



# Round Table: Responses by Nassim Majidi

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**Question 1: The rhetoric surrounding smugglers is packed with graphic images of violence and exploitation. What does your research indicate? Are smugglers really parasites profiting on human desperation, or, at the end of the day, do they provide a service to those on the move? How do we move the conversation forward?**

I will take an excerpt written with Richard Danziger, from a chapter of a book to be published by IOM, on smuggling in the world. Our case study deals with Afghanistan, and we ask to what extent does smuggling support migration patterns. The answer is nuanced as crime is just one side of the picture. "Smugglers may be breaking the law but they are also providing a valuable and often necessary service. As such, it cannot be eliminated without the provision of alternative options for potential migrants. Governments will need to make a



choice: to crack down on all smugglers (which is impossible given the widespread net of smugglers) or just those who are putting lives in danger (a minority). Key to this is to understand the relationship between the smuggler and the migrant in Afghanistan, an often complex, and organic relationship, coming from the same social, cultural, and ethnic lines.”

**Question 2: Media, academic and policy circles suggest that human smuggling is a gateway into human trafficking. Many times both terms are used interchangeably. Does your work provide any insight into these phenomena and what does that say about migration?**

I have regularly conducted interviews with migrants, returnees, and smugglers in Afghanistan since 2008. The migration patterns have changed drastically but one constant remains: the smugglers. They provide a service and are seen as service providers, not as criminals or ill-intended groups.

The tactics used by smugglers have evolved over time. In 2008, they started providing a “one-for-three” package for Afghans wanting to enter Iran to find work: they would ensure, at a given price, three re-entry attempts. The Iranian government had stepped up policing at the border, making it harder for Afghans to enter illegally. So they adapted and provided a service that took into account the probability of failure before success.

Increasingly, smugglers offer services to Europe. These include meeting with families and relatives in the location of origin to explain the process and requirements of migration, including the lack of guaranteed success. They then offer migrants a choice of various routes, with longer travels stopping in Turkey, Greece and other countries where migrants can work to pay their journey, either on construction sites or in restaurants. As a third step, they match migrants from one location to ensure that they can build on common experiences and identities, to strengthen migrant’s ability to ‘make it to the end’ with some source of social and cultural support when times will get tough during the journey. As a result, the smuggler is not just a “travel agent”, as they often describe themselves.



In 2015, they have adapted again. Given the tightened border controls on the way to and within Europe, migrants only have to pay certain smugglers if they make it to the final destination. The money is held by the family and released only if the final destination is reached. This is a new *modus operandi* that is more constraining for the smugglers than for the migrants. Now this is a far cry from the images of bonded labour and trafficking where consent is absent, terms are fraudulent, or agreed upon under coercion.

In Afghanistan, the confusion and conflation of terms are constant. The government will use the word trafficking when speaking of smuggling. The terminology is revealing, the accent is put on the criminal nature of smuggling and the political intent is to stop Afghan nationals from fleeing their country – whereas it is also a safety valve for them. Smuggling and trafficking are used interchangeably in Afghanistan, betraying a legal blur between the two. In the official language, Dari, there is one word for both terms: *ghachag-e insan*. Additionally, the word *ghachag* is used commonly to refer to all types of illegal transport, be it of drugs, arms, or persons. National legislation, in contrast, must be more precise in order to be enforceable. A Samuel Hall / IOM research project from 2013 emphasised the use the term *tejarat-e insan* (human trade) to refer specifically to trafficking, and set it apart from smuggling.

**Question 3: Another myth connected to smuggling is the one pertaining to its organisation. We hear of smugglers organised into cartels, networks or transnational groups, but also of small-scale operations. What does your work suggest, and what does that say about irregular migration?**

A multi-stage smuggling process spans internal and international borders: a ‘local’ smuggler from any given province of Afghanistan will create a link with another smuggler on the Afghan side of the border, who will then ‘pass on’ the migrants to another smuggler on the Iranian side. Many of the smugglers are prior migrants and returnees themselves: unable to benefit from their other skills, they use their migration experiences as assets. In the focus groups I led in Kabul in 2012 with taxi drivers calling themselves “travel agents”, over half of them had



migrated to Europe and returned, and all of them had migrated to Iran and Pakistan at the very least. Even if their deportation or return experience dissuaded them from trying again, they became multiplying factors of migration upon their return: instead of leaving on their own, they contribute to groups of 10, 20, or 30 Afghans being shown the path to migration.

The sense of community is more present than the sense of cartel in Afghanistan: the choice of a smuggler starts in the province of origin, up to the village of origin. Smugglers work with migrants who they know (and whose families they can locate), while migrants work with smugglers they can trust. A community link serves as a guarantee for both sides. The organisation is then led by phone or SMS, with few smugglers travelling with the actual migrants. They will remain responsible for them and for introducing them to connections of theirs at border points and beyond borders. Rather than a transnational close-knit network, it is a referral network in the voice of many Afghans interviewed. Its relatively 'loose' nature means that migrants can be disappointed in the service or find themselves having to do part of the journey on their own. In locations like Calais, the organisation then closely resembles a cartel. Fancy cars driving in the 'jungle' show that there is a hierarchy between the smugglers at the top and the smugglers in the field, those who provide orders and means, and those who implement those orders. Migrants distinguish between different types of smugglers: the "mercedes benz smugglers", describing those at the head of the smuggling pyramid, collecting most dividends from the irregular passage to the UK; and "those who live among us" and who are the day-to-day focal points who advise on the best passage. The latter are often very hard to differentiate from the migrants, as they share similar profiles, backgrounds and histories that got them to Calais in the first place. The former are the heads of transnational businesses, reportedly having a foot in the UK and a foot in France, and making rare physical appearances in Calais.

The story of smuggling is definitely not the same from start to finish. The faces of smugglers change and the experiences that migrants have change with them. There are those who prey on migrants as their victims, others who believe they



are providing a life-saving service. The reality is somewhere in the middle, but they do provide a service than legal frameworks do not provide.

**See more responses here:**

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