

Why civil war? Geography

POL 126

Prof. Juan Tellez
Spring 2022

TODAY

Homework

Role of terrain in war

Opportunity and grievances (revisited)

The homework

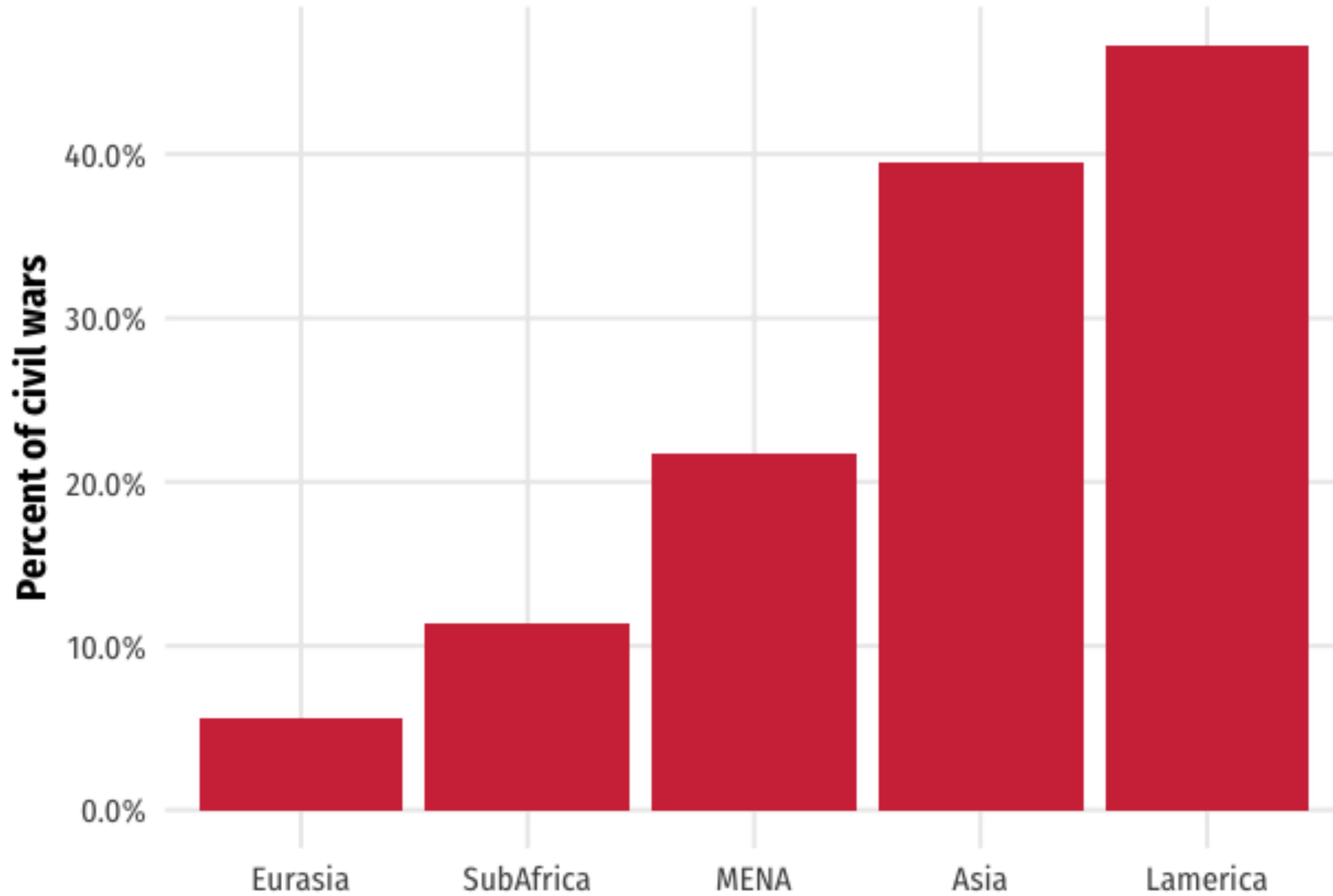
Homework

What civil wars did you look at?

Longest lasting war?

Shortest war (in LA)?

Largest and smallest armies?



Geography and war

The shift

What motivates people to
rebel

What makes rebellion
possible

Grievances, identity,
ethnicity

Lootable resources,
geographic conditions

Geography?

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Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War

JAMES D. FEARON and DAVID D. LAITIN *Stanford University*

An influential conventional wisdom holds that civil wars proliferated rapidly with the end of the Cold War and that the root cause of many or most of these has been ethnic and religious antagonisms. We show that the current prevalence of internal war is mainly the result of a steady accumulation of protracted conflicts since the 1950s and 1960s rather than a sudden change associated with a new, post-Cold War international system. We also find that after controlling for per capita income, more ethnically or religiously diverse countries have been no more likely to experience significant civil violence in this period. We argue for understanding civil war in this period in terms of insurgency or rural guerrilla warfare, a particular form of military practice that can be harnessed to diverse political agendas. The factors that explain which countries have been at risk for civil war are not their ethnic or religious characteristics but rather the conditions that favor insurgency. These include poverty—which marks financially and bureaucratically weak states and also favors rebel recruitment—political instability, rough terrain, and large populations.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine

<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/13/podcasts/the-daily/russia-ukraine-war.html>

2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine

24 February 2022 - present



The geography of war



War has always been deeply influenced by geography

Movement of troops, supply lines, use of cover

Exploited heavily in **irregular warfare**

The graveyard of empires



Khyber Pass



Some weirdo made this



First as tragedy...

heights, block the front and rear of the column, and then destroy your enemy at leisure. This is what happened to the British 'Army of the Indus' in January 1842 on the road east from Kabul through Jalalabad to the Khyber Pass. More than a hundred years later the mujahedin would man the heights overlooking the route of the slow-moving Soviet columns, with their cumbersome lorries and their escorting tanks and personnel carriers. They would knock out the first and last vehicles with a mine or a rocket, and then systematically destroy the remainder.



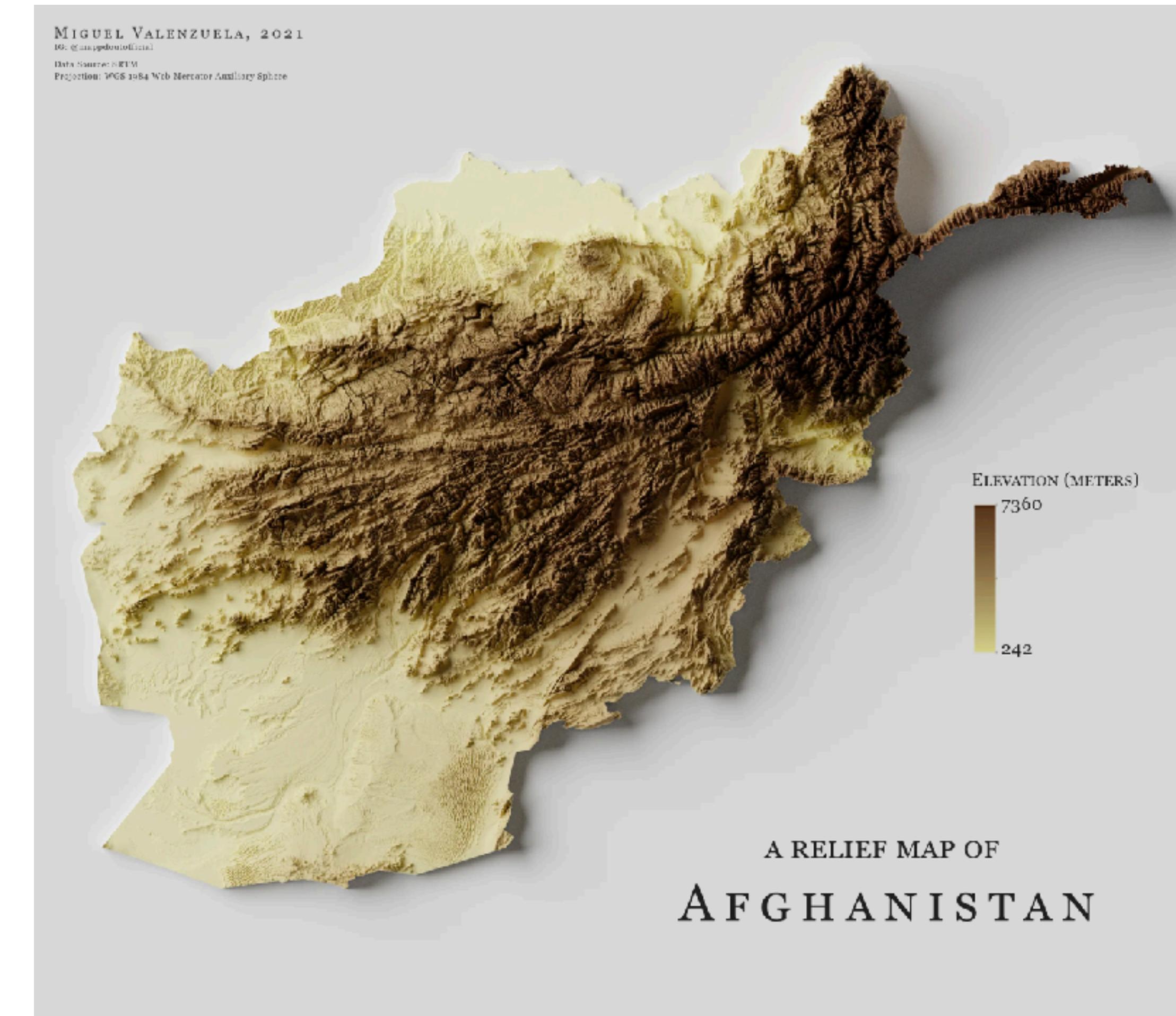
Geography of Insurgency

Geography is key to
irregular warfare

—> where rebellions form/live

—> what **tactics** rebels use

—> how war “spreads”



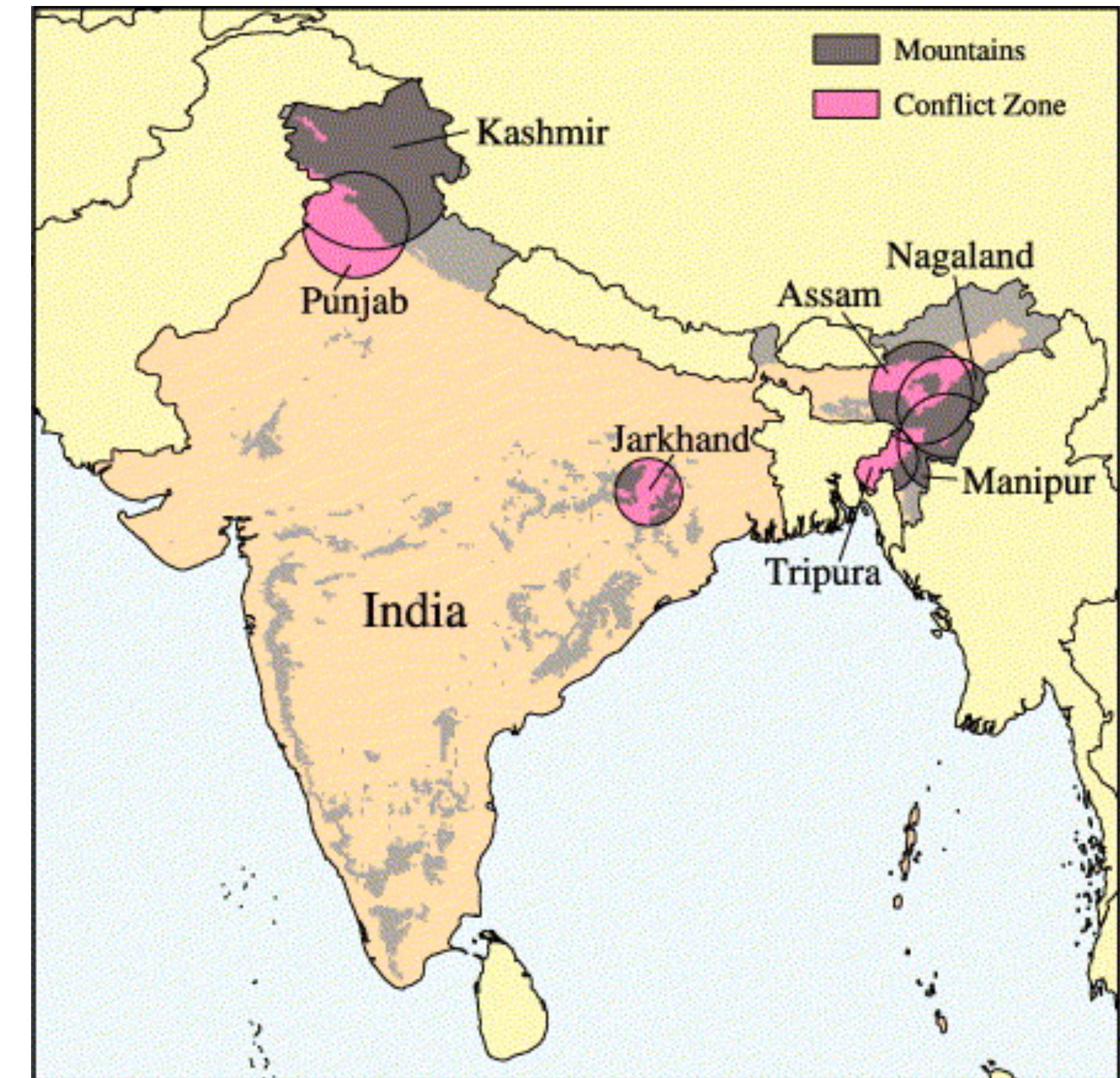
Mountains help the weak

Rough terrain – mountains, jungles, etc. – **advantage** to rebels over the state

Places to hide

Ambushes/hit-and-run

Difficult to navigate



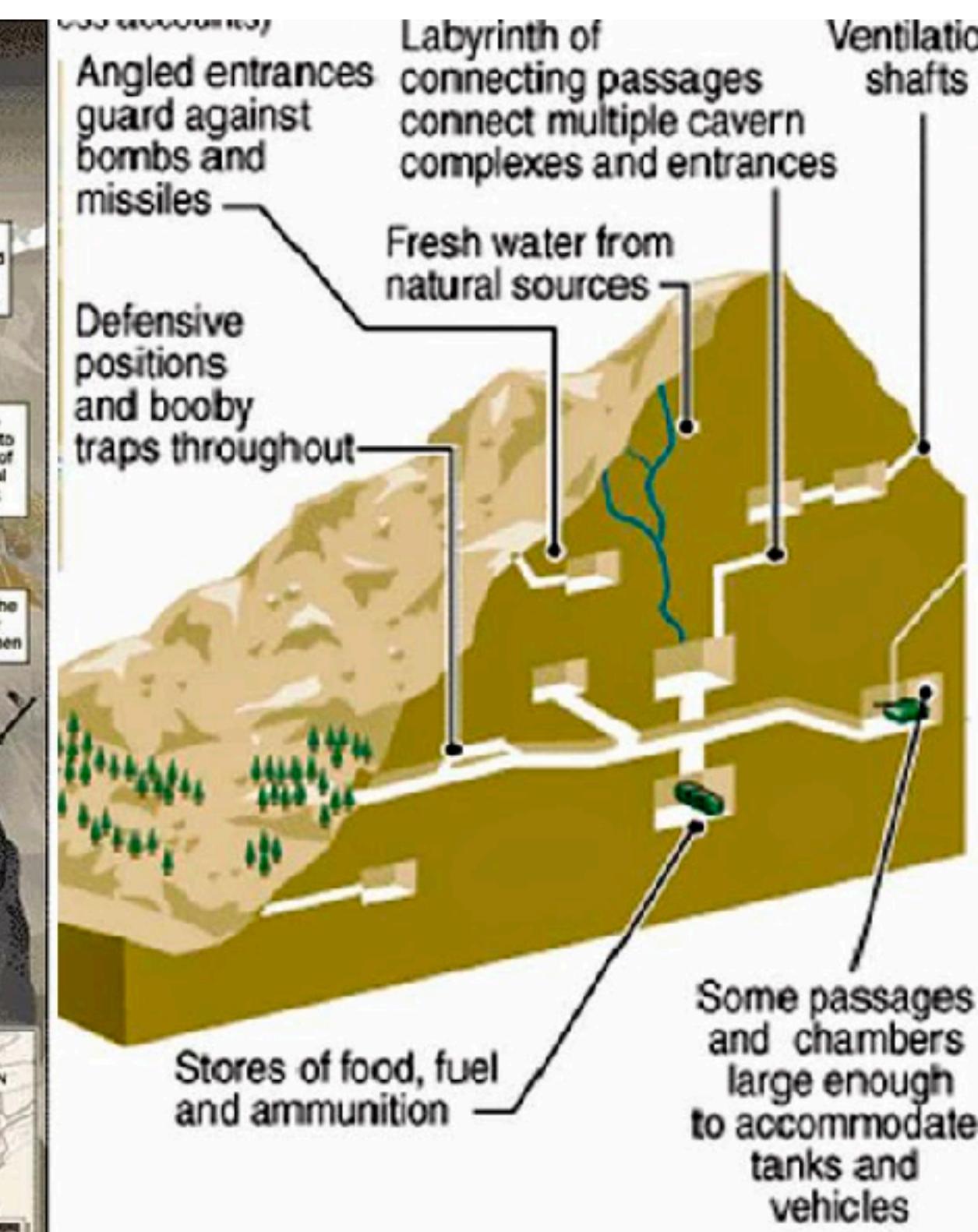
Cave networks in Afghanistan



Cave network in Pakistan,
used by Taliban/Al Qaeda



Journalist depiction of Bin Laden “fortress”
(lol)



Terrain navigation

The mountains which cover four-fifths of Afghanistan sweep from the Pamirs in the east, where Tajikistan, India, Pakistan, and China join,

almost to the frontier with Iran beyond Herat in the west. They divide

These mountains are hard enough to fight in at the best of times.

The locals know all the paths and tracks, often cutting along the sides

of the mountains, easy to ambush, easy to defend, hard to find.

Worse than that. At sixteen thousand feet, where some of the

highest peaks in the world are found, you can be incapacitated by altitude sickness until

you become acclimatised. If you are wounded it can take as many as six

of your comrades to get you down to help, often under fire.

Outsides more than tracks, passable enough by men and pack animals, but not

to wheeled traffic.

Often terrain navigation is
all about local knowledge

Advantage to rebels – recruit
from locals vs. states who
recruit from elsewhere

Selection from Afgansty

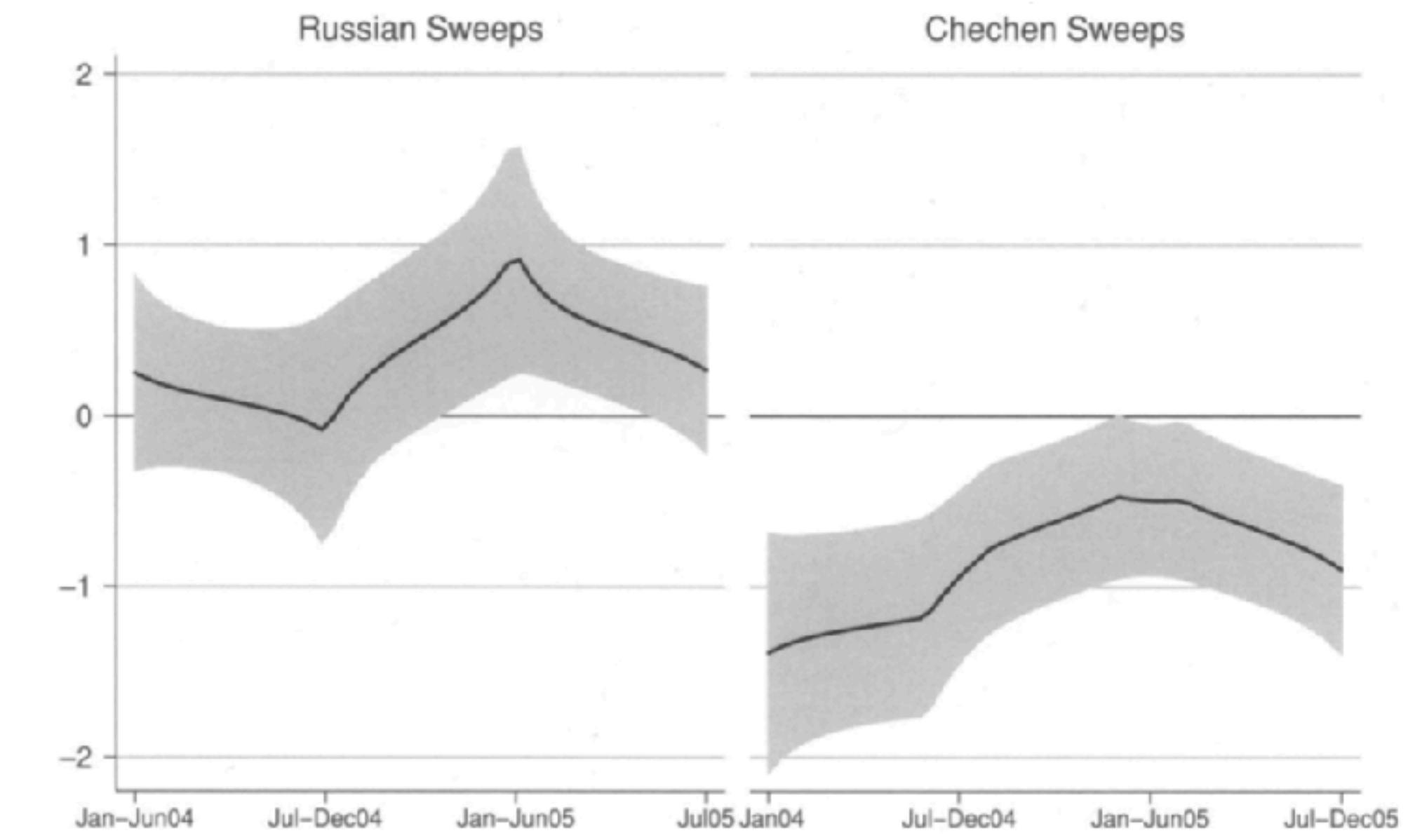
Local knowledge is key

To find a bandit, I would quietly gather information and appear at his door at two or three at night, shake his hand, and say hello. After such a visit, this bandit would disappear. With three or four more operations, everyone would be clear on everything.

—Akhmed Kadyrov, April 2002, in Politkovskaya 2003, 142

FIGURE 1. EVALUATION OF SWEEP OPERATIONS IN CHECHENIA BY VILLAGE, 2000–5

FIGURE 2. Difference in Mean Postsweep Attacks, by Sweeper Identity, 2004–5



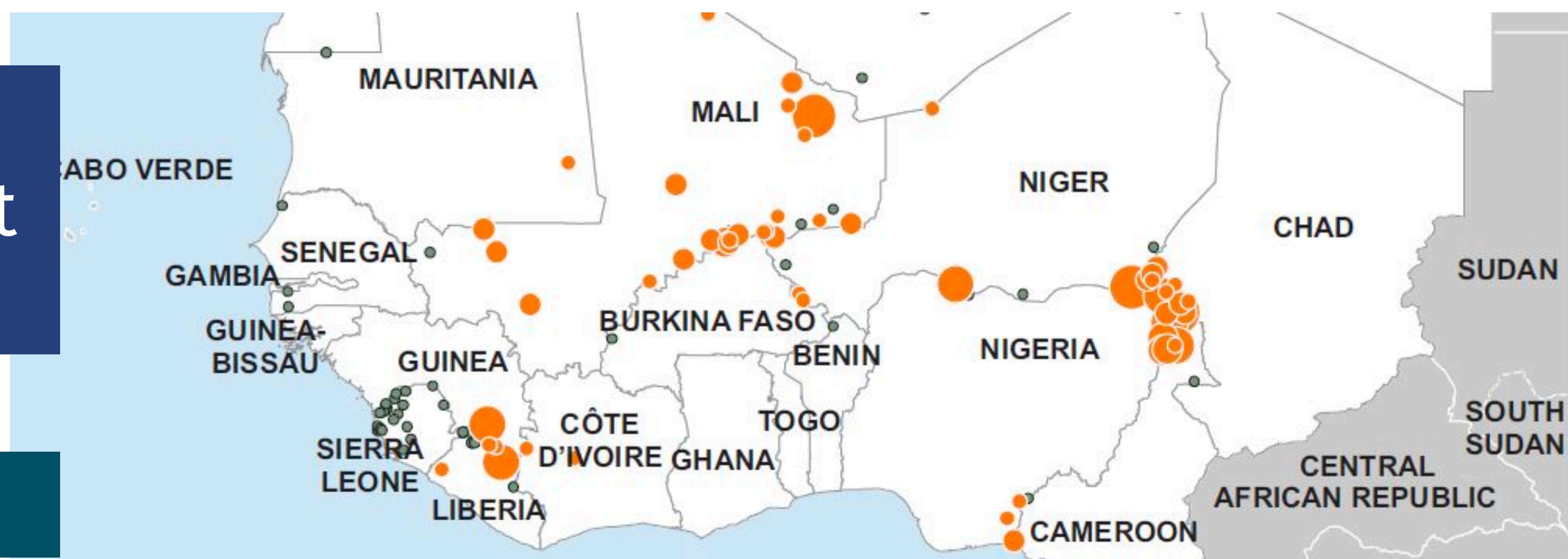
More on this later! But terrain →
legibility of population

Borders

International borders
are a frequent hotspot
for violence – why?

Spillovers

Sanctuaries

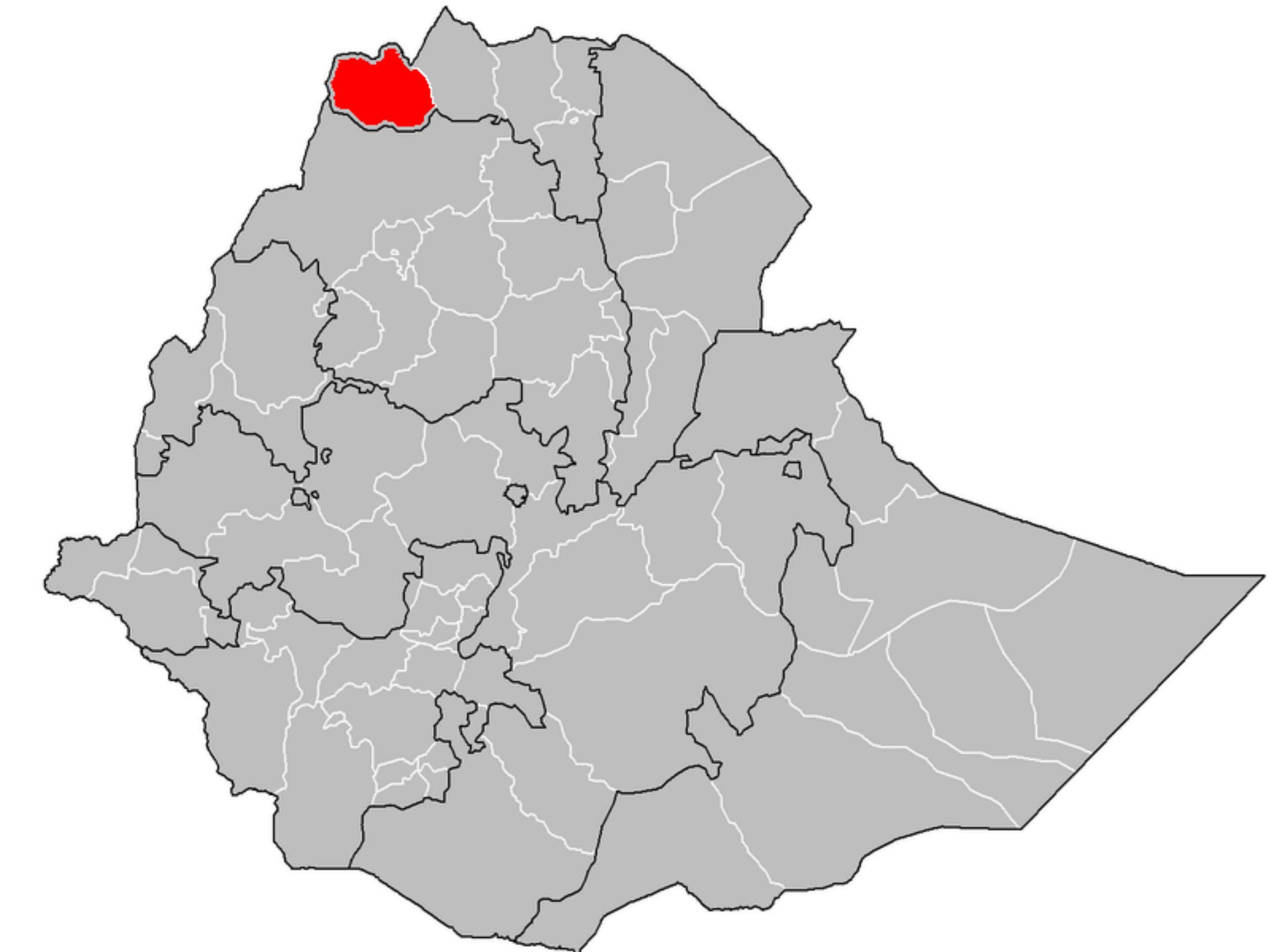


Spillovers

Fighting near borders can
“spillover” into neighboring states

Neighboring states can also take
advantage of fighting

Eritrea took a “chunk” of Ethiopia
during Tigray War



Western Tigray, Ethiopia

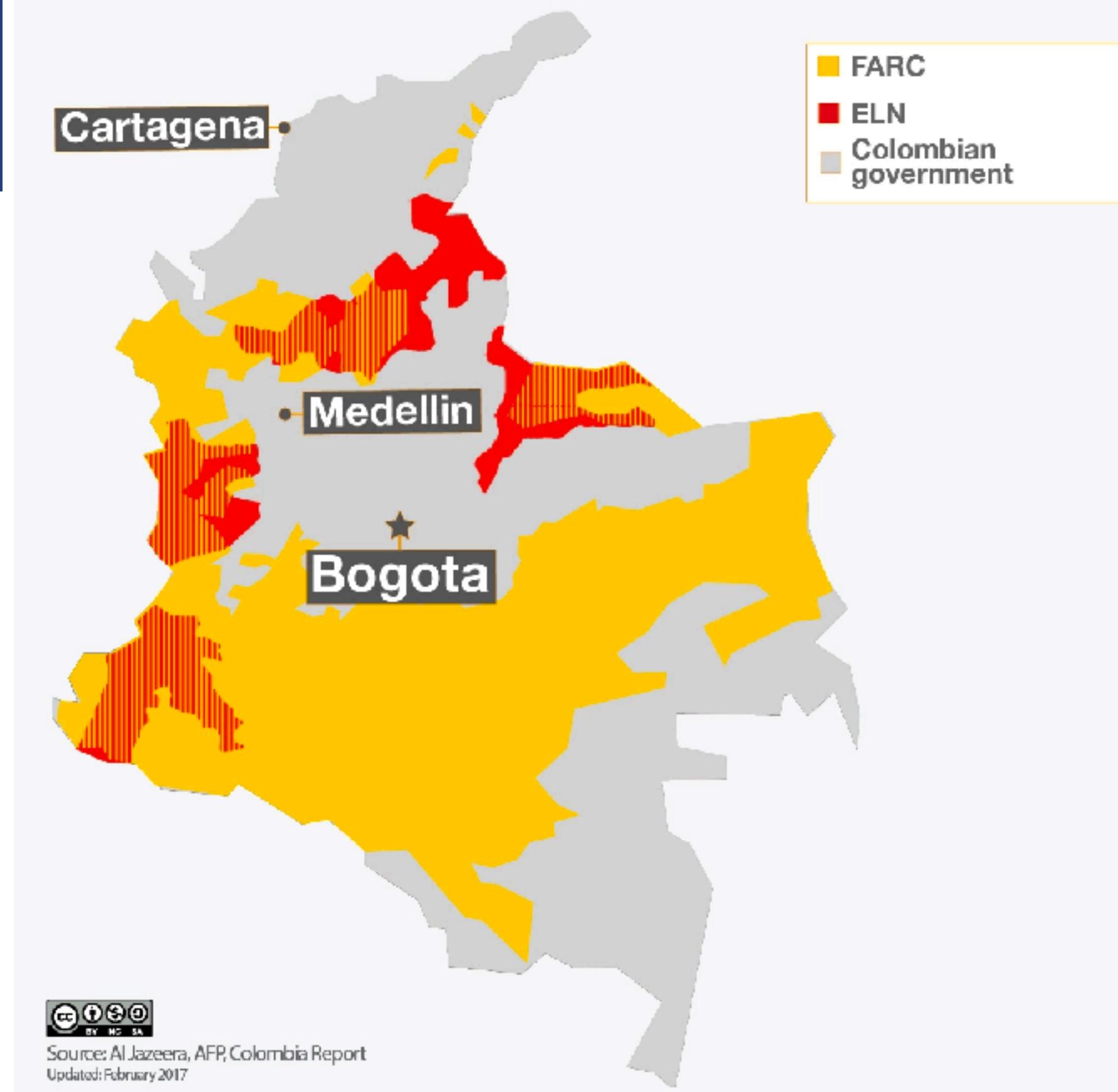
External sanctuaries

Rebel groups often have **bases abroad**
(with **and** without knowledge of “host”!)

gies employed by rebel groups to evade state repression. Extensive data collection on rebel groups since 1945 indicates that a majority (55 percent) have used external bases to some extent. This finding alone casts considerable doubt upon analyses that treat states as self-contained units of analysis, ignoring their broader regional context.

What challenge does this pose for states fighting rebels?

Colombia: Areas of influence



Operation Phoenix

2008: Air strikes by Colombian military in Ecuador

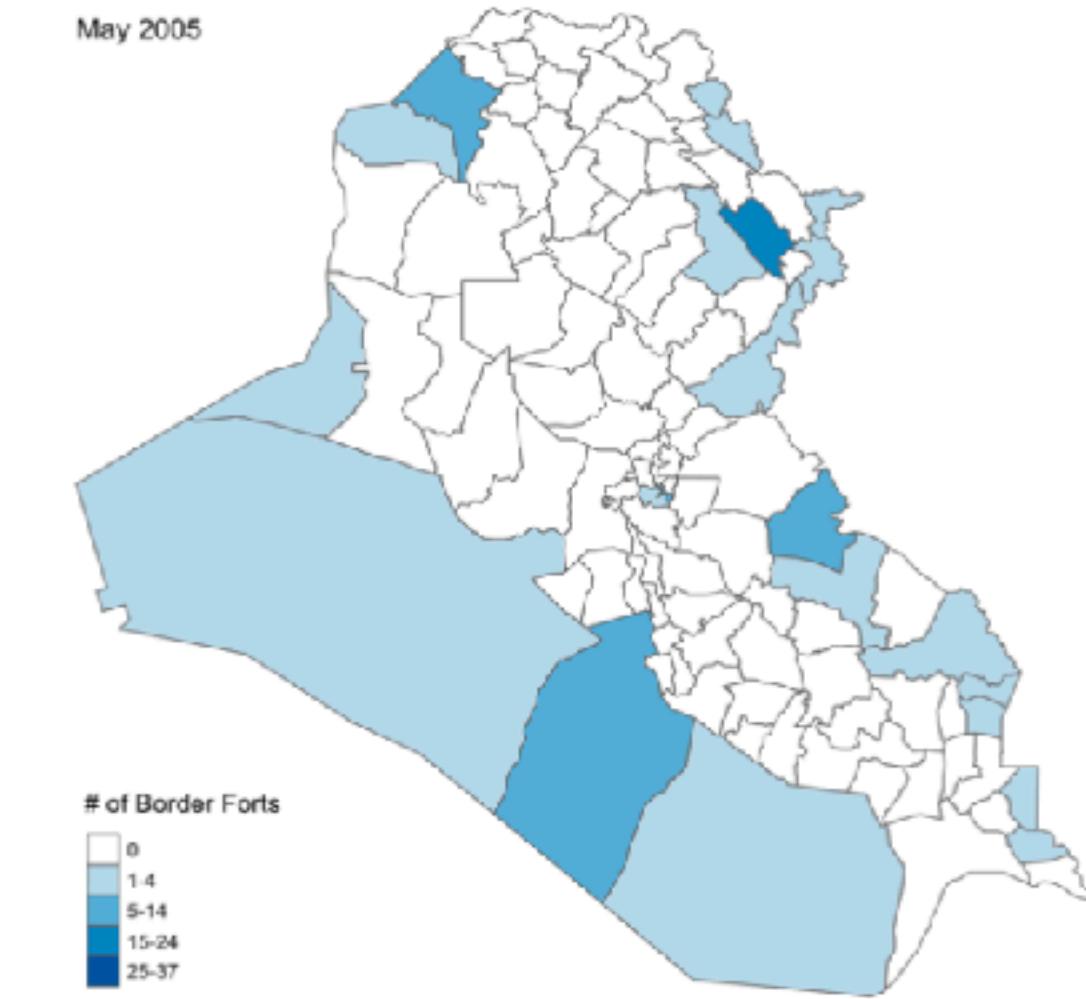
Kills second in FARC command –
but also...

Ecuadorean and Mexican citizens 😬

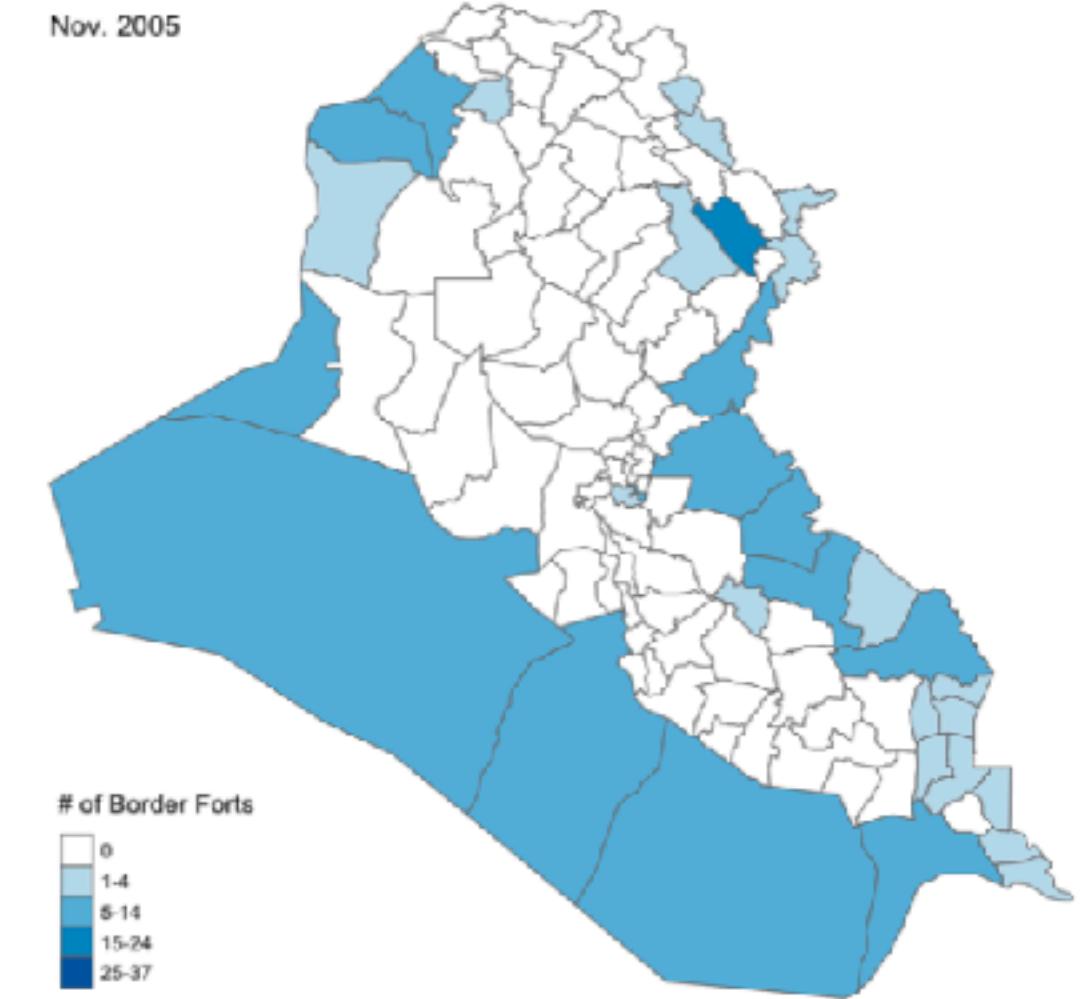


States expend considerable effort (often in vain!) on fortifying borders

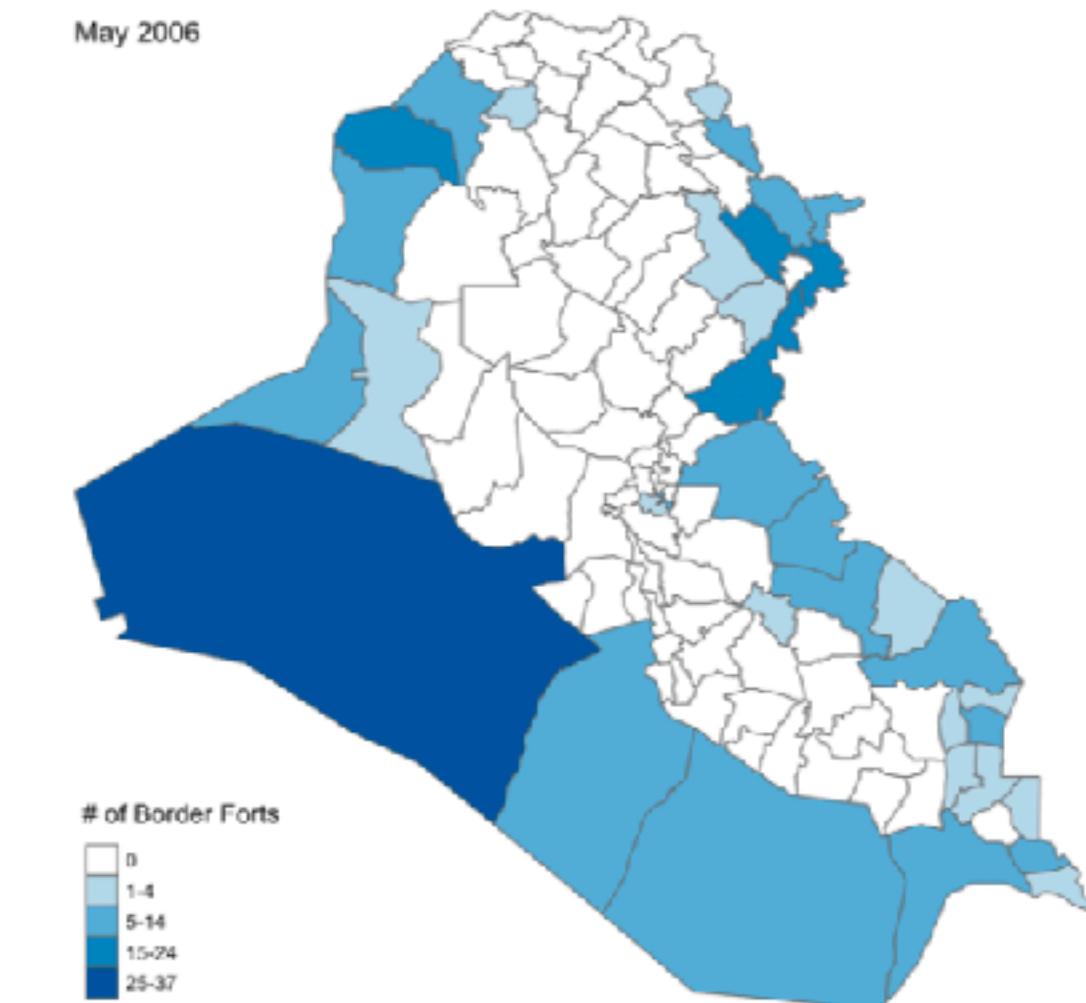
(c) Forts in May 2005



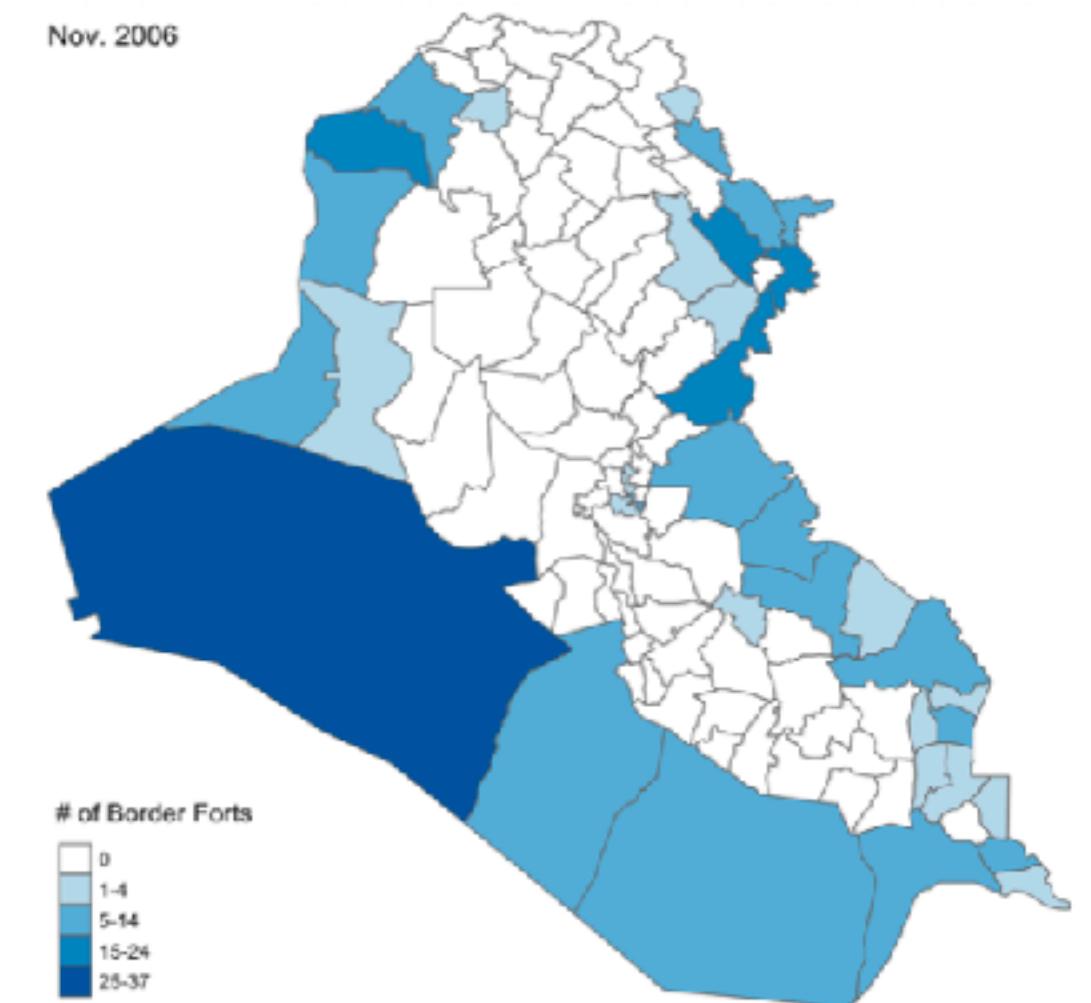
(d) Forts in November 2005



(e) Forts in May 2006



(f) Forts in November 2006



Note: Darker shades indicate more forts.

Roads

Roads (and other transport)
can also help rebellion spread

Villages linked by road –
conflict spread (Zhukov, 2012)

Road **networks** can also make
some places **strategically**
valuable – worth fighting over

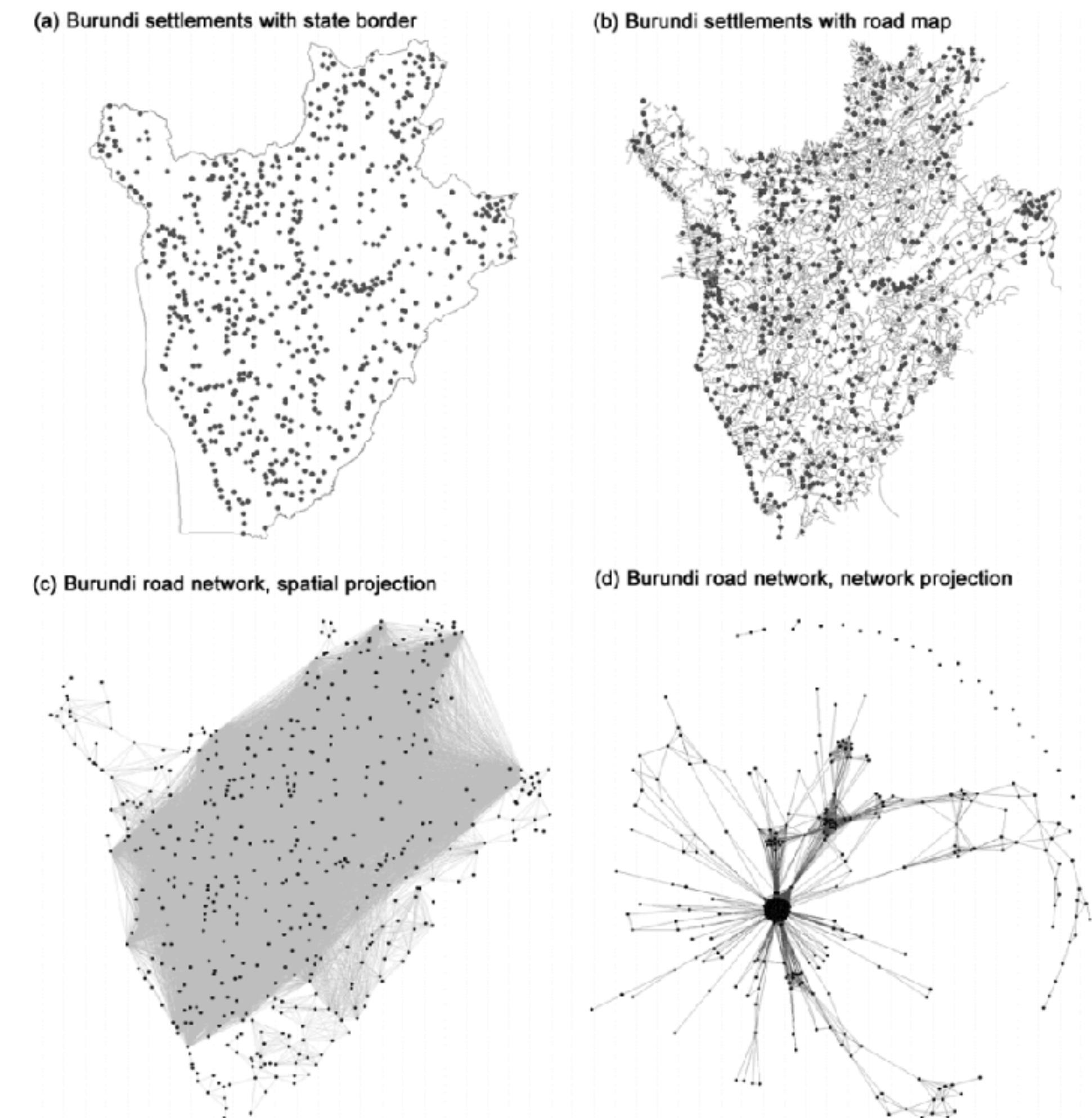
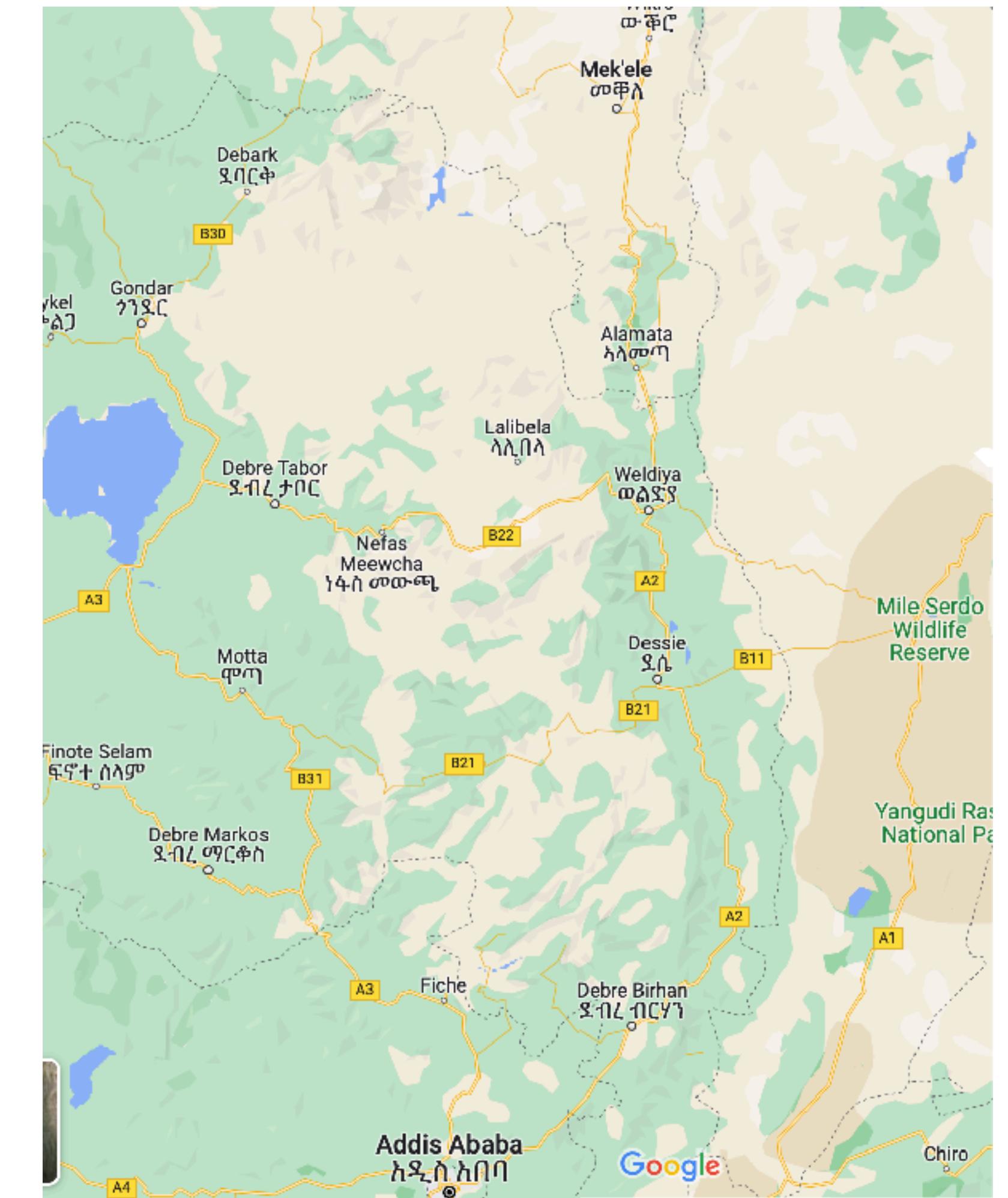


Figure 2. Spatial and network-centric representations of Burundi's population settlements

The Tigray War

Ethiopian government and Tigray rebel movement fought viciously for control of A2 highway



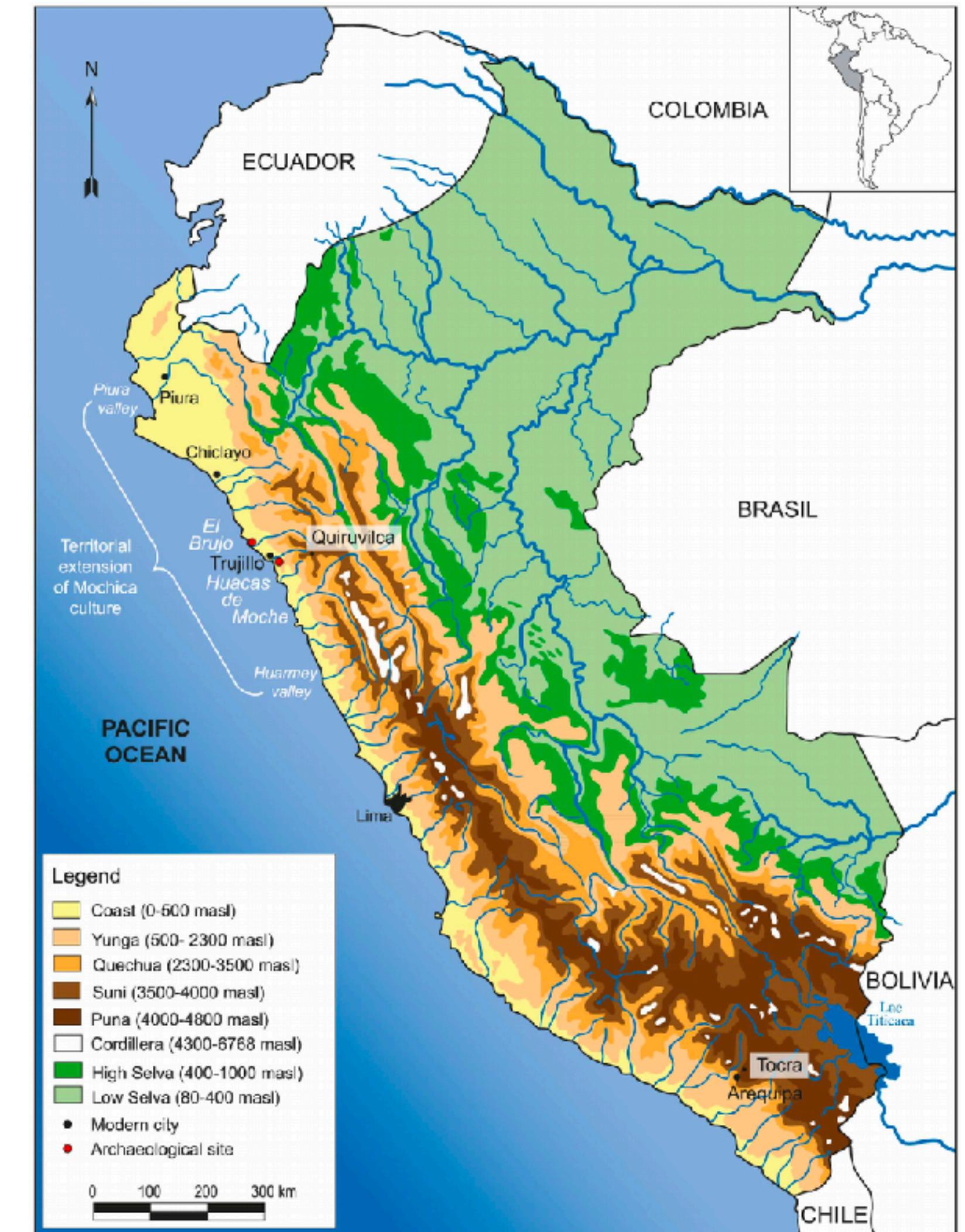
Geography and war

Geographic features (mountains, jungles, roads, borders) —> **conflict**

These are factors related to making conflict **feasible**, not **motivating** conflict... right?

Carter et al on terrain

How does Carter et al connect terrain, ethnicity, grievances and conflict?



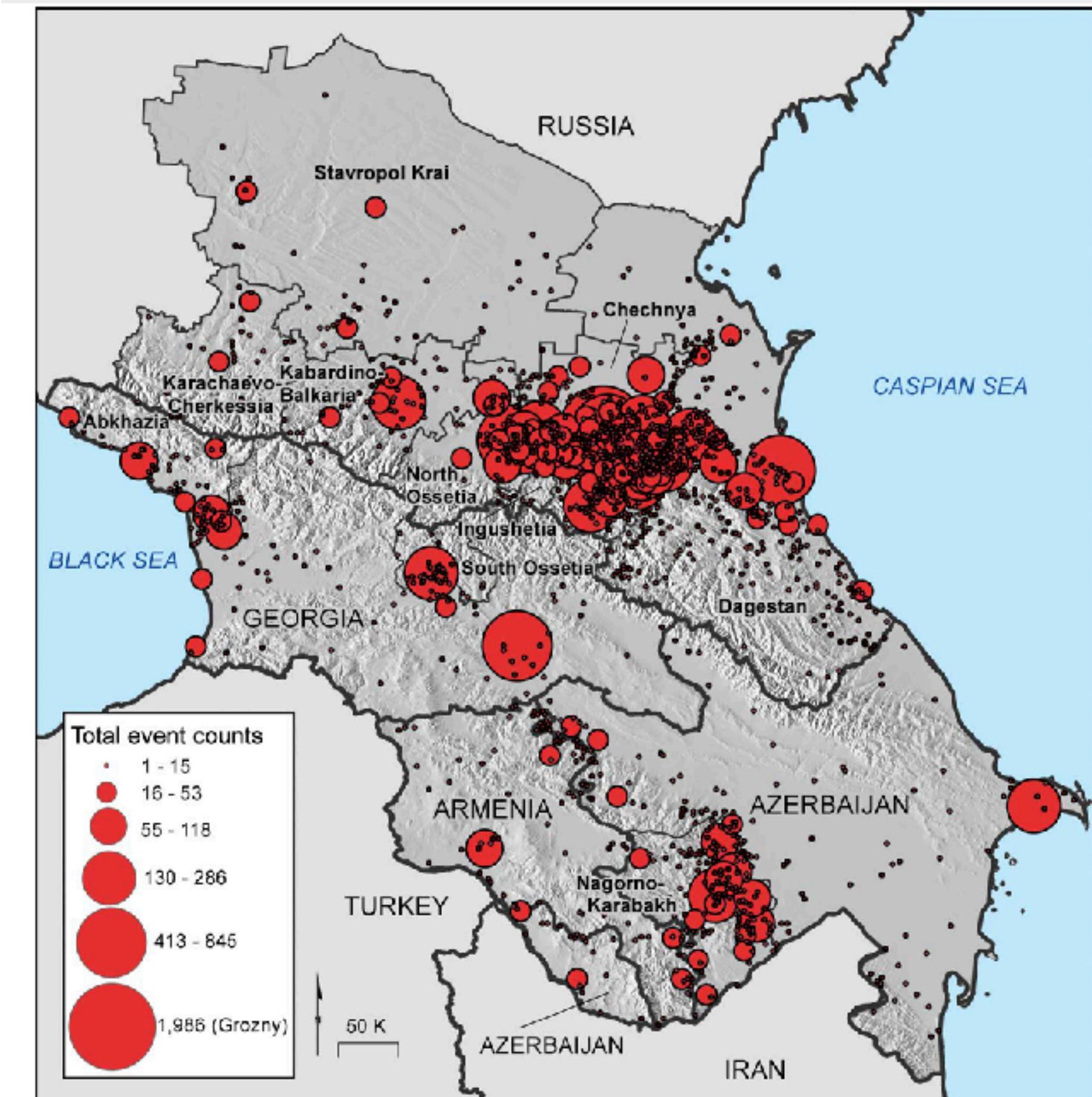
Chicken or the egg?

Mountain fighting; what does it mean?

One interpretation: feasibility

Another: grievances, marginalization

Distinct groups, exclusion



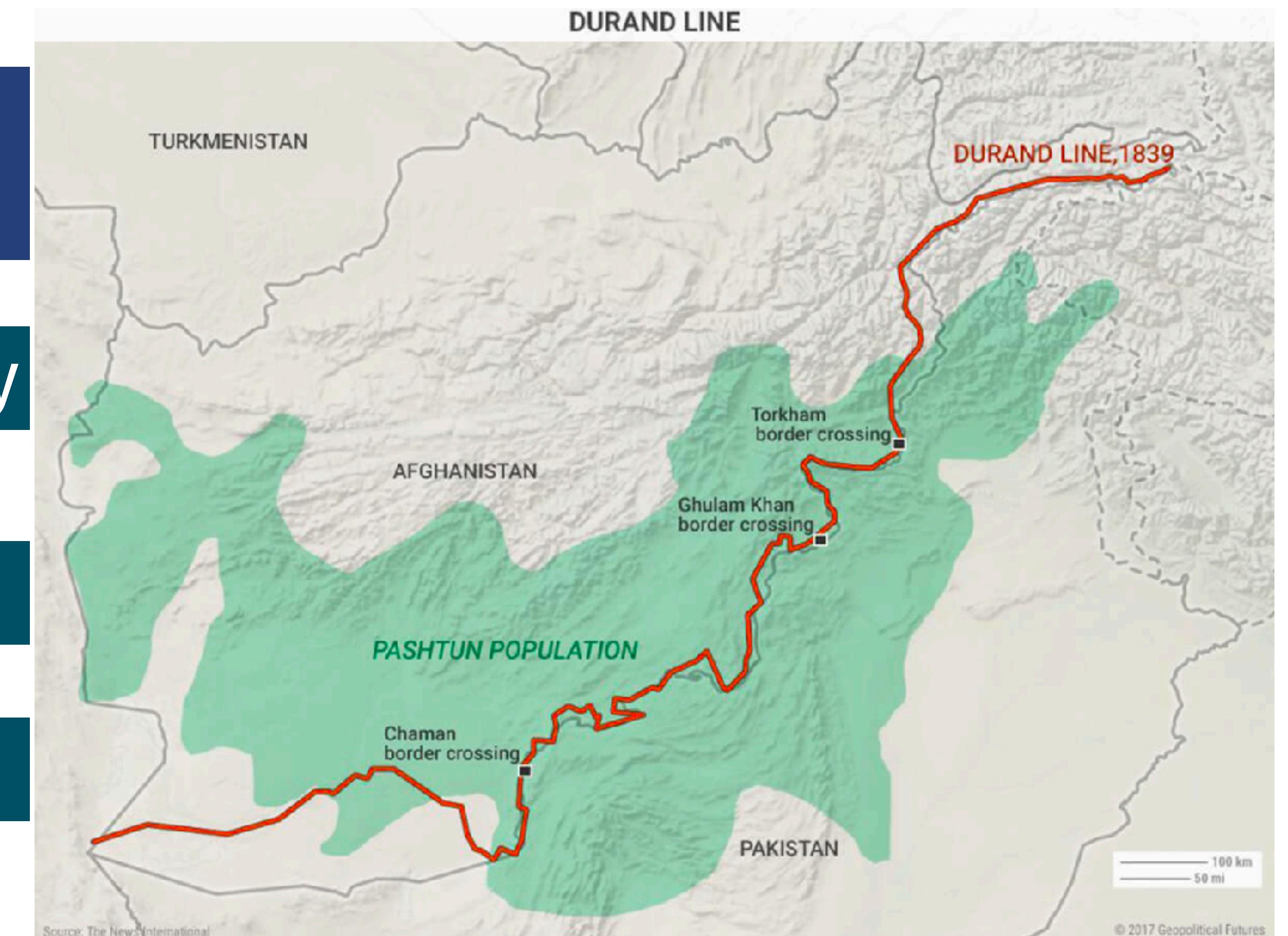
Chicken or the egg?

Border fighting; what does it mean?

One interpretation: feasibility

Another: colonialism!

Divided homelands



Grievance, greed, or opportunity?

Scholars said: **grievances** are no good as an explanation!

American Po

Better to focus on **opportunity**

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Greed and grievance in civil war

An influential corollary of the theory of ethnic conflict is that the Cold War and its end were the main source of ethnic antagonisms. We find that the accumulation of protracted conflicts since the 1950s and 1960s rather than a shift in international system after the Cold War is the main source of ethnic violence. We also find that after controlling for the number of ethnic groups, more ethnically or religiously diverse countries have been no more likely to experience civil war than less diverse countries. This suggests that the causes of ethnic violence in this period are more likely to be rural guerrilla wars and other forms of rebellion than ethnic agendas. The factors that contribute to ethnic violence are not the same as those that contribute to civil war. Religious characteristics do matter, but rather the conditions that favor insurgency. These include the presence of large populations, rough terrain, and large populations.

Resources might be a means to an end, source of grievances

Resources to fund the war, terrain to fight

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But exact role of resources and terrain is tricky!

Terrain may also “create” ethnic groups, grievances