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ARTICLE

‘Separated by a River, Connected by History’: The Role of the Aga Khan Development Network in Fostering Cross-Border Cooperation Along Afghanistan’s Northern Borderlands 🗝

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Abstract

This article examines development initiatives between Tajikistan and Afghanistan to demonstrate how borders can serve as platforms for peace building through cross-border cooperation (CBC). These efforts are enabled by a non-state transnational actor, the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN), whose philosophy of viewing borders as opportunities addresses the void left by state neglect in a post-conflict context. By funding and implementing projects for border residents, the AKDN enhances local stability while advancing its broader religious agenda. In this context, peace building manifests through economic, medical, and tourist cross-border exchanges that connect communities and highlight the transformative potential of CBC. The CBC approach of the AKDN thus offers a framework that could be emulated in other post-conflict borderlands.

Keywords: [cross-border cooperation](#), [Tajikistan](#), [Afghanistan](#), [borders](#), [peace building](#), [development](#), [Aga Khan](#), [Aga Khan Development Network](#)

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Introduction

Afghanistan shares a border of over 2,000 kilometres with three former Soviet republics: Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan. After gaining their independence from the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), these countries have adopted cautious and evolving foreign policy approaches towards their southern neighbour. During the first Taliban regime (1996–2001), labelled the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA), diplomatic engagement was minimal, and relations remained largely distant. This hesitancy continued under the American-backed governments (2004–2021), primarily due to persistent security concerns and regional instability. However, all three Central Asian states have shifted towards a more conciliatory stance vis-à-vis the new IEA (2021–present).

This policy move can be understood through the lens of border ambivalence wherein the border is perceived as both a source of threat and a site of opportunity (Kolossoff & Scott, 2013). Maintaining stable relations with the Taliban is seen as essential to securing the region and preventing cross-border destabilization, while also enabling economic integration through southern trade corridors extending to ports in Pakistan. Even Tajikistan, initially the most vocal opponent of the Taliban (Sadozai, 2021b), has changed its position to a more conciliant one. The decision by policy-makers and government authorities to engage more actively with the Taliban and to capitalize on their shared border with Afghanistan carries considerable symbolic significance. Historically, the notion of borders as platforms for peace-making has been primarily promoted by international organizations (IOs) operating in the region, and not by government officials.

Since the early 2000s, initiatives aimed at addressing the physical, political, and economic marginalization of borderland communities, resulting from the collapse of the Soviet Union in Tajikistan and two decades of conflict in Afghanistan, have been primarily led by a particular international actor, the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) (Bredigkei et al., 2020, p. 80). This transnational development organization fosters cross-border connections, particularly among Ismaili communities, and plays a central role in promoting regional cohesion and resilience.

Ismailism is a branch of Shia Islam, with the Nizari sub-branch distinguished by its belief in a living Imam, also known as the 'Aga Khan', who is regarded as a direct descendant of the Prophet Muhammad (Daftary, 2007). In the eastern borderlands of Tajikistan and Afghanistan, Ismailis constitute the principal religious group (Sadozai, 2021a, p. 463). In Tajikistan, this area is commonly referred to as 'Gorno-Badakhshan'¹, a term derived from its Russian acronym, while in Afghanistan it corresponds to the province of Badakhshan. Founded in 1967 by Prince Karim al-Husayn (Lakha, 2021, p. 188), the father of the current Aga Khan who passed away in February 2025, the AKDN comprises a set of development agencies particularly active in Badakhshan. This region offers a compelling illustration of the initiatives led by the Imam and his institutions to reimagine the area as a region of exchange and connectivity (Sadozai & Blondin, 2022). In his effort to reunite the geographically dispersed Ismaili community, the Aga Khan advocates for a vision of borders not as barriers but as sites of interaction and cohesion, while still acknowledging and respecting the national identities of his followers. Through this approach, he actively cultivates the emergence of peaceful Ismaili communities able to coexist with their fellow citizens.

The organization employs a strategy that prioritizes support in civil society and local governance. By building local capacities and fostering community resilience, the AKDN contributes to the stabilization of regions where state institutions struggle to provide equitable access to essential services (Bredigkei et al., 2020), such as in Tajikistan and Afghanistan. This approach underscores the AKDN's role as a non-state actor engaged in both development and peace building, particularly within conflict-affected settings. The AKDN has approached borderland populations as active and resilient communities rather than as security threats. It has conceptualized the border as a space of connectivity rather than division, a perspective that has been essential

not only for fostering cross-border relations but also for promoting long-term regional stability (Price & Hakimi, 2019; Ryazantsev & Garibova, 2021).

For more than a decade, a body of literature, often written by local scholars, has advocated for cross-border infrastructure projects as a means to promote stability in Afghanistan (Gerstle, 2006; Olimov & Olimova, 2013; Ryazantsev & Garibova, 2021; Sadozai, 2023; Tadjbakhsh et al., 2015; Tashrifov, 2016; Tolipov, 2013; Walraven et al., 2009) in order to move beyond a stereotypical perception of the wider central Asian region as a 'locus of danger' (Heathershaw & Megoran, 2011, p. 589). This article falls into this line of research. Far from being a zone of instability, the Tajikistan–Afghanistan border can be viewed as an effervescent and peaceful interface. It has witnessed numerous cross-border initiatives that foster community engagement and promote sustainable development. Drawing on this case, I argue that cross-border cooperation (CBC) serves as an effective mechanism for peace building and regional stability not only in areas directly affected by conflict but also in those experiencing indirect forms of violence such as economic deprivation, enforced isolation, food insecurity, and the lack of essential public services.

The border regions of Afghanistan in Badakhshan have remained relatively insulated from direct war-related violence,² but still affected by banditry and smuggling, that was only stabilized by pressure on insurgency leaders and the establishment of local militias (Koehler & Zürcher, 2015). On the other side, Gorno-Badakhshan in Tajikistan can be characterized as a post-conflict region striving to achieve basic standards of living and social development following the end of the civil war that affected the country between 1992 and 1997, a period after which IOs began engaging in post-war peace-building efforts (Kluczevska, 2020, pp. 3–4). Therefore, this article does not directly focus on war and peace. Nor will it discuss 'cross-border peacebuilding' (Ramsbotham & Zartman, 2011) since the current border has not been disputed in the sense of international law in contemporary times (Guo, 2018). Instead, it examines how micro-level border interactions spurred by a transnational non-state actor evolve within the contexts of conflict-affected Afghanistan and post-conflict Tajikistan, two areas often presumed to be dominated by instability, and how CBC is conducive to creating a peaceful environment.

The time frame under consideration begins in the early 2000s, when IOs launched development programmes in Tajikistan, and extends to 2022. In that year, a significant shift occurred as the Tajikistani government suspended many of the activities previously supported by the AKDN. In contrast, although AKDN agencies have encountered challenges in Afghanistan, they have not been formally prohibited from operating by the IEA. Notably, some cross-border activities resumed in September 2023, marking a cautious re-engagement in the region despite ongoing political sensitivities.

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and documentary analysis. Primary sources include official publications from the AKDN and Ismaili institutions, complemented by first-hand observations and semi-structured interviews conducted along the Tajikistan–Afghanistan border between 2014 and 2025. Personal communications cited in this piece were held with border residents, traders operating in cross-border markets, and employees of AKDN agencies.

The first section of the article examines the distinctive position of the AKDN within the landscape of IOs, highlighting its motivations for promoting CBC as a means of peace building. The second section contextualizes the borderlands between Tajikistan and Afghanistan, emphasizing their relative stability and the presence of an undisputed border that facilitates CBC. The final section presents the principal CBC initiatives funded and implemented by the AKDN in the region, drawing on secondary literature, organizational documentation, and empirical data collected during fieldwork.

The AKDN in Relation to Peace

The Peace–Development Nexus

Acknowledging the lack of consensus around the definitions of peace and development (Gledhill et al., 2021, pp. 201–203), I adopt a comprehensive understanding of both concepts. Drawing on Galtung's (1969, p. 183) framework, I define peace as twofold: comprising both 'negative peace' and 'positive peace'. The former refers to the absence of direct, personal violence, typically physical in nature, while the latter encompasses the absence of structural violence; that is, the systemic social, political, and economic inequalities that prevent individuals from meeting their basic needs. This dual conception allows Galtung to argue that peace theory is intrinsically linked to development. While positive peace aligns more directly with development, both dimensions of peace intersect with the broader goals of reducing violence and promoting human well-being. In this view, peace is not merely the absence of war but the presence of conditions that enable individuals and communities to reach their full potential. This follows the position of development actors who believe that improved economic opportunities reduces the potential for conflict between communities by tackling the reasons why individuals might join militias, drug networks, or terrorist groups (Gerstle, 2006, p. 35).

While recognizing the relevance of economic indicators such as growth and productivity (Gledhill et al., 2021, p. 203), the AKDN also prioritizes a human-centred vision of development, echoing the need for positive peace:

We believe that successful development occurs when a continuum of development activities offers people in a given area not only a rise in incomes, but a broad, sustained improvement in the overall quality of life. (AKDN, 2025)

The AKDN makes this vision operational through nine thematic areas, including 'Alleviating Poverty' and 'Improving the Quality of Life', under which many cross-border initiatives are categorized and have been assessed in the scholarly literature (Kanji et al., 2012; Price & Hakimi, 2019). This approach to development explicitly aims to prevent both negative and positive violence by fostering community cohesion and mutual understanding. In this view, the border is a connecting device, a space for opportunities, cooperation, and shared development.

Approaching the AKDN as a Unique Actor in the International System

As the living Imam of Ismailism, the Aga Khan serves as a globally influential spiritual leader whose guidance shapes the everyday lives of approximately 12–15 million followers (The Ismailis, 2025), including the majority populations in the borderlands of Badakhshan. Beyond his religious role, he directs the AKDN. In this context, the Aga Khan embodies what scholars describe as an 'authority without territory' (Poor, 2014), or, as one follower put it, 'a kind of president without a country' (Mostowlansky, 2018, p. 391) enjoying deep-rooted social legitimacy and support.

The AKDN does not identify as a religious institution,³ nor does it conform to the conventional model of a non-governmental organization. It encompasses for-profit enterprises and maintains close relationships with state actors, yet it lacks sovereignty and the authority or resources characteristic of a state (Karns, 2015, p. 241). Nevertheless, as Ruthven (2010, p. 190) observes, the AKDN exhibits traits of both religious and non-governmental entities. It shares key features with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) which Karns (2015, p. 242) defines as:

voluntary organizations formed and organized by private individuals, operating at the local, national, or international level, pursuing common purposes and policy positions; [they] debate over whether activities need to be in support of a public good.

As I will demonstrate, AKDN's mission is shaped by principles rooted in Ismaili philosophy, thereby imparting a religious dimension to its activities. Moreover, through its support for the globally dispersed Ismaili community, the AKDN exhibits key characteristics of a transnational actor. In this context, I adopt Risse-Kappen's (1995, p. 3) definition of transnational relations as 'regular interactions across national boundaries when at least one actor is a non-state agent or does not operate on behalf of a national government or an intergovernmental organization'.

The AKDN stands out as a distinctive international actor that defies conventional categorization. It is neither perceived as a 'government's puppet' and 'big business' driven by donor agendas or media pressures, factors that often undermine the legitimacy of NGOs and humanitarian organizations (Frangonikolopoulos, 2005, pp. 49–50). Nor does it operate as a typical IO promoting global norms in domestic politics (Rincón et al., 2025, p. 561) or as part of a transnational advocacy network to reshape international principles and institutions (Keck & Sikkink, 1999, p. 89). Instead, the AKDN functions as an extension of the Imam, independent of any state, serving as a 'sociopolitical glue' (Steinberg, 2011, p. 61) that connects Ismaili communities across the globe. Its initiatives have cultivated a sense of care and inclusion among marginalized populations,⁴ reinforcing their loyalty to the Imam. In regions like Badakhshan, both the Imam and the AKDN have emerged as trusted authorities, often surpassing the central state in influence (Sadozai, 2025). As a probing example, in 2022, construction and renovation of primary healthcare facilities in Gorno-Badakhshan were entirely supported by entrepreneurs and non-state partners but not by local authorities (Sodiqova et al., 2025, p. 72). As Mostowlansky (2016, pp. 233–234, 239–240) notes, while the AKDN presents itself as a secular and pluralistic organization not exclusively serving Ismailis, its programmes in Badakhshan are deeply intertwined with religious identity, granting it legitimacy through the spiritual connection beneficiaries feel with the Imam. Additionally, the organization originally started operating in Tajikistan and Afghanistan because of the presence of Ismailis and in solidarity with their precarity (De Cordier, 2008, p. 171).

Unlike other actors, such as the government in Tajikistan, and the Taliban, insurgent groups, or foreign forces in Afghanistan (Koehler & Zürcher, 2015), the AKDN is viewed not as a threat but as a stabilizing force. As an example, after 2022, following the Tajikistani government's reappropriation of control over the AKDN structures, most of my informants in the borderlands expressed concern about the potential dismantling or nationalization of AKDN programmes. They identified the organization as the region's primary employer and a cornerstone of local stability. In Tajikistan, where the state is highly centralized and holds significant control over domestic affairs, the AKDN's local legitimacy enables it to stand out as a distinctive transnational actor by successfully integrating into the country's social fabric. Typically, transnational actors find it easier to gain access in contexts where the state is more fragmented and civil society is well-organized (Risse-Kappen, 1995, pp. 6–7), as is evident in Afghanistan, both under the Islamic Republic and the IEA. Once access is established, however, this transnational actor exerts a significant and far-reaching influence (Risse-Kappen, 1995, p. 26), as we observe both in Tajikistan and Afghanistan.

Based on this rationale, I will consider the AKDN as a non-government transnational actor, with features of a faith-based charity. The work of the AKDN challenges the conventional idea that sees peace as a prerogative of the state or the mandate of IOs (Holsti, 1995, p. 335), by giving tangible examples of how transnational non-state actors can also bring positive peace (Galtung, 1969) without deploying conventional peacekeeping operations but through development and cross-border initiatives.

The AKDN and Peace Building

According to Anderson (1996, p. 344), NGOs based in Europe and North America, as is the case of the AKDN, operate according to four mandates, the last one being the ‘pursuit of peace’. This element has long been central to the Aga Khan’s vision and serves as a guiding principle behind the global initiatives of the AKDN, which emphasize the humanities and a humanitarian ethos (Mostowlansky, 2016, p. 232). As the spiritual leader of the Ismaili community, the Imam is entrusted with interpreting the faith and ensuring the well-being of his followers in accordance with their social and cultural contexts (Ruthven, 2010, p. 190). This includes fostering peace within the Ismaili community and promoting harmonious relations with other communities. The organization follows an ethical framework comprising eight headings that each project must meet: inclusiveness, education and research, compassion and sharing, self-reliance, respect for life and healthcare, sound mind, sustainable environment, and governance (Poor, 2014, p. 175). Together, these principles contribute to peace building by creating conditions that prevent conflict, support reconciliation, and promote long-term stability.

Concepts such as ‘universal brotherhood’ and ‘pluralism’ embody the guiding philosophy of the organization, as declared by the Imam himself and enshrined in the Constitution of the Ismailis promulgated in 1986 (Karim, 2014, p. 150). While not a state constitution, this foundational document serves as the structural basis for both religious governance and the development institutions affiliated with the Imam. As stated in the preamble, the Ismaili Constitution should serve the followers namely ‘to secure their peace and unity’ (Aga Khan IV, 1998, p. 7). By fostering a sense of global kinship, the concept of universal brotherhood reduces the ‘us vs them’ mentality that often fuels conflict and rather encourages cooperation and reconciliation. Similarly, pluralism provides a framework for managing diversity peacefully (Lakha, 2021, pp. 185–188). Pluralism functions not only as a philosophical foundation but also as a strategic political tool within the broader mission of the AKDN. Its scope extends beyond the Ismaili community, aiming to foster mutual understanding both within the community and with the wider world (Poor, 2014, p. 152). It has also constituted a strategic measure as fostering intercommunal dialogue not only mitigates friction but also contributes to stabilizing targeted areas while reinforcing the organization’s legitimacy (De Cordier, 2008, pp. 175–177). This global vision is emphasized on the organization’s website and exemplified by the work of the Global Centre for Pluralism, co-founded by the Aga Khan and the Government of Canada. Through this initiative, pluralism is promoted as a proactive approach to peace building, offering a framework that values diversity as a cornerstone for sustainable and enduring peace. As articulated by the Centre, it ‘offers a transformative approach, predicated on valuing diversity as a foundation for a more durable, lasting peace’ (Global Centre for Pluralism, 2020). Indeed, pluralism serves as a tool for the AKDN to avoid conflict worldwide, as Islam calls on Muslims to actively embody their principles through concrete actions. As Ruthven (2010, p. 191) puts it: ‘For Ismailis the Imam of the Time facilitates the imperative of social action by providing the appropriate institutions—a duty the present Imam takes very seriously.’ The AKDN’s commitment to humanist principles has brought about social changes and development conducive to stabilization. Within the framework of the ‘war on terror’, which has prioritized security concerns and cast the Central Asian–Afghanistan region as a focal point of international scrutiny, while reinforcing a reductive ‘discourse of danger’ (Heathershaw & Megoran, 2011), these principles have gained traction and materialized in concrete actions on the ground.

Peace Building in Tajikistan and Afghanistan

The concepts promoted by the AKDN have translated in Tajikistan and Afghanistan through myriad development initiatives. By establishing social welfare and economic growth, as well as promoting education and infusing peace messages, the AKDN has played a major role in supporting development as a pillar of positive peace among impoverished communities on a global scale (Kahumbi, 2023). The AKDN started operating in Tajikistan amidst the civil war in 1993 by providing essential humanitarian assistance, including food, medicine, and basic supplies (Mostowlansky, 2016, p. 238). Through the Pamir Relief and Development Program (PRPD), the organization helped alleviate suffering in regions isolated by a government-imposed blockade that led to a famine in the winter of 1992–1993 (Bliss, 2006, p. 276; Grogan, 2021). During the formal peace negotiations, UN special envoys maintained regular consultations with the Aga Khan, who even met the President of Tajikistan in May 1995 (Bashiri, 2020, p. 259), thus playing a role in influencing certain moderating parties. The Imam visited the region in that same year, an event known as the *didor*,⁵ where he emphasized the importance of peace in a speech to his followers. A few months earlier, in January 1995, he delivered a *farman*⁶ in which he highlighted the principles of ‘generosity, kindness, caring, and forgiveness’, the last of which resonated deeply amid the ongoing war and served as a call for reconciliation (Mostowlansky, 2018, p. 391).

Not only did the *didor* symbolize the reconnection between the Tajikistani Ismailis and their supreme leader but it also marked the Aga Khan’s contribution to establishing peace. It is worth noticing that the event took place in Khorog, the capital of Gorno-Badakhshan located at the Afghan border, symbolizing the role that the border would play in stabilizing the region. In Afghanistan too, the AKDN has actively promoted peace-oriented initiatives, translating the Imam’s vision into tangible development efforts in healthcare, education, emergency relief, agricultural support, finance, and telecommunication, among others. The organization began its operations in the country in 1996, amid the instability that followed the civil war (1989–1992) and during the emergence of the first Taliban regime (1996–2001). While aid agencies failed at operating properly during these decades of conflict, the AKDN stood out as a leading actor providing humanitarian assistance. Since then, the narrative of peace and stability has remained central to the AKDN’s mission in Afghanistan. This commitment was reaffirmed in the aftermath of the Taliban’s return to power in 2021, when the organization publicly stated: ‘AKDN looks forward to continuing to work for Afghanistan’s peaceful and prosperous future, and to improving further the quality of life of the Afghan people’ (AKDN, 2021).

It is important to clarify that the AKDN has not operated in Tajikistan and Afghanistan solely as a humanitarian aid organization addressing the immediate needs of conflict-affected populations, except during the respective civil war periods. As one of my informants, leading cross-border initiatives in the Tajikistan–Afghanistan borderlands, stressed: ‘we are not a humanitarian organization, but a development one’.⁷ Indeed, since the early 2000s, the AKDN has functioned more as a development actor, supporting community recovery from the residual impacts of conflict and fostering local capacities. As a non-governmental organization, it is the ‘the primary operational arm of the large relief and development aid enterprise’, and ‘can be positioned to support peace and negate war (Anderson, 1999, p. 2)’.

The Imam’s development interventions have fostered a sense of care and inclusion among populations neglected by their central governments, thereby deepening their already strong devotion and trust in his leadership (Steinberg, 2011, p. 61). In the borderlands of Badakhshan, both the Imam and the AKDN have gained social legitimacy by functioning as alternative governance structures that maintain social order and provide essential services, roles traditionally associated with the state. These frameworks not only shape identity and belonging (Sadozai, 2025), especially among communities that feel culturally and linguistically closer to their cross-border neighbours, but also contribute to peace and stability by reinforcing social cohesion (Deiana et al., 2019) and reducing reliance on fragile state structures.

The Borderlands of Tajikistan and Afghanistan: A Symbol of Stability

The international boundary between Tajikistan and Afghanistan extends for approximately 1,374 kilometres, following the Amu Darya River, with nearly 910 kilometres traversing the Pamir Mountains. This segment demarcates Tajikistan's autonomous province of Badakhshan from Afghanistan's province of the same name. Although the predominant religious affiliation in both Tajikistan and Afghanistan is Sunni Islam, most inhabitants in the Badakhshan border area adhere to Ismailism. Furthermore, these populations typically do not speak the official national languages, Tajik (Tajikistan) and Dari (Afghanistan), as their first language. Instead, they communicate in one or more languages belonging to the Eastern Iranian subgroup of the Indo-European language family, commonly referred to as 'Pamiri' languages.

The Fate of the Amu Darya as a Political Boundary

While the concept of the Amu Darya as a border can be traced back to the Antiquity, the first written references to the river as a border appeared in the chronicles of Arab and Persian historians from the 7th century AD (Rhoné-Quer, 2020). However, it was not until the late 19th century that the formalization of a border became a pressing political issue, prompted by Tsarist Russia's expansion into what is now Central Asia, and its confrontation with Afghan ambitions in the region between the Amu Darya and the Hindu Kush. The Badakhshan region and the Pamirs, previously semi-autonomous and governed by local leaders, became contested zones as Russian forces advanced (Felmy & Kreutzmann, 2004, pp. 100–101; Kreutzmann, 1998, p. 291). These leaders, caught between Russian imperialism and Afghan centralization, often sought support from both sides but were ultimately subdued. During the negotiations which started in 1872, asked 'what appeal could be made to an Afghan boundary', British officer Charles Hardinge Hammond in charge of the delineation answered, 'there is no such thing' (quoted in Chakravarty, 1976, p. 62); nonetheless both colonial cabinets finally agreed to formalize the border along the Amu Darya. The river divided the northern bank under Russian control and the southern bank under the British-backed Emir of Kabul. Despite its geopolitical significance, the administrative border held little meaning for local populations, who continued familial, social, and even commercial interactions across the river despite attempts by the Tsarist power to prevent them (Odilbekova, 1984, pp. 39–41). This changed dramatically in 1936 when the Soviet Union sealed the border to suppress anti-revolutionary movements and enforce ideological separation (Shaw, 2011), severing long-standing cross-border ties and deeply affecting local communities. Residents of the Pamirs recall the abrupt and painful end of cross-border relations, with personal stories illustrating the human cost of geopolitical decisions (Steinberg, 2011, p. 122). During the War opposing the USSR to Afghanistan (1979–1989), the borderlands became a strategic zone for military movements. After Tajikistan's independence in 1991, the border assumed new significance as the official international boundary between two sovereign states.

The Amu Darya: An Undisputed Border

Despite a history of violence and separation for local communities living along the river, since its establishment as a colonial boundary the Amu Darya has not been a bone of contention, with the exception of skirmishes between Imperial Russian forces and Afghan soldiers over territorial claims to river islands (Ewans, 2010, pp. 87–108). During the Soviet era, the southern border was completely sealed, effectively preventing cross-border movement and communication, even among nuclear families, thereby contributing to the sociocultural alienation of the borderland communities (Shahrani, 1979). The closure of the border was driven more by ideological motives than territorial disputes, aiming to isolate the socialist state from capitalist influences. Although local crossings were forbidden and the border was militarized, neither the Soviet government nor successive Afghan regimes challenged the legitimacy or location of the border; on the contrary, both sides engaged in agreements to formally delineate it. A 1921 bilateral treaty transferred parts of Afghan territory to the Soviet Union, and a 1981 agreement reaffirmed the border's inviolability.

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the border was reopened, facilitating the renewal of cross-border relations. After the civil war, the government of independent Tajikistan codified the border's status in the 'Law on the National Border of the Republic of Tajikistan', which defines it as:

the line and the perpendicular level passing through this line that defines the boundary of the state territory (land, sea, underground, and air) of the Republic of Tajikistan, i.e., the spatial extent of the state sovereignty of the Republic of Tajikistan.⁸ (House of Representatives of the Republic of Tajikistan, 1997, p. 1)

In Afghanistan, despite decades of political upheaval since 1973, including coups, regime changes, and foreign interventions, the administrative existence of the border has remained unchallenged. Neither the first IEA led by the Taliban, the subsequent Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, nor the second IEA have disputed the border's legitimacy, in contrast to the famous 'Durand Line' shared with Pakistan (Poya, 2020). The Amu Darya thus functions as a clearly defined and undisputed international boundary, recognized by all relevant state actors, thereby fulfilling its role as a politically operative border (Dillon, 2000). Although river borders frequently give rise to tensions between neighbouring states (Bouchez, 1963), the Pyanj River, which corresponds to the upper reaches of the Amu Darya separating Tajikistan from Afghanistan, has not triggered conflicts over water allocation between the two states.⁹

The Border as a Peace Enabler

Unlike governments and IOs, which were compelled to revise their normative frameworks in the early 2000s in response to emerging threats (Frangonikolopoulos, 2005, p. 51), the AKDN has demonstrated consistent adherence to the foundational principles articulated in the Ismaili Constitution and the *farman*. In an effort to underscore the symbolic significance of these principles within the context of Badakhshan, an Aga Khan Foundation (AKF) publication titled one of its sections 'Separated by a river, connected by history' (Wilton-Steer, 2018). This phrase refers both to the separation communities experienced when the border was drawn at the end of the 19th century, and to the enduring connections rooted in their shared linguistic, religious, and historical background. In this same AKF report, the proposed solution to the region's fragmentation is framed as 'creating connections through cross-border infrastructure'. Indeed, among the most tangible manifestations of this commitment are the seven 'friendship' bridges constructed along the Tajikistan–Afghanistan border (see Figure 1), designed to facilitate pedestrian movement and, in certain cases, vehicular crossings. During the inauguration of the Ishkashim Bridge in 2006, the Imam emphasized the importance of reunifying the two riverbanks and reintegrating the local Ismailis into the broader community he leads, implicitly referencing the legacy of conflict in Tajikistan and Afghanistan:

It has always seemed to me that bridges are among the most powerful and important symbols in human society—symbols of connection, of cooperation and of harmony. When harmony breaks down and conflicts ensue, the destroying of bridges is usually among the most urgent targets. But when peace and healing come, then it is the construction and rehabilitation of bridges that marks our progress. (Aga Khan IV, 2006)

This narrative is not surprising, given that bridges serve as both literal and figurative symbols of (re)connection, the overcoming of obstacles, and the potential for unity and reunification; indeed, a bridge is ‘a passageway by which we move between bordered things’ (Harrison, 2021, pp. 8–9). In contexts marked by conflict, the destruction of bridges is not merely a tactical military objective. It also conveys a symbolic rejection of the ‘Other’ and a desire to secure one’s own community from this perceived ‘Other’ (Tratnjek, 2009, p. 2). Public statements by the AKDN and the Imam align with this common understanding of bridges as emblems of reconciliation. They are also deeply embedded in his strategic vision. As a result, the Badakhshan borderlands and the Pamirs occupy a unique position within the transnational agenda of the AKDN, as much of the population in these regions is Ismaili, unlike other parts of the world where Ismailis constitute minority communities (Mostowlansky, 2022). Border areas thus hold particular significance, functioning as loci of reconciliations and pluralism. A 2019 report on AKDN activities in Tajikistan explicitly states that the organization would deliver on its philosophy by enabling the emergence of cross-border initiatives:

AKF places pluralism at the center of its practice by . . . supporting economic and social cooperation and exchange in border areas through a cross-border health program and critical investments in cross-border infrastructure, including bridges, markets, irrigation, and energy transmission; increasing the capacity of communities in borders areas to sustainably manage natural resources, such as water and pasture land, through the implementation of tools and approaches to mitigate and de-escalate conflict. (AKE, 2019, p. 22)

In this vision, CBC clearly holds potential for conflict transformation (Deiana et al., 2019, p. 531), as the border becomes a soft one, enabling contacts and exchanges to flourish in support of the Imam’s agenda to unite Ismaili communities fragmented by administrative borders.



Figure 1 Cross-border Bridge in Darwaz Between Tajikistan (left) and Afghanistan (right) Spanning the Pyanj River, 2021

Source: Photograph taken by author.

A View From the Ground: Cross-Border Activities Between Tajikistan and Afghanistan

To deliver on the principles of ‘universal brotherhood’ and ‘pluralism’, with the support of the Republic of Tajikistan and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (Ryazantsev & Garibova, 2021, p. 148, p. 154), the AKDN launched a series of initiatives under its ‘Cross-Border Program’, leveraging the infrastructure legacy of the Soviet era in Tajikistan (see figure 2)¹⁰. Unlike Afghanistan, Tajikistan benefited from Soviet development efforts, particularly in the sectors of health and education. The AKDN made the most of these existing investments to implement and replicate development models across the border in Afghanistan. As stated by the organization, the Cross-Border Program ‘acknowledges the development paths of Tajikistan and Afghanistan, capitalizing on these differences as opportunities to promote development for mutual benefit’ (AKE, 2012, p. 37). In practice, this has meant utilizing Tajikistan’s institutional and infrastructural capacities to support development in adjacent Afghan districts. Empirical studies assessing AKDN’s activities in the borderlands of Tajikistan and Afghanistan suggest that improving the quality of life in Afghan communities is most effectively achieved by connecting them to the more advanced infrastructure and services available in Gorno-Badakhshan (Kanji et al., 2012; Sherbut et al., 2015, Wilton-Steer, 2018). While potential bias may arise due to the researchers’ affiliation with the AKDN, their findings have been corroborated by independent research (Price & Hakimi, 2019) and resonate with the perceptions of local populations (Sadozai, 2021a). In numerous interviews and conversations that I have conducted in the border regions since 2014, residents consistently linked the reestablishment of cross-border ties to four initiatives undertaken by the AKDN.



Figure 2 Map of Main Cross-border Infrastructure between Tajikistan and Afghanistan in Badakhshan

Source: Designed by author, 2025. Adapted from Sadozai, reprinted by permission of Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group, www.tandfonline.com on behalf of Association for Borderlands Studies.

Cross-Border Markets

In Badakhshan, residents of border areas display a pragmatism comparable to that of populations living along borders rich in economic resources. They are also savvy consumers and traders, as borders offer opportunities due to asymmetrical economic systems (Martinez, 1994, pp. 53–54). The construction of bridges has facilitated the development of four cross-border markets with the support of the AKDN, which have contributed to the normalization of local trade between Tajikistan and Afghanistan. These markets are situated either on Tajikistani or Afghan territory, or, in the case of the Ishkashim market, on an island designated as a free zone, allowing for more flexible legal and regulatory frameworks (Dörre, 2025). Only Afghan and Tajikistani traders are authorized to operate there. In 2012, goods worth over US \$1.15 million were sold at three weekly cross-border markets (AKE, 2012, p. 36). By 2018, around 1,000 traders attended these markets each week (Wilton-Steer, 2018), and in 2016, between 60% and 80% of the border population frequented them (Barratt, 2016, p. 39). In 2019, a woman from a village more than an hour away from one of the markets explained to me that she regularly visited it and that her neighbours planned their trips several days in advance, thus showing the attractiveness of these places far beyond their immediate areas.¹¹ During my observations at the Tem cross-border market in 2025 (see Figure 3), respondents identified three primary reasons for visiting them. First, prices are significantly lower than in inland Tajikistan; for example, laundry soap costs about half as much. Second, the markets offer products that are unavailable in Tajikistan, such as certain fruits and vegetables imported from Pakistan or India. Third, respondents emphasized the superior quality of goods compared to those typically available in Tajikistan. These findings suggest that access to these markets is essential for household survival and not just mere attractions.¹²

In the case of the Ishkashim cross-border market, the fact that Afghan traders come not only from Badakhshan but also from provinces near the Pakistani border, up to 10 days' travel from the Tajikistani cross-border markets according to one of them,¹³ demonstrates their economic appeal. These traders report earning higher profits at the border than in central Afghanistan, and consumers also benefit by spending their money where prices are lower than in their home countries. Afghans sell artisanal or natural products from Afghanistan as well as goods from India, Pakistan, and sometimes China, while Tajikistani sell Russian or Chinese merchandise. The appeal of this market should, however, be viewed with some nuance; as Dörre (2025, pp. 113–116) demonstrates, there is a clear discrepancy between the initial ambitions of the Special Economic Zone and its ultimately 'stagnated' performance. Their economic resource is thus primarily localized.

The economy of cross-border markets extends beyond trade in the strict sense, giving rise to other businesses, as seen in other markets in Tajikistan and Central Asia (Karrar, 2019). Snack bars and fast-food stands have opened, drivers profit from the distance between homes and markets, others offer loading and unloading services, and at the Tem market, an Afghan 'traditional doctor' (*tabibi khalqi*) provides consultations to both Tajikistani men and women. Among the other benefits, job creation remains crucial for border communities, including for women. As early as 2001, women dominated trade at the Khorog market, representing at least two-thirds of all vendors (Herbers, 2001, p. 276). In 2015, 30% of men and 19% of women in Gorno-Badakhshan, and 7% of men and 1% of women in Afghan Badakhshan, had declared employment (Sherbut et al., 2015, p. 263). For them, cross-border markets have provided a new source of jobs or income, with some previously inactive women preparing food to sell at the markets. Before the Taliban's return, Afghan women also took the opportunity to sell their own plants, harvests, and sometimes jewellery. Women's participation in these markets reflects the Imam's guidance promoting gender equality among his followers and deliver on his pluralistic approach (Mamodaly & Fakirani, 2012). In 2025, Tajikistani women reported visiting the Tem market weekly to buy bedding, eggs, and cosmetics, which they found cheaper and of better quality than in Tajikistan. The presence of the Taliban at the markets does not deter them from attending.¹⁴

In addition to economic and social benefits, cross-border markets also represent a space for social contact. By bypassing the usual formalities of international border crossings, exchanges between traders and consumers are greatly simplified, sometimes turning market visits into genuine attractions. It is not uncommon for

acquaintances from both sides of the border to meet at the markets to exchange news, inquire about living across the border, or bring gifts to family members. Thus the border itself becomes a point of attraction, sparking curiosity among both residents and tourists.



Figure 3 Cross-border Market in Tem, 2025

Source: Photograph by author.

Border Tourism

Much like other international boundaries, the border with Afghanistan functions as a ‘tourist attraction’ for foreign travellers, who are often motivated by a desire to boast about having entered the country, by fascination with the transition from one world (Tajikistan) to another (Afghanistan), or by an interest in the lifestyle found on the other side of the border (Timothy, 1995). In the Pamir Mountains, the Wakhan Valley divided by the border stands out as particularly captivating and has attracted international tourists since the 1960s (Felmy & Kreutzmann, 2004, p. 112). Its distinctiveness is amplified by characteristics that contrast sharply with the rest of Afghanistan. These features, often highlighted by travellers and tourism agencies, contribute to its appeal: relative safety, the absence of Taliban fighters (until the summer of 2021), greater freedoms for Wakhi women, and a sense of isolation that has helped preserve both cultural traditions and natural landscapes, is a key feature of tourism attraction in peripheral areas (Butler, 1996).

Access to the Afghan side is almost exclusively secured through Tajikistan. Thanks to the border posts and bridges over the Pyanj River, tourists can easily access the entrance to the valley coming from Tajikistan’s capital Dushanbe via the border towns of Tem or Ishkashim.¹⁵ By travelling through Tajikistan instead of Afghanistan from Kabul, tourists can avoid inconveniences while still enjoying an experience in the country.

The Wakhan Valley's proximity to Tajikistan offers the added benefit of being able to quickly reach the other side, in the event of internal unrest in Afghanistan. Since 2008, the AKDN has actively promoted the tourism potential of the Pamirs by supporting local households in establishing guesthouses and encouraging activities such as trekking, hiking, and cultural tourism (Rakhmatova, 2015). That year marked a turning point for the local tourism sector, as it signalled the beginning of access to the Afghan Wakhan via Tajikistan. Marketing efforts such as brochures and online promotion showcasing 'cross-border travel' (PECTA, n.d.) have further strengthened its appeal as a safe and distinctive destination. In Khorog, the Pamirs Eco-Cultural Tourism Association (PECTA), an AKDN agency, sells for US \$2 English-language brochures that highlight tourism opportunities in Afghanistan, particularly in the Wakhan Valley (see Figure 4). These materials quote explorers like Marco Polo as some of the visitors of the region and promise that the Pamirs will leave tourists "touched" forever as they did these famous adventurers'.¹⁶ Moreover, informal conversations with foreign tourists at guesthouses in Dushanbe and Gorno-Badakhshan indicate that many cross the border specifically to visit the Afghan Wakhan. A simple keyword search on social media platforms such as YouTube, X, and Instagram also reveals numerous posts by international travellers celebrating the valley and its inhabitants, further contributing to its growing reputation as a unique and desirable destination.

Cross-border markets also offer an experience of Afghanistan. This is reflected in the display of Afghan products such as hats, jewellery, rosaries, coins, and in the opportunity to interact with Afghans without having to cross the border. 'Seeing Afghanistan' is part of a spatial imaginary constructed by tourists as a source of fascination. Tourism in the Wakhan, whether on the Tajikistani or Afghan side, is a sector sustained by the act of crossing the border. It represents a form of mobility enabled by cross-border infrastructure that debunks the idea of the border as a barrier (Timothy, 1995, p. 526), which can also be observed in the healthcare sector.

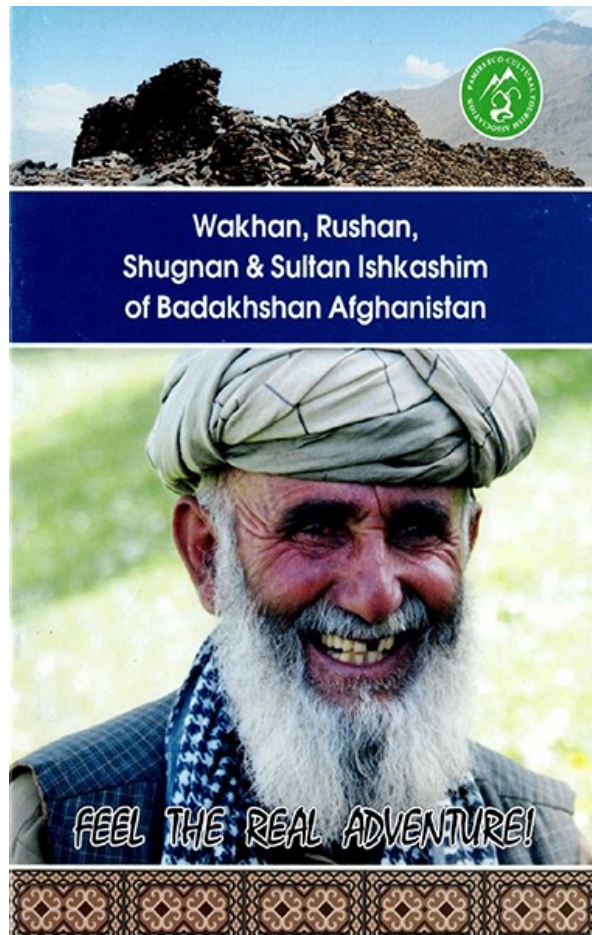


Figure 4 Front Page of PECTA's Brochure Sold in Khorog (Tajikistan) Advertising Tourism in the Borderlands of Afghanistan's Badakhshan Province, 2025

Source: Scan by author.

Healthcare Mobility

The divergent historical developments of Afghanistan and Tajikistan since the late 19th century have significantly shaped their respective levels of development. In the healthcare sector, Tajikistan's Soviet-era investments led to the establishment of a comprehensive medical infrastructure in Gorno-Badakhshan, where each village had free access to health services (Sherbut et al., 2015, p. 259). Although the civil war severely disrupted this system, international efforts have contributed to its partial recovery (Bliss, 2006, p. 278). Nonetheless, access to medical facilities and the shortage of qualified personnel remain persistent challenges in the region (Sodiqova et al., 2025). In Afghanistan, recurrent conflicts have hindered development efforts that would have already faced considerable challenges due to the region's rugged topography and endemic poverty. As a result, populations in Badakhshan are unable to access adequate medical care, whether from the government or the few remaining NGOs. In 2001, a survey conducted in Badakhshan revealed that of the 44 villages surveyed, 'only 11 had a clinic within an hour by donkey' (Strategic Monitoring Unit, 2001, p. 36).

In 2009, the Aga Khan Healthcare Services (AKHS), an AKDN agency, launched a cross-border initiative to improve medical services along the border, which was partially suspended in 2020 due to COVID-19 followed by Taliban's restrictive policies. Like cross-border workers in the European Economic Area, Tajikistani physicians would spend five days a week in Afghanistan, while others provided routine services by spending five days per month in Afghanistan, or emergency services by staying two to three days. Leveraging the ease and speed of border crossings before the Taliban's return to power, the programme established multiple healthcare facilities

on the Afghan side,¹⁷ enabling qualified Tajikistani specialists to provide care and collaborate with Afghan medical staff. Another component of the initiative enabled critically ill Afghan patients to be transferred to hospitals in Tajikistan. In such cases, patients were exempt from visa requirements and received both medical care and transportation free of charge. For communities isolated from Afghanistan's economic centres, proximity to the Tajikistani border became a lifeline, offering access to essential health services. The initiative also provided other opportunities: trainings in Tajikistan for Afghan physicians, sample analysis in Tajikistan for Afghan patients, medical equipment donation, surgery telecommunication with AKDN's hospitals in Kabul or Karachi, in Pakistan. Despite the challenges posed by poverty and conflict, cross-border healthcare supported by the AKDN had tangible benefits for local communities. For Tajikistani medical professionals, the programme demonstrated that they are not merely specialists confined to their own country but active participants who seize the opportunity to work in Afghanistan, both with and for Afghan communities, who they define as 'the same people' as them, 'without any difference'.¹⁸

Energy Provision

Since 2002, Pamir Energy, an AKDN affiliated company, rehabilitated power plants in Gorno-Badakhshan, aiming to improve access to affordable electricity across the province, following a concession agreement signed with the Government of Tajikistan. In June 2008, the company launched a cross-border electricity export programme, initially providing power to 500 Afghan households that had never had access before. Prior to 2008, only 1% of Afghan Badakhshan had access to electricity, a figure that rose to just 5% by 2019. In 2019, approximately 40,000 people in Afghanistan's Badakhshan province were receiving electricity, and a bilateral agreement signed in Kabul on 22 July 2019 set the goal of achieving full coverage across the province by 2027.¹⁹

These infrastructure upgrades have enabled year-round electricity supply, particularly addressing winter shortages when river levels are low. According to Pamir Energy's internal data, in 2019 96% of Gorno-Badakhshan's population had access to electricity throughout the year. On the Afghan side, access to electricity has had a significant impact on quality of life. In the border regions of Badakhshan, electricity is even more affordable than in other parts of the country, where residents do not benefit from cross-border transmission and where the energy sector faces technical, financial, and institutional challenges. Electricity facilitates daily household tasks, enables the use of mobile phones, and allows businesses to operate during the winter months, when they were previously forced to close. Women in electrified communities within Afghanistan's Sheghnan district bordering Tajikistan tend to have higher literacy rates compared to those in non-electrified areas; they also report lower incidences of disease and infant mortality, along with improved access to economic opportunities (Polansky & Laldjebaev, 2021). Schools, health centres, and cross-border markets similarly rely on electricity to function. As a result, CBC in electricity export serves as a foundation for broader forms of regional interaction in Badakhshan. As part of the CBC programme, Pamir Energy employees from Tajikistan continue to travel to Afghanistan for work assignments, even under the Taliban regime. For example, an engineer might be stationed in Murghab (Gorno-Badakhshan) for two years, then transferred to Fayzabad (Afghanistan's Badakhshan) for seven months before joining the headquarters in Khorog (Gorno-Badakhshan). Additionally, the company offers scholarships to Afghan students pursuing degrees in electrical engineering.

The development of the electricity grid by Pamir Energy does not guarantee reliable Internet access, which limits other CBC activities such as education. Professors from the University of Central Asia (UCA) in Khorog, a project stemming from the AKDN, often cite the university as a resource for Afghan students, however most enrolled students are Tajikistani, primarily from Khorog. Moreover, part of the admission process is conducted online, creating a barrier for Afghan high school students without Internet access. In 2017 in Sheghnan (Afghanistan), only 30% of respondents in electrified areas had permanent Internet access, while 53% used it occasionally (Polansky & Laldjebaev, 2021, p. 8). Afghan students graduating from UCA typically attend courses in centres on the Afghan side of the border (Ryazantsev & Garibova, 2021, p. 151), in Darwaz, Sheghnan, Eshkashem, and Fayzabad, rather than in Tajikistan. Thus, while the AKDN could offer educational resources,

opportunities to study *across* the border remain limited and even more hindered by the reluctance of Tajikistani authorities to issue visas for Afghan citizens.

Watersheds were also established by the AKDN in the borderland area of Darwaz in order to compensate for the lack of water access in certain villages. Some of them are supplying water from Tajikistan to the Afghan side, and others are operating in the reverse direction. In 2021, the manager of this initiative explained the crucial aspect of water-sharing for localized communities on either side of the border: 'Previously, these two villages faced enormous water-related problems: land irrigation and a lack of drinking water. Now, these problems have been solved.'²⁰ This programme is limited to a few sites in Darwaz and does not necessarily represent the most dynamic, visible, or wide-reaching aspect of CBC. Nevertheless, it illustrates the success of CBC development projects in alleviating struggles encountered by communities in a region where water remains subject to tension. A notable example is the Qosh Teppa Canal whose rehabilitation was ordered by the Taliban leadership shortly after taking power and has raised concerns in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, both of which risk losing a vital source of irrigation from the Amu Darya (Ugli et al., 2025, pp. 500–505). Thus far, the border stretch in Badakhshan has remained unaffected by such macro-level disputes.

Conclusion

Social scientists have long struggled to trace the influence and effectiveness of NGOs (Karns, 2015, p. 268), transnational actors (Risse-Kappen, 1995, pp. 3–33), and even CBC in post-conflict borderlands (Deiana et al., 2019, p. 531); within this context, the nexus between stability and the work of the AKDN remains complex and potentially subjective. One way to measure it is to assess their impact on the beneficiaries and their perceptions that can be collected through qualitative research. In 2015, assessments conducted in the borderlands of Tajikistan and Afghanistan indicated that perceptions of safety and levels of trust within and between neighbouring communities were relatively high in both Badakhshans. The study concluded that improvements in quality of life 'may be most effectively fostered by linking these communities with the superior infrastructure and services available in GBAO' (Sherbut et al., 2015, p. 268). Similarly, a subsequent study found that this border region served as a space of opportunity, reinforcing local Pamiri identity through CBC facilitated by the AKDN. This cooperation amplified the voices of border communities in Tajikistan, who expressed positive perceptions of their Afghan neighbours (Sadozai, 2021a). In line with this argument, further research is needed to examine whether these perceptions have been affected by the turmoil following the Taliban's return to power.

What remains evident is that the cross-border initiatives facilitated by the AKDN have not exacerbated tensions or triggered conflict. Instead, they have supported border communities in addressing challenges that might otherwise contribute to instability and positive violence, such as social alienation, and economic insecurity (Gerstle, 2006). In the Tajikistan–Afghanistan borderlands, other IOs such as the United Nations, the European Union, or the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe have handled border management programmes (EU & UNDP, 2014; OSCE, 2015; Ryazantsev & Garibova, 2021, p. 154). Additionally, local leaders on both sides of the border have contributed to stabilizing the borderlands rather than creating chaos, as their actions helped mitigate corruption among state officials and address shortcomings in international border management programmes (Levi-Sanchez, 2016).

However, the AKDN has become a unique actor in fostering negative and positive peace in the borderlands, primarily by prioritizing development-led stabilization and the enhancement of community resilience, unlike other IOs, local leaders, or state officials. Although not a political or military actor, the AKDN's aid efforts are grounded in long-term socio-economic strategies aimed at addressing the root causes of conflict and promoting inclusive and sustainable development. While the AKDN does not function as a peace agency *per se*, it aligns with the argument made by Anderson (1999, p. 3) that aid organizations have the potential to deliver

both emergency and long-term assistance in ways that support peace rather than perpetuate violence. While the principles guiding the AKDN's work are rooted in the vision of the Aga Khan, which defines the organization's approach to development and peace building, it is important to stress that they also promote a religious agenda.

From a border studies standpoint, the AKDN has transformed the Tajikistan–Afghanistan border from a source of geopolitical anxiety into a 'zone of contact' (Mostowlansky, 2016, 2017) between local communities, serving not as barrier but as 'a base that can also be used as [an] attractive input for cross-border development' (van Houtum, 2021, p. 29). In other words, peace building has remained feasible through a border livelihood strategy (Gerstle, 2006, p. 39), which prioritizes development initiatives over the intensification of security measures. Extending this reasoning, AKDN's Cross-Border Program constitutes a model that could be emulated in other conflict-affected regions where communities on both sides of the border share linguistic and religious affinities or a common historical legacy.

This article has also aimed to highlight the critical importance of 'thinking beyond the state' in efforts to build peace across borders (Ramsbotham & Zartman, 2011), including leveraging the unique capacities of border regions themselves to foster peace. Although the AKDN has often been portrayed as a substitute for the state (De Cordier, 2008, p. 172; Mostowlansky, 2018, p. 391), its influence over functions traditionally associated with state authority has also led to a reduction in its operational autonomy. CBC described in this article has been significantly affected by the shift in the Tajikistani government's approach towards the AKDN that occurred in 2022. Since the end of the civil war, the state has maintained a dominant position in Tajikistan, making the AKDN a unique example of a transnational actor able to penetrate the social sphere in a context where the state remains strong and civil society paralyzed. The regime has historically regarded the activities of the Aga Khan both as compensation for its own limited intervention in the country's poorest province and as a potential counter-power, given its own lack of full legitimacy among the Badakhshani population. Since 2022, the government has increasingly acted on these concerns. Iconic AKDN landmarks in Gorno-Badakhshan have been progressively nationalized (Eurasianet, 2023), with Pamir Energy also being taken over by state agents, and numerous cross-border initiatives, including medical mobility, have been partially or totally suspended. These obstacles imposed by the Tajikistani regime demonstrate that the AKDN no longer enjoys the privileged status it once held as a transnational actor: 'the more the state dominates the domestic structure, the more difficult it should be for transnational actors to penetrate the social and political systems of the "target" country' (Risse-Kappen, 1995, p. 6).

States play a crucial role in enabling or constraining transnational activities (Risse-Kappen, 1995 p. 25), including those aimed at fostering peace through development. Paradoxically, according to its own employees, the AKDN currently operates with fewer obstacles in the IEA than in Tajikistan.²¹ This situation illustrates how external interference in the work of development agencies can have direct consequences for the beneficiaries of their aid and would deserve further research in this context or other borderland areas sharing similar features. In the Tajikistan–Afghanistan borderlands, the Tajikistani government's intervention in AKDN projects has generated fear among communities that are heavily dependent on its programmes. This reliance illustrates the ambivalent role of the AKDN in the region. While its initiatives contribute to Galtung's concept of peace, the extensive presence of its agencies in these borderlands over the past two decades has also fostered dependency among local communities rather than promoting self-management (Rakhmatova, 2015), despite it being a core component of the AKDN's ethical framework (Poor, 2014, p. 175). Recent restrictions imposed by the Tajikistani state on AKDN activities further highlight the vulnerability of development initiatives on the northern side of the Pyanj, raising concerns about the sustainability of progress without external support.

While cross-border markets, energy provision, and tourism have resumed since the return of the Taliban to power and sustained micro-level interactions, macro-level decisions taken in Dushanbe may ultimately jeopardize these activities and, by extension, the stability of Afghanistan's most connected border (Hohmann & Sadozai, 2023).

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- 1 *Gorno-Badahšanskaâ avtonomnaâ oblast* (GBAO) is the official Russian name and its equivalent in Tajik is *Viloâti Muhtori Kÿxistoni Badahšon* (VMKB), which both translate into ‘mountainous autonomous province of Badakhshan’.
- 2 I emphasize the distinction between the situation in the border areas, where the Taliban only arrived for the first time in July 2021, and the districts and villages further inland, where insurgent/counterinsurgent violence and fights with Taliban combatants had already taken place.
- 3 See the FAQ under the question ‘Are AKDN and its agencies religious organizations?’ https://the.akdn/en/how-we-work/our-approach/frequently-asked-questions#94642873_1
- 4 Criticism of the work of the AKDN from within the Ismaili community does exist, whether concerning the perceived inefficiency of certain initiatives or directed at the organization’s leadership. As Poor (2014, p. 152) explains, some of these tensions and conflicts have cultural roots, as Ismailis originate from diverse backgrounds. Lakha (2021, pp. 195–196) also mentions resistance on the AKDN initiatives in Pakistan from non-Ismailis who condemn proselytism and fear the disruption of local social order and attacks on Sunni’s faith.
- 5 *A didor* refers to the occasion during which the Imam offers a personal audience and physical presence to the Ismaili community.
- 6 Imam’s directive or instruction sent to his followers.
- 7 Personal communication with author, Khorog, 2021.
- 8 Author’s translation from Tajik.
- 9 Water usage is based on a 1958 treaty signed between Afghanistan and the USSR and a 2010 cooperation agreement between Afghanistan and Tajikistan.
- 10 In Langar, the border-crossing infrastructure has been constructed, though it remains non-operational as of this article’s publication.
- 11 Personal communication with author, Dushanbe, 2019.
- 12 It should also be mentioned that the markets were temporarily closed after 2015 due to security concerns and the COVID-19 pandemic, and could not be then seen then as reliable sources of supply and meeting places. They became again fully operational in September 2023.
- 13 Personal communication with author, Ishkashim, 2014.
- 14 Personal communications with author, Khorog, 2025.
- 15 Foreign visitors can also cross the border from the Sher Khan Bandar border post in the province of Khatlon in Tajikistan.

- 16 PECTA brochure collected in Khorog, 2014.
- 17 See the list of these centres on the Aga Khan Health Services' website: <https://www.akhs.org/en/outreach-health-centres-afghanistan>
- 18 Personal communications between author and AKHS pharmacist, and AKHS cross-border initiatives manager, Khorog, 2019.
- 19 Unless referenced otherwise, the figures in this section are drawn from Pamir Energy's internal documentation and primary data collected by the author during fieldwork in Khorog in 2019 and 2021.
- 20 Personal communication with author, Khorog, 2021.
- 21 Personal communication between author and AKF Afghanistan employee, Tem, 2025.

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