



MIDDLE EAST INSIGHTS

Afghan Trading Networks, Geopolitics and Everyday Diplomacy Transcending West Asia's Northern and Southern Tiers

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ABSTRACT

Central Asian transnational commercial networks play an important role in connecting much of West Asia. Since the traders who form such networks are multi-lingual and able to inhabit multiple cultural spaces, they are helpfully thought of as “everyday diplomats” skilled especially in the art of negotiation. This article focuses on commercial networks made up of Afghans. It identifies two major corridors of Afghan mobility in West Asia: one connecting West Asia's Northern Tier to East Asia and the other connecting its Southern Tier to Turkey and Central Asia.

On 1 January 2018, the attention of security experts came to focus on a category of actors that had hitherto rarely been popularly associated with global jihadism. Abdulkadir Masharipov — a citizen of Uzbekistan who was fluent in Russian, Turkish, Chinese and Arabic, and had ties to Uyghur communities in Central Asia and Turkey — played a leading role in the attack on Istanbul's Reina nightclub that resulted in the deaths of 39 people. He was eventually apprehended by police after having dropped off his four-year-old son in a house in Zeytinburnu, an Istanbul neighbourhood that had long been home to Central Asians. Masharipov had purportedly received military training in Afghanistan.

Transnational communities and networks of Central Asia are playing an important role in creating transregional connectivity across multiple West Asian contexts, yet in ways that contrast with the

connectivity illustrated by Masharipov. Like Masharipov, the traders who form such networks are multi-lingual and able to inhabit multiple cultural spaces. The principal concern of such actors, though, is commerce rather than religious militancy. Mobile merchants offer a distinct lens into Central Asia's connections to adjacent regions.

Among such networks, those made up of Afghans are especially prominent. There are two major corridors of Afghan mobility in West Asia: one connects post-Soviet Eurasia to China via the Muslim-majority republics of Central Asia; the other binds Turkey, the Hijaz, and Central Asia in a triangle. Afghan merchants simultaneously connect West Asia's Northern Tier to East Asia and its Southern Tier to Turkey and Central Asia.

A strong case exists for treating Central Asia's transnational actors as "everyday diplomats" — a term that emphasises the capacities that particular groups and networks of persons have in the skills of diplomacy, especially those of negotiation and cultural/linguistic versatility. Nation-states beyond Central Asia have increasingly recognised how the diplomatic skills of sections of their populations can add another dimension to their foreign policy agendas and another layer through which interstate relations are formed.¹ The Central Asian states could similarly capitalise on the pursuit of informal diplomacy along human-commercial routes. Yet, in order to do so, one-sided stereotypes that circulate about traders from the region need rigorous contesting. These states also need to develop a vision of West Asian transregional connectivity that embraces the region's Northern and Southern Tiers.

AFGHANS IN WEST ASIA'S NORTHERN TIER

A regional context in which Afghan traders have demonstrated themselves as being especially adept operators is the former Soviet Union — West Asia's Northern Tier. Mobile Afghans in Central Asia are largely viewed by officials from the region and beyond either as costly refugees or terrorists/criminals. In recent years, policy relating to Afghan traders has been confused. States in the region have introduced policies specifically targeting the commercial activities of Afghan traders. Less frequently, policy makers have sought to encourage Afghan merchants to invest in the commercial and agricultural sectors of their countries, as in Uzbekistan today.

Afghan commercial networks in the post-Soviet space were established by Soviet-sympathising Afghans who studied in Soviet universities, technical institutes and party schools during the 1970s and 1980s. These students engaged in petty trade on the side. They dealt in foreign currency and clandestinely sold Indian-made cloth and jeans from Hong Kong to Soviet citizens. On home visits

¹ See Alan Christelow, *Algerians without Borders: the Making of a Global Frontier Society* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2012), and Yolacan, Serkan, "Azeri Networks Through Thick and Thin: West Asian Politics from a Diasporic Eye," *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, forthcoming.

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to Afghanistan, they transported air conditioning units made in Azerbaijan as well as Russian-made tea pots. Such goods also found their way to Pakistan along established smuggling networks. The trading activities of these Afghan students built on a deep knowledge of the historical trade in Muslim Central Asia and Eurasia. Various Afghan networks — including those made up of Sikhs and Hindus — had been active in the trade between British India and Central Asia/the Russian Empire, stretching as far as the city of Murmansk, close to the Arctic Circle.²

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Afghan traders helped to ensure that the populations of the Soviet Union’s successor states received basic foodstuffs. They re-exported to Central Asia foodstuffs imported from Iran and Pakistan. In the same years, they also cornered the wholesale market in Chinese commodities in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus. Doing so involved establishing trade routes between China and the post-Soviet states, interacting with officials and negotiating market access with other influential trading communities.

Many of the Afghans who moved to the former Soviet space after the 2001 US-led invasion of the country and officially registered themselves as refugees found informal employment in the region’s “container markets” as “sellers” for the established Afghan merchants. Such activities continue to be important for the region’s economies today, although in some settings new legislation has curtailed the scope of Afghan businesses.

After the Eurasian Customs Union was launched in 2015, Afghans began shipping goods to Russia and Belarus using Kazakhstan’s port and rail network. They are now diversifying their range of activities: supplying raw material (such as Russian wood) to Afghanistan and investing in China’s café culture in the city of Yiwu.

Afghan merchants operating in this expansive context communicate with one another in Farsi and Pashto. But they are always fluent in both Central Asia’s Turkic and Persian languages, as well as Russian and often also Mandarin or Cantonese. Their skills in informal diplomacy have occasionally been latched upon by authorities in the countries where they work. An Afghan trader in Ukraine was said to have helped in August 2015 to secure the release of a Ukrainian citizen captured by the Taliban. In Yiwu a trader from Afghanistan was elected as representative of the city’s 13,000 or so foreign traders. He is now a regular feature at official meetings organised by the city’s municipal government and widely featured on Chinese television.

For such networks to function, merchants cultivate and sustain close relationships with regional officials. Such relationships help to insulate traders at times of political sensitivity. As a trader remarked during a conversation with me in Yiwu in January 2018, “We Afghans have lots of

² See for example, Dale, Stephen, *Indian Merchants and the Eurasian Trade* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

experience of states grabbing our money. That's why the only people who invest in China are those who know officials in high places who are ready to inform them of new policies coming our way.”

Although the Central Asian states frequently depict Afghans as terrorists or criminals, the region's public widely regard them as successful and adaptable traders — “instead of reciting the Qur'an into the ears of new-borns, Afghans drizzle honey and raisins in their mouths to foster a love of money”, a Tajik who works in one of Dushanbe's universities once remarked to me. Indeed, most Afghan traders in West Asia's Northern Tier seek actively to reject the association of Afghanistan with radical Islam. They largely lead secular lives in which the shared ideal of “living well” is achieved through the demonstration of commercial success and participation in public forms of entertainment. This personal ethics of the good life is combined with a strong collective and cultural commitment to Afghan national identity. This aspect of the traders' identity is reinforced by the policies towards migrants in the post-Soviet states: state officials monitor, fashion ties with and channel available support to “migrant communities” through formally established “diaspora associations”.

AFGHANS IN WEST ASIA'S SOUTHERN TIER

A second key human-commercial corridor brings to light the activities of traders originally from the border regions of Afghanistan and Central Asia, who currently live and work in two of West Asia's greatest religious, commercial and political centres: Istanbul and Jeddah. Most of these traders claim descent from families who lived in the Bukharan emirates of Central Asia until they emigrated across the border to Afghanistan in the 1920s against the backdrop of persecution by the Bolsheviks. These Bukharan émigrés lived in Afghanistan until the early 1980s.³ They were active in the country's industrial and commercial sectors — especially in the fur and carpet businesses — and also played a leading role in the development of modern industry in the country.⁴ Elite Central Asian families became close to Afghanistan's urban elite and achieved high-level positions in government. Some of these elite families began to leave Afghanistan for Saudi Arabia, Europe and the United States after the 1973 coup d'état that resulted in the overthrow of Afghanistan's monarchy.

After the invasion of Afghanistan by the Soviet Union in 1979, thousands of less wealthy émigré families fled to Pakistan, fearing that their lands and capital would be confiscated by the communist regime in Kabul. While community elders supported various anti-Soviet *mujahidin* organisations, many migrated so that their children could evade conscription into the Soviet army. In Pakistan, they continued to be active in the Central Asian carpet manufacture and trading industry. In the late

³ See for example, Audrey Shalinsky, *Long Years of Exile* (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1993).

⁴ Mohammad Khan Jalallar, *Rumi Tomato: Autobiography of an Afghan Minister*, ed. Babur Rashidzada (USA: Create Space Independent Publishing Platform, 2013).

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1980s, hundreds of these families moved from Pakistan to Jeddah in Saudi Arabia, where Central Asians had lived in the Bukhariyyah neighbourhood since at least the 1850s and were followed by a later flow of Central Asians in the 1920s.⁵

The Central Asian émigrés who arrived in Jeddah in the 1980s rapidly established themselves there as well as in Mecca and Medina. They initially filled niches in the economy that had been vacated by earlier waves of Central Asian migrants, such as restaurants selling the Saudi “national” dish, *ruʿ al bukhari* (bukhari rice). They then became active in the import from Turkey and then China of machine-made prayer carpets and cheap ready-made clothing, both items purchased by *hajjis* and overseas labourers as gifts to take home.

The *kaafala* system — whereby foreign businesses must be registered in the name of a Saudi sponsor — means that conducting business in Saudi Arabia is inherently risky for foreigners. The most successful of Afghanistan’s Central Asian émigré merchants in Saudi Arabia moved their capital to Turkey. Initially, they bought homes in Istanbul’s Central Asian neighbourhood, Zeytinburnu. Increasingly, they invested in new developments that have sprung up under the regime of President Tayyip Erdoğan. Rising living expenses in Saudi Arabia, partly arising from the “family tax” introduced in 2016, resulted in many Saudi-based Afghans closing their business in the kingdom. Those with sufficient capital secured access to Turkish residency permits and sometimes citizenship.

These merchants regularly emphasise their ties to Turkic communities in Central Asia: doing so legitimises their collective and individual citizenship claims in Turkey. Associations established by Afghans in Istanbul are frequently formulated in relationship to an explicitly ethno-linguistic Turkic identity, most conventionally that of “Afghan Turk”. Many Afghans in Zeytinburnu say, however, that they came to emphasise the Turkic aspects of their identity after moving to Turkey: “Back in Afghanistan we knew we were Uzbek but we only ever spoke Farsi. I learned more Uzbek in Istanbul than in my homeland”, a representative of one such cultural association remarked to me in August 2017.

Afghan traders in West Asia’s Southern Tier are culturally and linguistically versatile. They are at home across the Muslim societies of South and Central Asia, the Hijaz and the Arabian peninsula more generally, as well as Turkey. They speak Arabic, Farsi/Persian, Central Asian Turkic languages and modern Turkish. Those who travel to China for trade also often speak fluent Mandarin and/or Cantonese. Most are fluent in Urdu.

There are, however, some limits to the type of worlds across which they traverse. In contrast to the Afghan networks in West Asia’s Northern Tier, the émigré traders in the Southern Tier often remark

⁵ Eileen Kane, *Russian Hajj: Empire and the Pilgrimage in Mecca* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2015).

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that their people chose to live in Saudi Arabia because there are few greater blessings than living close to the sacred cities of Mecca and Medina. They also say they are most happy in countries where they can “hear the call to prayer”. Indeed, some émigré families that are commercially active in Western Europe often arrange for their elderly parents to live in Zeytinburnu.

CONCLUSION

There exist two core axes of Afghan mobility in West Asia that are disconnected and characterised by contrasting cultural and political priorities and outlooks. It is increasingly likely, however, that changing political and economic circumstances in West Asia will lead to reconfigurations in the dynamics and geographies of these human-commercial channels. Policy towards foreign traders in Saudi Arabia has already resulted in some of these traders permanently moving to Turkey but also seeking new commercial opportunities in Eurasia (especially in Ukraine and Kazakhstan, the latter being a country where ethnically Turkic Afghans benefit from a citizenship policy directed at diasporic Kazakh communities).

In the context of such geopolitical shifts and the effects these are having on the geographical location of traders, commercial networks that were hitherto disconnected in political and geographical terms will gradually fold into one another, regardless of the ideological differences among those who make them up. Afghan traders will be well positioned to act as a driving force behind a form of transregional connectivity that builds off but transcends the geopolitics of West Asia’s Southern and Northern Tiers.

Afghanistan’s foreign relations are constrained today as in the past by the country’s interstitial between multiple geopolitical forces. As an Afghan merchant based in China since 2004 told me in Yiwu in August 2018: “The Chinese offered to build a high-speed rail route that would deliver passengers to Urumqi from Kabul in eight hours. When the Americans heard of the plan they blocked it.” Against this backdrop, the Afghan state stands to learn a great deal about how to manoeuvre in a complex neighbourhood from the forms of everyday diplomacy practised by its traders. These traders’ networks, activities and strategies form a sound basis for a sustainable and grounded vision of regional connectivity.

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