

CHAPTER 4

The Institutional Career of the ACSU Project



Kabul, June 2007, the UNHCR Branch Office. The afternoon is given over to a big party in the grounds of the Executive Office. The hundred or so employees gather in a marquee set up in the garden, around a banquet of kebabs and fruit. This celebration marks a major rollover of staff, with five people leaving and four coming in. But above all, it marks a change of leadership. Saverio arrived a few months earlier (in February 2007) to head the Afghanistan Operation. It was he who decided to organise this celebratory gathering. And among those who are about to leave is the Deputy Head of Mission, who has been in Kabul for three years and is now leaving for Geneva. To replace him, Eric has just rejoined his partner as Deputy Head of Mission. Saverio introduces him enthusiastically to his colleagues. Since Eric arrived, spirits have been high in the Executive Office and the new Representative has attacked his work with renewed fervour. The knowing winks they exchange indicate not only their pleasure at seeing one another again but also their excitement that they do so in Kabul, with a status that gives them more authority to influence the organisation's policies.

This chapter follows the career¹ of the ACSU project within the UNHCR – how the strategy evolved and how it became established as its authors took up new roles and the institutional context also changed. We left them on the third floor at Headquarters, at the South-West Asia Desk. Their promotion to lead one of the organisation's most important interventions thus appears to indicate that their innovative strategy was being pursued with conviction within the UNHCR. However, as I will show, despite the support of senior managers at Headquarters, this vision did not yet enjoy a consensus or have a concrete impact on the everyday management of the Afghan Operation. In early 2007 Eric and Saverio were promoted to lead it. While their approach thus became more

rooted in the field, opposition sharpened in the Tehran and Islamabad offices, while Saverio and Eric, faced with the priorities of the field and representing the UNHCR by virtue of the position they occupied, also came to somewhat modify their view.

By following the career of the ACSU project, we can examine the difficulties involved in translating this atypical strategy, which the UNHCR bureaucratic structure found hard to 'digest', onto the operational level. These difficulties derived both from the opposition of a number of internal actors and from the project's 'tailor-made' character, which departed from the standardised frameworks of understanding and management. The innovative potential of the ACSU project was thereby weakened. Considering the project's institutional career also offers the opportunity to examine the organisation's internal functioning. This incorporates powerful mechanisms of rationalisation and standardisation, such as internal hierarchies, staff rotation and formatted procedures for making reality legible, which are essential to an institution operating on a global scale. But this does not mean that the organisation functions mechanistically. Observing the multiple different perspectives that develop and come into conflict, depending on the trajectory and stance of each internal actor and the permanent processes of reconfiguration and negotiation that underpin the UNHCR's everyday activity, allows us to conceptualise its institutional space as an arena.

A Contested Approach

As noted above, when it was conceived, the ACSU project enjoyed a consensus that gave it a powerful legitimacy and led to the creation of the ACSU in 2003. The support of the then Representative in Afghanistan and some senior directors at Headquarters, who saw this approach as a reasoned and appropriate way of addressing the issue of Afghan refugees in the long term, despite its unusual character, were crucial in this process. But a dedicated unit and a strategic paper were not enough to make the new approach operational reality. In order for the strategy to influence the management of the programmes on the ground at all levels, it had to win over all the internal actors involved. However, not only did most of these actors have no hierarchical link with the unit created at Headquarters, they also had a different view of the problem and different priorities, depending on their position within the institution and the specific problems they encountered in their work.

In the distribution of tasks established in 2003, the Unit was simply juxtaposed with the work of the Desk,² and its two staff members were integrated into strategic discussions. They followed the evolution of the situation on the ground closely. They provided analytical support and catalysed

internal strategic reflection, seeking to establish consistency between the three Country Operations in Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan. Bolstered by their status as experts and sanctioned by the senior hierarchy, despite their lower rank, they participated in key decisions alongside senior managers from Headquarters and those in Tehran, Kabul and Islamabad. In the meantime, they also worked on setting long-term goals: they commissioned research on the labour market and migration flows, managed contacts with the IOM and the ILO with the aim of organising joint activities, and organised ‘high-level strategic consultations’ with representatives of the governments involved. These took place in Brussels in 2004, Kabul in 2005 and Islamabad in 2006 (AREU and Ministry of Refugees 2005; AREU and CSSR 2006).

Eric and Saverio hoped that in the long term, the strategy would be gradually incorporated into the local management of the three Country Operations and that the ACSU would merge with their leadership. Thus, once the strategy had been launched, the unit could be wound up and together the three Operations would follow the established tactical plan. This line of action seemed well in train during my placement in 2006, as Saverio had combined his position in the ACSU with the directorship of the Desk since 2005.

Nevertheless, the ACSU project encountered difficulties during its first three years. At Headquarters, colleagues in the Protection Department were hesitant or even anxious. During the weekly Desk meetings I attended, the delegate from Protection regularly expressed her concerns: would these long-term programmes focused on ‘migrant workers’ not detract attention from the concrete reality of the Afghans in immediate ‘need of protection’? It would be better to concentrate on more immediate goals that could have a substantive impact for the population for which the UNHCR was directly responsible. They also felt the strategy’s approach was over-intellectual and idealistic.

To some extent, these debates had their roots in the perennial tensions between the UNHCR’s two major departments: Operations (of which the Desks are part) and Protection. The UNHCR’s expansion during the 1990s laid the groundwork for an antagonism between the two, one of them focused on legal protection and the other on humanitarian interventions. The lawyers tend to feel that the compromises required to fund programmes weaken the organisation’s capacity to fulfil its central mission, and even hijack this mission. But the concerns of the colleagues from Protection also related to a key element of the ACSU project: the holistic approach to migration flows. The Protection Department works tirelessly to define the legal boundaries of the specific category of persons for which the UNHCR is responsible, i.e. refugees – hence the difficulty of persuading them of the usefulness, for an organisation dedicated to refugees, of taking into account the entirety of the Afghan population in Iran and Pakistan.

These doubts were shared by the managers of the Country Operations, who were unreceptive or even opposed to the approach being advocated by Geneva. The Representative and their Deputy lead the UNHCR programmes in the field, with a status just below that of the senior management in Geneva (the directors of departments at Headquarters and the 'troika' comprising the High Commissioner and their two Deputies), and they enjoy a great deal of autonomy. The managers in the region put up resistance and expressed doubts about the viability of the ACSU project. Thus, during the initial years from 2003 to 2006, the unit's activity remained juxtaposed to the three Country Operations, and associated with Saverio and Eric as individuals. This was despite the fact that they had made frequent missions to the region and had collaborated with the management of the three Branch Offices in organising the 'strategic consultations', and that official documents (validated at the Desk level) had gradually incorporated the strategy's objectives. In practice, however, in the long term, the strategy was not followed with conviction in the field.

In Tehran and Islamabad the UNHCR managers, daily grappling with the Iranian and Pakistani authorities, were dealing with increasingly harsh conditions for Afghans and rising tension in negotiations. The senior staff of the Tehran Branch Office, for example, did not question the soundness of the strategy, but were very cautious. In their view, laying the foundations for a transformation of Iranian immigration policy would lead to a conflict of priorities that would be very difficult to manage – at a point when the UNHCR's room for manoeuvre was increasingly restricted as repatriation rates fell. Despite a few gestures, they felt that the Iranian government had no interest in following the project's long-term recommendations as put to them during the 'strategic consultations'. Their view thus aligned with that of the lawyers at Headquarters: in these circumstances, it was better to focus on more immediate goals that could have concrete effects for people who fell directly under the UNHCR's mandate.

In Kabul in the meantime, the former Representative who had encouraged the development of the ACSU strategy had been replaced. In his final mission before retirement, the new head was not enthusiastic about innovative approaches at this stage in his career. When I arrived at the Kabul Branch Office in 2007, I was surprised to find that staff knew relatively little about the content of the ACSU strategy, and at best it was seen as a somewhat nebulous approach cooked up at Headquarters in Geneva. The studies commissioned by the ACSU were displayed at the entrance to the Executive Office, but were tellingly covered with a thick layer of dust. The term 'comprehensive' was not understood by colleagues in the sense of strategy and did not arouse their curiosity; instead, it was ascribed, with a degree of mistrust, to a tactical and rather empty choice of language aimed at making the strategy attractive to donors and enhancing the image of the UNHCR as an innovative organisation.

The attitude of the three Representatives reflected the structural antagonism between Headquarters and the field. Officers based at Headquarters claim to have an overview, an encompassing position that allows them to stand back from the context of each Operation and hence take into account what is at stake for the UNHCR as a whole. This position justifies the relative hierarchical superiority of Headquarters, where the senior managers have their offices, and budgets, strategic orientations and field programmes are approved. As noted above, this encompassing vision is strongly evident in the regional and long-term approach taken by the ACSU. But it often meets with distrust from officers working in the field, who see it as too distant from the local, concrete operational realities with which any strategy must ultimately get to grips. At the Kabul Branch Office, staff working in the hushed corridors and well-appointed workspaces of Headquarters were often referred to as ‘those who sit in Geneva’. From Kabul, Geneva is seen as the place of bureaucracy, where all people do is write reports and come up with new procedures and budget limitations; it is the place where people have time to focus on details (for example, footnotes and the consistent use of acronyms), to be sophisticated. In the field, on the other hand, there is no time to ‘sit around’; staff are not in a position to get lost in nuances, because they are caught up in concrete, complex and contingent reality, and have to react to unforeseen events. Colleagues in Headquarters are often accused of disregarding local difficulties.

The strategy was also out of step at the administrative level. This project was a ‘nightmare’ for the administrative staff. The administration and accounting involved fell outside the norms for a structure accustomed to managing programmes on an annual basis (whereas the unit’s project funding was supposed to run over two and a half years), operations targeted on specific countries (as opposed to this one with its regional scope) and with subordinate execution partners (while here the IOM and the ILO were equal funding partners for the project). Moreover, since Saverio had become Director of the Desk, management of the project had fallen to Eric, who was highly independent and impatient with bureaucratic formalities; he saw administrative requirements as less of a priority than the concrete pursuit of activities, and hence regularly aroused the irritation of colleagues in Administration.

This stalling of the strategy was beginning to shift. At the end of 2006, when the leadership of the Afghan Operation was due to be replaced, the managers at Headquarters decided to appoint Saverio and Eric to head it. The central leadership of the organisation had changed since 2003. António Guterres had replaced Ruud Lubbers as High Commissioner. The director of the Asia Bureau, Saverio and Eric’s direct superior, was also new, and since his appointment, relations of respect and trust had been established. These new managers also agreed with Saverio and Eric’s convictions and felt that

‘comprehensive solutions’ was the best approach. In the face of an increasingly alarming situation (the resumption of conflict in Afghanistan and growing pressure for return from the Iranian and Pakistani authorities), they decided to trust the authors of the long-term strategy. Given the growing complexity of the ‘equation’, their vision, however unorthodox and demanding, seemed the only one capable of overcoming major deadlock.

Thus, at the end of 2006, the Unit was wound up and Saverio and Eric took over the reins of the Afghanistan Operation. This was a substantial promotion for them, testifying to the trust placed in them. Saverio was the organisation’s youngest Representative and was taking on leadership of the UNHCR’s largest intervention. Eric, despite his short length of service with the UNHCR and his hitherto peripheral position as an adviser, acquired a position of responsibility and representation in the institution. Saverio, whose career had been more conventional (although young for a Representative, he had already had a long career with the UNHCR), remained nevertheless the live wire of the partnership: when he emailed me to tell me of his new posting, he said ‘I’m taking Eric with me’.

Thus, the vision advocated by Saverio and Eric had the opportunity to become more rooted in the institution and influence the ongoing management of the Afghan Operation. For these two, it was an opportunity to come face to face with reality and take full responsibility for their recommendations. They recognised that the results remained hitherto modest and lagged behind the original time plan: the public declarations of the Iranian and Pakistani authorities had remained as inflexible as ever since 2001, despite the ‘strategic consultations’ and the research already undertaken. But they also remained fully convinced of the validity of their project. What was needed now was to get to grips with the UNHCR’s internal machinery, to integrate the strategy more fully into the structure so that it could be pursued more consistently.

Staff Rotation

Before examining the challenges that awaited Saverio and Eric in Afghanistan, I shall take a moment to consider the procedure whereby they were transferred from Geneva to Kabul, making it possible for the strategy to circulate within the organisation. This is the policy of staff rotation. As Saverio pointed out at the party in Kabul: ‘In this job we’re always welcoming and saying goodbye to colleagues.’ Following a ritual I witnessed many times, the Representative says a public farewell to each member of staff who is leaving the office. In their remarks about the departing employee, they speak of the mission the employee has just completed and wishes them good luck for the following posting, before presenting them with a gift from the whole office.

Each departing employee also makes a speech, usually followed by speeches from their closest colleagues.

The life of the Kabul Branch Office, and the appearance of the offices, was punctuated by the rotation of expatriate staff. Spaces were perpetually rearranged and repopulated each time with new files, diagrams and photos. Thus, the gloomy space of the Executive Office in Kabul, where workspaces were installed for staff in transit, acquired an unusually solemn quality when Eric settled in there as he waited to take over the grand room reserved for the Deputy Head of Mission once his predecessor departed. And when a new post was created and a manager whose role justified a separate office arrived, the distribution of offices had to be completely revised. Dispossessed of the quiet outer room I had been sharing with a colleague who was only there in the afternoons, I found myself sharing the office of the Deputy Head of Mission's assistant. In this room, next to Eric's office, the constant comings and goings enabled me to participate more in the life of the office – but made it much more difficult to concentrate.

Staff rotation is a pivot of the UNHCR's bureaucratic machinery. Under this procedure, expatriate employees circulate between the agency's offices, on missions that last an average of two years. Rotation is based on the principle of interchangeability of expatriate staff and is designed to ensure that the most difficult postings are shared, and also to avoid the personalisation of relations with the organisation's interlocutors. It contributes to the high level of mobility of expatriate staff³ and accounts for a considerable part of the institution's administrative work (especially on the part of the Human Resources department). This procedure is also found in other forms of bureaucratic administration operating over extensive territories, such as the diplomatic postings of foreign ministries, or imperial and colonial administrations (Anderson 2006; Aymes 2008). In these administrations as for the UNHCR, rotation of staff is an instrument of rationalisation and standardisation that enables the organisation to operate in a multitude of contexts while retaining global consistency (according to Weber, this is one of the principal interests of bureaucratic authority). Thus, this procedure fulfils an essential function of stability and reproduction of the institution.

For the protean, geographically dispersed machinery of the UNHCR, rotation of expatriate staff is a key element of consistency and internal cohesion. By way of their 'bureaucratic pilgrimages', to use Benedict Anderson's term,⁴ UNHCR employees circulate around the UNHCR's context of intervention and functions. They mark the perimeter of the organisation's field of intervention, and renew relations between offices. Not only do they come into contact with many of their counterparts, fostering an esprit de corps, they also develop an awareness of the organisation as a whole. Thus, by virtue of their mobility, international officers form the hard core of the organisation; they

embody its 'global' identity, transcending contextual interventions and are the agents of its epistemological, ideological and administrative consistency. On this point, Fresia (2010) describes UNHCR expatriates as an 'imagined community' that is close-knit despite its geographical dispersal. Moreover, rotation is also what distinguishes expatriate staff and sanctions their superior position in the hierarchy relative to both administrative staff in Geneva and staff recruited locally in countries of intervention. These employees do not rotate. Their localised and therefore peripheral position is underscored by hierarchical subordination.

Although at the level of the institution, rotation of expatriate staff is key to internal consistency, within each administrative unit, it limits continuity and acts as a brake on institutional activity. The federative function of mobility is in fact offset by the constant reconfiguration of teams. Officers – social actors each with their own background, personality and aspirations – are not as interchangeable as the bureaucratic ideal type suggests. Each rotation therefore entails a period of familiarisation, an individual and collective endeavour to integrate the new arrivals, and establishing legitimacy with one's colleagues. A new balance, including in relations of power, has to be negotiated each time.

The process of internal specialisation that took place within the UNHCR as it expanded led to a diversification of posts in terms not only of geographical context but also of tasks. A position in the Protection Department, for example, may take a completely different form depending on whether the person works at Headquarters drawing up directives or in the field coordinating aid programmes, in constant interaction with local authorities, refugee representatives and NGO staff. Thus, each time an employee changes post, they need time to familiarise themselves with their new role. In addition to the specific tasks associated with the post, there are always quantities of new elements that need to be absorbed as quickly as possible in order to get to grips with the role, from the organisation's strategy in the country to the content of programmes, the names of provinces and of ministers, not to mention all the new acronyms to be remembered. The new arrival also has to integrate into a pre-existing socioprofessional group, which includes both new colleagues (expatriate and local) and external partners. Ultimately, it takes several months to become genuinely operational.

The set of knowledges and skills specific to the operational context is mainly acquired from colleagues *in situ* or from documents prepared by those who previously worked in the Operation. These modes of transmission imply strong dependence on colleagues already working in the context. Length of service in a particular posting gives officers a special authority with their colleagues. When I arrived at the Kabul office, I was welcomed by my line manager, who acted as my guide, outlining the programmes and pointing me towards key documents to read. At the beginning, she consistently checked

the documents I was writing for external circulation, modifying terms, turns of phrase and the hierarchy of information. Asha had arrived for her first mission in Afghanistan after a long mission in Sri Lanka. She found herself head of an entire section at the Kabul Branch Office, while her juniors had been working in the Operation for much longer. Several months later, she still felt that she had not managed to catch up and free herself from her dependence on her colleagues. She relied heavily on Clara, who had been in Afghanistan for four years and had also been posted in the field in Herat for two years. Effectively, notwithstanding the hierarchy, it was Clara who led the section.

Subsequently, as the rotation continues, officers rapidly become 'experts'; long service is soon won. Barely ten months after I arrived, I was the one who welcomed, guided and supervised a new colleague joining the small Donor Relations section. Similarly, when a colleague arrived on a mission from Headquarters, we were his primary source of information, even those of us who had just arrived. This rapidly gained 'expertise' is precious in relations with colleagues but equally contingent, for it will be reset to zero at the beginning of the next mission.

It is now becoming clear what was at stake when Saverio and Eric arrived to lead the Afghan Operation. The time was counting down from their first day: this was 'their moment' to apply the direction they advocated to the organisation's policies in the field, knowing that they could not stay there indefinitely.⁵ But before anything else, they had to familiarise themselves with the functioning of the Operation and, above all, to gain the trust of the teams already there. For Saverio, this was a return, since he had already been on mission in the region in 2002 and 2003. But his service in the field was not recognised as such by his colleagues in Kabul, because all the expatriate staff had changed since that time and because his job had been to maintain communications between the managers of the three Operations, and he had had little contact with the Afghan staff. For his part, Eric, on his many missions to Afghanistan, had been working for other organisations. Nor was the role of experts on Afghanistan that they had been credited with since 2003 recognised, as at the Desk they had interacted mainly with the managers they were now replacing. In the eyes of most of the staff posted to Afghanistan, Saverio and Eric were simply the new managers arriving in Kabul, who they hoped they would get on with.

The 'Briefing Kit' and Other Standardised Legibility Tools

Before examining how they took over the reins of the Afghan Operation, I consider another internal tool in the UNHCR's bureaucracy: the standardised frameworks for reading reality. This will help to highlight a significant element that made the ACSU an atypical project: its tailor-made character.

The diversity of operational contexts and the heterogeneous nature of UNHCR postings heightens the need for standardised points of reference that are easy to adopt and allow expatriate staff to move smoothly from one posting to another and quickly familiarise themselves with the contexts in which they are working. Thus, staff rotation goes hand in hand with formatted tools for reading the real-world situation, amplified by the culture of New Public Management (Jacobsen and Sandvik 2018). Faced with a heterogeneous and complex reality, the institution develops uniform, universal models of legibility and action that can be applied everywhere, enabling it to stabilise representations of reality and to take the measure of any situation and make it manageable. These models must be easily transposed and simple to handle. They therefore work more by analogy⁶ and synthesis than through detailed knowledge of a context.

This feature is common to all bureaucratic institutions. James Scott (1998) analyses the procedures of rationalisation and standardisation developed by the state in order to convert the hieroglyph of reality into a legible and therefore manageable format. The need for standardised frameworks of understanding is even more acute in the case of the UNHCR because of the global scope of its activities. The organisation has not only to manage a multiplicity of specific contexts in a similar way (as in the case of a colonial administration or an NGO with projects in a limited number of countries), but to support all of the world's refugees. The UNHCR is thus continually engaged in the construction of a global order: the multiple contexts are seen as different sections of a coherent global system; local phenomena arise within the continuity of global phenomena; and local contexts are the multiple facets of the same 'refugee problem'.

The *Global Appeal* report offers a good illustration. Each year, this document gives an overview of the UNHCR's activity throughout the world (priorities, programmes, budgets and operational aspects), mainly with the aim of raising funds (UNHCR 2007m). An introductory section on trends in refugee affairs and the UNHCR's priorities in the world is followed by a description of each Operation in geographical order. The result is a coherent representation of the refugee phenomenon and the UNHCR's activity on a planetary scale. Contexts and activities are set within and harmoniously integrated into a global system, just as the UNHCR's global priorities are pursued at a local level. The information on Operations is produced by the Branch Offices, who are asked by Headquarters to fill in a template with preset fields. These files will be grouped by regions and then by continent. The introductory paragraphs on regions and continents are written by the editors. The resulting document describes a world that is entirely within the UNHCR's grasp.

The world is rendered legible for UNHCR employees primarily by the international episteme of refugees (see Chapter 2). The reading involved in

this episteme allows migration phenomena and contexts of intervention to be classified according to easily mobilised concepts. It provides a key for comparing UNHCR postings, roles and programmes in such a way that staff are never at a loss in a new posting. Migrations are categorised as movements of ‘refugees’ or ‘migrant workers’, depending on people’s reasons for departure. Countries are divided into ‘countries of origin’, ‘countries of asylum’ or ‘resettlement’ depending on their place in the migration journey. UNHCR programmes involve ‘repatriation’, ‘reintegration’, ‘integration’ or ‘resettlement’. The concept of ‘refugee situations’ allows for comparison between flows and programmes.

Recurrent use is also made of ‘portmanteau concepts’. These are not highly developed analytically; they simply need to be sufficiently elastic to be easily applied to various different contexts, in order to facilitate comparison and help identify common lines of action. They often reflect a new way of understanding or presenting the organisation’s priorities rather than the result of detailed definition and conceptualisation. The concept of the ‘protracted refugee situation’ is one example of these amorphous ideas. This concept became widely used within the UNHCR during the 2000s, aiming to draw the attention of donors and the public to the political deadlock that was preventing the ‘resolution’ of many ‘refugee situations’. The definition is quite flexible: the characteristic features of such ‘situations’ are the number of years they have continued, the number of refugees concerned and the absence of any prospect of solution.⁷ Nevertheless, ‘protracted refugee situations’ are defined as a distinct phenomenon, with its own causes, effects and scale. Thirty-three such situations were identified in 2004, involving more than half of the world’s refugees (UNHCR 2006a: 10). The concept quickly became a new key for comparative reading across situations, and a category among the UNHCR’s global strategic priorities. In 2006 an entire chapter of *The State of the World’s Refugees* report was given over to ‘protracted refugee situations’ (UNHCR 2006a: 105–77). In 2007, the concept was the central plank of understanding for the UNHCR’s work in Asia, allowing for comparison between Afghans in Iran and Pakistan and the Karen in Thailand, the situation in Myanmar and the conflict in Sri Lanka (UNHCR 2007i).

The distribution of manuals and guidelines represents another way of producing and transmitting uniform, encompassing and transferrable cognitive frameworks and models of understanding. They are always produced by the central offices, with the aim of standardising the practice of subordinate offices. The Geneva Headquarters is therefore the primary producer. Manuals stabilise the interpretations circulating within the organisation and guide the actions of officers beginning a new mission. The best known is the one on criteria and procedures for determining refugee status (UNHCR 1992 [1979]), but there are many others, such as those on emergency contexts (*Handbook*

for Emergencies) and on repatriation (*Handbook for Repatriation and Reintegration Activities*). When I arrived in Kabul, I was given a small handbook recently completed by the Protection Department in Geneva, entitled *UNHCR and International Protection: A Protection Induction Programme*. This was written for all employees in order to instruct them in the basics of refugee protection and communicate the current priorities and concepts to all UNHCR officers (UNHCR 2006b).

One of the key elements among the procedures for producing, organising and transmitting knowledge within the organisation is the 'briefing kit'. This is a file that brings together documents of various kinds (statistics, reports, maps, budgets, etc.), with the aim of providing concise but exhaustive key information on a given case, situation or context. The briefing kit is omnipresent. When I arrived at the Kabul office, my line manager drew up a list of colleagues who I should ask to brief me on the work of their offices, and also provided me with documents she deemed essential to read in order to grasp the context of the Operation and what was involved in my job. When a senior manager from Headquarters came on mission to the region, each of the three Branch Offices sent the Desk the key documents for their Operation. These were put together in a comprehensive file that the manager read on the plane, so that he could know what he was dealing with when he landed in the region.

My work consisted precisely of producing and updating briefing material – the documents that inform the UNHCR's external partners in Kabul about Afghan refugees and the organisation's programmes. I put together innumerable briefing kits, either in digital form or on paper. The preparation of the kit becomes an 'art', with the kit acquiring its own aesthetic: how best to put together the different elements that make it up (maps, statistics, narrative sections)? What is the most attractive format, the easiest and the most pleasurable to consult? What format is most appropriate to the person it is made for? I remember my disappointment when I realised that the material available would not allow me to present similar briefing kits to the various donors invited for a briefing – and the admiration I felt when my colleague from Jalalabad, on internal mission in the region, gave me a particularly well-crafted briefing kit on the UNHCR's action in the east of the country. Where had she got hold of those folders – did they come from Pakistan? When had she had the time to prepare it so carefully?

A pre-prepared and anonymous pack that packages reality in manageable, transmissible, ready-to-use formats, the briefing kit is one of the tools essential to the smooth functioning of UNHCR bureaucracy. It embodies the institution's bureaucratic rationality and its quest for consistency. Easy to produce and absorb, this procedure enables officers to move easily from one posting to another, to make reality manageable, to be interchangeable and always ready for action. Officers are spared the effort of reflecting and

gathering for themselves the information that seems relevant to them. They have only to absorb the information selected by their colleagues.

Thus, global legibility is generated at the cost of simplification and even difficulty in grasping the specificities of the multiple operational contexts. While it makes it possible to intervene across vast territories, the bureaucratic framework is not equipped to deal with the incongruity and complexity of reality, or to grasp the historical, geographical and contextual aspects of phenomena. As Scott cogently explains (1998), bureaucracy tends to impose its own constraints on reality: the continual effort to maintain consistency that underpins its operation may even distort reality to make it conform to the needs of legibility and functionality. While they are essential elements of the flexibility that allows the organisation to operate on a global scale, these tools of legibility lead to a rigid understanding of reality and make it more difficult to adapt and take contextual specificities into account.

Take, for example, the knowledge held by longer-serving staff in a given Operation. This knowledge, the fruit of having spent longer in the place, does not necessarily equate to a deeper understanding of the sociopolitical context. It is usually an operational competence resulting from greater familiarity with the office procedures, its local partners and past programmes. This understanding is shaped by the institution and remains entirely compatible with a profound lack of connection with local reality (see Chapter 5).

Local languages do not feature among the set of knowledge to be acquired when an officer arrives in a new posting. The limited length of missions and the rarity of interactions between expatriate staff and locals give no incentive to invest time in studying them. In my job, speaking French was a hundred times more important than speaking Dari, since it allowed me to interact with European donors. Those who nevertheless make the attempt find once again that their learning is mediated by the organisation. My Dari teacher, for example, had previously taught several other colleagues. He taught me phrases – such as ‘the head of mission is in his office’ and ‘the UNHCR is closed today’ – associated with the bureaucracy of which I was part; the subjects were often his former students. In the end, owing to other priorities that determined my work, and lack of practice (given that English was always the language I spoke with my colleagues), I did not succeed in learning Dari despite my motivation to do so.

During my first placement with the UNHCR, I was surprised to discover that in order to build a career in the organisation, specialist knowledge of specific cultures, training in international law or knowledge of languages other than English and French were not as highly valued as personal qualities – charisma, quick thinking, relatability and adaptability – together with accumulated practical experience of working in the field of refugee aid. Building up missions was a major asset, enabling officers to master the key frames of

reference and thus to acquire a mindset that allowed them to contain the complexity of the world. These frames of reference are acquired directly through practice, by working in the organisation. Thus, what matters is the number of missions accrued rather than a detailed knowledge of a specific context. ‘I’ve done Darfur, Congo, Côte d’Ivoire...’: each mission was not only a mark of distinction, but also added to the list signifies greater wisdom and expertise as a refugee aid professional.

In addition to offering an insight into the internal functioning of the UNHCR, this digression on standardised legibility tools helps to pinpoint a feature of the ACSU project that made it particularly hard for the institution to digest: the fact that it was tailor-made. Saverio and Eric worked with an approach they had matured over the years, through in-depth, context-specific reflection on the long-term issues of the Afghan refugee crisis. As noted above, Eric in particular was not preconditioned by the international refugee episteme or by operational requirements, but did have particular knowledge of the Afghan context. His approach resulted from years of work in Afghanistan in various capacities, from reading research on the issue, from continual monitoring of the current situation and from a rigorously regional attitude. This was an approach that took the history, economics and the social dimension of Afghan migration seriously, and situated them in a larger historical context. Such a relationship to a specific situation is very unusual in the UNHCR.

The result was a strategy that was repeatedly described as ‘sophisticated’ and even sometimes ‘oversophisticated’: sophisticated in the sense of ‘coming from Headquarters’, as noted above, where officers have the luxury of taking time to reflect, consult research studies and think on the grand scale – but also because of the frame of analysis and the concepts used, which were all different from those in the predetermined strategies. The concept of ‘population movements’, references to ‘migrants’ and to ‘development’ issues in the argument, for example, limited the document’s legibility and made it hard to absorb. While it may seem paradoxical that Headquarters should support such an approach when it is there that standards are usually generated, it should be borne in mind that the senior managers who approved the strategy did not have to apply it themselves; their main concern was that the Afghan crisis should be well managed, even at the cost of making it an exception. Moreover, as noted above, the regional and long-term approaches corresponded closely to that of Headquarters.

How would officers in the field react? On top of the difficulty of grasping it, a bespoke project coming from Headquarters calls into question the role of offices in the field and their capacity to adapt the standard to the context.

Leading the Afghan Operation

To return to Saverio and Eric: when I arrived at the Kabul Branch Office in early April 2007, just a few weeks after Saverio had arrived, his change in status was striking. I had left him in his Geneva office as Desk Director. His workspace was more spacious than that of the other Desk staff, but he was only separated from his colleagues by plastic partitions with Venetian blinds. You could see when you passed through the corridor whether he was in his office or not, in a meeting or on the phone. He was always approachable: when I arrived and before I left, he had taken the time to have lunch with me. During my first day at the Kabul Branch Office, I did not see him at all – I merely heard his authoritative voice in the foyer as he gave final instructions to his secretary before getting into the car that his personal driver kept just outside the office. It was not until late in the evening that I dared to cross the now darkened office of his secretary, listen to see whether he was in a meeting or on the phone, and finally knock on his door to say hello. In the vast room that was now his office, he looked up from his files and greeted me warmly, but his eyes and hands were focused towards his computer, ready to dive back into his work.

In 2007 the Kabul Executive Office, where around twenty people worked, was the heart of one of the UNHCR's biggest interventions. It was the central cog in the administrative machinery of the Afghan Operation, directing all the activities of the Branch Office. There were around one hundred people working there, and it was responsible for the administration and coordination of all the Afghanistan Sub-Offices, accounting for a total of around six hundred employees. It was a nerve centre of power, linking levels of activity and reporting lines, and occupied a key position in the chain of bureaucracy. Within the space of a few seconds, the Representative's inbox might receive a Sub-Office's report on a mission in difficulty, a confidential message from the High Commissioner, an email from the head of UNAMA about the most recent Taliban attack, another from the Human Resources section about renewal of a contract and so on. Having arrived full of enthusiasm and energy, Saverio would not lose his charisma or his intensity and dynamic energy, but his drawn appearance was an irrefutable sign of a gruelling workload. The fact that he took no holiday, and the times when his emails were sent, offered evidence of how he sought an ultimate balance between his own needs and keeping a grasp on the machinery of the Operation.

Having started from a relatively peripheral position, the two authors of the ACSU project found themselves at the head of one of the central hubs of the organisation. But their new positions did not automatically translate into immediate pursuit of their long-term strategy. It was not this vision that would help them to establish their legitimacy as managers. Moreover, in order

to bend it to one's vision, one must first have control of the mechanism. Thus, to begin with, while it remained on their strategic horizon, the ACSU strategy was not their priority: they first had to take hold of the reins of the Operation.

Having arrived with specific ideas about the long-term regional strategic orientation, the new managers quickly developed other views of priorities and the changes that were needed in internal organisation. As soon as he arrived, Saverio took hold of the Operation with gusto, aiming to re-energise and revitalise it, in order to foster greater cohesion between Sub-Offices and the Branch Office. Once Eric arrived, they embarked on a full review of the Operation. The comprehensiveness and rapidity of the changes shook up the habits of each and every member of staff, and inevitably aroused mistrust and resentment. Some criticised them for not even taking the time to assess the field and consult those who had been there for longer. The new priorities necessarily demoted programmes that had previously been considered priority, to the great disappointment of those leading them. This transition meant an increase in workload for everyone, even if it was only in adapting to the new priorities. The intensified work rate and organisational changes were particularly burdensome for colleagues whose missions were coming to an end.

Saverio and Eric, aware of the tensions their decisions might arouse, adopted a number of strategies to enhance their credibility, win the trust of the staff and build a close-knit team. First, they surrounded themselves with trusted collaborators. Just as Mr Gortani had done a few years earlier, Saverio invited colleagues with whom he had worked in the past to join him in key posts in Kabul (including as directors of the Branch Office Administration and Programme departments), as their previous missions came to an end. Second, they took care to establish links between the changes they were introducing and what had been done in the past. The Afghan Operation had the reputation of being particularly well managed, owing its success to the close-knit teams that had succeeded one another. As the third Representative since the Operation was set up in 2001, Saverio always presented his work as a continuation of that of his two predecessors. In the autumn he invited and welcomed Mr Gortani – who I recognised from having seen his photograph on the desk of his former secretary – to Kabul. A drinks reception was organised in the garden, during which several of the Afghan staff gave heartfelt speeches welcoming him ‘home’.⁸ Despite the changes they introduced, Saverio and Eric always showed the greatest respect for their predecessors and what they had accomplished.

Saverio and Eric also highlighted their longstanding links with the Operation and their understanding of the Afghan context. Saverio emphasised that he already knew several of the staff who were leaving, having met them during the time he had been working in Afghanistan. Shortly after his arrival, a photo of a much younger Eric, when he was in Herat during the 1970s,

was circulated around the Kabul Branch Office, as a lighthearted reminder of his longstanding expert knowledge.

Over the months, Saverio won powerful legitimacy and was able to bring everyone behind him. His charisma, his devotion to his work and his drive, including the attention he gave to ensuring information was shared, quickly won him the trust of staff and established him as a popular leader.

With the change in leadership in Kabul, the ACSU project began to be integrated more into the everyday management. From this point on, all decisions taken by Branch Office senior staff were marked by this long-term vision. In this way, the content of the strategy was disseminated to the staff of the Afghan Operation. For example, in April 2007, during one of the first meetings of heads of Sub-Offices since he had taken up his post as Representative, Saverio declared ‘we are following a vision’, which he then proceeded to explain. The public documents produced by the office also emphasised the strategy more systematically. Thus, in a strategy document published in the spring of 2007, the establishment of a legal framework for regional migration appeared as one of the UNHCR’s three major objectives in the region (UNHCR 2007b). For my part, in the weekly bulletins I was writing, I referred to it as often as possible, providing data on the frequency of cross-border movements and emphasising the need for a comprehensive approach to ‘Afghan population movements’ (UNHCR 2007p). Moreover, from the moment they arrived, Saverio and Eric had prioritised the relationship with the representatives of the European Commission Humanitarian Aid Office (ECHO) and the American Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration (BPRM) (the organisation’s key donors), and took care to ensure that their long-term strategy was understood and supported within the ‘club’, as Saverio called these gatherings.

Nevertheless, the place given to the ACSU project in the ongoing management remained relatively limited, confined to papers and high-level discussions. After several months, I could not help but note with disappointment that we were far from a radical shift of perspective among the staff in Afghanistan. Certainly, the vision was still clearly a strategic objective for the managers sitting in Kabul Branch Office, but their approach had changed markedly since they had arrived in the field.

The relatively peripheral place they had occupied in Geneva had allowed them to position themselves as unorthodox experts. Now that they were leaders, other priorities arose. First, the time they were able to devote to the strategy was much reduced, as their first concern was to run the Operation and, as will become apparent, to manage the successive crises. But there was also the question of how to introduce an atypical approach that was difficult for staff to take in when they were now representing the institution and concerned for its internal cohesion and smooth running. In their position as

managers, they had to draw on standardisation tools that enabled them to direct the Operation (for example, the new standardised model for monthly reports from Sub-Offices that Saverio, unsatisfied with the previous model, instituted). A radical change of vision would be too costly.

The change of posting also partially altered Saverio and Eric's point of view because they were now in the field. In a reflective moment, Eric confided in me that once he was faced with his post in Kabul, he understood that his vision had remained detached from the problems of the field. He recognised that he had underestimated factors such as time schedules, the smooth progress of the reconstruction programme in Afghanistan (see Chapter 9) and the relative willingness of the Iranian and Pakistani authorities to negotiate (see Chapters 7 and 8). This explains why this phase of preparing the field and waiting for the right moment to finally push the ACSU project forward was extended indefinitely.

The Regional Front

In addition to the Afghan Operation, Saverio and Eric had another concern in Kabul: relations with the two neighbouring Operations. In the UNHCR's internal geographical organisation, the Operations in Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan make up the 'South-West Asia' region,⁹ which reports to a single Desk at Headquarters. Since the three Operations all focus on Afghan refugees and work in the same regional political context, the managers in Tehran, Kabul and Islamabad need to be aligned and consistent in their positions. The repatriation programme in particular requires joint negotiations with the authorities in the three countries, as well as continuous coordination between Sub-Offices on either side of the borders. While studies on humanitarian organisations generally focus on the vertical dimension – i.e. the relationship between headquarters and field (Atlani-Duhault 2005; Dauvin and Siméant 2002; Mosse 2005) – examining the horizontal dimension of relations between neighbouring Operations reveals a more complex play of internal connections and power relations.

At the point when Saverio arrived in Kabul, a process of decentralisation was under way in the UNHCR (and across the UN more broadly), aiming to create regional platforms to which Headquarters would grant greater decision-making and financial powers, in order to bring decision-making closer to the field and to foster greater cohesion between Operations dealing with the same crisis. From 2007, the Operations in Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan were thus considered as 'the Afghanistan Situation' and were deemed to require a 'situational approach'. The Kabul office became the regional coordinating centre, and its Representative combined his role with that of 'Regional

Co-ordinator'. The regional approach of the ACSU project married well with this 'situational approach' promoted by Headquarters, and it is likely that this contributed to the decision by senior staff at Headquarters to entrust the leadership of the Kabul office to Saverio and Eric.

Yet tensions between neighbouring Operations were common. With the rates of repatriation falling, the situation in Afghanistan deteriorating and increasing pressure for return from the Pakistani and Iranian authorities, internal relations were becoming tense. It was difficult to reconcile the viewpoints of the Tehran and Islamabad Branch Offices, whose priority was to retain room for negotiation with the authorities in the 'host countries', and that of the Kabul office, faced with the urgent challenges of reintegrating returnees. For Saverio, becoming Regional Co-ordinator was also no easy matter. As noted above, the senior staff in Tehran and Islamabad had reservations about the long-term strategy, which they felt was not sensitive to their difficulties. Because of Saverio's age, they had even more difficulty in accepting his role and seeing him as not just a peer but above all a coordinator. Saverio was after all in his first post as Representative, whereas his opposite numbers in Tehran and Islamabad were older and well versed in their roles as managers.

These tensions were latent even before the crises of the summer of 2007 brought them out into the open. They were apparent when the Deputy High Commissioner for Operations came on mission to the region. This mission was organised down to its finest detail by the leadership of the Branch Offices, and occupied a large number of employees for several weeks. In each country, everything was put in place to ensure that the UNHCR 'number two' got the best possible impression of the Operation and its managers. His itinerary was planned down to the last detail. Saverio gave a trusted person the task of preparing her food (the instructions received from Headquarters specified that the 'number two' did not like to miss meals). The Representative in Islamabad went to the airport at 5 am to welcome her to the region. In a situation of latent horizontal tensions, the concern for each Representative was both to show how well he was managing his own Operation and could therefore be entirely trusted by Headquarters, and to make clear his point of view on the management of the 'Afghan Situation'. Each office therefore sought to impress on the top level of the organisation the main difficulties facing its Operation. For Saverio, for example, it was important to make clear to senior management the difficulties involved in reintegrating returnees – challenges that, in his view, should have been taken more fully into account when negotiating with the Iranian and Pakistani authorities. On returning to Geneva, the Deputy High Commissioner herself noted in her report that for the time being the 'situational approach' was far from established, since the three Branch Offices had very different visions and priorities.

The acid test for regional cooperation arose immediately after Saverio's arrival in Kabul in April 2007, when a first crisis erupted. The Iranian authorities began to expel tens of thousands of undocumented Afghans,¹⁰ who thus found themselves stuck in desert areas on the Afghan-Iranian border, in conditions of acute distress. Never before had the Iranian authorities gone so far in terms of number of deportations and the conditions in which those expelled found themselves. A split emerged between the offices in Tehran and Kabul on how to manage this situation.¹¹ UNHCR managers in Tehran took a cautious approach. In a daily stand-off with the Iranian authorities, they were less inclined to take responsibility for Afghan deportees, or to adopt a public position by openly criticising the expulsion policy. Familiar with the unilateralism of the Iranian authorities, and working to alleviate repressive measures against Afghans holding a regular status in Iran, they feared that a confrontational stance would risk further reducing the UNHCR's room for negotiation.

The managers in Kabul took a different view. The escalation of deportations had generated a new situation: demonstrations in the street, the sacking of two ministers and so on. Never had the issue of Afghans in Iran received so much attention, both from the Afghan government or from international actors in Afghanistan. This attention put pressure on the UNHCR, which was clearly considered responsible for the deportees despite the fact that they were not officially 'refugees'. The organisation's reputation was at stake, at the same time as its legitimacy and its ability to work in the south of the country were being challenged by the Taliban. In addition, Saverio and Eric wanted to capitalise on this heightened attention to plead for one of the objectives of the ACSU project: the introduction of a bilateral regime to manage the migration of workers between the two countries (which would, among other things, protect Afghans from expulsion). From this point of view, while the UNHCR was not officially responsible for undocumented Afghans, the deportations were an indirect concern for the organisation. 'We can't wash our hands of this situation', Saverio declared emphatically at a meeting of Heads of Section where the expulsions were the subject of a long discussion.

Saverio and Eric thus favoured an interventionist approach aiming to assist deportees. Ultimately their point of view was endorsed by the Tehran office, following consultations with Geneva. At the same time, the issues raised by the managers in Tehran could not be ignored. It was therefore agreed that the UNHCR would act discreetly under the auspices of a multilateral intervention and would not officially take a critical position.

In this case too, the ACSU project shaped decision-making in the field more directly, even at a regional level. Nevertheless, the approach was still contested and its implementation always required negotiations with the managers of the neighbouring Operations. There was also an additional difficulty.

When Saverio and Eric were in Geneva, equally distant from the three Branch Offices, they could not be suspected of supporting one Operation more than another. Once they were in Kabul, it became difficult to hold the role of regional leader at the same time as heading the Afghan Operation, since it was even more difficult to recognise the difficulties Tehran and Islamabad encountered in their negotiations with the Iranian and Pakistani authorities from Kabul. Thus, at the very moment when the authors of the ACSU strategy arrived in the field, the horizontal understanding between Operations, so vital to the strategy, became more problematic.

The UNHCR as a Bureaucratic Arena

Even when they are investigating the reasoning and procedures behind the governance of bureaucratic institutions, many researchers tend to attribute greater coherence to institutions than they actually have. They also assume the existence of a single intentionality and way of thinking, which simply needs to be decoded before analysing how it is implemented. For example, Scott (1998) tends to view the state as a homogeneous actor that sees the world through a unified gaze – as the title of his book *Seeing Like a State* indicates. Ferguson (1994), in his study of a World Bank project in Lesotho, intelligently uncovers the conceptual apparatus of development while highlighting its depoliticising way of thinking. But he does this on the basis of a single document, the World Bank's 1975 Country Report on Lesotho. As for Barnett and Finnemore (2004), they seem to abstract the internal actors who design and implement the impersonal norms they view as the characteristic feature of international organisations.

Tracing the trajectory of the ACSU project within the UNHCR has shown that on the contrary, a bureaucratic institution cannot be ascribed a single gaze or even a unified voice. Many gazes coexist within the UNHCR (multiple resolutions and ways of approaching and understanding a given situation), and many types of documents are produced at the same time (from the *Global Appeal* report, with its standardised entries, to the ACSU project's strategic papers). Seen from the inside, the UNHCR is far from a monolithic institution operating mechanically and impersonally through its bureaucracy.

Max Weber (1968) saw bureaucratic administration as the form of power best adapted to large-scale interventions and to large populations. According to the ideal typical features identified by Weber, the legal authority that underpins bureaucratic operation rests, among other things, on a division of labour based on clearly defined areas of responsibility, on a hierarchy that monitors the activity of its officers, and on stable regulations that guide decision-making. These procedures make it possible to stabilise representations of reality,

to make collective action predictable and to give bureaucratic power the universal potential to be applied to any kind of task, in any context.

Powerful procedures of rationalisation and standardisation are indeed at work within the bureaucratic apparatus of the UNHCR. The hierarchies and areas of responsibility laid down in the organisational structure (which attribute greatest power to the levels furthest from the field) are augmented by the circulation of officers, and cognitive frameworks that standardise the understanding of reality. Maintaining an overall consistency and a grasp of reality is all the more essential because the organisation has a global remit and intervenes in a wide range of political, cultural and linguistic contexts. These principles of rationality, hierarchy and transparency are evident in the architecture of the Headquarters building in Geneva (see Figure 3.3) – a massive, geometric structure within which each officer is given a workspace (containing at least a desk, a chair, a computer and a landline), the characteristics of which generally reflect their position in the hierarchy. The higher up one goes, the more elevated one is in the hierarchy, up to the offices of the ‘troika’ on the uppermost, eighth floor. Glass, as ubiquitous inside as it is on the outside, symbolises transparency.

But we have also seen that these procedures of rationalisation and standardisation are not sufficient in themselves to explain the UNHCR’s internal functioning. I have noted, for example, the limits of the organisation’s legal authority. The approval of the strategy by senior managers, and the appointment of Saverio and Eric to a position of power were not enough to establish the ACSU strategy, for in order to carry forward and realise a vision, its legitimacy has to be won and continually renewed with all the interests concerned. The post of manager involves a constant effort to establish one’s authority. Each office fulfils a necessary function and establishes a unique position within the bureaucratic structure, and this interdependence relativises hierarchies.

Hierarchy and standardisation also come up against the plurality of perspectives that coexist within the institution – a plurality that the dominance of legal frameworks and rationalisation cannot of themselves bring into alignment. As I have noted, officers are by no means as interchangeable as bureaucratic rationality would wish. I have also noted that depending on its position within a particular arena, on its partners and specific difficulties, each office develops its own vision, its own way of understanding the organisation’s priorities. These visions may be very different, if not irreconcilable.

The result is that the design and implementation of policies are continually contested and involve compromising with many different points of view. The UNHCR as institution can thus be seen from the inside as a *bureaucratic arena*: a field demarcated by bureaucratic rationality, within which many different actors interact and compete. These actors – offices and officers – effectively constitute hubs rather than cogs. Within this field, which is constantly

reconfigured thanks to internal staff rotation, negotiation is permanent and relations of power are redefined over time. Accounts that suggest order and consistency (reports, organisational charts, etc.) testify not to an actual consistency, but rather to the constant efforts to organise and align within this arena. These efforts are thwarted both by the diversity of viewpoints that come into conflict within the organisation and by the specific details of each context of intervention.

This approach to the UNHCR aligns with a growing body of recent social science research on international organisations in general and international aid organisations in particular. This research reveals the plurality and diversity of the actors who interact within these organisations (officers, diplomats, experts, local staff, etc.) and their trajectories (Ambrosetti and Buchet de Neuilly 2009; Atlani-Duhault 2005; Bendix 2012; Dauvin and Siméant 2002; Fresia 2010, 2012; Mosse 2005; Pouliot 2006). They reveal an institutional space that is open and porous, at the crossroads between national and international fields, traversed by the transnational circulation of ideas, norms and knowledges, a place of negotiation between different understandings and interests (Abélès 2011; Cling et al. 2011; Decorzant 2011; Kott 2011).

Notes

1. In interactionist sociology, the concept of career designates an actor's sequence of moves within a given field over a given period. This concept seems appropriate here, as it allows the development of the strategy itself to be dynamically linked with the institutional context in which it was set. Drawing on one of the best-known studies that uses this concept, Howard Becker's study of 'deviant careers' (1963), here I show how the impact of a deviant strategy is diluted within the institution.
2. The administrative unit that acts as an interface between the offices in the field and Headquarters, and is part of the Asia Bureau, which in turn is a section of the Operations Department.
3. Within the UNHCR, some postings involve rotating between operations even more often; this is the case, for example, with teams deployed in emergencies. Internal missions are also very frequent.
4. Anderson describes the journeys of colonial officials in Latin America as 'bureaucratic pilgrimages', arguing that this mobility emerged as a secular counterpart to religious pilgrimages during the development of the administrative machinery of absolutist monarchies in the seventeenth century (Anderson 2006: 54–55).
5. Overall, their time there would last four years: Saverio remained Representative until the end of 2008, whereupon Eric took over the role until the end of 2010.
6. Aymes sees comparison as a central strand in the profession of provincial administrator in the Ottoman Empire, used by officials who found themselves in unknown lands and attempted to 'return to familiar ground' (2008: 7).
7. The UNHCR defines a 'protracted refugee situation' as a 'long-lasting and intractable state' in which after 'five or more consecutive years' of exile refugees have no prospect

of a solution to their situation and their 'basic rights and essential economic, social and psychological needs remain unfulfilled' (UNHCR 2004d).

8. A similar, but much less celebratory, atmosphere of remembrance overcame the Branch Office a few months later, on the death of the preceding Representative.
9. Depending on the context, Afghanistan may be attached to various different geographic units – Central Asia, South Asia, etc. For example, the US State Department locates the country in South Asia, a throwback to the geography of the opposing blocs during the Cold War. The UNHCR emphasises the geographical unity of South-West Asia in referring to the area circumscribed by Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan. For the UNHCR, this unit makes sense because it brings together the 'country or origin' and the two main 'host countries' of Afghan refugees.
10. The issue of Afghans' status in Iran will be analysed in Chapter 7.
11. In this chapter the focus is on divisions between the Kabul and Tehran offices. In Chapter 8 I will consider those between the Kabul and Islamabad offices.