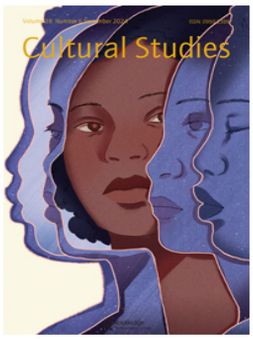
Article:
De Jong, Sara (2024) Brokering War:Afghan Interpreters, Western Soldiers and Unequal Encounters in Crisis. Cultural Studies. ISSN: 0950-2386

https://doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2024.2437434



Cultural Studies

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rcus20

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To cite this article: Sara de Jong (08 Dec 2024): Brokering war: Afghan interpreters, western soldiers and unequal encounters in crisis, Cultural Studies, DOI: 10.1080/09502386.2024.2437434

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2024.2437434

Published online: 08 Dec 2024.

CULTURAL STUDIES
https://doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2024.2437434

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

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ABSTRACT

Crisis scholarship has so far remained inattentive to the uneven entanglements and encounters that operate in what are designated as times or spaces of crisis, such as conflict and war. Indeed, scholarship on crisis suffers from a division between scholars who study the effect of crisis on privileged groups and locations and those who research marginalized communities. This has led the first to approach crisis as an exceptional moment, and the latter to argue that crisis is a semi-permanent condition. The lack of exchange between these two bodies of crisis scholarship has resulted in insufficient consideration of the divergent experiences of the nature and temporalities of crisis by unequally situated actors. This article looks at the contact zone forged by the 2001–2021 Afghanistan war to demonstrate that temporalities of crisis manifest themselves in varied and uneven ways, depending on the positionality of actors. Empirically, this article draws on interviews conducted with western Afghanistan veterans and with Afghan interpreters who worked as linguistic and cultural brokers. By contrasting the experiences of Afghan interpreters with that of the international soldiers who were dependent on their brokerage, I show how differential structures of power and privilege shape what constitutes a crisis, who is touched by it and how and when crisis makes itself felt. Close analysis of the narratives of Afghan interpreters also challenges scholarship which presents brokers as crisis *opportunists*, who subsequently experience an existential crisis and tragic demise (Distiller and Samuelson 2005, Gaskill 2023). Instead, I develop the argument that brokers' relationship to crisis can be better understood when the relational and spatio-temporal frames to situate their actions are expanded. I suggest that the cliché of the tragic broker is unsettled when tracing the strategies of Afghan interpreters over time and with attention to the interactions with those for whom they broker.

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 17 November 2024; Accepted 29 November 2024

KEYWORDS Afghanistan; war; interpreters; crisis; brokerage; contact zone

Introduction

In August 2021, the rapid Taliban take-over of Kabul and the scramble to evacuate Western nationals and Afghans who had supported the NATO

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mission, hit television screens and newspapers all over the world. The language of 'crisis' was ubiquitous in the unfolding events. The European Union set up a 'dedicated crisis cell' to provide support for the evacuation of EU and Afghan nationals in the wake of the Taliban take-over of Kabul (Immenkamp 2021, p. 4). The UK's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) was 'formally in crisis mode for 47 days in August and September', starting on the 12th of August 2021 when the Taliban took over Herat, Kandahar, and Ghazni (Foreign Affairs Committee 2022). Afghan interpreters employed by Western armies as linguistic and cultural brokers, who are the focus of this article, featured prominently as one of the groups who were particularly at risk under renewed Taliban rule. While some countries, such as the UK, had accelerated the resettlement of Afghan interpreters 'as the crisis approached' (Foreign Affairs Committee 2022, p. 5), when Kabul fell to the Taliban, many were still in Afghanistan and several were left behind after Western nations ended large-scale evacuation efforts at the end of August 2021.

This dominant narrative of sudden and time-limited crisis obscures as much as it reveals. Henrik Vigh's critique of mainstream understandings of crisis as constituting sudden rupture and his observation that '"crisis" could instead acquire an enduring hold on people and societies as it becomes endemic rather than episodic' (Vigh 2008, p. 7), is highly relevant in the context of Afghanistan. Not only were there advance warning signs of a Taliban take-over, but the history of conflict, displacement and poverty had long created a situation in which Afghans had to navigate 'crisis as context' (Vigh 2008, p. 11). Some anti-imperial scholars date the start of the crisis in Afghanistan at least 20 years earlier, attributing the crisis to 'the political, economic, and military methods of *neoliberal imperialism*' (Klassen 2013, pp. 140–141), while others have highlighted the impact of the longer history of imperialism, conflict and displacement (Rubin 1996, Manchanda 2017). Afghan interpreters were already exposed to dangers and threats in the preceding decades, both during and post-employment, due to their association with Western forces (European Asylum Support Office 2021). Their initial motivation to work as interpreters, at least in part, stemmed from economic necessity in a context of limited options (De Jong 2022a).

As this article will show based on my extensive interviews ($n = 65$) with Afghan interpreters and Western soldiers who have served in Afghanistan, questions about the temporality of crisis cannot be separated from the question, 'crisis of what and for whom?'. As postcolonial critic Hamid Dabashi (2021a) suggests, for instance, the 20-year Afghanistan war was not a crisis of liberal statebuilding, but a 'resounding success for American militarism in the region and beyond' (see also: Rutherford 2005, p. 636 on the military-market complex). When crisis occurs and what constitutes crisis depends on where one stands in structural as well as political terms, in

other words, on positionality. In this article, I will make positionality explicit by centring understandings of crisis 'from below' (De Jong 2023b). I will do so through a careful tracing of the life story of one Afghan interpreter, 'Hamid'[1], contextualizing his experiences with the wider data set, which I present in the Methodology and Background section below. Hamid worked as a locally employed interpreter for the US Army (2004–2006) and British Army (2007–2009) and was eventually resettled to the UK in 2021, where I interviewed him. As Heidemann has observed, employing this ''bottom up' approach begins with the act of putting aside a priori or etic conceptualizations of crisis in order to understand how crisis realities materialize in and through people's lived experiences' and 'scrutiniz[ing] how specific sets of people respond to highly localized and situational aspects of polycrisis in specific ways' (Heidemann 2023, p. no page number). I suggest that focussing on Afghan interpreters' understandings of crisis from below, opens up a particularly fruitful perspective as brokers move between different lifeworlds and mobilize multiple cultural and social registers to make sense of their experiences.

Recognizing that 'crisis and conflict […] position[s] […] brokers at the centre of fast-changing events' (Yannakakis 2008, p. 84), this article will put scholarship on crisis and brokerage in dialogue with one another to interrogate the relation between crises, temporality and brokerage. The next section will introduce scholarship on crisis and brokerage, followed by a brief overview of the methodology and background of my study. In the subsequent analytical sections, I will develop the argument that brokers' relationship to crisis can be better understood when the *spatio-temporal frame* to situate their actions and decisions is expanded. Against dominant perspectives that only bring brokers into view when their role as broker commences, which often tell a story of upward social mobility followed by existential crisis and demise, I go both further back into time to trace what motivates decisions to become a broker and further forward into the 'after-life' of the broker. This expanded perspective reveals that brokers' positions can neither be reduced to tragic figures nor to crisis opportunists and that brokers' empowerment and disempowerment move across an uneven continuum shaped by conditions beyond being a broker. Finally, I will contribute to existing scholarship by placing brokers in a *relational frame* that includes the complex interactions with those for whom they broker in and out of crisis. By contrasting the narratives and experiences of Afghan interpreters with that of the international soldiers, who were dependent on their brokerage, I show how differential structures of power and privilege shape what constitutes crisis, who is touched by it and when crisis makes itself felt. I thereby address a gap in crisis scholarship that has so far remained inattentive to the uneven entanglements and encounters that operate in what are designated as spaces or times of crisis.

Crisis and brokerage

Brokers are viewed as having an ambivalent relation to crisis *(cf. editorial, this issue)* (Meehan and Plonski 2017, Goodhand and Walton 2022). On the one hand, they have been portrayed as crisis opportunists, who use situations of change and upheaval for personal gain and empowerment. On the other hand, brokers have been presented as actors experiencing disempowerment once the conditions that created a demand for their services are no longer in place. This suggests that there may be an asynchronicity in the temporality of crisis as experienced by brokers. Brokers could experience a crisis, 'go broke', exactly at the point when they have resolved the crisis for one or both of the sides between which they broker (Salovesh 1978).

Hamid Dabashi presents Afghan interpreters as opportunistic brokers who capitalized on the crisis brought by the military invasion. He labels them 'collaborators', 'paid for their incorporation into the massive military-intelligence machinery that facilitates the daily operation of the occupation' (2011, p. 18), who were eventually 'running for their lives – and the US could not care less' (2021a). The compromised position of Afghan interpreters, viewed as first capitalizing on crisis and then being brought down following political change, echoes that of their predecessors in imperial contexts (De Jong 2018, Bräuchler et al. 2021). Historically, brokers 'have been portrayed as social climbers, tragic figures, power seekers, and lesser partners in the colonial enterprise' (Yannakakis 2008, p. 5).

Cultural and linguistic brokers, in particular, have been described as being at risk of an existential crisis, once the cultural adaptation that enables them to broker between different lifeworlds, leads to cultural estrangement from their 'original' community. Malcolm Gaskill, for instance, suggests that 'identity was most confused in those [indigenous individuals] trained as […] interpreters, who were essential for imperial projects but doomed for ever to be in-betweeners […] [with] depression and suicide […] common' (2023, p. 20). He then stops in his tracks and reflects: 'It's a moot point, however, as there's little direct evidence of what they actually felt […] often all that can be recovered is the gap itself' (Gaskill 2023, p. 20).

Recent scholarship on cultural brokerage in colonial contexts has encouraged a 'rethinking' of the 'tragic narrative', as the tragic broker's 'unhappy demise' (Distiller and Samuelson 2005, p. 35) has suffered from becoming a trope rather than a useful analytical concept (Scully 2005, Dortins 2009, Fullagar 2009). By placing the experiences of indigenous brokers in broader and relational contexts, the broker is revealed as much less of a victim and rather as a transnational, well-linked and adapted individual (Fullagar 2009). As I will demonstrate, this suggestion to situate brokers in a broader context to better understand their experiences is also relevant to the current neo-imperial era. While some historians have sought to recover the lives of indigenous colonial

brokers *before* and *beyond* their relationship with imperial agents, they tend to remain constrained by archives in which these brokers often only appear once they are seen to become meaningful for hegemonic imperial histories. I have the advantage of access to Afghan interpreters' own voices, contrary to historians studying brokers in the past. This allows me to 'go […] beyond black and white, bedevilling or praising brokerage, [by] put[ting] a stronger focus on the human side of brokerage, the brokers' emotions, personal investments, vulnerabilities and sufferings' (Bräuchler et al. 2021, p. 290).

In the analysis presented in this article, I will show that the extended temporal framework associated with a 'crisis as context' perspective (Vigh 2008) helps to challenge the tragic broker narrative of social ascent and empowerment followed by demise. Situating Afghan interpreters in a relational framework with western soldiers illustrates the point made by the editors of this special issue that 'notions of empowerment are […] dynamic', depending on positionality and temporality *(see editorial this issue),* without denying that they have been viewed as traitors by the Taliban and some other members of the Afghan community and that they themselves have felt betrayed on an interpersonal, institutional and structural level, as I have argued elsewhere (De Jong 2023a). As Goodhand and Walton have noted, brokers' 'decisions can only be understood by appreciating how multiple forces pull the broker in different directions, leading to compromises, tradeoffs and decisions that manage, rather than resolve, problems' (2022, p. 2336), which demonstrates that 'common representations of brokers as crafty opportunists are a misrepresentation' (2022, p. 2337).

Methodology and background

The tasks of local Afghan interpreters who worked for NATO and Allied Forces between 2001 and 2021, consisted of interpreting between international soldiers and local communities, translating intercepted Taliban communication and advising international soldiers about culturally appropriate interactions with local political leaders. They hence represent a type of broker that combines cultural, social and political knowledge to 'reframe local realities […] to make them accessible and intelligible for […] international agents' (Bräuchler et al. 2021, p. 287). Referred to as traitors and as the eyes and ears of 'infidels', they faced threats by the Taliban during and after their employment. The Taliban's targeting of local interpreters stems both from western soldiers' practical dependency on their linguistic skills and cultural awareness and from local interpreters' symbolic status as 'mouthpieces' of the western invasion. The threat level increased after August 2021 when the Taliban returned to power, as 'article 11 of Taliban's *Layeha* (code of conduct) orders the execution of individuals working for *Kofaar* (foreign infidels), including *Tarjoman* (interpreters)' (European Asylum Support Office 2021, p. 60). Migration,

either through asylum routes or resettlement schemes, became an important pathway to safety for former interpreters. As mainstream political and media discourses have 'fram[ed] migration as a crisis […] disregard[ing] migrant agency' (Mainwaring 2019, p. 35), it is important to centre understandings of crisis by those forced to migrate (De Jong 2023b).

Humanities-based research in language and translation studies has drawn on secondary data, mostly from media, to reconstruct the role of Afghan and Iraqi interpreters (Rafael 2007, Collin 2009, Baker 2010, Inghilleri 2010, Footitt and Kelly 2012, Rosendo and Muñoz 2017). This article contributes to emerging Social Science scholarship on Afghan interpreters' own experiences and their interaction with international soldiers, based on primary data collection from in-depth interviews (Bos and Soeters 2006, Kremmel 2016, Rosendo 2020, Coburn 2021, De Jong 2022a, De Jong 2022b, De Jong 2023a). Between 2017 and 2022, I conducted 48 semi-structured interviews with Afghan interpreters, investigating how Afghan interpreters and their advocates articulated their demands for protection and rights. All interviewed interpreters had left Afghanistan and at the time of the interview lived in the US, UK, Canada, France, Germany, or the Netherlands. I also interviewed 45 advocates and service providers in the aforementioned countries, including veterans, lawyers, representatives of professional interpreting associations, civil society activists, and refugee resettlement caseworkers between 2017 and 2024.[2] Finally, this article is informed by informal relationships built over several years with Afghan interpreters and advocates through collective advocacy work and (participant) observation of advocacy, network and support events.

This article will center the story of an Afghan man that I call 'Hamid', who worked as a locally employed interpreter for the US and UK Armies. The method of tracing the story of one protagonist and his 'meaning-making' in and of crisis (Heidemann 2023, p. no page number) follows studies in anthropology and development, which foreground the life story of one broker (e.g. Goodhand and Walton 2023) to document changing political dynamics and brokers' 'embeddedness in social, political and historical contexts' (Bräuchler et al. 2021, p. 290). Conflict studies have started to attend to 'everyday practices and politics' (Hilhorst 2013, p. 4) and the 'complex temporalities […] including the continuities between the pre-war, wartime and post-war periods, as well as moments of rupture and transformation' (Goodhand and Walton 2022, p. 2344) to rebalance its original focus on the macrostructures of state politics. The method of centering one or a few actors also corresponds with research on the experiences of crisis as a semi-permanent condition for marginalized communities (Jackson 2008, Pedersen and Højer 2008). A microstructural approach does not mean ignoring macrostructural dynamics of crisis, because 'large-scale global, regional or societal malformations are intimately tied to social and personal crisis' (Vigh 2008, p. 15,

Heidemann 2023). In the analysis that follows, I will corroborate Hamid's story with reference to other interview data and the wider structural context framing his experiences. I will also complement the analysis of his experience with accounts from Afghanistan veterans drawn from 17 interviews to develop a relational account of crisis in spaces of encounter.

Expanding the temporal frame: navigating crisis as a condition

If crisis constitutes a context or condition rather than a sudden rupture, when does it start? I met Hamid in March 2022 in a quiet coastal city in the UK, almost exactly 7 months after he was evacuated on the 25th of August 2021. Now 39 years old, he had started working as an interpreter for the US Army as a 20-year-old man. To understand Hamid's decisions and experiences, however, it is important to go further back in time. When I met Hamid, it was 20 years ago that he had left Pakistan to return to Afghanistan with his mother, three sisters and one brother, but without his father who had passed away two years earlier. His father had died alone, as a refugee in the Netherlands, waiting for family reunification documents that came too late.

Hamid had grown up as a refugee in Pakistan. A 1996 Country Report with the title 'Afghanistan: the forgotten crisis' documented the displacement of Afghans in the aftermath of the 1979 Soviet invasion and described Afghanistan as the main source of refugees and internally displaced persons (Rubin 1996). In September 2001, Hamid and his family were part of the 4 million Afghan refugees residing mostly in Pakistan and Iran, out of a total population of 26 million Afghans (Noor 2006). Today, Afghans are among the main refugee populations worldwide (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2023). The statement of UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Filippo Grandi that 'Afghanistan's displacement crisis is one of the largest and most protracted in UNHCR's seven-decade history' (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2022) suggests that Afghanistan could be regarded as a space of permanent crisis, and indeed, as Goodhand and Walton note in this special issue, that the tensions that conflict brokers negotiate, often have long-term roots. For Afghans who lived through decades of war, migration has always been an important pathway to 'survival, material and social empowerment, both at the level of the individual migrant and the household' in the hope that migration brings opportunities for financial remittances and reunification (Scalettaris et al. 2021, p. 521). Hamid, his siblings and now widowed mother had been living in Pakistan without their father for the past seven years, supported by his uncle. Hamid had studied English and computer courses in a private school in Pakistan, but after his father died, his uncles ceased their support and appropriated his father's assets. Hamid, his mother and siblings returned to Kabul in 2002, where he attempted to complement his mother's earnings

from a cleaning job with his own income, first from his job as a teacher in an internet club, then in a nail factory.

Expanding the spatio-temporal frame and attending to Hamid's experiences before he started working as an interpreter is important to disrupt the cliched narrative of the tragic broker, solely defined by his encounter with international forces. Hamid's condition of crisis starts before 9/11 and harks back to the time first as a refugee in Pakistan, then as a child left alone by his father's migration and subsequent death. What are the relevant dates to understand crisis, and for whom? Postcolonial critic Dabashi argues for a rejection of the 'imperial imposition of 9/11 as an iconic date' that has marred our historical consciousness and asks why '10/7', the date of the invasion of Afghanistan has never been 'a marker of anything' (2021b). For Hamid, however, neither dates are explicit reference points, though the US-led military NATO intervention and presence of international forces would shape his 'agency as possibility' (Vigh 2008, p. 11). As Hamid explained: 'The situation of Afghanistan got better, a new regime came to Afghanistan, and we left Pakistan, we came back to Afghanistan'. This understanding of crisis from below by someone for whom crisis is a condition, challenges anti-imperial critiques, which solely view the invasion as bringing crisis to Afghanistan, rather than it being part of a larger forcefield of overlapping instabilities.

New groups of Afghan refugees fled to Pakistan in the aftermath of the US airstrikes on Afghanistan in 2001, but in 2002 almost 1.6 million Afghans made their way back from Pakistan to Afghanistan (Noor 2006). This forced migration itself has roots in multiple, overlapping crises: humanitarian, economic and environmental (Rajmil et al. 2022). Hamid's actions were informed by the simultaneous deterioration of the family's situation in Pakistan and their observation of political change happening in Afghanistan. Operating in crisis as context in which unpredictability has become the norm, requires a constant readjustment of one's temporal and spatial horizon (Vigh 2008). Unfortunately, the move from Pakistan to Afghanistan did not provide Hamid, his mother and his siblings with sufficient means for their subsistence. Against this backdrop, Hamid recounted his grandfather, a Colonel in the Afghan National Army, calling him:

> He told me: 'do you want to work with American Coalition Forces, and they will be paying you 500 dollars and that will be enough for you and your family?'. I was worried about my sisters, because they were young, I couldn't leave them behind and just go to any province of Afghanistan. […] Still, I convinced my mother and I told my grandfather, 'OK, I'm ready'.

Hamid was the oldest son of a widow, left unsupported by her brothers in law. At only 17-years old, Hamid was the responsible breadwinner according to Afghan cultural norms (Echavez et al. 2016). As Bräuchler, Knodel, and Röschenthaler have argued, individuals acting as brokers are not 'solely

brokers'; it is 'a role that they take on but it should not be mistaken for the actors themselves' (Bräuchler et al. 2021, p. 293). Hamid was part of a larger community of young men, who started working as local interpreters for international forces. While the U.S. Government started with a limited expansion of language training programmes and recruited from Afghan-American communities, eventually they were 'relying more and more on local Afghans who had learned English to provide these skills', to the extent that locally recruited Afghan interpreters 'far outnumbered Afghan-Americans working for the U.S. military' (Coburn 2021, p. 5). Between 2001 and 2018, the British Army directly employed around 2850 interpreters (Mercer 2020). The actual number of local interpreters is higher, because it excludes interpreters hired through subcontractors and security companies post-2018 and Special Forces interpreters. Recruitment of local interpreters was cheaper for western forces than training and bringing their own military linguists. While Hamid did not speak very explicitly about his motivations for taking a job as an interpreter beyond his family's financial needs, most interpreters were motivated by a combination of 'ideological and pragmatic motives', with employment as an interpreter offering 'economic opportunities for young men in a context of limited options' (De Jong 2022a, pp. 251–252). Pragmatically, Hamid's schooling in Pakistan had provided him with English language skills, as was the case for other Afghan returnees from Pakistan who made the same decision to interpret for NATO forces (Marsden 2009). This reinforces the point that 'reducing brokers to mere manipulators for their own benefits would simplify the motivational landscape of brokers, [which are rather the] result of complex negotiation processes and dynamics that the broker is not always in control of' (Bräuchler et al. 2021, p. 291).

Local interpreters as key brokers in neo-imperial wars, characterized by power inequalities and violence, occupied a complex, sometimes complicit, structural position and could accrue personal social and financial capital. Recognizing the structural conditions under which brokers made decisions, helps understand that 'it is not a matter of taking sides only but of brokering for a better future as such' (Bräuchler et al. 2021, p. 291). Rather than simply crisis opportunists, local Afghan men started employment as interpreters to negotiate crisis as 'a terrain of action and meaning' (Vigh 2008, p. 8). To understand crisis as a terrain of operation, it is important to not only attend to the temporal aspect, but also to its inherent intertwinement with spatial dimensions *(see editorial, this issue)*.

Expanding the relational frame: crisis in spaces of encounter

Hamid's narration of the start of his employment with the US Army offers a compressed account of the impact of his decision, his relationship with the

soldiers for whom he brokers and the experiences which they share and those which separate them.

> I went to Gereshk, Helmand. I was an interpreter for Captain Jason Smith. During my job with him, I got shot once, in my ribcage. I was still doing my job; I didn't take a break. I went to Kandahar, I was hospitalized there, I went back, and I did my job again, because my family needed the money. […] I was still working with Captain Jason Smith for a while; then he went to America for a vacation after 6 months.

It is important to use a relational frame to unpack the elements present in the seemingly casual story in which Hamid summarizes his injury, the ensuing departure from and return to the battlefield and his link to and subsequent separation from Captain Jason Smith. As the editors of this special issue note, while 'brokers and the ones they are brokering between are connected within the same time', 'their temporalities [and interconnected spatialities], may vary widely' (*editorial, this issue)*. As I will illustrate below, the same actions and events in the space of encounter in conflict have radically different effects depending on the positionality of the actors.

Firstly, while the type of injury sustained by Hamid would result in repatriation for western soldiers, Hamid only spent a short time away before returning to the frontline. Instead of the injury being a crisis that would inaugurate a tempo-spatial rupture – the end of a soldier's tour –, Hamid integrates his injury within his prolonged crisis as condition, marked by his precarious financial situation. As I have argued elsewhere, when locally employed civilian interpreters got injured, it fragmented the military brotherhood in which they were already only partially integrated (de Jong and Jalal Shajjan 2025). While the number of injured and deceased western soldiers has been recorded and frequently quoted as representing the cost of the Afghanistan war, 'there is no simple or precise count of […] the number of these Afghans who have been killed during or after their service' for the US army (Coburn, 2021, p. 5). The UK Ministry of Defence only released the information that they paid compensation for the deaths of 26 of their directly employed Afghan local interpreters and that they hold records of 135 injured interpreters for the period 2001–2018 following a Freedom of Information Request (Ministry of Defence 2022). For his medical treatment, Hamid was taken to Kandahar airfield, 'where they cut that piece of my skin and then they did some medications. They didn't even do stitches, but they just left that part open and they just put bandages on it'. Like many other local or third-country contractors working for the US army, Hamid received 'substandard care' and no financial compensation for the injury he sustained (Coburn 2021, p. 7).

Secondly, local interpreters, like Hamid, were often employed for several years and exposed to combat over prolonged periods of time, in contrast

to the limited timeframe of a western soldier's tour of duty (which for the US Army typically lasts 12 months and for the British Army 6 months). While regulations required Captain Jason Smith to return home to avoid crisis due to 'the intensity of the assignment and exposure to combat stress' (Reed 2011, p. 63), no limit was put on the employment duration of patrol interpreters, reflecting a racial economy in which the lives of some are valued over that of others. What remains invisible in official military doctrine about the optimal length of soldiers' tour of duty to balance 'the health of the service and the welfare of the soldier with mission accomplishment' (Reed, 2011, p. 62), is that local interpreters provided the institutional continuity that averted many potential crises for western soldiers. The space of encounter between Afghan interpreters and western soldiers resembles the colonial contact zone, described by Mary Louise Pratt as 'the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relationships, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict' (2008, 6). This space of encounter can also be understood as a 'boundary place' 'in which worlds that are incompatible in other settings become temporarily – and at least partially – compatible [while at the same time] these worlds are re-established in their difference' (Koster 2014, p. 128).

Afghanistan was the site for the space of encounter between Afghan interpreters and western soldiers, but the differential relationship to the country, to conflict and poverty created significant differences in their experiences of crisis. In Milstein's words, 'the status of an event as a crisis is immanently and inextricably bound up with a variety of normative presuppositions and expectations' (Milstein 2015, p. 146). However, there is a scarcity of literature that captures the lived experiences of crisis in spaces of encounter between those 'structurally violated, socially marginalised and poor' for whom the world 'is characterised […] by the presence and possibility of conflict, poverty and disorder' and those for whom 'crisis is an experience of temporary abnormality' against the backdrop of a lifeworld characterized and understood as presenting 'peace, prosperity and order' (Vigh 2008, p. 7). The unhelpful scholarly divide between those focussing on communities and places for whom crisis tends to constitute a short-lived rupture and those analysing the experiences of those for whom crisis is continuous or ubiquitous (Jackson 2008, Pedersen and Højer 2008) obscures brokered spaces of encounter. Western soldiers, as well as humanitarian workers, journalists, peacekeepers and researchers for whom crisis is likely a rupture, move in and out of these sites and interact with those for whom crisis is a condition of life. This relational dimension requires reflection on how differential structures of power and privilege shape what constitutes crisis and who is touched by it. This blind spot of crisis scholarship to spaces of encounter and entanglements, should be situated within the broader context of 'frameworks of

geopolitics' in International Relations and other disciplines which 'rely on geographical separations of land, people and knowledge', presented 'as naturalized, even when violence is foundational to its consolidation' (Agathangelou and Turcotte 2010, p. 45). I seek to disrupt this division by paying attention to spaces of brokerage in crisis settings, which bring together differentially positioned actors.

Despite meeting at the same time and space in the conflict zone, Afghan interpreters and western soldiers experienced different types of crises, reflecting divergent temporalities (cf. Whittaker and König this issue, Goodhand and Walton this issue). Hamid was part of a formalized industry of local interpreters, representing 'institutionalised forms of brokerage' with its distinct set of 'interdependencies' (Bräuchler et al. 2021, p. 292). Hamid and other Afghan interpreters were dependent not only on the income they derived from their work, but also on the protection that the soldiers provided them on patrols. As lay civilian interpreters, their entry into their employment was often marked by an initial lack of confidence about their English and fear of the risks and violence they faced. As time went on, as indispensable brokers, alongside the hardship, they experienced empowerment through their vital cultural and linguistic knowledge, their military and institutional nous which quickly grew over time, and their payment in Western currency, which offered financial and social status in Afghan society.

Western soldiers experienced an epistemological crisis when they arrived in Afghanistan, suddenly confronted with the limits of their own linguistic and cultural capabilities. While western politicians regularly refer to the 'vital role' played by interpreters working with western soldiers, they refrain from explicitly referencing the ignorance and vulnerability of western soldiers, which shaped their dependency on local interpreters. This echoes colonial relations in which colonisers maintained their superiority despite being utterly dependent on local indigenous labour for their survival (Agathangelou and Ling 2004). However, closer attention to the stories of Afghanistan veterans exposes 'the trappings of racialized privilege' embodied by western soldiers (Agathangelou and Ling 2004, p. 530). Matt, a British veteran told me: 'I had no idea how valuable [local interpreters] would be. I thought they would just do some speaking.' John, an American former Captain whose life was saved by his interpreter shortly after his tour begun, admitted: 'I arrived with this naïve belief that my ability to shape the world around me was greater than it really was.' He continued:

> My expectations were naïve and childish … I was 26. I think I had grown up with this romantic idea of what it meant to be a soldier and serve my country. I never thought that an Afghan man who I didn't even know existed prior to meeting him would save my life – nor was I prepared for how just dependent I would be on someone like that.

Initially confident in their knowledge and sense of entitlement to operate abroad, many western soldiers found themselves ultimately reliant on locals. Crisis in the spaces of encounter between local interpreters and western soldiers manifested itself both in the challenge to the superiority of western knowledge as well as in the threats to life recounted in several interviews by interpreters and soldiers, when the advice of interpreters was ignored at western soldiers' peril.

Interpreters like Hamid faced crisis as a semi-permanent context of their lives in or in exile from Afghanistan. Western soldiers on the other hand, often related to Afghanistan as a space of exception marked by a socio-economic crisis, far removed from the realities at home. As US soldier John describes: 'I knew I was so out of my element the day I arrived in Afghanistan and realized I had never experienced poverty like that in my entire life. I remember calling home and someone saying, 'what's it like there?' and me saying, 'it's an insult to the third world to call this place the third world'.' He described climbing onto a guard tower in Kabul to get his bearings. On the left side he saw 'the twenty-first century, which is our base' with modern technology, running water, a bowling alley and movie theatre and 'on the other side, it was the twelfth century with open air toilers, mud-brick homes, people doing their own subsistence farming in their little plot right there.'

The account of Nils, a Swedish veteran further illustrates the profound sense of estrangement many international soldiers experienced when they first arrived in Afghanistan. As he told me: 'There were donkeys, camels, sheep, bicycles, all in the same lanes, and there were some poor traffic police standing there with their whistle. There was no asphalt, it was just dust everywhere. […] I guess even if you look at movies or pictures, it's not possible to prepare for this. You would still be in shock.' The stories of conviviality between soldiers and their Afghan interpreters told by John, Nils and others hence existed alongside accounts that portrayed the country from which their interpreters hailed as far removed in time and space. This reflects long-standing dynamics in which 'temporal regimes are used in order to deny coevalness and thereby create deeply asymmetrical relationships of exclusion and domination', according to Kirtsoglou and Simpson, as quoted by the editors in their introduction to this special issue.

Crisis, temporality and mobility: stuckness and migration

In crisis as condition, time manifests itself as a repetition of attempts at a better life, tried and failed time and again. For brokers like Hamid, spatial mobility holds promise, but does not guarantee an escape from crisis. As Brun has recognized, while stuckness 'indicates temporal, social and geographical stillness', in protracted conflict, stuckness can coincide with

movement, social or geographical, 'which could see people moving to a better or a worse condition; people find ways of moving on, and even though they do not move on, there are changes in their lives' (2016, p. 393). Impressed by Hamid's return to work so soon after being injured, the US Special Forces offered Hamid a job, but he resigned after two months, describing his decision as follows: 'It was so tough, they were fighting in the front line, and so I was so scared by that job, so I resigned'. When he asked his supervisors if they could post him to Kabul, closer to his family, he was stationed for a few months in Camp Phoenix. However, 'bored in Kabul' and needing the 'extra money [as a compensation for being sent to] another province', Hamid left and supported several missions in Herat, then in Farah province, before eventually being sent to Sangin, a town in Helmand province, which as Hamid knew, was 'the most dangerous'.

As Hamid recounts:

> We faced ambushes there, and our vehicle was blown up by an IED [improvised explosive device]. We were facing a lot of different situations in Sangin. We didn't get any sleep […]. Most of the ANA [Afghan National Army] guys, they didn't want to go there, so people were escaping from there as well. But I was still […] doing my job. One day we faced another ambush, we killed 40 Taliban, […] and 8 ANA soldiers died in that engagement.
>
> After a while, I was so tired of that job. We went back to Herat, and I stayed there [and] asked them if I can go home for a vacation and then they said 'OK'. And I went to Kabul. I tried my best to get transferred to Bagram airfield, but I couldn't. I was so tired of going away from my family; my sisters were young and I didn't want to leave them alone anymore. My mother was also afraid; I got shot and I didn't tell her, but she saw the scar, so she didn't want me to go back to that particular area again.

While on leave in Kabul, Hamid resigned from his job as an interpreter and invested his earnings to set up his own cosmetics business. When the cosmetics shop failed and Hamid lost his investment of 7000 dollars, he once again resorted to working as an interpreter, this time for the British Army. Again, Hamid requested to be sent away on a mission to increase his salary, 'any other place where they are paying 1700 dollars, because I was getting 600 dollars and that was not enough; I wanted to get married and I wanted to build a house for my family'. This time he injured his shoulder when the patrol vehicle in front of his vehicle was blown up and he 'was struck by the weight of it'. He also lost two interpreter friends: 'He was called Mohammad, and they brought only one hand of him in two pieces, and another friend called Hayat, he died through an IED.'

With this exposure to violence, what does crisis and survival mean? Hamid engaged in a continuous quest to find the precarious balance between economic and physical survival; between high-risk jobs that paid well but could cost him his life and affected his mental health and lower-risk jobs, which

could not financially sustain his family. He needed to stay flexible, ready to change strategy when the balance tipped to one or the other side, followed by the shadow of his father who ultimately failed to secure his family's and his own survival. He eventually resigned from his job with the British army due to a combination of the Taliban threats he faced and the desire to spend time with his fiancée. Hamid's description of his engagement period punctures his story of existential struggle, presenting joy and respite, however short-lived when the costly dowry and wedding left him broke again:

> After many years I found what I wanted. For nine months we were just chatting and walking around, enjoying our life, and then after nine months I got married with her.

Over the course of the subsequent years, Hamid worked as an election media monitor, marketing assistant, security guard for a UN office, potatoes and onion vendor, hotel maintenance and security guard, Kabul airport CCTV camera operator, clerk in a human resource office for a production company, and sold watermelons, apples, ice candy, energy drinks and juices from a wheelbarrow. He secured jobs through his contacts and followed business opportunities, reflecting the apparent 'continuation of the normality' in the 'economies of survival during crises' (Hilhorst 2013, p. 5). The international military and humanitarian industry that emerged in Afghanistan during the two decade-long intervention offered better paid jobs, but these were often precarious and short-term (Rivas 2020). The military intervention by US and allied forces military intervention also indirectly destroyed 'lives due to the war-induced breakdown of the economy, public health, security, and infrastructure' (Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs 2022).

Hamid returned to the survival strategy of migration, following his own past and his father's footsteps. After getting married, he spent one year in India with his new wife and children, supporting his family by 'selling biryani rice in front of a metro station'. He fled as he was 'so tired of Afghanistan and I was always feeling trapped by the people who were surrounding us […], I was always afraid in Kabul'. He registered with the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) in India, hoping 'we may be sent to Australia, Canada, or any other western country'. managed to bring his mother and sisters to India after his grandparents sold a piece of land that they owned in Balkh province, but eventually returned to Afghanistan when the conditions in India became unbearable for his young children.

While Hamid's life navigating crisis as condition was weighed down by the 'labour' required for the 'maintenance of [biological] life', which 'is repetitive, and […] consists of activities which arise out of necessity' (Brun 2016, p. 399), his attempts to find avenues for living a 'biographical life' expressing his desire and 'ability to act within or upon the forces that shape and restrict

our possibilities to reach a desired future' (Brun 2016, p. 399) should not be minimized. Hamid described how on his return he was 'living a very scary life and always wrapping my face with a scarf and having a small beard [to disguise his identity]'. As he explained, 'I was aware of the situation of Afghanistan, which was getting worse and worse [with the] Taliban having captured one province and then another.' Hamid had applied for an American Special Immigrant Visa, a resettlement programme for those who had worked for the US Army for more than 2 years. However, the structural backlogs in the programme (Coburn 2021) meant that his right to resettlement had not yet been confirmed. Hamid considered trying to obtain a visa to India again to escape with his family, when a friend advised him to apply for the new British resettlement programme for interpreters, the Afghan Relocation and Assistance Policy (ARAP), which was launched in April 2021 when the NATO's withdrawal from Afghanistan was announced.

It was the ARAP resettlement programme, which finally allowed Hamid to escape Kabul in the chaotic and violent moments of the Taliban take-over of Kabul in August 2021. Once again, however, he was separated from his family as the British Embassy did not allow his mother and sisters to join him on the plane. Crisis repeats in this family trauma when this time it is him, not his father, who leaves his mother behind. Hamid cried, recalling the moment of separation:

> My mother, she cried and she said 'please, we don't have anybody, we will die, we don't like to live here'. My sister she talked to the staff, […] [and said] she won't be a burden on the British government, she will make money there by herself. […] But finally, the lady [from the Embassy] also cried, and said '[…] he's only eligible for the ARAP scheme and no one else'. So we hugged each other, we cried and my sister's son, my nephew, he was also crying, my mother was yelling, and then we had a very bad time. At the end when we left each other, it was like they are dying and we are going to live, and we are going to heaven and they're going to hell.

The condition of crisis for Hamid may have 'become normal in the sense that it is what there is most, but it does not become normal in the sense that this is how things should be' (Vigh 2008, p. 11). Hamid's reference to dying and living, heaven and hell demonstrates that also for those living the condition of crisis, experiencing crisis denotes discrimination and distinction from an expectation that a situation could be different. Crisis is therefore, as Roitman has argued, 'bound to its cognate 'critique'' (Roitman 2016, p. 24), because declaring crisis involves 'reference to a norm' (Roitman 2016, p. 28), for instance, an ethical ideal or an awareness of better lives lived elsewhere. Hamid continues his story, through tears, lamenting not just the personal tragedy of his family's separation but the downfall of his country, highlighting 'social and personal crisis' as 'two interrelated dimensions' (Vigh 2008, p. 11).

> Why is this world so cruel?' […] I was yelling and I was not feeling very well because I spent 20 years in my country and then finally this happened. Some people were so cruel and some were corrupt. I didn't even have one happy hour in my life; only when I got married, that was the happiest time of my life. […]
>
> Since we are born, we were living in Pakistan as asylum seekers, and then when we came to Afghanistan […] we were looking for peaceful life, and then […] Afghanistan was invaded. […] Kabul is my city, my father was born there, he married my mother here, my sisters were born there, my children, but now it's not our country anymore. […] I was always trying my best to get educated, to have a life, that I can be proud of myself, my mother can be proud of me. […] I was supporting [my family] by going to the Helmand, going to the front lines, and facing all these difficulties […] but everything fell and we lost. […] All the young generations, all the boys and girls of Afghanistan, now depend on some people who don't even know how to use machines, how to get more education, manage the economy, do engineering.

Hamid's retelling of his life struggles and pain at the fall of Afghanistan to the Taliban is not the story of the downfall of a broker, but a critique of the political and social injustices shaping his own and others' lives. Western countries are not exempt from his critique. When I asked Hamid if he wanted to make a final statement, Hamid, like many other Afghan interpreters appealed to western countries to evacuate all the people who risked their lives for western forces, as these Afghans are 'humans like other humans who live in this world'.

Conclusion

In 2021, a Dutch consultancy firm for strategic crisis management noted in a report commissioned by three Ministries that the Dutch political response to the Taliban take-over had been 'hindered by the unfortunate timing of the crisis: in the middle of the summer holiday' (Boin et al. 2021, p. 9). This article has challenged this account of crisis as a time-bound rupture and highlighted the importance of positionality to understand that the 'what' and 'when' of crisis is subjective and situational. This article has traced the story of how an Afghan interpreter who brokered for American and British soldiers made sense of and negotiated the condition of crisis from below. This microstructural approach enriches macrostructural understandings of crises as it offers insight into crisis as a terrain of action and agency.

This article also offered an intervention to resolve the analytical divide between scholars focussing on communities and places for whom crisis tends to constitute a short-lived rupture and those analysing the experiences of those for whom crisis is continuous or ubiquitous. I have argued that in many crisis settings, including humanitarian and military interventions, privileged and marginalized actors interact in brokered spaces of encounter.

Future research in these areas should adopt a relational perspective on crisis to be more attentive to how unequally situated but entangled actors have divergent experiences of the 'what' and 'when' of crisis.

By expanding the spatio-temporal and relational frames in which brokers' actions are analysed, I have also disrupted the simplistic temporal account presented by the tragic broker trope. Instead of the decision to become a broker *leading to* a tragic demise and an existential crisis, I have shown that in many cases becoming a broker is a decision *informed by* the condition of crisis. This perspective reveals that brokers are neither tragic figures nor simply crisis opportunists. Instead, brokers' empowerment and disempowerment move across an uneven continuum and cannot solely be attributed to their role as broker. Following an Afghan interpreter's everyday navigations of overlapping crises of war, displacement and economic hardship, I have shown that while crisis is his context for action, he continues to show agency not just by his actions, but by articulating a critique of the political and social forces that create the condition of crisis in the first place.

Notes

1. I use pseudonyms throughout for all research participants as well as for any persons they refer to in their interviews.
2. I obtained ethics approval for this study from the Ethics Committee at the Open University and the University of York's Economics, Law, Management, Politics and Sociology (ELMPS) Ethics Committee. All participants provided free, informed, written consent.

Acknowledgements

This research would not have been possible without the generosity and time of my research participants; Afghan interpreters and their advocates. An early version of this article was presented at the inspiring workshop 'The Micro-Dynamics of Peace and Conflict Workshop', organised at the University of Durham by Roger Mac Ginty. This article has greatly benefitted from the close reading by the anonymous reviewers and the editors of this special issue, Birgit Bräuchler, Nadeeka Arambewela-Colley and Kathrin Knodel.

Disclosure statement

The author is a co-founder and trustee of Sulha Alliance CIO, which supports Afghan interpreters who have worked for the British Armed Forces.

Funding

This research has been partially funded by a British Academy Mid-Career Fellowship [grant number MCFSS22\220055].

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