

‘Common Afghans’, A useful construct for achieving results in Afghanistan

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Abstract

Considering the seemingly perpetual problems in Afghanistan, this paper defines a new construct – the Common Afghans – and argues why it should be considered in strategic reflections and actions related to stability of this country. It tries to show that part of ill-performance in comes from the fact that the contributions of an important stakeholder “the Common Afghans” are ignored in the processes undertaken by international stakeholders in this country since 2002. It argues why considering the notion “Common Afghans” is helpful for achieving concrete results related to different initiatives undertaken in Afghanistan, by different stakeholders.

Key words: Afghanistan, Common Afghans, Accurate unit of analysis, Policies, Strategies

1. Introduction

Afghanistan looks to be in perpetual turmoil. In a recent desperate reflection, Robert Blackwill, a former official in the Bush administration and former US ambassador to India suggests partition of Afghanistan since the US cannot win war in this county (POLITICO, 2010). On same mood, Jack Wheeler defines Afghanistan as “...a problem, not a real country...”. According to Wheeler, “...the solution to the problem is not a futile effort of “nation-building” – that effort is doomed to fail – it is nation-building’s opposite: get rid of the problem by getting rid of the country...” (Wheeler, 2010). These new American discourses about Afghanistan are very different of the ones we used to hear right after 9/11. Remember President Bush's first State of the Union address, delivered to Congress in January 2002, conveying a total different message: “...America and Afghanistan are now allies against terror. We will be partners in rebuilding that country...”. What happened? Should the international community give up Afghanistan now that success seems more and more far-away? Performance in Afghanistan becomes a reverent topic to discuss.

The central theme of this paper is to define and propose the notion “Common Afghans”, which is a unit of analysis for policy actions and reflections in Afghanistan. The paper argues that considering this notion in strategies of different stakeholders – including the international actors, the Afghan authorities and the NGO communities – brings clarities of objectives, goals and adds value to efforts mobilized for the stabilization of this country. By extension, it was because this important stakeholder had insufficiently been integrated in different local and international strategies about Afghanistan that general performance in this country seems not satisfactory to some stakeholder. The paper argues that it is still possible to win the struggle for stabilizing Afghanistan if “Common Afghans” are considered as an essential piece of defence/security, socio-politic, and economic strategies related to Afghanistan. The paper is organized the following way. Its second section describes methodological approaches used while its third section proposes a panoramic picture of Afghanistan’s contemporary history that will help arguments of the central theme. The following section presents a comprehensive definition of “Common Afghans”, followed by a discussion on how/why considering this notion is so important for success/failure of defence/security and socioeconomic strategies in Afghanistan. The final section draws some conclusions.

2. Methodological approaches

The ‘experts’ of Afghanistan do not agree on many points, but they generally agree on one point: that winning the stability of Afghanistan requires a subtle combination of bright defence/security efforts, effective diplomatic activities, good governance and intelligent development initiatives. This convoys us to the complicated question of “what is performance in Afghanistan, and how this performance can be achieved?” As it is discussed in Youssofzai (2004), performance in Afghanistan implies considering notions such as “complexity”, “antinomy logic”, “multi-dimensionality”, “effective coordination”, and “accurate decision-making”. One known approach that consider all these notions and integrate them is “strategic management” (Ackoff, 1970; Allison, 1971; Andrews, 1971; Ansoff, 1957; Barnard, 1938; Bourgeois, 1980; Bower, 1972; Braybrooke & Lindblom, 1963; Chandler, 1962; Crozier, 1964; Cyert & March, 1963; Daft, 2004;

DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Drucker, 1954, 1989, 1990, 1993; Eisenhardt & Bourgeois, 1988; Hill & Jones, 1999; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Mintzberg, 1987 a&b, 1994; Morgan, 1980; Quinn, 1984; Roetlisberger, 1977; Rumelt, Shendel & Teece, 1994; Saloner & Shepard, 2001; Scott, 1987, 1992; Scott & Meyer, 1991, 1992; Selznick, 1949, 1957, 1996; Simon, 1945; Thompson, 1967; Weber, 1947; Wheelen & Hunger, 2010). This paper adopts the “strategic management” perspective to approach performance in Afghanistan. To synthesize, these known works discuss the role, in achieving satisfactory performance, of leading, organizing, coordinating, and assessing the external environment.

Regarding methodology, different definitions have been offered to this notion – some general, other narrower. This paper adopts a synthesized definition of methodology as given by Grawitz (1992) who defines methodology on the basis of three important characteristics: (a) a research approach, (b) a ‘paradigm’ – i.e., a way of looking a reality with specific concepts and types of causalities binding together different dimensions of this reality -, and (c) some techniques of data collection. We believe that this general definition of methodology is suitable to the complexity of Afghan context. The ‘reality’ to which this paper is interested is the advantages of considering the notion “Common Afghans” in strategies of local and international actors related to stabilization of Afghanistan. We will try to show that part of confusion about performance in Afghanistan is that, because of a high level complexity in this country, it has become difficult to target the right category of Afghan groups with myriad socioeconomic projects.

Different definitions have been given to the notion of “complexity” in the literature¹. For this paper, essentially, the complexity paradigm describes a phenomenon not by reducing it to its different composing elements (like the reductionist-Cartesian tradition), but by describing, and taking into account, its richness as a whole. While the Cartesian tradition supposes that the “whole” is a simple combination of “parts” (i.e., the “complex” is a simple combination of “simples”), the Complexity Theory considers “real” to be a “complex whole” that may not be fully understood if it is examined in its different composing parts. To better understand what complexity is, Edgar Morin (1977) suggests to think about the metaphor of tissue or carpet. A tissue is made out of heterogeneous, but inseparable, elements; a carpet is built up of different linens, each arranged out of wool, cotton, and silk of varied colors. To understand each of these linens, one has to know the laws and principles that compose them. However, to understand the new reality of “carpet” - including its texture, its configuration and its shape – knowing the mentioned laws and principles about each linen is not sufficient. One has to appreciate this new reality (the carpet) by studying the “whole” - i.e., the carpet. In other words, the first step to understand the carpet is to appreciate the characteristics of its different linens; the following step is to consider the new reality (the carpet) in a holistic manner.

Therefore, knowing the sum of the elements (the linens) is not sufficient to understand the whole (the carpet); contrary to the Cartesian principle, in Complexity theory the “whole” is superior to the sum of its parts. A final important note that will clarify arguments of this paper is that complexity constitutes the heart of “systemic approach”, which combines objective hypothetical-deductive and subjective-interpretative methods. The former uses logics and rigueur in order to demonstrate and prove systematically while the later uses more general intuitive scales in order to describe and explain. Back to the elaboration of methodology! Regarding the collection, treatment and interpretation of data - third component of methodology according to Grawitz (1992) -, we follow what Martinet (1990) calls “methodology pluralism”. In this regard, Langley (1999) synthesizes the relevant literature on methodological approaches in strategy into seven groups², among which, the following are found appropriate for the context of Afghanistan (Table 1)

¹ The literature about Complex Thinking is very wide, and this paper hasn’t the capacity of covering it all. However, two important principles of this school should be recalled: The Principle of Dialogic and The Principle of Hologrammic. **The Principle of Dialogic** permits the articulation of contrary logics that exist within any complex system. According to **The Principle of Hologrammic**, each part of the “totality” contains this same totality. For example, each cell of one’s body contains his/her overall genetic heritage. Also, society in its global breath is present in an individual through his/her language, culture, education, values, etc.

² “Narrative strategies”, “quantification strategies”, “alternate templates strategies”, “grounded theory strategy”, “visual mapping strategy”, “temporal bracketing strategy” and “synthetic strategy”.

Tableau 1. Methodological Aspects

Strategy	Key anchor point(s)	Exemplars	Fit with process data complexity	Specific data needs	“Good theory” dimensions (Weick)	Form of sensemaking
Narrative strategy	Time	Chandler (1962), Pettigrew (1985), Bartunek (1984)	Fits with ambiguous boundaries, variable temporal embeddedness and eclecticism	One or few rich cases ; Can be helped by comparison	High on accuracy ; Lower on simplicity and generality	Stories, meanings, mechanisms
Alternate templates strategy	Theories	Alisson (1971), Markus (1983), Pinfield (1986), Collis (1991)	Adaptable to various kinds of complexity, different templates capture different elements	One case is enough, Degrees of freedom come from multiple templates	Each theory can be simple and general; Together they offer accuracy, but simplicity and generality disappear with theory integration	Mechanisms
Temporal bracketing strategy	Phases	Bareley (1986), Doz (1996), Denis et al. (1996)	Can deal with eclectic data, but needs clear temporal breakpoints to define phases	One or two detailed cases is sufficient if processes have several phases used for replication	Accuracy depends on adequacy of temporal decomposition ; Moderate simplicity and generality	Mechanisms

Source : Adapted from Langley (1999)

With these clarifications about methodology, the next section presents a quick look at Afghanistan’s recent historic events.

3. Contemporary history of Afghanistan

For decades, the entire world has been hearing sad news about Afghanistan! But what is the problem in this country? A quick reminder of its contemporary history can help answering this question.

Through the history, the land called today Afghanistan has lived with waves of violence, invasions and local resistance. Since millineries this land has been envied by world’s notorious powers; Persia, Alexander The Great, post-Islamic Arabs, Mongols, Tsars, British Empire, and ex-Soviet Union. Each of these powers adventured themselves to conquer Afghanistan but none of them succeeded to control the land. These adventures had systematically faced harsh local resistance, and created lost, defeats or even collapse of these powers (Rashid, 2000). But the local populations have had to pay an enormous price – in terms of human suffering, number of killed and wounded persons, socioeconomic costs, and loose of opportunities. It is possible to argue that during the history, the Afghans have won the wars militarily, but they have repeatedly lost them politically and economically (Barry,1984; Centlivres et al., 1984; Victor, 1983). The general population almost never benefited from the results of their sacrifices. Those who did profit were some limited number of opportunists and well organized freeloaders of war. The contemporary history of Afghanistan reveals more eloquently the tragedy of this country.

Afghanistan, a country relatively stable and prosperous in the past, one of the founders of the ‘non-aligned countries’ during the Cold War era, got suddenly into a profound crisis after a bloody communist coup d’état in April 1978. The surprising success of a small pro-soviet Afghan communist group can be explained by a combination of internal and external factors. It has been argued that the most important external factor that made the communist Coup successful was a direct and somehow massive help of the ex-Soviet-Union’s spy agencies KGB and GRU to the Afghan communists. On the other hand, the most important internal factor that helped the collapse the then afghan regime was its unprofessional and indifferent security institutions, personnel and leadership. The very next days of their coup, Afghan communists undertook the unrealistic goal of transforming a traditional society to an ‘ultra communist’ society while not sparing brutalities, random arrests and massive killings (Barry,1984; Centlivres et al., 1984; Victor, 1983; Shah, 1983; De Ponfilly, 1985; Dubois, 1989; Bazgar, 1987). Hafizullah Amin, one of the coup leaders, declared once (in his multiple and incessant speeches from the national radio) that in the process of transforming the afghan society toward communism it would have been sufficient even if one million Afghans had left (from an approximate total population of 18 millions at that time). Consequently, on the one hand hundreds thousands families were forced to take the paths of asylum towards Pakistan and Iran;

on the other hand different instantaneous groups of resistance were formed all across Afghanistan. With time, frustrated by the lack of popular support, the communist regime further accentuated its repression against the villagers; which further inflated the numbers of refugees and armed opponents to the point that the regime was going to collapse imminently (idem.). This was not acceptable for the Soviet protectors. To avoid the debacle, on 27 December 1979, the ex-Soviet-Union decided to invade Afghanistan militarily, politically, and economically. A new chapter of sorrow and pain had started for the innocent Afghan villagers. From this date, it was up to the Red Army, and other Soviet-affiliated security and spy organizations, to continue armed struggle against Afghan villagers – called “rebels” by the invaders and their local puppet regime.

A total war was undertaken against Afghan villages; which included massive bombardments, random arresting, torturing and killings; and destruction of infrastructures, irrigation canals, harvests, cattle, etc. In the urban centers, the Afghan communist regime’s secret police Khaad was systematically arresting intellectuals, business leaders, community leaders, religious leaders, students, and public administrators that were perceived (by the party members) as “anti-revolutionaries”, “rebels” or “rebel sympathizers”. The arrested prisoners were then almost systematically massacred after being interrogated under horrible tortures (Centlivres et al., 1984; De Ponfily, 1985; Bazgar, 1987; Barry, 1984). Already after two years of communist regime in Afghanistan, some 60 000 peoples were executed this way.

These atrocities had further multiplied the number of refugees in the neighbouring countries. In 1981, UNHCR was putting forward the figure of 4 millions Afghan refugees in Pakistan and Iran; this figure raised to 6 millions (i.e., one third of total Afghan population) in 1986. While the refugees were piled up in the improvised refugee camps with abominable life conditions, international aid started to reach them timidly. Beside political vacuum, a serious humanitarian catastrophe was starting to be born in Afghanistan all along the period of Soviet occupation (1980-88), and was accelerated during the period of civil wars that followed Soviet withdrawal (1988-2001). It was in this context that the two groups Al-Qaeda and Taliban were born in Afghanistan with complete indifference of the Western world in degustation of victory over the Cold War. To avoid prolonging this paper, we will not elaborate about Al-Qaeda except mentioning two points. First, the settlement of Osama Bin-Laden and his followers in Afghanistan (before the formal birth of Al-Qaeda) was planned and executed by both outsider powers and local warlord groups, independent of Afghan citizens’ well. Second, Al-Qaeda has never been popular in the Afghan villages (Rashid; 2000, 2002 & 2008).

Analysts agree on one point about the Taliban; this is one of the most secret and mysterious organizations in the world. The following paragraphs summarise description of the Taliban as much as it concerns the subject of this paper. Originally the Taliban was born in Kandahar (south-eastern city of Afghanistan) in reaction to the two years (1992-1994) anarchy, chaos, killings, and lootings of the post communist era in Afghanistan - created by different armed groups terrorising defenceless villagers all around Afghanistan and profiting from the power vacuum in this country. Warlord groups composed now of people belonging to the two ex-communists and ex-Mujahedin warriors went rapidly under sponsorship of envying regional powers in search of spreading their influences in Afghanistan. Afghans heard for the first time in 1994 about the emergence of a new group in Kandahar (Afghanistan) called the Taliban (which means young students of religious schools - “Madrassas”). It is narrated that these students, mostly handicaps and/or orphans of war, had not supported the decadence, fighting, and killings of the warlords in the country; they took arms in order to end the general anarchy in the country and to re-establish ‘order’. It is counted that the first success of Taliban was the capture, disarming, and hanging up of a warlord near Mulla Omar’s Madrassa in southern Kandahar. This warlord was accused of sequestering and sexually abusing the wife of a passant.

This was the beginning of a long journey for the Taliban; the first town liberated by them was Spin-Boldak situated at the border of Afghanistan and Pakistan. Encouraged by this victory, other groups of religious students (from Madrassas of refugee camps in Pakistan and those of inside Afghanistan) joined the Taliban movement and made it stronger. To this was added the undoubted help of Pakistani circles combined with the welcome of local populations tired of killings, lootings, and destructions of armed warlords that were terrorizing them. Neighbouring cities of Kandahar were going to fall down under Taliban control one after the other during the coming weeks. Rapidly after, the remaining eastern and western provinces of Afghanistan were falling down under the Taliban control. The Taliban entered to the capital city, Kabul, during the night of 26-27 September 1996. After each victory over a city, Taliban’s methods were similar: disarmament of local population (and eventually imprisonment of the warlords if they didn’t already runaway), dismantling of ‘check-points’ (installed by warlords, for ransoming the passengers), interdiction of popular leisure (music, movie, TV,...), imposition of clothing codes to both men and women, and instauration of their version of the famous (Islamic) *Sharia Law*.

The more the Taliban were getting closer to northern and central Afghanistan, the more their methods were challenged by local populations; and, consequently, the more they were becoming tough - indifferent of the international and human right organizations' protesting. With time, Taliban methods were frankly becoming unsupportable for the more liberal-minded residents of Kabul who, however, generally welcomed Taliban's arrival in their city – which liberated them from the tyrannies of warlords' fiefdoms. The growing Taliban casualties, inflicted by their Northern Alliance opponents, were making the Taliban regime even tougher to the point that even in Kandahar, ordinary shoppers and taxi drivers had enough of Taliban harshness. Growing allegations of serious human rights abuses committed by the Taliban in the northern and central Afghanistan were going to be reported. Afghan villagers were growingly disappointed by the Taliban. They were realizing that Taliban are not different from any other groups dominating the politico-military power in Afghanistan since 1978. Eventually, the Taliban regime was overthrown by the US-led coalition's strikes in Afghanistan (November 2001) after it was accused to be linked with the tragic events of 9/11/2001 (for a chronology of important events in Afghanistan, see Annex 2). A new administration in Afghanistan was agreed upon, by the international community, through the Bonn Agreement (December 2001), and Hamid Karzai was chosen head of a new administration to replace the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. Hamid Karzai is still at this post.

The fall of Taliban was accompanied with appreciable progresses in Afghanistan such as return of right the women and minorities, relative freedom of speech, reopening of schools, and liberalization of trade. The international promises of better governance, improved institutions, and new constitution in Afghanistan raised immense hopes among Afghans who had been so much desired seeing the end of darkness in Afghanistan. But the absence of an effective public administration together with the growth of an unprecedented level of corruption in the country since the fall of the Taliban regime – combined with the incoherent strategies of international players in Afghanistan – have made these limited original gains insignificant. Indeed, the current Afghan administration under Karzai has been accused of endemic corruption, nepotism, cooption with past criminal warlords and drug mafia, pillaging of foreign aid, and ineffectiveness. According to Amnesty international (2009), “...progress in the area of human rights has been slow..” since the fall of Taliban regime. According to the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (2010), Afghan civilian death toll jumps 31 per cent in the six past months. Staffan de Mistura, the Secretary-General's Special Representative and head of UNAMA was saying in a conference in Kabul that “...The human cost of this conflict is unfortunately rising...”. The same disappointing assessment is also given by known journalist writer Ahmad Rashid (2008):

“...Initially, 9/11 would ensure that the world addressed the social integration and state failure in South and Central Asia...Afghanistan had to be rescued...Instead,...the US-led war on terrorism has left in its wake a far more unstable world than existed [before]...The international community had an extended window of opportunity for several years to help the Afghan people – they failed to take advantage of it” (pp xxxvii-iii):

“The consequences of state failure in any single country are unimaginable. At stake in Afghanistan is not just the future of President Hamid Karzai and the Afghan people yearning for stability, development, and education but also the entire global alliance that is trying to keep Afghanistan together. At stake are the future of the United Nations, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the European Union, and of course America's own power and prestige. It is difficult to imagine how NATO could survive as the West's leading military alliance if the Taliban are not defeated in Afghanistan or if Bin-Laden remains at large indefinitely. Yet the international community's lukewarm commitment to Afghanistan after 9/11 has been matched only by its incompetence, incoherence, and conflicting strategies...” (p xxxiv).

To sum up this section, a quick look at Afghanistan's past three decades history reveals the stories of wars, killings, immigrations, human right abuses and other kinds of human atrocities; it reveals also the stories of heroism, sacrifices, love for freedom, compassion, and humanism. Like everywhere else, wars in Afghanistan have always gone together with the “economy of war” and “politics of war”, which has allowed earning wealth and power out of miseries of victims. Miseries have been almost exclusively the share of innocent and peace loving individuals and families that constitutes more than 90% of Afghanistan's population. On the other hand opportunities have been hijacked by a very small – but well-organized and powerful – group composed of warlords and their external sponsors, drug dealers, corrupted officials, and unethical contractors. The contemporary history of Afghanistan reveals another important trend. With time, a genius culture of “how to deal with wars and invasions” has been emerged inside Afghanistan and its surrounding regions.

For the warlords and exploiters of poor's miseries, this culture explains how to take advantage of the involved stakeholders' (belligerents, aid communities, other international communities...) vulnerabilities in order to realize more gains (material wealth and socio-political capital). For those who carry the miseries of war, the ordinary local Afghans, this culture explains an extraordinary degree of resilience and how to deal with crises and catastrophes.

This paper is about the second group that is called "Common Afghans".

4. *The notion of "Common Afghans"*

One important consequence of the three decades of wars and instability in Afghanistan is the deep change in this country's social tissue. While it is futile and counterproductive to see Afghans according to their ethnic affiliations, it is also difficult. The simple reason is that Afghanistan has a particular high percentage of interethnic marriages, which makes difficult to determine who is "pure" Tajik, Uzbek, etc. It makes, therefore, more sense to group the inhabitants of Afghanistan according to different "socio-economic groups". Afghan communities today are not limited to inside Afghanistan, but are extended to large refugee camps in Pakistan and Iran, labour markets in the Gulf States and refugee/immigrant/naturalized populations in Europe, North America, Australia and elsewhere. Within these communities one can observe "classes of Afghans" with huge life standard differences. There are in West, for example, established physicians, scientists, etc., who earn annual incomes of several hundred thousand dollars; that call themselves "Afghans". In the mean time, there are inside Afghanistan numerous teachers, and clerks - often responsible of families of 6 to 9 members - who earn incomes of less than 10 dollars a day - on an irregular basis and under extremely dangerous security situation - that call themselves "Afghans".

This socioeconomic fact renders difficult answer to the simple, but important, question "Who is Afghan and who is not?" Answer to this question is important since almost 40 countries are involved in Afghanistan to stabilize this country and since billions of dollars are mobilized monthly for achieving this goal. This question needs to be related to the local and international defence, development, and diplomatic strategies toward Afghanistan. Each mentioned initiative needs answers to questions such as "who is (should be) the beneficiaries in this Afghanistan?" This paper's answer is "Common Afghans".

It is important to clarify that the notion "Common Afghans" is neutral; i.e., it is neither "good" nor "bad", but a unit of analysis that helps operationalization of national and international strategies (defence/security, development/reconstruction, and diplomacy) related to Afghanistan. Common Afghans love freedom and justice, which are two core values of Afghan culture. Common Afghans view struggle (in its general meaning, which includes physical self-defence and resistance to oppressor) as legitimate fight, as fundamental part of behavioural values. In the mean time, Common Afghans know pacific resistance and resilience as mentioned in the above account. Common Afghans are those local Afghans - men and women, from all over Afghanistan, and from all ethnics and religious affiliations of this country - that have been subjected to the negative consequences of three decades wars in Afghanistan; independent of their wishes. Common Afghans are those that are called with general terms such as "the people of Afghanistan" and "the vast majority of Afghans" by the following two account of a Canadian NGO representative in Kabul (Canadian Voice, 2010):

"...I came to understand the human suffering that Afghanistan has endured over three decades of conflict and, at the same time, was tremendously impressed with the resilience of the people of Afghanistan and their will to rebuild Afghanistan. After retiring from the Canadian Forces in 2006, I advocated for Canadian support of the Afghan people, delivered training to a variety of groups and worked in Kabul in the governance sector...."

"...The vast majority of Afghans are not insurgents, fighters, drug lords or corrupt officials on the take. Instead, they're hard working people with families, friends and hopes for a better future. Most simply want what Canadians got on Confederation in 1867 - "Peace, Order and Good Government." They just need support to attain that aspiration..."

Identifying what we call "Common Afghans" is important for several important reasons. First, except in some occasional and politically correct discourses, they have been largely ignored and marginalized by both Afghan authorities and international community involved in Afghanistan - all along the three decades of war in this country. The people that are part of what we call "Common Afghans" have paid the heaviest price of the three decades of war in Afghanistan - materially, psychologically, and collectively. May be part of the problem is that there has been a general confusion of who are "needy Afghans" and who are not; which constitutes the second reason why the notion of "Common Afghans" is important. Indeed, myriad of social and humanitarian programs in Afghanistan representing substantial amount of resources need adequate answer to the question of "whom they are for?"

The third reason why the notion of “Common Afghans” is important is that these people detain tremendous unexploited energy and knowledge that can be mobilised for the stabilization of Afghanistan and for fight against terrorism in this country. We will come back to these points in next section. At this stage, another important question becomes relevant: Who is NOT “Common Afghan”? Answer: Because of his/her relatively substantial higher incomes and other advantages, is not Common Afghan whoever that (a) does not live permanently inside Afghanistan with his/her immediate family; (b) is employed by the NGOs and other international organizations; (c) went back in Afghanistan from West as employee of international organizations or as high-ranking-employee/advisor of the Afghan government; and rich local traders. Because of his/her relatively substantial higher incomes and other advantages AND because of the illegality and unethical profession, is not Common Afghan whoever that is involved in (d) drug dealing, (e) (illegal) arm dealing, (d) terrorism, (f) warlordism, and (g) corruption.

In their deep inside, Common Afghans define themselves rather citizen of a country (Afghanistan) and even world citizen – rather than defining themselves on the basis of narrow ethnic and linguistic bases. In this regard, there exists a generalized unfortunate misunderstanding and confusion that consists of projecting the population of Afghanistan as primly linked to “ethnics”. Some observers think that this confusion has been nourished by some biased Medias, NGOs and members of the international aide community as well as those called, by some Afghan analysts, “ethnic merchants” (*Tika-Daaraan-e-Qawmi*); i.e., warlords that claim to be so-called leaders and voices of this or that Afghan ethnic groups. This point is important and requires more elaborations.

Abdul Satart Sirat, a well-known and respected afghan intellectual and political figure, provides an interesting analysis in this regard. According to Sirat (2004), subtle factors have caused the failure of international political action in Afghanistan. Analyzing Afghan-US relations since the 1970s, Sirat’s explains that after liberation war against the ex-USSR and the collapse of the Soviet Union, Afghans were not capable of handling their country’s affairs:

“...Unfortunately, the Afghans who bravely fought the Soviet Union to liberate their country could not handle their post-Jihad [freedom fighting] affairs. The decade of Jihad in Afghanistan was a historic and honourable period in the history of our country; however the decade after Jihad was characterized by bloody and tragic events...” (Sirat, 2004).

After joyfully witnessing the Red Army being defeated in Afghanistan and the Soviet Union collapsing, adds Sirat, the nations of the West in general, and the United States in particular, “*turned their back on Afghanistan and did not have any visions about what should happen after the Red Army left ...*”. According to Sirat, it was only after the sad events of Sept 11th, 2001 that the United States focused its attention back to Afghanistan with some relatively significant financial resources, and deployment of political and military efforts to fight terrorism and to attempt to change the political and military structures in Afghanistan. What Sirat is most critical of is the method used in this deployment. The method of the Soviet occupation in Afghanistan during the 1980s, affirms Sirat, was to divide the country into as many ethnic groups as possible in order to establish fractured and vulnerable regions. This same destructive method has been followed by each of the major political players in Afghanistan after the collapse of the Taliban - the UN, the US and other western countries. The political events which mark these interventions are (1) The Bonn Conference (2001) for the establishment of an interim administration for Afghanistan; six months later, (2) the Emergency Loya Jerga for the establishment of a two-year transitional government, and (3) the second Afghan Loya Jirga (December 2003), organized to discuss a draft of Afghanistan’s constitution:

“...In each of these political events, ...ethnicity became the main factor instead of professionalism and qualification. Special Envoy of the U.N. Secretary General (Mr. L. Ibrahimi) ...intervened in the political life in Afghanistan and he supported ethnicity as the basis to get any position in the political and administrative affairs in Afghanistan. By doing that he endangered the national unity of Afghanistan” (Sirat, 2004).

Indeed, as it is explained by Sirat, *ethnizing* the affairs of Afghanistan has been one of the main problems of perpetual instability of this country. The notion “Common Afghans” being ethnically neutral is a more accurate unit of analysis and action related to Afghanistan.

5. “Common Afghans”, a useful unit of analysis for stabilization strategies of Afghanistan

According to Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai (2008), Afghan academic and former World Bank executive who was finance minister for two years after the Taliban regime, agencies working in Afghanistan “*...are not coherent; they are not co-ordinated under one UN program. In Afghanistan, every agency has a separate set of priorities and we do not know how capable they are because they are unaccountable...*”. Clarity is thus the most important missing part in Afghanistan’s puzzle.

The most important usefulness of considering the notion of “Common Afghans” is clarity. In his recent book, journalist Ahmad Rashid uses the metaphor “chaos” to describe disorders and confusions in Afghanistan – created among others by incoherent strategies of United States, Pakistan, Afghanistan, the European Union, and the rest of allies involved in Afghanistan. Rashid criticizes the U.S. “*magical formula*” that had consisted to win Afghan war with “*advanced military technology and good intentions*”. According to the author, the United States, Pakistan and Afghanistan, “...*have strategized with little regard for each other in pursuit of incongruous goals...*”. The following accounts of Afghan intellectual Sirat says also about unclearness:

“...*I asked an American friend in the early nineties: "Does the U.S. have a specific policy in Afghanistan?" After thinking for a few seconds, he replied, "If you find out, let me know. The cold war is over, we do not have any interest in Afghanistan." I told him: "If you don't have any interest in Afghanistan, your enemies will find a free and best place for their anti-American activities...."*” (Sirat, 2004).

Considering the notion “Common Afghans” brings, therefore, clarity regarding “strategy formulation” and “strategy implementation” in Afghanistan – no matter if the strategy is about defence/security, development or diplomacy. Considering the notion “Common Afghans” clarifies “objectives”, “goals”, and “stakeholders” –, which are essential parts of strategy formulation according to the mentioned literature. One step further, by definition, a strategy is formulated in order to achieve a given “performance”. This later is defined, analyzed and assessed by important involved stakeholders. Logically, in a corporate context the main stakeholder is “the client”; in a public sector context the main stakeholder is “the common citizen or taxpayer”; and in a non-profit context the most important stakeholder is “the beneficiary”. Who is the main stakeholder in an Afghan context? Answering this question by notions such as “the Afghans”, “the people of Afghanistan”, “the Afghan ethnics”...conduct to vagueness as it was explained in the earlier section; answering it with our notion “the Common Afghans” brings clarity in objectives definition. According to Ahmadzai and Lockhart (2008), “...*the key to state building is to recognize that legitimacy flows from citizens, then agree on the goals and functions of a state, from a citizen's point of view, and search for pragmatic ways to support those goals...*”.

Considering the “Common Afghans” can also help the processes of strategy implementation in Afghanistan. This is possible in two ways. First, based on the mentioned literature about strategy, successful *implementation* of a strategy requires, among other factors, a realistic *formulated* strategy. If from the starting point, a strategy is formulated with vague and contradictory objectives; its chance of successful realization is logically mince. This is particularly true in a context like Afghanistan, where the degree of complexity is high. Integrating Common Afghans into the strategies helps to overcome this cavity. Second, even if the mentioned strategies are supposedly defined with perfection, would they guarantee success? Not necessarily since still according to the literature, success depends on people’s commitment and efforts during the process. How can a strategy about Afghanistan succeed if more than 80% of its population (called Common Afghans) do not find - in these strategies - its aspirations, hopes, and dreams; if the senior decision makers of these strategies do not mobilize every efforts and resources possible to acquire, and mobilize, the massive energy of this population? Clarity is also required in Afghanistan from an ethical perspective, which is another important ingredient of success for a strategy.

The short historic account of Afghanistan in the earlier section is also an account of crimes, atrocities, right abuses against the group that we called “Common Afghans”. This group has had persistent justice claims that are not satisfactory recognized, even on a discourse level, by those who govern Afghanistan. Worse, some known criminal warlords have been offered high ranking positions within the Afghan government, or sent to golden asylum in the foreign countries. The claims of “Common Afghans: for justice have been diluted by discourses such as “it is difficult to talk about justice since the warlords have too much power”, “everybody did commit crimes in this country, let’s move ahead”, “time will fix everything”, “look at South Africa, there is a national reconciliation there, let’s do the same in Afghanistan”³, etc. These discourses have created further distances between the victims of three decades atrocities in Afghanistan and the power circles governing this country: There is a feeling that more Afghan victims (i.e., Common Afghans) are losing trust in the system. In general, one can argue that the Common Afghans – affiliated to different ethnic groups - have rather had suffered during the past decades by the actions of warlords of their own ethnic groups than other warlords.

Finally, if it is true that considering the notion of Common Afghans brings clarity, thus positive outcomes from initiatives within Afghanistan, then it is also true that it affects positively regional stability since it is largely admitted that Afghanistan’s stability has always affected regional stability (Kuhzaad, 1947; Ghubaar, 1968; Reshtia, 1968; Barry, 1984; Habibi, 1985; Farhang, 1993; Rashid, 2008; Taraki, 2010).

³ Based on interviews by the author during different travels (summers 2004-2010) in Afghanistan.

It was explained that Afghanistan's recent turmoil started with the soviet-supported communist coup of April 1978; and has been continued – with ups and downs - since the Soviet invasion (1980-1989), the civil war (1989-1996), the Taliban era (1996-2002), until today. Consequently, Afghanistan's massive refugee populations, political vacuum during the 1990s, drug production, etc., have all affected the entire Central and Southern Asian regions. Solving this problem naturally requires solving the problem of Afghanistan. It was argued that considering our notion "Common Afghans" in both reflections and actions related to Afghanistan can help.

6. Conclusions and discussions

This paper introduced the notion "Common Afghans", and defined it as one of the most important stakeholders – may be the most important, in Afghanistan. This notion is important because it constitutes a more accurate "unit of analysis" related to strategic reflections and actions about Afghanistan and its stability. All other units of analysis used so far (in policies and strategies related to Afghanistan) have shown their limits, be it "regions" (North, South, Center, West, East, North-East, etc.), "ethnic/linguistic affiliations" (Pushtun, Tadjik, Hazara, Uzbek, Baluch, Turkmen, etc.), "religious affiliations" (Sunni, Shiite, Sikh, Ismaelian, etc.), "gender affiliations" (men, women), and "citizenship affiliations" (dual citizen-Afghans/single citizen Afghans, refugee/non-refugee, etc). Actually using them as "unit of analysis" does not only conduct to biased and erroneous policies in Afghanistan, but are also unethical, and may lead to more disastrous orientations such as "regionalism", "ethnic-linguistic segregation and superiority/inferiority", "sectarianism", and "sexism". The next steps after identifying and using an accurate unit of analysis related to policies in Afghanistan are to define and implement comprehensive strategies. These topics are beyond the scope of this paper and require separate researches.

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Annex 1

Chronology of important events in Afghanistan

- **1919** - Afghanistan regains independence after third war against British forces trying to bring country under their sphere of influence.
- **1926** - Amanullah proclaims himself king and attempts to introduce social reforms leading to opposition from conservative forces.
- **1929** - Amanullah flees after civil unrest over his reforms.
- **1933** - Zahir Shah becomes king and Afghanistan remains a monarchy for next four decades.
- **1964** - Constitutional monarchy introduced - but leads to political polarisation and power struggles.
- **1973** - Mohammed Daud seizes power in a coup and declares a republic. Tries to play off USSR against Western powers. His style alienates left-wing factions who join forces against him.
- **1978** - General Daud is overthrown and killed in a coup by leftist People's Democratic Party. But party's Khalq and Parcham factions fall out, leading to purging or exile of most Parcham leaders. At the same time, conservative Islamic and ethnic leaders who objected to social changes begin armed revolt in countryside.
- **1979** - Power struggle between leftist leaders Hafizullah Amin and Nur Mohammed Taraki in Kabul won by Amin. Revolts in countryside continue and Afghan army faces collapse. Soviet Union finally sends in troops to help remove Amin, who is executed.
- **1980** - **Soviet intervention**, Babrak Karmal, leader of the People's Democratic Party Parcham faction, is installed as ruler, backed by Soviet troops. But anti-regime resistance intensifies with various mujahideen groups fighting Soviet forces. US, Pakistan, China, Iran and Saudi Arabia supply money and arms.
- **1985** - Mujahideen come together in Pakistan to form alliance against Soviet forces. Half of Afghan population now estimated to be displaced by war, with many fleeing to neighbouring Iran or Pakistan. New Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev says he will withdraw troops from Afghanistan.
- **1986** - US begins supplying mujahideen with Stinger missiles, enabling them to shoot down Soviet helicopter gunships. Babrak Karmal replaced by Najibullah as head of Soviet-backed regime.
- **1988** - Afghanistan, USSR, the US and Pakistan sign peace accords and Soviet Union begins pulling out troops.
- **1989** - Last Soviet troops leave, but civil war continues as mujahideen push to overthrow Najibullah.
- **1992** - **Mujahideen triumph**, Resistance closes in on Kabul and Najibullah falls from power. Rival militias vie for influence.
- **1993** - Mujahideen factions agree on formation of a government with ethnic Tajik, Burhanuddin Rabbani, proclaimed president.
- **1994** - Factional contests continue and the Pashtun-dominated Taliban emerge as major challenge to the Rabbani government.
- **1996** - Taleban seize control of Kabul and introduce hard-line version of Islam, banning women from work, and introducing Islamic punishments, which include stoning to death and amputations. Rabbani flees to join anti-Taliban northern alliance.

- **1997** - Taliban recognised as legitimate rulers by Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. Most other countries continue to regard Rabbani as head of state. Taliban now control about two-thirds of country.
- **1998** - Earthquakes kill thousands of people. US launches missile strikes at suspected bases of militant Osama bin Laden, accused of bombing US embassies in Africa.
- **1999** - UN imposes an air embargo and financial sanctions to force Afghanistan to hand over Osama bin Laden for trial.
- **2001 January** - UN imposes further sanctions on Taliban to force them to hand over Osama bin Laden.
- **2001 March** - Taliban blow up giant Buddha statues in defiance of international efforts to save them.
- **2001 April** - Mullah Mohammad Rabbani, the second most powerful Taliban leader after the supreme commander Mullah Mohammad Omar, dies of liver cancer.
- **2001 September** - Eight foreign aid workers on trial in the Supreme Court for promoting Christianity. This follows months of tension between Taliban and aid agencies.
- **2001** - Ahmad Shah Masood is killed, apparently by assassins posing as journalists.
- **2001 October** - US, Britain launch air strikes against Afghanistan after Taliban refuse to hand over Osama bin Laden, held responsible for the September 11 attacks on America.

2001 November-December, Taleban falls

- **2001 5 December** - Afghan groups agree deal in Bonn for interim government.
- **2001 22 December** - Pashtun royalist Hamid Karzai is sworn in as head of a 30-member interim power-sharing government.
- **2002 January** - First contingent of foreign peacekeepers in place.
- **2002 April** - Former king Zahir Shah returns, but says he makes no claim to the throne.
- **2002 June** - Loya Jirga, or grand council, elects Hamid Karzai as interim head of state. Karzai picks members of his administration which is to serve until 2004.
- **2002 July** - Vice-President Haji Abdul Qadir is assassinated by gunmen in Kabul.
- **2002 September** - Karzai narrowly escapes an assassination attempt in Kandahar, his home town.
- **2003 August** - Nato takes control of security in Kabul, its first-ever operational commitment outside Europe.
- **2004 January** - Grand assembly - or Loya Jirga - adopts new constitution which provides for strong presidency.
- **2004 October-November** - Presidential elections: Hamid Karzai is declared the winner, with 55% of the vote. He is sworn in, amid tight security, in December.
- **2005 February** - Several hundred people are killed in the harshest winter weather in a decade.
- **2005 May** - Details emerge of alleged prisoner abuse by US forces at detention centres.
- **2005 September** - First parliamentary and provincial elections in more than 30 years.
- **2005 December** - New parliament holds its inaugural session.
- **2006 February** - International donors meeting in London pledge more than \$10bn (£5.7bn) in reconstruction aid over five years.
- **2006 May** - Violent anti-US protests in Kabul, the worst since the fall of the Taliban in 2001, erupt after a US military vehicle crashes and kills several people.
- **2006 May-June** - Scores of people are killed in battles between Taliban fighters and Afghan and coalition forces in the south during an offensive known as Operation Mountain Thrust.
- **2006 July onwards** - Nato troops take over the leadership of military operations in the south. Fierce fighting ensues as the forces try to extend government control in areas where Taliban influence is strong.
- **2006 October** - Nato assumes responsibility for security across the whole of Afghanistan, taking command in the east from a US-led coalition force.
- **2007 March** - Pakistan says it has arrested Mullah Obaidullah Akhund, the third most senior member of the Taliban's leadership council.

Nato and Afghan forces launch Operation Achilles, said to be their largest offensive to date against the Taliban in the south. There is heavy fighting in Helmand province.

Controversy over Italian deal with Taliban, which secures the release of five rebels in exchange for kidnapped reporter Daniele Mastrogiacomo. His Afghan driver and translator are beheaded.

- **2007 May** - Taliban's most senior military commander, Mullah Dadullah, is killed during fighting with US, Afghan forces.

Afghan and Pakistani troops clash on the border in the worst violence in decades in a simmering border dispute.

- **2007 July** - Former king Zahir Shah dies.

A group of South Korean Christian charity workers is kidnapped by the Taliban. Two are killed, the rest are freed over the next six weeks.

- **2007 August** - Opium production has soared to a record high, the UN reports.
- **2007 October** - Fifteen are put to death in the second confirmed set of executions since the fall of the Taliban in 2001.
- **2007 November** - A suicide attack on a parliamentary delegation kills at least 41 in northern town of Baghlan, in the country's worst such attack.

- **2007** December - Two senior EU and UN envoys are accused by Afghan officials of making contact with the Taliban and expelled from the country.
- **2008** April - Nato leaders meeting in Bucharest say peacekeeping mission in Afghanistan is their top priority. They pledge a "firm and shared long-term commitment" there.
- **2008** June - Taliban engineers massive jail-break from Kandahar prison, freeing at least 350 insurgents.

British Defence Secretary Des Browne announces British troop numbers in Afghanistan to increase by 230 to new high of more than 8,000 by spring 2009.

President Karzai warns that Afghanistan will send troops into Pakistan to fight militants if Islamabad fails to take action against them.

- **2008** July - Suicide bomb attack on Indian embassy in Kabul kills more than 50. Afghan government accuses Pakistani intelligence of being behind this and other recent militant attacks. Pakistan denies any involvement.
- **2008** August - Ten French soldiers killed in an ambush by Taliban fighters.

President Karzai accuses Afghan and US-led coalition forces of killing at least 89 civilians in an air strike in the western province of Herat. He later sacks two senior military commanders over the strike.

- **2008** September - President Bush sends an extra 4,500 US troops to Afghanistan, in a move he described as a "quiet surge".
- **2008** October - Germany extends Afghanistan mission to 2009 and boosts troop numbers in Afghanistan by 1,000, to 4,500.
- **2008** November - Taliban militants reject an offer of peace talks from President Karzai, saying there can be no negotiations until foreign troops leave Afghanistan.
- **2009** January - Kyrgyzstan decides to close US air base at Manas that supplies troops and materiel to Afghanistan.

US Defence Secretary Robert Gates tells Congress that Afghanistan is new US administration's "greatest test".

- **2009** February - Up to 20 Nato countries pledge to increase military and other commitments in Afghanistan after USA announces dispatch of 17,000 extra troops.
- **2009** March - President Barack Obama unveils a new US strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan to combat what he calls an increasingly perilous situation. An extra 4,000 US personnel will train and bolster the Afghan army and police, and there will also be support for civilian development.
- **2009** May - US Defence Secretary Robert Gates replaces commander of US forces in Afghanistan, Gen David McKiernan, with Gen Stanley McChrystal, saying the battle against the Taliban needs "new thinking".

US military says a US-Afghan force arrested 60 militants and captured more than 100 tonnes of drugs in Helmand province, in the largest drug seizure since foreign troops arrived in 2001.

- **2009** July - US army launches major offensive against the Taliban's heartland in southern Helmand province, involving about 4,000 Marines and 650 Afghan soldiers.
- **2009** August - Presidential and provincial elections are held, but are marred by widespread Taliban attacks, patchy turnout and claims of serious fraud.
- **2009** September - Leaked report by the commander of US forces, Gen Stanley McChrystal, says the war against the Taliban could be lost within 12 months unless there are significant increases in troop numbers.
- **2009** October - Hamid Karzai is declared winner of the August presidential election, after second-placed opponent Abdullah Abdullah pulls out before the second round. Preliminary results had given Mr Karzai 55% of the vote, but so many ballots are found to be fraudulent that a run-off was called.

The British government says it will send 500 more military personnel to Afghanistan.

- **2009** November - Hamid Karzai is sworn in for a second term as president.
- **2009** December - US President Barack Obama decides to boost US troop numbers in Afghanistan by 30,000, bringing total to 100,000. He also says the United States will begin withdrawing its forces by 2011.

An Al-Qaeda double agent kills seven CIA agents in a suicide attack on a US base in Khost.

- **2010** January - Parliament rejects 17 of President Karzai's first list 24 cabinet nominees. In a further vote, MPs reject 10 of Mr Karzai's second list of 17 nominations.

Taliban gunmen and suicide bombers carry out a bold attack on civilian and government buildings in central Kabul. The fighting leaves 12 people dead, including seven militants.

- **2010** February - Nato-led forces launch major offensive, Operation Moshtarak, in bid to secure government control of southern Helmand province.

President Karzai angers Western diplomats by issuing a decree giving him total control of the UN-backed Electoral Complaints Commission, which helped expose massive fraud in the October presidential election.

Top Afghan Taliban military commander Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar is captured in Pakistan

- **2010** April - President Karzai says that foreign observers were responsible for fraud in last year's disputed poll, and accuses UN and EU officials of involvement in a plot to put a puppet government in power. The White House calls his remarks "genuinely troubling".
- **2010** July - Major international conference endorses President Karzai's timetable for control of security to be transferred from foreign to Afghan forces by 2014.

Source : Adapted from BBC, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/1162108.stm