How is Afghanistan Different from Al Anbar?

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Executive summary

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.

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.

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

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.

A new campaign[*]

Al Anbar was a tough fight for the Marine Corps. The Sunni people, allied with the terrorists of Al Qaeda in Iraq, rose up against US presence and the Shi'a-dominated government. Al Anbar's cities raged with violence: IEDs littered the streets, suicide car bombs tore apart police stations, and a brutal assassination and intimidation campaign cowed (at least temporarily) anyone thinking of working with the government. Eventually the situation changed. A series of American and Iraqi clear, hold, and build operations secured the cities. Marines and Soldiers dispersed into outposts and patrolled the streets, making themselves into a model of good counterinsurgency. Most importantly, Sunni tribal leaders grew tired of Al Qaeda in Iraq and turned against them. Soldiers and Marines took advantage of this turn of events and backed the tribes. Together, the Sunni tribes and the Americans defeated AQI and established security in Al Anbar.

Now, battalions of Marines are 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, the policies of the insurgents, economics, and outside support for the insurgency—bear only a passing resemblance to Al Anbar or Iraq. Politically, Iraq has been defined by its civil war. Staunching it has been an imperative for US forces. In contrast, sectarian (and ethnic) divides are muted in Afghanistan; a fairly representative government exists. The political problem is that the government has failed to rule fairly or well. The structure of society differs too. The basis of the turnaround in Al Anbar was a social movement—the alliance of tribes who together threw out Al Qaeda in Iraq. In Afghanistan, tribes are highly de-centralized, broken into small bits and averse to coming together. Nor does the insurgency itself look the same. Insurgents in Afghanistan pay closer attention to keeping the support of tribes and the population. There is no obvious analogy to Al Anbar's rift between the tribes and Al Qaeda in Iraq. Tribes may have disagreements with the Taliban or Al Qaeda but as of yet no major rifts have formed that unite the majority of the tribes behind the government. Finally there are the two most obvious differences between Afghanistan and Al Anbar: the poppy trade, which pumps money into the insurgency, and the insurgent safe haven in Pakistan, which dwarfs anything that Syria, Saudi Arabia, or Jordan ever afforded the Sunni insurgents.

These differences naturally affect what kind of strategy US commanders adopt. In this paper, we do not seek to recommend a strategy but rather to highlight the differences between Al Anbar and Afghanistan and to consider their implications upon counterinsurgency. While we frequently refer to "Afghanistan", we are really focusing on southern Afghanistan and its

[*] The authors thank Kael Weston, Lieutenant Colonel Dimitri Henry, Patricio Asfura-Heim, Sarah Chayes, and Dr Jonathan Schroden for their comments.

Pashtun inhabitants. That is where the Marines will most likely be fighting. We examine 9 major differences:

1) Sectarianism in Iraq versus government misrule in Afghanistan

2) The strength of Arab tribes in Al Anbar versus Pashtun tribes in Afghanistan

3) Afghanistan's unique history of warlordism

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

5) Arab tribal customs versus the Pashtun tribal code (Pashtunwali)

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

7) The IED and suicide attacks of the Anbar insurgents versus the small-unit tactics of the Afghan insurgents

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

9) The cross-border sanctuaries surrounding Al Anbar versus Pakistan's tribal areas.

What are the implications of these differences? What do they mean for the counterinsurgency efforts of US Marines and Soldiers? Here are the four common implications that stand out:

1) Government misrule and warlordism define the problem in Afghanistan. Without reducing the abusive behavior of the government and their warlord clients, it is hard to see how security measures will have a long-lasting effect.

2) Together, the large safe haven in Pakistan's tribal areas and the poppy trade make the insurgency resilient. They may have the wherewithal to go round after round, fighting season after fighting season.

3) The fragmented nature of the tribal system, the absence of a major rift between tribes and the insurgents, and the feuding of Pashtunwali demand patience and forethought in the planning and execution of tribal engagement efforts. Small-scale community successes are more likely than large-scale province-wide successes.

4) Pashtunwali, a rural environment, and the tactical skill of the insurgency call for a re-thinking of the tactics of counterinsurgency. Some tactics, most notably cordon and searches, air strikes, and population control measures, may need to be restrained. Because of Pashtunwali, their costs may exceed their benefits.

The remainder of the paper discusses each of the differences and their implications.

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Government misrule is more of a problem than sectarianism

In counterinsurgency, politics is primary. The political problem in Iraq was sectarianism. Shi'a dominance over the government and military upset the Sunnis in Al Anbar and elsewhere, compelling many to fight. It was not the only factor behind the insurgency but it was certainly a major one. Accordingly, US officers worked to convince the Iraqi government to let Sunnis from Al Anbar have their own security forces, economic assistance, and greater political representation.

Afghanistan has many ethnic groups (all but one of which are Sunni). Uzbeks and Tajiks live in the north and west. Hazaras (who are Shi'a) live in the center. Pashtuns, the largest group, live in the east, west, and south (where the Marines are likely to deploy). The vast majority of the fighting occurs in Pashtun areas and the vast majority of the insurgents are Pashtuns. But neither sectarian nor ethnic conflict is a major factor behind the insurgency, at least not yet. Pashtuns play a major role in the government. A Pashtun—Hamid Karzai—is president and other Pashtuns fill important posts and sit in the legislative body, the National Assembly.

Rather than sectarianism or ethnic conflict, the political problem is government misrule.

The current government—across the national, provincial, and district levels—has managed to upset large portions of the Pashtun population by treating them poorly, favoring certain Pashtuns over others, and imposing itself upon populations that would prefer to be left alone. This is not Tajiks or Uzbeks oppressing Pashtuns. This is Pashtuns oppressing Pashtuns. According to the most recent Asia Foundation survey, "governance issues…feature strongly amongst the reasons why people think things are moving in the wrong direction, including corruption (19%), bad government (12%) and administrative corruption (9%)."[2] Afghans take up arms for many reasons—Islam and jihad against non-Muslim invaders among them—but government misrule cannot be discounted.

This is particularly the case in southern Afghanistan. Hamid Karzai became president in 2001, following the defeat of the Taliban. To bolster his political support, he appointed a select group of warlords, supportive tribal leaders, and his own family members into positions of power in the south. These new officials delivered spoils and patronage to their tribes and sub-tribes and, worse, mistreated the people in general. Widespread corruption, participation in the poppy trade, limited delivery of goods and services, illegal taxation, and abusive police upset the people.[3] In the words of Sarah Chayes, the writer who has lived in Kandahar for 7 years, "ask any Afghan what's really needed, what would render the Taliban irrelevant, and they'll tell you: improving the behavior of the officials whom the United States and its allies ushered into power after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks."[4]

[2] "Afghanistan in 2008: A Survey of the Afghan People," The Asia Foundation, 2008, www.asiafoundation.org, 18.

[3] See Antonio Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov, and Laptop: The Neo-Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan* (London: Hurst, 2007); Ahmed Rashid, *Descent into Chaos: the United States and the Failure of Nation Building in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia* (London: Viking, 2008); and Sarah Chayes, *The Punishment of Virtue: Inside Afghanistan After the Taliban* (New York: Penguin, 2007).

[4] Sarah Chayes, "The Other Front," *Washington Post*, 14 December 2008.

Government misrule opened the door for the Taliban's return.[5] Since 2006, the British, Dutch, and Canadians have tried to reform government leadership in the south and Karzai has installed more professional governors but, alas, numerous problems remain.

Implications

For a long time in Al Anbar, US officers had to worry more about getting Sunni representation in the government (and security forces) than about ensuring that Sunni leaders governed well. This will not be the case in Afghanistan. Improvements in local security are likely to prove fleeting until district and provincial governments improve their policies. Outposts and patrolling may reduce the number of attacks but as long as misrule persists the people will still be oppressed and will still be fertile ground for insurgent recruiting.

For Marines and Soldiers on the ground, a major question will be how to encourage government leaders to rule justly and fairly. Mentorship is one way, but another may be a willingness to hold back support at times in order to compel government leaders to do the right thing. Perhaps a district governor does not need to be given additional reconstruction projects until he brings more tribal elders into decision-making. Or perhaps the district police chief does not need a new police station until his police stop taxing people on the road. The ultimate punishment would be to lobby the national government for the removal of a poor leader, though you never know who will be the replacement.

A final way to reduce government misrule could be to work with the national government to empower traditional tribal structures. The idea is not to supplant the national government, which has an important role to play in Afghanistan, but to draw structures into the fold that may be more representative and have greater authority on the ground. The wisdom of this course of action is open to debate. Regardless, working with tribes in Afghanistan is different than in Al Anbar, and it is to that topic that we now turn.

[5] See Elizabeth Rubin, "In the Land of the Taliban," *New York Times Magazine*, 25 October 2006.

Tribes matter in Afghanistan, but are more divided than in Anbar

In Al Anbar, tribes play an important role in society, particularly in rural areas. They resolve disputes, distribute patronage to their tribesmen, and defend their communities. At the same time, competing political institutions and figures—city councils, state courts, the provincial council, mayors, and the governor—limit their power, particularly in the cities. In Afghanistan, tribes are even more important. Competing political institutions and figures are much weaker, and the majority of the population lives in rural areas, far from government institutions.

Yet there is an important difference between tribes in Al Anbar and tribes in Afghanistan. In Al Anbar, Soldiers and Marines came to understand that, while a shaykh might claim to control his entire tribe, this was rarely the case. Usually, a shaykh controlled some number of loyal tribesmen but certain sub-tribes or disaffected groups of tribesmen had their own agenda. In Afghanistan, tribes are even less cohesive. While people may identify strongly with their tribe, the tribes are highly de-centralized and cannot readily unite into a powerful political and military force.

Traditionally, Pashtuns deem no one leader to have authority over the rest. There is no equivalent to the shaykh. Leaders who can bring entire tribes to the side of the government are rare. The key decision-making body is the "shura" (council) of tribal elders, also known as a "jirga." Shuras convene across Pashtun society to resolve disputes, deliver goods and services, and unite communities against threats.[6] Shuras convene from the lowest to the highest levels—village, sub-tribe, district, tribe—and in many cases involve more than one tribe. The people look to them for local leadership (though they recognize the district, provincial, and national government as a potential arbiter, patron, ally, and provider of goods and services).[7] The 2008 Asia Foundation survey found that nearly 70% of the respondents had confidence in community shuras compared to only 51% in government ministers and 46% in the government justice system.[8] While respected, shuras naturally provide indecisive leadership. Action depends on consensus, which oftentimes never occurs.

Furthermore, as much as possible, the shura system delegates decision-making to the lowest level (usually the village). It is understood that higher-level shuras address only those problems that cannot be resolved at a lower level. Higher-level shuras rarely issue directions to the lower level; rather, the lower-level brings issues to them. As a result, small groupings of tribesmen or villagers (often called a "*qawm*") have a high degree of independence. This decentralization means that a tribe is rarely united as one. In times of outside attack, a tribe

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[6] Olivier Roy, *Islam and resistance in Afghanistan*, 2nd Edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 22–24, 35. Steven Caton, "Anthropological Theories of Tribe and State Formation in the Middle East: Ideology and the Semiotics of Power," *Tribes and State Formation in the Middle East*, Eds. Philip Khoury and Joseph Kostiner (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 96–97.

[7] Olivier Roy, *The Failure of Political Islam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 148–149.

[8] "Afghanistan in 2008: A Survey of the Afghan People," The Asia Foundation, 2008, www.asiafoundation.org, 25, 62, 77, 79.

may form a "*lashkar*" (tribal army) to defend its territory. But once the outside threat disappears, different *qawms* often revert to competing with one another.[9]

Implications

Working with tribes, in order to improve both governance and security, has become one of the major new strategies on the table for Afghanistan. Ever since the success of the tribal awakening in Al Anbar, policymakers have been re-examining the potential of empowering tribes.[10] Indeed, encouraging government leaders to work with local shuras and jirgas is one of the best ways to get things done in Afghanistan. Doing otherwise risks insulting key leaders or power-brokers and creating un-needed enemies. Local security is only as strong as the shura behind it. In the words of Haji Mohammed Zalmay, one of the better district governors in Kunar province, "the key to success is getting tribes to come to shuras and keeping them united."[11]

Such tribal engagement, though, probably will not produce the kind of broad tribal movement witnessed in Al Anbar. The individual interests of every *qawm*, the deliberative nature of the shura system, and the absence of any one leader will undercut cohesion. Local interests easily trump the greater good. Indeed, the independent nature of the Pashtun tribal system has made Pashtun tribal forces traditionally unreliable. Take this British intelligence assessment from the 1920s: "The advantages which they [the Pashtun tribes] enjoy from their mobility, excellent intelligence and powers of endurance are largely neutralized by lack of cohesion and absence of any effective system of command."[12] An effective Pashtun tribal force one day could easily turn against the government the next as village interests shift with the wind. To be clear, Pashtun tribal forces are not necessarily a bad idea; US commanders should just be aware of their limitations.

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[9] For more information on tribal forces see: Mohammed Osman Tariq, "Tribal Security System (Arbakai) in Southwest Afghanistan," Occasional Paper no. 7, Crisis States Research Centre, December 2008.
[10] Karen DeYoung, "Pakistan Will Give Arms to Tribal Militias," *Washington Post*, 23 October 2008. Linda Robinson, "What Petraeus Understands," www.foreignpolicy.com (September 2008), accessed 6 December 2008.
[11] Discussion with Haji Mohammed Zalmay, Watapur District Center, 20 April 2008.
[12] Akbar Ahmed, *Pukhtun economy and society: Traditional structure and economic development in a tribal society* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), 76.

A history of warlordism

We have now discussed two important actors in Afghan politics and society—the government and tribes. A third exists: warlords. Afghanistan has a history of warlordism unparalleled in Al Anbar. The jihad against the Soviets bred a new social class: mujahideen commanders with large numbers of guns and a large amount of money (raised through illegal activities or foreign sponsorship). These commanders may or may not have enjoyed prior status within the tribal system. Some were in fact tribal elders; some were lesser members of a tribe who proved themselves in war; and some were opportunists who grew powerful through exploiting foreign aid or the poppy trade. Whatever the case, these commanders, known as "warlords" in the West, became more powerful than the traditional tribal leaders (khans, maliks, and elders) and were able to control large parts of the country.[13] The civil war of the 1990s featured warlords on both sides. They fielded militias that abused the people, fought with each over power, and lorded over tribal elders. Their behavior fueled the rise of the Taliban. Unfortunately, many were put in power after the fall of the Taliban in 2001, especially in the south. They had not learned their lesson. They abused the population and thereby contributed to the Taliban's resurgence. Since 2004, their influence has waned as the government has tried to disband militias and put professional technocrats into positions of power. Nevertheless, warlords and their militias still exist and in many districts hold the preponderance of power.

Implications

Marines and Soldiers will run into warlords. They will have money; they will have 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. The traditional tribal structure will be undermined as one man is empowered and given the ability to disregard shura decisions, thus, in turn, weakening local governance. This is not to say that Marines and Soldiers should not deal with warlords at all. It should just be done in a way that includes other tribal leaders and restrains their abuses.

[13] The leaders of a tribe, sub-tribe, or clan are generally known as tribal elders. A khan is a prominent tribal elder who is usually also a large landowner. A malik is someone elected by the tribal elders to liaison with the government for a village or sub-tribe.

Minor instead of major rifts in the insurgency

In Al Anbar, the insurgency fell into two broad groups: the Sunni resistance and Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). The resistance was composed of locally-based groups of Sunni Iraqis seeking to defeat the American occupation and reduce Shi'a political power. Most of the shaykhs were part of the resistance. AQI was a well-structured organization that aimed not merely to remove the Americans, but also to gain control over the Sunni provinces, possibly in order to establish an Islamic state. While the leaders of the resistance sought to maintain or regain their old power, AQI sought to create an entirely new power structure. The differences between the resistance and AQI eventually splintered the insurgency. AQI's growing control of territory and black-market activity, together with their brutal tactics, caused shaykhs, their tribes, and other Sunnis affiliated with the resistance to turn.

Afghanistan has no equivalent of AQI, with its cadres of fighters, suicide bombers, and assassins. Al Qaeda, the obvious parallel in Afghanistan, is more of a facilitator than an active fighting force. The insurgency in Afghanistan has at least five major insurgent groups—the Taliban, the Haqqani network, Hezb-Islami Gulbuddin (HiG), TNSM, and the Pakistani Taliban—operating in different areas of the country. Countless smaller tribal and local insurgent groups fight as well. The goals of the various insurgents range from establishing an Islamic state to keeping the government out of their valley. However, few currently have a reason to fight each other. Likewise, few tribal leaders affiliated with the insurgency have yet found a reason to turn against the Islamist parts of the insurgency. Sure, small rifts exist. Some have resulted in fighting (most notably in Bajaur Agency in Pakistan) and others may have the potential to become deeper. Right now, though, there is no clear block of insurgents at odds with another group.

One thing that helps minimize rifts is that Afghan insurgents, even the Islamists, are generally far more sensitive than AQI ever were to local concerns. The Taliban, for example, work through traditional tribal structures, restrain the brutality of their intimidation, and try to limit the application of Islamic law (shari'a). In the south, districts under their sway have not been forced to adhere to strict Islamic practices. Rather, the Taliban have set up their own shadow government to provide law and order. The people reportedly appreciate their efforts to resolve disputes fairly, something the government is not trusted to do. According to Taliban fighters, the people willingly give them donations (*zakat*), a sign of their support.[14]

Implications

The rift between tribes and extremist insurgents was perhaps the most important factor behind the Al Anbar Awakening. The absence of a major rift at the moment lessens the likelihood of a similar event in Afghanistan in the near future. Efforts to identify a major rift should continue but, until one is found, the creation of smaller-scale tribal movements centered on villages and districts appears to be more feasible than the creation of a large multi-province tribal movement.

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[14] Graeme Smith, "Talking to the Taliban," http://www.theglobeandmail.com/talkingtothetaliban/, accessed 1 February 2009.

Pashtunwali

The tribes of Al Anbar have their own set of customs (which are entirely separate from Islamic law). They vary from tribe to tribe but usually include an obligation to avenge the injury or death of a tribesman, maintain the honor of women, and offer sanctuary to any who ask, even an enemy (*dakhala*). Punishment meted out by tribal custom can include killing the offender. More often, a shaykh, special mediator, or tribal notable decrees that the offending party offer monetary compensation (*diyya*) or arranges marriages between the parties in conflict. Sunnis in Al Anbar follow tribal customs to varying degrees, partly because they have recourse to other sources of authority than their tribes—state courts, government leaders, and the police.[15]

The Pashtuns have Pashtunwali, "the way of the Pashtuns." Much has been written about Pashtunwali and how it defines Pashtun life.[16] Without going into detail, some important aspects of Pashtunwali are that any attack must be avenged regardless of the cost or passage of time (*badal*), that the honor of a woman must not be violated (*tor*), and that a Pashtun must treat any guest hospitably (*melmastia*). Pashtunwali obviously resembles Al Anbar tribal customs. The difference is that Pashtunwali plays a much greater role in the lives of Pashtuns in Afghanistan than tribal customs play in the lives of Sunnis in Al Anbar. For example, a Pashtun's compound—built for defensive purposes—is sacred. Even decades-long friends enter no further than the guest room.

Pashtuns follow Pashtunwali closely; partly because of the absence of state courts, government leaders, and police; partly because the scarcity of arable land encourages conflict. Honor and revenge are taken very seriously. Whereas in Al Anbar punishment or vengeance often ends in a fine or intermarriage, in Afghanistan, the end is often death (though fines and intermarriage exist as well). Ask a Pashtun what comes first: Pashtunwali or Islam? The answer is invariably Pashtunwali.

Implications

The implications of Pashtunwali span far and wide and are both good and bad. As the prevailing form of law and order (at least in Pashtun areas), Pashtunwali forms a natural break against Islamic extremism. At the same time, Pashtunwali facilitates insurgents moving in from Pakistan by ensuring that there will be shelter and food—even from hosts who have no love for the Taliban. Pashtunwali creates fighting between Pashtuns (which US observers easily confuse with insurgency activity) by emphasizing vengeance, making it tougher to unite them behind the government.

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[15] Patricio Asfura-Heim, "Tribal Strategies and their Impact on Legal Pluralism in Iraq," CNA Research Memorandum, June 2008.

[16] See Thomas Johnson and M Chris Mason, "No Sign until the Burst of Fire: Understanding the Pakistan-Afghanistan Frontier," *International Security*, vol. 32, No. 4 (Spring 2008): 41-77; and Akbar Ahmed, *Pukhtun economy and society: Traditional structure and economic development in a tribal society* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980).

For Soldiers and Marines, Pashtunwali means that what was acceptable in Al Anbar may not be acceptable in Afghanistan. Glancing at women will offend Pashtun men. Shying away from a dish of fatty goat may insult an elder's hospitality. Choosing a Pashtun ally quickly or blindly can entangle Marines and Soldiers in feuds that have little to do with Taliban activity. Cordon and search operations, as well as census operations, risk entering rooms considered private or, worse, reserved for women. Air strikes risk killing family members. Either of these last two actions will oblige a Pashtun and his immediate relatives to seek revenge. Interviews with Taliban fighters suggest that many joined following the death of a family member in a Coalition air strike.[17] The Taliban thrive off such vendettas.

In other words, Pashtunwali may demand more than a change in the sensibilities or manners of Marines and Soldiers. It may demand a change in tactics, to include how Soldiers and Marines go after insurgent leaders and how much risk they bear in a firefight before calling in air support.

[17] Graeme Smith, "Talking to the Taliban," http://www.theglobeandmail.com/talkingtothetaliban/, accessed 1 February 2009.

A rural population

Al Anbar is relatively urban. While its exact population is open to debate, in 2003, at least 1 million out of an estimated population of 1.2 million were reported to live in the cities and towns. Consequently, insurgents focused their efforts there.

Afghanistan is predominantly rural. Most of the population resides not in the major cities of Kabul, Kandahar, and Jalalabad but in small villages of mud-walled compounds distributed throughout the countryside. For example, in Helmand province, only about 10% of the people (1.4 million in all) live in urban areas.[18] Throughout the Pashtun lands, insurgents rely on the rural population for shelter, food, and opium taxes. Thus, Afghanistan has a rural insurgency.

Implications

Counterinsurgency in Al Anbar was about protecting the population in the cities and towns. Marines and Soldiers set up outposts and heavily patrolled the cities in order to root out the insurgents. Clearing and holding the cities was the utmost priority. The concentrated nature of the towns and cities in turn concentrated forces and supply routes along the Euphrates River Valley. In contrast, counterinsurgency in Afghanistan will require protecting a rural population that is spread out over a very wide area. Critical problems will be: first, how to dispose US forces in a way that secures the population without stretching those forces thin; and, second, how to supply numerous small detachments possibly spread out over hundreds of kilometers.

[18] Helmand Provincial profile, www.mrrd.gov.af, accessed 1 February 2009.

Sophisticated small-unit tactics

Insurgent tactics in Al Anbar were deadly, particularly from 2003 to 2007. Improvised explosive devices (IEDs) killed Americans daily; suicide car bombs blasted apart fortified outposts; and assassination campaigns took out Iraqi leaders willing to work with Americans. Tactics that minimized exposure to American air strikes and artillery fire were preferred, although insurgents would mass on occasion for major battles, sometimes even incorporating suicide car bombs into their attacks. The insurgents excelled at IEDs, suicide car bombs, and assassination and intimidation.

In contrast, Afghan insurgents, while increasingly employing IEDs and suicide bombers, really excel at small-unit tactics. Afghan insurgents regularly conduct organized ambushes (tales abound of insurgents luring US forces into well-laid ambushes) and large-scale attacks. Cover and concealment, mutually supporting fires, and fire and maneuver are all in order. Mortars are frequently combined into the attack plan. In areas of regular fighting insurgents set up fortified positions, sometimes in-depth. Determined, insurgents have been known to fight through air strikes. Unlike in Al Anbar, the number of attackers has exceeded 100 on numerous occasions. Sometimes insurgents even assault a position. (witness 2008's Sarpoza prison break, suicide attacks on FOB Salerno, and attack on the base in Wanat). During one ferocious ambush in Gulistan, insurgents even pursued a retreating American and Afghan column over several kilometers.[19]

Part of the insurgency's strength in small-unit tactics lies in the terrain. In the mountains, rock-covered peaks hide insurgents and narrow canyons channelize American road-bound movements. Along the rivers, irrigation canals, orchards, waist-high poppy fields, and mud walls have a similar effect. Three decades of war helps as well, both in terms of combat experience and knowledge of how to use the terrain. So too do heavier weapons; insurgents often field Dshka heavy machine guns and recoilless rifles, weapons rarely encountered in Al Anbar. Finally, Afghans are simply hardened to a tough life, which enables them to overcome the terrain and the hardships of prolonged warfare.

Implications

Marines and Soldiers will face tougher small-unit engagements than in Al Anbar, often over terrain that will make maneuver difficult. In such situations, it will be hard not to resort to close air support. Whether the Afghans will actually inflict more casualties than the Iraqis is open to question. Ambushes and attacks usually cause fewer casualties than IEDs and suicide car bombs (though these have been on the rise). Regardless, training on how to deal with IEDs and defeat groups of over 100 insurgents will be needed.

[19] For more information on Afghan insurgent tactics see Ali Ahmad Jalali and Lester Grau, *The Other Side of the Mountain: Mujahideen Tactics in the Soviet-Afghan War* (Quantico: USMC Studies and Analysis Division, 1995); and Stephen Biddle, "Afghanistan and the Future of Warfare: Implications for Army and Defense Policy," Strategic Studies Institute Monograph (November 2002).

Narcotics are a major source of insurgent funding

In Al Anbar, the insurgency depended partly upon black-market smuggling and other criminal activity for funding. In particular, AQI and other insurgents stole oil and sold it within the province or smuggled it into Syria and Jordan. Exact estimates are hard to find but the insurgency may have made millions. The Coalition eventually undercut this funding by winning over some of the best smugglers (turning a blind eye to their activities) and improving supervision of the oil industry.

Afghan insurgents, the Taliban in particular, appear to be much better-funded than their Anbar counterparts. Instead of oil, they have poppy. Poppy funds not only local fighters but the Taliban headquartered in Quetta and Al Qaeda itself. Estimates of their profits from poppy vary from $100 million to $750 million.[20] David Kilcullen assesses that poppy and associated extortion and protection rackets account for nearly 75% of Taliban funding.[21]

The allies of the government are also deeply connected to narcotics. Most of the powerful warlords grow and trade poppy, jealously protecting their share of the industry. Government eradication efforts unfairly leave these allies alone, targeting tribal competitors and poor farmers, who cannot pay bribes. Many of those targeted have turned to the Taliban.[22] A Canadian newspaper, *The Globe and Mail*, managed to interview 42 Taliban fighters. Nearly all had farmed poppy and 21 had been hit by government eradication efforts.[23]

Implications

Poppy provides the insurgents with a robust source of funding. This makes it more difficult for the government and Coalition to use projects and other spending to gain the support of the people. The Taliban can compete. Indeed, it is possible that the Taliban provide as much for the people as the government, in which case, Marines and Soldiers may have to redouble their civil affairs efforts and coordinate tightly with provincial reconstruction teams (PRTs) and USAID. Additionally, a rich insurgency should be able to field a capable military force (one with large numbers of well-armed and well-trained fighters) and regularly replenish combat losses.

What should be done about poppy is not clear. The government's own reliance on poppy and its unfair targeting policies make all-out eradication a sticky proposition. If the government runs eradication, their allies will probably be excluded, furthering the perception of government misrule. The United States could always take over eradication and end unfair targeting policies, but then the government might lose a major source of income. Moreover,

[20] For more information on poppy and the insurgency see: Gretchen Peters, *Seeds of Terror: How Heroin is Bankrolling the Taliban and al Qaeda* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, May 2009).
[21] David Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).
[22] See Antonio Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov, and Laptop: The Neo-Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan* (London: Hurst, 2007).
[23] Graeme Smith, "Talking to the Taliban," http://www.theglobeandmail.com/talkingtothetaliban/, accessed 1 February 2009.

all-out eradication would risk upsetting the farmers whose livelihoods depend on poppy. Eradication could drive them into the arms of the insurgents. Alternative crops may help but thus far the jury is out on their effectiveness; lucrative substitutes for poppy are few and far between. The opposite of eradication—ignoring poppy altogether—appears no more palatable. Doing so would leave insurgent economic resources untouched and possibly run into domestic political opposition in the United States. The right answer to this complex question obviously has yet to be found.

A robust safe haven and support area in Pakistan

Al Anbar's borders were never secured. Insurgents always moved back and forth from Syria and, to a much lesser extent, Jordan and Saudi Arabia. Inside Syria, insurgent leaders could take refuge, financiers could organize money flows into Al Anbar, foreign fighters could transit en route to Al Anbar, and insurgent cadres could even establish a few training camps. The Syrian government seemed to turn a blind eye to much of this activity, although they never allowed insurgents to truly mass inside their territory.

This level of outside support pales in comparison to what the Afghan insurgency enjoys inside Pakistan. Although the Pakistan military has acted against some of the more extreme groups operating on its side of the border, it continues to aid and abet elements of the Taliban and other insurgents fighting in Afghanistan—especially those based in and around Quetta in Pakistani Baluchistan, which borders Afghanistan's southern provinces. The Pakistani military, the directorate for Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) in particular, sees the Taliban as a means of pursuing its own strategic interests inside Afghanistan—such as undermining the Karzai government (which can be hostile to Islamabad), putting more conservative Pashtun leaders in power who have connections to Pakistan, and countering India's influence in Afghanistan. Pakistan is also hesitant to move against insurgent groups for fear of a larger backlash.[24]

The benefits of this support for the insurgency are significant. The Taliban leadership is based in Quetta, while other groups such as HiG and the Haqqani network operate farther north from bases in Pakistan's tribal areas. There are at least 150 training camps in Pakistan that feed the insurgency inside Afghanistan. Much of the IED material and expertise being used in Afghanistan originates in these camps. Many suicide bombers are Pakistani citizens educated in radical madrassas. There are also Pakistani facilitators who help move men and weapons across the border and organize Taliban military operations. Some of these facilitators are committed insurgents, some are Pakistani government agents, and some are simply war profiteers.

Besides the support from the Pakistani military, most of the insurgents operating out of Pakistan are Pashtuns with strong cultural ties to Afghanistan. These Pakistani Pashtuns are not considered "foreign fighters", a term reserved for Arabs or Punjabi-speaking Pakistanis. Many are actually from Afghanistan, having fled following the defeat of the Taliban or during the war against the Soviets; others are from Pashtun tribes on the Pakistani side of the border who are practically indistinguishable from their Afghan counterparts.

Implications

Much of the insurgency in Afghanistan is based in Pakistan where US forces cannot go. The tempo of Pakistani military operations, the character of peace deals between the Pakistani

[24] See Barnett Rubin and Ahmed Rashid, "From Great Game to Grand Bargain: Ending Chaos in Afghanistan and Pakistan," *Foreign Affairs* (November/December 2008).

government and the insurgents, and the extent of Pakistani support to elements of the Taliban—all are conditions beyond US direct control that will have a substantial effect on the quality and intensity of fighting in Afghanistan. Stepped-up border operations will disrupt some insurgent movement over the border, but will not solve the safe haven problem—especially in the south where the border is particularly vast and unguarded. There will be safe havens in Pakistan as long as the Pakistani military remains uncommitted to shutting them down.

These safe havens mean that US commanders can expect the insurgency to be resilient. The odds of a quick victory are slim. Through good counterinsurgency Soldiers and Marines may clear and hold certain areas in Afghanistan. They may build enough (and restrain government misrule enough) to win popular support. They may even create credible police. These will be steps forward. However, the insurgents will probably be able to have another go at winning over the population by retreating across the border, resting, reorganizing, and then coming back. They might try direct attacks on US forces, the Afghan National Army, and the police. Or they might try to infiltrate into cleared areas and re-establish their command and control infrastructure. Or they might just hold sway over the ungoverned deserts and mountains. It is hard to say. Their attempts might be entirely unsuccessful. But the threat will probably have to be faced—whether by US forces or Afghan security forces—season after season until the situation in Pakistan changes.

Conclusion

In summary, counterinsurgency in Afghanistan will be different from counterinsurgency in Al Anbar. Any "solution" to the Afghan insurgency must address not sectarianism or a civil war but government misrule tied to a history of warlordism—strategic factors that define the problem. Without reducing the abusive behavior of the government and their warlord clients, it is hard to see how security measures will have a long-lasting effect. Security will not stop mistreatment at the hands of government officials or the continued predatory behavior of warlords.

Another strategic factor that cannot be avoided is the large safe haven in Pakistan's tribal areas, where insurgents can readily train, recuperate, and organize; a permanent bastion. Given time, US forces may be able to pacify some parts of Afghanistan, perhaps even the bulk of the population. Nevertheless, until the policies of the Pakistani military change, the insurgents should be able to regenerate in the tribal areas. From there, they will be able to try again and again at breaking into pacified areas. Poppy does not help. Funds from its production and trade enhance the ability of the insurgents to keep going. In the end, their attempts may go nowhere but they will have the wherewithal to go round after round, fighting season after fighting season.

Other differences between Al Anbar and Afghanistan may not be strategic but will affect operations, most notably tribal engagement efforts. Tribal engagement, to include the development of tribal forces, will need to be built around the fragmented nature of the tribal system, the feuding of Pashtunwali, and the opportunism of warlords. Patience and forethought in the planning and execution of tribal engagement efforts are advised. Small-scale community successes are more likely than large-scale province-wide successes. Gaining the support of as many tribal elders as possible and using the shura system are likely to be necessary steps in any effort. Locally recruited forces—whether police or some kind of neighborhood watch—will only be as strong as the shura behind them.

Finally, the differences between Al Anbar and Afghanistan will affect tactics. A rural environment, the tactical skill of the insurgency, and Pashtunwali compel a re-thinking of the tactics of counterinsurgency. How Marines and Soldiers outpost, patrol, re-supply, collect bottom-up intelligence, and many other tactics—not to mention logistics—will have to adjust to a rural environment where the population is spread out over wide distances and to an insurgency skilled at small-unit tactics. The usefulness of certain other tactics deserves reconsideration, most notably cordon and searches, air strikes, and population control measures. Because of Pashtunwali, their costs may be greater than their benefits.

In spite of all these differences, Al Anbar and Afghanistan have some similarities. In addition to government misrule, Afghan insurgents also fight because of the presence of US (and allied) forces—infidels—in their country and, in some cases, because they want to see the establishment of an Islamic government.[25] The same could be said of insurgents in Al Anbar.

[25] Graeme Smith, "Talking to the Taliban," http://www.theglobeandmail.com/talkingtothetaliban/, accessed 1 February 2009.

Accordingly, the emphasis that was placed on giving Iraqis a lead role in counterinsurgency operations in Al Anbar will need to be replicated for Afghans in Afghanistan (even if we must at the same time try to empower the right leaders and guide them toward good governance). To give other examples, tribes are important political players in both regions, underlining the wisdom of tribal engagement of some kind; while advising indigenous forces and clear, hold, and build efforts have proven as effective in Afghanistan as Al Anbar, though 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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