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Brokers Betrayed: The Afterlife of Afghan Interpreters Employed by Western Armies

Abstract: Brokers have long been under scrutiny for their purported disloyalty, but brokers' attachments to and expectations of the parties they mediate for, remain largely neglected. This article contributes to existing scholarship on brokerage by reversing the much-discussed theme of betrayal *by* brokers, focussing instead on betrayal *of* brokers. It maps three forms of betrayal - interpersonal; institutional and ideological – drawing on unique empirical material, including interviews with Afghan interpreters who worked for Western armies. It argues that the betrayal *of* brokers is facilitated by conditions of reduced demand and weak social ties in an unequal global order. In cases where the brokers' remit is largely dictated by the patron, brokers stand more to lose than to gain.

Keywords: interpreters; brokers; Afghanistan; conflict; war; betrayal; neo-imperialism

Introduction

Betrayal is a central theme in research on brokers. It can refer to mistrust concerning their potentially unreliable performance, or disloyalty to the communities they are supposed to serve. The fear of brokers' betrayal is often linked to assumptions about brokers' opportunism (Aspinall, 2014; Kern & Müller-Böker, 2015). This article turns the question of betrayal and loyalty upside down by shifting away from betrayal *by* brokers to betrayal *of* brokers themselves. It thereby seeks to make visible explicit and implicit expectations in brokerage relations mediated by power inequalities. It also draws attention to the afterlife of the broker when they cease to be in demand or are replaced. Finally, instead of focussing on brokers' benefits, it highlights the potential losses experienced by brokers.

The article draws on interviews with Afghan former local interpreters employed by western armies in the context of a neo-imperial war. These lay interpreters, who found themselves in the limelight of international media after the Taliban take-over of Afghanistan in August 2021, offered cultural mediation, political diplomacy and intelligence gathering as part of their role, beyond mere interpreting. They interacted

with local leaders, translated Taliban radio exchanges and negotiated with farmers whose land was damaged by western militaries. Their role and interrelated tasks can be well captured by the term ‘broker’, defined as those who “bridg[e] gaps in communication between persons, groups, structures and even cultures” (Boissevain, 1969, p. 380). Local interpreters were part of a community of local brokers emerging in the context of the war, including cultural mediators of western embassies and local staff of international NGOs, who transmitted information and resources between external international actors and local communities.

Local Afghan interpreters were recruited into a project of political domination, where military might was exercised alongside a counter-insurgency strategy of ‘winning hearts and minds’ in which “cultural mediation [serves] as a technology of governance” (Spathopoulou, Pauliina Kallio, & Hakli, 2021, p. 361). They represent a type of broker whose power primarily emanates from external, powerful actors; in this case the western armies that employed them (Meehan & Plonski, 2017, p. 39). This distinguishes them from other types of brokers, such as “embedded brokers”, who represent communities at the margins, despite the fact that interpreters’ brokerage skills were derived from “a degree of embeddedness” with the local community, in linguistic, cultural and religious terms. It also sets them apart from “liaison brokers” or middle-men, who are not aligned with either community between which they mediate (Meehan & Plonski, 2017, p. 39).

Afghan local staff who worked for western troops and organisations, and interpreters for western armies in particular, have been considered traitors of their community. Both prior to the evacuation of Kabul in August 2021 and since the end of the evacuation, several former locally employed civilians, have reportedly died in targeted attacks by the Taliban (de Jong & Sarantidis, 2022). With lacking international coordination concerning the protection of local staff and with anti-immigration politics shaping most countries’ resettlement policies, Afghan interpreters encountered many barriers when they turned to seek help from those they had supported (de Jong & Sarantidis, 2022).

The notion of ‘betrayal’ gained new meaning when Afghan interpreters sought protection from the threats they faced due to their association with western troops, through resettlement. Betrayal became a watchword for both interpreters and advocates to refer to the leaving behind of local staff, while their western military counterparts could return home to safety. In 2007, George Packer wrote a much-cited feature for the *New Yorker* entitled “Betrayed: The Iraqis who trusted America the most”. The British tabloid newspaper *Daily Mail* started a campaign in 2014 called ‘Betrayal of the Brave’ to highlight the plight of Afghan interpreters. Once the United States and other NATO forces announced their withdrawal from Afghanistan in April 2021, betrayal became a catchphrase to refer to local interpreters left at risk after the Taliban take-over of the country in August 2021. Packer’s assertion that “the arc from hope to betrayal that traverses the Iraq war is nowhere more vivid than

in the lives of these Iraqi [interpreters]” (Packer, 2007) resonates strongly with similar assessments of the Afghanistan withdrawal, made 14 years later by journalists, advocates, veterans and politicians.

Even after civil society and media pressure encouraged the last-minute evacuation of former staff of western forces and organisations, a careful break-down of the numbers of the United States and the United Kingdom who evacuated the largest groups of Afghan evacuees (respectively 76, 000 and 10,000) in August 2021, shows that a minority of evacuees were former local civilian employees. Only 3,290 Afghans evacuated to the US during the two-week evacuation ‘Operation Allies Refuge’ were Special Immigrant Visa holders (the visa programme for Afghans who worked for the US Government), with experts noting that many who were eligible were not able to get on the planes (Kessler, 2022). 495 of the 891 locally employed staff that were relocated to the UK under the Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy (ARAP) scheme during August 2021 were civilians employed by the Ministry of Defence, with another 242 having worked for the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Heappey, 2022).

This article will centre the experiences of Afghan former local interpreters, foregrounding brokers’ own understandings of betrayal and loyalty. Afghan interpreters are only the most recent examples of a long lineage of brokers whose loyalty has been under scrutiny from both sides, while eventually suffering from a sense of betrayal themselves. Their position in neo-imperial wars echoes that of colonial brokers mediating power struggles, who were suspected to be traitors, but subsequently faced alienation. In the next section, I will offer an overview of the literature on brokers and betrayal. I will present a set of conceptual tools and the case study, before mapping three forms of betrayal experienced by Afghan interpreters brokering: interpersonal; institutional and ideological. I will then discuss the conditions for such betrayal, arguing that facilitating factors include reduced demand and weak social ties. I will show that conversely, concerns about future demand and strong social ties can protect brokers from betrayal.

Brokerage and Betrayal

Theories and empirical studies of brokerage predominantly focus on the broker as a potential traitor. This is reflected in the various disciplines that have engaged with brokerage. For instance, it can be seen in the work of sociologist Georg Simmel’s essay on the triad, which “anticipates a great deal of the subsequent theoretical and empirical research on brokerage” (Stovel & Shaw, 2012, p. 142). In this essay, Simmel suggests that the third element in a relationship, can either play the role of a non-partisan mediator, or of a “*tertius gaudens*” (the third who enjoys) who “in some fashion or another draws advantages from the quarrel of two others”, or can even use an explicit strategy of divide and conquer, actively instigating discord for personal

gain (1950, p. 154). Simmel fails to discuss, however, what happens when the third actor is left with little to rejoice.

In migration studies, scholars have highlighted the “classic stereotype of the broker as a streetwise thug who works outside the law, luring innocent migrants into exploitative situations” (Lindquist, Xiang, & Yeoh, 2012, p. 14). The broker as criminal agent does not have their loyalties to each party questioned, but their lack of scruples when pursuing their own gains. While recent critical studies ‘redeem’ the broker by emphasising their crucial function for aspiring migrants and the challenges of performing in risky settings (Alpes, 2017; Kern & Müller-Böker, 2015), they remain focussed on the potential of the broker to betray rather than looking at the impact of these stereotypes on brokers themselves. As Faulkner and Cheney note in a different context, “most sociological studies document the positive returns to brokers due to the social capital advantages of brokerage [but] no theory exists highlighting the limitations, stresses, strains, and negative consequences that might accrue to brokers under certain social conditions” (2013, p. 267). They argue that we need to think beyond brokers’ “premium” and consider brokers’ “penalty” (Faulkner & Cheney, 2013).

The concept *traduttore-traditore* (translator-traitor) from language and translation studies offers another approach to the broker as traitor. It alerts us to the fact that translation can never be completely faithful and that interpreters are often employed in the service of power (Rafael, 2009). The interpreter is therefore often presented as the skilful, powerful manipulator (Garane, 2015). Maya Hess coined the concept of “the translator-traitor mentality”, to “captur[e] the historic continuum and spectrum of distrust, discrimination, and threats” faced by interpreters, particularly in hostile settings marked by power differences between both parties (2014, p. 148). With this helpful move, instead of focussing on the interpreter *as* (potential) traitor, she centres interpreters’ experiences and looks at the effect of mistrust *on* brokers. Hess also recognises that the culture of suspicion surrounding interpreters is “further compounded by social anxieties about Islam and Muslim cultures” (2012, p. 31). This observation is relevant for the case of Afghan interpreters who operated in the context of a so-called War on Terror, which built on and amplified anti-Muslim ideologies.

In the work of historians of colonialism, the broker appears as someone whose “grasp of different perspectives left all sides to value them, although not all may have trusted them” (Szasz, 2001, p. 6). The hegemonic representation of Mexican indigenous woman Malintzin, who translated and negotiated for the Spanish conqueror Cortéz, is as “ethnic traitress supreme” (Fehrenbach quoted in: Candelaria, 1980, p. 1), and *malinchista* is still used today as a pejorative term for ‘race traitor’ (Scully, 2005). In their edited volume on local intermediaries and interpreters in colonial Africa, Benjamin Lawrance, Emily Lynn Osborn, and Richard Robert suggest that these “might be described as collaborators, for they aided and abetted

the expansion of the colonial state” (Lawrance, Osborn, & Roberts, 2006, p. 6). The postcolonial critic Hamid Dabashi has also used the label “collaborators” to refer to Afghan and Iraqi interpreters who are “paid for their incorporation into the massive military-intelligence machinery that facilitates the daily operation of the occupation” (2011, p. 18) by telling “the conquering power what it needs to know in order to better dominate” (2011, p. 23).

Colonial interpreters could accrue significant authority and resources as part of their “‘bargain of collaboration’ with the colonial state” (Lawrance et al., 2006, p. 15). Similarly, in Afghanistan’s neo-imperial war, working as an interpreter provided a degree of social status and was financially attractive; depending on whether you were directly employed or subcontracted, working on the front line or inside the base, you could earn between 600-1700 US dollars a month. However, “the social mobility afforded by brokerage is often of a temporary and precarious nature” (ANOYMISED REFERENCE, 2018, p. 619), which makes it pertinent to ask what happens to those for whom this bargain of collaboration does eventually not work out? We can glean some limited information from the historical biographies of colonial brokers. Many of these, however, tend to locate the tragedy in the individual, highlighting their drunkenness and other flaws rather than structural conditions (Dortins, 2009).

However, as Julia Wells’ counter-reading of a colonial broker’s story suggest, we should instead look at the structural, colonial dynamics, “which so soon made bridging, trans-cultural people like her [...]redundant” (Wells, 1998, p. 436). In contemporary anthropology and development studies, a similar attention to rich biographical case studies also reveals that brokers’ position changes over time with changing contexts and conditions. In their research on the role of brokers in Sri Lanka’s post-war transition, Jonathan Goodhand, Bart Klem and Oliver Walton trace the “rise and fall” of several political brokers and conclude that though one broker’s demise “was a sudden one, it is not atypical of the shifts in power and fortunes that frequently accompany, and are features of, contested post-war transitions” (2016, p. 818).

One of the most prominent publications on political brokerage, ‘When Brokers Betray: Clientelism, Social Networks, and Electoral Politics in Indonesia’ (2014) by Edward Aspinall, centres the notion of betrayal. It distinguishes between two forms of betrayal by political brokers, predation (the misappropriation of resources), and defection, in which brokers are disloyal to their political candidate (Aspinall, 2014). Aspinall (2014) develops a typology of three ideal-types of brokers to map how each type’s loyalties may be compromised under different circumstances. He identifies “activist brokers”, whose own ideologies and political commitment align with the candidate for which they broker, “clientelist brokers” whose focus is on maintaining patron-client relationships for future rewards, and “opportunistic brokers”, who base their loyalty on the prospect of immediate rewards. Opportunistic brokers are

subsequently most likely to betray their candidate based on their assessment of a candidate's electoral prospects and resources, while activist brokers tend to stay loyal. This typology and analysis has been further developed and nuanced by others, who have highlighted that the social setting in which brokers operate, and broker's concern with their reputation and social relations, can have a softening effect on broker's impulses to betray (Tawakkal, Kistanto, Asy'ari, Pradhanawati, & Garner, 2017). While this scholarly engagement uses brokers' motivations to predict betrayal by brokers, it does not explore whether brokers' motivations also have an impact on their own sense of betrayal.

I will return to the impact of brokers' motivations in the analysis below. This analysis will draw on the insights from the literature discussed above, including the importance of recognising that brokers' positions shift over time and is affected by rapid changes, which characterised the development of colonial governance as well as conflict and post-conflict settings. Before turning to the analysis, the methodology and case study will be briefly introduced.

Methodology and Case Study

The main data source for the analysis offered here are 46 semi-structured interviews that I conducted between 2017-2022 with male Afghan civilian local interpreters and other LECs from different ethnic backgrounds (including Pashtun, Tajik and Hazara), who now live in the US, UK, Canada, France, Germany, and the Netherlands. Some had worked for several different armies (for instance, the US and French forces). Most started in early adulthood, motivated by a mixture of desire for financial independence, male breadwinner responsibility, curiosity about western culture, adventurism, youthful ambition, and patriotic pride. In contrast to the military linguists that some western armies brought to Afghanistan, locally recruited civilian interpreters were generally unarmed (de Jong 2022a). However, there are documented exceptions, especially among interpreters who worked with U.S. Special Forces who "largely ignored those regulations", with at least one interpreter found to be complicit in U.S. war crimes (Aikins, 2013).

When I interviewed the interpreters, they had all left their employment with western forces. Some had used the limited resettlement routes that existed prior to August 2021 (de Jong & Sarantidis, 2022), some had left on their own accord to claim asylum, while others had been evacuated in August 2021 or had found a way to flee in subsequent months. They could hence all reflect on the 'afterlife' of being a broker, though some had subsequently adopted new broker positions as refugee case workers or transnational business liaisons. The interview questions addressed their experiences during their employment in Afghanistan and their subsequent resettlement or evacuation to the West and included reflections on their hopes and expectations vis-à-vis the countries that had employed them. The article is also

informed by interviews with 36 advocates and service providers in the aforementioned countries, including veterans, lawyers, representatives of professional interpreting associations, and refugee resettlement caseworkers. Additionally, I conducted document analysis of (social) media and policy reports and carried out (participant) observations of political meetings.

Suspicion and the accusation of treachery appears prominently in the data, reflecting the established academic literature on betrayal *by* brokers. Firstly, local interpreters were a primary target for the Taliban as they were aware of their crucial role, including translating intercepted radio exchanges. As an interpreter, who had been evacuated to the UK in August 2021, explained: “The Taliban [...] thought interpreters are the tongue and eyes of the British Forces. They announced, ‘you should kill the interpreters first, because they are showing the soldiers the way’.” An Afghan interpreter who I interviewed in Germany observed: “You will always be seen as a spy, and as a traitor. Because you’re working with foreigners”. Their accounts are confirmed in the 2021 European Asylum Office Country Guidance for Afghanistan, published after the Taliban take-over of Afghanistan, which outlines: “Article 11 of Taliban’s *Layeha* (code of conduct) orders the execution of individuals working for *Kofaar* (foreign infidels), including *Tarjoman* (interpreters)” (p. 60). None of the interpreters trusted the statement reportedly issued by the Taliban leadership that “all [...] people [who worked for foreign forces] should show remorse for their past actions and must not engage in such activities in the future that amount to treason against Islam and the country”, and that they would then be left in peace (“Taliban says Afghans who worked for foreign forces will be safe,” 2021).

Secondly, while many interpreters built friendships with western soldiers, they were also considered suspect. As one interpreter told me, “If an American or a British soldier was killed, you will see the next day that the whole camp displays a different kind of behaviour towards the interpreters [...] as if it was not the Taliban who killed the soldier, but any Afghan”. Local interpreters were subject to stringent security checks and, on some military bases, certain areas remained off-bounds (de Jong 2022a). Similar dynamics have been found in relation to local interpreters in other regions, such as former Yugoslavia, where Baker found a “procedural mistrust that underlay day-to-day camaraderie” (2012, p. 139). The US forces introduced polygraph tests in Iraq to test the trustworthiness of their local staff (Johnson, 2013). While there were informants among interpreters and some engaged in violence against western soldiers, there is no evidence that defection among interpreters was structural or widespread. Even among so-called ‘blacklisted’ interpreters, the offences which led to the termination of their contracts tend to be minor and very rarely constituted serious security breaches (Martienssen, 2014).

Thirdly, local interpreters were also viewed as ideological and religious traitors by some ordinary members of the Afghan community. One former interpreter in the UK told me about family members in Afghanistan who disavowed him, even

refusing to visit him in the hospital after he was wounded in an attack. Another interpreter who had recently been evacuated to England following the Taliban takeover, recounted how a family member told him that the money he had earned as an interpreter was *haram* (sinful according to Islamic law). Yet another evacuated interpreter mentioned that when he once asked a local farmer for some bread while on patrol, the farmer asked him: “why are you wearing the uniform of the infidels, you are not a Muslim!” and refused to give him bread. While former interpreters described their distress concerning such interactions, they also often downplayed them by attributing the hostility to ignorance and generational difference. This highlighted a broader structural dynamic as interpreters tended to be drawn from young, relatively well educated, often urban communities in Afghanistan, who encountered a rural, less educated, older community during their deployment. It also points to a methodological limitation as the data on which this article is based only offers an indirect and inevitably biased account of the perspectives of local communities on brokers (and betrayal).

Afghan and Iraqi former interpreters who migrated to western countries due to the threats they faced, frequently also continue to face animosity by other members of the diaspora. Afghan interpreters in the UK reported not being welcome in local mosques. At an international conference where I delivered a paper drawing on the experiences of local interpreters, an American academic referred to my research participants as “lubricants of US imperialism”. He subsequently shared an anecdote of how he had refused to shake the hand of a new Iraqi colleague who just joined his Department as an Arabic teacher, as he had been working as an interpreter for the U.S. Army. In her study of Iraqi interpreters who have been resettled to the United States, Madeleine Campbell describes the “chronic suspicion” they faced: “from the US Forces, to whom they represented potential threats to American security; from fellow Iraqis, some of whom saw their work with US Forces as a betrayal to Iraq; and, not least of all, from each other” (2016, p. 3). Indeed, local interpreters as key brokers in neo-imperial wars, characterised by power inequalities and violence, occupied a complex, sometimes complicit, structural position and could accrue personal social and financial capital.

However, the data also showed that brokers themselves felt betrayed. This feeling was indirectly confirmed by advocates, especially veterans, who used the language of betrayal to describe the lack of regard for the protection of interpreters at risk, because of their employment history. Hence this paper seeks to contribute to existing scholarship by asking why the broker-cum-traitor feels betrayed and what type of betrayal they experience. What are brokers’ expectations during and beyond their role as brokers, what are the potential losses rather than the gains accrued by brokers, and what conditions facilitate betrayal *of* brokers?

The Betrayal *of* the Broker

In this section I will shift the analysis from betrayal *by* to the betrayal *of* the broker, proposing to identify three dimensions; interpersonal, institutional and ideological betrayal. I will focus on the betrayal experienced by brokers from the side of the western troops and organisations that employed them. The unequal and contentious relationship between western forces, Afghan citizens and Taliban created a situation in which interpreters could neither be considered neutral nor innocent brokers. To interpret for NATO troops and western organisations was to engage in “arbitration, which results when the third party chooses a side” (Metcalf, 2005, p. 257). Choosing to become an interpreter meant investing a certain amount of trust and loyalty in an external community, and by implication alienating oneself to a degree from one’s own community.

In a recent special issue, Birgit Bräuchler, Kathrin Knodel and Ute Röschenhalter note that “what has [...] been ignored in the literature so far is that engaging in brokerage often comes with high costs” (Bräuchler, Knodel, & Röschenhalter, 2021, p. 291). Asadullah (not his real name) is an Afghan interpreter who now holds refugee status in the Netherlands after a long, traumatic asylum journey and protracted legal process. In a case of mistaken identity, his brother was murdered by the Taliban as revenge for his work for western forces. Still a young man when he started working as an interpreter for the NATO’s ISAF mission, he was employed by the American and the Dutch armies and also had a spell working for the British Armed forces, in one of the war’s most violent regions. Talking about this time with the Americans, he said: “For me the most important thing is that I won the heart of the people with my honesty, with my love, with respect and with discipline. They called me ‘Rambo’ and ‘Jim Carey’, because I was a massive fan of his. They said, ‘We will never forget you, brother’, and I felt the same for them”.

Asadullah’s account is echoed by that of many other interpreters who told me about friendships with western soldiers. Thrown together in a challenging context, for many soldiers, it was their first time in Afghanistan, while for many of the Afghan civilian staff, including interpreters, it was the first time they entered a military context. With most soldiers’ tour of duty being limited to either 6 or 12 months, and interpreters often working in the same role year after year, it was the local staff who maintained the institutional knowledge upon which western troops were highly dependent.

Once the soldiers he worked with and finally also Asadullah left Afghanistan, Asadullah’s understanding of the relationships he had forged, was compromised. “I am still in contact with my American colleagues [...] on Facebook. If they have their birthdays, I am the first who congratulates them. Believe me, sometimes they are taken aback and ask, ‘who are you Asadullah?’. For them it was just work, but for me it wasn’t like that. For me, you are important, and you stay my friend for the rest of my life.” His strongly optimistic – and for some perhaps naïve – understanding of

friendship and loyalty translates to disillusionment, but also fuels his indignation. As he explains: “We were friends in a difficult situation. But now we have left Afghanistan, no one knows us anymore. That is very strange for me. I would never do that. If I would work for Defence or the NATO, I would protect my colleagues with my life. I would not be able to sleep peacefully. I don’t know how they can sleep? If I see that my interpreter is in danger, [...] believe me, I would not sleep. But they, nobody cares!”.

Asadullah presents a strong account of the interpersonal betrayal felt by many Afghan interpreters. Interpersonal betrayal is defined by a broker’s loyalty to the persons that they brokered for that is not being reciprocated. The disillusionment and indignation are intensified by the fact that Afghan interpreters paid high costs both during their work and post-employment for their loyalty, including alienation from their communities, high personal security risk and post-migration loss of social status. At the same time, their western counterparts pay comparatively minimal costs for their loyalty or disloyalty to their former brokers. While Asadullah predominantly uses the frame of friendship to describe his relationships and expectations, like other Afghan interpreters that I interviewed, he also refers to the Afghan ethics of hospitality that puts obligations on people to host strangers, including ISAF soldiers, in their land (cf. Karlborg, 2014). As he explains: “The interpreters are not ISIS, they are not Taliban. [...] You only let someone work with you when you trust them. You let someone eat with you, but after a few days, you throw him away. That is not normal.” This frame of hospitality helps to highlight why Afghan interpreters feel particularly betrayed when they do not see the care and protection that they displayed towards western soldiers in Afghanistan reciprocated, after they have fled to the West. It demonstrates their expectation that the brokerage relationship would be reversed and the hope that western soldiers would now adopt the role of cultural mediator, helping their former local counterpart navigate the new realities after migration.

While interpersonal betrayal is the experience of disloyalty by individual persons against one’s expectations, institutional betrayal is the collective disavowal that the broker can experience in relation to the organisations, parties, communities or states they served. In the specific case of Afghan interpreters, it is the disappointment about what their employers, and by extension the western states they worked for, have offered in terms of support and protection. Mohammad, an Afghan man who worked for 7,5 years for the British army, starting his employment when he was only 17, draws a direct link between the individual and institutional betrayal he experiences. Referring to his former British soldier colleagues, he tells me that there was an institutional steer to discontinue contact with former local staff: “Somehow we have been ignored by them as well. And a couple of them, they said clearly to me ‘we have been advised by the MoD [Ministry of Defence] that we should leave the families alone and try to stay away from them’. And that's why the officers who I know, and who I used to work with on the battlefield, today they're not willing to

see me”. Mohammad and Asadullah also shared their disappointment that they received no official recognition or welcome from the army after they settled in the UK and the Netherlands. In their eyes, this is a disavowal of their pre-existing relationship with the state that employed them, as they feel relegated to the status of ‘generic refugee’ without prior attachment to the host country.

Mohammad observes a broader institutional betrayal by the British and other western armies towards those Afghan interpreters who are still in Afghanistan. Mohammad himself was resettled in 2015 under the British ‘ex-gratia scheme’, which was announced in 2013 to compensate local interpreters who “were made redundant as a direct consequence of the UK’s military drawdown from Afghanistan” and who had “12 months or more continuous service outside the wire on the frontline mostly in Helmand” (Ministry of Defence, 2021). Under the initial eligibility criteria of this scheme, only about 450 out of a total of around 2850 interpreters directly employed by the UK Ministry of Defence were resettled (Sulha Alliance, 2021). Mohammad, who also worked inside the British Labour Support Unit, which administered the contracts of Afghan locally employed staff, has close insight into its employment practices. He told me he receives daily phone calls from former colleagues left in Afghanistan, because they were dismissed for disciplinary reasons and were therefore not eligible for relocation under the ex-gratia scheme:

Their life is in danger, and they are still suffering, and they are still hiding themselves. [...] Imagine someone works for five years for the British forces, or for the Americans on the ground. And for a very small reason, they got terminated, and now what happened to their future? [...] They leave them alone there; they kick them out of the base, and now they're in Afghanistan. [...] So the [military] unit was just coming to Helmand Province only for six months, and the entire pressure was [on the interpreter] staying there with so many different units, and they've seen so many actions [engagements/battles]. Some of them got mental problems, because they have seen too many things that happened in front of their eyes. And for a very small reason [they were dismissed], whether they showed disrespect to their boss on the ground, or turned up late for a very small reason, or because they had a mobile phone.

Mohammad’s account of the minor nature of the offences that led to disciplinary dismissals – without any right to appeal – is corroborated by many other interpreters. Data released by the UK Ministry of Defence itself showed that an astonishing 35% of Afghan local interpreters employed between 2002 and 2017 (1010 out of 2850) were dismissed for disciplinary reasons (Mercer, 2020). Only following strong pressure by civil society actors and veterans (Fisher, 2021), those dismissed for minor offences were eventually included in a revised version of a new resettlement scheme, the Afghan Relocation and Assistance Policy (ARAP), first introduced in April 2021.

Mustafa Paaksimaa is a former interpreter who worked for the German Army and later for many years in the German Embassy in Afghanistan who insists, in fluent

German, that I use his real name: “When one stays anonymous, one also gets ignored. [...] When one is named, one can show people, that one consciously took the decision to work for Germany, that one was proud to do so, that one had a goal, to help one’s own country, but also its [western] friends. But unfortunately, the friends didn’t take that well. They thought, ‘when we pay them the money, we are even. But that is wrong. [...] There are values that one cannot buy with money, which one cannot in any way repay with money.”

Mustafa’s account illustrates the ideological betrayal experienced by brokers like himself. Ideological betrayal can be defined as the violation of a moral standard or the trust in shared principles. Several former interpreters expressed their disillusionment with the purported values of the mission in Afghanistan, such as human rights and democracy. They had believed as young men that these principles had underpinned the NATO mission, but had grown to realise that the war had been fought under false pretenses. In Aspinall’s typology, Mustafa and other interpreters like him, are typical “activist brokers”, motivated by a “political, ethnic, religious, or some other loyalty [...] that motivates them independently of patronage calculations” (2014, p. 548). Since these are ideal types, that does not mean that material benefits do not play any role for the activist broker (Aspinall, 2014), but these are not the primary motivation, as Mustafa emphasises:

I once debated with a diplomat, who was responsible [...] for what happens with interpreters who worked for the German army or for German organisations. [And she said:] ‘They get paid for that they do. That’s everything, they could also not have worked for us, they could have decided differently’. How silly, how stupid one must be, to give such an answer. She was a highly ranked diplomat; maybe she now leads a country or an embassy or so. Because she did not have any understanding that someone put their life, and not just their own life, but the life of their whole family on the line, because they had ideals, like an ideology, to help the country. [...] The goal of the mission was, fighting terrorism. Why? So that we would all live in peace, Afghans as well as Europeans. That was a common goal and we wanted to be part of it.

Mustafa’s story suggests that Aspinall’s typology to predict the likelihood of betrayal *by* brokers, can be usefully turned on its head to analyse the betrayal *of* brokers. The same logic that *decreases* the likelihood for activist brokers to defect – i.e. their ideological loyalty – *increases* the likelihood of brokers experiencing a sense of ideological betrayal when the party they are brokering for, is ideologically unfaithful to their purported cause.

The Conditions for and against the Betrayal of Brokers

This section will discuss the conditions which help facilitate or prevent the betrayal of brokers. It sets out two key dimensions which can either protect brokers against

betrayal or enable it: the nature of the demand for brokers and the strength or weakness of social ties. As historian Alida Metcalf notes, “moments of encounter, of conflict, of change present the socially and geographically mobile individuals who often become go-betweens with opportunities. [...] When conditions change, however, altering the nature of a particular moment or of a physical space, a go-between can lose his or her source of power” (2005, p. 236). The case study of colonial Brazil from which Metcalf derives her analysis of the changing conditions under which brokers operated and the opportunities this afforded or foreclosed, refers to a situation in which colonial powers gained the upper hand and stayed to continue to extract resources. In present-day Afghanistan, however, western powers opted to leave when they failed to become fully hegemonic and it no longer sufficiently served their interests.

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan opened some employment opportunities for locals within a very constrained context, but these came with varying degrees of risk as the conflict unfolded. When western countries reduced their troops over the years, many locally engaged civilians lost their jobs and the protection afforded by the army base. Eventually, with the drawdown and arguably lost war in 2021, this was brought to a crisis.

In the earlier years of the war, some interpreters had the opportunity to choose between working for e.g. US or UK troops and they were a few who ‘defected’ after a while, and started to work for another nation. However, once the withdrawal from Afghanistan was announced in April 2021, interpreters could not afford the option of defection. Literature on political brokerage suggests that brokers are more likely to betray political candidates when they judge the candidate’s political prospects to be low (Aspinall, 2014). However, for local interpreters there was no equivalent party to choose from when all NATO countries decided to follow the US in its withdrawal. The 2020 Doha Agreement between the US and the Taliban was not agreed with the Afghan Government and, in the words of defence specialist Jack Watling, was not signed with the “expectation that it would benefit Afghanistan”, but “was all about America getting out” (“Oral evidence: Withdrawal from Afghanistan, HC 699,” 2021). Interpreters did not trust the Taliban leadership’s offer to repent and be reabsorbed into the community. As western forces and organisations initially decreased in number and finally extracted themselves from Afghanistan, they could both literally and figuratively distance themselves from their redundant former brokers.

The level of demand for brokers structures the potential for interpersonal and, especially, institutional betrayal. On the one hand, a decreasing demand for interpreters alongside a large reserve army of labour of potential interpreters, made it easy to dismiss interpreters for spurious reasons, thereby reducing any future obligation towards them. The high number of disciplinary dismissals of interpreters employed by the British Army coincided with a reduction in their troops. As retired

Colonel Simon Diggins, former British attaché in Kabul, stated: “There is a suspicion that the dismissals were used for HR management” (quoted in: Hunter, 2021). On the other hand, the anticipation of a potential future demand for brokers helped protect current brokers against institutional betrayal. American retired diplomat Ryan Crocker, former ambassador of Iraq and Afghanistan, for instance, employed the following widely used argument to advocate for the protection of Afghan interpreters: “Right now, we are on track to leave the largest number of allies behind since the end of the Vietnam War some 46 years ago. Those pictures are still haunting. The videos of murdered interpreters are just as bad, and we fear we will see more of those soon. The world will not forget. Both America’s credibility and ability to attract local allies in future conflicts are on the line” (2021, p. 5).

The second factor that can either facilitate or counteract betrayal *of* brokers is the strength or weakness of social ties. Locally recruited interpreters had to build and develop social ties with the western personnel they worked alongside. Advice to western soldiers to sever contact with their former local colleagues, as noted above, weakened their ability to maintain these interpersonal bonds. Western organisations and armies also used a range of deliberate institutional mechanisms to minimise the bonds with their local staff. Germany used 4-week contracts for their local interpreters, including those who they employed for years, so that they could reduce their staff numbers without further obligations. Interpreters could only apply for relocation to Germany if they filed an intimidation/security threat report. However, some were fired after filing such report with the justification that they would now be vulnerable to extortion. This discouraged others, who simply needed the job, from filing an intimidation report, jeopardising their future prospect of protection through resettlement (personal correspondence 3 September 2021).

The Danish state used Afghan interpreters employed by the British Armed Forces. This construction allowed them to claim that they carried no legal responsibility, because they had not employed any local interpreters (despite these interpreters wearing Danish uniforms). In 2013, it also paid a fee to the British state to resettle 23 interpreters who had supported Danish soldiers. As Poul Hauch Fenger, lawyer and specialist in asylum law and former employee of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights noted:

I haven't seen a similar scheme before, neither in my work in the UN and the EU nor as a lawyer in Denmark. Denmark pays itself out of a legal responsibility for the interpreters, as we pay an amount to send them to the UK, which thus takes over the humanitarian responsibility that would otherwise have been ours (The Nation, 2021).

In 2014, the United Kingdom decided to move to subcontracting their Afghan local staff, due to what the British Ministry of Defence described a “combination of money and juridical liability” (Plambech & Skov Danstrøm, 2014, p. 4). Again,

subcontracting was used to diminish responsibility and when in April 2021, the Ministry of Defence announced the new Afghan Relocation and Assistance Policy (ARAP), it stipulated that only those directly contracted would be eligible for relocation. Subcontracted Afghan interpreters, including those working for decades at the British Embassy in Kabul, were initially rejected for relocation and only granted eligibility for resettlement under ARAP after intervention by the UK charity Sulha Alliance. The charity had been contacted by the embassy interpreters when they saw their resettlement applications rejected on the basis of their subcontracted status. The Sulha Alliance successfully used their media contacts to expose this, leading to a policy change (Brown, 2021; Williams & Nicol, 2021).

On a structural level, the ties between local interpreters and employing countries were also affected by anti-Muslim discourses, compounded by the so-called ‘War on Terror’, which present Muslim men as potential security threats (de Jong 2022b). In the poignant words of the American author and advocate Kirk Johnson: “We didn’t know the deep background of each Vietnamese we saved in 1975: the benefit of the doubt was given to those fleeing the country. [...]. We know far more about [Afghan local staff] than we did about the Vietnamese, but, then again, that was all before the war on terror, which has led to an immoral timidity that rejects Muslims [...]. Good enough to die alongside us, but not enough to live among us” (2021).

By contrast, strong social ties with the broker’s patron can avert or alleviate interpersonal or institutional betrayal. This is illustrated by the fact that many of the advocacy organisations for the resettlement of Afghan and Iraqi interpreters have been set up by veterans who became aware of the wider plight of former staff through the contact with their own interpreter: No One Left Behind in the United States, Forsaken Fighters in Australia and the Sulha Alliance in the UK. Social media facilitate maintaining and rebuilding social ties. The Dutch soldier Roy Grinwis, who was severely injured during his Afghanistan tour in a suicide attack in which his lieutenant was killed, told me in March 2021 that he accidentally tracked down his former interpreter when he was searching on Facebook for photos of the area, around the anniversary of the attack.

I just typed ‘Deh Rawod’, where I was based in Uruzgan and looked at profiles of people who live there to see if I could find any pictures. And then I suddenly saw a picture of someone who looked very familiar with a name that sounded very familiar. That was one of our interpreters and I was curious how he was. I first waited for a while, a week or so, thinking should I contact him or not? Is it wise to do so? Because you are being warned about maintaining contacts in Afghanistan. But my curiosity won. And then I sent him a message, ‘do you still know me?’

By defying the institutional advice against contacting his interpreter, his interpersonal loyalty ruptured the institutional betrayal experienced by many Afghan interpreters. Upon hearing that his former interpreter was trying to get resettled to the

Netherlands, and that there were others facing similar threats, Roy became actively engaged in a campaign to expedite their relocation. The interpersonal loyalty shown by veterans, such as the founders of the UK, Australian and US organisations, and Dutch soldier Roy Grinwis with strong social ties to their former brokers, amplified calls for institutional loyalty. Social ties were also instrumental for interpreters in the resettlement application process to prove employment and good standing. For instance, there was a short window of opportunity when Roy Grinwis was co-opted by the Dutch Ministry of Defence to support the assessment team for resettlement applications. He was able to use his networks to track down veterans who could vouch for their former brokers, based on old photos shared by Afghan interpreters who had lost their employment contracts.

Afghan interpreters are caught in a discourse not dissimilar to historical brokers, such as the *Askari*, the African colonial soldiers who worked for the German colonial army, who have been described as ‘collaborators’ in Tanzanian scholarship, and as ‘good soldiers’ by German anthropologists (Moyd, 2014). At a discursive level, the mediated interpersonal loyalty of several advocate veterans towards their former interpreters facilitated the symbolic rescripting of the broker. This constituted a shift away from the representation of the Afghan interpreter as entrepreneurial opportunist and potential security risk who does not deserve loyalty, to a portrayal as fellow veteran, ‘brother’ or even hero, who suffered from institutional betrayal. Political brokerage literature has suggested that if brokers have social ties to their employers, they are less likely to betray due to fear of reputational damage and “disharmony” in their community (Tawakkal et al., 2017, p. 56). The findings here suggest that the reverse is true as well; western armies risked suffering reputational damage if they betrayed those Afghan interpreters who western soldiers regarded as honorary veterans and ‘brothers in arms’. Moreover, with western states’ ideological betrayal becoming increasingly difficult to deny during the chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan, expressions of institutional loyalty towards their former brokers served a new political function of helping western nation-states redeem their tarnished reputation.

Conclusion

While brokers have long been under scrutiny for their purported disloyalty, brokers’ attachments to and expectations of the parties they mediate for, remain largely neglected. This article has used the case study of Afghan local interpreters who have worked for western armies and organisations to study the betrayal experienced by brokers. It has argued that brokers can experience three types of betrayal; interpersonal betrayal, institutional betrayal and ideological betrayal. The first constitutes disloyalty by individuals with whom brokers have associated themselves. The second refers to the betrayal by organisations, institutions, or parties which do not recognise mutual ties of obligation towards the broker. Finally, ideological betrayal is the infidelity to the political principles and ethics that the broker originally

mediated. I have suggested that activist-brokers are most affected by ideological betrayal, as they simultaneously identify with ‘the cause’ and with their patron. Once they recognise that they have been ideologically betrayed, they are forced to come to terms with the fact that they have loyally translated a treacherous message.

Shifting the focus from brokers’ accountability to accountability to the broker, I have suggested that variations in the demand for brokers and the strength of social ties affect the degree to which brokers can be betrayed. Both historical and contemporary examples show that when demand for brokers declines, the risk of their betrayal increases. When brokers’ usability expires, there is less investment into brokers’ safeguarding. Power relations and politics shape whether a party can or wants to protect brokers mediating in contentious situations. Once brokers have severed social ties with their original community due to their mediating role, their social ties to external communities become increasingly vital. In the case of Afghan interpreters, interpersonal and institutional betrayal was facilitated by deliberate state and institutional strategies to weaken the ties that bound them to their employers. However, these strategies could be counteracted by interpersonal relations that were cultivated by interpreters and their former western colleagues. Finally, under political pressure to demonstrate institutional loyalty to their former staff, western states could use piecemeal commitment to ‘saving our allies’ to conceal their structural ideological betrayal in Afghanistan.

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