

STRATEGIES OF SURVIVAL

Navigating Kabul's Money Bazaars

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Introduction

January 20, 2018, commenced like any other. After awakening to the morning *Azan* ricocheting across the morning twilight, I headed out of my fortified compound in the north of the city, through Kabul's winding streets and toward my private Dari-language classes tucked away in a small, inconspicuous building near the historic Darulaman Palace. Our classes ended as they always do with a line of dark humor unrelated to the session but rather a sobering testament to the uncertainty that had become a mundane state of affairs in Kabul: "I'll see you tomorrow, if we're alive, *Inshallah*." That evening, as I sat at my office desk to work on this chapter, the Intercontinental Hotel, a mesmerizing landmark within sight of my residence, came under attack. The sound of bullets pierced through the evening darkness and continued into the morning, by which time heavy smoke had taken over the north side of the hotel. A venue I had frequented on many occasions, the hotel had been breached by insurgents despite its several layers of security—a grim reminder of the vulnerabilities a researcher faces in choosing Kabul as a field site.

Kabul is as unpredictable as it is enchanting. Field researchers come to experience the endless tales of life and vitality, just as they must face the realities of operating in a zone where fatal attacks have become routine. However, this piece is not about death: it is about survival. More specifically, it speaks to strategies that a researcher operating in a war-torn and unstable

environment—in my case Kabul—may employ to best protect herself against the dangers associated with being in the field. A slowly emerging body of literature has brought attention to the possibility of conducting fieldwork in unstable areas.¹ This chapter is a reflection on the process that allowed me to carry out research in Kabul despite the security concerns associated with my fieldwork.

My fieldwork in Kabul spanned from 2017 to 2018, during which time much of my thoughts on the current chapter took shape. My research focused on a little-studied group of societal actors that plays a vital role for the economic sustenance of the country—money exchangers (*sarraf*). Money exchangers occupied Kabul's major street corners with thick wads of cash in their hand, in a wide variety of currencies, hoping to hail down customers needing a quick transaction during their commute. Those seeking to exchange a larger amount of cash may enter into any one of the several exchange bazaars that exist throughout the city and conduct the transaction within the safety and privacy of the exchanger's stall. However, currency exchanging was simply the smokescreen for a great variety of transactions carried out by these actors. Exchangers accept monetary deposits for safekeeping, transfer funds using *hawala* (an informal money-transfer system between two people to offset the transfers that they send to one another), provide trade financing, hold funds in escrow, and help to control the money supply. It is no stretch to say that money exchangers form the economic nervous system of the country by facilitating commercial transactions in every corner of Afghanistan and internationally.

While my doctoral research focuses on the operations of these exchangers, here I focus on the challenges and strategies that I employed in gaining access to their world. The world of money exchanging is rife with uncertainty and danger, as exchangers present as easy targets for nefarious characters. Exchangers have every reason to be suspicious of new faces, particularly with those whose Dari language skills betray a foreignness. On one level, exchangers are cut from the same cloth as all Afghans and thus are susceptible to insurgent attacks like any other citizen. On another level, exchangers deal with high volumes of funds—some in the millions of dollars—making them the prime target of individuals and groups seeking to il-

legally gain those funds. One of the remarkable characteristics of Kabul's money exchangers that makes them precisely worthy of study is that despite the unpredictability that characterizes their activities and physical environment, they are able to execute complex transactions that even banks are incapable of. A researcher must be mindful that he risks bringing undue attention—and increased risk—to himself by spending significant time with money exchangers. Studying exchangers thus required a carefully designed strategy so that I could mitigate dangers to the extent possible while also fielding meaningful information.

In this chapter, I focus on three strategies that I employed to mitigate the dangers associated with my fieldwork. First, I built my own personal community of trusted individuals whom I relied upon to help navigate my various field sites—gatekeepers who not only know potential interviewees but who also could be relied on to help assess safety considerations. Second, I recognized that different contexts entailed different types of dangers and planned accordingly. Closely following this point, my third strategy was to cope with the unpredictability of attacks and other dangers in Kabul by maintaining an unpredictable schedule to make it difficult for others to track my movements easily.

Community-Building

In Afghanistan, a social structure of everyday life is the *qawm*.² A protean concept that may be associated with kinship, ethnicity, religious inclination, geographic area, or otherwise, the term can loosely be defined as “community.”³ As a nonessentialist category, the “community” defines membership according to rules and meanings set by its members. Its boundaries are necessarily porous and shifting as membership is continually reconstituted by the identities and needs of its members. In a country where the government is weak and widely viewed with suspicion, people rely on their immediate social circles for various forms of support. When an individual needs financial support, the first people he will turn to are his immediate community members. When important personal events take

place, such as marriage ceremonies or a *Khatam Quran* (a religious gathering where guests read the entire Quran)—I was invited to the *Khatam Quran* of a money exchanger who had recently purchased a new house—one’s immediate social circle will be invited. Gift-giving exchanges between community members is common—comparable to Marcel Mauss’s notion of the “gift”—thereby building and reaffirming personal ties.⁴ It is common though not required for marriages to take place between community members. In rural areas, communities can provide certain public services without relying on the government by pooling communal resources.⁵ Communities exhibit flexibility as they are continuously being reconstituted. Some communities choose to “diversify their political ties to various factions to ensure that some kin are always on the winning side.”⁶ Communities are better imagined as clouds rather than billiard balls—their form and composition changes over time and their boundaries are hard to define.

My research on money exchangers fundamentally depended on the personal relationships that I have developed during my time in Afghanistan. This network of individuals formed my community. I lived in Afghanistan for four years (2012–2016) prior to commencing fieldwork (2017–2018) on money exchangers, which helped me to develop many longstanding personal ties. When I first arrived in Afghanistan in 2012, my circle of social ties was weak, and owing to this, many of my interactions were transactional—paying for taxi services, receiving security updates from my workplace as part of their protocols. As time passed in those initial days in Kabul, I developed a network of contacts with local Afghans whom I would interact with socially and trust for help. Some were colleagues from my work who showed me around the city, others were from my neighborhood, others I met in chance encounter—a restaurant owner and I got into a heated exchange once on the slow service, and we ended up becoming friends long thereafter. This community of friends and social relations would help me with everything from safety reports to transportation between parts of the city (at a reasonable rate) to suggestions on the market price of items. I also enjoyed spending time with these individuals—we would socialize, frequent restaurants, and discuss both personal and societal matters for many hours. This community

steadily grew (and also lost members) thereafter and came to include individuals with a variety of occupations, including doctors, lawyers, businessmen, bankers, engineers, civil servants, army officials, and so forth. We met and interacted in a variety of settings, professional and social, with the boundaries between the two often blurring. This accumulated past social capital certainly gave me a considerable leg up in being able to hit the ground running when I returned to Kabul in September 2017 to commence research on money exchangers. Even during my time in the field, my community continued to expand, and it eventually came to include many exchangers.

Malejacq and Mukhopadhyay—both of whom have undertaken fieldwork in Afghanistan—talk about the importance of “tribe-building” for their own research.⁷ Tribes provide a source of “access, support, and protection” when navigating the dangers and complexities of the local environments.⁸ Tribes may be essential in settings where “[p]ersonalized relationships are ubiquitous, rules are often informal, and information is of very high value, often hidden or hard to find.”⁹ The nature of many war-affected regions like Afghanistan is that the necessary data may be tucked away in hard-to-reach pockets of society, and newcomers are not necessarily welcomed with open arms. Crucially, a researcher’s fellow tribesmen (or -women) can help to overcome the trust deficit by facilitating third-party introductions. Tribes can also provide a source of friendship and help a researcher deal with the stressful and potentially traumatic effects of operating in a volatile environment. The close-knit quality of the tribe helps to emphasize the protection and interest in personal safety afforded to insiders. On the evening of the attack on the Intercontinental Hotel, several of my community members contacted me to confirm my safety.

While I strongly align myself with the principle of tribe-building, I prefer the metaphor of “community” in my current research on money exchangers for two reasons. First, “community” better represents the spatiality of relationships that I held with others as well as my place among them. Like with any community, the strength of my relationships varied among members. I had those whom I could rely on for immediate assistance. Others would be very helpful in getting in contact with high-ranking officials. Others still were simply good so-

cial company. Each individual had his role, which made him a valued community member. Furthermore, my community had grown to a size where members were not necessarily familiar with one another. For me, this was important for both safety and research purposes. I like to believe that all the members of my community are trustworthy individuals. But as many researchers of Afghanistan have noted, alliances regularly shift,¹⁰ and thus to hedge my safety at all times, it was best to have several lifelines available. In terms of research, a dispersed community allows me to confirm (or disclaim) answers provided by one branch of my community by comparing them with that of another.

Second, words have a powerful way of conveying images and histories, as they may be trapped within a particular “legislation of language.” By employing a term like “tribe,” one risks bringing to the discussion more than what is intended. For many, the “tribe” immediately conjures the image of “pre-modern,” “traditional” folk gathered around a fire without access to electricity. Words have played a crucial role in the construction of the image of Afghanistan in recent years. The traditional, often rural-based individual has been pitted against a more modern, liberal and progressive Afghan who favors “democracy” and “human rights” (certainly not uncontroversial terms). As is usually the case, people’s lives are complex and often elude such categories.¹¹ This is certainly the case among the community that I relied upon to understand money exchangers. Many of these individuals were in vogue with the latest fashion while also holding strongly their religious framework.¹² Some of my friends who were money exchangers would always wear the traditional Afghan *perahan tunban* clothing while relying vigorously on their smartphone for minute-to-minute updates on currency prices (provided by a special application designed for this purpose). An important part of the relationship to my community was resisting the parochial categories that would slot individuals into one box or another. Individuals were bound to a variety of subjectivities, and I too defined my community membership according to these shifting subjectivities.

Throughout my research, my community provided a network of trust as I studied the elusive money bazaar and its se-

cretive actors. When I arrived in Kabul ready to dive directly into research by spending a significant amount of time in the central money bazaar, Sarai Shahzada, I asked a friend how I could best “become an insider.” His simple response was, “You cannot become an insider because you are not an insider.” The poignant statement was a reminder of the challenges so many researchers face in becoming “insider-outsiders” during the course of their fieldwork.¹³ But more pragmatically, my friend’s earnest comments were a caution for my safety. The money bazaar is a site of vibrant business life just as it is a venue crawling with secret police as well as a variety of criminal groups, all looking for something that may stand out of the ordinary. I only ended up visiting the central money bazaar for the first time two months into my fieldwork, and even then I was accompanied by one of my community members who could help to assess the security situation in real time. In the time leading up to this initial visit, I frequented other commercial centers in the city, including smaller money exchange markets in Kabul, and also visited commercial banks and the central bank to gain a broad understanding of the overall setting.

My community was my lifeline throughout the city. I relied on a trusted driver to take me to appointments across the city—in markets, homes, and offices—where I would often meet friends to discuss my research. These friends often introduced me to a third party whose activities involved money exchanging or financial transactions more broadly. I ended up having conversations with exchangers, bankers, traders, government officials, and members of the judiciary. I also relied on my community members for their feedback on whether my topic of conversation was appropriate for the setting. During one conversation with an exchanger, my research assistant advised me (in real time) not to ask questions about people smuggling (*qachaqbar*), as it was a sensitive topic and might give the impression that I was an undercover police officer or, alternately, personally involved in the trade. It would be wrong to say that my agency was completely limited in such instances, as I could use alternate means to acquire the relevant information (e.g., I could ask about smuggling from people whose family members had left the country). Nonetheless, such warnings by my assistant were helpful in making me

aware of instances when I ran the risk of entering a particularly sensitive topic.

My community members were vital for me in gaining the trust of third parties. This meant that all of the interlocutors that I spoke with were somewhat entangled in the same social web to which I belonged. Snowball sampling of this sort, according to Malejacq and Mukhopadhyay, “offers opportunities to address the trust inherent in war zones, where informants tend to be suspicious of newcomers.”¹⁴ Snowballing was a necessary strategy as I had little hope of speaking to any individual—particularly weary money exchangers—unless others could vouch for my name. Furthermore, snowballing also allowed for my name to remain contained within a particular locale of actors. According to one interviewee, information within the central money bazaar circulated within seconds. One strategy for hedging against risks to my personal safety was to prevent my research from becoming the talk of the town, and thus I generally sought interlocutors who were within close “social distance” to my own personal network.

A potential risk of the snowballing technique is that data may end up being collected from an isolated sampling with similar views given the close association of individuals, which may not be broadly representative. I tried addressing this problem by deploying the snowballing method among several branches of my community simultaneously. One question that I pursued in the course of my research was on the types of problems and conflicts that arise between money exchangers. Among one branch of my community members, the categorical answer was that problems never occurred. I was highly suspicious of this response since, when money is involved, conflicts are surely bound to arise, especially in a volatile setting like Afghanistan. By consulting another branch of my community unrelated to the first, I was able to discern that an entire resolution mechanism was available specifically for money exchangers facing a dispute—a fact that the first branch was unaware of as they were not involved in the day-to-day activities in the country’s central money exchange market. Furthermore, some level of snowballing would seem inevitable given the limited size of the central money exchanger bazaar. While countless money exchangers were spread out across the city, the main

actors stationed their activities in the central bazaar, and as one exchanger told me, “There are four hundred shops in Sarai Shahzada and one exit door. And so all sarrafs [money exchangers] share each other’s happiness and sadness with each other.”

While community-building presents opportunities, it also raises challenges. The researcher risks becoming embedded within a community where they would also be expected to abide by its operating norms. This issue became most apparent when individuals asked for financial assistance. When an individual faces a period of financial need—a sick family member needing medicine, marriage payments, purchase of car, etc.—he will first turn to his community for support. Loans between members help to create overlapping ties that keep the community together. As a researcher-turned-community-member, on several occasions I was asked if I could provide a loan. Requests would range from \$7 to \$7,000 (in the latter case, to help pay for some—though not all—of the expenses associated with a marriage, i.e., wedding hall, food, *mahr* [bride-gift], *toyona* [gift to the bride’s parents], etc.). For large requests, it was easy to truthfully explain my extremely limited budget as a research student, despite the image of “wealthy foreigners” that has become widespread in Kabul. For smaller amounts, I would need to consider, on the one hand, the ethics of getting involved in other people’s personal lives such that they would feel obliged to partake in my research, and, on the other hand, the plain humanity of helping someone in a difficult situation (\$7 to help a person’s two sick children visit the doctor need not be overanalyzed).

Trust-building with locals during fieldwork reveals how a researcher may become part of multiple communities, which can lead to tensions and conflicts of interest. During the early days of my research, I had become friends with economically affluent Afghans as well as those among the economically disadvantaged groups. Each would rely on his own class-based networks of support and in different ways—affluent Afghans often had networks where jobs, gatherings, and other opportunities circulated while those disadvantaged had networks that served as an economic safety net. As time passed and I entered the community of money exchangers, I began to see not just

how I was part of different communities but also how I provided leverage for some of their members, as the following account reveals. Raz Khan was a taxi driver whom I met in 2012, and by 2017 we had become good friends. He was from an economically disadvantaged background as his father died while he was young, forcing him to work odd jobs from an early age to support himself and his family. He would regularly drive me to see Haji Paiman, a jovial money exchanger who generously gave me his time throughout my fieldwork. I kept an account of money with Haji Paiman, both to understand the activities of money exchangers and as a means of paying my research assistants. One day, after sending him a voice message (via WhatsApp) authorizing him to disburse funds to an assistant, Haji Paiman sent a reply message where he seemed upset. He informed me that I did not have much funds left in my account and also (to my surprise) that Raz Khan had not yet repaid a loan owed to him. Raz Khan had used me as an intermediary between two communities to gain the trust of Haji Paiman, and subsequently a loan, which would have likely been impossible otherwise. Raz Khan had converted the immaterial trust that existed between us into economic opportunity. Haji Paiman likewise used the combination of my account with him along with my relationship with him as a form of insurance for his loan to Raz Khan. Each was open to expanding his own community of trusted members through an imprecise calculation of trust. The fragility of trust comes to the fore when individuals—in this case Raz Khan—fail to meet expectations. In this instance, Raz Khan assured me he would clear the matter with Haji Paiman, which seems to have been the case, since Haji Paiman never mentioned the matter again to me and the two continued interacting in an affable manner. Parties are often keen to maintain relationships of trustworthiness given the ways in which it can provide future opportunities, material and immaterial. Trust does not grow endlessly, but rather it continually transforms as actors interact, expanding and shrinking in the process. Researchers must be conscious of how interactions between members of their different communities may impact their own standing in those communities and their level of trustworthiness among its members. Put simply (and crudely), trust is an imprecise game, and all parties are participants.

Disaggregating Dangers

It is trite knowledge to say that dangers arise in choosing Kabul as one's research site. More meaningful an exercise was disaggregating the particular types of dangers associated with such fieldwork. Field research on money exchangers included two distinct dangers. The first was associated with doing research in Kabul, where suicide bombings and targeted attacks occur with some regularity. The second was associated with spending time in money bazaars, where organized criminals may kidnap or extort unsuspecting persons.

As the capital city, Kabul draws together individuals of competing political interests from all over the country. The presence of prominent political figures, foreign workers, and elite businessmen makes it one of the prime targets of insurgency. While terrorist activities by their nature are unpredictable, certain areas and venues can be considered as higher-level targets. Generally, the so-called "Green Zone" or diplomatic area, which hosted many embassies and foreign NGOs' headquarters, was a higher-risk area. Though heavily guarded and patrolled by the Afghan military, it remained a prized target by terrorist groups seeking to assert their might. In June 2017, three months before I commenced my fieldwork, a tanker packed with explosives went off in the Green Zone, killing nearly 250 individuals, the worst attack since the collapse of the Taliban in 2001. Government offices, courthouses, and police and military installations were also high-risk areas, as they all represented organs of the state that stood in direct opposition to the interests of insurgent groups. Hotels, restaurants, and other venues frequented by foreigners and distinguished persons remained risky areas, despite—or rather, particularly because of—their added security protocols (these venues were relatively safe before 2014, but a spate of targeted attacks against them in 2014–2015 made them security risks). The devastating attack on the Intercontinental Hotel mentioned in the introduction was a stark reminder that even a venue with three security checkpoints may be infiltrated. Sadly, many innocent individuals consciously avoided such venues but still became the victims of attacks, as one often heard news of innocent Afghans or security officials who were killed in the initial attack to breach the secured

premises. Avoiding higher-target areas was a strategy to help reduce undue risks.

My field site—the central money exchange market in Kabul as well as the four smaller money exchange markets spread across the city—hosted a number of occupational and venue-specific dangers. Money exchanging is a risky business in Afghanistan. Both clean and black money passes through the hands of money exchangers, as transactions regularly lack proper documentation. While a great number of transactions involve legitimate businesses—often traders doing business with partners in other countries—the lack of documentation allows for illicit transactions to go unnoticed. These bazaars are also the perfect venue for corrupt individuals to hide their income—government officials could launder money using exchangers, and drug dealers and insurgents could transfer their funds. Because of the competing interests of various ideological groups, all of whom had some interest in the institution of money exchanging, these bazaars were not particularly high-risk areas in terms of insurgency—put simply, everyone had his hand in the bazaar, and no one wanted to blast his own arm off. These bazaars did face another risk nonetheless—organized crime.

Money exchangers and those doing business in the bazaar can quickly find themselves the unsuspecting target of robbery and kidnappings. According to a statement by the president of the central money bazaar in November 2017, money exchangers have had to pay as much as \$5 million monthly in ransom and other forms of extortion (a figure that may have been exaggerated but nonetheless highlights the constant dangers that exchangers face). One of my community members, a money exchanger, once almost found himself the victim of organized criminals. He was returning from the central money bazaar to his shop in the west of the city and was carrying the equivalent of \$10,000. As he stepped out of the taxi, an individual tapped him on the shoulder. “I’m from the secret police,” the individual said, “and we have information that you are part of the Taliban. Please come with us.” The exchanger stood in shock, but as the other individual was carrying a special handphone characteristic of the secret police, he went into his car, seeking to resolve the matter. As the secret police (and his driver) set

off, the exchanger—now sitting in the backseat—became suspicious of their questions. It then dawned upon him that the two were thieves and had followed him from the central money bazaar. He immediately proceeded to jump out of the car and threatened to injure the two thieves if they followed him. Such stories—often with less formidable outcomes—are widespread among exchangers.

Because of the acute dangers—both safety-wise and financial—associated with the trade, exchangers were acutely aware of the promise and, importantly, perils of trust. On the one hand, exchangers relied on trust to maintain their community of social relationships with family and friends. However, as business actors, they had a shrewd understanding of how community members may at times seek to leverage that trust to access economic capital. Exchangers would often provide small loans to members of their close social circle. Doing so exposed them to risks, but it also revealed how such exchangers genuinely sought to help those close to them, despite those risks. Moreover, providing a loan allowed them to maintain a privileged position within their community and could help in elevating the overall economic strength of the community (for example, if the loan bearer was able to launch a successful business of their own). Exchangers also employed next of kin to work as employees, as they could be trusted with secretive information like the financial dealings of an exchanger, though they often remained suspicious, since relations could always leak information to nefarious actors. Unlike small loans, large loans were mostly reserved for business partners with a track record of business dealings. Trust with these businesses was more closely (though not exclusively) related to economic success and making good on one's contractual agreements. Researchers occupied an ambiguous space, as they were neither kin nor business relationships, but they still sought to extract information on what many exchangers perceived as sensitive information. Here, the researcher faces the perennial insider-outsider dynamic, as they must leverage their community contacts as best as possible to gain trust with exchangers, who are cautious about welcoming others into their community, giving privileges to those newcomers, and entrusting the newcomers with certain information.

By disaggregating the various sites involved in my fieldwork, I could attempt to mitigate unnecessary risks by planning strategies for myself accordingly. If I needed to meet someone at a restaurant, I could choose one that would not attract attention, such as a local restaurant in an inconspicuous part of the city that catered exclusively to locals. When entering bazaars, I would be accompanied by a fellow community member to the venue specified for the particular meeting, and my conversations always took place within the closed-off shop of a money exchanger. Occasional strangers would enter and become intrigued by the presence of a foreigner asking about money exchange. However, I could be reasonably sure that the stranger had some familiarity with the exchanger in question and thus was just one step removed from my own community.

Confronting Uncertainty with Uncertainty

In a city where uncertainty abounds, one can hedge certain dangers by maintaining an unpredictable schedule. Routine movements and actions, particularly in the bazaar under the discreet gaze of undisclosed persons, could increase the risk of being kidnapped or mugged. An unpredictable schedule can help researchers keep one step ahead.

While I initially sought to focus on the central money bazaar given the higher concentration of exchangers, I realized early on that much of my information could be obtained by adopting a more multisited approach. Using the theme of money exchanging as a point of departure, I talked with exchangers scattered throughout the city, some located in one of several smaller bazaars in other parts of town. I also spoke with bankers, NGO workers, and traders in their respective venues who were familiar with the circulation of money within and outside of the country. Many issues are common to all exchangers, and such information could be gleaned outside of the central money bazaar. This approach also provided me with some intriguing findings. Some exchangers outside of the central bazaar used banks, and others did not. Those using banks recognized the safety in transferring money from one location to another through such a medium. Others felt that banks were inefficient

and time-consuming and thus would carry cash on themselves when traveling to and from the central money bazaar, despite the dangers of traveling with large funds. Furthermore, exchangers outside of the central money bazaar often treated the exchange rate as fixed whereas those in the bazaar were more likely to negotiate for the best prices. These variations pointed to how space affected the operation of exchangers. And all of this information was gathered outside of the central bazaar.

Whenever I did visit a site, whether in the central money bazaar or otherwise, my visits were unannounced. I would develop trusting relationships with exchangers through periodic visits. However, I would never give an indication of when the next visit would take place. This strategy ensured that my movements were not visible as a routine in the bazaar, since I was aware that criminal activities coalesce around such spaces. Nonetheless, my research required me to enter these spaces at times. As a male (the market was exclusively male and only very occasionally would I notice elder female customers enter its premises) of South Asian heritage—both my parents are Bangladeshi—I was able to blend in relatively easily with the locals. Dressed in traditional *perahan tunban* clothing and either my *pakol* or *kola kandahari* (whichever hat I fancied that day), I entered the venue, met with my intended interlocutor, and observed the general activities taking place in the market. My visits would not normally extend more than two hours, which meant that on each visit, I had to ensure that I could gather as much information as possible. These time-limited visits to the bazaar presented some challenges since participant observation normally requires long and sustained periods of observation before one can get a grasp of the internal operating norms. Such an approach was simply too dangerous. Thus, I adopted the next best strategy, which was to purposefully visit the bazaar several times—each time unannounced—at varying times of the day. This allowed me to observe different behaviors at different hours. Mornings tended to be very busy as traders often preferred to make their transactions early in the day. Mornings were also a time of neighborly visits, and thus it was common to see exchangers from several stalls huddled on the carpeted floor sipping tea in one of the exchanger's shops. Lunch was also a time for socializing, not just about the

market but also everything from religion to politics to security to food preferences. Afternoons would bring in a different crowd—often businesses that sought to deposit their money, and money exchangers based outside the central bazaar seeking to change currencies before the following day. I had to piece this information together over several visits rather than through a sustained period in the bazaar.

To maintain a final level of uncertainty in my overall routine, I would periodically leave the country altogether. Sometimes this was due to outside engagements, and other times it was simply for the sake of leaving. Leaving the country even for just a few days created enough of a rupture in my routine that when I returned, it often took members of my own community several weeks to realize that I was back. By the time word of my presence had reached most of the corners of my community, I repeated the process, thus restarting the clock. While some may consider such an approach overly taxing, researchers need to decide for themselves what collection of actions will provide the optimal safety strategy given their circumstances. In my case, the dangers associated with researching the money bazaar were enough to personally justify several protective and preventative measures, such as this one.

Conclusion

Early on during my fieldwork, I had the chance to attend a conference at the Kabul Serena, the country's premier five-star hotel, on the topic of Islamic finance. As the *qari* (Quran reciter) opened the event with the recitation of the *Quran*, the electricity went out. The *qari*, however, did not wince for a moment and completed the entire passage, by which time the electricity had returned. Afghan society has developed tremendous resilience that has allowed it to adapt to new, shifting, and at times unpredictable circumstances. Categories such as "traditional" and "modern" often fail to capture the depth of people's experiences. The strategies employed by individuals in the face of changing conditions can reveal powerful insights on the innovative capacity people have to adapt to varying local, translocal, and global forces. However, opportunities also

present challenges, and any researcher based in Afghanistan must decide on the strategies they will employ in going about infiltrating their particular field site.

My study of money exchangers in Kabul required visiting somewhat insecure bazaars within the instability of insurgency characteristic of the wider city. Scholarly inquiry may at times require a researcher to enter an environment that entails certain risks, both for the researcher and those being researched. Still, such research may be possible with a carefully curated plan on how one will go about collecting information given the risks entailed in the research. A researcher must mitigate risks based on the particularities of the given setting. I personally employed three different strategies to help me gain access to money exchangers while maintaining a level of safety. I developed a personal community that I relied upon to eventually gain access to the money exchangers of Kabul; I disaggregated the different types of dangers associated with my research, namely being in Kabul versus being in specific money bazaars, and planned my movements accordingly; finally, I maintained an unpredictable routine, making my precise schedule difficult to track even by members of my own community. Importantly, I maintained a context-specific and ever-evolving understanding of trust throughout my fieldwork, which included relying on the community for both safety and third-party introductions but also being cognizant of members of my trusted community who may themselves leverage my presence to expand the reach of their own community of social ties and opportunities. My specific research on money exchangers required being acutely aware of how they maintained highly privileged trust networks consisting of kinship and business ties, each with his own set of privileges and obligations. I thus devised a plan to enter their community by leveraging the members of my community for introductions and meeting regularly with exchangers to reinforce social ties, while being acutely aware that my own somewhat unusual position as a researcher entailed its own privileges and limits.

Researching in potentially dangerous conflict and postconflict zones requires being aware of the challenges and preparing accordingly. A frank and open discussion of these challenges can hopefully foster greater appreciation for the frailties that

researchers may sometimes face during the course of their fieldwork and the strategies that may be employed to deal with uncertainty. When researching in a place like Afghanistan, one may sometimes be put into situations out of one's control. However, a thoughtful overall strategy can help to provide a framework for mitigating risk and dealing with new contingencies as they arise.

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Notes

1. Massoud 2016; Paasche 2016; Dowler 2001; Gerharz 2017.
2. Rubin 2002; Barfield 2008; Barfield 2010.
3. Barfield 2008.
4. Marcel Mauss 1966.
5. Murtazashvili 2016.
6. Monsutti 2013a.
7. Malejacq and Mukhopadhyay 2016.
8. Malejacq and Mukhopadhyay 2016: 1017.
9. Malejacq and Mukhopadhyay 2016: 1017.
10. Monsutti 2013b.
11. Monsutti 2013a; Marsden 2016.
12. See, e.g., Mahmood 2011; Tarlo 2010.
13. Madden 2010; Altorki and El-Solh 1988.
14. Malejacq and Mukhopadhyay 2016: 1017; Hobbs and Wright, 2005; Sluka 2015; Nilan 2002.

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