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“We are the ones they come
to when nobody can help”
Afghan smugglers’ perceptions of
themselves and their communities

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Introduction

Afghanistan is one of the top countries of origin of migrants to the extent that dynamics around Afghan migration have gained significance for policy makers and researchers. Concerning refugees more specifically, Afghanistan was the second largest country of origin of refugees worldwide in 2017 (UNHCR, 2018), and the third one in Europe where Afghans amounted to 7 per cent of all first-time asylum applicants (Eurostat, 2018). A significant proportion of Afghan migrants moves to neighbouring countries (primarily the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan) and further afield through the assistance of extensive migrant smuggling networks. While information about Afghan migration flows has become more available in recent years,¹ the understanding of Afghan smuggling networks remains weak, including as to how the Afghan smuggling “business” operates, how it has evolved over the course of the Afghan displacement, and the factors that motivate smugglers.

To address these gaps, this paper aims to analyse smugglers’ perceptions of themselves and their relationships with their communities in Afghanistan. Qualitative primary data collection took place to support the analysis; 23 smugglers have been interviewed in three sites in Afghanistan. The study focuses on the microlevel; it considers community dynamics and low-level smugglers rather than high-level organizers of smuggling networks. The analysis in this paper is intended to provide insights on how smugglers see themselves, their role in society and the evolution thereof. The paper also provides an analysis of factors that affect perceptions of and trust in smugglers among Afghan society.

The paper highlights that smuggling networks have a long-standing and respected place in Afghan culture. Migrant smuggling networks have roots in Islamic pilgrimage and Afghan trade networks and the “profession” of smuggling has been passed from father to son. As such, communities have historically high levels of trust in smugglers. In recent years, according to smugglers, the profession has become less reputable, as the legal context changed and new smugglers with a more purely financial orientation entered the business. This paper concludes with recommendations to support policy responses and programming concerning migrant smuggling and migration in Afghanistan.

Literature Review

Smuggling: Definitions, Concepts and Context

As laid out by the Protocol Against Smuggling of Migrants by Air, Sea and Land supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime,² migrant smuggling is defined as “the procurement, in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit, of the illegal entry of a person into a State Party of which the person is not a national or a permanent resident” (United Nations, 2000b, Article 3). Migrant smuggling is distinct from human trafficking on three main counts: first, the Protocol’s definition does not require an element of coercion over the migrant as it is the case for victims of trafficking; second, contrary to human trafficking, the objective of migrant smuggling is not that of exploitation but

¹ Alongside the Afghan Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation, attempts have been made by some international bodies to collect data on various aspects of Afghan migration and migrants such as profile of migrants, pull and push factors, migration routes, protection risks on routes, returnees, etc. The Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM) and Mixed Migration Monitoring Mechanism Initiative (4Mi) are two leading examples in this context; the first initiated by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) is a system to track and monitor displacement and the latter, an initiative led by the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) and the Mixed Migration Centre (MMC), is collecting data on Afghan mixed migration flows.

² The Protocol was adopted in 2000 and entered into force in 2004; it has so far been ratified by 147 States.

of “obtain[ing], directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit”; and, third, in contrast to human trafficking, migrant smuggling is always transnational as it consists in the “illegal entry of a person” into another country (see United Nations, 2000a, Art. 3 and 2000b, Art. 3).³

Academic conceptualizations of smuggling encompass four broad frameworks. Salt and Stein (1997) have outlined the prevailing framework that is rooted in the notion that smuggling is a business that delivers a service for people who are looking to move in return for a profit as well as the “exploit[ation] of legal as well as illegal methods and channels of entry” (ibid: p. 484). Majidi (2018) employs an ecological systems approach to depict smuggling practices as operating at different layers of the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem and macrosystem. This framework is highly reliant on understanding the relationships (i.e., social organization) required at each level for smuggling networks to be effective. Stone-Cadena and Velasco (2018) build on this approach by placing smugglers within cultural and historical contexts, where smugglers are an important part of the community and patterns of mobility, with strong levels of local links depending on demographic characteristics. Finally, altruistic and humanitarian conceptualizations of smuggling that denote an ethical and moral imperative have been extensively discussed in the literature (van Liempt and Doornik, 2006; Achilli, 2018). Across the literature, positive aspects of smuggling are highlighted. This includes aspects of community trust and membership that can reduce protection risks (Achilli, 2018; Majidi, 2018; Stone-Cadena and Velasco, 2018; Mengiste, 2018; Slack and Martinez, 2018) and the helpfulness this service is to many community members (Salt and Stein, 1997; Achilli, 2018; Maher, 2018).

Academic conceptions of smuggling aim to provide a framework for a complex phenomenon that is changing rapidly, due in part to globalization. There is a wide range of literature on the impact of globalization on human trafficking and migrant smuggling networks (e.g. Koslowski, 2011; Andreas, 2013; GMPA, 2015). Globalization facilitates trafficking and smuggling by expanding the array of networks open to smugglers, decreasing the costs associated with fund transfer and increasing available transport options (Koslowski, 2011: 61–62). The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2011) pointed out that increasingly sophisticated networks emerged in regions where anti-smuggling law enforcement strategies are robust. New technologies have had a clear impact on migrant smuggling. Smugglers use WhatsApp, Twitter and Facebook not only to reach out to migrants, but also to provide information about migration routes (Frouws et al., 2016; Crisp, 1999; Jacobsen, Robinson and Lijnders, 2013). Finally, the overall migration picture has changed significantly: the absolute number of people living outside their country of birth is at a record high and recent flows of migrants into Europe have generated widespread policy and response discussions.

The smuggling network organization has been detailed in the literature. For instance, Triandafyllidou and Maroukis (2012) review research to date and suggest that most networks have differentiated the work into multiple subroles, including investors, recruiters, transporters, guides, enforcers, and corrupt officials (see Salt and Stein, 1997; Kyle and Koslowski, 2001; Koser, 2008). There is also data collected from social media networks about how smugglers communicate with migrants and potential migrants (e.g. Frouws et al., 2016; UNHCR, 2017; Ali, 2016). There is a widespread understanding that there are strong social links between smugglers and the communities in which they operate (Majidi, 2018; Stone-Cadena and Velasco, 2018), but the precise nature of these links and this relationship is difficult to determine (UNODC, 2011) in large part because of lack of data about smugglers themselves.

³ As Carling, Gallagher and Horwood mention (2015), this is often blurred in practice and imperfect information, unequal power dynamics, and contextual changes along the migration route can lead to situations of effective coercion or exploitation.

Despite the increasing interest in migration, data on smuggling remains relatively limited, with much of it being qualitative and addressing localized issues (IOM, 2016). Where quantitative data is collected, it is often not comparable due to differing methods and definitions (ibid). Moreover, qualitative data is limited by the sensitivity surrounding the illicit nature of smuggling; smugglers are reluctant to be interviewed (UNODC, 2011).

Migration and Smuggling in the Afghan Context

Afghanistan has a long-standing history of movement and migration and many refer to the fact that Afghan populations have historically used migration in many ways (e.g. AREU, 2005; Klaus, 2006; Monsutti, 2008; Mehlmann, 2011). Nomads migrate to ensure access to better pastureland, businessmen migrate for trade and pilgrims migrate to religious sites, both Shi'a and Sunni. Migration can be referred to as a coping strategy for Afghans (Monsutti, 2008).

Displacement and migration of Afghans are more recent phenomena that have been closely linked to the country's history of conflict and instability. Displacement episodes began in 1979, primarily to Pakistan and the Islamic Republic of Iran, when jihadist groups formed against the Soviets causing instances of conflict to increase. When the Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan in 1989, a mass inflow back into the country took place (Mohammadi, Abbasi-Shavazi and Sadeghi, 2018) but the start of civil war in Afghanistan and the emergence of the Taliban led to a new wave of displacement to neighbouring countries (Mahmoudian, 2007) due to the suppression of ethnic and religious minorities. This process once again reversed after the collapse of the Taliban and the establishment of a new government in 2002 (Mohammadi, Abbasi-Shavazi and Sadeghi, 2018). However, the revival of the Taliban in 2006 and the subsequent deterioration of the security environment and economic situation slowed this trend. The withdrawal of international forces in 2014 exacerbated this situation, as economic growth rates dropped to the single digits⁴ and livelihood opportunities diminished. In all of these periods, migration has been a survival strategy among Afghans, leading to a high number of Afghan refugees and migrants looking for better opportunities elsewhere (Monsutti, 2008).

Over the last forty years, Afghan migration took place primarily to neighbouring countries and to a limited extent to Europe (primarily to Germany, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands) and Australia.⁵ Flows to Europe have taken place continuously, but in 2015 there was a sharp increase in the number of migrants overall, as well as in the number of Afghans, arriving in Europe. Afghans represented the second main citizenship of first asylum applicants registered in European Union (EU) Member States during 2015 and 2016 (Eurostat, 2017) and a major one of undocumented migrants in Europe (Angeli and Triandafyllidou, 2016: 107).

For most Afghans, there are significant challenges associated with accessing regular migration routes, including the ability to secure visas, cost associated with obtaining visas, the bureaucratic challenges, and the speed at which necessary documents can be produced (McAuliffe et al., 2017; Monsutti, 2012). Due in part to the strong demand for departure among Afghans and in part to restrictions and challenges in accessing legal migration networks, smuggling networks have long viewed Afghanistan as a lucrative market (e.g. IOM, 2008; Koser, 2008; Triandafyllidou and Maroukis, 2012; Schmeidl, 2014; Majidi and Danziger, 2016). Smugglers provide diverse services for Afghans including transportation, provision of shelter, forging of documents, and support in crossing borders (e.g. MMC, 2017; Majidi and Danziger, 2016; Triandafyllidou and Maroukis 2012).

⁴ <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?locations=AF>

⁵ The first considerable wave of Afghans reached Australia in 1979 and continued during the 1990s due to ongoing civil war and emergence of Taliban. During 2000s, this movement continued mostly because of persecution against minority ethnic groups by Taliban.

Academic research into these networks is more recent and expanding. In *War and Migration*, Alessandro Monsutti (2012) outlined the variety of actors involved in smuggling networks, including guides, facilitators from other ethnic groups, owners of inns for travellers and money transfer agents. Using an auto-ethnographic approach, Khosravi (2007) described his journey through informal networks, and his relations with smugglers. Triandafyllidou and Maroukis (2012) summarized existing data and conducted interviews with 44 smugglers bringing people from Asia to Europe. Although this research provides information about smuggling routes and the challenges migrants face, it offers only a limited understanding of the relationships between smugglers and the migrants they transport. Some of the other works in the literature are produced by organizations like the International Organization for Migration, the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) and UNODC, providing insights into the types of protection risks faced by migrants and the ways in which smugglers communicate with migrants.

Overall, the literature has not addressed the self-conceptions of smugglers, including how they view their occupation, their place in the community, and their place in broader sociohistorical narratives of helpfulness and/or criminality. This research seeks to address this gap using a case example of the Afghanistan context. While the authors do not argue that the perspectives of migrants or broad trend analysis should be ignored, there is a need to better understand smuggling and recent contextual changes through the perspective of smugglers for a more comprehensive perspective on demands and drivers of migration.

Methodology

The goal of the research is to address the following questions: How do smugglers perceive their role in Afghan society and culture? What factors affect how human smugglers are perceived by Afghan society?

The study involved interviews with 23 Afghan smugglers in three locations – Kabul and the two primary Western border crossing points into the Islamic Republic of Iran (Herat and Nimruz). The smugglers were identified through migrants and potential migrants themselves as well as the researchers' networks with international non-governmental organizations working on mixed migration data collection. The researchers selected smugglers who could participate in the study through both of these means.

The immediate data collection was made possible because the researchers have significant experience in and engagement with communities affected by migration. The researcher responsible for data collection has been working on collecting data about migration in Kabul, Nimruz and Herat since 2016. The research team has close links with community members within these areas, including with local officials, migrants, people responsible for maintaining accommodation for migrants and moneylenders. The team drew on these connections when identifying potential interviewees. Although this study focuses on smuggler self-perception, it is set within a context of broader understanding of dynamics in the selected locations by the research team.

The researchers collected data using semi-structured interview formats, and analysed data using inductive coding methods. Data was collected in a team comprised of the lead researcher and field assistants, all male, working in teams of two (interviewer and note taker). Interviews were generally held at the interviewee's home, office or workplace and were held in the local language (Dari). Interviews took place in August and September 2018 with follow-up interviews in December 2018. Interviews were conducted with full informed consent, but most interviewees did not permit the researchers to record the interviews, or to refer to their names in the research.

The research methodology has several limitations. First, the sample size was small – only 23 smugglers were interviewed. While the researchers aimed to select a sample that was adequately diverse and represented various demographics, the sample is not large enough to capture all perspectives. Furthermore, this study also is localized to Nimruz and Herat border crossings, both of which border the Islamic Republic of Iran. Data was not collected regarding migration through Kandahar and Jalalabad/Nangarhar, that is, migration of Afghans toward Pakistan and the Eastern routes. As such, the data in this paper is not representative of the complete Afghan smuggling networks.

Analysis

Smugglers as an Integral Part of Afghan Culture

Smugglers have a long history in Afghanistan, closely linked with traditional migration for reasons including pilgrimage, trade and education. Forty years of conflict have reinforced the role of smugglers in Afghan society and have bolstered smugglers' self-image, including the concept that they are engaged in humanitarian work. Despite these positive perceptions, there is a widespread recognition among smugglers that communities perceive a close connection between their profession and violence; it is regularly assumed among smugglers, however, that violence is perpetrated by "others".

With migration forming an integral part of Afghan culture, including as a coping and social mechanism (Monsutti, 2012; Majidi, 2018), there is little negative connotation associated with migrant smuggling or facilitation of migration. Monsutti (2012) refers to a variety of guides that were in use by Hazara ethnic group on migration routes. He points to two types of facilitators – "rahbalad", or guides "who know the road", and "qachagbar", or "dealers in contraband". He further notes that there is an ethnic dimension to the terms used by migrants: "Although the two terms are often interchangeable ... there is a tendency to use 'rahbalad' for the Hazara intermediary and 'qachagbar' for the Baluch accompanying them on the trip." (ibid., 161). Smugglers interviewed over the course of this research mentioned that the word "rahbalad" has a positive meaning among the Afghan people and implies "those who help people in times of crisis and desperation". Majidi's (2018) more recent research emphasizes the neutrality of smuggling as a profession, noting that "this ordinariness is even evidenced linguistically, through terms like qachag... meaning smuggler or trafficker yet carrying no negative connotation" (ibid., 103).

The primary data collected for this paper not only reinforce the neutrality of smuggling as a profession but indicate that smugglers have a well-respected place in Afghan culture. Smugglers see themselves as valued members of their own communities and believe they perform a necessary service. Many of the smugglers interviewed felt a strong sense of pride in their work.

We have a good status and reputation among our people. They don't look at us negatively. We take their children and youth to safety, to where they can work and send money back home. (32 years old, Kabul)

I help people to access their rights and I'm sure I will get rewarded for that by God. (50 years old, Pashtun, Kabul)

One of the reasons for the respect accorded to smugglers may be the fact that they are seen as the last port of call during difficult times. Several of the smugglers we spoke to consider their profession to be a vocation or an altruistic calling helping the most vulnerable. One smuggler stated clearly: "We are the ones they come to when no body can help." Another smuggler explained the humanitarian imperative that he says drove his own work; he also suggested that he was willing to engage in smuggling even in the absence of financial motives.

We are doing this job for more than 30 years, and a lot of people are saved because of us. It happened a lot that in the mountains or deserts we found people without guide who were on the verge of dying. We saved them all... (45 years old, Baluch, Herat)

The altruistic element of smuggling may be linked to historical precedent. According to some of the smugglers interviewed, the traditional role of *rahbalads* is to take people on pilgrimage including to Shi'a holy sites such as Mashhad (the Islamic Republic of Iran) and Karbala (Iraq), as well as to support trade routes. During periods of insecurity, rahlabads took people to safe places and became the cultural basis for the concept of a rahlabad as a saviour.

The political turmoil that took place in Afghanistan in the 1980s and 1990s appeared to reinforce the respect accorded to smugglers in the Afghan culture. One smuggler noted that the situation was particularly dire following the Soviet invasion: "If it wasn't for the help of people like my father, God knows what happened to the poor people. Everybody tries to use and take money from people. Everybody. Government. Russian. Talibs." Smugglers offered Afghans a way to leave the country and to maintain contact across borders with different family members. Smugglers played many roles for people, and facilitated transfer of information and money, as well as of people over borders. Older smugglers who had operated during this period were aware of their critical place within the community. They, and others, were aware of the fact that smugglers had an enhanced reputation due to the extreme danger of the situation and the degree of conflict.

Years ago, during the civil war, smugglers had a lot of reputation. They were trusted and when people left the country, they left their homes and belonging to the smugglers to take care of... The smugglers travelled to Iran and Pakistan regularly and took news of relatives and family members to the migrants and vice versa. They brought money back to the country; the money that families in migration sent to their relative. We were trusted at this level. (55 years old, Tajik, Zaranj)

The cultural dimensions of smuggling can also be seen in the ways in which smugglers are recruited. Many of the people interviewed during the course of this research were brought into the trade by family. Specifically, fathers and uncles passed down being a "rahlabad" to their sons and nephews. One smuggler commented, "We have been doing this business for many years. Most of my relatives have been smuggling for at least 50 years as I remember." Another explained that he entered the smuggling business through relatives who had originally smuggled him out of the country; through this connection, he started entering the smuggling network.

The Soviet invasion and the subsequent conflict was critical, not only in developing among the smugglers a sense of self-worth and value, but also in bringing new people into the smuggling network. One interviewee who joined a family business of smuggling explained how his father and uncles evolved from traders into smugglers.

For many years, my dad with my uncles traveled to Iran several times and were familiar with routes, especially to Mashhad. When the Russians attacked Afghanistan, many people try to flee to Iran and Pakistan. Hazaras went to Iran and they had to pass through Herat. Every month many caravans arrived in our city from Bamyán, Behsud, Daikundi, Ghazni, etc. At that time, my father and other relatives were working as traders between Herat and Mashhad, so they accepted to pass one or two caravans of Hazarajat from the border every month. (58 years old, Tajik, Herat)

The Soviet invasion increased the scale of conflict in Afghanistan and generated mass out-migration; older smugglers see themselves as a key resource for people during this traumatic time linked to rahbalads that facilitated pilgrimages to holy sites. They perceive their roles to have been multi-faceted, and to encompass not only movement of people, but also ensuring communication and safety of possessions.

In the research conducted, it is widely recognized among smugglers that the profession includes a degree of violence, and smugglers also express the underlying opinion that violence among smuggling networks has increased in recent years. It is notable, however, that smugglers always refer to violence as being perpetrated by “others”.

Smuggling and Violence

Many of the smugglers interviewed in this research believe they are pursuing an altruistic motive, but they are also aware of the fact that people come to them when there are no other options. Several smugglers referred to the fact that their clients “need” to send family members across the border, that “it’s only us” who can help people, and that people have nowhere else to turn when they approach smugglers. Smugglers are also perceived to be prone to violence. Although none of the smugglers we interviewed admitted to using violence themselves, there was a strong recognition that violence is a part of the smuggling culture. Even if smugglers do not themselves abuse migrants, other groups along the network may engage in physical and sexual violence.

Many Qachaghbars (smugglers) in Pakistan and Iran misuse migrants, treating them badly, robbing them. All these incidents make our names bad. I know many smugglers who talk about how they beat or harass men and women on route and they talk about it with pride. Like they did something very brave. Well, other people hear these stories too and it’s bad for all of us. Poor people have no choice but to come to us with fear... (45 years old, Baluch, Herat)

The high levels of physical violence that take place throughout smuggling networks are well documented. For example, DRC undertakes periodic semi-random sampling of migrants and data collected indicates that physical assault and beatings are recurrent incidents taking place on Afghan migration routes with smugglers as one of the main perpetrators.⁶ Majidi (2018: 110) also points to the range of violence and exploitation faced by migrants, including extortion and neglect of the most vulnerable at the hands of smugglers.

There is an ethnic and a national element to discussions about violence. Many of the smugglers who discussed violence and the negative reputation of smugglers said that this reputation was associated with Pakistani or ethnic Baluch smugglers. No smugglers associated perpetration of violence with Afghan communities or Afghan smugglers. The fact that those from different ethnic groups and nationalities are viewed with less trust has been referred to by Monsutti (2012). The way in which violence among smugglers is displaced can be seen through one smuggler who stated:

Some smugglers are working with thieves and criminal networks ... Especially those smugglers in Turkey and Bulgaria are very cruel and not only beat migrants but also engage in rape and theft. ... here also there is these kind of things, in Pakistan mostly. In Afghanistan, most of robbery and beating is from Taliban side on the route to Pakistan. (33 years old, Hazara, Kabul)

The smuggler associated violence first with locations furthest away from Afghanistan (Turkey and Bulgaria), implying that violence levels are lower in the region. He then says that regional violence takes place in Pakistan, and finally attributes violence to the route to Pakistan, strongly associated with the Baluch ethnic group.

⁶ For the reports and monthly updates, see: www.mixedmigration.org/regions/asia/

Some older smugglers believe that the profession has become more violent in recent years:

I liked [smuggling] before. Ten years ago... But now everybody is saying that smugglers are illegal, even our families... No one trusts anybody unless they know you for a long time ... there are many young smugglers who don't care about the migrants and their dignity. They do bad thing to migrants which is not coherent with Sharia and humanity. They just think about the money and they don't care about the poor people. (55 years old, Tajik, Zaranj)

The changes these older smugglers perceive in the environment could be due to several factors. During the first two decades following the Soviet invasion, Afghans had by default *prima facie* refugee status in neighbouring countries. There was therefore nothing formally and explicitly illegal about smuggling. The major changes associated with globalization, including the linkages to more criminal networks and the facilitation of transport routes, had not yet taken place, so it is possible that people needed to rely more on trust networks.

Factors Affecting Perceptions

Several factors affect smugglers' perceptions of themselves, and their idea of how the wider community perceives them; the interviews conducted suggest that these factors are generally at the "exosystem" or "macrosystem" level (Majidi, 2018). The perception that migrant smuggling is linked with other forms of smuggling, including drugs and arms, erodes community trust in smuggling networks. On the other hand, perceptions that the Government is corrupt, and that there is a limited future in Afghanistan (both in economic and security terms) encourage people to migrate and to lean on existing smuggler networks.

The migrant smuggling business is characterized as one of the most profitable illicit activities in the world. It is common for academics and practitioners to assume that migrant smuggling is closely tied to other illegal activity. Academics have documented links between migrant smuggling and the arms trade, the drug trade, nuclear materials, cigarettes, and petrol (e.g. Sanchez and Zhang, 2018).

There are some indications that migrant smuggling networks have grown more violent, with some researchers claiming that this is due to the closer links between migrant smuggling and drug smuggling (UNODC, 2018). In contrast, some scholars argue that migrants engage with smugglers and smuggling networks with the aim of engaging in some form of self-securitization, both in terms of finance and security (Sanchez and Zhang, 2018). There have been fewer studies on migrants and smugglers' perceptions of the links between migrant and other forms of smuggling.

Some of the smugglers interviewed for this paper pointed out that clients and community members confused opium smugglers and migrant smugglers. One smuggler pointed to the link with opium as a reason for lower levels of community trust: "It's not good. Some of our neighbours think that we take opium to the Islamic Republic of Iran. They don't trust us and they keep their distance. They respect us when they face us but behind our back, god knows what they say about us..." Other interview respondents referred to connections with mafia and criminals. Still others mentioned that the role of smugglers in bribing officials has caused further deterioration in the reputation of the profession.

Lack of confidence in the Government

When Afghans believe that their Government is not providing an appropriate or basic level of service, they are more likely to turn to smugglers, according to interviewees. Similarly, they communicated the perception that when the Government is perceived as corrupt, the activities of smugglers, including bribery and illegal activities, become more acceptable.

In general, there is a significant amount of evidence to confirm that Afghans have very limited confidence in government institutions. According to the Survey of the Afghan People (Asia Foundation, 2018), more than 70 per cent of Afghans say that corruption is a major problem in their daily lives, and over 60 per cent of Afghans say that the country is moving in the wrong direction. A third of those who believe the country is moving in the wrong direction say that issues with governance drive their perspective. In addition, the third most frequently cited reason for leaving Afghanistan is related to weak governance (ibid).

For smugglers interviewed in the course of this research, lack of transparency on the part of the Government was a key justification for their behaviour. While smugglers felt that corrupt behaviour on the part of government officials was an excuse for their own behaviour, they also felt that lack of service delivery on the part of the Government made the smuggling service necessary.

[Smuggling is] not legal. But what is legal in this country, from the president himself is doing illegal things to the shopkeepers. Everybody is corrupt. So why not we do what we can do and prepare the way for some flee this bad situation. (37 years old, Tajik, Kabul)

If we had a good government who could help people get jobs and have security of course our work would have negative effects ... But look at the situation now. The corruption. The security. The unemployment. There is no choice for the government to let people to migrate otherwise all the youth would protest and burn the country. But the government do nothing. They are thinking always about themselves and their pockets. (45 years old, Baluch, Herat)

For many smugglers, government authorities were inherently complicit in smuggling activities and networks. Their involvement consisted both of taking bribes and of supporting the overall smuggling networks. Even though authorities did not necessarily acknowledge their roles in the smuggling networks, they have an incentive to support the continuation of the business. “The authorities are our enemy. They are corrupt and make our business very difficult. Of course they don’t stop us they just want us to pay them a share.”

Smugglers believed, in some cases, that they were taking over the role of the Government. They considered access to opportunities to be a critical right and, in the absence of government capacity to meet this need, they were stepping in. One smuggler said “If they [the government] help people there is no need for us. In fact, we are doing what government should do...” Another explained that the Government is not in a position to help those who are vulnerable: “If we do not help [vulnerable people] a lot of people will face problem. Not the government not others help them. They are all by themselves.”

Sense of a Future

Migration, according to the smugglers interviewed, takes place because people do not see a future within Afghanistan. This links closely to the logic used by the *Survey of the Afghan People* when asking questions about migration. Some of the critical factors associated with migration, according to this survey, are lack of economic options and possibilities (cited by over 50% of those who would consider leaving) and domestic insecurity (the primary factor behind departure, for 80% of those who would leave) (Asia Foundation, 2018). The figures cited match the qualitative information provided by smugglers regarding why people come to them. Economic issues are prevalent, with many smugglers stating that clients could not find jobs. Several smugglers referred frequently to the fact that families would send away youth in the hope that the children would send money back home.

All young people are helpless with the corruption in the government and the police. You have to have some money or some people in the government. Otherwise, you must die out of hunger. In this situation, families have to send their young members to work in Iran and Turkey and send money home. If they do not do that, they must all die out. The corrupt government will not send them. Well, we have to do it. We know that our work is illegal, but it at least helps the people to survive. (33 years old, Hazara, Zaranj)

The rationale outlined by both smugglers and the Survey of the Afghan People is consistent with the logic outlined by Monsutti (2012), Majidi (2018) and others for Afghan migration. People are moving and facilitating movement for their children as a coping strategy – smugglers are facilitating this strategy.

Some smugglers believe that the situation is likely to worsen significantly in the future. One stated that “I’m sure there will be total riot in two years so whoever can, will leave the country... It’s the reasonable thing to do. It’s only a crazy person who can migrate, but decides to stay”. Another outlined a dire scenario for the Afghan people: “If people cannot migrate to Pakistan or Iran, believe me, half of the country will die out of hunger.” This smuggler added that the poor outlook was shared implicitly by the authorities: “The government also know this so they don’t take it so hard on us, because without us they will have a lot of problems.”

Migration can therefore be seen as an indictment, both on the part of migrants and on the part of smugglers, of the Afghan State. Smugglers state clearly their belief that people are “voting with their feet” regarding the future of their country.

Conclusion and Implications

The body of literature about Afghan migration and smuggling provides an analysis of the multi-faceted and complex nature of Afghan movement, as well as a description of various actors and roles within smuggling networks. This paper builds on this work by exploring the factors that lend credibility to smugglers in Afghan society and culture as well as their own self-perception. The most significant of these factors are the links to religious pilgrimages and the perception that smugglers protected and provided services to the most vulnerable during the 1980s and 1990s. Smugglers believe that they have retained a significant amount of this trust over time, and that they are doing work that is fundamentally humanitarian.

Nonetheless, a variety of factors are breaking down trust in smuggling networks. New entrants into the human smuggling market are more violent and aggressive than traditional smugglers. Linkages with opium smugglers and black or grey market operates also erode trust in smugglers.

The primary factors that appear to drive perceptions of human smugglers are contextual factors linked to the macrosystem or exosystem (Majidi, 2018). In particular, smugglers compare themselves to government actors; corruption within the Government legitimizes smuggler activity, and low service provision gives smugglers a sense that they are substituting for government actors. Lack of a sense of future also is critical in giving smugglers confidence. Smugglers perceive that demand for their services is critically linked to perceptions about security and employment within Afghanistan. So long as it is more profitable for people to send their children abroad to work, smugglers will have a place in society. Likewise, while people fear for their physical and economic security, they will continue to support smugglers. This is likely to be linked to the fact that smugglers were critical in supporting lifesaving population movements after the Soviet invasion.

The current study has several limitations that limit its scope and applicability: the smugglers that were interviewed were only in Kabul, Nimruz and Herat, so the study does not reflect more Sunni- and Pashtun- dominated eastern smuggling routes. It also draws on a relatively small sample size. Nonetheless, even considering these drawbacks, some implications can be drawn from the research and conclusions.

- (1) Migration and “root causes” programming: Several governments, in particular EU governments, currently fund programmes designed to address root causes of migration, particularly at the rural level. While these programmes may be useful to stabilize rural communities, smugglers are tapping into concerns about the overall direction of the Afghan Government, the security, and the rule of law. Concrete progress on corruption, security and economic growth will be needed to address concerns brought up by smugglers.
- (2) Leveraging the “humanitarian imperative” felt by smugglers: Smugglers have indicated that they feel a humanitarian or moral imperative to help customers; it may be possible, through community programming to leverage this imperative. Non-governmental organizations and other community actors may be able to set up protective networks, including a “code of conduct” for smugglers.
- (3) Violence, criminality and other smuggling groups: Smugglers consider violence, criminality and other smuggling groups to be key elements that deter customers from accessing services. Smugglers work around issues linked to violence by associating violent incidents with “others” including Pakistanis and Baluchs. A clearer picture of who perpetrates violent incidents along smuggling paths may help migrants in making informed decisions.
- (4) Migration and smugglers as a key part of Afghan culture. Smugglers perceive themselves as a part of a long-standing Afghan tradition; they consider themselves to be a service provider of last resort and firmly embedded in the culture. For policymakers to support safer and more regularized migration outcomes, they will need not only to ensure that legal options are available at the policy level, but also that the most vulnerable in the communities are aware of these options. Policy developments must be accompanied by a strengthening of social services, particularly for the most vulnerable.
- (5) Future research: The imperatives and incentives of Afghan smugglers are still poorly understood. This research provides an initial indication of smugglers’ perceptions, but further, in depth research is needed in order to generate more robust policy relevant findings. Further research should focus on the motivations of smugglers for their work and the incentives which can change smugglers’ actions. Two major aims of global policy makers and practitioners are to reduce the prevalence of smuggling networks and ensure the safety and dignity of those who move. One effective way of achieving these goals is to work through programming that attempts to influence smugglers’ incentives and this type of programming can only be developed if these incentives are clearly understood.

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