afghans and speaking Dari. As the Taliban insurgency and other forms of militancy increasingly affected northern regions of Afghanistan in 2007 and onwards, Chitralis were even more sought after as the mobility of foreigners in rural areas was further restricted. Several Chitralis work in both Afghan and Tajikistan's Badakshan provinces. These include men who had traded with Afghans across the Chitral border with Badakshan during the jihad. Their relations with men who were once jihadi commanders and cross-border traders yet who are now local officials and political representatives, means that they are especially effective in their jobs: Chitrali man is the national director of the Aga Khan Network's development activities in Afghanistan, another is responsible for the organization's regional cooperation programme between Afghanistan and Tajikistan.

The Aga Khan Development Network is one of the most influential of organizations that is actively promoting 'regional integration' across the frontiers of *Crossroads Asia*. In the summer of 2010, for example, a Chitrali Ismai'li man who works for the Aga Khan Foundation in Badakshan in the position of 'regional coordinator' invited Chitral's most well-known musical group – 'the Nobles' - to perform at a celebration of 'Pamiri culture' in Khorog - the administrative headquarters of Tajikistan's Badakshan province. Chitrali NGO workers are critical, thus, to processes of regional integration. On the one hand, they carry out the policies of the organizations for whom they work. At the same time, however, they also talk about deriving more complex forms of personal and intellectual satisfaction from their employment in the borderlands of *Crossroads Asia*. Something I want to briefly explore.

Sohail is the descendent of a family of Chitrali Seyyids, descendents of the Prophet, who fled from Chitral in 1924 on the occasion of an outbreak of Ismaili-Sunni conflict to Hunza, located in what is today's Gilgit-Baltistan region. Sohail worked for seven years as a programme manager in the borderlands of Tajikistan and Afghanistan before becoming an independent contractor and now the manager of a company in Kabul. He told me, while working in this space, how he had realized how his 'identity' fluctuated between two poles: One of these was 'Persian' or *ajami* and reflected the influence of Persian linguistic forms and cultural values on his indigenous Chitrali culture. The other identity pole was rooted in the 'Arab' ethnic identity of his Seyyid ancestors - he had increasingly come to recognize this part of his identity because of his interactions with Seyyids on both sides of the Tajikistan-Afghanistan border in Badakshan.

Chitralis are playing an active role in attempts by the Aga Khan Foundation to define this part of *Crossroads Asia* at least in part in relationship to its particular Ismaili religious and cultural identity. Yet they also identify themselves as being the inheritors of yet more expansive identities shaped by ideas of 'Arab' and 'Persian' as much as those of 'Ismai'li' or 'Pamiri'. These ideas are, indeed, important and recognizable to Muslims across much if not all of South Asia and beyond. They are informed by the thinking of such great figures of Islamicate literary culture as Alama Iqbal, who wrote of 'Arab' and 'Persian' as registering for South Asian Muslims different 'philosophical principles', such as the 'Arab' insistence on the 'letter of the law' and 'Persian' emphasis on the 'contemplative life'. Modern Chitrali reflections on such philosophical principles highlight the history

of how the changing limits and opportunities in terms of mobility, employment, intellectual life and imagination are implicated in Crossroad Asia's changing political economy. They point towards the intellectual processes that continue to unfold even in the midst of what is often rather simplistically described as the region's 'war economy'.

5. Cross-border Traders

My final example – Afghan trading networks that link Chitral, northern Afghanistan, Tajikistan and other contexts beyond – highlights further the co-implication of and relationships between movements of people, ideas and things in this space. Tajikistan is an increasingly important destination point for Afghan sojourners, traders and refugees. Based both in the major cities of Dushanbe and Khujand, as well as some of the smaller towns such as Murghob and Khorog, Afghans play an important role in supplying Tajik markets with basic goods – cement, vegetables and fruits – from Pakistan. They are also active in the opening of shops, such as vehicle workshops that employ Afghans able to deal with the modern engines and electronic systems of the expensive cars that enter Tajikistan largely as repayments for drug shipments. Some, of course, are less fortunate, earning a living pushing trolleys or *arabas* in the bazaars to support their mothers back in Afghanistan. Still more are part of an extensive middle-men trading minority of Afghans that is central to the movement of key goods – cosmetics, food stuffs, and precious stones in particular – within Central Asia, as well as between Central Asia and the industrial cities of Istanbul and even Jakarta. Thousands of Afghans also visit the country for leisure, providing employment to the countless middlemen and women who rent them flats, register their passports with the local authorities, and get them out of trouble with the police when needs be. As a result of all of these patterns of mobility, older, Soviet-era stereotypes that associate Afghans with primitive animalism are rapidly giving way to an image of Afghans as modern, wealthy merchants with ties to the wider world. This shift in perceptions is also changing social and moral perspectives on the acceptability marriages between Afghan men and women from Tajikistan.

One Afghan, who has spent time working in Tajikistan's bazaars and whose life illustrates the complex role played by practices of mobility in the forging of both myriad regional connections and also political dynamics unfolding across it, is Ahmed. I met Ahmed first in 2000 when he came from his hometown Kunduz to the Chitrali village in which I stayed. His father had migrated to Kunduz in the 1950s from the upper reaches of the Panjshir valley, and had started a business in the town like many other Panjshiris of his generation in the sale of car spare parts (*purza*) there. By 2000, Kunduz was under Taliban control. While the family were not badly treated by the Taliban - partly because of the latter's need for decent vehicle workshops and parts - Ahmed and his unwell father visited Chitral in order to seek out treatment in one of its hospitals. While there, they stayed with Ahmed's paternal uncle, the owner of several bakeries and butcher shops. One of these shops served as the mid-morning meeting point for Chitrali boys and young men (both Sunnis and Ismai'lia), who chatted to Ahmed and his cousins learning some Persian, and teaching Ahmed Khowar and English.

I next met Ahmed in 2005 in Kunduz. Ahmed's command of English (he had studied English language courses in Peshawar after leaving Chitral) helped him to secure employment as a translator with ISAF. When I visited him in December 2008, Ahmed had left ISAF "for a break" – the work was tiring and stressful he reported - and so he was trying his luck for a while trading in religious books in Dushanbe. There was an expansion of Afghan trading in Tajikistan at this moment, largely due to the opening of the border bridge at Sher Khan Bandar. His elder brother, having established good relations with traders from Tajikistan during the course of tours across Pakistan with the Tabligh Jama'at, the Islamic movement of reform and purification, had embarked on the export of religious books to Tajikistan a couple of years before. His Tajiki trader-preacher partners often also stayed in Kunduz on their way back and forth between Zahedan in south-western Iran – a city in which their wives and children were studying the Islamic sciences in a well-known Salafi madrassa – and it was with these men whom Ahmed stayed. Another of Ahmed's brothers also embarked on the lucrative trade in Pakistan cement to Tajikistan. The representatives of Pakistani cement businesses - men I have met on the course of visits they make to Dushanbe to assess Tajikistan's market for cement - say they like to work with Afghan middle men such as Ahmed's brother: Afghans are prepared to buy hundreds of tones on a trust, no-contract basis, and they also take high risks in their trading ventures. Ahmed's brother became part of these networks. Within a few months he had opened a trading office at the Sher Khan Bandar border post, replete with soft Turkish carpets and a cook for his guests. Ahmed, however, returned to Kunduz, taking up his job with ISAF again: he said he wanted "more from life than trade" and was fed up of talking about the cost of a tone of cement. He had even turned down an offer made by one of his brother's business partners to marriage to a hijab or *ruhmol* wearing Tajik girl.

Ahmed was known amongst Kunduz's Panjshiris as being one of their more properly "Muslim" sons. He even refused to picnic on the famous spring pasture near Kunduz to mark the passing of the New Year: partaking in celebrations other than the two Islamic Eids, he said, is a sin. His humour and sophistication, however, ensured that Ahmed was recognized by other Panjshiris - including influential politicians and successful merchants who spend their lives between Dushanbe, Dubai, Peshawar and Kabul - as being skilful at inhabiting this complex, fluid and heterogeneous space. Many of his friends were surprised, then, when, in July 2010, Ahmed left ISAF and "joined his friends – the Taliban". At the time, Kunduz was too dangerous to visit, and I have been unable to follow-up Ahmed's story in depth. It would be easy to interpret Ahmed's decision to embrace the insurgency as deriving from his interest in Salafi Islam. Some of his friends argued that it was Ahmed's experiences in ISAF that led him to change his political direction: "he has obviously seen or realized important things" is what many of his friends say. For some Panjshiris in Kunduz Ahmed's move to the Taliban was located in the world of Afghan political strategy: his intelligence had outwitted him - "mentally ill" he had made a "bad" decision.

We shall, unfortunately, never know what Ahmed would say about such attempts to theorize the ways in which he acted: he was killed in an attack by government forces on the house in which he was staying in December 2010. Ahmed's life between 2000 and 2010 illuminates the rich, complex and highly contingent ways in which mobility, trade and militancy articulate with one another in this ever-changing space. In particular, it powerfully demonstrates the dangers of making simplistic assumptions about the directions along which so-called radical forms of Islam flow and the relationship of these to ethnicity. More broadly, it suggests the need to understand the agency of

Frontier actors and their political choices in relation to particular constellations of networks and circumstances rather than as the outcome of one or other set of factors or of the long-term planning, convictions and beliefs of actors over the long-term.

6. Conclusion

Through considerations of a range of both more modern and historically embedded forms of social actors and patterns of movement in *Crossroads Asia*, I hope to have brought some attention to the centrifugal and centripetal processes that are shaping *Crossroads Asia*, bringing its people together at the same time as they are pulling them apart. I have sought to emphasize the suite of skills and sensibilities that people use to move across this world, skills that include a willingness to move and travel for education, while also form close and intimate relations with people from ethnic and religious backgrounds very different from their own. The ideas that people hold about the world in which they live, such as those pertaining to national identities or Islam, are also embodied in relationships to their transregional pasts and experiences of mobility.

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Information on the competence network *Crossroads Asia*

The competence network *Crossroads Asia* derives its name from the geographical area extending from eastern Iran to western China and from the Aral Sea to northern India. The scholars collaborating in the competence network pursue a novel, 'post-area studies' approach, making thematic figurations and mobility the overarching perspectives of their research in *Crossroads Asia*. The concept of figuration implies that changes, minor or major, within one element of a constellation always affect the constellation as a whole; the network will test the value of this concept for understanding the complex structures framed by the cultural, political and socio-economic contexts in *Crossroads Asia*. Mobility is the other key concept for studying *Crossroads Asia*, which has always been a space of entangled interaction and communication, with human beings, ideas and commodities on the move across and beyond cultural, social and political borders. Figurations and mobility thus form the analytical frame of all three main thematic foci of our research: conflict, migration, and development.

- Five sub-projects in the working group **"Conflict"** will focus upon specific localized conflict-figurations and their relation to structural changes, from the interplay of global politics, the erosion of statehood, and globalization effects from above and below, to local struggles for autonomy, urban-rural dynamics and phenomena of diaspora. To gain a deeper understanding of the rationales and dynamics of conflict in *Crossroads Asia*, the sub-projects aim to analyze the logics of the genesis and transformation of conflictual figurations, and to investigate autochthonous conceptions of, and modes of dealing with conflicts. Particular attention will be given to the interdependence of conflict(s) and mobility.
- Six sub-projects in the working group **"Migration"** aim to map out trans-local figurations (networks and flows) within *Crossroads Asia* as well as figurations extending into both neighboring and distant areas (Arabian Peninsula, Russia, Europe, Australia, America). The main research question addresses how basic organizational and functional networks are structured, and how these structures affect what is on the move (people, commodities, ideas etc.). Conceptualizing empirical methods for mapping mobility and complex connectivities in trans-local spaces is a genuine desideratum. The aim of the working group is to refine the method of qualitative network analysis, which includes flows as well as their structures of operation, and to map mobility and explain mobility patterns.
- In the **"Development"**-working group four sub-projects are focusing on the effects of spatial movements (flows) and interwoven networks at the micro level with regard to processes of long-term social change, and with a special focus on locally perceived livelihood opportunities and their potential for implementation. The four sub-projects focus on two fundamental aspects: first, on structural changes in processes of transformation of patterns of allocation and distribution of resources, which are contested both at the household level and between individual and government agents; secondly, on forms of social mobility, which may create new opportunities, but may also cause the persistence of social inequality.

The competence network understands itself as a mediator between the academic study of *Crossroads Asia* and efforts to meet the high demand for information on this area in politics and the public. Findings of the project will feed back into academic teaching, research outside the limits of the competence network, and public relations efforts. Further information on *Crossroads Asia* is available at www.crossroads-asia.de.