



# STRANGERS ACROSS THE AMU RIVER: COMMUNITY PERCEPTIONS ALONG THE TAJIK–AFGHAN BORDERS

SIPRI–OSF Policy Brief

October 2015

SHAHRBANOU TADJBAKHS, KOSIMSHO ISKANDAROV AND  
ABDUL AHAD MOHAMMADI

## SUMMARY

While securing a total of 2387 kilometre river-border from the potential trespassing of traffickers, extremists and terrorists forms part of the national security agendas of Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, for the border communities living along the Amu Darya and Panj rivers, concerns stem not just from these traditional threats but from broader aspects of human insecurity: access to decent livelihoods, quality healthcare and education, and adequate water for irrigation. These every day challenges require a rethink of the question of border security. Otherwise, not only do states fail to take advantage of the potential of involving communities in preventing illegal trespassing and facilitating exchanges, but their strict interdiction policies can also contribute to more insecurity.

Based on field work among communities on both sides of the river-border, the paper makes the case for a human security border regime that should rely on investing in the needs of border communities while supporting cross-border cooperation and exchange as means to border stability and prosperity.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh (United States/Iran/France) teaches on Human Security at Institute of Political Studies (Sciences Po) in Paris and is a Research Associate with the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO). Kosimsho Iskandarov (Tajikistan) is Head of the Department of Iran and Afghanistan at the Institute of Language, Literature and Oriental Studies of the Academy of Sciences of Tajikistan. Abdul Ahad Mohammadi (Afghanistan) is a Senior Researcher and the Head of the Peace Studies Department at the Afghan Institute for Strategic Studies (AISS) in Kabul.

## SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Preventing the illegal crossing of narcotics, weapons and other illicit goods, as well as religious extremists and related fundamentalist ideas across the 2387 kilometre of borders between Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Afghanistan is of critical concern for these states. As such, border security is squarely located within the scope of their national security, and responses to perceived threats rest on strengthening border control. This approach requires regional cooperation in joint operations, intelligence sharing and coordination between national law enforcement authorities at the technical level. At the political level, however, it has so far translated into mutual mistrust in each other's competence and ability to prevent illegal trespassing, frequent border disputes and closures, strict visa regimes and the laying of mines of adjacent areas.

Borders are not only physical barriers between states. They also consist of the spaces inhabited by people who once belonged to the same family or kin groups prior to the existence of modern states. Border communities often have a different perception of the opportunities and threats posed by borders than do policy makers sitting in distant capitals. For the border communities living along the Amu Darya River, which delineates Central Asian states and Afghanistan, concerns stem not just from the fear of transborder threats such as terrorism, extremism and illegal trafficking, but from more tangible human needs such as decent and durable jobs, protection from environmental hazards and access to quality health and education services. Yet, the state-centric, national-security based approach to border issues in the region seems to have failed in many ways to address the core every day concerns of communities, while simultaneously exacerbating human security-related issues of the border populations.

In order to gauge the point of views of border communities concerning the threats and opportunities that borders present, this study analyzes the findings of a pilot fieldwork study conducted among border communities living along the Amu Darya and the Panj rivers across nine districts of Tajikistan and Afghanistan (see figure 1). The study assess how border populations view their human security needs, how they relate to communities on opposite sides of the borders and what roles they could play in reducing border tensions. Overall, the study aims to understand whether border communities benefit from cross-border interactions and whether the governments' border securitization approach correspond to the human security concerns of communities living in border areas.

The following sections discuss the four main questions explored by the study and their implications for policy.

### **Does the securitization of borders in Tajikistan and Afghanistan correspond to the human security concerns of communities living in border areas?**

While security and stability for border communities have improved since the end of the civil wars in Tajikistan and Afghanistan, concerns remain over long-term stability, particularly in light of the presence of organized crime (e.g. mafia groups), drug traffickers, extremists and terrorists and



Figure 1. Map of towns surveyed, Afghanistan and Tajikistan

the deterioration of the situation on the southern banks in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, the most pressing concerns for border communities remains focused on broader aspects of insecurity, including jobs, livelihoods, health, education, regulation of water flows and adequate water for irrigation.

The Tajik and Afghan border districts tend to be economically impoverished, environmentally insecure and isolated from the centre, thereby presenting limited opportunities for economic stability and growth—the primary concern of surveyed communities situated in such areas. General dissatisfaction from factors affecting the ability of border populations to farm effectively, earn a decent living and access social services has led to a widespread desire to find work in other countries, while isolation from capitals and district centres has encouraged the development of religious and cultural conservatism—a worrying foundation for extremism to take root.

For the majority of those residing in border areas, agriculture provides the main source of income—a sector that has not seen much investment or attention from governments, especially in Afghanistan. To subsist, agricultural communities are dependent not only on adequate equipment, transport and access to markets but also on the reliable availability of water, land and favourable climate, all factors beyond their control. These needs are even more acute in areas of environmental instability (e.g. prone to natural disasters such as floods) or environmental degradation (e.g. where the soil quality is compromised). Poor regulation of the Amu Darya River and its Panj tributary—an essential irrigation source—has led to frequent flooding causing widespread destruction, while sandy and muddy shorelines mean that cultivation is problematic in some areas. Some areas along the Amu Darya are also hampered by low crop yields and low production as a result of salinity due to poor drainage of groundwater.

Physical barriers such as deserts and difficult terrain reduce access for border populations to provincial and main economic centres. With few opportunities available in neglected and impoverished border regions, migration presents a viable solution for the low or unskilled youth labour force who look to Iran, Pakistan and the provincial centres for decent jobs on the Afghan side. A large number of families in Tajikistan also live off of remittances from relatives working in Russia. Inadequate incomes have also forced many members of the border populations to take on multiple jobs to supplement their earnings.

A combination of physical isolation, distance from the centres and a lack of state attention to rural development have led to a dearth of decent social services and unsatisfactory health and education services on both sides of the rivers, while Afghanistan is the most affected. While some populations are traditionally more religious, cultural and religious conservatism has taken hold in many border areas due to geographic isolation on the Afghan side and influences from time spent in Afghan refugee camps during the Tajik civil war on the Tajik side.

These every day challenges to survival, livelihoods and dignity of border communities requires a rethink of the question of border security from a traditional perspective. The consequences of border security strategies that ignore people's everyday concerns are two fold: not only do states fail to take advantage of the potential that people have in preventing illegal trespassing and facilitating exchanges, but their strict policies can contribute to insecurity when they over-focus on interdiction. Strict border controls and limitations put on the type of goods that can be imported or exported harm border communities in two ways: first, they create incentives for the activity of traffickers and corruption in border regions which affects the everyday life of native communities. Second, these practices naturally create disincentives for the free movement of people and goods in the region. Isolationist policies exacerbate the poor socio-economic situations of border populations and can lead to increasing tensions and competition over resources. Leaving populations isolated and impoverished can also make them prone to despair and superstition, which in turn can produce conditions conducive to recruitment by extremists and engagement with smugglers that are the main concerns of regimes.

### **Do border communities benefit from the potential of exchanges and opportunities that borders provide?**

Isolated border communities seem like an oxymoron: borders, after all, potentially open to new possibilities. But for the population of northern Afghanistan who are not connected to the ports and bridges, isolation best describes their predicament, trapped by strongly controlled borders on the one hand, and desert, insecure roads and lack of means to get to the centres on the other. While the population on the Tajik side is less isolated than that on the Afghan side, they, too, can fall into neglect as communities far from centres in an already economically vulnerable country.

In terms of the opportunities to be had living in border areas, there is little evidence to suggest that border communities have tangibly benefitted so far from their proximity to the borders. Despite new bridges, bazaars and

crossings, the majority of border dwellers had either no or limited contact with the other side and were often unable to financially afford the crossing. Despite improvements that have facilitated trade across the borders, significant hurdles remain that hamper the ability of local communities to take full advantage of the opportunities for trade. These include a need for better infrastructure and transport routes, the initial capital for investment, connections, overcoming red tape and, overall, trust.

While benefits have not been fully explored, proximity of borders is conceived by local communities as an asset in terms of providing trade opportunities, use of common resources such as electricity and water, safe havens in case of the need for refuge, travel for medical purposes and the exchange of know how. At the same time, however, borderlands are also viewed as a liability due to the possibility of the spillover of insecurity and criminal elements as well as the environmental difficulties caused by a fickle river that frequently floods and destroys farmlands.

**How do communities across the borders assess the lives of their co-ethnic groups across borders and how much do they consider them as threats or opportunities?**

While border communities share ethnicity, culture, language and religion, their modern 20th century trajectory of rule under different political regimes had led to significantly different political, social and economic identities. The Panj and Amu rivers are not only physical barriers but foremost psychological ones as well, with a great divide among kin who were once family. The closure of borders has long disrupted ties, interactions and movements.

Overall, contacts between border communities are based on infrequent trade links rather than kinship or religion. With little by the way of cross-border human interaction, communities have formed impressions of their counterparts across the river predominantly through hearsay and the media, with the exception of Darvoz in Tajikistan where bridges and markets have created opportunities for cross-border contact. This has inevitably led to stereotyping and entrenched assumptions about each other: Afghans perceive Tajiks as enjoying better living conditions and of being less religious. Tajiks base their views of their kin across the rivers on the portrayal of Afghan society in their media as particularly poor and violent, a perception that is challenged where communities are able to view media from Afghanistan directly or travel there.

The study revealed that while Tajiks are more likely to view their Afghan counterparts sympathetically through a veil of co-ethnicity, calling them ‘our neighbours’ and ‘our Tajiks’, this sentiment was not generally returned in full by Afghans. Indeed, both communities perceive one another as having differing values, particularly pertaining to the level of religiosity, education and culture, and such impressions have been slow to change over the years. A degree of alienation among the border communities has been the result of vastly different socio-economic trajectories including the historical dispersion of ethnic groups after borders were settled, geographic barrier in terms of a river, strict border controls, lack of economic pull



factor, poverty of community borders, intimidation by criminal groups and a lack of curiosity.

**By extension, how can communities play a role in rapprochement between the two states and contribute to long term stability and development if their human security were addressed effectively?**

In both Tajikistan and Afghanistan, border regions are populated by relatively isolated poor people requiring attention. When border communities are protected, provided for and empowered, they can become positive agents for stability and cooperation; if they remain isolated and neglected, they can succumb to the vulnerabilities related to their situation and in turn contribute to border insecurity.

The policy goal of the governments on all sides of the borders should be to bring people out of isolation and to address their human security needs, as part of, or at least in addition to, their border security agendas.

One of the most effective strategies to control border areas is to involve local communities: this both focuses on their needs and engages their support in securing borders. If communities have access to the benefits of employment, cross-border trade and cultural contacts, quality education and healthcare, the likelihood of them being recruited by smugglers or extremists would also be lessened.

An enhanced human security border regime re-imagines Central Asian border security in terms of a comprehensive and layered view of security that goes beyond traditional physical security measures to focus equally on developing secure and prosperous local communities across borders. Such an approach would rely on investing in the needs of border communities at the national level while supporting for cross-border cooperation and exchanges between communities as means to enhance confidence-building measures.

**ELEMENTS OF A POTENTIAL HUMAN SECURITY BORDER REGIME**

**Boosting border development for the people, by the people**

- Involving border communities in the selection of priorities and design of interventions at the national level, and, if possible, at the cross-border level. This implies a certain degree of decentralization of decision-making about development priorities and empowerment of local communities to allow for participation in local governance.
- Creating livelihoods and economic development through, for example, public works projects, small enterprise development, private sector development, support to agriculture activities, and so on. In return, people will be encouraged to engage in legal activities.
- Building and maintaining quality social infrastructure, including the schools and medical clinics that communities need.
- Mitigating risks posed to farmers by the fickle movement of rivers.

- Luring populations away from the consumption of drugs—which is both a health concern and a security one given that it creates demand for the activities of drug smugglers—through provision of healthcare facilities to cure and prevent addiction, and livelihood opportunities for former addicts.

### **Investing in cross-border community projects**

- Ensuring better cross-border relations between communities as means for confidence building through people-to-people exchanges.
- Establishing cross-border councils drawn from the border communities in order to give them a political voice to advance proposals around shared interests.
- Investing in joint projects around sharing of natural resources (water, land and energy) as a way to build trust between communities and alleviate their environmental and economic insecurities at the same time.
- Fostering the development of border markets as an ideal vehicle for exchanges of ideas and information about commodities with different prices, qualities and brands and building trust and improving economic conditions of people on both sides of the borders. More investment is needed to boost the potential of border markets, (e.g. pave roads leading to them; simplify procedures for movement of traders and goods, customs procedures; and create additional infrastructure for storage etc).
- In order to reduce the potential influence of extremist and radical groups, neighbouring countries could invest jointly in developing curriculum for religious education and promote official exchanges of *ulemas* (religious scholars and authorities) to think together of ways to help prevent radicalization among the youth of the region.

The international community should also support this agenda by shifting focus from funding physical security measures and capacity building (such as equipment and guard training) towards projects that would contribute to improving the living conditions of border communities. This could be coupled with an inclusive approach involving local communities in decision-making. While such aid would most likely be geared to national level, efforts should go towards supporting cross-border projects on both sides of the Tajik–Afghan borders that require cooperation between communities across the two countries.

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**STOCKHOLM INTERNATIONAL  
PEACE RESEARCH INSTITUTE**

Signalistgatan 9  
SE-169 70 Solna, Sweden  
Telephone: +46 8 655 97 00  
Fax: +46 8 655 97 33  
Email: [sipri@sipri.org](mailto:sipri@sipri.org)  
Internet: [www.sipri.org](http://www.sipri.org)

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**OPEN SOCIETY  
FOUNDATIONS**

224 West 57th Street  
New York, New York 10019, USA  
+1 212-548-0600  
[www.opensocietyfoundations.org](http://www.opensocietyfoundations.org)