

DISSERTATION SYNOPSIS

Networks in Transition: Forced Migration in Afghanistan

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When war threatens and individuals are considering whether to escape to a different country, from whom can they expect support? How are people's networks transformed by war and exile? These are key questions in the doctoral dissertation *Networks in Transition*, which is based on fieldwork carried out in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan.

Harpviken takes as his starting point people's decisions about whether to escape or to remain behind. He examines the social ties on which people draw in order to gain access to information and economic resources, as well to serve as guarantors of their security. The same dimensions – information, economic resources, security - are examined in relation to people's establishment in exile, their decisions about whether to return to the country of origin, and possible re-establishment in that country. The dissertation is critical of the one-sided victim focus of traditional refugee studies, and it demonstrates the ability of people to mobilize considerable resources and make conscious decisions even when under severe strain.

Two villages on the outskirts of Herat city provide the main focus. During the time of the Soviet-supported regime of the 1980s, both found themselves in the primary battle-zone. In the first village, the majority of the population sided with the resistance, and the village was badly affected by the war. Most people fled to Iran, and a significant proportion of the men continued to take part in the war at home. In the second village, a majority chose collaboration with the government, war damage was limited, and fewer people left for exile. Many of the refugees returned to the village after the resistance took power in 1992; some of these enjoyed good relations with the new regime, while others could return to farms that were virtually intact. The Taliban's coming to power in Herat in 1995 turned things upside-down, however, and the instalment of the Karzai government in 2001 represented another major turning point. To a significant extent, the ability of people to adapt to such dramatic changes is dependent on their social networks.

Harpviken's analytical framework is to a large degree based on studies of social networks in other contexts, such as coping with natural disasters or participation in political movements. In crisis situations, there is a tendency for social networks to shrink, and people are able to trust only close affiliates. At the same time, though, it is precisely loose ties – those connecting people in different environments – that offer access to fundamentally different resources, such as new information. The dissertation partially confirms the common assumption that networks contract in war situations, and it demonstrates that many individuals become dependent on a small circle of ties. Simultaneously, though, war provides opportunities to strengthen certain old ties and to build new ones. The exile experience is particularly important: today, in the two villages studied, there are few people who do not have strong ties to Afghans living in Iran.