

Micro/Macro Afghanistan
By Tyler Moselle
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Two narratives often dominate contemporary public discussion about Afghanistan.

One narrative emerges from an organic, bottom-up level, articulated by NGO workers, journalists, country aid specialists, and those who spend time traveling throughout the country, province by province, city by city, searching for personal stories, and personal truths. They argue the country can only develop with the patient, nuanced, detailed attention of individuals and organizations on the ground, in direct contact with “the people.”

The second narrative emerges from policy-makers, think tank analysts, academics, individuals stuck in embassies who cannot leave due to security precautions, and other high-minded, lofty visionaries. They characterize the country as progressing slowly but surely, note achievements in girls attending school, women returning to the workplace, a formal de-emphasis on Shariah law, an emerging economy, and improvements in security. They latch on to policy documents and working papers generated to craft overarching strategic goals.

We must have both to comprehensively understand the vexing complexity of America’s most pressing foreign policy and humanitarian mission underscored in President Obama’s Inaugural address when he committed to forge a “hard-earned peace in Afghanistan.” But there is a missing gap which connects both of these visions and leaves the micro and macro camps clamoring for more.

Before trying to answer what that more is, let us first step back and ask the irreverent question: is Afghanistan worth it?

America invaded Afghanistan to topple the Taliban only because they provided sanctuary to al Qaeda. America and NATO did not carry out a humanitarian intervention when the Taliban slowly imposed Shariah on the country, assaulted art, intellect and reason by dynamiting great Buddha statues at the foot of the Hindu Kush mountains, removed women from the workplace and girls from schools, and persecuted intellectuals, musicians, and opposition figures. Of course the Taliban brought stability and a brutal form of justice to a disorderly, war-torn, society. The West was assuaged.

Obama campaigned on the argument that he would refocus America’s attention on those who attacked the United States on 9/11: Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda. Obama would not allow Americans to be distracted by the ill-conceived and ill-planned invasion of Iraq: Afghanistan would receive the attention it deserved.

But what is that attention exactly? Obama’s recent announcement of the “Af-Pak” policy review focused mainly on destroying al Qaeda, preventing Afghanistan from being used as a launching pad for international terrorist activity, and attempting to induce Pakistan to

assist in clamping down on militants. The plan does not articulate a nation-building objective even though it does note the U.S. will prod international organizations to support development. In short, the Obama Af-Pak policy is minimalist and surprisingly not much different substantively than the Bush Administration's "global war on terrorism" agenda that focused on defeating and destroying al Qaeda. Obviously the Bush Administration's agenda was global related to State safe havens for al Qaeda while the Obama Administration's agenda is localized, focusing specifically on Af-Pak. The Obama Administration would pursue and hunt international terrorists outside the region of Af-Pak much like the Bush Administration did, but would probably not initiate invasions as a tool to overthrow regimes who potentially would harbor transnational terrorist movements and leaders.

What can America do to al Qaeda and how does this relate to Af-Pak? Say America kills or captures bin Laden and all of the senior al Qaeda leaders, disrupts 90% of al Qaeda's operational infrastructure and logistical operations, and effectively maims the rest of the foot-soldiers and cells around the world. Even if this were possible, Afghanistan would still be one of the poorest countries in the world, still be forced to deal with the worldview of the Taliban, and still be surrounded by countries like Iran and Pakistan, while being entangled with regional politics emanating from China, India, and Russia.

Then there's Pakistan. Pakistan is the only country in post-colonial history besides Israel that was created almost purely on the basis of religious identity. Pakistan faces serious internal conflicts with its civil-military relationship, places 70% of its defense capabilities against India, does not have a solution for Kashmir or the Durand Line, and has nuclear weapons. The majority of Pakistanis dislike American policies. Numerous Islamist movements and strict worldviews germinate from within the country. Pakistan does not control its border region. Pakistani Madrassas engender educations hostile to the West, many of which are funded by Saudi Arabia. The list goes on.

Even if America does entirely defeat al Qaeda, how many other organizations are ready to take its place? How many more Muslims feel contempt for the West because of Palestine, because of their own authoritarian and corrupt regimes, because of a poor local economy, because of a poor education, because they feel historically and culturally humiliated?

The counter-argument is that these organizations do not have a global agenda or reach – which al Qaeda did. This is largely true. But the main point is that the Obama Af-Pak macro strategy does not reach fully into deeply rooted micro-problems. Perhaps this is asking too much for a new President and a new Administration.

Or perhaps, America and the West can do better.

Perhaps there is a way to synthesize the micro/macro visions, objectives, and struggles of so many individuals, organizations, and thinkers. Perhaps there is a middle ground.

Let us start more specifically with the micro. There are roughly 105 international organizations and foreign NGOs, roughly 10 Afghan NGOs, roughly 30 international and Afghan NGOs focusing women and children, roughly 15 different foreign diplomatic missions, and roughly 20 different overt military missions all working in Afghanistan. Each of these organizations employs a variety of individuals who work on detailed and specific issues such as: traveling to provinces to interview villagers, asking them what they need and/or want; building schools; working as accountants, project managers, translators, teachers, and security contractors; helping to re-establish cultural traditions and heritage. These individuals argue Afghans need basic things such as electricity, sewage systems, running water, adequate healthcare, decent education, professional police and military to provide security, politicians who are not corrupt, and cordial relations between the various ethnic and religious groups in the country. These individuals and organizations work on these issues at a granular level: they meet with local leaders to convince them to garner support from the community for a new school, to employ young men to clean up trash, to train Afghans in basic vocational skills such as woodworking, pottery, jewel carving, construction, and calligraphy. These micro-workers struggle and sweat and suffer. And see minimal results in short periods of time. They listen to policy-makers or diplomats visit on short trips, or debate with analysts who cannot truly interact with the people because of security restrictions, and wonder if the policies they are crafting are informed by real information, real people, with real hopes, dreams, problems and traumas. The policy-makers and Ambassadors sometimes seem surreal as if the words they are writing and speaking are only meant for themselves and their cadre of professionals who exist in an impenetrable bubble. These micro-working individuals renounce the comforts of a western lifestyle and are generally not well-paid. They seek adventure, are motivated by idealism, and some simply want to live and work in a raw environment with minimal rules. Many are romantically frustrated being forced to move in small expat circles but find ways to relieve stress and renew optimism. They have difficulty seeing the forest from the trees and wonder if their efforts will turn out to be fruitful for themselves and the country they generally become fond of.

Let us turn more specifically to the macro. There are roughly 175 proclaimed experts on Afghanistan hailing from think tanks, Universities, and media organizations. There are nearly 5,000 overt analysts, diplomats and thinkers from government, military and international organizations who claim an expertise on, or work in an office focused on, Afghanistan. These individuals are typically educated at the best schools in history, political science, economics, religious studies, sociology, anthropology, philosophy and languages. They read about and reference the deep history of Afghanistan noting tensions between the ethnic groups (remember the Pashtuns are the majority), political/economic/cultural connections to the various surrounding countries (Iran will protect Shiite minorities), highlight the invasions of former countries and individuals (Alexander the Great, Genghis Khan, the British, and the Russians all tried to rule the country), analyze the potential for economic development via natural gas or natural minerals (the Uzbekistan pipeline could affect Russian interests), investigate differences between Islamic law and culture and Western concepts of rule of law, democracy and human rights (there is such thing as an Islamic democracy), and employ years of counterinsurgency history and theory to scope out the Taliban and other potential

militants arising from the Afghanistan/Pakistan border (civilians are the center of gravity). They write reports and articles because the incentive system for their work and production line is different from the system at the micro level. They need to produce immediate analysis during the 24 hour news cycle and assure policy-makers there are historical, social, religious, cultural, and economic precedents for certain actions. They translate policies to the world and deepen the superficial goals of politicians. When they hear the opinions of the micro-workers they may view them as uneducated, simple, and naïve. They view the micro-level work as vital but missing a key ingredient from grand analysis. They try to admire the trees while looking at the forest from a far away mountain or in some cases, a citadel.

And then there is the missing, magic lynch-pin of the in between where the problems from micro/macro Afghanistan come together: the local Afghan people and leaders who have the will, the education, the money, the energy, the passion, the stamina, to say: “thank you, we’ll take it from here.” They are the only group that can successfully synthesize and integrate micro/macro Afghanistan.

There is a gap here because it does not exist. The micro and the macro camp both wish it did and both try to engender such a group with their work but the frustrating reality is that most Afghans who were educated, wealthy, or had the will, were either killed during the last 30 years or left the country. After 9/11, many from the Diaspora came back to help rebuild and serve the country but they are simply too few and far between.

Afghanistan lacks the economic and educational prerequisites to generate a new class of leaders. The country has experienced so much trauma and destruction that it may take another 20 to 30 years to even develop to the point where Afghanistan looks like one of its neighbors. Will the international community be willing to contribute to a program of sustained, longer-term development so Afghanistan can reach that point? Will the international community grow tired of benchmarks and set backs and irritated domestic constituents and turn its eye to the next failed/failing state such as Somalia?

We can argue that the UN, or NATO countries, or the EU, do not have the ability to carry out long-term nation-building projects. We can argue that it is difficult to convince citizens to support fellow humans in a far away country. We can do all of these things but somehow, we realize none of these answers, or even questions, are satisfying.

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