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Understanding Terrorist Safe Havens

EDITED BY MICHAEL A. INNES

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Foreword

Readers of these essays ought to come away shaken by the expanded definition of terrorist “sanctuary” and “safe haven” that the authors present and quite ably defend. We in the West are conditioned by political leaders and the media to think of sanctuaries as specific geographic locations where terrorists can assemble, train, and plan in a relatively unthreatening environment. Such places are assumed to be mostly in so-called failed-states or in states that are ineffectively governed. And in many cases, this is exactly where they are located: Somalia, Afghanistan, the North Caucasus, Iraq, Yemen, Bangladesh, and a startlingly numerous group of other states. The essays in this volume address these physical locations and reveal the benefits that terrorists derive from them, including the lack of governmental interference, inaccessibility to those hunting them, and an environment that allows systematic and patient training.

To their credit, however, the authors likewise point out that these remote safe havens also present problems for the terrorist groups in some of the same ways, such as difficulties of ingress and egress, primitive living conditions, and the lack of modern communications. In addition, we find that the lack of an effective central government does not mean an absence of local authorities that hinder terrorist activities. Tribal and clan rule in African countries, to take just one example, can limit the terrorists’ ability to fully exploit their safe haven.

The authors generally see these geographic sanctuaries as almost a lure to imperialism in the sense that to the extent that the United States and other Western governments focus on bringing these “ungoverned regions” under control, they must use military operations that unavoidably lead to prolonged occupations and the emergence of new Western dependencies. With this argument I certainly concur, but I believe it results less from an imperialist urge in the West than
from the endemic moral cowardice among Western leaders that keeps them from effectively using their overwhelming military superiority to destroy the enemy at hand and then leave. Many of the terrorist problems that crop up in ungoverned regions can be solved militarily, but not if force is applied with a dainty or incremental hand. As always, the only mercy in war—as Machiavelli suggested five centuries ago—is the use of annihilating force at the start in order to end the conflict as quickly as possible. And, yes, by consistently remembering that once the military job is complete, the time has arrived to withdraw and go home.

Beyond geographic sanctuary, the authors closely examine the safe havens and sanctuaries that terrorists have developed in urban areas, via the Internet, and through cooperation with well-organized criminal groups with international reach. The authors also make clear that the terrorists have built a comfortable, proficient, and thoroughly modern relationship with globalization’s impacts, and are exploiting the increasing unwillingness of Western governments to enforce their own laws.

The vital importance of urban sanctuary to the terrorists discussed in these essays is on mark for two reasons. First, because it is indisputably true. For the United States, for example, the attacks of 9/11 became realities because the attackers were able to lose themselves in the crowd and function effectively in Karachi, Hamburg, Jakarta, New York, and other mega-cities, just as much as because they were able to train at camps in Taleban-ruled Afghanistan. Second, the volume’s emphasis on urban and electronic sanctuary drives home an essential point that is still too much ignored by Western governing elites: Islamist terrorists more often than not come from among the best-and-brightest of the Muslim world’s population. These are not poor, hopeless, illiterate economic migrants; they are educated, talented, pious, modern, and computer savvy men and women drawn from the middle and upper-middle classes, individuals who not only fit into urban environments but thrive there. Their motivation is based on religion-based hatred for the impact of U.S. and Western actions on Islam and its followers, and this keeps them tightly focused on their basically defensive goal—protecting their faith by waging war to remove the Western, and especially the U.S., presence from the Muslim world. This focus enables them to work effectively, as Osama bin Laden has long advised, with such lesser, un-Islamic evils as organized crime, interest-based financial institutions and networks, and narcotics traffickers.

In fact, so comfortable and efficient are terrorists in using these lesser evils to further their goals that they have created lose-lose situations for the United States and the West in several areas of the world. This is demonstrated in the volume’s essays analyzing the West’s losing and Taleban-benefiting efforts at heroin eradication in Afghanistan; the painful reality that the UK government may well alienate its large Muslim population by taking the law-enforcement measures needed to reduce the chances of domestic terrorism; and the emerging fact that unbridled globalization—especially in finance, commerce, and communications—has created sanctuaries for terrorists that can only be destroyed by blows that
would strike just as hard against the West’s basic economic and ideological, i.e., free speech, interests.

I also want briefly to note a further, fairly durable terrorist sanctuary—or at least a protected niche—that the essays strongly suggest, even though there is no paper that deals with it specifically. That sanctuary lies, I think, in the deep and stubborn left-right division of Western politics. The essays capture the ability of terrorists to operate in the West’s modern and urban environment, and suggest—at least to me—that this favorable environment is likely to remain open to them because as the West fights the terrorists, we are also fighting each other. From the right, we find the oddity of an overemphasis on military operations that are simultaneously too mild to be effective, an element that favors Christian crusading, and an unfettered desire to promote globalization and illegal immigration to sate the need for continuing economic growth and the always voracious greed of human beings. From the left, we see an almost doctrinaire and surely ahistorical religious faith in the viability of multiculturalism, the benign benefits of globalization, and the ebbing belief in the efficacy of the nation-state and its military capabilities. And both sides share a studied, fearful reluctance to publicly debate politically hard and nasty domestic issues, such as enforcing immigration laws and border controls, toughening antidrug laws, and—most difficult of all—giving careful consideration to what extent, or even whether, Islamism is compatible with contemporary Western society. As long as right and left remain at daggers drawn, it seems to me that effective self-defense in the West is a very distant goal, and that this reality offers the terrorists another valuable sanctuary.

Overall, the essays presented in this well-edited volume are a welcome addition to the literature on terrorists and the bases and sanctuaries—physical and virtual—from which they operate. Readers will, of course, agree, disagree, or simply reject certain of the essays’ specifics and conclusions. They would be daft, however, to come away from these essays without a greater respect for the modern, resourceful, and adaptable enemy the West faces; indeed, the term “terrorist” seems to minimize and even belittle the foe’s size, power, geographical reach, and potential impact. The authors have done a splendid job in laying bare this reality, and have provided a greatly expanded foundation from which a more multifaceted and sophisticated consideration of the problem of the terrorists’ sanctuaries can be constructed. For this service, we owe them thanks and a hearty, if old-fashioned, “Well done.”

Michael F. Scheuer
First thanks, as always, go to the contributors to this book. Their recognition of its importance, and their commitment to thinking and writing about sanctuaries, meant that this volume was one whose time had come—it was a book, simply, that needed and wanted to be published. Thanks also to Hilary Claggett at Praeger, whose patience and guidance have been a lesson in professional standards. The book’s focus first emerged as a line of inquiry while I was thinking primarily about post-war and transitional issues in Bosnia-Herzegovina, which resulted in a short article in *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*. Thanks are due to Bruce Hoffman for seeing fit to publish that initial piece. Early discussions with Ken Menkhaus were also formative. His has been a voice of reason in a sea of near-hysteria on state failure and its potential to draw in terrorist entrepreneurs. His work on Somalia and the Horn of Africa has been an invaluable aid in distinguishing truth from fallacy in the war on terror. A book on sanctuaries was in many ways intended to be a corrective to the prevailing wisdoms. At a basic level, however, it was meant to give substance to a subject much debated but poorly understood. It went beyond being simply a germ of an idea as a direct consequence of our discussions.

For those parts of the book that I wrote, the statements and findings are my own, and in no way reflect the official interest or endorsement of any past or present employer. That said, extended dialogue with numerous scholars and practitioners has benefited the project immensely. Thanks to Peter Andreas, John Torpey, Tom Sanderson, Daniel Lambach, Pete Stoett, and Frank Chalk, for indulging early (and often incoherent) drafts, and to the usual suspects, Callum, Caroline, Arpad, Sebastien, the two Pacos, Matt and Marc-Olivier, for their comments, criticism, and suggestions on various bits and pieces I threw their way.
Alice Hills and Clive Jones at the School of Politics and International Studies, University of Leeds, deserve special mention for their interest in seeing continued research into the subject. James Gow helped crystallize some of my thinking: in a very brief meeting in London in June 2006, he suggested that my approach to sanctuaries lay somewhere between understanding its “anthropological underground” and an inquiry into the politics of “veiled intent.” Both issues, and the realm of behavior and activities that relate to them, have obvious relevance across a range of challenging topics, inter alia: cultural masks and warlordism, flight and refuge from war crimes prosecution, cross-border criminal and political mechanisms, the use of surrogate and secret forces in foreign policy, broader issues of sovereignty, empire, and civilization, and so on.

This book limits its coverage to problems directly and indirectly associated with terrorism, broadly speaking, in the post-9/11 world. It is not meant to be a book only about al Qaeda or jihadi terrorism. It incorporates issues as diffuse as asylum policies in the West, legal and political exceptionalism, terrorist and counter-terrorist thought and practice, and the changing character of war. It is structured quite deliberately to flesh out ten specific problem-sets of the war on terror: the political geography of sanctuary, the political discourse that has structured our understanding of it, al Qaeda and the state, terrorist exploitation of state failure, bordered security and urban warfare, transnational crime and terrorist finance, national security law, information warfare and virtual havens, diaspora issues, and problems of state-building and reconstruction. Its observations and lessons are meant to challenge the way we think about the threat of terrorism, and provide cues for dealing with it constructively and effectively. Such lessons, I hope, will provide the sort of intellectual leverage that can help us better survive the complexities and difficulties of contemporary and international affairs.

The contributors have engaged the topic with innovation and substance. In some cases the currency and changing nature of global security problems lent an immediacy and urgency to their work. When the project was initiated, Afghanistan and Iraq were foremost in our thoughts, but as 2006 wore on, crises in Somalia and Lebanon reminded us that we continue to live in interesting times. By no means do the authors all agree on the issues. Given the breadth of subject matter, achieving consensus was not the intent—although all concur that terrorist sanctuaries are a complex subject of inquiry. Here, also, a brief note on transliteration is called for. While purists may insist on a more correct Usama ibn Laden over Osama bin Laden, and quibble over the countless variations and accuracy of the spelling of al Qaeda, they have also become household names since 2001. Understanding the content and contours of what they represent requires broad thinking across the disciplines, with a view to the wider accessibility and practical application of research outcomes. Ultimately, if those working the issues or simply seeking to understand them find this book to be useful, then it has achieved its purpose.

Michael A. Innes
Brussels
Cracks in the System:
Sanctuary and Terrorism After 9/11

Michael A. Innes

In 2000, Rory Stewart, a former British Army officer and diplomat, set out to cross the breadth of Asia on foot. Starting in Turkey and heading east, his journey was interrupted in December 2000 when the Iranian government revoked his visa, and he was refused entry into Afghanistan. He picked up the trail in Pakistan and carried on, reaching eastern Nepal by the end of 2001. There he heard of the fall of the Taliban. He returned to Afghanistan in January 2002 to the western city of Herat—shortly after the opening battles of the war on terror, when the United States, United Kingdom, and Allied troops were just beginning the long hunt for the country’s former al Qaeda guests. He would take a straight line from there to Kabul, thus joining the two sections of his long walk. Public utilities and western amenities were nonexistent on the Herat-Kabul road, where “Villages combined medieval etiquette with new political ideologies.” For many households “the only piece of foreign technology was a Kalashnikov, and the only global brand was Islam.” The irony was not lost on Stewart: “All that had made Afghanistan seem backward, peripheral, and irrelevant now made it the centre of the world’s attention.”

Armed with little more than a well-developed sense of local history, a smattering of Afghan languages, and enough hard currency to smooth the way, he was a Westerner sussing out hidden and lost places along ancient trading routes, impossibly isolated villages, and lethal mountain passes. He was doing it during a period when foreign visitors tended to arrive bearing arms and deadly intentions, not gifts and idle curiosity. His commitment to the physical rigor of the trek, not to mention his indifference to its dangers, was equally suspect. What good purpose could it serve? Who in their right mind would choose to test the limits of endurance across such a forbidding and hostile landscape? Why would someone choose to do such a thing in a place everyone now knew was the quintessential terrorist sanctuary?
For Stewart, the answers were both simple and complex. After finally negotiating his way into the country, he explained to a Los Angeles Times reporter his reasons for such a mad caper. “I told him that Afghanistan was the missing section of my walk,” Stewart recounts, “the place in between the deserts and the Himalayas, between Persian, Hellenic, and Hindu culture, between Islam and Buddhism, between mystical and militant Islam.” More, “I wanted to see where these cultures merged into one another and touched the global world.”2 The physical side was unimportant, “more a way of looking at Afghanistan and being by myself,” although explaining away the danger was difficult to do “without sounding awkward, insincere, or ludicrous.”3

Reading his memoir of the journey, The Places in Between, one gets the impression that the Afghan security officials, special forces operators, and al Qaeda sympathizers he met probably suspected him of being an intelligence officer on a deep reconnaissance mission. Stewart’s asceticism, however, was enough to convince them that he was something other than a learned traveler with questionable motives. He was a latter-day mystic, a walking transnational dervish in search of meaning and depth in a world of revealed mysteries and exposed truths.

Sleeping in mosques and caravanserais, and subsisting on a basic diet of bread, water, and what incidental fare local villages could afford, the harshness of daily life reduced his expectations of survival to an ecstatic minimum. Cultural discovery meant learning that traditions of hospitality are often the grudging result of open shaming and arm twisting, and tend to favour familiar faces less desperate for it over those of strangers and beggars. It also meant stumbling over fragments of long lost civilizations, only to find that their artefacts were being vigorously excavated and hawked to alleviate the crushing burden of poverty. The harshness of rural life offered the classic bandit’s retreat from the law, and the refuge of death itself loomed persistent and close to those unwise enough to think they could disappear behind the protective cover of climate, terrain, or local politics.

Minimal nourishment, exposure to the elements, and countless hours of walking took their toll, leading Stewart to psychological detachment and euphoric contemplation. It also allowed him to compartment injury and persevere. “Exhaustion and repetition,” he recollected, “created within the pain a space of calm exhilaration and control.”4 In shorter dispatches from earlier sections of his Asian walk, he likened interstitial sensory experiences to T.S. Elliot’s “moment of silence,” incidents of deliberate calm beyond the random cacophony of modern experience.5 Such episodes of mundane and extraordinary transcendence offer a recurring theme of sanctuary, in all the escapist potential one might expect of a risk-laden jaunt at the edges of terrorist space.

Stewart’s tale personalizes one of the most vexing issues in contemporary politics. It suggests there are as many ways, places, and reasons to hide as there are approaches to understanding and locating the hidden. Indeed, notions of sanctuary are ubiquitous, embedded in legislative frameworks, political and religious conventions, cultures of hospitality, and codes of honor and revenge the world over. Their varied and subtle facets have traditionally been depicted in ways that relate
to individual human beings, but they are also more generally places and spaces apart, where real and perceived challenges to established order can thrive and persist. Guerrilla movements have used them as bases from which to plan and launch paramilitary operations against conventional armies, and criminal organizations have used them to avoid police and judicial interference in their illegal activities. In medieval England, sanctuaries were religious facilities meant to provide individuals accused of various wrongdoings with temporary and legally sanctioned asylum. In traditional Albanian society, *kanun* law contains provisions for protected physical locations, where members of families embroiled in long-standing blood feuds can seek shelter from the vengeful. In Islamic cultures, extending hospitality to guests, with all the protection that it implies, is a key element of the social fabric.

The global world is pocked with circumstances of intermediate character, threaded with gaps and omissions, filled with histories of the ignored, the discarded, the secret and the forgotten. In the international system, traditional diplomacy provides foreign embassies and their staff immunities from local laws. Refugees fleeing violence and persecution can seek asylum outside their home countries. Exiles abroad join diaspora communities in their search for better economic opportunities, improved access to higher education, or greater political freedoms. The privileged elite of almost any nation can hide their wealth in offshore financial and tax havens while *hawaladar* conduct untraceable business off the digital grid. Broad sketches of international order look to the social and political frictions at the frontiers of the world’s great communities. During the Cold War, communism and capitalism bedded down into armed camps, but exceptions to bipolarity persisted through nonalignment—even as wars of national liberation and anticolonial resistance often served one or the other of the two dominant paradigms. Recent wars in Africa and the Western Balkans have been widely described as neomedieval battlefields, set apart from the proper conduct of civilized states. More distant wars of the twentieth century have shown that allegedly advanced, modern societies sometimes perpetrate acts of unspeakable cruelty and atrocity, the reality and acceptance of which can remain suppressed beneath a gossamer veil of hubris.

Sometimes things fall through the cracks, or so the expression goes. Other things are willfully thrown into them. Still other things deliberately hide within them. After the September 11, 2001, attacks, Afghanistan was seen to be the archetypal terrorist base of operations, linking official sponsorship of terrorism, failed state vulnerability to terrorist exploitation, and the absence of international legitimacy that underscores both. Terrorist sanctuaries have since captured the collective attention of policymakers, intelligence officials, and military planners. The sad truth, evidenced in the post–Cold War record of so-called intelligence failures, is that we know precious little about the terrorist underground beyond what its denizens choose to reveal to us. Our perceptions and understanding of terrorism, insurgency, and war have been in a continual process of negotiation with events and trends in Afghanistan and Iraq, in Istanbul, London, and Madrid. Military and counterterrorist campaigns have raised important questions on how
we deal with security both at home and elsewhere in the world. Terrorist sanctuaries have been at the center of such discussions, and they remain important for several reasons.

Terrorists operate across a broad spectrum of political, insurgent, and criminal realms. There is little doubt that being better equipped to identify such sites will help to combat the threats to individual and collective security that inhabit them. Just as importantly, terrorists and their sanctuaries go to the heart of debates on national security because of the questions they raise about the interface between states and individuals. They raise doubts on our endurance for the expediency of counterinsurgency and counterterrorism, on our willingness to track and neutralize terrorists, on our capacity for ferreting out the threats that lurk in the hidden worlds of al Qaeda, Basque Fatherland and Liberty (ETA), the Kurdish Worker’s Party (PKK), the Irish Republican Army (IRA), and countless other terrorist organizations. They remind us of the vulnerability of our own freedoms, of our sometimes tenuous commitment to the ethical pursuit of threats to it, and of the complex moral and practical outcomes of the war on terror.

John Kenneth Galbraith once noted, famously, “the enemy of the conventional wisdom is not ideas but the march of events.” The primary thrust of this chapter, and of this book as a whole, is an extension of that most pointed criticism: that the war on terror so defined is essentially a war on a tactic. The argument put forward here is somewhat narrower: given the war’s emphasis on “denying sanctuary to terrorists,” it places a premium on locations—and a war on locations is equally fraught with complexities and pitfalls. Much of what we know and think about sanctuaries is rooted in poorly conceptualized policy statements. As such, this chapter, and this book, treats sanctuaries as an intellectual challenge, surveying, among other things, the context within which the subject has gained prominence in recent years. It also interrogates the conventional wisdom policymakers have proffered since September 11, 2001, focusing on Bush administration statements, policy, and related problems of implementation in the “grey zones” or “black spots” of the war on terror. The 2004 Report of the 9/11 Commission is probably the single most important document to address the problem. It receives special treatment, as do the Congressional hearings that followed its release. I raise more questions than I answer, in an effort to expand the way we think about the clandestine worlds of terrorists. To understand the secret lives of sanctuaries, in short, is to uncover the internal workings of multiple hidden realms, filled with militants, criminals, soldiers, and spies, with the pious and the profane, with dangers that lie below the surface and in the margins.

THE LONG WALK INTO THE FUGITIVE UNDERGROUND

At about the same time Stewart was crossing through Nepal, nineteen terrorists in four airliners brought to a sudden end the lives of thousands of civilians within the United States. Since then, decision makers, intelligence officials, and military
planners, interested in confronting terrorists as part of an expansive, open-ended campaign, have expended considerable ink and blood identifying and denying ground to their quarry. The opening salvos of that war gave Stewart the opportunity to alter course. A geostrategic analogue hardly bears elaboration, but if it can be compared to anything, it would be to the British adventurer’s break from the mundane to head off on a long walk through uncharted and fugitive spaces. The “war on terror” has been a similarly benighted march into the unknown, based on a vaguely defined political and military concept. Everything that follows from it begs deeper study and review.

Political scientist Richard Jackson tells us, for example, that “At the heart of every counter-terrorism campaign is a ubiquitous narrative of threat and danger.” Far from dismissing that threat as a political fabrication, the London School of Economics’ Mary Kaldor notes, “it is too serious to be hijacked by fantasies of old war.” The current war on terror, she argues, deliberately merges archaic notions of heroic armed struggles between states (what she terms “Old War”) and a state of war readiness in which armed confrontation is subordinate to the ideological convictions that sustain it (such as the Cold War, the “war on drugs,” the “war on crime,” and so on). This has created a false sense of political community whose overextended militarism could, in turn, produce a condition of perpetual violence, largely bereft of redeeming purpose or regulatory mechanisms (or “New Wars”). As politically defined subsets of the war on terror, terrorists and their sanctuaries have not fared any better. Oxford University’s Sir Adam Roberts, for example, has criticized post-9/11 U.S. policy for its limited sense of “previous experience of governments in tackling terrorist threats, or the ways in which certain international wars of the twentieth century were sparked off by concerns about terrorism.”

Denial of sanctuary is specifically problematic. Karin Von Hippel, formerly of the War Studies department at King’s College, London, and now with the Centre for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, DC, notes two camps in the U.S. policy debate on denial of terrorist space. “Night Raiders” are conservative advocates of “smash and grab raids” against terrorist threats and military options against their sponsors, but prefer noninvolvement in the broader domestic conditions of foreign states. “Reluctant Intervenors,” on the other hand, believe “that force will only make a difference if it is accompanied by development and humanitarian assistance,” arguing that the only effective approach to denying terrorists sanctuary “is to help restore effective government, provide adequate security sector reform, and strengthen the economy.” The two sides of the debate link the shape and character of foreign engagement to the political will for it, but specifically neglect “the enormous differences between the types of problem states.”

Such strategies present additional concerns. “The proposition that terrorism should be attacked at source is attractive,” Roberts observes, but notes that it is “a false choice” since engaging “the enemy at longer range . . . is no substitute for defensive anti-terrorism and counter-terrorist activities.” More, “the history of counter-terrorist operations suggests no simple conclusion.” Surgical denial of sanctuary operations have been successfully conducted, but there have also
been real constraints against waging war on asymmetric threats, such as limited capability for launching long range military operations, or political disinterest in openly engaging powerful state sponsors of terror. Finally, Roberts notes, denial of sanctuary “is a recipe for a revival of imperialism,” since military operations intended “to eliminate the sources of terrorism must inevitably mean, in many cases, exercising external domination for a period of decades.”10 As such, the policy perspectives put forward in the five years since the Twin Towers fell deserve much scrutiny. Much can be learned from the political and military responses to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and from longer-term inquiries into the failures and consequences leading up to that day.

Smoking Them Out of Their Holes

The current Bush administration has been at the forefront of voicing contemporary denial of sanctuary concerns—although not the first to use the term or voice concerns of a similar nature, in the United States or elsewhere. Speaking from Camp David four days after September 11, 2001, President George W. Bush set the tone for his administration’s counterterrorism policy. As he gathered senior administration officials together to plan the nation’s response to the attacks, the focus of their meetings was locked into a denial of sanctuary framework. “We’re going to meet and deliberate and discuss,” he told reporters, “but there’s no question about it, this act will not stand; we will find those who did it; we will smoke them out of their holes; we will get them running and we’ll bring them to justice. We will not only deal with those who dare attack America, we will deal with those who harbor them and feed them and house them.” Following statements by Secretary of State Colin Powell and Attorney General John Ashcroft, a reporter asked Bush what he would say “to Americans who are worried that the longer it takes to retaliate, the more chance the perpetrators have to escape and hide and just escape justice?” Bush’s lexicography wavered little. “They will try to hide,” he replied, “they will try to avoid the United States and our allies—but we’re not going to let them. They run to the hills; they find holes to get in. And we will do whatever it takes to smoke them out and get them running, and we’ll get them.”11

Bush’s promise to seek out terrorists where they live and “smoke them out of their holes” quickly became totemic of the administration’s approach to al Qaeda. Often criticized for his stilted oratory and derided by pundits for his smirking and swaggering style, this particular sound bite would take on significant policy relevance and a great deal of political loading. The phrase fit with the much caricatured frontier mentality of a former Texas Governor. It also acted as a salve for Americans still in shock that an enemy attack could have taken place on U.S. soil, with such devastating consequences. The notion that a foreign-based and sponsored enemy had struck into the heart of America was only part of the picture. Its corollary was that North America had always been an impenetrable refuge from the conflict and instability of the world, a sanctuary now compromised by foreign
terrorists. Bush: “Americans have known wars—but for the past 136 years, they have been wars on foreign soil, except for one Sunday in 1941. Americans have known the casualties of war—but not at the center of a great city on a peaceful morning. Americans have known surprise attacks—but never before on thousands of civilians. All of this was brought upon us in a single day—and night fell on a different world, a world where freedom itself is under attack.”

In a series of speeches and addresses, the U.S. President focused on the global and offensive nature of the coming “long war” against terrorism. “We will starve terrorists of funding, turn them one against another, drive them from place to place, until there is no refuge or no rest,” he stated. “The only way to defeat terrorism as a threat to our way of life is to stop it, eliminate it, and destroy it where it grows.” A little over a week later, on the scope and focus of the U.S. campaign against al Qaeda: “our war on terror will be much broader than the battlefields and beachheads of the past” and “this war will be fought wherever terrorists hide, or run, or plan.” Bush was clear that Osama bin Laden, al Qaeda, and the Taliban would share the fates of their historical analogues: “We are not deceived by their pretenses to piety. We have seen their kind before. They are the heirs of all the murderous ideologies of the 20th century. By sacrificing human life to serve their radical visions—by abandoning every value except the will to power—they follow in the path of fascism, and Nazism, and totalitarianism. And they will follow that path all the way, to where it ends: in history’s unmarked grave of discarded lies.”

The powerful administration rhetoric that followed in the days and weeks after 9/11 expressed outrage over the attacks in often indelicate and insensitive terms, a public tone that for many was strikingly reminiscent of arguments against humanitarian intervention in the early 1990s. References to “crusaders” and “barbarians” could hardly have reassured world leaders—particularly those in the Muslim world—already faced with the certainty that the global security agenda had quite literally undergone a radical overnight shift. But the demonization of foreign terrorists also contains important cues on perceptions of sanctuary and of the terrorists that inhabit them. To wit, the primitive conditions in Afghanistan and the border regions of Pakistan: “We’re mounting a sustained campaign to drive the terrorists out of their hidden caves and to bring them to justice”; “slowly, but surely, we’re smoking al Qa’ida out of their caves so we can bring them to justice”; and “In terms of Mr. bin Laden himself, we’ll get him running. We’ll smoke him out of his cave, and we’ll get him eventually.”

The conduct of subsequent counterterrorism and counterinsurgency operations in Afghanistan, the Philippines, the Horn of Africa, the Balkans, and Iraq—and the public addresses and policy statements that followed—reaffirmed the opening rhetoric of the war. The February 2003 National Strategy for Combating Terrorism made denial of sponsorship, support and sanctuary to terrorists its “second front” in the war on terror. The July 2004 report of the 9/11 Commission devoted significant attention to terrorist sanctuaries and the policy options available for denying them to the enemy. The following month a number of government documents and hearings discussed, with varying degrees of elaboration, the
Commission’s key findings and recommendations on the issue. A Congressional Research Service study, *Terrorist Sanctuaries: The 9/11 Commission Recommendations and U.S. Policy*, was published on August 10, 2004. It noted that the focus on terrorist refuges had been a long-standing pillar of U.S. strategy, but that after September 11, 2001, “U.S. efforts to deny terrorists sanctuary were substantially increased worldwide.” Congressional hearings held on August 6, 10, and 19, 2004, and subsequent public testimony on March 10, 2005, elaborated on the Commission’s interpretation of sanctuary, and identified policy approaches and methods for tackling the threat.

**The 9/11 Commission and Beyond**

The substance of the 9/11 Commission’s findings revolved around militant Islam, the threat of mass casualty terrorism, and the most likely geographical conditions in which terrorists could organize, plan, and train for such attacks. For the Commission, the complexity of mass casualty terrorism, on a par with 9/11, required “Time and space to develop the ability to perform competent planning and to assemble the people, money, and resources needed for the terrorist act,” “A relatively undisturbed area to recruit and train those who will carry out the operation,” “A logistics network,” “Access to materials needed to conduct a chemical, biological, radiological or nuclear attack,” “Reliable communications,” and “Conditions in which the plan can be rehearsed and tested.” Commission members argued that such activities are most easily planned and prepared in “states with rugged terrain, weak governments, and low population density” where “terrorists can hide themselves, as well as their supplies and infrastructure.” For Commission members, “these characteristics provide a recipe for a terrorist sanctuary or haven.” They noted other forms of sanctuary, including diaspora communities among liberal democratic states, but settled on a “consensus view” that “the United States should focus on remote regions and failed states.”

Subsequent discussion of the Commission’s ambiguous formula did not look much further than the territorial implications of terrorist threats. State supporters of terrorism, and the vulnerability of failed states to terrorist exploitation, figured prominently at Congressional hearings. California Congressman Brad Sherman asked: “Which states lack the desire to confront terrorists operating on their soil? Which states have the desire but lack the resources? Which governments are losing control of some of their territory, and which countries are becoming failed states where terrorists can operate freely? And which of these states, or portions thereof, contain persons who are receptive to the al Qa’ida ideology?” 9/11 Commissioner Richard Ben-Veniste observed that “Active sponsors of terrorism must be coerced into giving up sponsorship, and if they will not, they should be dealt with severely,” while “many other states are hostile to al Qa’ida, but are not able to control their own territories sufficiently to stop it. These countries, victim countries, should be bolstered wherever possible.” Deputy Secretary of Defence
Paul Wolfowitz, similarly, identified “the kind of geographical sanctuary that terrorists enjoy when they are harbored by sympathetic regimes like Afghanistan under the Taliban and Iraq under Saddam Hussein,” and the kind “also found in the vast ungoverned regions in the world, areas that are beyond governmental control”—typically involving “notoriously difficult terrain, far removed from population centers, in countries with fragile governments.”

Such statements emphasize a geographic and rural vision of terrorist sanctuaries, in line with the 9/11 Commission’s general privileging of the state in international affairs, and its special focus on Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Iran, and Pakistan (among others). But the important distinctions made by Sherman, Ben-Veniste, and Wolfowitz were also accompanied by observations ranging from the crude “It is failed states that are a threat to us, because this is where the terrorists hide and this is where they plot”;26 to the confused “Congress need look no further than the World Trade Center bombing in New York City to see the adverse impact that this failed state in Afghanistan is having on United States national security”;27 to the contentious “Iraq would go to the top of the list as a terrorist sanctuary if it were to become a failed state.”28 Subtler interpretations focused on practical problems of governance and terrorist agency. Ben-Veniste: “Any area where there is lawlessness and the inability of a government to control its countryside is an area fertile for exploitation by terrorists,” and “areas where a government cannot control its borders may well provide an area for terrorists who will take root and move to strike at us.”

Oral and written congressional testimony also provides a glimpse into policy concerns with various types of sanctuary, although the issue is only addressed in the most rudimentary terms. Sometimes conflated, sometimes awkwardly differentiated, it offers little by way of a coherent breakdown of characteristics. “Sponsorship, support, and sanctuary” and “sanctuaries, leadership, finances, and command, control and communications”29 were repeatedly grouped as targets in a holistic approach to counterterrorism “using all instruments of national power.”

Paul Wolfowitz theorized that in addition to the geographic space terrorists occupy, the “911 terrorists themselves were able to create a kind of sanctuary inside the United States and other democratic countries, exploiting the very freedom and openness they were attacking in order to hide their evil plans.”30 He noted the ideological sanctuary “our enemies enjoy when extremist clerics provide cover by sanctioning terrorism, by recruiting new adherents, and by intimidating moderate clerics from speaking out against them”; and “cyber” sanctuary, “the ‘space’ that exists through communications networks made possible by modern technology.”

J. Cofer Black offered keen insights into the problem. He appeared before Congress as Ambassador-at-Large and Coordinator for Counterterrorism at the U.S. Department of State. He had also served as a CIA officer for almost three decades, including a rough and tumble stint as Station Chief in Sudan from 1993 to 1995. He intimated that there is an underlying hierarchy of terrorist sanctuaries. “The removal of the Taliban regime from Afghanistan,” he noted, “stripped al-Qaeda of primary sanctuary and support and shut down long-standing terrorist
training camps.” He also alluded to the importance of dispersed niche sanctuaries, differentiating between training and other sites of terrorist activity: “Although our work in Afghanistan continues to root out remnants of al-Qaeda,” he stated, “that organization has lost a vital safe haven. Our on-going operations against al-Qaeda have served to isolate the leadership and to sever communications links with operatives scattered around the globe.”

Ambassador Black’s statements were the nuanced exception to the rule. Policymakers have otherwise put forward a scattershot list of attributes within a thinly conceptualized framework, now enshrined on the public web site of the Office of the Coordinator for Counterrorism at the U.S. Department of State. The conventional wisdom, one might surmise, has been accepted somewhat uncritically, although it does have its detractors. It can be summed up as follows:

- Terrorist sanctuaries are embedded within the structures of states, whether those states are strong or deficient.
- They are geographical phenomena, linked to the physical territories of states, often behind poorly secured political and natural borders.
- They are primarily rural phenomena, concentrated in the countryside or on the rugged frontiers between states.
- They are both isolated and accessible, with low population density.
- They provide terrorists the time, space, and resources to gather, organize, learn, rehearse, test and implement plans, weapons, skills, beliefs, and so on.
- They are bases for numerous types of activity, including leadership, financing, command, control, communications, sponsorship, support, propaganda, and recruiting.

Taken in the aggregate, these six pieces of conventional wisdom offer a conceptual point of departure that is incomplete, awkward, sometimes misleading, and often conflicting.

**RECKONING WITH THE LIMITS OF CONVENTION**

Critics of the Bush administration’s war on terror note the deeply problematic nature of trying to deny something as ill-defined and potentially ephemeral as “sanctuary.” Former CIA analyst Michael Scheuer, the “Anonymous” author of *Imperial Hubris: Why the West Is Losing the War on Terror*, and whose words grace the opening pages of this book, suggests that taken to its logical extreme, denial of sanctuary so defined will require a scorched earth campaign of profoundly destructive physical and human consequences. “With killing must come a Sherman like razing of infrastructure,” he writes. “Roads and irrigation systems; bridges, power plants, and crops in the field; fertilizer plants and grain mills—all these and more will need to be destroyed to deny the enemy its support base. Land mines,
moreover, will be massively reintroduced to seal borders and mountain passes too long, high, or numerous to close with U.S. soldiers.”

Daniel Benjamin and Steve Simon, former National Security Council staffers and coauthors of two bestselling books on contemporary terrorism, note, however, “The jihadists comprise a social movement, not just a cluster of terrorist organizations, and they are totally opportunistic and endlessly plastic in how they accommodate to circumstances. They thrive on our preconceptions and our instinctive determination to come up with rigid schematizations, and we will get the better of them only when our thinking is as flexible and innovative as theirs.”

These and other sobering critiques suggest the structures and functions of sanctuaries are infinitely variable. If Stewart’s long walk across Afghanistan provides numerous observations into the multidimensionality of sanctuary, it suggests some equally pointed insights into the limits of conventional thinking. Like the much politicized post-9/11 inquiries into the world of intelligence and its alleged failings, the apparent paradox of openly discussing secret processes and clandestine worlds raises some difficult questions. The search for hidden truths, however, need be neither awkward nor contradictory. To borrow from another Galbraith pearl, we should not let the conventional wisdom “protect us from the painful job of thinking.” Stewart’s experiences highlight the value of a return to basics and thoughtful analysis. In the following two sections, I work through some of the problems that limit our understanding of terrorist sanctuaries, first by contesting the validity of the conventional wisdom, and second by voicing alternative ways of thinking about the issues.

**Pushing Back the Boundaries**

A general reading of the issues suggests eight grounds on which the conventional wisdom bears further elaboration. First, it clearly privileges the state as the primary conservator of security in the international system. This is appropriate to a coherent global approach to collective security, but it favors Western perspectives, and is of dubious relevance to an enemy whose interests often differ greatly from Westphalian notions of politically and territorially structured power and identity. For numerous jihadists, the state is more or less relevant depending on their interpretation of Islam, and as with many secular terrorists, on its relation to their particular brand of militancy. Perspectives on this range from resistance against perceived inadequacies in state promotion of theological tenets, to an overarching community of the faithful that supercedes expressions of statehood.

Second, debates on rogue states and failed state polarize threats without assessing in depth the spectrum of problems that lies in between. The narrow focus of the 9/11 Commission is a case in point. As Richard A. Falkenrath suggests in an insightful review of the Commission report’s content, it fails to adequately explore “jihadist terrorism in general, a broader phenomenon of which al Qa’ida is only one manifestation,” and tends “to view al-Qaida in isolation from the myriad
issues that surrounded it." While the Commission was clear in naming state sponsors and relatively straightforward in trying to describe state failure, it tended to merge the two without explaining the former. Dan Byman makes the excellent point that declining post–Cold War policy and analytical interest in state sponsorship of terror “suggests a superficial understanding of terrorism in general and of al-Qa‘ida in particular.” State support to terrorism occupies a spectrum of passive and active intentions and measures, he writes. More, “[s]anctuary facilitates all other forms of assistance,” although “[i]nuances in the provision of sanctuary are often missed, or deliberately overlooked.” The Commission’s findings and subsequent Congressional hearings rightly address a problem of clear significance to collective security, but express a limited range of categories and characteristics. Consequently, they propose a model of limited range and depth, for dealing with a terrorist phenomenon of allegedly unprecedented scope and complexity.

A third and related problem is that terrorist sanctuaries have been portrayed as foreign zones of hostility, lawlessness, or neglect, artificially separating them from domestic constituencies. This “war over there” vision, and the fortress mentality that accompanies it, is conceptually and practically unreliable. It leaves little room for insight into terrorist approaches to undermining collective security, and the role sanctuaries play in the process. Most importantly, it fails to convincingly address how diasporas and modern democracies fit into a possible matrix of terrorist sanctuaries. This is significant when one considers the various under explored terminologies of the war on terror. Notions of “remoteness,” “virtuality,” “flight,” and “safety”—among many others—can mean many things to many people, something not readily apparent in a reading of the conventional wisdom. Within a basic framework of insurgency and counterinsurgency, traditional assumptions certainly seem convincing enough, particularly when applied to local phenomena. It also raises the question, however, as to whether or not this provides sufficient understanding of the likely distortions and consequences of terrorism in a much wider transnational context. In a globalized world, is such a model of conflict, normally applied to local circumstances, still relevant? Or does it lend false coherence to a problem of enormous complexity?

This leads to a fourth point: a common criticism of Bush administration policy has been that it privileged military responses to terrorism over more subtle intelligence and policing approaches. The critique is debatable, given the potential consequences of allowing mass casualty terrorist capabilities to develop. I argue a narrower point: that the terrorist sanctuary target-set has been overmilitarized. In practical terms, this has meant denial of sanctuary operations have been plugged into a counterinsurgency framework—in which sanctuary is understood to mean protected terrain that allows clandestine groups to organize and train under paramilitary conditions, free from the unwanted intervention of hostile forces. The Commission report and Congressional hearings display a distinct sensitivity to such issues, not surprising in light of the complex emergencies of the 1990s and the rejuvenation of “small wars” military doctrine for dealing with them. But insurgency theorists are clear on what they mean by both sanctuary