One of the most troubling aspects of the current insurgency in Iraq is its transnational nature. Islamic radicals are recruited from far-flung networks across the Middle East and Europe and piped into the country through neighboring states, principally Syria and Jordan. Infiltration by foreign suicide and insurgent fighters across the Syrian border into western Iraq has taken a particularly ghastly military and civilian toll, especially in al-Anbar province. On the other side of the country, the eastern border with Iran is a transport conduit for deadly explosives and could become an even greater liability, should the United States press coercive diplomacy against Iran’s nuclear program. Despite the costs and dangers imposed by porous borders, U.S. troops and Iraqi security forces seem unable to halt the flow of men and materiel. This failure is not unprecedented; from Afghanistan to Kosovo to Vietnam, transnational insurgent movements have posed daunting, even insurmountable, challenges to counterinsurgent powers.

The inability to neutralize transnational insurgencies reflects a broader problem. Conventional models that guide policymakers, the military, and academics generally assume that insurgents are drawn solely from the native population. Consequently, conventional counterinsurgency strategy instructs that, by instilling loyalty or terror in the populace, the uprising can be defeated. In Iraq the pronouncements of U.S. and Iraqi officials clearly indicate that they are operating within this framework. The flaw in this approach is that the transnational aspect of insurgent conflict introduces actors who are not permanently embedded in the local population. Transnational insurgents can live and organize in external sanctuaries, rely in part on foreign...
recruits and diaspora fund-raising support, and if desired, only enter the country for a period of hours or days, after which they kill themselves or flee back across the border following an attack. As long as the insurgent group maintains minimal support within the country for logistics, it can undermine conventional domestic counterinsurgency strategies such as “winning hearts and minds” or coercing the population.

Exploiting transnational opportunities has allowed insurgents throughout the world to survive and grow under otherwise unpromising circumstances. Since World War II, in Algeria, El Salvador, Lebanon, Northern Ireland, and Sudan, among others, insurgencies facing serious disadvantages have stayed alive and fighting by reaping the benefits of sanctuary, diaspora-based funding and recruiting, and porous borders. Insurgent groups translate transnational campaigns into enhanced staying power, increased political influence, and even ultimate victory in some cases. This is especially true when cross-border ethno-nationalist or religious sentiments can be mobilized in the face of a foreign presence, as transnational insurgency against the Soviets in Afghanistan and against the Americans in Vietnam revealed. Along similar lines, many radical Islamists now view Iraq as a battlefield against the United States and have traveled to the country to join the fight.

In the face of these challenges, how can counterinsurgents win the transnational dimension of a conflict? Specifically, how can the United States and its allies neutralize the transnational insurgent challenge in Iraq? Transnational insurgencies undercut the effectiveness of conventional counterinsurgency strategies; neither the hearts-and-minds nor the coercion model can work when an influx of external fighters flows unchecked. Moreover, many of the strategies proposed to deal specifically with transnational insurgencies, such as offensive military incursions, population resettlement, and diplomatic threats and bribes, tend to be either counterproductive or only useful as one part of a much broader strategy against transnational insurgencies. Despite the allure these policies possess, they are rarely as effective as a transnational containment strategy built around three primary elements: border defenses, nationalist propaganda operations, and intelligence cooperation with states where diaspora “feeder” networks are based.

This package of containment policies is not easy to implement, but countries less wealthy and powerful than the United States and its allies in Iraq have successfully used it. Turkey, Israel, India, Morocco, and France (in Algeria) have all blunted determined transnational insurgencies by sealing off
external sanctuaries and disrupting the ability of insurgents to convert international recruiting and fund-raising networks into military and political power. Fences, cooperation, and rhetoric may lack the drama of invasions, ethnic cleansing, aerial bombardment, and high-stakes diplomacy, but historically they produce better results at a much lower cost. This argument has significant implications. Transnational, cross-border insurgencies are not amenable to the kinds of offensive strategies that the Bush Doctrine emphasizes. Unlike global terrorism networks, transnational insurgencies generally center on contested borders and specific pieces of territory. The appropriate strategies for these kinds of conflicts, including key aspects of the current Iraq insurgency, are very different than those that may be necessary in defeating an apocalyptic terrorist group such as Al Qaeda. Going on the offensive against Iran and Syria for their cross-border support of insurgents would be a much less effective and much more costly strategy than a containment policy. In fighting transnational insurgencies, history strongly suggests that defense trumps offense.

The Nature of Transnational Insurgency

In their early stages, insurgencies often attempt to seize land, attack government forces, and form proto-states, provoking retaliation from the full force of the state. When insurgents successfully defend and govern territory, conventional and semiconventional civil wars develop, and armies clash along fluid yet definable battle lines. When they fail and insurgents are unable to fend off the efforts of the counterinsurgent government, they must find new ways to maintain political and military power. Ironically, then, transnational insurgencies are usually born from initial failure or weakness in the face of government counterinsurgency efforts. The insurgents’ response can take many forms, including retreating to hospitable terrain, de-escalating violence to reduce government pressure, and seeking shelter among friendly social networks in cities, towns, and villages. Especially helpful to insurgents on the run is a neighboring state that is either sympathetic toward their group or unable to effectively control its own borders. Neighboring-state sanctuary enables insurgencies to survive under otherwise tenuous circumstances.

Over time, transnationalizing insurgencies significantly increase their potential to inflict pain and win the conflict by enhancing three components of their strength: manpower, materiel, and momentum. The first dimension—having trained, capable, and plentiful manpower—is obviously crucial to victory in any conflict. The transnational element of an insurgency helps the group improve and protect its combat forces by providing sanctuary and diaspora support, while porous borders allow the larger, better trained, and
rejuvenated forces to reenter the battle area. Sanctuaries in neighboring states can provide a safe haven for training and organizing tasks that would be difficult inside the actual combat zone. In escaping the daily pressures of basic survival looming in their home territory, insurgent groups may even come to resemble professional military organizations. Recruiting among diasporas can also increase manpower beyond what is indigenously possible.

The Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) in 1998 and 1999, for example, gained hundreds of recruits from the worldwide Albanian diaspora. The KLA leveraged its diaspora and cross-border sanctuary to maintain a fighting capacity against the Serbs. The existence of porous borders then allows insurgents to maintain or augment combat power within the homeland, replace battle losses, increase the size of military forces, and sustain political links to the interior. Domestic counterinsurgency efforts focused on the static population will have significantly less effect if most of the people committing violence move back and forth across the border and reinforcements flow in to replenish losses among the dead and wounded. With lines of transport and communication to the outside, insurgents can endure even a massive counterinsurgency campaign.

In Vietnam from 1959 to the war’s end in 1975, for example, the Vietcong received massive reinforcement from North Vietnam through Laos and Cambodia by way of the Ho Chi Minh trail, frustrating U.S. efforts. Similarly, mujahideen insurgents moving into Afghanistan across the Pakistani border tremendously complicated the 1979–1988 Soviet counterinsurgency campaign in Afghanistan. These groups were able to absorb heavy losses and survive even in the face of advanced, modern militaries. The Tutsi Rwandan Patriotic Front, ZANU/ZAPU in Rhodesia, the armed wing of South Africa’s African National Congress, and the Pathet Lao in Laos are other good examples of insurgencies relying on external sanctuary and porous borders both for basic survival and ultimate success. In cases such as that of Chechen and Kashmiri separatists, transnational insurgents have not achieved victory, but their survival as effective combat organizations is attributable in large part to foreign sanctuaries, diasporas, and porous borders through which they rebuild and replace their manpower.

Access to materiel is also crucial to an insurgency’s survival. Money, ammunition, food, spare parts, and weaponry are all necessary in war fighting, yet they tend to be difficult to extract in large quantities from a population that is the focus of an intensive counterinsurgency campaign. External sanc-

Going on the offensive against Iran and Syria would be much less effective than containment.
tuary and border infiltration provide safe collection areas and effective transit into combat zones. Diasporas also can be sources of money and weaponry, keeping afloat otherwise poor and isolated insurgents. The Irish Republican Army (IRA) and Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE) are both excellent examples of insurgents’ fruitful use of diasporas for raising funds and procuring materiel. The IRA was able to get money and weapons from the Irish diaspora, including supporters within the United States, while the Tigers continue to rely on the Tamil diaspora across the world for support in their battle against the Sri Lankan government.

Finally, using a transnational strategy allows insurgents to ride out and respond to counterinsurgents’ domestic initiatives. It provides the insurgent group with a measure of control over momentum, enabling them to compensate for a temporary loss of local support and subsequently exploit counterinsurgent vulnerabilities. This has been the case in Iraq, where the promising decline in violence in the aftermath of the January 2005 election was soon overshadowed by a prolonged campaign of suicide bombing largely fueled by foreigners entering Iraq, primarily through Syria.

Each of these advantages reduces the ability of conventional domestic counterinsurgency strategies to overcome an insurgent challenge. There are two dominant approaches to domestic counterinsurgency: winning hearts and minds, which attempts to win the loyalty of the population, and coercion, which focuses on making support of insurgents too costly a burden for a population. Both are irrelevant when the violence is coming from actors based outside of the population, as is the case in transnational, cross-border insurgent campaigns. Neither hearts-and-minds nor coercion strategies can produce a counterinsurgency victory against transnational insurgencies.

**Popular but Ineffective Responses to Transnational Insurgency**

Recognizing the limits of conventional domestic counterinsurgency strategies, other approaches are often proposed and attempted. There are three common, general strategies, each of which holds a certain intuitive appeal but is significantly flawed in practice. First, invasions are often counterproductive; limited incursions produce ill will without eliminating sanctuaries, while full occupations tend to spark new insurgencies or the military involvement of other states. Even airpower is only effective when insurgents are acting like conventional ground forces, the counterinsurgent has excellent intelligence, or the insurgent organization is led hierarchically by a single, charismatic leader. Second, population resettlement is incredibly difficult and, as with invasions, tends to be counterproductive. Finally, using threats and incentives with sanctuary states has limited success because
states intentionally supporting insurgents are not easily intimidated or bribed and states unintentionally supporting insurgents are incapable of cracking down on them effectively.

**GOING ON THE OFFENSIVE**

The most direct response to a transnational insurgency is invasion, amassing conventional military power and then moving into the areas of external sanctuary while flooding the border with combat forces. This policy aims to eliminate the sanctuary, kill or capture insurgent forces, disrupt recruiting networks, uproot the supporting infrastructure, and punish or even remove the regime supporting the insurgents. Invasion may aim at a long-term occupation or be viewed as a shorter-term punitive incursion to inflict pain on insurgents and state sponsors while degrading the former’s combat capabilities. In either case, a preponderance of ground power is generally necessary to embark on this course, with some kind of exit strategy or feasible political solution envisioned beforehand.

Ground offensives have a logical appeal to civilian and military leaders, but the costs and complexities of these endeavors are usually badly underestimated. Israel’s invasion of southern Lebanon (“Operation Peace for Galilee”) in 1982, South Africa’s clashes with the frontline states during the apartheid era (1948–1994), and Austria-Hungary’s punishment of Serbia in 1914 for its support of Serb insurgents in Bosnia all demonstrate how offensive counterinsurgency operations can unravel against transnational insurgencies. Cross-border offensives may be necessary when facing an absolutely existential threat, but usually they result in messy wars of occupation, unintended consequences, or widened conflicts that undermine the entire purpose of the invasion. Israel ended up facing Hizballah and finally withdrawing from Lebanon in 2000, South Africa became embroiled in nasty but inconclusive clashes along and beyond its border, and Austria-Hungary sparked World War I, leading to its own dismemberment. Overall, ground offensives often spark new insurgencies; and wars can widen, often unexpectedly, into terrain in which the war-fighting doctrine and equipment of modern conventional armies is unsuited.

Alternatively, more limited incursions are unlikely to succeed because insurgents can disperse until the counterinsurgent’s forces leave. Punitive expeditions may make a temporary difference, satisfy the public that action is being taken, or send a signal to the host state, but they will almost by definition fail to address the root problem. South Vietnamese and U.S. incursions into Laos and Cambodia were unable to solve the infiltration problem along the Ho Chi Minh Trail permanently, while incursions by Rwanda into eastern Congo since 1994 have not decisively crushed the remnants of geno-
cidal Hutu Interahamwe militias. Launching a ground offensive in pursuit of transnational insurgents without first attempting a concerted defensive effort can be unnecessarily risky and costly.

Short of ground offensives, states may seek to bomb insurgents in their sanctuary, attempting to interdict supply lines, impede training and operations, or kill leaders. The goal is less ambitious than an invasion, with a focus on disrupting and decapitating, rather than eliminating, the insurgency. Air offensives may be either tactical or strategic, depending on the nature of the available targets. Targeted assassinations by Tomahawk missiles or sustained carpet-bombing of trails and bases are both examples of air offensives. The growing accuracy of missiles and bombs has made the use of airpower increasingly appealing to counterinsurgent governments.

Yet, air offensives are also only successful under limited conditions. As the Soviets in Afghanistan and Americans in Southeast Asia learned, most air attacks on insurgent sanctuaries and border-infiltration routes end up wasting enormous amounts of ammunition and effort on empty jungles and mountain paths. Political scientists Robert Pape and Daryl Press have argued that airpower is most effective when used against mobile, conventional military formations. Insurgents’ combat forces are more easily dispersed and less visible. Moreover, insurgents’ resupply needs tend to be fairly low, making supply lines less important than in conventional combat. Consequently, the best time to launch an air offensive against insurgent forces is when they attempt a conventional invasion or large-scale, organized infiltration. These opportunities, however, are rare; and thus insurgencies, both transnational and purely indigenous, are difficult targets for airpower.

The other case in which airpower can be helpful as an offensive tool is in the decapitation of insurgent leaders. Killing key leaders can trigger disarray and even disintegration within insurgencies or at least disrupt their operations and organization. Relying on decapitation, however, comes with two major problems. First, it is extremely difficult. The early phases of the U.S. war in Iraq saw numerous attempts by the United States to kill Ba’athist elites from the air. Despite an enormous investment of effort, these attempts met with very limited success. On the other hand, Israel has been successful in targeted killings, which can be largely attributed to its excellent intelligence, and the United States has had some success against Al Qaeda leaders. The second problem is that many insurgent groups rely at least in

Conventional counterinsurgency is irrelevant when violence comes from outside the population.
part on a cellular or networked structure in which individual leaders are not crucial to the survival and operation of the insurgency. Decentralized insurgent organizations can replace leaders and maintain fighting power even in the face of an effective decapitation campaign. Because of the rarity of these conditions, airpower is too limited and risky a strategy to form the centerpiece of a transnational counterinsurgency campaign.

**Population Resettlement**

Population resettlement is an attempt by the counterinsurgent government to reduce its strategic vulnerability by moving large sections of the population away from the borders. The aim is to make infiltration less useful and reduce strategic vulnerability by removing sympathetic population groups who may provide insurgents with sanctuary. Other demographic strategies can also be used, such as flooding the area with ethnic groups loyal to the government, as the Chinese government has done by relocating large numbers of Han Chinese to Tibet and Xinjiang. This strategy can also be part of a domestic counterinsurgency initiative, such as the strategic hamlet program used in South Vietnam, which attempted to consolidate and protect the rural population in defended villages. As political scientist Kelly M. Greenhill has persuasively shown, however, the successful implementation of population resettlement is incredibly difficult, whether aimed at a transnational or domestic insurgency. Unless extreme coercion or remarkable efficiency characterizes the process, the target population is neither broken nor satisfied.

Resettlement can actually make the insurgency worse, increasing the population's willingness to support insurgents. Forced resettlement may quickly aggravate indigenous grievances, weakening government power and degrading the overall security situation. The potential costs of resettlement are generally not worth the possible benefits, especially when cheaper and less complex strategies are available. If resettlement is to be used in combating a transnational insurgent, it should be restricted to areas directly along vulnerable border areas and be as temporary as possible. For example, Francisco Franco's government in Spain used limited population resettlement in 1944 to help thwart an attempted insurgency across the French border mounted by remnants of Spanish Republican forces. Population movements limited both in scope and duration can reduce dislocation and grievance, avoiding the backlash that accompanies more ambitious resettlement initiatives. Moving entire populations is a risky policy response to transnational insurgency because of its complexity and potential for sparking unintended and counterproductive spillover effects.
DIPLOMACY: COERCIVE AND OTHERWISE

Diplomacy may also be used to try to eliminate sanctuaries. Bribes and threats (“carrots and sticks”) can lead sanctuary-providing governments either to withdraw their active support for insurgents or provide the resources for them to crack down. Diplomatic options generally require plentiful resources with which to bribe weak states as well as a strong counterinsurgent military to lend credibility to threats. When wealth and power back clear interests, diplomatic inducements and coercion may allow for transnational insurgencies to be cauterized with little or no military action.

Using threats or bribes alone to influence the sanctuary state, however, will likely be insufficient. Coercive diplomacy is difficult because states generally calculate relative power and resolve before deciding to support an insurgent group. If it has chosen to provide sanctuary, the state likely believes that it can withstand counterinsurgent military action or that the counterinsurgent will back down. Although it may in fact be mistaken, the host state will still be confident in its strength during bargaining. Consequently, threats are unlikely to be very effective, as the sponsoring state has taken them into account already when deciding to offer sanctuary. Resistance to coercive diplomacy is particularly strong when the sponsoring state has either a strong ethnic/nationalist/religious connection to the transnational insurgents or is a determined rival of the counterinsurgent government. Today, for example, because both Iran and Syria have strategic objectives to weaken U.S. power in the Middle East, they have not proven cooperative in sealing their borders with Iraq. Both ideological affinities and material security competition can fuel state sponsorship.

Invading neighbors to eliminate an insurgency’s sanctuary is often counterproductive.

Weak or failed states pose a very different problem. Although intentional sponsors possess power and will, weak states lack both. Threats are useless because these states are able to do little on their own. Because not much can be done about state capacity in the short term, even generous bribes will only succeed with time. Yet, this strategy assumes that bribes will ultimately be converted into state capacity, which may not be true given the levels of corruption and organizational disarray that characterize many weak and failed states. The countries most desperate to be bribed are also those least likely to be able or willing to turn the money into success against transnational insurgents.
Counterinsurgents trying to eliminate the neighboring-state sanctuary and seal the border must either engage in the costly and lengthy process of building up the host state’s capacity through foreign aid, military assistance, and other such programs or must take matters into their own hands militarily, which has its own problems, as discussed earlier. Although weak states do not possess strong militaries, they often are the site of ethnic and religious divisions and are awash in small arms, making them challenging terrain for any military incursion, as U.S. forces found in Somalia in 1993. Neither threats nor bribes offer much promise of short-term success. As with decapitation, this strategy, although worth trying, is unlikely to succeed quickly and is sorely incomplete as a stand-alone policy.

**Containing Transnational Insurgency**

Because much of the insurgent’s combat power and leadership is no longer located among the local population, a transnational insurgency reduces the effectiveness of many standard counterinsurgency policies. Moreover, states sponsor insurgencies for strategic, political, and ethno-nationalist reasons, likely possessing a mixture of political will and military strength not easily overcome, taking many options off the table. Ground and air offensives, population resettlement, and engaging in diplomacy with sanctuary-providing states are unlikely to meet with frequent success. The previously discussed empirical record bears this out; many failed counterinsurgents seized on one or more of these strategies as a way to avoid the challenges of fighting a transnational insurgency. The strategies outlined above can succeed, but each relies on a specific, restrictive set of circumstances, and even success is usually just one part of a much broader counterinsurgency effort. Essentially, these are only good ideas if all the stars are aligned. Otherwise, counterinsurgent governments risk a widened war, insurgency-bolstering backlash, or simply wasted time, hope, and resources.

The benefits that insurgents derive from a transnational campaign place counterinsurgent governments in a difficult position, forcing them to confront more than the standard set of obstacles that purely domestic insurgency presents. Governments waging such a conflict must gain the acquiescence of the populace, protect territory from attack and sabotage, keep an economy running despite violence and instability, and formulate coherent and mutually supporting packages of military, political, and economic policies. Counterinsurgency is an intricate, time-consuming process under the best of circumstances.

The complexity of this task increases even further in the face of a transnational campaign, adding an international dimension to the conven-
ional domestic tasks. In fact, the international and domestic aspects of the conflict become intermingled. Victory cannot be achieved domestically if insurgents are free to build up forces in foreign sanctuaries, recruit abroad, and funnel combat resources across porous borders. Conversely, no amount of successful diplomacy, international military action, or border control can end an insurgency if incompetent domestic measures fuel continued violence and resentment. When facing these various insurgent advantages, how can a counterinsurgent government win the transnational component of a conflict?

History indicates that the best policy combination for neutralizing the transnational component of an insurgency is containment. A mixture of border defenses, marginalization campaigns promoting nationalist propaganda, and law enforcement/intelligence initiatives that undercut diaspora networks is the most likely to succeed at the lowest cost. Such containment policies are not as sexy as bold offensives, telegenic aerial bombing, or high-profile crisis diplomacy, but they are extremely effective at precisely slicing the sinews of transnational insurgent power. By sealing off border infiltration routes, using nationalism to delegitimate foes based abroad, and reducing the ability of insurgents to collect men and money abroad, external sanctuaries can be turned into isolated and impotent enclaves. These containment strategies hold the key to overcoming the challenge of transnational insurgency.

**DEFENSIVE BARRIERS**

The first step in this strategy is to build and maintain defensive barriers. The basic aim is to make infiltration difficult, raising the costs of external sanctuary until they outweigh the advantages. If forced to navigate minefields, breach electrified fences, and evade air-mobile assault forces, an insurgency’s combat power can no longer flow freely across borders, impeding its ability to withstand the impact of domestic counterinsurgency offensives. Isolating the insurgents’ men and materiel from the primary arena of warfare reduces their ability to make military and political gains, cutting off insurgents’ contact with and assistance from external sanctuaries and diasporas.

Fences, minefields, surveillance, and patrols reduce border porosity, increasing the difficulty of infiltration. Mobile pursuit forces are particularly effective for tracking down and capturing or killing infiltrators who make it through barriers and border surveillance. The specific mixture of fixed barriers and pursuit forces depends on the counterinsurgent’s strategic vulner-
ability, or the defender’s “margin for error” if infiltrators get across the border. When a counterinsurgent’s strategic vulnerability is high, for example, where valuable targets are located near a border and successful infiltrators can quickly find sanctuary or strike vulnerable targets, a serious investment in robust fixed barriers and surveillance is necessary along the border to minimize damage. When there is reduced vulnerability, for example, if even successful infiltrators would need to travel deep into the country to find either sympathetic population groups or attractive targets, the emphasis can shift to mobile pursuit forces and layered defenses to hunt down insurgents who make it across the border. Because they most directly neutralize the key mechanisms through which transnational insurgencies accrue power and avoid unpredictable spillover effects by carefully limiting the scope and nature of military and diplomatic action, border defense and pursuit are valuable strategies. Although relying primarily on defensive actions cuts against many of the offense-oriented attitudes of military and civilian decisionmakers, these measures offer the most effective single response to the challenge of transnational, cross-border insurgency.28

Historically, barriers and pursuit forces have been used with great success to counter transnational insurgents. Perhaps the most striking victory in the transnational component of a counterinsurgency was by France in Algeria in the late 1950s. French counterinsurgents had remarkable success at that time in sealing off Front de Libération Nationale guerrillas based in Tunisia and Morocco. The primary French defense was the Morice Line, completed in September 1957 and composed of “an eight-foot electric fence charged with five thousand volts; on either side of this was a fifty-yard belt liberally sprinkled with anti-personnel mines and backed up with continuous barbed-wire entanglements,”29 stretching approximately 250 kilometers along the Tunisian border. Sensors on the wall, alerting the French if and where the barrier had been cut, helped direct artillery fire to any breach and guide elite helicopter-borne paratroop forces to areas of pursuit. The famed historian Alistair Horne refers to the line as “a remarkable and sinister triumph of military technology.”30 Some estimate that the Morice Line reduced infiltration by as much as 90 percent.31

Today, both India and Israel rely heavily on fences and border-defense systems. In each case, a democratic state faces nationalist and/or Islamist insurgents who utilize suicide terror. The key to reducing the rate and impact of infiltration has been a mixture of defense along the border and pursuit/
Defeating Transnational Insurgencies: The Best Offense Is a Good Fence

surveillance to catch those able to breach the defenses. These policies have met with success, significantly reducing the flow of infiltrators from, respectively, Pakistan and the Palestinian territories.32 The Indian government claims that the fence along the line of control has helped reduce infiltration into Kashmir by up to 60 percent.33 Israel claims to have successfully blocked 92 of 93 infiltration attempts from Gaza between January and July of 2005.34 Israel has also used barriers along its northern border with Lebanon to great effect. Despite fears of an endless infiltration campaign by Hizballah, the border has remained fairly quiet and secure. The presence of a large number of troops and of advanced technology, crucial both to surveillance and mobility, bolsters the defensive line. These defenses have had their desired effect without sparking unintended and counterproductive spillover effects.

Even less-wealthy countries with small or moderately sized militaries have successfully pursued the defensive-border policy. In the aftermath of the 1948–1960 counterinsurgency campaign against a Communist insurgency in Malaya, the rebels were kept almost entirely confined to enclaves in Thailand, where they remained impotent for decades before surrendering in the late 1980s. Today, Morocco holds Polisario rebels at bay with an enormous barrier in the Western Sahara, and Turkey’s defenses along the Iraqi and Syrian borders have limited the Kurdish Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan.35 Kuwait is in the process of building a steel fence across its border with Iraq to block a spillover of radical violence.36

One cautionary note is raised by the unsuccessful experience of the United States in its attempt to build the “McNamara Line” along the demilitarized zone in Vietnam.37 This effort failed not because the idea was intrinsically unsound, but rather because it was strategically mistimed. By the time the United States began to construct a barrier in 1967, the Vietcong’s strength in South Vietnam was already too great. The 1968 Tet Offensive revealed the inadequacy of the domestic counterinsurgency being conducted by the United States and the Republic of Vietnam and led to a reduction of U.S. resources for the conflict. Once the Vietcong was decimated in the aftermath of Tet and the war moved to one of large-unit North Vietnamese infiltration, a barrier would have been more appropriate.38 The lesson of this case is that border defense is a highly effective policy only when complemented by a competent and appropriate domestic counterinsurgency effort.

Successful implementation of a barrier-and-pursuit strategy requires a sustained commitment of resources, attention by high-ranking officers and politicians, and close coordination between border guard and pursuit forces. With this combination, counterinsurgents can isolate foes from strategic areas and then essentially wait them out. As long as the insurgent group is un-
able to build a powerful conventional army in its sanctuary, its separation from the combat zones of the interior renders it ineffective. Good fences may not quite make for good neighbors, but they can certainly make them less dangerous.

**A Campaign of Marginalization**

An effective barrier-and-pursuit defense opens the door for sustained law enforcement, intelligence efforts, and propaganda aimed at undercutting both the ideological appeal as well as the recruiting and fund-raising capability of the insurgents. This type of marginalization campaign has two primary components: nationalist propaganda and network-eliminating cooperation. When they are effectively combined, transnational insurgents simultaneously lose political support and material resources.

First, as insurgents are being isolated in external sanctuaries, the counterinsurgent government can employ a propaganda campaign to paint the infiltrators as tools of foreign power and influence who are disconnected from the population, unrepresentative of the country as a whole, and hopelessly weak. Britain/Malaya in the 1940s and 1950s as well as Greece in the 1940s used this type of propaganda very effectively against the Malayan and Greek Communist insurgencies, respectively. It is particularly important when trying to undermine the insurgency to appeal to nationalism. The counterinsurgent uses its control over the media and state educational apparatus to push nationalist propaganda targeting foreign-based insurgent groups relentlessly. Sparking nationalist reactions against groups based abroad can blunt the ability of the insurgents to capitalize on grievances among the population. Although such a strategy is difficult when the counterinsurgent power is also a foreign power, as in Iraq today or French Algeria, or if this kind of nationalist propaganda does not succeed in winning over supporters of the insurgency for any other reason, at the very least the counterinsurgent government can generate deeper loyalty among the supporters it already has for a sustained, often brutal counterinsurgency campaign.

The second prong of a political marginalization strategy focuses on attacking global recruiting and fund-raising networks with a concentrated intelligence and law enforcement campaign. States friendly to the counterinsurgent government may be used as “feeders” for transnational insurgent movements. Feeder networks provide men and material to the insurgency, which can effectively organize these resources in its host-state sanctuaries. For example, Albanian Kosovars from around the world assembled in Albania, where they were trained for battle across the border in Kosovo. Immigrant populations in particular are fertile recruiting grounds, and the importance of diasporas
has dramatically increased with improvements in global transportation and communications.

Intelligence and law enforcement cooperation with friendly governments among the feeder countries of a diaspora is the key to this strategy. The counterinsurgent must work with them to disrupt or destroy the pipeline of recruits and money to the insurgency from abroad. Reducing the insurgent group’s appeal and arresting or monitoring the activity of prominent recruiters and fund-raisers can limit the effectiveness of the insurgent’s transnational networks. Cutting off the supply of cash and fighters holds promise for starving them out. This can involve attempts to bribe, threaten, or compromise with the sanctuary state, but it is often less costly and more effective to try to go further afield into the diaspora network. The counterinsurgent must work with the law enforcement and intelligence services of these friendly states to eliminate or at least reduce recruiting and fund-raising. Efforts by the Sri Lankan government to reduce the reach and power of the LTTE among the Tamil diaspora illustrate the importance that Sri Lanka attributes to this network of support.41

**Lessons for Iraq and Beyond**

Counterinsurgency is a difficult business, especially in the face of domestic and transnational challenges. Neither challenge can be overcome without at least neutralizing the other, and often failure in one leads to failure in both. The most successful policy against a transnational insurgency is to embrace a containment strategy, combining border defenses with aggressive propaganda as well as international intelligence and law enforcement efforts. Other transnational counterinsurgency strategies, including military strikes, population resettlement, and diplomacy, can sometimes succeed but are narrower and riskier.

What does this imply for counterinsurgency in Iraq? The ineffectiveness of coercive diplomacy against Syria has already been witnessed, and an invasion of either Syria or Iran would stretch U.S. military power to or even beyond its limits.42 The most cost-effective way to cauterize the transnational component of the insurgency is to build an Iraqi version of the Morice Line. Fences, surveillance, and aggressive pursuit along vulnerable sections of the Syrian and Iranian borders would significantly increase the difficulty of infiltration. The lessons for Iraq from the French, Israeli, and Indian defensive strategy experiences are far from perfect, but they are at least suggestive. Iraqi forces could assume the labor-intensive tasks of routine patrol and maintenance of the line, while U.S. forces could be responsible for capital- and technology-intensive surveillance and pursuit.43 Rattling sabers against
Iraq’s neighbors, launching sporadic offensives in al-Anbar province, and hoping that Iran will refrain from exploiting the opportunities presented by a porous border are less likely to succeed. With a sustained border defense, the flow of suicide bombers and insurgent fighters into Iraq would be disrupted, having an enormously positive impact on stability in the country and helping lay the groundwork for drawing down U.S. forces.

Defensive military efforts along the border alone are insufficient. They need to be combined with a sustained focus on disrupting recruiting networks in the Middle East, North Africa, South Asia, and Europe that have provided willing jihadists to the insurgency in Iraq. Skillful public diplomacy by the Iraqi government should emphasize the fact that many of these infiltrators are foreigners and attempt actively to publicize the terrible toll these foreigners’ attacks take on Iraqi civilians. Delegitimizing the transnational pillar of the insurgency is most likely to succeed if undertaken by the Iraqi government and not the U.S. military, to give it a credible nationalist foundation. Quietly finding and supporting clerics in “feeder” countries willing to oppose the recruiting of local men into the insurgency would be another valuable step in reducing the insurgency’s appeal. Containing the transnational aspect of the Iraq insurgency is only one part of a much broader counterinsurgency effort, but it is nevertheless vital to stabilizing Iraq and achieving U.S. interests.

This argument is not only applicable to the situation in Iraq. The U.S. and NATO effort in Afghanistan, although much less widely discussed, also faces elements of a transnational insurgency. The porous Afghanistan-Pakistan border allows Al Qaeda and Taliban forces to move between the two countries. Indeed, many believe that this allowed Osama bin Laden to evade U.S. search efforts by escaping into Pakistan. Intensive efforts to monitor, patrol, and block key border passes could at least reduce the difficulty of pacification and state building in Afghanistan.

More broadly, analysts of insurgency should pay greater attention to the transnational dimensions of internal conflicts rather than focusing primarily on humanitarian intervention, peacekeeping and peace-building, and full-scale external military involvement in civil war. Because sanctuaries and infiltration often are crucial, insurgent conflicts should not be approached as closed systems with an exclusive focus on domestic counterinsurgency policy. Governments, analysts, and academics need to focus on understanding how to delegitimize insurgent groups, the specific mechanisms through

A propaganda campaign can paint the infiltrators as tools of a foreign power.
which diasporas accumulate men and money, and the best ways to employ forces and technology in border defense. Transnational insurgencies are likely to be enduring features of the international security environment well into the future. Scholars and policymakers should have the tools at hand to understand and confront them in Iraq and beyond.

Notes


6. For information on the use of Pakistan as a base for launching attacks against Soviet forces in Afghanistan, see Steve Coll, Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, From the Soviet Invasion to September 11, 2001 (New York:

7. Byman et al., *Trends in Outside Support for Insurgent Movements*, p. 84.


22. I thank Caitlin Talmadge for this important point.


25. Byman et al., *Trends in Outside Support for Insurgent Movements*.


27. This phenomenon is known as a “selection effect” and is highlighted in James Fearon, “Signaling Versus the Balance of Power and Interests: An Empirical Test of a Crisis Bargaining Model,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 38, no. 2 (June 1994): 236–269.


43. See Hamilton, Defeating Insurgency on the Border.

