10

CROSSROADS ASIA

Conflict · Migration · Development

CROSSROADS ASIA

Working Paper Series

Being a *muhajir* in
present-day Afghanistan –
Views on flight and migration
from inside.

Christoph Wenzel

Crossroads Asia Working Papers

Competence Network Crossroads Asia: Conflict – Migration – Development

Editors: Ingeborg Baldauf, Stephan Conermann, Anna-Katharina Hornidge, Hermann Kreutzmann, Shahnaz Nadjmabadi, Dietrich Reetz, Conrad Schetter and Martin Sökefeld.

How to cite this paper: Wenzel, Christoph (2013): Being a *muhajir* in present-day Afghanistan – Views on flight and migration from inside. In: Crossroads Asia Working Paper Series, No. 10.

Partners of the Network:

Imprint

Being a *muhajir* in present-day Afghanistan –
Views on flight and migration from inside

Christoph Wenzel

Table of Contents

1. Introduction

"The choice of language and the use of a particular vocabulary, both in the discourse of the refugees as well as in the discourses about them, can serve to mystify as well as clarify the social processes and historical realities depicted" (Shahrani 1995: 188).

With these words Shahrani starts his explanations about the Afghan refugees in 1995 in reference to Zolberg, Suhrke and Aguayo (1989: 274). I want to reuse this well-fitting citation, to look at those who can be regarded as refugees in present-day Afghanistan – although today, around 20 years later, people move in a different surrounding with changed discourses, social processes and geographical settings.

An analysis of the way refugees are discussed is complicated because there are discourses on at least three different levels: a legal discourse concerning the politics of international laws and the work of international organizations and NGOs, academic discourses contributing theoretical perspectives from various disciplines as well as internal discourses of those who are directly and indirectly affected by forced migration in specific situations, in place and time. Of course these discourses are partly overlapping and mixed up in everyday life.

In this paper I focus on the internal discourse of those Afghans who are refugees within their country today. I want to show how the use of a certain vocabulary is crucial for the creation of particular perspectives on developments and social processes in present-day Afghanistan. Central for this analysis is the term *muhajir*[1], an originally Arab term that can be translated as migrant or emigrant but also as refugee. The expression has a specific history in the region. I want to show who is a *muhajir* today. What are the continuities and changes in meaning and usage of the term over time and what conclusions can be drawn about the social settings in which the term is used?

My data is based on descriptions of personal migration experiences and insights into living conditions. Interviews and observations were made in and around the city Mazar-e Sharif in Northern Afghanistan in a one-month field trip from August to September in 2011 and a two-month stay from June to August in 2012. The contact to informants was partly arranged through responsible authorities[2] but also through previous informants or unplanned meetings by accident. Interviews were taken with single persons and with bigger groups (approx. 5-15 persons) of men. In some cases also women or entire families were interviewed. What unifies all people who are considered here is the fact that they described themselves at one point or another as *muhajir*.

In this paper I first give a very short overview over official definitions in the field of forced migration. After that I introduce one academic attempt that might be helpful to understand the presented data. A closer look at the term *muhajir* displays its origins and its history in Afghanistan. Examples from the field will illustrate the manifold use of this expression. This will also show how the current use takes into consideration aspects from both discourses, those about the term refugee as well as those

---

[1] A simplified transcription of *Muhājir* is used in this paper to make reading easier. For more details regarding the term, see below and Ansari (1990).

[2] The *Directorate of Repatriatons and Refugees (DoRR)* is the provincial branch of the *Ministry of Repatriatons and Refugees (MoRR).* It was primarily the responsible authority for the refugee repatriation but is now also dealing with the internal refugees.

historical references of the term *muhajir*. I argue that the recent use of the term *muhajir* is to be understood in relation to the strong international presence in certain parts of the country.

2. Being a *refugee,* being a *muhajir* (from legal and academic perspectives)

Official refugee definitions

According to the 1951 *United Nations Refugee Convention*, a refugee is someone who:

> "owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country"[3].

Central to this official definition are hence the involuntary character of the movement and the location outside of the country of origin. Following this definition one would not find Afghan refugees in Afghanistan. How to handle those who are displaced inside their country?

The insight that also those people who were fleeing within their countries are in special need to external protection and support showed the insufficiency of the category refugee as basis for humanitarian work. Therefore the United Nations started in 1992 to use the term *Internally displaced persons* (IDP). These are:

> "persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalised violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognised State border" (UN-OCHA 2004: Introduction).

Unlike refugee, IDP is not a legal definition in international law. Nonetheless it is used widely by humanitarian organizations and NGOs. The persons interviewed for this paper are Afghan IDPs in this regard. Their number is officially documented as high as 400.000 persons even though the data does not take into account insecure regions, where a large number of IDPs is expected. Similarly urban areas are excluded from documentation because they are difficult to measure (UNHCR 2012). At the same time though, cities and urban areas constitute the main destination for internal refugees. Due to the poor data situation, the overall number of internal refugees is likely to be higher. Around 10.000 IDP households are estimated to live in the city Mazar-e Sharif[4], where my research was conducted.

Academic attempts

In the field of migration studies, the terminology is manifold and sometimes confusing. It is a question of academic discipline whether one talks about moving people as migrants, forced migrants, displaced persons or refugees. Research disciplines are often closely interlinked with the political and humanitarian context (Bakewell 2008).

---

[3] See http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49c3646c125.html (02.12.2012)
[4] Interview recorded 8.7.2012 with DoRR Balkh Field Staff in Mazar-e Sharif.

The near impossibility to use voluntary and forced migration as a dichotomy, led Richmond (1993) to use a spectrum, ranging from proactive to reactive migration. Further approaches, like the *UN's Mixed Migration* (UNHCR 2007) or the *Migration-Displacement-Nexus* (Koser & Martin 2011) can hold up to several empirical observations. The problematic question of how to distinguish forced from voluntary migration and how to deal with everything in-between often remains. So who is, besides all political definitions, a refugee, a forced migrant, or a displaced person from a scientific perspective?

A reasonable attempt in order to distinguish forced displacement from free migration is suggested by Bakewell (2011). He looks at the relationship between both categories from three different perspectives: in regard to processes, conditions and categories. Since his effort seems to be quite useful for organizing the observations presented here, it shall be introduced.

Bakewell refers to the often made observation that there are only few differences to be detected in the processes of flight and migration. Looking at those movements he states that displacement can only be a subcategory of migration:

> "Recognizing that the migration process is taking place is relatively straightforward as we are helped by the observable fact of people moving, which marks them out from other population groups. However, it is much harder rigorously to identify the subset of those who are displaced, as then we have to be able to analyse people's motivations for moving." (Bakewell 2011: 21)

Instead, displacement seen as a condition is much different from migration, so Bakewell. He argues that whereas the process of migration comes to an end, the state of being a migrant as well as being displaced persists. As a condition, displacement differs a lot from migration, as being displaced "is about not being where one wants to be" (Bakewell 2011: 22), a feeling that can be maintained and reproduced over a long time. It can be reserved and come to an end with the finding of a place for a new home. On the other hand, displacement, in being a subjective condition, can even be transferred to the offspring that never moved themselves. He also points out that migration and displacement as conditions are experienced quite differently by different persons and may have quite varying influences on peoples' self-perceptions and daily lives (Bakewell 2011: 23).

Finally, Bakewell looks at categories for the distinction between migration and displacement. He emphasizes that categories require some critical reflection because of their close linkage with political discourses. They are often incorporating priorities and assessments or might imply a certain degree of victimization. This is mainly problematic for humanitarian organizations which are obliged to define their field of work. Often they have no other choice than:

> "working with a system of bureaucratic labeling, based on stereotypical identities and sets of assumed needs. [...] The critical point to note here is that these categories of migration and displacement may not overlap with the corresponding conditions" (Bakewell 2011: 25).

Therefore Bakewell advocates in another context (2008) to keep research on flight and migration free from political categories.

> "[R]esearch which is designed without regard to policy relevance may offer a more powerful critique and ironically help to bring about more profound changes than many studies that focus on policy issues from the outset" (Bakewell 2008, 433).

Nonetheless the attempt to deny preset political categories might kickback from academia to the political discourses:

> "'By contending that the distinctions between voluntary and forced migration are blurred in some cases, or that not all refugees necessarily find repatriation the most desired solution to their problems, researchers run the risk of preparing the ammunition for governments or other actors who will not recognize the legitimate claims of refugees or internally displaced persons'" (Stepputat 1999: 416–417 in Bakewell 2008: 438).

Afghan refugees - Afghan muhajirin

The expression *muhajirin* (pl.) became common for Afghan refugees in the aftermath of the communist coup in Kabul in 1978 and the following invasion of the Soviet army in 1979. Many Afghans left their country mainly for the two neighbouring countries Pakistan and Iran but also for places all around the globe. In the same way the enduring civil war following the Soviet withdrawal in 1989 and the increasing power of the Taliban movement at the end of the 1990s led many people to leave their country in search of safer livelihoods abroad. During all this time those who had left their home country behind were recognized as refugees in the sense of the international humanitarian laws and named *muhajirin* in the regional discourse. Despite the different meaning of these terms it was possible to use them synonymously in regard to this group of Afghans in exile, as will be shown below.

The expression *muhajirin* was not used randomly by Afghan refugees in the 1980s. The term refers to the beginning of the Islamic religion, to the *hijra* of the prophet Mohammed, who left Mecca accompanied by the first Muslims and went to Medina. The *hijra* was an important act for the constitution of the Muslim community and for the preparation of the recapture of Mecca. Its symbolic strength is generated by numerous mentions in Islamic sources (Shahrani 1995: 188).

The Arabic root of the word is *h-j- r* (ﻫ ﺝ ﺭ). According to Ansari (1990) this indicates dissociation, separation, partition or emigration. "Moreover, the root "h-j-r" also has the nuance of "dislike" as the motive for dissociating oneself from or leaving something or someone" (Ansari 1990: 9). He points out that "hijrah has come to denote migration from Domain of Disbelief to the Domain of Faith, similar to the migration from Mecca to Medina" (Ansari 1990: 9).

More recent examples from the region include the emigration of Central Asian Muslims fleeing from the Bolsheviks to Afghanistan in the 1920s (Shalinsky 1979) or the Indian Muslims moving to their declared 'Muslim homeland' after the partition of India and Pakistan. In a continuity of those events also for the Afghan refugees in the 1980s "'hijrat' and 'muhajir' did not simply mean a displaced person or a refugee but meant very specifically a 'Muslim refugee'" (Shahrani 1995: 189), also implying the temporary character of the exile and the hope to return to the place left behind (Shahrani 1995: 191; Boesen 1990: 160).

In that time, it was a common interpretation that the migration of Afghan refugees was a political act directly linked to their religious belonging. For this reason also the term *hijra* was used in the sense of an exodus. It was used more often than the word *muhājirat* that has less religious connotations. However, individual decisions to migrate as well as the personal perception of exile did not inevitably have to be linked to those discourses. Instead, for the resistance movement of that time the religious references became important elements for their legitimacy. The perception as explicit Muslim

political actors led to a positive image of Afghan *muhajirin* among the Pakistani people and government. This determined their large autonomy and the possibilities to organize the resistance movement to a large extent through refugee camps in Pakistan (Shahrani 1995: 192f.; Grare 2003: 73; Roy 1990: 165 ff.; Lischer 2005).

Empirical work on Afghan *muhajirin* has already changed this picture. Connor (1987) looked at self-settled refugees that were not part of organized camps. Monsutti (2005) and also Harpviken (2009) emphasized the connection of flight and migration strategies and the fluidity of categories:

> „Escape from violence is not necessarily incompatible with a real migratory strategy. The geographical dispersion and the resulting economic diversification can become an asset. Afghan refugees and migrants have known how to adapt to each context. People with similar identity and sociological profile have defined themselves differently according to their migratory trajectory and their final destination"(Monsutti 2010: 61f.).

After the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001 and the ambitious international efforts to rebuild the country as a place of peace, stability and 'enduring freedom' many Afghans were repatriated or returned voluntarily to their home country. Refugees became returnees in large numbers. Except some people fleeing fights in the South, no new refugees worth mentioning were detected inside the country – also owing to binding political success stories.

In the last years the discourse about developments in Afghanistan has changed. The formerly announced successes were increasingly questioned. Reports about recently expelled people brought up just another aspect of the failed stabilization of the country. International humanitarian organisations and NGOs began to ring the alarm bells by documenting rising numbers of explicitly conflict-induced migration all over the country (Refugees International 2011, UHCHR 2012). These recent internal migrants are also called *muhajirin*. At first sight it seems as if their rising numbers can be regarded as an indicator for the deteriorating living conditions and especially the worsening security situation in large parts of present-day Afghanistan. So who is a *muhajir* today and what does this tell us about the developments in Afghanistan?

We can conclude that the term *muhajir* had a very special meaning in the last decades in Afghanistan – if not explicitly for personal migration decisions, strategies and everyday lives but at least for the discourses and self-descriptions. The exile of the Afghan *muhajirin* was interpreted as a political and/or religious act, as a conscious decision to leave a certain area, await conditions to change or even prepare a return actively and go back. What might have been a comprehensible interpretation for the Afghan *muhajirin* in the 1980s and 1990s does not fit for today's *muhajirin* who are moving within the country. Instead references today are much stronger influenced by international discourses as I will show below.

3. Being a *muhajir* (from an emic perspective)

Many people fit roughly into the profile of potential informants to whom the term *muhajirin* could be applied. These are persons who were either displaced for a long time and had maybe spent some time in foreign exile. Additionally there are *muhajirin* who came to the city more recently from rural areas. Most of them live in poor conditions and have insufficient access to food, housing, medical services, education, and work.

In their descriptions, people do not necessarily use the term *muhajir* although it is easy and common due to the structure of the Persian verbs, that can be formed by a combination of nouns or adjectives with the verbs for 'to do' (*kardan*) or 'to become' (*shodan*). People do say *mā muhājir shodim* to express 'we became refugees' or *mā muhājirat kardim* for 'we fled' but there are many other ways to express quite the same. 'To flee' might also be described by the words *farār kardan*, *gurekhtan*, *tark kardan* or *panāhanda shodan*. People also use the term *parāganda shodan* that can be translated to 'being dispersed', *bejāy shodan* what means something like 'to lose one's place/ to become homeless' or *jāy ba jāy shodan* what stands for 'to go from one place to another'. In many cases the migration process is also described with rather neutral verbs like 'to go' (*raftan*), 'to come' (*āmadan*) or 'to move' (*kuch kardan*) but then these verbs are often combined with descriptions of fear (*tarsidan* or *harās)* or pressure (*majbur* or *feshār*). For example *az feshār-e tālebā āmad* is an often heard expression that can be translated as 'he came here because of the pressure of the Taliban'. Many small phrases like *majbur ast* ('it is force/coercion'), *majbur budim* ('we were forced') or *tawān-e nafar nist* ('it is not within somebody's power') are used to highlight the force to migrate in the sense of 'no choice'. *Muhajir* as a noun and even more its plural *muhajirin* become more important to mark the belonging to a group of people sharing the same or similar fate and to describe the condition people are living in. These terms occur in media reports about people that are displaced in the country or the work of for example UNHCR[5]. It is said '*daftar-e muhājirin rafti?*' or even just '*muhājirin rafti?*' what means 'did you go to the Department for Refugees?'.

As mentioned above, people who had gone to exile to one of the neighboring countries can also describe themselves as *muhajirin*. This is the case in the following example: A group of Pashtun villagers had fled abroad when the fighting intensified in the North in the end of the 1990s. They returned to Afghanistan about three years before I met them in 2011. They did not go back to the place where they had lived before but came to Mazar-e Sharif. They were facing poor living conditions in makeshift dwellings, tents and tarps:

> "We were frightened. There was a lot of fighting in that time. On the one side the Taliban. On the other side the commanders. And we, we had nothing. The Taliban, for example, came to our house, they were eating and drinking and then they said: 'Fight with us, come with us.' But I, I do not know how to fight. There was a lot like this. We were forced. For example, if someone is fighting - the kids, what shall they eat? Our family, what shall they eat? Our mother, what shall she eat? We were forced. We left. From here we went to Pakistan. From Pakistan we went to Iran. We have been there for seven or eight years. Our life there was very good. We had many things. Motorcycles. Refrigerators. […] We had to leave there. Go back to your own country, they said. […] Now we are here. We have nothing. Living under a tarp. No work. No house. No food. No doctor. People are dying here because of cold in winter and because of heat in summer." [6]

In many interviews conducted with recent migrants who came from rural areas, the descriptions of force are quite similar. People feel helplessly caught in the middle, being exposed to pressure and

---

[5] See http://ariananews.af/video/ariana-news-21-auggiaggust-2012-%e2%80%93-dari/ (25.06.2013)

[6] Interview recorded 7.09.2011 at the western outskirts of Mazar-e Sharif with a bigger group of men from Chahar Bolak.

violence. Especially demands brought upon them by the Taliban[7] are described quite similarly, as the following example shows:

> "Many of us who are coming right now are coming because of war, because of the insecurity that is caused by the Taliban. There is war. They beat people. They say: 'Give us people. Give us soldiers. Buy us weapons. Give us money.' People flee. What shall they do?"[8]

An old man, originally from Sar-e Pul, whose son is working in Pakistan, said:

> "They [the Taliban] knew it. It is known there that my son is not around. 'Where is your son?' they asked. 'Where did he go? Did he get engaged with a foreign girl?' 'He went for work', I said. 'Your son went to Pakistan. You sent your son to Pakistan. You must be a rich man. You have to give us some money. You have to fight with us, dear brother'. I said, 'No. Enough.'"[9]

Another informant from Chimtal district explained how young men are recruited in particular:

> "They [the Taliban] are lying to the young men and want to convince them to fight for them. This is why we bring them here."[10]

Almost every migrant knows a story about someone in these situations, like this one told by a young man from Faryab:

> "They [the Taliban] do not want young people like me to study in the city. I know a guy who was killed by the Taliban when he went back to our village. [...] Only one day a year I go home to my village. When I am at home my father is very nervous. He doesn't sleep. He stands at the door, looking to make sure no one comes. All my brothers are living somewhere else today. I am a student but I am also a *muhajir*." [11]

All these short statements show that coercion is described in different ways but it is mainly connected to physical violence or to the fear of it. People also try to avoid economic claims that are brought against them for far-fetched or for no reasons at all. They are afraid that the claims might be backed by violence. In many cases families or communities are splitting up. For example some members of a family are staying at their home places and are taking care of the properties while others, like the young men who are of special interest as fighters, are sent away from the area to safety. They often go to the cities to work or to get an education.

People are also describing themselves as being caught in the middle without being part of the conflict. They might not be directly persecuted, but they are in a situation of constant risk as the following two examples show:

> "Pressure to the people is from two directions. On one side there is the state that is coming ... with soldiers ... with airplanes and so on. This is bringing pressure to us, to the civilians. This is force. And on the other side the force is on the people by the Taliban: 'Give us weapons. Buy us

---

[7] References to the Taliban here may not refer to one specific group or unified set of actors.

[8] Interview recorded 7.09.2011 at Qala-e Jangi with a bigger group of men from Chimtal.

[9] Interview recorded 8.07.2012 at Kurd-o Barq with a group of men from Sar-e Pul.

[10] Interview recorded 7.09.2011 at Qala-e Jangi with a bigger group of men from Chimtal.

[11] Interview recorded 18.08.2012 in Mazar-e Sharif.

a motorcycle. Brother, find a motorcycle'. Nothing else. 'Buy a motorcycle. Buy weapons. Give us people. We have to beat this man, help us a night or two.'"[12]

"The Taliban bother us at night, the state by day." [13]

So the force to leave a certain place is reported to be brought on uninvolved people by different actors for example just by the fact of settling in a certain region. Living in an area that is regarded as a Taliban area by the military might be a permanent threat.

When thinking about the role of coercion in migration, another interesting aspect is the question of how to prepare the relocation. The descriptions regarding this point are quite diverse. Some examples come close to common images of flight. Other reports tell about long-term preparations. In one group interview men were saying:

> "We came here by foot. We had no money for a car. We came by foot. [Another man continues:] One night we came to one place. The next night we arrived at another place. We came to another place and again another place. From one village to the next village. It was like this. [The first man goes on:] In the night we escaped from the Taliban. At night, this is why we could not go by car. We fled at night because they were bothering us. We had no easy life, we were walking, moving by ourselves."[14]

Different from these narrations were several reports about the preparation of relocation to the city. People described how they contacted members of their families or persons from the same region to help them find a place to stay and work in the city. In some cases representatives of a community tried to arrange places for a bigger group of people. Social networks are playing an important role in this process. Even though there are differences in the (narrated) migration processes, people who had migrated either to rural or urban areas described themselves as *muhajirin*.

Up to this point the presented statements have focused mainly on the danger or fear of physical violence, which fits with widespread understandings of flight. But this is not the only factor to be taken into consideration. Other commonly cited reasons for migration into the city include insecurity and limited economic opportunities, mostly due to insufficient precipitation for the rain-fed agriculture. It did not become clear in every case how these two conditions were actually affecting the individuals interviewed. Sometimes even within one family the reasons for migration were narrated differently.

Individual interpretations of the situation left behind depend in large part on the given context in which their fates are narrated. The environment in which the act of telling a personal migration story can be construed as a tangible interview, but it can also be seen within the context of the community or social space of the city. The way a narration is presented can also be affected by certain assumptions about accepted and common categories. This will be illustrated in the following example.

---

[12] Interview recorded 7.09.2011 at Qal-e Jangi with a bigger group of men from Chimtal.

[13] Interview recorded 7.09.2011 at Mazar-e Sharif with a group of men from Chimtal.

[14] Interview recorded 8.07.2012 at Kurd-o Barq with a group of men from Sar-e Pul.

The course of a group discussion among several men shows this awareness about the meaning of the depicted fate as well as the potential impact of certain 'stories' at the destination of the migration.[15] In this reported case roughly 500 families who originated from different close-by villages in mountainous South of the Chimtal district were living in a loose community among resident villagers in Qale-i Jangi, some kilometers West of Mazar-e Sharif. They came to this area at different times. Some erected houses whereas others were living in tents and makeshift shelters. A man took the lead to describe their situation:

> "Two hundred families came recently because of the pressure of the Taliban. And two hundred seventy families came round about three years ago. Three years ago they came to this place. They were all working in agriculture, but peoples' crops did not grow. These people and also we, we are really *muhajirin*, we became homeless."

Some people got on with describing their fate. Comments like the following were made:

> "The people who arrived just recently, for them it is force. The local Taliban ask them to buy some things. 'Buy us a motorcycle. Or give us zakat.'[16] But the crops did not grow. There is no money to buy anything. It is beyond the peoples' power. We inhabitants, we are caught, we are struggling. We are forced to become homeless, to flee."

One man, who was more or less dominating the discussion, went on:

> "Everyday a family arrives. Today they also came. This morning two families arrived. They pitched their tent over there. We were straying around. The street is the place for the helpless people. For all of them the only place for their pillows is on the road. [Pointing at a man] He arrived yesterday. Where shall he go? He has no tent. He has no tarp. He has nothing, the family is helpless. He also escaped from the hand of the Taliban. They said to him: 'Brother, buy us a motorcycle, give us money, help us, do this and that for us'. If people are not doing what they are asked, they are beaten or arrested. This is why he and all the others came here."

After all those quite similar comments, a man suddenly contradicted loudly, addressing the one who has talked most of the time:

> "You have not been there recently, have you? Besides all this talking about the Taliban you do not find one glass of water there. You do not find one glass of drinking water there."

Yet another man interjected later:

> "Those *muhajirin* who are moving here at the moment ... we are working together with the one or the other. And it is good that there was some help from the Office for Refugees. The chief of the office was here. Before that UNHCR delivered some help. They helped the *muhajirin*. But did they also help the poor homeless in the past? No. We were 270 families. There was no help. Nothing. Until today there was no help for us. For those people who are coming now there is help. It is good for them."

---

[15] Interview recorded 7.09.2011 at Qal-e Jangi with a bigger group of men from Chimtal.
[16] Donation in Islam for religious purposes.

The presented extracts from the discussion display the difficult relationships within the community which shape the way the men present themselves to a foreign visitor. First it is remarkable that all the members of the community are described by their representative as *muhajirin*. They are named in this way because they became homeless due to reasons that were beyond their power. They see themselves as having been forced to migrate. Besides this, a quite clear distinction is made within the community, regarding the time of migration and the reasons why people came to town. Whereas those who came around three years ago had been forced to leave mostly due to the lack of rain, the recent migrants are presented as having fled first and foremost due to the Taliban. It seems that mainly because of their poverty, they were not able to meet the demands brought on them.

The course of the discussion shows that the clear distinction of these two groups cannot be maintained. By explaining that they left the region due to problems caused by drought even today, one of the recent migrants asserts that the reasons for migration have not changed completely. At least the presented reasons seem to be less dichotomic than presented at the beginning. The emerging power of the Taliban might have been just one more rather than a different reason for migration. It could be understood as some kind of a tipping point, especially if one keeps in mind that the later migrants are repeatedly described as very poor by those who migrated earlier. The latter seem to be in a slightly better economic situation and feel obliged to support the recent migrants due to kinship ties or common regional origin.

The last listed citation of this discussion in particular shows clearly how important the presentation of reasons might be. Be it by accident or not, those migrants who were conceived as fleeing due to insecurity in their area received a certain degree of support whereas the earlier migrants, who had been forced by the drought to migrate, did not.

This caused the representatives of the community to stress the aspect of insecurity. In their interpretation of the donor policies, they expected this to be the most striking reason for potential support. They told their stories in a context in which they had the privilege to present their fate unchallenged. Although circumstances like insecurity and drought are also documented by other sources perceived as being more 'objective',[17] a 'validation' of these narratives is not intended here. Nonetheless, modifications of the presented picture become possible in situations like the interview above, in which the course of the talk reveals some opposition and other facets. It is not the uniformity that might tell us something but the contradiction within the statements.

Similarly, coming back to the description of the nighttime escape by foot above, the overall picture also changed when later in the meeting the men described their living conditions before the migration. This might not have been so different from the described 'flight' itself. Before the 'migration' to the city they were poor landless workers, often without shelter and work. The special setting of the city offers them a possibility to redefine themselves as *muhajirin*, which makes them belong to a different or at least relevant category even though their relocation into the city can also be understood as a continuation of their generally non-sedentary lifestyle. The migration in this example improves their chances to find work. The aspect of economic possibilities in the city is not in

---

[17] For example: http://aan-afghanistan.com/index.asp?id=3006 (10.01.2013), or
http://www.fews.net/docs/Publications/Afghanistan_Alert_2011_06.pdf (10.01.2013)

the center of interest in this text but it has to be kept in mind when thinking about the relocation to the city by poor migrants.

As shown in the examples given above, the stories of many *muhajirin* were modified after some time when closer contact was established. Many migrants still have close relations to their home areas and travel back and forth. Parts of their families are still living in the area they left, and in the city they receive visitors from there. In one situation it was said about someone absent, "He is also a *muhajir*, but for Ramadan [the Islamic month of fast] he went home. It is not so hot there."

Without denying the fact that there might be well-founded fears that make people leave their homes in remote Afghan rural areas, it was my intention to show with these examples that the reasons for migration are more diverse than the first impressions might indicate, especially in relation to the vocabulary of flight and forced migration. The category *muhajir* can be adopted in a rather strategic way in communication with the state and international actors. This strategy is favored due to the fact that only little information is available about the areas left behind, as well as the fact that the danger presented by the Taliban is widely recognized.

Three lines of analysis can be drawn from this depicted data: (1) Change and continuity in the use and meaning of the term *muhajir*; (2) Aspects of voluntariness and coercion in the depicted migration; (3) the relationship of the terms refugee and *muhajir*. To find a way through all these observations, quoted statements and theoretical explanations that were discussed above, we remember Bakewell's processes, conditions, and categories as introduced above.

Processes

Concerning the processes of flight and migration we can say that *muhajirin* are moving in a different geographical setting today. Whereas in the 1980s and 1990s those who regarded themselves as *muhajirin* were moving to foreign exile, today *muhajirin* are mainly moving within the country, in many cases towards the cities. The distinction between places of asylum abroad and within the country – that is of relevance for the official categories refugee and IDP – became irrelevant for most of the *muhajirin*, who were discussed here. For their self-ascription as well as for the ascription given to them by others the fact of being explicitly in foreign exile is of little importance today:

> "We did not go abroad. We are *muhajirin* in our own country. We had to move. It was not our decision. We did not go to another country. We went to the city."[18]

Nonetheless the former dominant use of the term *muhajir* is still present. Some people still think it should be mainly applied to those in foreign exiles or those who had spent time there.

Conditions

It is not easy to look at the changes and continuities in the use of the term *muhajir* from the perspective of the condition of displacement and migration. As already explained above there is no common point of reference. Even though there was quite a clear picture in the discourses about the Afghan *muhajirin* in the 1980s and 1990s, on-the-ground-research (Harpviken 2009; Monsutti 2005)

---

[18] Interview recorded 3.07.2012 in Mazar-e Sharif with a group of men from Sar-e Pul

showed the minor relevance of religious connotations in migration decisions and strategies. In the same way various reasons are contributing to the set of pressures and motivations that lead to migration today. Obviously migration today has even less to do with moving from a domain of disbelief (Ansari 1990) or being in explicit religious exile. Instead people are confronted with actors like the Taliban that are regarded as being too strict in their religious views.

It is difficult to evaluate the question in how far people are feeling displaced or forced to move, especially for those people who were introduced here. General assumptions can hardly be made. In many cases coercion was presented as a reason for migration but it was not always limited to a single cause. The aspect of being forced to become mobile became the main link to the term *muhajir*. Anyway there was a tendency to highlight facets of insecurity what should not be dismissed as solely strategic presentation.

Coming back to Bakewells description about being displaced as a condition of being where one does not want to be (Bakewell 2011, 22) one fact might be unexpected. Only few of the migrants were willing to go back to the places where they were from. Similar and not less surprising a study of *World Bank* and *UNHCR* from 2011 stated that more than 90 percent of the Afghan IDPs plan to settle permanently in urban surroundings irrespective of the development of insecurity in their home regions (World Bank & UNHCR 2011: 7). One may ask how someone can feel displaced but nevertheless prefers the place of destination. Irrespectively whether someone is presenting oneself strategically as a refugee or not, the underlying question implies something else: It was only mentioned casually in this paper but most of the migrants were holding up good connections to their places of origin and to other places. Such links and related movements can be seen in the sense of what Schetter calls a 'translocal network society', a condition that is characterized by high spatial mobility and dynamic social networks (Schetter 2012). From this perspective 'going back' might imply – besides the actual dangers and the lack of livelihood opportunities – also the circumstance of giving up or reducing multilocality. Or how Calogero puts it: "It is only possible to conflate refugee-repatriation with 'returning home' to an audience that is well-insulated from the living conditions, life-opportunities, and political constraints of refugee households"(Calogero 2011: 2). This statement aims at economic aspects behind the migration that were not central in the descriptions presented here but which have to be considered to a larger extend. The conditions of poverty in rural areas consisting of a high dependency on natural conditions, little economic chances beside agriculture, and poor perspectives on positive changes are contrasted with at least some employment possibilities, potential external support and relatively high security in the city.

Regarding the relationship of the terms refugee and *muhajir* we can conclude that at least the conditions presented by the *muhajirin* seem to be influenced by the conditions of being a refugee. This is leading to the next and maybe most crucial aspect in this context, the categories.

Categories

Most points regarding the importance of categories have already been explained in the course of this paper. To sum it up, the affiliation to certain categories can imply certain advantages and might therefore be intended. By introducing themselves as *muhajirin* people aim to fit into the category IDP like it is used by the international actors and the state authorities to a lesser degree. In this case those who are approved as IDPs by the local *Directorate of Repatriatons and Refugees* (DoRR) are receiving *refugee cards* that entitle them to a basic food supply via the *World Food Program (WFP)*. Even

though the IDP definition makes no difference between people being displaced by violence and those suffering natural disasters, people are stressing aspects of insecurity in their presentations of mobility. This gives some hints about their understanding of the category and also their interpretation of what are accepted narratives and keywords in the new surroundings.

It is remarkable that the migrants are in the position to choose this category quite freely. Even if the ideas people are trying to align to, are influenced by the presence of international actors, the use of the term *muhajir* can be understood as an emic social category. The label is not given to them from the outside in the first place. Rather it is their translation of what they think is the expected status in the environment of international organizations and NGOs. If the necessitated vocabulary is met, this might pay off. People can join a category freely. For example, those who had been *bejāy* (homeless) before can in new surroundings present themselves as *muhajirin*. Insufficient knowledge about living conditions and dangers in rural areas by state and international actors abets this strategy. Therefore this connection serves as a good example for how influential international donor discourses touch the ground and influence the social realities on the local level. At the same time the international discourses are reinterpreted and adjusted to the local needs. What is to be added here is the fact that the belonging to the category of the *muhajirin* is reduced to particular situations and settings, i.e. in the interface with the state and international actors.

4. Conclusion

To answer the question asked in the beginning, who is a *muhajir* today, one realizes that an answer is not easy to find. One perspective is that *muhajirin* are increasingly internal migrants feeling forced by diverse reasons to make their way into the city. The meaning of being a *muhajir* has changed. While in the past it was linked to the idea of being in religious exile abroad – with certain differences between discourses and practices – today it is understood as to be forced to move and eventually to be in a situation to claim support. Even though in the past every Afghan *muhajir* was a refugee according to the official definition, today the two terms are maybe closer linked to each other. Aspects of refugeeness are adopted for the presentation of being a *muhajir*. By this the internal and the international legal discourse are coming closer together through practices of the people.

The discontinuity to be found in the use of the term *muhajir* can be detected in Afghan migration strategies in tough surroundings, characterized by high mobility and adaption to a particular context.

The two areas linked with each other through processes of migration by the *muhajirin* are not different geographical countries anymore but rural and urban areas within the same country. Nonetheless they are marked by huge differences in security, economic possibilities, and potential external support.

A closer look at people who are denominating themselves as *muhajirin* today showed how connections of mobility, social discourses and livelihood strategies are helping people to cope with a surrounding of insecurity, economic hardships, humanitarian help and urbanization. In this interplay of people, meanings of the term *muhajir* is central and allegorical for the changes in Afghanistan.

The analyzed connection between local and international discourses touches the core interest of the Crossroads Asia Network. It showed how international influences are shaping local social realities and

how these external powers are perceived, reshaped and instrumentalized by those 'on the ground'. New social categories are formed from the bottom up in answer to a top down project.

Of high interest might be the role of the counterparts to those who had their say in this paper: staff of international organizations, state officers, and NGO staff. They are contributing in the same way to the adaption and reformation of the 'great Western ideas' to the local contexts.

This Working Paper focused on the presentation of mobility and showed which conclusions can be drawn from this. Nonetheless the relation of forced and voluntary migration could be discussed deeper by looking closer to individual fates and case studies from other regions. Furthermore questions of social mobility could be taken stronger into account in order to modify the picture given in this paper.

Literature

Ansari, Z. I. (1990): Hijrah in the Islamic tradition. In: Anderson, E. & Hatch Dupree, N. (Eds.): The Cultural Basis of Afghan Nationalism, Oxford, pp. 3-20.

Bakewell, O. (2011): Conceptualising Displacement and Migration: Processes, Conditions, and Categories. In: Koser, K. & Martin, S. (eds.): The Migration-Displacement Nexus. Patterns, Processes, and Policies. New York, Oxford.

Bakewell, O. (2008): Research beyond the categories: the importance of policy irrelevant research into forced migration'. In: Journal of refugee studies 21(4), pp. 432-453.

Boesen, I. (1990): Honour in exile: continuity and change among Afghan refugees. In: Anderson, E. & Hatch Dupree, N. (Eds.): The Cultural Basis of Afghan Nationalism, Oxford, pp. 160-174.

Calogero, P. A. (2011): Planning Kabul: The politics of urbanization in Afghanistan. Berkley.

Connor, K. M. (1987): An Analysis of residential choice among self-settled Afghan refugees in Peshawar, Pakistan. Lincoln.

Harpviken, C. (2009): Social Networks and Migration in Wartime Afghanistan. New York.

Grare, F. (2003): The Geopolitics of Afghan Refugees in Pakistan. In: Stedman, S. J. & Tanner, F. (eds.): Refugee Manipulation. War, Politics, and the Abuse of Human Suffering. Washington, pp. 57-94

Koser, K. & Martin, S. (2011): The Migration-Displacement Nexus. Patterns, Processes, and Policies. New York, Oxford.

Lischer, S. (2005): Dangerous Sanctuaries. Refugee Camps, Civil War, and the Dilemmas of Humanitarian Aid. Ithaca & London.

Monsutti, A. (2005): War and Migration: Social Networks and Economic Strategies of the Hazaras of Afghanistan, New York & London.

Monsutti, A. (2010): The Transnational Turn in Migration Studies and the Afghan Social Networks. In: Dawn Chatty and Bill Finlayson (Eds.) Dispossession and Displacement: Forced Migration in the Middle East and North Africa, British Academy Occasional Papers 14, Oxford, pp. 45-68.

Richmond, A. (1993): Reactive Migration: Sociological Perspectives On Refugee Movements. In: Journal of Refugee Studies, 6(1), pp. 9-24.

Roy, O. (1990): Islam and Resistance in Afghanistan. Cambridge.

Schetter, C. (2012): Translocal Lives. Patterns of Migration in Afghanistan. In: Crossroads Asia Working Paper Series, No. 2.

Shahrani, N. (1995): Afghanistan's Muhajirin (Muslim 'Refugee-Warrios') Politics of Mistrust and Distrust of Politics. In: Daniel, E. V. & Knudsen, J. Chr. (Eds.): Mistrusting Refugees, Berkley and Los Angeles, pp. 187-206.

Shalinsky, A. (1979): Central Asian Emigres in Afghanistan: Problems of Religious and Ethnic Identity. In: Afghanistan Council of The Asia Society, Occasional Paper 19, New York.

Stepputat, F. (1999) 'Dead Horses?' In: Journal of Refugee Studies 12(4), pp. 416–419.

UNHCR (2012): Afghanistan. Conflict-Induced Internally Displaced Persons in Afghanistan. Interpretation of Data as of 31 May 2012.

UN-OCHA (2004): Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement. Introduction. http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/AB752ABEA5C1EFFCC1256C33002A8510-idp.html (20.3.2013)

World Bank and (UNHCR 2011): Research Study on IDPs in urban settings – Afghanistan. Kabul.
Zolberg, A.; Suhrke, A. & Aguayo, S. (1989): Escape from Violence. Conflict and the Refugee Crisis in the Developing World, Oxford.

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.

Publications in the Crossroads Asia Working Paper Series

- Marsden, Magnus (2011): Mobile Life on the Frontiers of Crossroads Asia. In: Crossroads Asia Working Paper Series, No. 1.
- Schetter, Conrad (2012): Translocal Lives. Patterns of Migration in Afghanistan. In: Crossroads Asia Working Paper Series, No. 2.
- Hill, Joe (2012): A Post-Area Studies Approach to the Study of Hill Irrigation across the Alai – Pamir – Karakoram – Himalaya. In: Crossroads Asia Working Paper Series, No. 3.
- Ismailbekova, Aksana (2012): Coping Strategies: Public Avoidance, Migration, and Marriage in the Aftermath of the Osh Conflict, Fergana Valley. In: Crossroads Asia Working Paper Series, No. 4.
- Ibrahimi, Niamatullah (2012): Shift and Drift in Hazara Ethnic Consciousness. The Impact of Conflict and Migration. In: Crossroads Asia Working Paper Series, No. 5.
- Jamali, Hafeez (2013): The Anxiety of Development: Megaprojects and the Politics of Place in Gwadar, Pakistan. In: Crossroads Asia Working Paper Series, No. 6.
- Kreutzmann, Hermann (2013): The Significance of Geopolitical Issues for Internal Development and Intervention in Mountainous Areas of Crossroads Asia. In: Crossroads Asia Working Paper Series, No. 7.
- Tiller, Petra & Hiltrud Herbers (2013): „Der Entwicklungsprozess des Islams in Tadschikistan nach dem Zerfall der Sowjetunion" als Figuration nach Norbert Elias? Eine erste Annäherung. In: Crossroads Asia Working Paper Series, No. 8.
- Behal, Rana (2013): Coolies, Recruiters and Planters: Migration of Indian Labour to the Southeast Asian and Assam Plantations during Colonial Rule. In: Crossroads Asia Working Paper Series, No. 9.
- Wenzel, Christoph (2013): Being a *muhajir* in present-day Afghanistan – Views on flight and migration from inside. In: Crossroads Asia Working Paper Series, No. 10.

Crossroads Asia Concept Papers

- Working Group Conflict (2012): Conflict Research on Crossroads Asia – A Conceptual Approach. In: Crossroads Asia Concept Paper Series, No. 1.
- Working Group Development (2012): Development at the Crossroads. Development Research on Crossroads Asia – a conceptual approach. In: Crossroads Asia Concept Paper Series, No. 2.
- Working Group Migration (2012): Crossroads Asia through the Lens of Mobility and Migration: A Conceptual Approach. In: Crossroads Asia Concept Paper Series, No. 3.