

# Crossroads Asia: The Nexus of Conflict and Migration in Afghanistan

A report on the workshop from 24 May 2012, by Helena Cermeño, Jana Jüssen and Catherine Reynolds

An international workshop Crossroads Asia: The Nexus of Conflict and Migration in Afghanistan took place at the Center for Development Research of the University of Bonn on 24 May 2012. Researchers of the competence network Crossroads Asia ([www.crossroads-asia.de](http://www.crossroads-asia.de)) as well as from London and Baltimore presented fieldwork conducted in Afghanistan.

Afghanistan has witnessed one of the largest movements of refugees and labor migrants globally in the last three decades. However, due to a widespread over-emphasis on the “Taliban”, the “drug economy” or “state-building”, migration patterns, which are shaping the livelihoods of many Afghans, are hardly discussed. The workshop aimed to help close this gap by bringing the nexus of conflict and migration to the forefront. Based on the concepts of figurations and mobility, the researchers assessed spatial and social networking on different scales, to understand how Afghans interact at the nexus of conflict and migration. The concept of figurations, introduced by sociologist Norbert Elias, implies that minor incidents within one element of a constellation can effect changes in larger constellations. In addition, the concept of mobility allows a focus on interactions and communication between human beings and the flow of ideas and commodities crossing cultural, social and political boundaries.

## NARRATIVES OF MIGRATION AND CONFLICT

Methodologically a convincing starting point, the first presentation of the workshop traced individual experiences of migration based on personal stories and narrations. People from Afghanistan are said to be among the best narrators in the world, and among their stories, migration narratives are usually present. “One of the saddest things people say is that through migration they have lost contact with their distant past and relatives”, stated Ingeborg Baldauf of the Humboldt University of Berlin. For a population of “movers”, narrations play a crucial role in reestablishing their past. However, one interesting finding was that people avoid telling stories about conflicts. Only the second or third generations start telling stories of their elders’ traumatic migration experiences.



Ingeborg Baldauf illustrates the nexus between conflict and migration, by looking at Afghan narratives.

community has migrated from Hazarajat in central Afghanistan to Quetta since the early 20th century and shares a sense of loss as well as a collective memory of injustice due to the process of spatial mobility, stated Niamatullah Ibrahim, Crossroads Asia Visiting Fellow at the Freie Universität Berlin.

## BORDERLANDS AND TRADE

However, migration has also proved to be a suitable survival strategy, as illustrated by Magnus Marsden from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), London, based on the example of Afghan Trade Networks in Central Asia. Trade networks started expanding from Afghanistan into the Soviet Union in the early 1980s. Afghan traders in Tajikistan today appear not only to be economically successful, but have become agents of social change, exerting a strong influence on the prosperity, consumption practices, and everyday lifestyle of Tajiks. Marsden concludes that the way in which commodities are traded shapes the “identity” of traders and how they perceive space across borders.

Jonathan Goodhand from SOAS also focused his presentation on the Afghan borderlands. “We know a lot more about how states have dealt with borderlands than how borderlands have dealt with states,” he stated in the beginning of his presentation. Goodhand continued his argument by underlining the fact that transboundary goods, ideas, and people have a direct impact on the very perception of borders and concludes that there is a constant process of bordering and re-bordering, an “itinerant territoriality”. Borderlands are simultaneously spaces of opportunity and danger, allowing for high profits but also presenting high risks. Borders are points of tension between the state and shadow economics in Afghanistan. The drug economy is an impetus for the state to get involved in a territory it might otherwise have

## ROLE OF DIASPORAS

Where narrations fail to transfer and reestablish connections with the past, diaspora members can be uprooted, and become easier to indoctrinate, observed Antonio Giustozzi from London School of Economics. Spatial mobility is gaining importance in the study of conflict and the insurgent movements in Afghanistan. Through processes of spatial mobility and the presence of diaspora communities, the Taliban have been able to blend into Pakistani society and undertake recruitment and fundraising among the local population.

This nexus between conflict and migration in the region can also be identified in the diaspora of ethnic Hazaras in Quetta, Pakistan. The predominantly Shi’a

neglected. There is no way to understand the drug economy without looking at mobility. Drug networks have a spatial logic of their own that is not based on the central nation-state.

## NETWORKS AND KINSHIP

The concept of migration is also of high significance within the country's borders. In his presentation Christoph Wenzel from the Humboldt University of Berlin focused on the fact that migration occurs in order to improve livelihoods. Particularly the decades of wars and violent conflicts in Afghanistan have caused refugee movements and displaced large parts of the population. Cities like Mazar-i Sharif are seen as "spaces of refuge", which are connoted to opportunities, expectations, and scopes of actions, which depend strongly on the social context and networks of the migrants. An interesting finding of Wenzel was that "spaces of refuge" merely exist temporarily. Moreover, usually only small parts of families or communities migrate, while others continue living in the place of origin or migrate to other locations. Hereby not only a diversification of livelihood strategies, but also a multi-local network emerges.

The crucial role of networks was discussed by Ayfer Durdu and François Ömer Akakça from the Humboldt University of Berlin. To avoid losing connection with family members and to reinforce family ties, many Afghans build networks through endogamous marriages within family lineage. Among different patterns of marriages, the Father-Brother-Children/Daughter (FBD) is especially recurrent in the Afghan context. FBD marriages encompass a great diversity of meanings, aims, and functions in society and in single social groups, observed Akakça. The concept of mobility is very present; even when the kinship relations are close, women cross family borders through marriage. "Two brothers married their children, and through this process they made kinship", explained Durdu. Marriages are fundamentally an affair of intra-family mobility, a source of building ties, making kinship and "getting close".



Participants and network members of Crossroads Asia listen intently.

Anila Daulatzai from Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, presented a paper based on an anthropological study of kinship in Afghanistan. She elaborated the fact that in conflict situations family ties are not necessarily mobilized in particular cases. In many cases a multiple manifest of betrayal, dangers and insecurity characterizes small-scale social networks such as families and kinship. As kinship in itself is already complex, the impact of protracted violent conflicts and wars in Afghanistan makes kinship relations extremely complicated. Conflicts structure the everyday life of Afghan migrants. Daulatzai underlined her argument by presenting 'fragments' of the life of a young Afghan from Kabul, for whom kinship relations failed.

Impressions from field research presented in this workshop offered stimulating discussions of different patterns of migration and conflict on the micro-level in Afghanistan. Migration, usually assumed to be a movement from A to B, is better understood in Afghanistan as pendulum movement between different locations. Spatial mobility can change through acceleration, stagnation, deadlock and blockage. Afghan society has in many senses become trans-local, as Conrad Schetter, the research coordinator of the competence network Crossroads Asia, suggested. Schetter challenged the idea that humans are necessarily "rooted" in certain spaces; instead the Afghan cases show that a trans-local space predominates. Within this space many Afghans move between multi-local poles of social networks, which often cross national borders. The preliminary fieldwork results presented at the workshop suggest that the concept of trans-locality could replace the concept of trans-nationality for the Afghan context, because it avoids taking the nation-state as the center of analysis. Moreover the concept of spatial mobility appears to be a more appropriate conceptual approach than migration.

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