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Trapped in the Margins: Russia, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, and the Story of Afghan Refugees in Tajikistan

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ABSTRACT

Since the Taliban's return to Afghanistan, thousands of Afghans have fled the country in search of refugee status abroad. In the wake of this crisis, one country in the region, Tajikistan, opened its borders to Afghans, vowing to grant refugee status to 100,000. Today, Tajikistan has closed its borders and is forcibly returning Afghan refugees and asylum seekers. This research aims to reveal the extent of influence that external parties have on Afghan refugee flows in Tajikistan. For this paper, the two external parties examined are the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and Russia. In examining the role of these two parties in Tajikistan's refugee policy, this paper deals with two separate cases of Afghan refugee flows to Tajikistan. The first was engendered by the Taliban's most recent return to power in 2021. The second case was incited by the Taliban's original rise to power in 2000. To analyze these two cases, this work utilizes the frameworks set up by border externalization literature to understand the competing influences of the UNHCR and Russia in Tajikistan. While the current Afghan refugee crisis does not yet have a clear result, and the role of Tajikistan is ever-evolving, this paper highlights the importance of discussing external influences when researching refugee flows.

EPIGRAPH

"It would be inaccurate to use the passive voice to describe much of the world's population flows. They do not merely happen; more often they are made to happen." [1]

[1]Weiner, Myron. "Security, Stability, and International Migration." International Security 17, no. 3 (1992): 91–126. https://doi.org/10.2307/2539131.

INTRODUCTION

Blurs of green and brown swirl my vision, whizzing before me. My head rests against the window, and I close my eyes for a moment, trying (and failing) to alleviate my nausea. Hisses and tones and clicks of multiple languages, none related, drown my ears for a moment distracting me from my unease as I focus on the sounds, trying to categorize them. After a couple of minutes, the train comes to a stop. Opening my eyes, I see we have stopped in a small town with one lonely platform. Five minutes later, two heavily armored officers with "POLICE" embroidered across their backs ask for passports. I provide them with my American passport, and they take it from me and then hand it back to me without even asking for me to pull down my mask during the interaction. The mother and daughter next to me provide two proofs of identification, Syrian passports, and a photo ID card, which I assume now to have been a visa. The officer pauses when examining their identification, looking between the four identifications and the two women several times before handing them back and moving on to the next car. Fifteen minutes later, we were still on the platform. Fifteen minutes turned into thirty minutes which turned into an hour until the train started moving again an hour and a half later.

Why had we stopped for a passport check in the Schengen area and why did it take so long? It was only once we arrived at the Munich train station that I realized both the answer to my questions and the totality of my privilege in that hour and a half stopped at the border. Stepping out of other cars on the train were hundreds of Ukrainian refugees.

In the space of the border, an entire spectrum of experiences emerges. At the border, my American identity had no effect on the ease of my travel. For the Ukrainian families around me, their identities produced a different experience. The border, instead of existing as an abstract, conceptual space, manifested as an obstacle, a fixed space where their freedom was hindered in a concrete way.

The UNHCR estimates that there are currently 32.5 million refugees in the world. Out of this population, about 7.8 million are Ukrainian refugees fleeing their homes in the wake of the war.[2] For the most part, Ukrainians have been welcomed warmly in the surrounding European states as refugees. However, a warm welcome beyond the space of the border is not a common reception. Often, refugees, displaced by conflict or otherwise, become trapped in this space of the border by their identities.

In the wake of the Ukrainian refugee crisis, one such refugee group has been pushed into the margins of the border and the international discourse. Just months before the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February, another geopolitical shift engendered a refugee crisis. With the return of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan, thousands of Afghans once again sought refuge and asylum

[2] This statistic comes from UNHCR's Operational Data Portal and was estimated in December 20, 2022.

outside of the country. As with the first time the Taliban seized control, most Afghans fled west to Iran or east to Pakistan. However, this time some Afghans in the northern provinces fled north into Central Asia. In Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, Afghan refugees were turned away and denied refugee status. In spite of the regional trend in Central Asia, fleeing Afghans were admitted and granted refugee status in Tajikistan following the country's commitment to host 100,000 Afghan refugees. Initially, there were about 8,000 refugees registered in Tajikistan. Now, Tajikistan has begun forcibly deporting refugees back to Afghanistan, and the Russian-controlled border between the countries is now closed.

Afghan refugees did not merely arrive in Tajikistan for no reason. As Myron Weiner[3] would assert, their movement was *made* to happen by the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan. Once refugees move outside their home countries though, the question remains, what *makes* them move towards a certain country, and what impacts their presence in that country, either for better or worse?

In an attempt to answer this question and the ones that will spring from its exploration, this project will first examine the current literature that attends to the question of state responses to refugees. Following this, I will explain my methodology. Then, I will examine Tajikistan, beginning with its civil war and ending with an examination of the two external parties that impact the presence of Afghan refugees in Tajikistan, the UNHCR and Russia. From here, I will then examine two cases of Afghan refugees in Tajikistan, one recent, and one not. Following an examination of these two cases from 2000 and 2021 will be a discussion and analysis of how the cases relate to externalization and the future of Afghan refugees in Tajikistan.

[3] See epigraph.

LITERATURE REVIEW

State Responses to Refugee Flows

In order to understand the singularity of Tajikistan's current situation, we first must understand state response to refugee flows within the discipline of refugee studies. Scholarship in the field has primarily dealt with two questions: what is a refugee and what explains the global refugee flows?

Answering the first question has led to the development and dissemination of a whole language used to speak about refugees first codified and legitimized by the UNHCR.[4] At the end of World War II, millions of Europeans were displaced from their home countries in the wake of the war's totality. In response to this crisis, the newly formed United Nations created the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in 1950 replacing the International Refugee Organization which ended its work in the same year. Originally, the UNHCR was tasked with a three-year-long mandate to continue with the assistance of resettling displaced Europeans back to their home countries. Seventy years later, the work of the UNHCR has expanded beyond European borders, and the UNHCR has become an international agency at the head of refugee discourse.

The UNHCR and Management of Refugee Flows

During those first three years of their mandate, the UNHCR established the essential legal and social framework of their institution. At the first Refugee Convention in 1951, UNHCR defined the term "refugee" while outlining the rights of the refugee and the High Commissioner's role in protecting these rights. According to UNHCR, a refugee is "someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion."[5] In this first article, the UNHCR's definition of a refugee was also limited by a contingency stating that the events which produced a refugee must have happened before January 1, 1951. Following the repatriation of European refugees under their first mandate, the UNHCR continued its work and extended this definition with the 1967 Protocol to encompass all refugees fleeing because of events happening after 1951.

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[4]B. S. Chimini's work on the geopolitics of refugee studies as a discipline deals with the question of Global North biases in the discipline of refugee studies. Notably, he remarks on the politicization of the refugee as a figure after the end of the Cold War through the emergence of the "new asylum seeker." This politicization has engendered a "myth of difference" between the refugees at the heart of "neutral" humanitarian language, Europeans displaced after the First and Second World Wars, and the refugees of the twenty-first century, the "Third World" refugees displaced and resettled in the "First World."

[5] "Article I." In *Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees*. Geneva: UNHCR, 1967.

As a response to the presence of refugees, the UNHCR presents the most influential case of institutional power over refugees. The organization, created by powerful Western states, therefore upholds the values of these states. Various scholarship about the UNHCR and its role in refugee studies and humanitarian work in practice maintain this understanding.

In his work examining the relationship between states' production of and response to refugees, Charles Keely emphasizes the importance of understanding the mandates of the UNHCR as ones granted by states.[6] These states, whose systems are destabilized by the flow of refugees, therefore have an interest in maintaining institutions of the refugee regime[7] like the UNHCR. Furthermore, the UNHCR's primary mandate to provide "state-like" protection to refugees demonstrates the nature of the institution as a state response to refugees. In this way, Western states create and control refugee flows via the UNHCR's mandate. Like other scholars, Gil Loescher equally emphasizes the state-like quality of the UNHCR while adding nuance in his article covering the history and rise in geopolitical power of the UNHCR.[8] Instead of an instrument through which Western states exert influence, such as was evident in the early years of the agency, Loescher affirms UNHCR as "a purposive, entrepreneurial, and strategic actor with independent interests and capabilities." As such an actor, the UNHCR is therefore independent of Western states like the United States, especially during the early years. Through Keely and Loescher, we can see a division in the literature regarding the extent of the UNHCR's independence from the Western countries that created it.

While Keely and Loescher differ in their understanding of the UNHCR as a state-like institution, both scholars rightly emphasize the institution's history within the context of the Cold War. In both cases, the UNHCR functions independently from the Western states which fund the majority of their work. For Keely, these geopolitical tensions between East and West, USSR and the US were left behind following the end of the Cold War, when the USSR was dissolved. By contrast, Loescher cites the UNHCR's work in Hungary as evidence of the UNHCR's position as a "mediator" between East and West during the Cold War. While the distinction between these two analyses may seem arbitrary in general, for the purpose of this project as an examination of the role of the UNHCR and Russia today, the difference between these two arguments is vital.

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[6] Keely, Charles B. "How Nation-States Create and Respond to Refugee Flows." *International Migration Review* 30, no. 4 (1996): 1046–66. https://doi.org/10.2307/2547603.

[7] Keely, in a note supplementing his essay in 1996, defines the refugee regime as "the collection of convent treaties, intergovernmental and non-governmental agencies, precedent funding which governments have adopted and support to protect and those displaced from their country by persecution, or displaced by war in some regions of the world where agreements or practice have extended protection to persons displaced by the general devastation of war."

[8] Loescher, Gil. "UNHCR's Origins and Early History: Agency, Influence, and Power in Global Refugee Policy." *Refuge: Canada's Journal on Refugees* 33, no. 1 (2017): 77–86. https://doi.org/10.25071/1920-7336.40450.

Theories of Refugee Flows

The work of the UNHCR, however, exhibits only one dimension of the state's response to refugee flows. For this analysis, other theories and examples regarding how individual states respond to refugees are necessary to decipher. In terms of theory, Everett Lee's push-pull theory of migration, which differentiates between the two different factors that cause migration, what pushes a migrant away from their country of origin and what pulls them towards another country outside of their origin, continues to dominate the discourse.[9] While neither the focus of this literature review nor the focus of this analysis, the push and pull factors that play an integral role in the decision-making process of refugees are an essential aspect of the study of refugee and migrant flows. Furthermore, Lee's push-pull theory also serves as a frame of reference for understanding state responses to refugees if applied instead to the state. What is it that pushes a state towards accepting refugees, or what is it that pulls a state away from accepting refugees? To help illuminate this line of question, I will highlight two examples found in the literature that delineate the distance between the cultural or physical space states create in response to refugee flows.

Culturally, refugees can present a unique challenge to both multiethnic and homogeneous states. Exploring the links between state security, stability, and international migration, Weiner identifies "ethnic affinity"[10] as the most cogent rationale behind states' accepting or rejecting to refugees or migrants.

Ethnic affinity between migrants and the citizens of a potential host country would in most cases encourage a state to accept these migrants. For multi-ethnic countries, however, affinity is more complicated. For certain groups within a country, a group of migrants or refugees could be considered a social, political, or cultural threat while to others these migrants or refugees are like kin. Weiner identifies five kinds of situations where refugees may be seen as a threat. Most relevant to this paper's discussion of state response to refugees are the perceptions of refugees as political threats/security risks or economic/social problems to the host country. In the first case, refugees are often painted as threats in relation to fears of terrorism, drug trafficking, arms smuggling, or other illegal activities. While not wholly unfounded in many cases, this state response is often hyperbolic within political discourses, especially in cases where refugees do not share ethnic affinity with their host countries or when they upset the ethnic balance in a multi-ethnic state such as Tajikistan. As an economic or social challenge to the state, refugees have also been perceived as burdensome in the resources that their presence within a country demands. Often in cases where the population of refugees is large or fast-moving, the economic and social burden of their presence in a host country is emphasized further. In both these cases,

[9]Lee, Everett S. "A Theory of Migration." *Demography* 3, no. 1 (1966): 47–57. https://doi.org/10.2307/2060063.

[10] Weiner explains ethnic affinity as the shared language, religion, or race between migrants and the citizens in their prospective host countries. As an expression of culture, ethnic affinity, Weiner affirms, is a social construct that is susceptible to change over the course of history.

the refugee is seen as a threat to the state system. From this perceived angle, the state, therefore, distances itself from refugees.

Physically, refugees also present a unique challenge to contemporary state systems. Most relevant to this analysis is the strategy of externalizing the space of the border.[11] Since the 1990s, the European Union has most notably employed this strategy in its approach to border control. With an expansion of conflicts globally, [12] comes an equally expanding population of refugees. In many cases, these expanding refugee flows intensify any perceived threats associated with a given refugee group by a state. Additionally, more refugees denote that these threats would also be larger in scale. From this context, the rationale behind the EU's border externalization arises.

Externalization of the Border

In much of his scholarship regarding the externalization of the border, Thomas Faist examines the influence of global political hierarchies on the external space of the border.[13] With the European Union, the work of externalization can take two forms depending on the strength of the states in question. An extension of the border across the Mediterranean Sea into North Africa's Maghreb region is different from externalization policies in Moldova for example. In order to classify the differences between these relationships between transit states and the EU, Faist outlines three "circles of externalization" in which transit states possess varying degrees of control in externalization agreements.

The first circle consists of states like Moldova which share a relationship with the EU governed under the European Neighborhood Policy.[14] These relationships are more egalitarian in their nature, as states like Moldova have secured forms of control like strict readmission agreements in their relations with the EU.

The second circle consists of states like Turkey and Morocco, which act as "gatekeepers" of external EU borders. In the case of Turkey, for example, an ENP-like deal that was brokered provides funding for the control of the border. However, Turkey still possesses the power not to

[11]A common, clear definition of externalization can be found in the work of Stock, Üstübici, and Schultz who define externalization as "the extension of border and migration controls beyond the so-called 'migrant receiving nations' in the Global North and into neighboring countries or sending states in the Global South."

[12] In 2016, the World Bank cited that, "more countries experienced violent conflict than at any time in nearly 30 years."

[13]Faist, Thomas. "Contested Externalisation: Responses to Global Inequalities." *Comparative Migration Studies* 7, no. 1 (2019). https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-019-0158-y.

[14] ENP denotes the European Neighborhood Policy. The European Commission defines ENP's objectives as follows: "stabilizing neighboring countries through economic development, employability and youth, transport and energy connectivity, migration, mobility and security" and "promoting key EU interests of good governance, democracy, rule of law and human rights."

readmit migrants or allow migrants to pass through the border without strictly abiding by regulations outlined by the European Commission.

The third circle comprises countries like Mali and Senegal where partnerships have been reached, but relationships between these states and the EU remain "contentious" (Faist, 2019). Issues regarding fair readmission agreements and halting migrants (unwanted by the EU) dominate the relationship and exemplify the geopolitical biases that frame it.

Expanding on previous externalization scholarship, Lena Laube examines how visa policies for citizens in countries of transit like Moldova have become a "key instrument for externalizing border control" by the EU.[15] Laube's work points out the emergence of border diplomacy and its effect on relationships between transit and destination countries. While previous studies of border diplomacy argue that the policies favor the destination countries, Laube contends this idea and highlights the nuances of the Global South/Global North context that inform externalization practices. While much of the EU's externalization policies and practices abroad have followed the same formula since their inception, Laube cites that the "different domestic preferences in partnering countries have surely contributed to the different outcomes of the negotiation processes so far" (pp. 17). Deals brokered in countries like Moldova, which lobbied for visa liberalization for their citizens during negotiations with the EU, exemplify this nuance of relationships between transit and destination countries that is often lost in analyses of externalization.

While the depth of literature on the border's externalization is vast and contemporary,[16] most scholars have focused on the externalization policies of the European Union and its individual member states. With such a focus, the literature is additionally dominated by a focus on a particular relationship between states involved in external border control ie. destination country, and transit country. This framing excludes relations between states where a destination state is actively against the presence of refugees in both their country and the so-called transit state. In this paper, a relationship such as this one takes shape in Tajikistan. Russia, fancying itself as a destination country, contests the presence of Afghan refugees in both Tajikistan and in Russia. Understood as a transit country between the states of Afghanistan and Russia, formerly Soviet Tajikistan emerges differently than countries like Turkey or Moldova. Understood as a destination country, authoritarian Russia emerges as even more different from the democratic destination states that the literature prioritizes.

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[15]Laube, Lena. "The Relational Dimension of Externalizing Border Control: Selective Visa Policies in Migration and Border Diplomacy." *Comparative Migration Studies* 7, no. 1 (2019). https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-019-0130-x.

[16] Lena Laube's recent article in 2021 that focuses on the diplomatic effects of external border control In the EU after the 2015 Syrian refugee crisis highlights the recent shifts and challenges in externalization strategies. Their paper concludes that these shifts in externalization stemming from "migration diplomacy" and the effects of globalization have inadvertently strengthened the positions of transit states in their negotiations with EU states.

METHODOLOGY

In its application of Global North and South biases to refugee studies in general, the literature is largely narrow in its focus on relationships between EU and non-EU transit states. With the expansion of the world and the increased connections between foreign states and peoples, the Global North and South binary not only limits an understanding of the diplomatic consequences of migration but clouds it.

The cases in Tajikistan with Afghan refugees both in 2021 and 2000 are therefore different in their nature. By selecting these two cases Tajikistan, I want to highlight both their similarities and differences. In 2021, the refugee flow was brought on by the return of the Taliban. In 2000, the refugee flow was brought on by the rise of the Taliban. Through both of these cases, we can see how Tajikistan emerges as a different case of an external border space. Tajikistan is not a transit country in the strictest sense of the term. Equally, Russia is not a destination country in the same way that EU member states are. Afghan refugees in Tajikistan are not being held in the country before they transit to Russia but instead are remaining in Tajikistan. In spite of this, Russia has, in a way, externalized control beyond its own border through the presence of its troops on the Tajikistan-Afghanistan border.

In order to compare these two cases in a way that highlights each of them, I will first deal with the 2021 case. Following this examination of the recent past, I will then turn to the less recent and discuss the 2000 case. In 2021, the case's peculiarity comes from the shifting role of Tajikistan as a transit country since the fall of Kabul in August 2021. In 2000, Tajikistan’s distinctness appears in its rejection of the role of a destination country despite the UNHCR’s objections. By looking first at the recent events in Tajikistan regarding Afghan refugees and then turning to a case from 2000, it will be easier and more illuminating to draw comparisons and attempt to sketch the future of externalized border control in Tajikistan and the place of Afghan refugees.

TAJIKISTAN: A GRAYED MARGIN

A Bloody History: Tajikistan Civil War

Before an analysis of the most recent events in Tajikistan regarding Afghan refugees, it is necessary to look at the brief history of the country. As an independent state, Tajikistan, like other Central Asian countries in the region, is recently a sovereign state independent from Russia. After the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, the previously sketched Soviet Socialist Republics of Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Uzbek, Turkmen, and Tajik became the independent nations known today as the "-stans." For these nations, whose borders were never drawn and governments never designed with the intention of autonomy, independence was not a welcome prospect.[17] In terms of their financial and state security, the "Stans" completely relied on Soviet support. The loss of this support was felt in each of the countries, but it was perhaps felt most deeply in Tajikistan.

Directly following the fall of the Soviet Union, Tajikistan launched into an anarchic civil war that lasted five years (1992-1997) and cost the lives of over a hundred thousand people.[18] About 60,000 people fled the country as refugees to Afghanistan in the south, while anywhere between 500,000-700,000 were displaced within the country as internally displaced persons (IDPs)[19] at any given time during the conflict.[20] Figures estimating both refugees and IDPs are difficult to cite with accuracy and confidence due to the conflicting estimates from the Tajik government and the lack of scope of UNHCR's reporting.

While the war was catalyzed by the fall of the USSR, the tensions of the conflict originated from a protest in Dushanbe where 25 people were killed by the KGB's Alfa division.[21] When the Soviets left the country, tensions exploded between the newly "elected" communist government

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[17] A more detailed study on the history of Central Asia and its relationship to Russia can be found in this report from the Asia Society. Russia has had a stake in Central Asia for much longer than our political history often remembers. Russian influence in the region goes all the way back to the nineteenth century when "the Great Game," the political monopoly between imperial powers of Russia and Great Britain for control of Central Asia, solidified the rivalry between the British and Russian empires.

[18] Exact figures on the casualties vary (35,000-157,000) due to the nature of record keeping during a civil conflict. Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty reports over 150,000 were killed over the five year war.

[19] According to the UNHCR's "Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement" (2001), internally displaced persons are defined as "persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized border."

[20] Exact and accurate statistics of the number of refugees and IDPs are difficult to source due to the unreliability of the government and opposition's reporting. This estimate comes from the UNHCR's regional overview of Central Asia in 1998.

[21] For more on the history of the civil war in Tajikistan, Bakhtiyor Sobiri's article provides a more detailed report. Sobiri is a Tajik journalist writing under a pseudonym.

and an opposition group made of Tajik nationalists and Islamist fundamentalists, the UTO (United Tajik Opposition). Before and during the war, the international community largely neglected direct interference. The conflict ultimately ended with a peace deal brokered by the UN with Russia. Guaranteeing the representation of the opposition within a fairly elected government, the peace accords that ended the war are still held as a model for peace by the international community.

Tajikistan Today

However, the story of Tajikistan today is different from the one told in the accords.

Today, Tajikistan is the poorest country in Central Asia. According to the World Bank, the GDP per capita was 896.9 USD in 2021.[22] Additionally, the poverty rate fell from 83% to 26.5% of the population during the period 2000-2021 with an average GDP growth rate of 7% per year according to the World Bank.[23] At first glance, an analysis of poverty-focused on Tajikistan would indicate that the magnitude of poverty is significantly less than in other countries, given its overall growth and reduction of poverty. However, the World Bank also indicated that job creation has not kept pace with the GDP growth rates over the years, meaning the economy is prone to external shocks as workers seek employment abroad.[24]

Politically, the country is classified by numerous nongovernmental groups and think tanks as not democratic.[25] In their most recent analysis of freedom in Tajikistan, non-profit think tank Freedom House classified the country as “Not Free,” giving it a score of 8 on their 100-point scale. Their scale, divided into two sections, analyzes the “political rights" and “civil liberties” present in a given country. In terms of political rights and freedoms, Tajikistan has a score of 0. Freedom House cites numerous reasons for this score including a lack of free, fair, and frequent elections and a lack of pluralism and legitimate opposition parties. In terms of civil liberties, Tajikistan is still ranked low given the lack of freedoms the media and judiciary have from the ruling government and the lack of individual rights overall.

Since the end of the civil war, Tajikistan’s president, Emomali Rahmon, has remained in power through neither free nor fair elections in which all opposition parties not in line with the current

[22] “Overview-Tajikistan.” World Bank. https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/tajikistan/overview#1.

[23] See previous citation.

[24] See previous citation.

[25] In 2021, the Economic Intelligence Unit scores Tajikistan at 1.94 on a scale of 10 points and the country ranks at 157 in the global rankings (“Democracy Index 2021: The China Challenge.” Economist Intelligence Unit. 2022). The nonprofit think tank, Freedom House additionally classified the country in its lowest measurement for democracy, “Not Free.”

ruling People's Democratic Party of Tajikistan are severely restricted.[26] In 2015, the Islamic Renaissance Party was banned from operating. This party was notably the only remnant of the UTO opposition from the civil war who were guaranteed representation in the new government formed. Maintaining his power by removing any opposition and centralizing power within his family, Rahmon has eliminated all political institutions that are free from dynastic corruption. Furthermore, through constitutional amendments in 2016, Rahmon has secured his rule indefinitely and made his family immune to prosecution by solidifying with legislation the corruption that plagues Tajikistan.[27]

However, with Rahmon nearing 70, the question of regime succession has become increasingly relevant. While he was recently reelected in October 2020 for a 5th consecutive seven-year term, a report from the Economist Intelligence Unit indicates that Rahmon is preparing his son, Rustam, the appointed mayor of the capital city and head of the Senate, to succeed. In addition to his son Rustam, Rahmon has appointed his family members and allies to numerous government positions, including the Foreign Ministry and Finance Ministry. Therefore, while a transition of power after twenty-eight years would ordinarily indicate political instability, the total corruption of the Tajik government by Rahmon hints at a peaceful yet oppressive transition and the continuation of the current regime.

External Parties: Russia and the UNHCR

Given their previous role in the region under the Soviet Union, Russia's continued influence in Tajikistan and in Central Asia as a whole plays an important role in the policies, domestic and foreign, in the country. During the civil war, Russia backed the winning side of the communist government, securing its rise to power following the war's end in 1997. Since then the Rahmon regime has remained in power.

Russia's influence additionally continues in the form of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), a security bloc composed of six former Soviet states including Tajikistan.[28] The military alliance, put into effect in 1994, functions similarly to NATO. In other words, an attack on one of the states would equate to an attack on all of them and provoke a joint military response. Since its establishment, the CSTO has been deployed for peacekeeping operations throughout the region.[29] Most recently, the CSTO conducted counter-terrorism

[26] Natalie, Trabox. "Understanding the Persistent Poverty in Tajikistan." *Borgen Magazine* , December 1, 2020.
[27]Rep. *Country Report Tajikistan* . London: The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2020.

[28]The CSTO's other member states include: Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan.

[29] Rosa Turarbekova's article in the IPS Journal provides a more in depth analysis of the evolving role of Russia as a "peacekeeping force" in Central Asia and within CSTO states more broadly.

military drills near the Tajik-Afghan border in October 2021.[30] Headed by Russia, the organization is a manifestation of Russian interests in Tajikistan and Central Asia more broadly.

In addition to Russia's ties to Tajikistan vis-a-vis the CSTO, Russia maintains consistent operations in Tajikistan independent of the CSTO through the border troops stationed on the Tajik-Afghan border. Solidified in a treaty signed in 1993 between the two countries, the Russian border forces controlled the border from 1993 until about 2005. Today, Tajik border forces maintain control of the border with periodic support from the CSTO joint forces when necessary. However, in the wake of the Taliban's return and the border's fluidity, Russia has reestablished its presence on the Tajik-Afghan border in the name of security.[31]

An extension of the United Nations, the UNHCR has been present in Tajikistan since the civil war in 1993. Following the refugee crisis that ensued when fighting broke out, the ruling government invited the group to help aid IDPs and assist in providing emergency relief in the country.[32] Today, Tajikistan hosts the most refugees in the region. Due to their proximity and the country's turbulent history over the past twenty years, most of these refugees are Afghans.

Besides refugees, stateless persons are the main group the UNHCR works to help in Tajikistan. Statelessness, as defined in the UNHCR 1954 Convention, is a term used to describe a person "not recognized as a national by any state under the operation of its law."[33] Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, statelessness has remained a prevalent issue in Central Asia, partly due to the loss of the centralized state system in the USSR. With the state institutions dissolved following independence, gaps in nationality legislation in the newly formed countries mean that thousands of persons in Central Asia are not officially recognized as citizens in their own countries of residence. In most cases, these persons are ex-citizens of the USSR who have not acquired or been granted new citizenship in their countries of residence.

Throughout Tajikistan's short history as an independent country, the influence of these two external parties, Russia and the UNHCR, has been considerable. In light of this history, it is therefore no surprise that their competing influences continue today with regard to the presence of Afghan refugees in Tajikistan.

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[30] "Russian-Led CSTO Stages More Counterterrorism Drills on Tajik-Afghan Border." RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty. Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty, October 23, 2021. https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-csto-afghan-tajik-border/31525710.html.

[31] "Russia to Begin Building Border Guard Post on Tajik-Afghan Border." *TASS*, December 27, 2021. https://tass.com/defense/1381573.

[32] "UNHCR in Tajikistan." UNHCR Central Asia. https://www.unhcr.org/centralasia/en/unhcr-in-tajikistan.

[33] "Article 1." In *Convention Relating to the Status of Stateless Persons*, 6–6. Geneva: UNHCR, 1954.

A Geopolitical Puzzle, 2021: Afghan Refugees Flee the Taliban–Again

On April 14, 2021, President Joe Biden announced the withdrawal of all United States personnel and troops from Afghanistan by the twentieth anniversary of the September 11 attacks. In the wake of this announcement, the UNHCR scrambled to organize an emergency response to the imminent refugee crisis that this withdrawal would produce. With no US presence and the Taliban reemerging again as a power in the more remote provinces, it came as no shock that the Taliban retook the capital city of Kabul in mid-August and dissolved the internationally recognized Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. In its place, the Taliban-led Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan took power and remains officially unrecognized by any country. Following the Taliban's return to Kabul, thousands of Afghan nationals gathered at Kabul airport, hoping to flee as US and allied personnel evacuated. In the wake of the chaos, UNHCR issued a non-return advisory for Afghanistan, calling for a bar on the forced return of Afghan nationals to their home country.

Neighbor to the north, Tajikistan has long opposed the Taliban's rule in Afghanistan. Following Biden's announcement of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, the deputy head of the Committee for Emergency Situations of Tajikistan announced the country's willingness and ability to accept upwards of 100,000 refugees from Afghanistan in July 2021. Far from what was expected to be the country's response, Tajikistan's commitment was profoundly generous and revolutionary, considering the country's economic status. However, in September, Tajikistan shifted its policy. During a meeting between the country's head of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the current head of the UNHCR, Tajikistan stated that they would no longer be able to accept a large flow of refugees from Afghanistan due to a lack of support from the international community in resources.

This puzzle is made more interesting by the fact that a week before Tajikistan's announcement, Putin criticized even the temporary hosting of Afghan nationals in Central Asia before they received visas for the United States or Europe. However, Russia's part in this puzzle is more complex than this one instance.

Russia's Response to Biden's Surprise Withdrawal

Russia's involvement in both Tajikistan and Afghanistan goes back to before the demise of the Soviet Union. In 1979, Soviet troops invaded Afghanistan, backing the Afghan communist government against the anti-communist guerrilla groups (the mujahideen). Their occupation of the country lasted for ten years as the Soviet-backed government attempted to centralize power in spite of the challenges posed by the mujahideen's control of the countryside and civilian support. A stalemate solidified with the support of the US for the insurgent groups, and the Soviet occupation tainted the history between the two countries.

Today, however, relations between Afghanistan and Russia have evolved. During the US' twenty-year military occupation in Afghanistan, Russia played a peripheral role in the country, selling arms to the Taliban in 2017.[34] Now with no US presence or US-backed government, Russia's relationship with Afghanistan has changed. While maintaining a stance against the presence of Afghan nationals in Central Asia, Russia hosted talks with the Taliban representatives of Afghanistan in October 2021, just a couple of months after the terrorist group took over the capital. These talks are not the first of their kind. Moscow has played host to multiple bilateral and multilateral talks with the Taliban since 2017. During the most recent meeting in Moscow, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov emphasized the necessity for an "inclusive government fully reflecting the interests of not only all ethnic groups but all political forces of the country."[35] And while Moscow's role in these early months of government for the Taliban is significant, the Taliban officially remains classified as a terrorist organization within the Russian government. Under Russian law, any association with groups on the list is a punishable offense. During the meeting with the terrorist organization, Lavrov echoed Putin's statements regarding Afghan refugees stating: "There is a real danger of terrorism and drugs spilling into the neighboring nations under the guise of migration."[36]

Following Russia's invasion of sovereign Ukraine in February 2022, the Taliban leader, Abdul Qahar Balkhi released an official statement on the invasion calling for "restraint" on both sides and a resolution of the "crisis through dialogue and peaceful means."[37] Two months later in April, the Russian Foreign Ministry received diplomatic Taliban representatives. In June, Russia reemphasized the dimension of "inclusivity" necessary in Taliban governance for their leadership to be recognized by Russia. One year after the Taliban's takeover of Kabul in August, Russia and the Taliban began discussions for a trade deal. At the end of September, Reuters reported that the deal had closed.[38] Per the agreement, Russia will supply one million tonnes of gas, one million tonnes of diesel, half a million tonnes of petroleum gas, and two million tonnes of wheat annually. This deal is the first international deal since the Taliban's seizure of control in Afghanistan and would significantly alter the economic crisis that ensued when aid to the

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[34]Gibbons-Neff, Thomas. "Russia Is Sending Weapons to Taliban, Top U.S. General Confirms." *Washington Post*, April 24, 2017.

[35]Isachenkov, Vladimir. "Russia Hosts Afghan Talks, Calls for Inclusive Government." *The Diplomat*, October 20, 2021. https://thediplomat.com/2021/10/russia-hosts-afghan-talks-calls-for-inclusive-government/.

[36]See previous citation.

[37] Sourced from tweet from the official Twitter account of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, Abdul Qahar Balkhi.

[38] Yawar, Mohammad, and Charlotte Greenfield. "Afghan Taliban Sign Deal for Russian Oil Products, Gas and Wheat." *Reuters* , September 28, 2022. https://www.reuters.com/markets/commodities/exclusive-afghan-taliban-sign-deal-russian-oil-products-gas-wheat-2022-09-27/.

country was halted, and sanctions solidified. However, in spite of this deal and the general diplomatic communications between the states, Russia has yet to officially recognize the legitimacy of the Taliban and the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. In fact, no country has officially recognized the new government.

Aided by the UNHCR, Afghans Flee North to Tajikistan

In the wake of these geopolitical relationships, refugees in the northern provinces of Afghanistan fled north into Tajikistan. Reports vary as to how many Afghan refugees are in Tajikistan, but UNHCR estimated an amount of nearly 14,000 refugees and asylum seekers in March 2022.[39] Since the escalation of this crisis, the UNHCR has called attention to the need for international support in Tajikistan's efforts to support the refugees at their borders. Of these 14,000 Afghans, the UNHCR estimates currently that about 6,883 remain in Tajikistan as registered refugees.[40] In addition to those registered, the UNHCR reported an additional 5,710 Afghans newly arrived seeking refugee status.[41]

Since the return of the Taliban in Kabul, the status of the border between Tajikistan and Afghanistan has been in flux. It was initially open to refugees and asylum seekers following the US's withdrawal from Afghanistan. Shortly after the initial influx of refugees, however, Tajikistan closed its borders to refugees. Today, the border remains closed to refugees, only open to those with valid passports and visas to enter Tajikistan.

Working in partnership with the government of Tajikistan, the UNHCR has continued its work in Tajikistan and helps to supply aid and resources to Afghan refugees in Tajikistan. However, given the fluctuating status of the border, UNHCR has often been at odds with the government. Most alarming for the UNHCR has been the forced returns of Afghan refugees to Afghanistan which have been reported since August 2022.[42] In light of these developments, the UNHCR has continued to call for stronger domestic protection of refugees in Tajikistan. Echoing Russian refugee stances, Tajikistan resists the presence of Afghan refugees citing their links to drug trafficking and terrorism. At the same time, however, Tajikistan continues to benefit from the

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[39] "UN High Commissioner for Refugees Calls for Greater Support for Afghan Refugees in Tajikistan." *UNHCR*, March 2022. UNHCR. https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/news/press/2022/3/6234c80f4/un-high-commissioner-refugees-calls-greater-support-afghan-refugees-tajikistan.html.

[40] Figure dated "Operational Data Portal." Afghanistan situation, 2022. https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/afghanistan.

[41] It is important to note that this figure is likely even larger in reality as UNHCR only included Afghans who had approached them in their estimation.

[42] "UNHCR Raises Concerns over Afghan Refugee Forced Returns from Tajikistan." *UNHCR*, August 25, 2022. https://www.unhcr.org/asia/news/press/2022/8/6306f7274/unhcr-raises-concerns-over-afghan-refugee-forced-returns-from-tajikistan.html.

international aid from the UNHCR that supports the presence of these very refugees that the country initially vowed to accommodate. Stuck in the middle of this geopolitical push and pull between the UNHCR, Tajikistan, and Russia are the Afghan refugees most affected by these continuous shifts in policy.

A Humanitarian Crisis, 2000: Afghan Refugees on the Border

Over twenty years, before the recent circumstances in Tajikistan, Afghan refugees were once again caught in the middle of these geopolitical actors. However, in 2000, these Afghan refugees were *physically* trapped in the middle.

After fighting between the Taliban and the Northern Alliance[43] intensified and the Taliban moved into the Kunduz province, Afghans residing in the town of Imam Saheb were forced to flee their town. With Taliban forces closing in on the southern parts of the province, Afghans in Imam Saheb had little choice but to flee north to Tajikistan.

An estimated 10,000 Afghan nationals made this journey north to the Tajikistan-Afghanistan border. Most of these 10,000 were women and children. However, these Afghans had to cross the Pyandzh River that separates the two countries to make it into Tajikistan. In September 2000, this group of Afghans was marooned on two islands on the river where they remained for almost two years. Over these two years, more than nine international organizations became involved in attempts to provide aid and assistance to these stranded Afghans. At a crossroads both in the figurative sense and the literal sense, the presence of these Afghans became a divisive issue between the UNHCR, Russia, and Tajikistan. Through further examination of this case, we can illuminate some of the unique challenges presented by the current Afghan refugee crisis in Tajikistan where these same political actors are involved.

The Space of the Border: IDP or Refugee? UNHCR or UNOCHA?

The question of what territory these 10,000 Afghans occupied presented a distinct challenge for all the political actors and non-governmental organizations involved. Depending on their official location, these Afghan nationals would either be considered IDPs— if considered to be in Afghanistan— or refugees— if considered to be in Tajikistan.[44]

At first glance, a distinction between these two classifications, IDP or refugee, may seem arbitrary. On closer examination, however, this distinction became vital for the actors involved.

[43] The Northern Alliance was an anti-Taliban military alliance formed in 1996 after the Taliban took control of Kabul. The alliance was primarily composed of ethnic Tajiks at first, but as the war continued the Northern Alliance was composed of multiple ethnic groups and supported internationally by NATO and the United States.

[44]Øverland, Indra. "Humanitarian Organizations in Tajikistan and the Coordination of Aid to Displaced Afghans in No Man's Land." *Journal of Refugee Studies* 18, no. 2 (2005): 133–50. https://doi.org/10.1093/refuge/fei017.

Whether these Afghans were considered IDPs or refugees would influence which organization should be involved in aiding them. In his examination of the Pyandzh River case, Indra Øverland classifies the case itself as a "no man's land" that works on three levels: the ambiguity of which country these islands belonged to, whether the people on these islands were IDPs or refugees, and which organization should be responsible for aiding them.[45]

In this gray space between Tajikistan and Afghanistan, therefore, the status of these Afghans is even more important. As refugees, they would be governed under the UNHCR 1951 Mandate and officially be the responsibility of the UNHCR. As IDPs, their status would be more ambiguous. Protected by the legal frameworks set in place by UNHCR, the Afghan refugees would still be understood as persons displaced by conflict if classified as refugees. However, as IDPs, humanitarian efforts would be led instead by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA or OCHA). Under OCHA's broader mandate to aid in coordinating humanitarian efforts, the work to help the Afghan IDPs would be mostly on a management level. As the lead agency, OCHA would focus on managing aid and resources while also fostering collaborations between the different NGOs on the scene. However, despite what UNOCHA provided in its more targeted approach to building relationships between humanitarian groups, the Office lacked the financial budget and history with the host country that UNHCR had in Tajikistan.

In the end, these Afghans were considered to be refugees. Less of a question of where the Afghans were geographically, either in Tajikistan or Afghanistan, their refugee status was ultimately determined by their use of the border as protection from the violence occurring on both sides. The Afghans on these islands were therefore classified as refugees and the UNHCR as the head agency.

Refugees in the Grayed Space of the Border: UNHCR

Given this argument for the Afghans as refugees and the group's established relationship with Tajikistan, the UNHCR office spearheaded the humanitarian effort with the displaced Afghans. Leading the coordination of humanitarian aid, UNHCR organized and led numerous missions to the islands, named Island 9 and Island 13, based on their locations relative to border markers. Other humanitarian groups, mostly non-governmental organizations like Save the Children and the World Food Program (WFP), provided materials such as food and medicine while UNHCR focused on mostly emergency items. On one of these resource missions in November 2000, shortly after the persons were displaced, UNHCR distributed blankets, tents, and other emergency items through the existing network of Northern Alliance commanders among the Afghans displaced on the island. This strategy is not only indicative of a larger pattern within the

[45] Øverland's article is nearly the only one of its kind that does not come from an international organization and analyzes this event in depth. The breadth of information from his article comes from over 15 formal, independent interviews with staff members of organizations in Tajikistan and 20 interviews with the staffs of organizations in Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan all conducted in 2002.

UNHCR's work in the region as a partner with local institutions but demonstrative of the agency's political maneuverability.

In the UNHCR's reports in December, the agency further reveals its role as a political actor on behalf of the refugees. Their release on December 6 calls for the government of Tajikistan to admit the 10,000 displaced Afghans, despite the presence of "armed ex-fighters in the Northern Alliance" who would be disarmed before admission in the country.[46] The report additionally highlights the approaching winter, the risk of flood, the lack of clean drinking water, and the depletion of food resources.

Most important to both the UNHCR's mandate as an organization and their argument for the admission of these displaced Afghans as refugees was the issue of safety. Within this gray space of the border, the issue of safety and protection is also grayed. On one side, the Taliban pressed closer on the border, occasionally firing upon the islands of refugees. On the other side, armed Russian guards were stationed behind electric fences and minefields.[47] With neither side hospitable to these Afghans, UNHCR underscored their safety, stating that "there will be no adequate solution for the thousands of Afghans unless they can reach safety in Tajikistan."

Despite continued pressure from UNHCR and the international press,[48] the Tajik government did not budge on its stance regarding the refugees at their border. Their argument was that, in spite of the support from the UNHCR, the country would not be able to bear the financial responsibility of the refugees' continued presence. Still recovering economically at this point from both the dissolution of the USSR and the five-year-long civil war that followed, Tajikistan was aid dependent and rebuilding its economy after the shocks of conflict. Still wary, too, of fundamentalist Islam growing in the country following the civil war, Tajik representatives aimed to preserve the fragile peace that was brokered between the former UTO and the current government. Any influx of Afghan refugees–and the perceived threats of violence and drugs

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[46]"Tajikistan Urged to Help Stranded Afghans." *UNHCR*, December 6, 2000. UNHCR. https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/news/press/2000/12/3ae6b81932/tajikistan-urged-help-stranded-afghans.html.

[47] Antipersonnel mines were placed along the border by Russian troops in an effort to strengthen the border's security in light of the Taliban's advancements closer to the Tajikistan-Afghanistan border. According to NYT, the secretary of Russia's National Security Council at the time considered the consequential Afghans that would flee to Tajikistan in light of Taliban's advancement "a threat that [they] consider to be very serious."
Tyler, Patrick. "Russia Hardens Its Positions Along a Tajikistan Border." *New York Times*, October 3, 2000. https://www.nytimes.com/2000/10/03/world/russia-hardens-its-positions-along-a-tajikistan-border.html.

[48] Even before the attacks on September 11, 2001 and the United State's involvement in Afghanistan, press coverage of this event was limited to a few writers. Most international publications focused instead on advancements and retreats within the civil war between the Northern Alliance and the Taliban. Significant however, was an article in *Eurasianet,* that covered the makeshift refugee camps in January 2001.
Narziyev, Ilhom. "Displaced Afghans Face Grim Future along Tajik Border - Afghanistan." ReliefWeb, January 22, 2001. https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/displaced-afghans-face-grim-future-along-tajik-border.

attached to their presence–would exacerbate the fragility in Tajikistan at the time. Moreover, the Russian presence on the Tajik-Afghan border held even more bearing on Tajikistan's refusal to admit these 10,000 Afghans. Characterized by their associations with drug trafficking and terrorism, these Afghan refugees were not only unwanted but a threat in the Russian eyes that monitored them.

However, Tajikistan and Russia were not the only parties averse to the idea of the movement of these Afghan nationals past the border. According to Øverland's interviews, the displaced persons themselves were not interested in refugee status in Tajikistan. In the space that they occupied along the border, the displaced Afghans governed themselves. On these islands, they were not under the constant surveillance and control that they would be subject to upon claiming refugee status in Tajikistan. Instead, they were free to move on and off their makeshift camp, receive aid from the surrounding NGOs, and receive protection (partly) from the ex-northern Alliance troops and Russian troops guarding the border.

The UNHCR Withdrawal and the Fall of the Taliban

While the UNHCR brought political pull and a large budget, the commitments of the UN branch to the Geneva headquarters meant the bureaucratic challenges of an institution of this scale also manifested in Tajikistan. After a visit in February 2001 from a Geneva-based delegation, the UNHCR halted its operations on the islands. Until the ex-Northern Alliance fighters could be separated from the civilians and until Tajik forces and Russian guards guaranteed unrestricted access to the islands, the UNHCR would remain uninvolved in the humanitarian effort. These conditions were not radical in their theory broadly—consolidating the refugees would facilitate aid distribution from NGOs and UNHCR. In practice, however, this mission became more complex. With the occasional shelling from the Taliban, the logistics of moving the refugees to one island would have been dangerous. Additionally, moving the Afghans from one island to another required that they pass through Tajik territory, making the execution of this condition impossible. In light of these difficulties, the UNHCR withdrew operations at the Tajikistan border. To fill the void, OCHA became the coordinating office to distribute aid in the territory.

It was not until the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, that the policy of the UNHCR shifted and the organization returned to the site. Now, the ex-combatants of the Northern Alliance were seen as the enemies of the most infamous terrorist group, and the issue of their presence amongst the civilian refugees was no longer a hindrance to the UNHCR's operation. Therefore, in spite of OCHA's work in generating a stronger and more efficient humanitarian response to those on the island, the UNHCR re-established its management of operations.

Following the invasion by US forces and the establishment of the interim government led by Hamid Karzai, the situation in Afghanistan seemed more amenable to the presence of the

refugees in the territory. In light of this geopolitical shift, a similar one occurred at the Pyandzh Islands. With the retreat of the Taliban forces and the increased stability in Kabul, the presence of the refugees in Afghanistan seemed illogical, and the UNHCR, like Tajik and Russian authorities, pushed for the return of the refugees to their homes in Afghanistan. By April 2002, the UNHCR had repatriated all the refugees to their homes.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

Circles of Externalization and A Grayed Space in Tajikistan

In the cases from 2000 and 2021, the emergence of Tajikistan as a grayed external space becomes clear. Physically, Tajikistan occupies a median space between Afghanistan and Russia. Politically, the country is positioned between Russia and the UNHCR. Tajikistan's occupation of these external spaces means that it is essential to understand the cases in Tajikistan through a lens of externalization. However, the lack of externalization scholarship outside the EU means that there is insufficient scholarship covering Russia's externalization practices and how authoritarian regimes externalize their borders differently than non-authoritarian regimes.

Given this lack and the frameworks that Faist establishes, it is helpful to analyze the cases of Tajikistan in this work through the circles of externalization framework. In relation to the first circle, the case of Tajikistan parallels the case of the EU and Moldova agreements in two ways. First, much like Moldova situated between Russia and the EU, Tajikistan exists at a crossroads geographically between Russia and the Middle East. Second, like the ENP agreement and visa agreements between the EU and Moldova, the presence of Russian border troops is outlined by agreements between Tajikistan, Russia, and the CSTO. With the second circle, Tajikistan bears similarities due to the countries' position as a "gatekeeper" still capable of using their transit country position as a tool for foreign policy. As seen in their failed promise to accept 100,000 Afghan refugees and their continuously shifting policies regarding the refugees' presence, Tajikistan still possesses political power thanks to its positioning between Russia and Afghanistan. In the third circle, the relationship between the UNHCR and Tajikistan, while established, remains fraught with challenges on both sides. At first, Tajikistan's acceptance of Afghan refugees in 2021 was a shift in relations. However, Tajikistan's recent deportations of Afghan refugees and shifted position today reflect the volatility of the country's relationship with the UNHCR.

Therefore, instead of belonging neatly to any of these circles of externalization, Tajikistan seems to exist in a new circle entirely. In this new circle of externalization, the position of the transit country, Tajikistan is central. Unlike in other analyses of external relationships which focus through the lens of the external party (EU or otherwise), the circle of externalization that Tajikistan occupies can be classified by *Tajikistan's* relationships with other external actors. By not framing an understanding of externalization through the external actor, Russia, Tajikistan emerges as a political actor, and the country emerges as its own external space. Through this framing, we see how the geopolitical push and pull between the UNHCR and Russia within Tajikistan is not a question of the competing Global North and South influences. Instead, it is a question of the influence of Tajikistan itself.

As a political actor in the relationships between the UNHCR and Russia, Tajikistan is therefore a different space of external borders. Russia, for its own part, has an interest in securing the external border between Tajikistan and Afghanistan thereby barring Afghan refugees. The UNHCR, for its own part, has an interest in keeping this border between Tajikistan and Afghanistan open for Afghan refugees. In spite of these external influences, however, Tajikistan has acted differently. Independent of both the UNHCR and Russia's interests, Tajikistan has acted both as an external Russian border *and* as a destination country for Afghan refugees.

Looking Ahead: Tajikistan and the Invasion of Ukraine

Viewing Tajikistan as an independent political actor is also important when looking forward to where Tajikistan and Afghan refugees in Tajikistan will be in the future. Since the invasion of Ukraine, Russian military presence has gradually diminished as more troops relocate to the Ukrainian front. With such a shift, Russian military and economic support have therefore waned in Tajikistan, particularly on the border with Afghanistan.

With Russian attention pivoted away from Central Asia, Tajikistan now bears the brunt of protecting its own border. As this external border becomes more internally controlled by Tajikistan, the country then emerges again as a central actor in the discussion of both the security of the country and the safety of Afghan refugees. With a lack of Russian border troops, it is perhaps possible that the Tajik-Afghan border will become more open to refugees. However, given Tajikistan's economic reliance on Russia for remittances and the World Bank's report that the country may face a decline of up to 22%,[49] the additional economic strain caused by Russia's advances in Ukraine may cancel out any progress for Afghan refugees in Tajikistan.

To answer the question of how the presence of Afghan refugees in Tajikistan will evolve, we can look back to the past. In the case of 2000, the resolution of an external conflict (the ousting of the Taliban in 2002) is what resolved the question of Afghan refugees in Tajikistan. However, today the presence of Afghan refugees in Tajikistan is more complicated. They are already within the country, having moved beyond the space of the border. While the crisis in 2000 was solved with the fall of the Taliban, given the presence of Afghan refugees in Tajikistan today, their return to Afghanistan does not seem like the most simple end of the story. Instead of being determined by external shifts, whether in Afghanistan or Ukraine, the future of Afghan refugees in Tajikistan will ultimately be determined by Tajikistan itself.

[49] Pazhwak, Barmak. "Russia's Ukraine War Weighs Heavily on Tajikistan." United States Institute of Peace, May 5, 2022. https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/05/russias-ukraine-war-weighs-heavily-tajikistan.

CONCLUSION

At the beginning, this analysis asked a seemingly simple question. How have geopolitical actors influenced the flow of Afghan refugees in Tajikistan? By looking back on the country's history and its relationship with the main actors concerned with the presence of Afghan refugees, we begin to understand the importance of the past when analyzing cases such as this. In the 2000 case on the Pyandzh River, the dust was still settling from Tajikistan's civil war. The UNHCR, Tajikistan, and the Russian troops failed to come to a compromise that would ensure the safety of 10,000 Afghans. The only resolution of the crisis came from an outside factor that triggered a shift both in the policy of the UNHCR and in the presence of the refugees. Today, a similar shift not only seems unlikely but peripheral to the question of Afghans in Tajikistan.

Trapped in the margins of the border and the international discourse, Afghan refugees in Tajikistan have therefore been rendered pawns in these geopolitical matches between Russia, the UNHCR, and Tajikistan. When returning to Weiner's claim that the movements of people like Afghan refugees are *made* to happen, the question of Tajikistan's role in those movements remains.

How will *Tajikistan* make the movement of Afghan refugees happen in the future and will it be different from before?

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