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Insurgent Safe Havens: Can we win the fight?

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Executive Summary

Title: Insurgent Safe Havens: Can we win the fight?

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Thesis: Insurgent groups with access to sanctuaries from which they can train, recruit, resupply, launch and recover from military operations, and receive external support are difficult, if not impossible to defeat.

Discussion: Theorists of Guerilla Warfare like Mao Tse-tung, T.E. Lawrence, and Che Guevara suggest some form of sanctuary is necessary for any insurgency to be successful; history shows this to be true and examination of modern examples further support this hypothesis. The Vietcong in Vietnam, the Sunni Insurgency and Al-Qaeda in Iraq, and the Taliban in Afghanistan all provide a foundation to understand the importance of sanctuary to insurgent groups and demonstrate how difficult they can be to defeat. Insurgent groups with sanctuary achieve varying levels of success depending on the type of sanctuary and the extent of external support they receive. The Vietcong were successful in prolonging the war in Vietnam long enough for the North Vietnamese Army to become a formidable conventional force and wear down our will to continue the fight. The Vietcong possessed vast areas of safe haven internal and external to Vietnam and also received vast amounts of external assistance from both China and Russia. The Sunni Insurgency in Iraq failed and faded away for several reasons, but was able to inflict heavy casualties on a coalition force unprepared for counterinsurgency operations. However, they did not possess the same external sanctuary and support as the Vietcong and eventually failed. The current fight in Afghanistan demonstrates yet again that insurgencies with access to sanctuary impossible to defeat.

Conclusion: The war in Afghanistan bears a striking resemblance to Vietnam with regards to sanctuary; the insurgency is utilizing sanctuary both inside Afghanistan and in Pakistan's western frontier to fight a protracted war against the US and its allies. Unless the United States denies the Taliban and al-Qaeda sanctuary in Pakistan, we cannot be successful in defeating the Taliban and destroying al-Qaeda's regional and global influence.

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Table of Contents

	Page
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY.....	2
DISCLAIMER.....	3
INTRODUCTION.....	5
WHY INSURGENCIES SUCCEED.....	6
SANCTUARY: THEORISTS AND PRACTITIONERS.....	7
THE CASE OF MALAYA.....	12
INSURGENT SANCTUARY: VIETNAM, IRAQ'S SUNNI INSURGENCY AND THE CURRENT FIGHT IN AFGHANISTAN.....	13
CONCLUSION.....	24
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	29

INTRODUCTION

On December 29, 1979, the Russian army invaded the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan as a part of grand strategy to expand communist influence at the crossroads of central Asia. As part of a cooperative occupation, the Soviets along with the communist government of Afghanistan ran an oppressive regime and not long after the invasion an insurgency began in Afghanistan to throw out the foreign invaders and seize power from the government. From 1980 through 1989 the Soviets fought a protracted war against a long established Mujahedeen insurgency consisting of a loose affiliation of tribal and foreign fighters. In response to the Soviet's brutal occupation and government reforms contrary to tribal customs, the Mujahedeen fighters were united and able to garner popular support among the Afghan people. Because of the ideological differences between the west and the Soviet Union, the insurgency gained the eventual support of the United States and beginning in 1980, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) ran a clandestine program to supply the Mujahedeen with funding, weapons and training. Based in Pakistan, the successful CIA efforts to train the Mujahedeen in guerilla tactics and equip them with modern weapons such as automatic weapons, explosives and surface to air missiles proved effective against the modernized Soviet army. With an occupying force of only about 150,000, the Soviets found themselves confined to major cities and establishing presence outside of the cities by air or only when necessary to conduct operations thus isolating them from the population. The ability of the Mujahedeen fighters to move with impunity outside of major Afghan cities, within the central mountain region and between the Afghanistan and Pakistan borders provided both internal and external sanctuaries where they could rest, train, equip and recruit fighters from the vast refugee camps became a major advantage. The safe havens in the small Afghan villages and the mountainous Pakistani border

region became an essential element for the insurgency in offsetting the Soviets superior numbers and advanced weaponry. Early in the war the Soviets realized the importance of the internal and external sanctuaries and developed tactics to deny safe haven to the Mujahedeen. Although the advantage tipped back and forth between 1980 and 1987, a Soviet army equipped for conventional war and a weakened economy could not overcome the insurgents equipped with modernized weapons operating from a secure area over the border.¹ After losing over 14,000 troops, the flood of global support and strengths of the Mujahedeen's insurgency overwhelmed the Soviet's will to remain in Afghanistan and in 1987 they began to withdraw, finally leaving in 1989. What the Russians learned in Afghanistan and what the United States seems to currently struggle with, is that insurgent groups with access to sanctuaries from which they can train, recruit, resupply, launch and recover from military operations, and receive external support are difficult, if not impossible to defeat. Denial of insurgent sanctuaries, whether internal or external to a nation's borders, is essential in dismantling insurgent movements.

WHY INSURGENCIES SUCCEED

Insurgencies throughout history are often successful against larger, more well equipped and trained forces for several reasons. Insurgent movements are generally a numerically inferior force relying on guerilla tactics to defeat a larger, conventional force thus allowing the insurgent greater speed and mobility than conventional forces. Insurgents often are able to employ a combination of guerilla warfare tactics and terrorism to achieve their goals, tactics that are often off limits to democratic, western opponents. Often, insurgents know the terrain of their homeland better than a foreign invader and in many instances better than the standing armies or police forces of their own state. As T.E. Lawrence stated of his Beduin fighters, "Our largest resources, the Beduin on whom our war must be built, were unused to formal operations, but had

assets of mobility, toughness self-assurance, knowledge of the country, and intelligent courage.”²

In many cases, the insurgents will outlast the political will of the larger force for the simple reason the insurgent is fighting a war of existence while the aggressor is fighting a limited one. “The United States was defeated in Indochina because the Vietnamese Communists displayed a far greater willingness to fight and die and pursued a strategy that simultaneously limited their exposure to US military strengths (firepower, air mobility) and exploited American political vulnerabilities (the electorate’s aversion to indecisive, protracted wars for limited objectives).”³

In addition, western armies simply do not possess the skills to fight a successful counterinsurgency; in the case of the United States “America has both a distinctive approach to strategy and a distinctive way of war rooted in its history, culture, political values, and geopolitical circumstances. All of these influences have combined to produce, among other things, not only an apolitical view of war, which encourages the pursuit of military victory for its own sake but also a profound professional military aversion to counterinsurgency, which hands insurgent enemies a strategic advantage.”⁴ However, despite these insurgent advantages and apparent weaknesses in the western approach to counterinsurgency, many practitioners of guerrilla warfare suggest that regardless of the foe or the insurgent’s advantages, sanctuary is essential to the success of any insurgency.

SANCTUARY: THEORISTS AND PRACTITIONERS

Early practitioners of guerilla warfare, T.E. Lawrence, Mao Tse-tung and Che Guevara recognized the need for sanctuaries as a critical element of their insurgent campaigns; each dedicating significant time and attention to the subject within their bodies of work. As early as 1832, Carl Von Clausewitz refers to the tactical use of inaccessible terrain by insurgent groups; “The country must be rough and inaccessible, because of mountains, or forests, marches, or the

local methods of cultivation.”⁵ Although Clausewitz does not refer to these areas as sanctuary or safe havens, he does state that it is a “condition under which a general uprising can be successful.”⁶; later in the 20th century, theorists and practitioners of guerrilla warfare would come to the same conclusion.

T.E. Lawrence led an Arab revolt against the Ottoman-Turks from 1916 to 1918; his experiences leading a successful insurgency led him to the same conclusions as Mao Tse-tung and Che Guevara later in the 20th century. In the 1929 edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica, Lawrence stated that “the guerrilla striking force must possess a safe haven, enabling it, to always keep a means of sure retreat into an element which the enemy cannot enter.”⁷ Lawrence stated the need for sanctuary as an imperative to the conduct of guerrilla warfare. In addition, Lawrence also implies that the sanctuary may not only be in geographical sense but in the conceptual sense as well, in the minds of the population; he expands on the importance of sanctuary by stating....

“Rebellion must have an unassailable base, something guarded not merely from attack, but from the fear of it: such a base as the Arab revolt had in the Red Sea ports, the desert, or in the minds of men converted to its creed. It must have a sophisticated alien enemy, in the form of a disciplined army of occupation too small to fulfill the doctrine of acreage: too few to adjust number to space, in order to dominate the whole area effectively from fortified posts. It must have a friendly population, not actively friendly, but sympathetic to the point of not betraying rebel movements to the enemy. Rebellions can be made by two percent active in a striking force and ninety-eight percent passively sympathetic. Thus in order to have any hope of success, a guerrilla force must be able to operate from a secure base. That base may be geographical but it may also be conceptual – lying within the minds of a friendly or sympathetic population.”⁸

Lawrence successfully defended the flank of General Edmund Allenby’s advance towards Palestine with numerically inferior forces and limited supplies, but with a vast open desert from which to hide and strike. “By war’s end the Arabs had gained control of some

100,000 square miles while holding 600,000 Ottoman soldiers in passive defense. Arabs had killed or wounded 35,000 enemy at little loss to themselves.”⁹ Lawrence developed his own doctrine of guerilla warfare employing it successfully against the Ottomans while protecting Allenby’s conventional army in Palestine. Out of necessity, Lawrence quickly realized the philosophies of Clausewitz and von Moltke the elder, who he is was heavily influenced as an Oxford scholar, did not fit the realities of the field. “I began to recall suitable maxims on the conduct of warfare: but they would not fit and worried me.”¹⁰ Like many modern insurgencies, Lawrence realized a successful guerrilla campaign relied on adaptations to his situation, in his case utilizing the desert as sanctuary to conduct hit and run strikes thus destroying their initiative and eventual will to fight.

After the Chinese communists failed to seize power through open urban warfare with Chiang Kai-shek, the communists retreated to remote safe havens “where they hoped difficult terrain and guerrilla tactics could keep them safe while they prepared a military recovery.”¹¹ A series of aggressive campaigns led by Chiang Kai-shek surrounded the communists in their rural Kiangsi base camp in 1934 and forced them to fight their way out finding new sanctuary over the border from the Soviet controlled Mongolian People’s Republic. Even from Mao’s new sanctuary the communists were nearly defeated if not for a new threat to China from the Japanese; forcing an alliance between Chiang Kai-shek and the communist to fight their common enemy. From these experiences, Mao developed much of his philosophy on Guerrilla warfare including the use of base areas and is credited with developing detailed foundation for guerilla warfare still used today. The “strategy of running to rural bases and irregular warfare after defeat in the cities was very much Mao’s idea.”¹²

In *Mao Tse-tung on Guerrilla Warfare*, Mao emphasizes the usefulness of basing by stating “The problem of establishment of bases is of particular importance. This is so because this war is a cruel and protracted struggle.”¹³ Although Mao recognized Guerrilla Warfare as an asymmetric, non-linear tactic often requiring actions without rear areas; he cautions his leaders to understand protracted war requires the establishment of base areas. “Ability to fight a war without a rear area is a fundamental characteristic of guerilla action, but this does not mean that guerrillas can exist and function over a long period of time without the development of base areas.”¹⁴ The establishment of sanctuary became a cornerstone of Mao’s philosophy of Guerrilla warfare and served the communists well at the strategic, operational and tactical levels of war. Mao’s approach to sanctuary is as detailed as his approach to most subjects and he describes its development in detail. “The subject of bases may be better understood if we consider: 1. The various categories of bases 2. Guerrilla areas and base areas 3. The establishment of bases 4. The development.”¹⁵ Mao goes on to describe in detail each classification of bases and its use in guerrilla warfare. Although Mao is not the first to utilize safe havens as part of insurgent tactics, his influence can be seen in subsequent communist insurgencies and revolutionary movements like those used by General Vo Nguyen Giap in Vietnam.

Also influenced by Mao Tse-tung’s philosophy on Guerrilla warfare, Ernesto ‘Che’ Guevara, noted the importance sanctuary as part of a successful insurgency. Although Guevara is not as methodical or Jominian in his approach as Mao; he recognized the establishment of sanctuary or “inaccessible places”¹⁶ as essential to the establishment of a guerrilla war. “Finally, an inaccessible place is chosen, a settled life is initiated, and the first small industries begin to be established: a shoe factory, a cigar and cigarette factory, a clothing factory, an arms factory, a bakery, hospitals, possible a radio transmitter, a printing press, etc.”¹⁷ Che viewed sanctuary as

more of a seed from which the insurgency can grow rather than a permanent base of operations to retreat. Once the sanctuary is established the insurgency can branch out, win over the population, garner their support, and clear another sanctuary from which to operate. As the insurgency continues to grow and flourish, guerrillas will enjoy greater ease of maneuver, support of the population, and increased security for lines of supply and communication. "But much more rapidly than in unfavorable ground the guerilla band will here be able to dig in, that is, to form a base capable of engaging in a war of positions, where small industries may be installed as they are needed, as well as hospitals, center for education and training, storage facilities, organs of propaganda, etc., adequately protected from aviation or from long-range artillery. The guerilla band in these conditions can number many more personnel; there will be noncombatants and perhaps even a system of training in the use of the arms that eventually are to fall into the power of the guerilla army."¹⁸

Che's influence grew throughout South America in the mid to late 20th century; his philosophy and tactics inspired insurgencies and guerrilla warfare in several Latin American countries. Guerrilla movements in Guatemala, Venezuela, Peru, Bolivia, Columbia, Nicaragua, and El Salvador all employed the use of rural sanctuary as part of their foundations. Each country possessed "the suitability of the physical terrain for guerrilla warfare (zones difficult to reach, either because of dense forests, steep mountains, impassible deserts or marshes) and were politically ripe for revolution. The insurgencies employed Che's model of guerrilla warfare and although the insurgencies met varying degrees of success, they were all able to carry out a protracted fight against conventional forces lasting several years and in some cases still exist today.

Practitioners and theorists of guerilla warfare such as Lawrence, Mao and Guevara all consider sanctuary an imperative of insurgent movements. Through their own experiences and observations they realized the importance of "an area, strategically located, in which the guerrillas can carry out their duties of training, self-preservation and development."¹⁹ The use of sanctuary made their insurgencies difficult if not impossible to beat and proved that an inferior force when properly hidden, striking the weak points of the enemy at the time and place of their choosing can overwhelm the aggressors will to fight. Their theories and practices inspired multiple insurgencies throughout history to employ the same philosophy of guerilla warfare, many successfully, against larger, more well equipped, and trained forces.

THE CASE OF MALAYA

The possession of sanctuary does not always guarantee insurgent success; the communist guerrillas in Malaya from 1948 to 1958 demonstrated that sound counterinsurgency tactics and competent leadership can overcome an insurgency operating from remote bases. After fighting alongside the British against the Japanese occupation of Malaya from 1941 to 1945, the disenfranchised communist party of Malaya tried unsuccessfully to gain influence in the Malayan government through non-violent means. However, after learning of a British plan to exclude the party from tin and rubber industry labor unions; the impatient leadership decided to resort to violent revolution to gain power.²⁰ From 1948 to 1952 the communist insurgency in Malaya operated successfully from jungle sanctuary in remote portions of Malaya receiving support from its ethnic Chinese minority in the form of "recruits, rice, weapons, ammunition, and medicine."²¹ An incompetent and poorly led British Army and Malayan government bolstered the communist support base by brutalizing the population and by 1952 could not prevent the insurgents from occupying large portions of the Malayan countryside.

A counterinsurgency campaign including the relocation of some 350,000 ethnic Chinese failed to stem the tide of the insurgency; a weak police force, poor intelligence and lack of quality leadership stymied British efforts. Finally, in 1952, after the assassination of the lead British administrator in Malaya, a frustrated British government sent General Gerald Templar to turn the tide of the war. Improving upon on previously failed counterinsurgency strategies to deny the insurgency of their crucial support base, General Templar continued to relocate the Chinese minority into armed camps isolating the insurgency from its base. He continued strengthening the police force, developing a home guard for security and improving his own intelligence gathering capability. In addition, Templar replaced incompetent civil and military leadership with experienced British and Malayan replacements thus reenergizing the counterinsurgency. Despite their access to safe haven in the jungles of Malaya; Templar's intensive retooling of the campaign eventually forced the communists out of Malaya. "By the end of 1958, the number of guerrilla fighters had fallen to 350, which prompted the Communist Party to move most of its armed forces into southern Thailand."

INSURGENT SANCTUARY: VIETNAM, IRAQ'S SUNNI INSURGENCY AND THE CURRENT FIGHT IN AFGHANISTAN

Now that the historical foundations and effectiveness of insurgent safe havens have been established and examined; it is now possible to analyze modern examples of insurgencies which use safe havens and how our counterinsurgency approach addressed the issue. When reviewing these examples, it is important to understand that the geographical, political and cultural situation varies in each one and although different they are in many ways similar in that the use of sanctuary is a process, it develops over time and has distinct phases. As demonstrated by Mao, Che and Lawrence their use and appreciation of sanctuary matured from the start of their

insurgencies to the end. In each example, it is also important to consider the type of safe havens used (i.e. internal vs. external, physical and virtual etc) and to consider that sanctuaries are evolving and becoming a more effective part of the process of insurgency. The American experience in Vietnam, Iraq's Sunni Insurgency and the current fight against the Taliban and al-Qaeda are good examples of the effective use of sanctuary and how the difficulties experienced in addressing each situation, with varying degrees of success.

After the success of several Vietcong attacks against American advisors in 1964 including attacks on Bien Hoa and Pleiku, South Vietnam neared collapse. After the attacks, American and South Vietnamese troops searched the jungle for the attackers, but only found evidence of their presence by the shell casings and mortar tubes left behind; the guerillas had escaped into the jungle living to fight another day. As a result of the perceived escalation, the United States government decided to conduct a buildup of American forces in the spring and summer of 1965. A study conducted by the US Military Assistance Command-Vietnam (MACV) in October 1964 of Vietcong infiltration of the South "...noted that the North Vietnamese had since 1959 directed and supplied the infiltration of tens of thousands of men and untold quantities of supplies into South Vietnam. The majority of the men and much of the material that made up the Vietcong, the report concluded, had crossed the border of South Vietnam from communist sanctuaries in Laos and Cambodia."²² In actuality Ho Chi Minh's guerilla force commanded by General Vo Nguyen had been conducting a similar brand of warfare against the French colonialists since 1945; by 1965 the Vietcong had a well established network of trails for supply, secure villages for recruiting and forage, and external safe havens in Laos and Cambodia to launch and recover from attack. Compounding the issue was the natural geography of Vietnam, a country of tropical lowlands, hills and densely forested highlands, with

level land covering no more than twenty percent of the area. The country is divided into the highlands and the Red River Delta in the north; and the Gai Truong Son, the coastal lowlands, and the Mekong River in the south. The combination of mountainous regions with hundreds of thousands of square miles of triple canopy jungle was ideal for concealing their complex sanctuary and supply routes.

As part of the communists overall strategy the Vietcong decided to conduct a new offensive in 1965 and 1966 to conquer the central highlands and split Vietnam in two thus creating a new, internal sanctuary to launch attacks.²³ However, several US special forces units occupied training camps along the border with Laos and Cambodia limiting the success of the Vietcong. The conventional forces of the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) then decided to get involved, culminating in a series of battles between the US Army 7th Cavalry and the NVA and Vietcong along the border with Laos and Cambodia in the Ia Drang Valley. Both sides incurred heavy casualties and finally withdrew from the area, but the NVA was able to slip back over the border to Cambodia eluding American and South Vietnamese pursuers. "The devastated NVA division used the sanctuary to spend the next six months recovering from the battle."²⁴

Although the South Vietnamese and United States governments were aware of the Vietcong and NVA's sanctuary as early as 1960, the struggle for control would consume the war effort from 1965 until the end of the war.²⁵ The possession of sanctuary and supply routes throughout the country allowed for much of the external assistance from Russia and China to move freely to the North Vietnamese and Vietcong. Russian funding and Chinese made weapons and assistance flowed into South Vietnam throughout the conduct of the war; China even supplied engineers to improve and design new supply routes. Russia supplied nearly half of the weapons to the North Vietnamese army and the remainder came primarily from China;

“from 1956 through 1965 alone, China provided the DRV (the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, North Vietnam) with 270,000 guns, over 10,000 pieces of artillery, nearly 200 million bullets, 2.02 million artillery shells, 15,000 wire transmitters, over 1,000 trucks, 15 aircraft, 28 warships, and 1.18 million sets of uniforms.”²⁶ The massive amount of weapons and supplies received by the communists can be directly attributed to their ability to establish and maintain sanctuary both internally and external to the country; weapons flowed to the south “by water, over the DMZ (Demilitarized Zone) and especially over the western border with South Vietnam through Laos and Cambodia.”²⁷

One of the unique aspects of the sanctuaries in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia is that they were not only used by communist insurgents, but as they improved they were eventually used by conventional forces. Trails and footpaths that could only accommodate bicycles and motorcycles eventually carried large trucks and tanks. This dual use of sanctuary was not by accident, but by design, part of a two phased effort by the communists to win the war. “First, the insurgency in the South by the Vietcong would weaken the ruling South Vietnamese regime and demoralize the American military. Second, a conventional campaign by the North Vietnamese Army would sweep through the South and complete the unification of Vietnam.”²⁸

Unfortunately, American efforts to deny sanctuary to the North came too little and too late; by the time US forces figured out effective means to destroy and deny sanctuary the communists were well into the second phase of their effort to retake the country.

Although the Americans and the South Vietnamese realized the impact and importance of North Vietnamese sanctuary and supply lines, their strategy to deny was often disjointed, misled or prevented from doing so by politics and inaction. Efforts to deny sanctuary and close the vital supply routes began in 1965 and continued until the end of the war in 1975. Solutions ranged

from a combination of counter-insurgency, airpower, and covert and conventional actions to technological solutions employing acoustic sensors in conjunction with a series of guard towers along the DMZ. "Still, as many as 600,000 NVA went south from 1966 -1971."²⁹

Finally in 1970, after much convincing, President Nixon approved the use of conventional forces to deny enemy sanctuary in Cambodia. Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) forces accompanied by the US 4th Infantry Division made incursions of up to 20 miles into Cambodia in areas known as the Fishhook, Dog's Head, and Parrot's Beak west and northwest of Saigon. ARVN and US forces met with limited success in the Parrot's Beak capturing a few weapons caches and a small NVA base. However, operations in the Fishhook and Dog's Head were highly successful and revealed the extent of the NVA sanctuary in Cambodia. A captured NVA base "covering more than 1.2 square miles, the base contained over five hundred structures, many of them storage houses filled with more than two hundred tons of rice. Bamboo walkways linked rows of barracks with a sprawling hospital, mess compound and a training area."³⁰ The remainder of the operation revealed more massive weapons caches and bases; in the end the operation netted thousands of weapons, 1,800 tons of ammunition, over 8,000 tons of rice, and resulted in over 10,000 enemy killed in action. However, it failed to deny the enemy sanctuary because the extent of the incursions were limited by time and distance; US and ARVN advances were limited to only 60 days and 20 miles only pushing the enemy further into their own sanctuary and allowing them to return when the operation was complete. In addition, the operation did not address sanctuaries in Laos and failed to sever the all important supply lines of the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

The importance of sanctuary in Vietnam cannot be over emphasized, the combination of secure lines of supply and both internal and external sanctuaries allowed the Vietcong guerrillas

to buy enough time for the NVA to mature as a conventional force and allow for America's will to save South Vietnam from communism to fade away. Although American failures in Vietnam can be characterized in many different ways, it demonstrated the difficulties we face when conventional armies are forced to fight an insurgency with access to sanctuary; particularly when they are located in neutral countries as in the case of Laos and Cambodia. The Vietcong and NVA became almost impossible to destroy when they could simply melt away into the jungle sanctuaries to rest, recruit, train, re-supply and essentially control the pace of the war.³¹

As practitioners of guerilla tactics, many modern groups such as Al-Qaida, Iraq's Sunni insurgency and the Taliban of Afghanistan have developed their own guerilla warfare doctrine. Al-Qeda's doctrine for insurgency uses many of the same tenants as Mao, Che, and Lawrance; "there should be bases, depots, and caches in areas (bases are not limited to the mountain, as a base is any secure spot in which the mujahidin can hide and from which they can operate). It is vital to have depots and caches that the movement can use."³² Iraq's Sunni Insurgency and al-Qaeda in Iraq demonstrated how insurgencies with sanctuary within a country can turn the tide of a successful conventional military campaign; it also shows how effective counter-insurgency tactics and lack of external support can doom an insurgency.

Shortly after the invasion of Iraq in March of 2003, small scale attacks and roadside bombs harassed American and coalition troops throughout the country, but in late in 2003 and 2004 a formidable insurgency began to take shape. Sunni Arabs unhappy with the US policy to replace Saddam Hussein's Sunni majority regime with a pro-Shi'a government, began a bloody and successful insurgency utilizing internal and external sanctuary. In addition, an al-Qaeda affiliated terrorist network led by Abu Musab al Zarqawi, conducted a violent part of the insurgency focused on antagonizing the Shi'a population into a civil war with the Sunni

population. The development of the insurgency took the US by surprise, “no comprehensive doctrine existed for counterinsurgency”³³ and each of the seven divisions in Iraq handled their area of operations differently with varying degrees of success. The only exception being the British forces, having been experienced in counterinsurgency tactics throughout their history, were able to quell much of the violence with their Iraqi counterparts.

The first three months of 2004 proved to be a very violent and bloody period for US and coalition forces. During this time, the disjointed and often heavy handed counterinsurgency efforts caused attacks throughout the country to jump from just under 200 per week to over 500 per week in the summer of 2004.³⁴ Ill-equipped for a counterinsurgency fight, the mostly heavily armored 150,000 troops in Iraq found it impossible to exert their presence, and as a result the city of Fallujah became a sanctuary where the insurgency could stage attacks throughout the country. Other towns within the famed Sunni Triangle also fell to the insurgency and became sanctuary where they could conduct operations and enjoyed widespread support of the population. Samarra, Ramadi, Baqubah, and even Bagdad all became insurgent safe havens.

“The central goal of the U.S. strategy in 2004 was to destroy the insurgency by depriving it of its base in the Sunni Triangle and its “ratlines” – the infiltration routes that run from the Syrian border into the heart of Iraq.”³⁵ Two lines of supply and infiltration became apparent to the Americans, one following the Euphrates River corridor from Syria to Bagdad and the other following the Tigris corridor from Syria to Bagdad. The towns and cities that were banded by the corridors became the central focus of U.S. efforts to deny sanctuary to the insurgency. Unlike in Vietnam, the insurgency did not have sanctuary in neutral countries outside of Iraq like Laos and Cambodia. The insurgency remained mostly within the country allowing coalition

forces to directly target the sanctuaries unhindered by international borders, political influence, and time.

Both Syria and Iran provided external support to the Sunni Insurgency, but pales in comparison to what Russia and China lent to the Vietcong and NVA in Vietnam. Syria lent support in the form of finance, weapons and refuge for only certain factions within the insurgency in Damascus and also facilitated the flow of foreign fighters through the Tigris and Euphrates corridors, most of whom arrived untrained and ill-equipped. However, for the most part the Sunni Insurgency along with its Al Qaeda in Iraq counterparts remained mostly within the borders of Iraq. Iran also lent some support limited mostly to training and materials, but the Sunni insurgency did not trust the Iranians and primarily relied on weapons caches left over and purchased from the Iraqi army. In both cases the Sunni Insurgency refrained from accepting sanctuary from either Iran or Syria lest they become subservient to the wills of either country. In addition, “most Arab and Muslim states – despite their disapproval of the US occupation of Iraq – have not been willing to antagonize the world’s most powerful country by supporting the insurgents”³⁶ and most hesitated from either passively or actively lending support.

The lack of external sanctuary in countries bordering Iraq and large scale state sponsored support left the Sunni Insurgency and Al Qaeda in Iraq vulnerable to coalition forces. Under these conditions the United States was able to mount a successful counterinsurgency campaign with a two pronged approach beginning with the denial of sanctuary within the Sunni Triangle. Starting with the fall of Fallujah, the insurgency slowly unraveled dispersing its members into smaller and smaller bands away from the cities reducing their effectiveness. “In and of itself, the loss of Fallujah didn’t cause the insurgency to collapse but it did deprive the rebels of an indispensable sanctuary.”³⁷ As each sanctuary town or city fell to the coalition and lines of

supply cut off, the insurgencies ability to conduct coordinated large scale attacks diminished. Continued U.S. pressure and counterinsurgency techniques prevented the insurgency from reconstituting in other towns or in the open desert. Finally, the “Rivers Campaign” destroyed the remainder of the insurgent infrastructure near Fallujah effectively destroying their lines of supply. “The so-called surge beginning in 2007 and the “Anbar Awakening”, which saw many Sunni sheiks turn against their erstwhile ally, al Qaeda, combined to deprive the latter of a very important sanctuary.”³⁸

The Sunni Insurgency and Al Qaeda in Iraq failed for many reasons. First, they lacked the external support of those sympathetic to their cause in terms of large scale material support and well trained and equipped insurgents. Second, they lacked unity of effort; while the Sunni Insurgency sought to eject the foreign invaders from Iraq, Zarqawi’s efforts were focused at both the coalition and his personal goal of creating an Islamic state within Iraq by creating a civil war. Although, they temporarily took advantage of internal sanctuaries in the towns and cities of the Sunni Triangle; their lack of coordination and command structure led them to defeat once the counterinsurgency effort of the United States coalesced. Finally, and most importantly they lacked large, isolated sanctuary over the borders where the entire insurgency could rest, train, recruit and retreat to after conducting an attack like the Vietcong, NVA, Maoist rebels, Che’s Guerillas and Lawrence’s insurgents before them.

After the fall of the Taliban in 2001, Al-Qaeda and its affiliates slipped over the porous mountainous Afghan border into Pakistan’s western frontier. From this sanctuary, the insurgency planned and launched attacks against coalition forces in Afghanistan and Al-Qaeda plotted regional and global terrorist attacks. Consisting of a 2,400 kilometer stretch of territory that comprises the northern reaches of Baluchistan, the Federally Administered Tribal Areas

(FATA), and parts of the Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP), the Pakistani border region is a large and complex area that makes an ideal sanctuary for Al-Qaeda and the Taliban.

“Western intelligence analysts believe that these cultural and demographic traits were critical determinants in shaping the strategic relocation calculus of both the Taliban and Al-Qaeda following the Tora Bora operation of 2001. The border provinces, especially the remote agencies of the FATA, were judged to be the most desirable place from which to recover and recoup losses inflicted at the hands of the US led coalition on account of their tribal affinity with people living west of the Durand line.”³⁹

The absence of governance and ethnic makeup, lack of border security, and complex terrain in the border region pose significant problems for the United States in defeating the Taliban and Al-Qaeda.

All three border regions are administered by loosely organized conservative Islamic religious coalitions, tribal affiliations, or remain ungoverned altogether; providing the Taliban and Al-Qaeda a sympathetic population to recruit from and ungoverned territory to train and rest.⁴⁰ Although Pakistan is a regional nuclear power with a democratic government and a standing Army, Navy and Air Force; “the Afghan-Pakistan border region remains beyond the formal functional, geographical, and technical writ of the central government in Islamabad.”⁴¹ In addition, the tribal region is “essentially Pashtun in ethnic makeup and overwhelmingly Muslim in religious orientation (99.4 percent), the NWFP is run according to strict Islamic precepts with a strong Pashtun tribal flavor and rejects much of the secular and modernist leanings of the Musharraf regime.”⁴² Thus, the nature of the region causes significant issues for both Pakistan’s and Afghanistan’s security; General David Petraeus emphasized the problem in his April 2009 testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee hearing on the United States Policy toward Afghanistan and Pakistan stating, “The Pakistani state faces a rising – indeed, an existential threat from Islamist extremist such as Al Qaeda and other transnational terrorist

organizations, which have developed in safe havens and support bases in ungoverned spaces in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border regions.”⁴³

Similar to the Vietcong and NVA in Vietnam, the Taliban and Al Qaeda fighters hiding in Pakistan enjoy almost limitless freedom to cross over the border to conduct attacks. The lack of border security continues to be an issue for a number of reasons. First, the frontier’s rugged terrain and sheer size prevents the already limited Pakistani security forces from securing the border; “the frontier is nearly bereft of roads, greatly limiting the scope for security force deployment.”⁴⁴ Second, corrupt, under resourced, and untrained customs and border security agents with ethnic and tribal ties on both sides of the border prevent any effective immigration and customs procedures.⁴⁵ In addition, Pakistan’s pre-occupation with security on the Indian frontier prevents them from dedicating additional resources that could be utilized on the Afghan border; in Pakistan’s eyes India still poses the greater security threat than the situation in Afghanistan.

In 2004, President Musharraf convinced tribal leaders in the western frontier to endorse an operation to clear South Waziristan of jihadists. “Over the course of the subsequent eleven months, some 302 militants were killed and 656 arrested.”⁴⁶ The surprising numbers of insurgents captured and killed is indicative of the wider spread problem of Taliban and Al-Qaeda sanctuary in the western frontier. Since the operation in South Waziristan, the Pakistani government continues their presence in the area providing public works, educational, humanitarian, and military construction projects. However, despite these well intentioned programs and the efforts in the wake of the 2005 and 2010 earthquakes, the region still runs counter to the central government in Islamabad. In addition, South Waziristan only represents a small portion of the ungoverned territory; without continued Pakistani military presence and

increased border security throughout the region, it will continue to act as a sanctuary for the Taliban and Al-Qaeda.

The United States and its allies continue to support Pakistan's security efforts in the western frontier as evidenced by the three billion dollars in security assistance to Pakistan from 2005 to 2010.⁴⁷ Pakistan, in turn, has increased its efforts to improve its presence in portions of Baluchistan, the FATA, the NWFP, and professionalize customs and border security agents. In addition, covert US action in western Pakistan has resulted in killing and capturing scores of insurgents and members of the Taliban and Al-Qaeda. However, "the Pakistani government (still) lacks both the human and technical means to monitor and maintain the integrity of its rugged and porous border with Afghanistan and Iran."⁴⁸ Although U.S. and coalition forces continue to make progress in denying sanctuary to insurgents within Afghanistan; Taliban and al-Qaeda forces in the western frontier still remain effective. Therefore, like the Viet Cong and NVA, without denial of Taliban and Al-Qaeda sanctuary in the western frontier they can continue to attack and plot at will and outlast the staying power of coalition forces to remain in Afghanistan.

CONCLUSION

Insurgent groups with access to sanctuaries from which they can train, recruit, resupply, launch and recover from military operations, and receive external support are difficult, if not impossible to defeat. Theorists of Guerilla Warfare like Mao, Che and Lawrence suggested that some form of sanctuary is necessary for any insurgency to be successful; history shows this to be true and further examination of modern examples further support this hypothesis. However, it is important to note that from an insurgent's perspective success is not always winning, just not

losing and living to fight another day. As in the case of the Sunni Insurgency and Al-Qaeda in Iraq; the movements eventually failed and faded away, but they were successful in that they were able to inflict massive casualties on an enemy with superior numbers and firepower for several years. Both the Sunni's and Al-Qaeda took advantage of the coalition's inability to establish presence throughout the country to develop sanctuaries in the cities and towns, only after the coalition removed the insurgency's sanctuary and their lines of supply, did the insurgency eventually collapse. If the Sunni's and al-Qaeda had been able to establish large sanctuaries over the Syrian and Iranian borders, history shows the outcome could have been entirely different.

Analysis of the Vietcong and NVA in Vietnam further shows how insurgents with access to an external base of operations, inaccessible by the enemy are nearly impossible to destroy. Although the Vietcong and NVA had vast amounts of external support from China and Russia, the flow of arms, money and the ability to arm and train the insurgency would have been impossible had it not been for the sanctuary inside Laos and Cambodia. Only after invading Cambodia for a short time in 1970, did the US and South Vietnamese forces make any significant progress against the Vietcong and NVA. However, at this point in the war, public opinion in America had swayed against the war in Vietnam and by 1973, the US began to withdraw. The Vietcong were successful because they were able to utilize their sanctuary to protract the war long enough to allow NVA forces to take over and fight a conventional war long after America had grown tired.

Unfortunately, the war in Afghanistan bears a striking resemblance to Vietnam with regards to sanctuary. Although there is no equivalent to the NVA in Afghanistan, the insurgency is utilizing sanctuary both inside Afghanistan and in Pakistan's western frontier to fight a protracted war against the US and its allies. As we make progress from within Afghanistan, the

insurgency, with what seems like an endless supply of weapons and external support, could last indefinitely fighting from friendly territory in the western tribal regions. History suggests that unless we overcome our unwillingness to deny the enemies sanctuary in Pakistan, the Taliban and Al-Qaeda will be able mirror the strategy of the Vietcong and NVA.

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