



## BIROn - Birkbeck Institutional Research Online

Goodhand, J. and Koehler, J. and Bhatia, Jasmine (2022) Trading spaces: Afghan borderland brokers and the transformation of the margins. In: Gallien, M. and Weigand, F. (eds.) The Routledge Handbook of Smuggling. Abingdon, UK: Routledge, pp. 118-133. ISBN 9780367489533.

Downloaded from: <https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/id/eprint/46936/>

*Usage Guidelines:*

Please refer to usage guidelines at <https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/policies.html>  
contact [lib-eprints@bbk.ac.uk](mailto:lib-eprints@bbk.ac.uk).

or alternatively

# 9

## TRADING SPACES

### Afghan borderland brokers and the transformation of the margins<sup>1</sup>

*Jonathan Goodhand, Jan Koehler, and Jasmine Bhatia*

#### **Introduction**

This chapter focuses on brokers and brokerage in the context of cross border smuggling or illicit trade. Drawing on illustrative case study material from the borderscapes of eastern and western Afghanistan, we shine a light on the lives of two brokers who act as go-betweens and gate-keepers in these complex and often conflictual transnational trading networks. One is a tribal broker in Nangarhar province on the Pakistan border, and another is an illicit trader in Nimroz province on the Iranian border. By focusing on their lives we aim to achieve two things: firstly, to present new empirical evidence on brokers, so as to better understand their lives, motivations, roles and effects – and in particular, how they adapted to border hardening and closures. Specifically, we explore the *positionality* of brokers in terms of their personal backgrounds, their ability to straddle lifeworlds, the ‘deal spaces’ they occupy, the resources and commodities they move, and the key pathways, corridors and choke points that channel and direct trade flows. We also examine the *dynamics* of brokerage, including the ways that brokers find solutions or ‘fixes’ to problems but rarely resolve them, and how brokers adapt to (or fail to adapt to) moments of rupture in fluid trading environments. Finally, we reveal the *effects* of brokerage in terms of how brokers cumulatively shape the ways in which states and markets function in marginal frontier and borderland environments. Though their agency is circumscribed, brokers are not merely mediators; they play a role in transforming and reconfiguring connections and relationships within political and market systems.

Secondly, we aim to contribute to wider theoretical debates about brokerage as a lens for conceptualising and analysing the dynamics of illicit trade in borderland environments. We show that paying careful attention to the edges tells us important things about the whole; the lives of seemingly marginal borderland brokers provide a privileged vantage point for understanding the wider political economy of (licit and illicit) trading systems, how they change over time and their distributional effects within and across borders.

In the next section we introduce key terms and provide a brief overview of the emerging literature on brokers and brokerage. We then set out our analytical approach to this phenomenon, which is followed by illustrative case studies of political and trading brokers in Afghanistan. We conclude with some reflections on the theoretical and empirical implications of this analysis.

## Frontiers and borderlands: spaces of innovation and transformation

In this chapter our focus is on a particular kind of trading space: borderlands and frontier regions that straddle the margins of one or more states. Borderlands are classically understood as zones straddling an international border, whilst frontiers are more fuzzy political spaces, marking zones of transition between different centres of power and regulation. Both are liminal spaces of cultural overlap and hybridity.

Many of today's borderlands bear the traces of earlier frontier dynamics and the legacies of empires, and these dynamics persist beneath the mosaic of nation states (O'Dowd, 2012). Rather than disappearing, frontiers tend to wax and wane in boom and bust cycles, linked to an amalgam of factors including the retreat and expansion of states and markets, the shifting dynamics of conflict, crises of accumulation in metropolitan centers, the building of infrastructure, and shifts in global and regional commodity markets (licit and illicit). 'Frontier effects' and 'border effects' may coexist and interact in the same marginal spaces, with the salience of each shifting over time, as shown in our case studies below.

Trading routes are often grafted onto longstanding regional networks and connections that preceded statebuilding, for example the Silk Route in Central Asia and the ancient trade routes crisscrossing the Sahara (McDougal & Scheele, 2012). Border delineation did not so much interrupt these regional networks of interdependence as restructure them, leading to smuggling networks and semi-licit trade and new regional power centres that were dependent on borders.

Border zones are often 'sensitive spaces' (Cons, 2016), absorbing a disproportionate amount of the time and attention of central state elites. They are frequently places where state authority and sovereignty are contested, access to the means of violence is fragmented and the existence of cross border networks and flows create a centrifugal dynamic that counters the centripetal forces of statebuilding.

Therefore, in studying the margins of the state, we are not looking at disconnected or lagging regions, but often spaces that are central to processes of statebuilding and development. We are interested here in developing a relational approach, which moves beyond methodological nationalism, recognizing transnational and subnational processes that are often rendered invisible in state-centric analysis. This approach reveals borderlands as places of radical uncertainty and rapid change, where peripheral elites and borderland populations are constantly improvising and innovating in order to survive and sometimes prosper.

### Borderlands as trading spaces

Borders generate a 'spatial discount' for those who are buying, selling or employing to derive profits by exploiting differences between regulatory regimes on both sides of a border. In this sense, rather than acting as constraints, borders are fields of opportunity. The intensity of economic flows and relations may be greater across the border than with the metropolitan centre within a state. Although smugglers may resist or subvert the state's regulatory efforts, they are rarely revolutionaries. The relationship between smugglers and state officials is more symbiotic in nature, often involving a high degree of collusion (Goodhand, 2020; Nugent, 2002; Tagliacozza, 2005).

Border regimes can be understood as *interactive orders* involving movement and counter movement on the part of those who police and those who transgress various border controls (Goodhand & Meehan, 2018). This takes place not only at the border itself. The policing and enforcement of border regimes can occur through multiple agents in various locations – from

the border guards, customs officials, and drones situated at airports, ports, and land borders, to financial regulators and migration officials based in capital cities.

Borderlands have their own particular ecosystems of constraint and opportunity, linked to their specific histories and geographies. Two factors are critical in structuring the dynamics of borderland trade: first, the type and level of state presence at the border; and second, the depth or degree of inequality at the border (Zartman, 2010). According to More (2011), ‘extreme borders,’ characterized by large economic asymmetries, exhibit particular ‘pathologies’ – including heightened levels of militarization and violence, illicit drug trafficking, and people smuggling. Rather than promoting convergence and integration that might help alleviate inequalities, the more powerful state typically does the opposite, which has the paradoxical effect of steepening these pathologies further, thus increasing the stakes, incentives and risk premiums associated with illicit cross-border smuggling, as shown in our case studies below.

The distinction between formal/legal and informal/illicit trade may carry little meaning in the borderlands; indeed, in border zones we see ambivalent and unstable encounters between legal and illegal, state and non-state, smugglers and state agents. Legal and illegal forms of trade can be understood as a continuum of possibilities that traders can flexibly use as part of a trading portfolio.

Both smugglers and state agents have an economic interest in controlling lucrative cross-border trading corridors and choke points, especially when there are asymmetric regulatory regimes on both sides. For example, as an unregulated, high-risk, high-opportunity environment, Goma is a crucial node in the network of East African trading corridors (Lamarque, 2014). Profits generated from this business, however, are invested on the other side of the border, where Congolese businessmen build their houses in the more secure and regulated Rwandese state space (*ibid*). As such, government positions at the border, such as police chiefs, customs officials, and border guards are extremely lucrative and cost significant sums to purchase. In order to recoup the initial outlay, officials often rely on rents extracted from the movement of commodities and people across the border. This in turn incentivises the proliferation of smuggling routes away from formal border crossings; for instance, on the Guatemala-Honduras border there are 15 formal crossing points but more than 100 informal ones. These ‘blind spots’ (*puntos ciegos*) are unofficial border crossings that central government officials have little capacity to control (ICG, 2014).

### **Traders, brokers and borderland brokerage**

Protracted conflict, illicit economies, and the presence of an international border alongside multiple internal borders demarcated by social, political, religious cleavages create a demand for brokers in borderland and frontier regions.

A broker can be defined as someone who acts as an intermediary, playing the role of a go-between or fixer. Brokers occupy a space ‘between handshakes and contracts,’ where formal institutions cannot be trusted and where informality and social capital are key to getting things done – for example, processing conflicts, distributing resources, and accessing rights and entitlements. Brokers are ‘network specialists’ whose ability to straddle multiple knowledge systems and life-worlds enables them to act as gatekeepers across various social ‘synapses’ or ‘choke points’ (James, 2011; Wolf, 1956) and in doing so “transmit, direct, filter, receive, code, decode, and interpret messages” across these interstitial spaces (Meehan & Plonski, 2017, p. 5).

The term ‘broker’ is rarely used self-referentially, as most people prefer not to define themselves as such (Bierschenk et al., 2002). In fact, in many contexts it is a pejorative term; for example, in South Asia brokers or ‘dalals’ are seen as self interested, extractive, dissembling

figures (Goodhand & Walton, 2020). Notwithstanding this perception, brokers are ubiquitous in many contexts, particularly borderland regions. They are ambiguous and Janus-faced figures who serve different constituencies, linking national and subnational political systems, or trading networks on two sides of a border. As Wolf (1956) notes, they stand guard over key synapses, or points of friction, acting as both the lubricant and the grit in the political or market system.

To develop further this broad characterisation of brokerage, three points about the positionality, dynamics and effects of brokerage can be highlighted.

First, in terms of their **positionality**, brokers aim to occupy 'deal spaces' or points of friction within political, economic or social systems that require and create opportunities for some form of intermediation and negotiation. In contexts marked by liminality and illegality, brokers fill a void created by the absence of formal regulatory mechanisms to allocate resources, process disputes and make claims. Brokers can play the role of connecting otherwise inaccessible spaces and performing tasks that formal actors are unwilling or unable to do.

Borderlands are places where the local and global collide and become entangled in complex ways. Brokers can be understood as 'friction specialists' who mediate, and reconfigure, relationships among communities, armed groups, state entities and businesses, regional patrons, and legal and illegal activities (Meehan & Plonski, 2017). Particular communities have historically played outsized brokerage roles – for example the Pashtuns of eastern Afghanistan and the Baluch on the borders of Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran. These groups are both highly local and transregional at the same time. They are adept at facilitating border crossings and gate-keeping. Their identities are bound up with notions and practices of flexible citizenship and operating among different normative orders.

The positionality of brokers varies according to where the demand for brokerage comes from – the extent to which brokers are beholden to the central state or societal groups in the borderlands – and their location within wider systems of governance and markets. *Apex brokers* occupy key synapses that shape the overall balance of power or distribution of resources within political settlements. This tends to be the case in the most salient borderland regions, connecting 'elites that matter' in the centre and the periphery. *Tertiary brokers* sit further down the political system or value chain – either within more marginalised borderlands or between less salient and lucrative internal border regions, rather than the critical interfaces between centre and periphery or across an international border (Goodhand & Walton, 2020).

Second, in terms of the **dynamics** of brokerage, the ambiguity and contradictions of brokers is bound up with their role as fixers who address problems, but rarely fully resolve them. Meehan and Plonski (2017) use the term 'brokerage fix' to describe the dynamic through which brokers perpetually engineer solutions to problems that are always temporary and provisional, and lead to new sets of contradictions and challenges, which in turn require new brokerage fixes. Successful brokers are able to reinvent themselves continually in order to occupy and monopolise deal spaces and to remain relevant. Some experience temporary success in this role but are unable to adapt and are marginalised, whilst others may graduate from being a broker to becoming a key decision-maker at the centre of power. This leads to questions, when looking at individual lives, about whether brokerage can be understood as a long-term career or a short-term transitional phase.

Third, in terms of the **effects** of brokerage, there is a tendency to view brokers as ephemeral, shadowy characters who adapt to change, but are rarely presented as the agents of change. Yet they are more than simply 'intermediaries' facilitating linkages and flows; they are also 'mediators,' with a degree of autonomy, agency and power, enabling them to shape, regulate, and filter flows (Bierschenk et al., 2002; Latour, 2005; Mosse & Lewis, 2006). They enable – and rework – deals among communities, companies and state entities, between

peripheries and centres within nations and across international borders (Meehan & Plonski, 2017). Therefore brokerage may have cumulatively structural effects on wider systems of state and market power. Trajectories of change in the borderlands are rarely gradual and linear, but marked by moments of rupture or ‘punctuated equilibrium’ in which there are major shifts in the dynamics of brokerage and underlying political settlements. The agency of brokers may be inflated during such moments of flux. As we explore further below, apex brokers can reshape political settlements, whilst trade brokers can set in motion new rounds of investment and development in frontier boomtowns.

### **The political economy of borderland trading and brokerage networks**

Borderland trade brokers mediate, filter and channel flows of commodities and resources across borders. Their power is derived from occupying key choke points or places of friction in transnational trading systems. This allows them to generate economic rents, which can in turn be translated into political power. Where high trade profits combine with inconsistent state control, cross-border networks can become alternative systems of power (Dobler, 2016). In Afghanistan for example, when the Taliban came to power in the mid-1990s, they were backed by powerful Afghan traders based in Peshawar, Pakistan, whose interests were undermined by the instability of warlord-dominated Afghanistan.

Border zone economies involve a multitude of actors (traders, transporters, brokers, drivers, loaders, processors, harvesters, farmers, miners, hotel and warehouse owners, government officials – customs officials, border police, military, intelligence agencies – commanders, rebel groups, militias), and complex assemblages and brokerage arrangements, which bring together transport, warehousing and logistics, labour regimes, financing and credit relations, technological innovation and market adaptation, information collection, data analysis and market research. Trading networks are highly adaptive and innovative, having been ‘stress tested’ by years of conflict, political fluidity and frequent economic shocks in contexts of radical uncertainty.

Trading routes or corridors – understood here as connected and coordinated bundles of transport, logistics, infrastructure, and services that connect centres of economic activity (Hagman & Stepputat, 2016) – are continually shifting. These trading routes vary in terms of their political and economic salience, the actors involved and the governance and brokering relations in which they are embedded. Building on Dobler (2016) a tentative taxonomy of trading corridors or pathways is presented in Table 9.1, each being associated with different types of brokers and brokering dynamics.

A number of observations flow out of this typology, which are developed further in the empirical material below.

First, across this typology of corridors there is a need to unpack and analyse power relations within trade networks, how governance relations and forms of rent extraction and taxation occur at different points in the value chain and the role of brokers in these processes. For example, containerised goods on major roads across official crossing points (Type 4) are likely to have more formal state involvement, more hierarchical relations, higher barriers to entry and greater involvement of apex brokers. In contrast, informal/illicit/semi-licit trade across unofficial crossings along unpaved roads and tracks is likely to involve more players, lower barriers to entry, greater involvement of tertiary brokers, less formal involvement of the state, particularly central state actors – and perhaps may also be more egalitarian and redistributive than containerized, formal trade (Mansfield, 2020a, 2020b). Therefore, we can analyse trading networks in terms of whether they enforce strong hierarchical ties, or rather whether they function through horizontal, diffuse and weak ties.

Table 9.1 Typology of trading corridors

<i>Pathway type</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Key actors, beneficiaries and brokers</i>
<b>Type 1</b>	<b>Small-scale informal crossings</b> on tracks in mountain passes and deserts; informal trading in maritime spaces (e.g., drug smuggling in dhows along the Makran coast of Pakistan).	Local communities, local elites, and non-state actors' small-scale markets, hotels, and tea shops, small-scale brokers, women involved in petty trade.
<b>Type 2</b>	<b>Large-scale informal/illegal crossings:</b> large-scale movement of goods along unofficial routes/border crossings that are not formally regulated or sanctioned (e.g., militarised transshipment of drugs from Afghanistan across the desert spaces of Nimroz).	Armed groups, government officials (unofficially), powerful business leaders and brokers, communities in border areas involved in the production and transportation of goods.
<b>Type 3</b>	<b>Licit and illicit goods, transported through official crossings on tarmac roads:</b> movement of goods and people across formally sanctioned border crossings that may involve adhering to regulations governing these crossings (e.g., border checks, paperwork, etc.) or efforts to transgress regulations and checks to move goods illegally by using formal crossings and infrastructure (e.g., smuggling of drugs and gold through Torkham on the Afghan-Pakistan border).	Customs officials, local government actors, local strong men, powerful business leaders and brokers; frontier boomtowns.
<b>Type 4</b>	<b>Major transnational (in some cases transcontinental) infrastructure corridors:</b> including trade and energy corridors and maritime and airports connected to infrastructure and logistics hubs in the Gulf (e.g., the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor within China's Belt and Road Initiative; the Chabahar port in Iran; the Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline project).	Foreign capital and national political elites; 'centres' more than 'peripheries'; regional powers (particularly China, Iran, and the Gulf).

Second, the trading networks vary in terms of their level of (in)formality and the role of information. In illicit networks information tends to be highly fragmented and lower-level actors are only partially sighted – they are only aware of their sections of the corridor, and other nodes in the smuggling network may be unknown to them. However, it is likely that apex brokers are able to see the bigger picture and have privileged access to information along different points of the chain; in the terminology of network analysis, they have greater 'betweenness centrality.'

Third, each route is associated with different types and levels of friction. Type 4 aspires to low-friction or frictionless trade, with fewer intermediaries and flows of goods in containers

running through official border crossings. Theoretically, where there is frictionless trade, then there is no need for brokers, but in the 'real world' it is difficult to find such situations. In Type 4 corridors there are fewer points of friction and power is likely to be concentrated amongst a small group of apex brokers, often located in metropolitan centres rather than at the border itself. Conversely, Type 1 flows involve multiple points of friction and consequently multiple points of rent extraction and brokerage. In many ways this makes them more redistributive than Type 4 corridors, in which a greater proportion of accumulated profits tend to flow to the centres of power rather than the border regions. Border hardening and the investment in infrastructure and technologies to manage, filter and funnel flows are likely to increase this dynamic of directing the proceeds of trade towards the centre rather than the borderlands. It also shifts the pattern of trade flows across borders from a capillary action to a funnel action, and as explored in the life histories below, this means that tertiary brokers either get pushed out of 'the game' or they need to reinvent themselves as apex brokers.

Fourth, as noted, brokerage relations and dynamics vary across these four corridors. They are associated with different kinds of 'deal spaces' involving differing barriers to entry and different kinds of brokers. We need more information about the extent to which brokers are generalists or specialists – do they focus on particular kinds of commodities and/or in particular types of corridors? How do brokers respond to moments of rupture? How do they reinvent themselves to find new 'brokerage fixes' and what new sets of contradictions do these fixes produce? Studying the complex life histories of individual brokers can help answer these questions.

## Case studies – the life histories of brokers<sup>2</sup>

### *Context*

The border between the Afghan province of *Nangarhar* and Pakistan is mountainous and rugged to the east and south (Figure 9.1), with the Pashtun tribes straddling both sides of the Durand line, which marks the international border (Barfield, 2010; Grötzbach, 1990). *Nangarhar* is a politically salient border province with strong connections to Kabul, as well as across the border with Pakistan. The main border crossing is at Torkham, the gateway to the Khyber Pass, which cuts through the Spin Ghar mountains. Highway A01 is the key transport corridor, running through Torkham and connecting Peshawar in Pakistan with Jalalabad, the provincial centre and Kabul, the national capital – and since the US intervention of 2001 it also became a key transit route for NATO supplies. In addition, there are multiple informal border crossing points, which have historically been key smuggling routes for a range of licit and illicit commodities (Mansfield, 2020a). Trade is central to the *Nangarhar*'s economy and in 2018 imports and exports through Torkham generated \$119 million in taxes (*ibid*).

*Nimroz*, on the other hand, is a remote frontier region of vast deserts with a historically open border with Iran and Pakistan. Unlike Jalalabad, Ziranj (Figure 9.1) was a neglected administrative outpost in a province inhabited mostly by the Baloch, a large but marginalised minority that straddle the borderlands of Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan (Boedeker, 2012; Larson, 2010, Titus, 1996). Arbitrage has been central to the local economy – trading networks are grafted onto long standing regional circuits of exchange, which were strengthened in the war years, when mostly Afghan Baluch and Hazara communities resettled in larger numbers on the Iranian side, establishing supply lines to support the anti-communist insurgency in Afghanistan as well as flows of remittances to family members remaining in the country (Kutty, 2014). These connections then provided the basis for smuggling narcotics and economic migrants into Iran and beyond, as well as bringing diesel from Iran into Afghanistan (Mansfield, 2020b).





Figure 9.1 Map of Afghanistan, highlighting locations referred to in the case illustrations

Source: Alcis.

Geopolitically, the border region has become more salient as Afghanistan, Iran and India have made investments in infrastructure to increase trade flows including the construction of route 606, which has become a major trading corridor linking Chabahar port in Iran with Ziranj and the Herat–Kandahar highway (*ibid*).

Like many other borderlands, border delineation divided geographically and demographically contiguous spaces and this separation was amplified by statebuilding processes on both sides of the border. The wars of the 1980s and 1990s interrupted these efforts, and Afghanistan’s eastern and western borderlands reverted to their historical status as open frontier regions, creating new spaces and opportunities for trading networks with low barriers to entry and multiple flows.

However, since 2001 neighbouring states, and to some extent the Afghan state, have sought to impose stronger border controls linked to concerns about terrorism and illicit narcotics, and a desire to increase official trade flows. This has led to investments in border security including fencing and border walls and infrastructure such as road building, customs posts and warehousing facilities. The ‘infrastructural power’ of the state (Mann, 1984) now reaches up to the borderline and both borderlands have become more regulated, closing off the multitude of informal crossing points along the borderline and channelling trade flows and movements of people through official crossing points. According to our typology of pathways, the main purpose of border hardening was to enhance licit trade flows along Type 3 and 4 pathways and to close off Type 1 and 2 flows – through enhanced border regulation and policing. These changes drastically reduced informal, largely open-access trade, professionalising and vertically integrating both legal and illegal access to the cross-border trading economy (Koehler et al, 2021; Mansfield, 2020a, 2020b). As explored further below, the dynamics of brokerage shifted accordingly.

The case studies below are drawn from a series of life history interviews with borderland brokers and their associates conducted in Nangarhar and Nimroz between August and

November 2020. They illustrate the *positionality*, *dynamics* and *effects* of brokerage: the process by which apex brokers come to dominate trading networks, what functions they serve, and how their positions as brokers spilled over into other aspects of conflict resolution and mediation. To protect the safety of these individuals, their names have been changed. Where appropriate, minor details have been changed or omitted to obscure their identities.

### ***From insurgent to mediator: emergence of an apex broker in Nangarhar***

The first case study looks at the life history of Haji M. Khan, an influential broker and tribal mediator. Haji M. Khan was born and grew up in a small village in a mountainous district bordering Pakistan in the 1950s. The district has limited agricultural land and he, like most people, was employed in the small-scale domestic wood trade with Jalalabad (the provincial centre) and Kabul. His family were also involved in informal cross-border trade in wood, opium, clothes and dry fruit, transported to the Tribal Areas of Pakistan via mules and donkeys, along Type 1 pathways and informal border crossings. Contacts and exchanges across the porous border with Pakistan were more frequent and important to Haji M. Khan and his community than to Kabul or even Jalalabad. While along this part of the border the dominant tribes on the Afghan and Pakistani side were different,<sup>3</sup> they had agreed on mutual protection agreements (*lokhae*). Haji M. Khan enjoyed privileged access since part of his lineage, as well as his eventual in-laws, were from the Afridi tribe on the other side of the border.

Haji M. Khan's cross-border relations provided a lifeline when he, and many other residents of the border district were forced to leave their homes during the initial phase of communist rule and subsequent Soviet occupation. His family settled in relative safety on the Pakistani side of the border while he engaged in *jihad* against the communist government, eventually commanding a front of some 50 armed *mujahids*. Pakistani support and supplies (with US backing) helped the *mujahidin* to secure control over the border districts, and fighters and supplies moved across the border along informal and constantly shifting Type 1 and 2 routes. With the collapse of the communist government in 1991, Haji M. Khan became the commander of a newly established army base close to the Khyber Pass and district administrator for the *mujahidin* government. Here he became adept at managing and processing conflicts brought to the attention of the district government through tribal elders and their *jirgas* (tribal or community gatherings of elders or 'white beards' who take decisions on issues of collective concern). If *jirga* decisions were not adhered to, Haji M. Khan, as representative of the *mujahedeen* government, provided enforcement.

When the Taliban came to power in 1994, Haji M. Khan fled with his family back across the border to Pakistan. However, the Taliban imprisoned his close relatives and pressured him to surrender his weapons. Eventually, a delegation of tribal elders negotiated his free return and the handover of weapons and vehicles. According to Haji M. Khan, about 100 elders from the Pakistan side and 80 elders from the Afghan side accompanied him when he returned, to guarantee his safety. After being disarmed, the Taliban released Haji M. Khan's kin but continued to monitor his movements. Eventually he decided to return with his family to Pakistan and join the anti-Taliban "Northern Alliance" resistance under one of the main commanders of the Eastern Provinces. When these efforts failed and his commander was arrested, Haji M. Khan settled in Pakistan and focused on building his reputation as a tribal mediator as well as his trade and transportation business between Afghanistan and Peshawar. During this period the drugs trade expanded and the district became a key centre and trading route with the growth of an opium bazaar and many drug processing laboratories.

After the fall of the Taliban in 2001, Haji M. Khan returned with his family to Afghanistan and continued to gain recognition as an important broker in Nangarhar. Two factors helped him: first, his *jihadi* credentials among the Northern Alliance commanders, who returned to power after the fall of the Taliban. Second, his knowledge of, and high standing with, the tribes on both sides of the Afghan–Pakistan border. Between 2002 and 2019 he was appointed district governor (*woliswol*) multiple times across Nangarhar, many of them key border districts. His *modus operandi* was to work with, and help support, an often fragmented system of tribal representation, decision-making and law enforcement. He played the role of mediator and regulator of conflicts that could not be resolved at a lower level through *jirgas*. He was viewed as an honest broker, who could authorize lower-level mediators to intervene on his behalf. Brokerage involved navigating hybrid forms of authority among multiple sovereigns, including various levels of government, the Taliban, local strongmen, militias, and in recent years, the Islamic State.

As a district governor, Haji M. Khan attempted to engineer a system of tribal representation that – as he saw it – re-connected to a traditional form of tribal governance based on *jirgas*, a system that had been broken by civil war and anti-tribal policies of Taliban rule, and needed proactive ‘fixing.’ He selected four elders from each tribe to liaise with the government. In some districts he managed to set up tribal counter-insurgency militias and secured state funding for them. He also used the re-invented tribal structure to agree and enforce rules on how to prevent and sanction collaboration with insurgents and finally how to deal with social, political and economic conflicts within and between tribal segments.

I established a tribal committee and decided that we won’t let the enemies of Afghanistan such as Talib, ISIS, thieves, and criminals come to the district, and they accepted and signed the treaty that if anyone provides shelter to above insurgents or enemies, we will burn his house and he will be fined 10 Lakhs Rs. We made this decision with consensus. (Paraphrased from interview)

As a foundation for this strategy, Haji M. Khan leveraged economic wealth to build social capital through networks of personalised trust. This was converted into political power and patronage, which further enhanced his economic standing. He understood that political success and longevity in a violent and competitive environment depended upon building social standing as a just and effective mediator. A reputation for hospitality was underpinned by an ‘infrastructure’ of high-profile guesthouses across the province where he housed and fed people seeking his advice (*langar khana*). Furthermore, he provided mediation and conflict solving services – including delegating issues to other reliable bodies or individuals, without charge (e.g., to *jirgas* specialising in smuggling-related conflicts).<sup>4</sup> Finally, Haji M. Khan used his influence and official positions to facilitate the illicit re-export of goods imported from Pakistan as transit goods back into Pakistan via major and well-organised smuggling routes.

Thousands of people used to be engaged in the transit business. When I was district governor, I arranged these transit commodities very well. This trade was arranged by cross-border communities [that] cooperate with us. When there was a problem, we were jointly solving the trade problems on both sides of the border. Now the transit commodities import and export pathway is blocked by Pakistan. [...] I gathered the tribal elders, youth and influential individuals. Thousands of people are now unemployed and the way is still blocked. (Paraphrased from interview).

Haji M. Khan showed considerable skills in diversifying income and risks, and in securing his long-term interests by building social, political and material capital. For example, he managed to secure elected positions for two of his immediate kin in the national and provincial councils. A third close relative is thought to play a key role in the cross-border trade business, aided by the political cover of the other two.

Eventually, Haji M. Khan was successful in re-establishing tribal representation in his home district, earning a widespread reputation and some recognition even in Kabul. He continued to play a significant role even after falling out with Kabul appointees in the province and losing his job as district governor. At the time of the fieldwork, he was still regarded as an apex broker and problem solver in his district; tribal militias loyal to him manned checkpoints and informally controlled access to the district undisturbed by the Afghan National Police. The researchers found a mostly idle district administration, while the guesthouses of the broker were overcrowded with people seeking the mediation, support and advice of Haji M. Khan to solve their problems.<sup>5</sup> However, his position was less stable and according to one of his allies interviewed, his interference in Kabul politics had caused him to lose his political backing there, leaving him in a now more precarious position.

### ***A small-scale fuel trader strikes it big: brokerage opportunities in Nimroz***

We turn now to a cross-border fuel smuggler in the South-West of Afghanistan. This is a story about how a small fuel trader from a minority group uses his cross-cutting networks to leverage new opportunities in a fast changing border zone, working his way up from being a tertiary broker to becoming a key apex broker in regional trading networks.

Haji Aziz, now in his forties, comes from a modest family of shopkeepers and craftsmen, with a multi-ethnic background, presenting himself as a mixture of “Hazara, Pashtun, Tajik, and Baloch.” When the Taliban were in power, his family moved to Nimroz and he worked in shops at the main provincial bazaar of Ghor Ghorī, refilling and cleaning fuel barrels smuggled across the border from Iran, earning extra money by filtering and selling excess or waste diesel on the side. Policing of the Iranian border was patchy and uneven at this time, but conversely the demand for fuel and trading infrastructure was low. However, whilst working in the main bazaar, Haji Aziz developed relationships with a range of traders and smugglers, including drug traders connected to the Taliban, who were concentrated in Ghor Ghorī bazaar. According to one source, Haji Aziz made his initial capital from drug smuggling; in 2001, when a Coalition air raid destroyed the market and forced the Taliban to abandon the area, Haji Aziz was one of the few local traders who reportedly stayed behind and appropriated sizable amounts of abandoned opium stores.

During the first decade after the fall of the Taliban government, licit and illicit cross-border trade via Nimroz province increased dramatically and Ziranj became a frontier boom town (Drugs & (Dis)order, 2020). Haji Aziz became one of the main importers of fuel, and subsequently cars, into the province. His business grew rapidly as he started importing fuel directly from Iran. He developed friendly and mutually beneficial relations with government and border officials and capitalised on his existing inter-tribal and cross-border contacts. A former business contact, and later competitor, explained in an interview that Haji Aziz’s business activities extended to Kandahar, where he forged strong relations with some of the most influential people in Southern Afghanistan, including indirect access to one of the former President’s half-brothers, Ahmed Wali Karzai (then head of the Provincial Council).

However, over the past ten years, trade relations with Iran changed and Haji Aziz was forced to adapt his business. First, Iran tightened its grip on the border and brought the many informal

crossings under control. Second, international sanctions sent the Iranian Rial into free fall, introducing high inflationary risks to cross-border trade. Finally, a significant part of the fuel business shifted to other provinces further north, where Iran established large fuel storage facilities as a new hub to distribute fuel across Afghanistan.

Haji Aziz diversified his cross-border business, investing more in domestic trade infrastructure, such as car showrooms and pump stations, in a number of provinces. He also leveraged connections with the provincial government and customs services so as to keep importing fuel and cars at reduced custom rates. In addition, he established himself as a service provider for other cross-border traders, facilitating and mediating their relations with both government offices and the parallel Taliban administration. He provides office space for some 170 licenced *commissionkars* at the official border crossing in Milak, who facilitate official as well as informal customs declarations for traders crossing the border (legal goods flow for the most part from Iran into Afghanistan). Haji Aziz's subordinates provide reduced rates in return for informal service fees. He also controls the main scales that weigh incoming cargo, and reduced net weights are regularly negotiated and certified against a fee. For a time, Haji Aziz was also authorised by Taliban and traders' unions to collect the unofficial but consistently enforced Taliban tax on goods crossing the province, exchanging the official customs tax slip with a tax slip recognized by the Taliban. He had negotiated this unofficial but formalised agreement to streamline official and informal taxation issues and make cross-border trade more predictable for the traders.

However, balancing commercial imperatives with the interests of powerful governmental and shadow-governmental actors involved serious risks and difficult setbacks. First, he lost his access to political protection in Kandahar when his link to the presidential family was killed and the newly appointed police chief demanded his share in undeclared profits made from the car business. Around 2019, Haji Aziz lost his main patron within the provincial Taliban leadership of Nimroz in a drone attack and was almost immediately summoned by his successor, who suspected him of not disclosing fully the profits made from tax collection on behalf of the Taliban. In both cases, he was forced to pay a hefty fine – revealing that even the most influential brokers must cope with a high degree of uncertainty and unexpected rent extraction. Ultimately the power of the armed executive (of both the state and shadow state) trumped the financial power of traders and business people.

Despite these setbacks, there remains a high demand for the mediation skills of Haji Aziz from traders and their associates. According to Haji Aziz, he stays out of politics: “I solve almost 80–100 conflicts per month and I don't want any money from anyone.” He says that, “people trust me, so I should serve them.” He also invests profits into numerous public welfare activities in Nimroz, evidence of his significant and enduring influence in the province.

## **Conclusions**

This chapter has focused on the role of brokers and brokerage in the context of cross-border smuggling and trading networks. By looking at two personal biographies, we aimed to illuminate the details and complexity of individual lives, whilst revealing wider processes of change linked to border hardening and shifting regional trading systems and political networks.

Firstly, in terms of their positionality, the two brokers have very different backgrounds and biographies, though they share some common characteristics. Both have become significant political and economic brokers, starting off as tertiary brokers, but over time graduating into apex brokers – though neither is sufficiently influential to be involved in brokering trade along Type 4 corridors, and both have been adversely affected and had to adapt to border closures.

Though their career trajectories follow a similar arc, their sources of legitimacy and power are quite different. Haji M. Khan is embedded in the tribal systems of the borderlands; he melded his tribal credentials and ‘architecture’ of hospitality with his *jihadi* history and his ongoing relationship with ‘men of violence’ so as to become a credible broker mediating and managing conflicts.

Haji Aziz, in contrast, is neither embedded in a tribal system, nor self-identifies as a particular ethnicity; instead, he positions himself as someone with a hybrid identity who can mediate across and among different social and political groupings. Unlike Haji M. Khan, he is primarily an economic player who lacks a *jihadi* history or ‘violence credentials.’ Although this can make him vulnerable – as for example when he was arrested in Kandahar – it also means he is able to act as a credible mediator with the Taliban, unlike Haji M. Khan. Like Khan, however, he is attuned to the importance of social standing and the redistributive role of brokers, as shown by his support of social works and welfare in Ziranj.

Secondly, there are similarities as well as differences in the *brokerage dynamics* revealed in the two life histories. Both are living and operating in contexts of radical uncertainty – like all borderlanders living in contexts of fluidity and flux, marked by moments of rupture – including the shifts in conflict dynamics linked to different phases of the war, shifting political regimes, changes in border security and management, and economic shocks.

What marks them out from the wider population is their ability to adapt and improvise so that they come to occupy key ‘deal spaces.’ These spaces differ and so do the brokerage fixes that they offer. Haji M. Khan is an ‘embedded broker’ (Meehan & Plonski, 2017) in the sense that his value as a broker lies in his ‘betweenness centrality’ within the tribal system. Haji Aziz is a ‘liaison broker’ (ibid) whose value lies in his ability to straddle social as well as territorial borders and boundaries. The fixes that Haji M. Khan provides are primarily related to localized conflicts and state–society relations. Haji Aziz’s brokerage fixes are primarily concerned with the management and flows of trade, and this depends on an ability to position himself above, or at a distance from, the political fray. Both embody the agency and ingenuity of borderland brokers, but they are also vulnerable characters, only as powerful as their last ‘fix.’ The power of Haji M. Khan, for example, appears to be on the decline, linked perhaps to the growing strength of the Taliban, shifts in political coalitions in Kabul and Jalalabad, and the effects of border hardening on local trade networks.

Thirdly, as the last point indicates, *brokerage effects* may be transitory and ephemeral, when viewed from the perspective of one broker or one brokerage fix. However, if we see brokerage in more systematic terms, as central to the way that states and markets are managed and ‘performed’ in the borderlands, then we can see how brokers may over time – certainly within the lifetimes of our two brokers – have significant structural effects. Haji Aziz, for example, is one of many traders and brokers in Nimroz who has contributed to a remarkable transformation of Ziranj from a frontier outpost to a boom town that has attracted internal investment, significant in-migration and increased governmental interventions and programmes. Brokerage has been central to this process of unruly frontier development, based on agglomerations of illegality, including drugs and people trafficking, drug use and processing, and other forms of illicit trade. In Nangarhar, brokers like Haji M. Khan have been central to the post-2001 statebuilding (and counterinsurgency) project – embedded brokers have played a critical role in extending the footprint of the state, managing coalitions and distributing rents amongst national and local political elites. As a major trading and political hub, Nangarhar is a prize fought over with particular intensity, leading to a constant process of political unsettlement and churning politics. Brokerage has in many ways entered the DNA of states and markets and is central to they way both function and their distributional consequences.

This brings us to our final point, that studying brokers on the margins can tell us much about how the markets and the wider political system works. The personal biographies of Haji M. Khan and Haji Aziz are inseparable from the wider spatial and political biographies of the frontier regions. Studying the lives of these individuals brings out the complex temporalities, socio-spatial relations and power dynamics of border zones, and it powerfully demonstrates how these regions are far from marginal or lagging zones; instead, they are best understood as transformative spaces and laboratories of change. Studying borders and brokers brings into focus the webs of connections, the points of friction and the fluid relations within trading systems. Our case studies hint at these processes and dynamics, but there is scope, and an urgent need, for further comparative research on this ‘missing middle’ level of analysis that explores the roles, dynamics and effects of borderland brokers. We have provided a tentative comparison of borderland brokers within different borderland spaces. There is further exciting work to be done, however, which develops in more systematic ways this comparative approach across regions, historical periods and types of licit/illicit flows. This opens up a range of questions yet to be addressed fully about the agency of brokers, how smuggling networks adapt to moments of rupture, the distributional effects of these shifts, and the impacts of peripheral trading economies on power relations and economic development within metropolitan centres.

### Notes

- 1 This chapter draws from fieldwork funded by UKRI Global Challenges Research Fund [Award Reference: ES/P011543/1: ‘Drugs & (dis)order: building sustainable peacetime economies in the aftermath of war’] and conducted by the Afghan NGO Organisation for Sustainable Development and Research (OSDR). The project seeks to generate new evidence on how to transform illicit drug economies into peace economies. The chapter also draws upon material and writing derived from an ESRC-funded research project ‘Borderlands, Brokers and Peacebuilding in Sri Lanka and Nepal: War to Peace Transitions viewed from the margins’ (Ref: ES/M011046/1). We are grateful to our field researchers in OSDR who conducted the interviews underpinning the case studies in this chapter, as well as to the editors Florian Weigand and Max Gallien for their invaluable comments.
- 2 The case studies are based on 24 in-depth life history interviews in both provinces as well as 740 more focused guideline interviews on licit and illicit economic activities (cf. Drugs and (Dis)order, 2020). Specifically on brokerage, our partner OSDR conducted three interviews with the broker and two of his associates in Nangarhar in August 2020 and seven interviews with the broker and his associates in Nimroz in October and November 2020. In Nangarhar, the associates were tribal elders who have known the broker over a long period of time; one of them was a former sub-commander of the broker. In Nimroz the associates were former business partners and competitors as well as people providing or receiving services of the broker in the context of cross-border trade.
- 3 The Afghan-Pakistan border often separates the same tribes or sub-tribes, but not in this particular location.
- 4 According to one interviewee:

Haji M. Khan has a lot of resources like he has 26 houses and guest houses in his village [...], the province and Kabul. [...] He has lorries, trucks and agricultural lands. His sons also make a lot of money as they have high-paying jobs. [...] Haji M. Khan represents local communities and derives his power from [the tribes in various districts]. [...] The tribes] rely on Haji M. Khan to put an end to their disputes. Many people gather at his home [every day] and it seems like there is wedding party. The reason why people count on him so much is because people are respected at his home. He has been doing mediation since when he was a sincere *Jihadi* commander and he keeps doing it.

- 5 Typically, people assemble during office hours at the district administration with all sorts of official and informal requests. Here, access to services was clearly dominated by the broker as a one-stop-shop.

## References

- Barfield, T. J. (2010). *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Bierschenk, T., J.-P. Chaveau and J.-P. O. De Sardan (2002). 'Local development brokers in Africa: The rise of a new social category,' *Working Paper No. 13 Department of Anthropology and African Studies*. Mainz, Germany: Johannes Gutenberg University.
- Boedeker, J. (2012). 'Cross border trade and identity in the Afghan-Iranian border region.' In Betina, B. and J. Mieggebrink (eds), *Subverting Borders. Doing Research on Smuggling and Small-Scale Trade*. V S Verlag, pp. 35–54. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-531-93273-6\\_3](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-531-93273-6_3)
- Cons, J. (2016). *Sensitive Space: Fragmented Territory at the India-Bangladesh Border*. Seattle and London: University of Washington Press.
- Dobler, J. (2016). 'The green, the grey and the blue: A typology of cross-border trade in Africa,' *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 54(1), 145–169.
- Drugs and (Dis)order. (2020). *Voices from the borderlands 2020: Illicit drugs, development and peacebuilding*. GCRF *Drugs and (Dis)Order: Building sustainable peacetime economies in the aftermath of war*. SOAS, University of London. <https://drugs-and-disorder.org/voices-from-the-borderlands-2020/>
- Goodhand, J. and P. Meehan (2018). 'Spatialising political settlements.' In Plonski, S. and Y. Zahbia (eds), *Accord Insight 4: Borderlands and peacebuilding: A view from the margins*. Conciliation Resources, pp. 14–19. <https://www.c-r.org/accord/borderlands-and-peacebuilding/spatialising-political-settlements>
- Goodhand, J. (2020). 'Fragility and Resilience Analysis: The Political Economy of Development in Borderlands.' In World Bank (ed), *From Isolation to Integration: The Borderlands of the Horn of Africa*. Washington, DC: World Bank.
- Goodhand, J. and O. Walton (2020). 'Fixes and flux: frontier brokers and post-war politics in Nepal and Sri Lanka.' Draft paper, unpublished.
- Grötzbach, E. (1990). *Afghanistan: Eine geographische Landeskunde*. Darmstadt, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft.
- Hagman, T. and F. Steppat (2016). *Corridors of trade and power: economy and state formation in Somali East Africa DIIs*. Working Paper 2016:8. Copenhagen: DIIS.
- ICG (2014). 'Corridor of Violence: The Guatemala – Honduras border,' International Crisis Group, Latin America Report no 52, Brussels, Belgium.
- James, D. (2011). 'The return of the broker: Consensus, hierarchy, and choice in South African land reform,' *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 17, 318–338.
- Koehler, J., G. Rasool, and A. Ibrahimkhel (2021). 'Dynamic borderlands – the challenge of adapting to hardening borders in Nangarhar and Nimroz,' *International Journal of Drug Policy*, 89, 103117.
- Kutty, S. N. (2014). 'Iran's Continuing Interests in Afghanistan,' *The Washington Quarterly*, 37(2), 139–156
- Lamarque, H. (2014). 'The DR.Congo/Rwanda Border at Goma and Gisenyi: A borderlands perspective,' Draft Paper prepared for the World Bank, GPSURR.
- Larson, A. (2010). 'Governance Structures in Nimroz Province.' Kabul, Afghanistan. Research and Evaluation Unit. [https://areu.org.af/wp-content/areu\\_publications/2016/02/1042E-Governance-Structures-in-Nimroz-CS-2010-Web.pdf](https://areu.org.af/wp-content/areu_publications/2016/02/1042E-Governance-Structures-in-Nimroz-CS-2010-Web.pdf)
- Latour, B. (2005). *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Mann, M. (1984). 'The autonomous power of the state: its origins, mechanisms and results,' *European Journal of Sociology/Archives Européennes de Sociologie*, 25(2), 185–213.
- Mansfield, D. (2020a). 'Mules, pick-ups and container traffic: Cross border production and trade and the shaping of Nangarhar's political economy,' Research paper, GCRF *Drugs&(Dis)Order*.
- Mansfield, D. (2020b). 'Catapults, pickups and tankers: Cross border production and trade and how it shapes the political economy of the borderland of Nimroz' (15.01.2020), Research paper, GCRF *Drugs & (Dis)Order*.
- McDougal, J. and J. Scheele (eds) (2012). *Saharan Frontiers: Space and Mobility in Northwest Africa*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Meehan, P. and S. Plonski (2017). *Brokering the Margins: A Review of Concepts and Methods*, Working Paper 1. ESRC Borderlands, Brokers and Peacebuilding Project.
- More, I. (2011). *The Borders of Inequality: Where Wealth and Poverty Collide*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.



- Mosse, D. and L. David (2006). 'Theoretical approaches to brokerage and translation in Development.' In L. David and D. Mosse (eds), *Development Brokers and Translators*. Kumarian: Bloomfield.
- Nugent, P. (2002). *Smugglers, Secessionists & Loyal Citizens on the Ghana-Toga Frontier: The Life of the Borderlands Since 1914*. Athens: Ohio University Press.
- O'Dowd, L. (2012). 'Contested states, frontiers and cities.' In Wilson, T. and H. Donnan (eds), *A Companion to Border Studies*. Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, pp. 139–157.
- Tagliacozza, E. (2005). *Secret Trades, Porous Borders: Smuggling and States Along a Southeast Asian Frontier, 1865–1915*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Titus, P. (1996). *Marginality and Modernity: Ethnicity and Change in Post Colonial Baluchistan*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Wolf, E. (1956). 'Aspects of group relations in a complex society: Mexico,' *American Anthropologist*, 58(6), 1065–1078.
- Zartman, W. (ed) (2010). *Understanding Life in the Borderlands: Boundaries in Depth and Motion*. Athens: University of Georgia Press.