

How is Afghanistan Different from Al Anbar?

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Al Anbar was a tough fight. Yet after four hard years of war, US Marines and Soldiers, together with the Sunni tribes, defeated Al Qaeda in Iraq and established security. Now, battalions of Marines may be headed to Afghanistan for a fight that promises to look different from the one in Al Anbar. Factors that loom large in any counterinsurgency campaign—politics, society, economics, and outside support—bear only passing resemblance to Al Anbar. This paper highlights 9 major differences between Al Anbar and Afghanistan (particularly southern Afghanistan) and considers their implications for the Marine Corps.

1. Sectarianism in Iraq versus government misrule in Afghanistan

In counterinsurgency, politics is primary. Politically, Iraq has been defined by its civil war. In contrast, sectarian divides are muted in Afghanistan. The political problem is that the government has failed to rule fairly or well. It has upset large portions of the Pashtun population by favoring certain Pashtuns over others and by imposing itself upon populations that would prefer to be left alone. Insurgents fight for many reasons—Islam and jihad against non-Muslim invaders among them—but government misrule cannot be discounted.

Implications: For a long time in Al Anbar, the Marines had to worry more about getting Sunni representation in the government (and security forces) than ensuring Sunni leaders governed well. This will not be the case in Afghanistan. Improvements in local security are likely to prove fleeting until government leaders improve their policies.

2. The tribal movement in Al Anbar versus divided tribes in Afghanistan

The basis of the turnaround in Al Anbar was a social movement—the alliance of tribes that together threw out Al Qaeda in Iraq. In Afghanistan, tribes are even more important. Yet there is an important difference. Pashtun tribes in Afghanistan are highly decentralized, broken into small bits and averse to coming together. They do not readily unite into a powerful military force.

Implications: As in Al Anbar, tribal engagement has merit in Afghanistan. Decentralization and local interests, though, may prevent the formation of the kind of large-scale tribal movement witnessed in Al Anbar.

3. Afghanistan's unique history of warlordism

Afghanistan has a history of warlordism that never existed in Iraq. The jihad against the Soviets bred a new social class: mujahideen commanders with guns and money, dubbed "warlords" in the West. After 2001, the government supported many warlords. They abused the population and contributed to the Taliban's resurgence.

Implications: Marines will run into warlords. They will have money and guns, and they will be willing to fight the Taliban. Caution is advised. Allying with them can greatly upset other warlords and, more importantly, tribes and locals who are the victims of warlord predation.

4. The major rift in the Al Anbar insurgency versus the minor rifts in the Afghan insurgency.

In Al Anbar, differences between the tribes and Al Qaeda in Iraq over ideology and competition over power eventually splintered the insurgency. In Afghanistan, tribes may have disagreements with the Taliban or Al Qaeda but no major rifts have yet been identified that might unite them behind the government.

Implications: The absence of a major rift in the insurgency further lessens the likelihood of an Al Anbar-style Awakening occurring in Afghanistan in the near future. The creation of smaller-scale tribal movements centered on villages and districts appears to be a more feasible objective for Marine commanders, at least until a major rift can be identified and exploited.

5. Arab tribal customs versus Pashtunwali

The tribes of Al Anbar have a set of customs, which are followed to varying degrees. The Pashtuns have Pashtunwali, "the way of the Pashtuns," which they follow closely. Some important aspects of Pashtunwali are: any attack must be avenged regardless of the cost or passage of time (*badal*), the honor of a woman must not be violated (*tor*), and any guest must be treated hospitably (*melmastia*).

Implications: For Marines, Pashtunwali means that what was acceptable in Al Anbar may be less acceptable in Afghanistan. Cordon and search operations risk entering rooms considered private or, worse, reserved for women. Air strikes risk killing family members. Either will oblige a Pashtun and his immediate relatives to seek revenge. The Taliban thrive off such vendettas.

6. The urban Al Anbar insurgency versus the rural Afghan insurgency

Most people in Al Anbar live in the cities. Afghanistan is predominantly rural. Most people live in small villages of mud-walled compounds distributed throughout the countryside.

Implications: Counterinsurgency in Al Anbar was about protecting the population concentrated in the cities and towns. In contrast, counterinsurgency in Afghanistan will require protecting a rural population that is spread out over a very wide area. A critical problem will be how to dispose Marine forces in a way that secures the population without stretching the Marines thin.

7. IEDs and suicide attacks in Al Anbar versus small-unit tactics in Afghanistan

Tactically, insurgents in Al Anbar excelled at IEDs, suicide car bombs, and assassination and intimidation. Afghan insurgents excel at small-unit tactics. Tales abound of insurgents luring US forces into well-laid ambushes. Over 100 insurgents—using fire and movement and good cover and concealment—often take part in large-scale attacks on district centers and outposts. Sometimes insurgents even assault a US position, something virtually unheard of in Al Anbar.

Implications: Marines will face tougher small-unit engagements, in many cases over terrain that will make maneuver difficult. Preparation to deal with both IEDs and to defeat groups of over 100 insurgents will be needed.

8. Fuel smuggling in Al Anbar versus the poppy trade in Afghanistan.

In Al Anbar, the insurgency depended partly upon black-market smuggling of fuel for funding. Rather than fuel, Afghan insurgents have the poppy trade. It is not unreasonable to estimate that the poppy trade provides the Taliban ten times the amount of funding that fuel smuggling provided to insurgents in Iraq. It may account for nearly 75 percent of Taliban funding.¹

Implication: The poppy trade helps make the insurgency resilient. More money means more men, more guns, more supplies, and, most importantly, more resources with which to win local hearts and minds. What to do is unclear. The government's own reliance on the poppy trade and its unfair targeting policies make all-out eradication a sticky proposition. Ignoring the poppy trade altogether leaves insurgent economic resources untouched. The right answer remains to be found.

¹ David Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

9) Sanctuaries: Syria versus Pakistan's tribal areas.

Al Anbar's borders were never secured. Insurgents always moved back and forth from Syria. The level of outside support from Syria, though, pales in comparison to what the Afghan insurgency enjoys inside Pakistan's tribal areas. The Taliban and other insurgents control large swathes of territory, aided and abetted by Pakistan's military.

Implications: Like the poppy trade, the safe havens in Pakistan mean that the Marines can expect the insurgency to be resilient. The Marines may clear and hold certain areas in Afghanistan. However, the insurgents will probably be able to make repeated attempts to infiltrate into the population by retreating across the border, resting, reorganizing, and then returning. They may be able to do this season after season until the situation in Pakistan changes.

Conclusion

In summary, the differences between Al Anbar and Afghanistan will have implications for counterinsurgency. Four implications stand out:

- 1) Without reducing the abusive behavior of the government and their warlord clients, it is hard to see how security measures can have a long-lasting effect.
- 2) Together, the large sanctuary in Pakistan's tribal areas and the poppy trade make the insurgency resilient. It may have the wherewithal to endure several fighting seasons.
- 3) The fragmented nature of the tribal system, the absence of a major rift between tribes and the insurgents, and the feuding of Pashtunwali make small-scale community-based successes more likely than large-scale province-wide successes.
- 4) A rural environment, the tactical skill of the insurgency, and Pashtunwali call for a re-thinking of the tactics of counterinsurgency. The costs of some may exceed their benefits.

In spite of all these differences, Al Anbar and Afghanistan have some similarities: in both countries, tribal engagement, clear, hold, and build operations, and advising indigenous forces have been effective, even if the tactical details of implementation differ. These similarities make clear that some fundamentals of counterinsurgency remain the same even though strategy as a whole may need to be re-shaped around the unique characteristics of Afghanistan.

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