



A
Rise to Peace
Special Report
On
**Child Terrorists and Violent
Extremism in Afghanistan**



RISE TO PEACE

Washington, DC



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Executive Introduction

Ahmad Shah Mohibi – Founder

We are here today to discuss child terrorism in Afghanistan. The number of children used as terrorists in Afghanistan is surging each year. Historically, political and religious groups around the world have used children for fighting. But now, terror organizations like ISIS, the Taliban, and Boko Haram are using children as suicide bombers, fighters, and spies. In some parts of Afghanistan, families send their children to madrasas in Pakistan for religious studies where they become easy targets for terrorist recruiters. Preventing terrorist groups from using force and hateful propaganda to brainwash and recruit children is imperative. Our organization, Rise to Peace, leverages education as a tool to eradicate youth extremism. We invite you to support our organization because we believe in what we do and our ability to make a difference.

Before we get to discussion of the issue, I want to first introduce you to Rise to Peace's Interview Project. We interview children who are former terrorists and use their voices to enhance our understanding of child extremism as it exists today, and as an inoculation against future recruitment. In addition to interviews, we hold annual symposiums wherein experts share their insights, helping citizens and government leaders alike better understand this problem. Rise to Peace aims to educate and cooperate with the public, the government and the international community to create effective policy to halt youth terrorism. The phenomenon will continue to threaten the Afghan and U.S. governments and the world unless we do something to stop it. It is crucial that we act now.

The child terrorist's rise in Afghanistan has its roots in shortcomings related to security, poverty, and education.

What is a child terrorist?

It's an unfortunate fact that children have been used as soldiers in political and religious conflict globally, throughout history. In the past, emperors provided children with guns to fight. Today, terrorists use children to behead infidels. Children have been recruited to fight in civil wars in Cambodia, Myanmar, Mozambique, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Syria, and

The phenomenon will continue to threaten the Afghan and U.S. governments and the world unless we do something to stop it. It is crucial that we act now.

About the Author

Ahmad Shah Mohibi



FOUNDER

Ahmad Shah Mohibi is founder and president of Rise to Peace. He brings more than 12 years' experience working with the United States and Afghan governments alongside the international community to help in a concerted mission—to combat terrorism and encourage democracy and stability in tumultuous regions.

Ahmad was born in 1989 in Afghanistan in the midst of civil war, the same year the world was positively affected by the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the tearing down of the Berlin Wall. Ahmad learned at an early age the value of difficult work for stability and happiness for loved ones and his country. His infancy and childhood were marked by violence and memories of anarchy. As a child, he breathed gunpowder instead of clean air. As a youngster, he went to school with fears, knowing he could not relax for a moment and take the simplest gesture for granted. As a young adult, he experienced murder, suicide attacks, corruption, and devastation. His inspiration to found Rise to Peace (R2P) was born out of his desire to bring about positive change in devastated areas. His hope is for stability and peace so children of future generations have a childhood without such horrific traumas.

Libya. Just as technological innovation has shaped globalization, so too has it altered the way we must counter terror's methods. Only 17 years ago, al-Qaida and the Taliban wrote letters threatening local or distant populations. Today they use social media to disseminate messages that stoke fear.

Scholars insist it will only get harder to protect children in a landscape where they can be used as couriers, spies, and suicide bombers. Boko Haram, ISIS, the Taliban, and Al-Shabab use children as young as 5 for their operations. Many factors have contributed to the surge in the use of child terrorists in Afghanistan, but they all boil down to national instability. Afghanistan is a country that has been at war in one way or another for nearing four decades. First, with the rise of communism in the 1970s, next with the mujahideen in the 1980s, after that it was the Taliban from 1996 - 2001, and finally, the War on Terror since 2001. War leaves children traumatized. Substandard education, poverty, mental illness and kidnappings exacerbate the problem. Afghanistan's youngest generation has never seen its country without war,

The Taliban's roots in Pakistan date back to 1994 when it emerged as a radical Islamist and

Pashtun nationalist movement. By 1996, they brought their extreme version of Islam to Afghanistan. The Taliban invests in youth, paying their expenses and teaching them their version of religion in order to capitalize on their investment thereafter.

Two of my own cousins, ages six and ten, were sent to Pakistan for religious study in 1998. The Taliban sends undercover missionaries to recruit children from villages purportedly for religious scholarship, but instead, deploys them as foot soldiers. Before they understood this danger, parents viewed such recruitment positively since they believed their children were learning about their religion. Not all madrasas are bad. But the fundamentalist ones steep children in ideas about jihad, inspiring them to kill infidels and stand against any western country or ally, especially the United States.

Between the years 1996 - 2001 I lived with my family in a village that was 40 miles from the Taliban's trenches. Afghanistan had been overrun by the Taliban with the exception of Badakhshan, our province. Keshem, our district, was the frontline of the war between the mujahideen (another name for the Northern Alliance fighters) and the Taliban.

My two cousins, to whom I referred earlier, spent six months in Pakistan and when they returned they were not the same. They avoided playing with girls. They prayed a lot. Privately, and somewhat sadly, we would make fun of them for over-praying. A few years later, once they'd grown up and become more self-reflective my younger cousin told me, "I am lucky that my family brought me back to Afghanistan. If not for this, I would have become a Taliban soldier." When I asked how that nearly happened, he explained, "They were teaching us that people in Afghanistan's north are not Muslims, and that their killing was halal," or lawful. Not much has changed. The same ideology, continues the fighting in Afghanistan.

The term infidel is used for both the Afghans who work in government and foreign forces. Infamously, the Taliban punishes locals more harshly even than they do foreigners. In a Frontline documentary about Afghanistan, ISIS fighters boast about teaching children as young as three to join the jihad, (cite source). Such children have no defense against such profound adult manipulation.

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The majority of Afghans believe the U.S. and its allies are in Afghanistan to eliminate terror and build a democracy. But terrorist groups do all they can to impress upon children that the United States' Global War on Terror is an act of invasion. They teach children the U.S. and allies are replacing Islam with Christianity.

Children are likened to branches on a tree. They can easily be twisted, broken, and carted off. According to Human Rights Watch, "Children are uniquely vulnerable to military recruitment because they are easily manipulated into violence that they are too young to understand or resist".

Education

In an unstable environment like Afghanistan, a lack of an education correlates directly to susceptibility to recruitment. Even a proper education about the Quran can be a vaccination against terror recruitment.

Armed with a better understanding of the Quran, and an openness to living in and learning about other cultures makes it far harder to dehumanize potential victims for children to kill in the name of a terror ideology.

The Taliban mendaciously claim they, "...only enlist fighters who have achieved mental and physical maturity." They say they do not use, "...boys too young to grow beards," (cite source) in military operations. But the children like my cousins who were, "...recruited from madrassas in Kunduz, Takhar, and Badakhshan provinces were 13 years old

The Interview Project aims to prevent future radicalization by educating families in vulnerable communities about the dangers of sending their children to fundamentalist madrassas. We aim to amplify the voices of child terrorist defectors. We aim to highlight the hypocrisy of terrorists' narratives. We aim to support locals, especially women and village leaders, to build resilience in at-risk communities. The Interview Project empowers tribes in Afghanistan as well as communities around the world to be the frontline, preventing children from becoming unwitting foot soldiers.

We work with partners on the ground in Afghanistan to facilitate dialogue and hear the voices of those in vulnerable communities. We interview children and international experts alike to better understand how extremist groups like the Taliban, ISIS, and the Haqani Network (HQN) prey on children. We aim to counter extremist narratives by broadcasting the true stories of those who were child terrorism's most vulnerable victims.

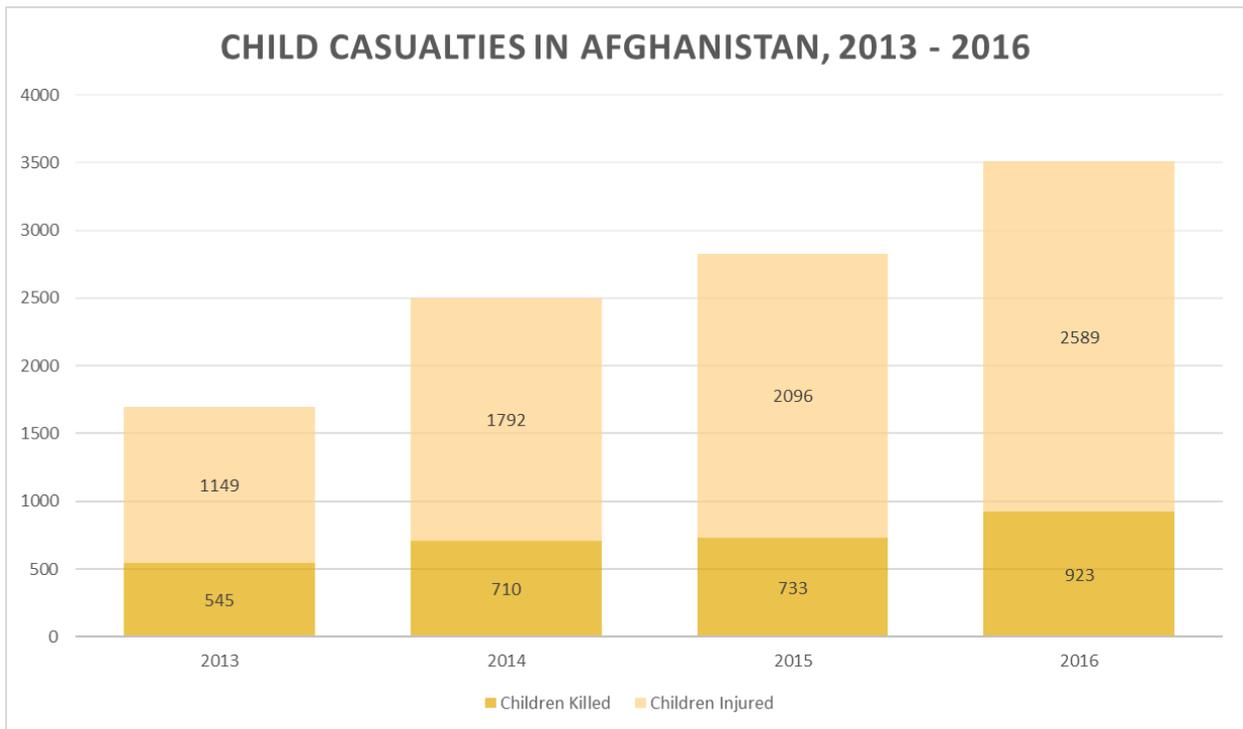
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The Afghan government must create policies that value and support the tribes in order to ensure communities can withstand the allure of terrorism. The Interview Project strives to bring back Afghanistan's strong, community-alliance system. There should be an emphasis on cooperating with the government while maintaining traditions.

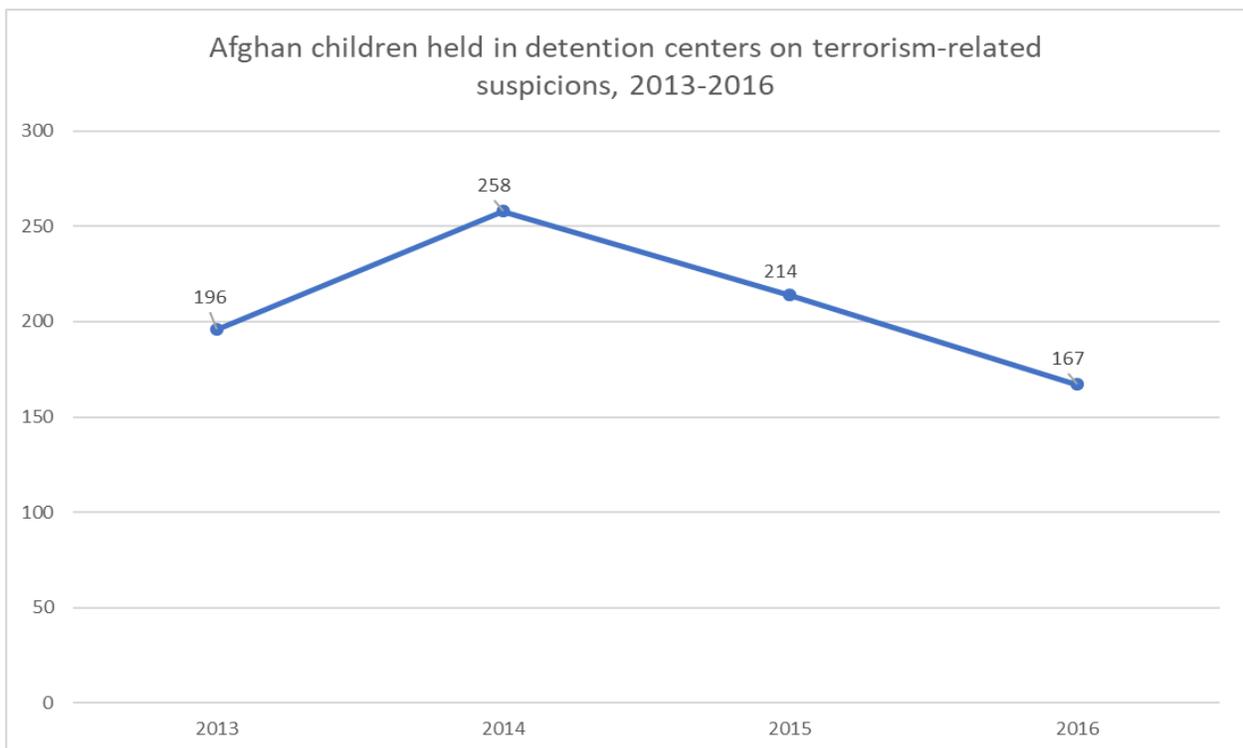
Reducing the Taliban's ability to rely on child terrorists, will weaken the group in the long haul as they will face personnel shortages.

Child Terror by the Numbers

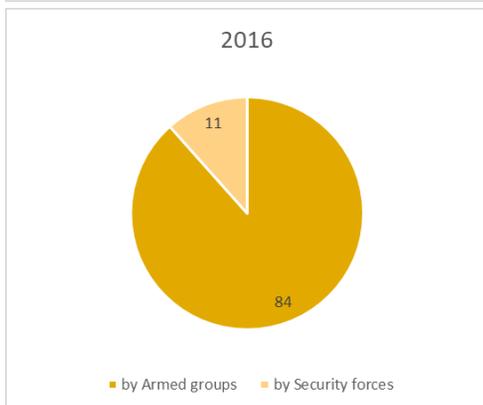
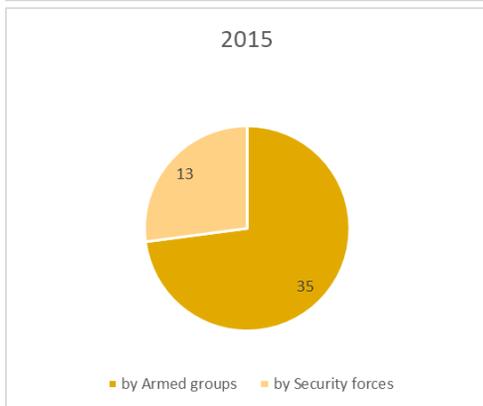
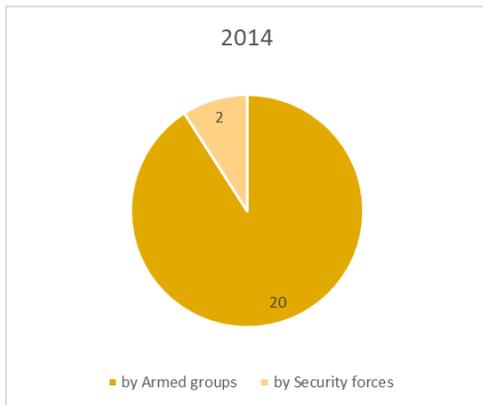
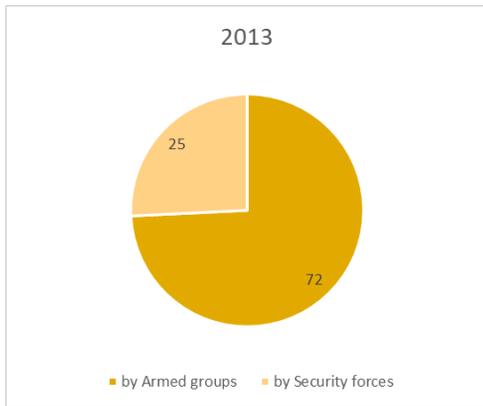
Tim O'Shea – Database and Intelligence Manager



Data from the 2014, 2015, 2016, and 2017 UN Reports on Children and Armed Conflict



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About the Author

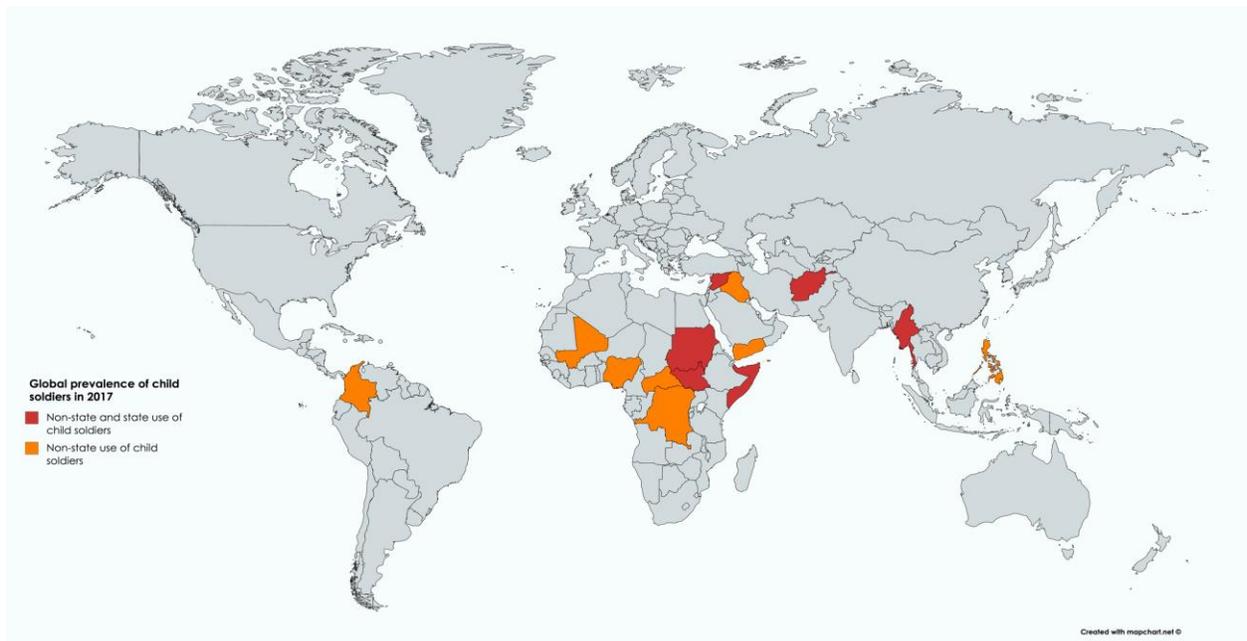
Tim O'Shea



DATABASE & INTELLIGENCE MANAGER

Tim O'Shea is a student at George Mason University studying Government and International Politics, as well as Economics and Data Analysis. In his role at Rise to Peace, Tim designed, built, and now oversees the Active Intelligence Database, managing the synthesis of thousands of news reports into legible and usable data on global terrorism and extremism. Besides his work at Rise To Peace, Tim has served as an immigration law clerk specializing in political asylum and data analytics, as well as in research internships at the Institute for Immigration Research and the Center for Political-Military Analysis at the Hudson Institute.

Data from the 2014, 2015, 2016, and 2017 UN Reports on Children and Armed Conflict



Data from the 2014, 2015, 2016, and 2017 UN Reports on Children and Armed Conflict

Causes of Successful Recruitment: Social versus Economic Factors

Sara Huzar – Research Analyst and Editor

Introduction

What could possibly drive a small child to commit an act of violence? This question has plagued psychologists, intelligence officers, and CVE experts for decades. The journey of a child driven to extremism is far too complicated to be reduced to one catch-all cause, but it is possible to broadly determine what aspects of a child's social life bear the most responsibility, and how those aspects relate to each other. Rise to Peace proposes that the primary impetus behind a child's radicalization is violent socialization, often through family, religious, or school influencers. However, socioeconomic factors like poverty or citizenship status are required for those influences to be fully effective.

Social and Familial Factors

Children make easy targets for terrorist recruiters because of their readiness to accept the authority of adults. In an interview with CBS's *60 Minutes* a Taliban commander, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, told reporter Lara Logan that, "Children accept what you say after you talk to them just a couple of times," making them less costly to recruit and radicalize than adultsⁱ. In his training camp, children were fed a narrative of incessant, unprovoked U.S. violence against Afghan citizens in an effort to promote a sense of righteous indignation within them. He saw that, in the presence of a military authority like himself, the children readily accepted that narrative, and were readily recruited to extremism.

"Children accept what you say after you talk to them just a couple of times."

His conclusion is echoed by Abdul Haq, a now seventeen-year-old boy who was groomed as a Taliban suicide bomber. He describes his experience in a madrasa: “We were shown videos in which Americans rape Afghan women and behead innocent people. It would provoke us to carry out a suicide attack right nowⁱⁱ”. Madrasas play an important role in recruitment and radicalization. Abdul attended a madrasa run out of his local mosque where, according to him, Taliban recruiters came, “often” to encourage him and his fellow students to take up arms against the governmentⁱⁱⁱ. Using what he describes as “emotional speeches,” Taliban members wooed the boys to their cause^{iv}. They made him feel like he was doing Allah’s work. When they ordered him to become a suicide bomber, they prefaced it with the promise of going to Heaven. When fed these ideas by teachers, the young boys accepted them as fact.

These ideas are even more powerful when they come from the child’s own family. The Taliban commander interviewed on *60 Minutes* vividly illustrates this principle. In his training camp, he teaches young boys that they will be sent to paradise in exchange for carrying out attacks. In his home, the same principle applies. He swears that his whole family is ready to go to paradise and that he wants to sacrifice himself, his wife, and his two sons: “One of my sons already knows about it. When you ask him, ‘What are you going to do,’ he says he is going to fight the infidels. He is five years old. He asks me when he will go for jihad. He is mentally ready for it”.^v

In this case, religious and parental authority created a deadly combination. Parents and religious leaders constitute some of a child’s most powerful influencers. If one or both is urging a child to violence, radicalization becomes almost inevitable.

About the Author

Sara Huzar



RESEARCH ANALYST AND EDITOR

Sara Huzar is a member of George Mason University’s Honors College Class of 2019 and is one of its nineteen members to receive the prestigious University Scholarship. She has held numerous leadership positions in on-campus organizations and spent the spring of 2017 living in Kyiv, Ukraine while interning at the US Embassy in the city. She has completed a funded research project on the discursive construction of Afghan and is currently researching.

Sara designed and produces Rise to Peace’s Week in Terror report; a weekly summary of terrorist attacks throughout the world. Her research interests focus on nationalism and national memory at the intersection of international security and ethnic conflict.

This problem is especially acute for immigrant families, for whom economic desperation melds with anxiety over citizenship status.

Socioeconomic Factors

These methods are exacerbated by economic hardships. Poverty and desperation contribute to many adults joining extremist groups, but the problem manifests itself in child recruitment as well. Children, especially sons, play an important role as breadwinners for the family. This is in part because their parents are rarely able to earn enough money to support the family, especially when, in keeping with Afghan cultural practices, their mother refrains from working outside of the home.

This problem is especially acute for immigrant families, for whom economic desperation melds with anxiety over citizenship status. Human Rights Watch has documented numerous cases of Afghan teenagers being recruited to fight for Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps in Syria^{vi}. They report that children as young as 14 have fought in the Corps Fatemiyoun division, an all-Afghan armed group. Iran maintains that all Fatemiyoun fighters are volunteers, however the vulnerability of Afghan nationals in Iran calls the legitimacy of their volunteerism into question. In 2015 Iran's Interior Ministry reported that there were approximately 2.5 million Afghans living in Iran, many of whom did not have legal residency papers. Recruiters have been known to approach young men as they attempt to renew or apply for residency permits, telling them they would receive permits for enlisting.

Though not an extremist group, IRGC's tactics provide evidence of the same problems that underlie terrorist recruitment. When faced with desperate socioeconomic conditions, children and their families see no better future for themselves than martyrdom. In light of these obstacles, the impassioned narratives of recruiters are easier to accept.

Conclusion

The horror of using children to commit acts of violence comes from an understanding of their vulnerability. They are susceptible to the will of the powerful adults in their lives, not yet having had the chance to develop their own sense of morality. When these adults push a narrative of violence, children are socialized to that norm and ultimately radicalized. Socioeconomic factors often create the conditions for this socialization, shaping the environment in which the children are acculturated.

Schooling and Terrorism in Afghanistan

Austin Ludolph - Active Intelligence Intern, Southeast Asia

All around the world children attend school. How children spend their free time and the type of education they receive correlates highly to a country's success or lack thereof. Afghanistan's children do not have the same luxuries as their peers around the world. Afghanistan has been plagued by war for more than 17 years. Its youth are inheriting a broken education system. Every child dreams of going to school, playing with friends, and learning subjects that will become the basis of his or her academic identity. Once again, Afghan children lack this luxury. Afghanistan's youth should be engaging themselves at Afghanistan's primary schools, but they aren't and a crumbling school system is exactly what Afghanistan does not need. Education in Afghanistan provides physical space in which kids are kept occupied, as well a place to build the intellectual fortitude to keep children from being brainwashed and turned into Taliban soldiers.

Afghanistan's poverty is another impediment to children attending school. Innumerable families have been displaced, separated, or broken completely. An overwhelming number of families have experienced the death of parents. Children in Afghanistan have few necessities and they do what they must to survive the deadly terrain into which they were born.

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Many Afghan children would like to go to school but the prohibitive cost of supplies prevents that from happening. Afghan families must provide for the basic everyday school supplies such as pencils, pens, notepads, and bookbags. The government is responsible for providing textbooks, but often times "books do not arrive on time, or there are shortages, perhaps in some cases due to theft or corruption"^{vii}. This in turn puts more pressure on Afghan families and most likely the costs are too overwhelming to send the child to school. Many families also live in "compounds behind high walls" where "grandparents, uncles, aunts, and cousins may share the same house, which might only have three or four rooms"^{viii}. Some children even say school is too far to travel to such as Najibi of Daikundi, 15, who says "By the time we walked to school, the school day would end"^{ix}. Even though some children

do attend school, there is still a large concern that “forty-one percent of all schools in Afghanistan do not have buildings”^x.

Primary school attendance among Afghanistan’s young girls is a variation on the theme. In October 2017, 3.5 million eligible Afghan children were out of school. 85% of these, or close to three million, were girls^{xi}. Most attendees, then, are boys, unsurprising as school is stressed less for girls less than it is for boys. Gender inequalities abound in Afghanistan where some parents will not allow their daughters to attend school because they need the girls to work in the house. Young girls are frequently subjected to discrimination for attending school, “as it is unchecked, difficult to prevent, and because of harmful gender norms, [it] can have damaging consequences for a girl’s reputation”^{xii}. Other factors that keep Afghan children, especially girls, from attending school: there are too few female teachers and often families prohibit their daughters from being taught by men. Many westerners would not see Afghanistan’s schools as places of learning. Children learn under the hot sun, classrooms lack desks and chairs, and girls study in small tents shown in the Human Rights Watch documentary “Afghanistan: Girls Struggle for an Education.” If Afghanistan made education for its children a higher priority, then more children would be in school than at home. Kinetic situations like Afghanistan’s continued struggle with the Taliban also keep education will remain lower on its list of priorities. Therefore, unfortunately, schools will remain few and far between.

About the Author

Austin Ludolph



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Austin Ludolph is a student at George Mason University studying Criminology, Law, and Society with a concentration in Homeland Security & Justice. He has worked with a political campaign in the past and has a strong passion for counter-terrorism, intelligence analysis, and border protection. He is currently working with Rise to Peace as an Active Intelligence Intern. In Austin’s free time, he enjoys playing tennis and attending/watching basketball and football games.

With fewer children attending school, more Afghan children have become Taliban recruits. The Taliban has taken over many Afghan Islamic Religious Schools (madrassas) to use as recruitment centers. Officials from the province of Nangarhar said in 2016, "...that fully two thirds of the province's 1,500 madrassas were not registered with the government and operated without permits"^{xiii}. The Taliban have used child soldiers for some time, so this is not a new tactic. Children 13 to 17 years old and younger, have been recruited by the Taliban. To be clear, the, "...deployment of children younger than 18 violates Afghan and international law. Instances involving children younger than 15 constitute war crimes"^{xiv} The Taliban has no compunctions about recruiting children. Unlike their coalition foes who fight by ethical codes, Children are seen as little more than a boon to The Taliban's military and its cause.

Child soldiers are rarely, if ever, relinquished. Certainly, then their education is hijacked.

There is rarely any turning back once a child has been recruited by militants. Parents and relatives beg the Taliban to return their children, but their pleas and offers of bribes are in vain. Child soldiers are rarely, if ever, relinquished. Certainly, then their education is hijacked. Children in madrassas are required to study Islam and the Quran as doctrine. By their early teens, they've acquired enough military knowledge to join the Taliban in specific districts and taking on roles like bomb making, IED-s and ordnance. According to the United Nations Security Council's work on "Children and armed conflict" in 2015, 116 cases of child recruitment were recorded, most of them involving the Taliban^{xv}. The report went further noting that, "...the Ministry of Justice reported that 214 boys had been detained in juvenile rehabilitation centres on charges relating to national security, including association with armed groups," and that, "53 of those were under 18 years of age." These numbers do not account for the many other Afghanistan cases that went unreported.

The following first-hand accounts from Human Rights Watch document the painstaking efforts of parents trying to win their sons back from the Taliban:

“Mansur, 15, was a resident of a village in Chahardara district, Kunduz province. In May 2015 he was recruited into an armed group. A relative said: ‘Commander A sent him to Waziristan in Pakistan for training in making explosives. His responsibility in the armed group is to plant IEDs in government agencies and government cars. The family has been unable to secure his release.’”^{xvi}

“Malek, 14, a student at a local madrasa, was recruited by his teacher, Commander E, one of the Taliban’s principal recruiters in Chahardara district. A relative said: ‘Before recruiting Malek, the Taliban took his cousin Esmat by force over his father’s objections. However, Esmat’s father succeeded in getting Esmat released and sent him to Iran to save him. Currently Qari Malek is tasked with carrying RPGs [rocket-propelled grenades] in Commander B’s unit.’”^{xvii}

“Burhan, 14, is also from Chahardara district. A relative told Human Rights Watch: ‘Qari Burhan was recruited in March or April 2015 into Commander B’s armed group, where he is armed with a Kalashnikov [assault rifle]. After he was recruited, he was sent to Waziristan [in Pakistan] to be trained in using explosive materials. He came back to the front after three months training in July 2015 and is active in Commander B’s armed group. Two of Burhan’s uncles are with the Taliban.’”^{xviii}

Despite the resurgence of child recruitment and the weakness of the education system, there remain notable advances. The United States Agency for International Development, or simply USAID, created in 1961 by President Kennedy has made progress in getting young boys and girls back into school. They have also equipped schools with administrations, educators and supplies. Between 2016 and 2017, USAID, “...equipped more than 154,000 teachers, including more than 54,000 women, with the skills they need to ensure schools are delivering on their promise to educate the next generation.” USAID has also printed and distributed 47.7 million textbooks.”^{xix} USAID’s progress will improve Afghanistan’s school system and the lives of Afghan children.

If Afghanistan’s schools receive more appropriate attention, then more children will receive quality educations, and there will be less child recruitment. The Taliban preys on poor children from broken families. The more children are educated, the more likely they will be to be inspired by goals greater than joining the Taliban.

A Key to Afghanistan's Neighbors and Their Effects on Afghan Child Terror

Maya Norman – Active Intelligence and Data Analytics Intern

Pakistan

Pakistan has repeatedly been reprimanded by the international community for providing safe havens to terrorists. The porous border separating the Federally Administered Tribal Areas and Afghanistan is exploited by terrorists, allowing them to move back and forth while remaining undetected by security forces. Pakistan has cultivated radical groups within Afghanistan as proxies.^{xx} These proxy groups, such as the Taliban and the Haqqani network, use child soldiers.

Iran

Many migrants fleeing Afghanistan have ended up in Iran. In 2015, the Interior Ministry of Iran estimated that Iran was home to 2.5 million Afghans, many of whom lacked proper residency papers. Since 2013, Iran has trained thousands of Afghans in their Fatemiyoun division, a group of “volunteer” Afghan forces. Afghan refugees, desperate for legal status, have gone to fight in Syria in exchange for papers for their family. According to Sarah Leah Whitson, Middle East director at Human Rights Watch, many of these soldiers are children.^{xxi}



Turkmenistan

Afghanistan and Turkmenistan fight terrorism and radicalism by focusing on poverty reduction. Poverty allows terrorist networks to prey on indigent youth who see no future for themselves. Terrorist networks radicalize and recruit such children to destabilize South and Central Asia.^{xxii} The two countries have worked together on energy and transportation growth, and share the common goal of providing electricity to rural parts of Afghanistan. Officials in Turkmenistan have denied that there is trouble on the border, despite reports of clashes in Afghan media.^{xxiii}

Uzbekistan

The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan is allied with the Pakistani Taliban, Afghan Taliban, Haqqani Network, and Al Qaeda. The IMU have expanded into Northern Afghanistan. In 2012, they were the target of 26 special operations raids.^{xxiv} Afghanistan has recently re-engaged with Uzbekistan to step up efforts for peace in the region.^{xxv}

Tajikistan

Tajikistan shares a long, porous border with Afghanistan. Limited resources and a dwindling economy strain border officials.^{xxvi} This has led to a proliferation of organized crime groups, as well as drug and weapon smuggling. Clashes have occurred at the border that have damaged the electrical supply to parts of Afghanistan.^{xxvii} Ramazon Rahimzoda, Tajikistan's Interior Minister, estimates that there are 10,000 - 15,000 militants along the Afghan-Tajik border, and many of these have cross-border connections.^{xxviii} Many Tajiks have joined ISIS, which poses the risk of returning fighters radicalizing others. Future fighting along the border could create a demand for child soldiers.

About the Author

Maya Norman



**ACTIVE INTELLIGENCE & DATA
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Maya Norman is a M.S. candidate at American University studying Terrorism and Homeland Security Policy. She received her B.A. in Justice, Law, and Criminology from American University in 2016. Her interests include counter-terrorism, intelligence analysis, terrorism financing, and the crime-terror nexus. She is also passionate about social justice and humanitarian issues. Maya has completed several internships, including interning at National Defense University – College of International Security Affairs and the Office of Inspector General at the Department of Labor. Outside of her studies, Maya enjoys traveling and recently backpacked around Southeast Asia for six weeks.

Child Soldiers in Afghanistan

Child soldiers are employed by Afghan security (military and police) forces and by terrorists and insurgents, typically through force and coercion. The two sides recruit child soldiers for similar reasons, despite fighting for different causes. Child soldiers are viewed as “expendable and replenishable” and they require little training or costly investment. They are able to fulfill vital positions such as spies, cooks, combatants, and porters. However, they are “unlikely to change the tempo of warfare or provide significant strategic advantage to one side or another.”^{xxxix}

Afghan Forces

As for Afghan security forces, some don’t intentionally employ child soldiers. Often it is difficult to determine the age of an Afghan child because the country has an inadequate health infrastructure which lacks the ability to register and retain information like a child’s age. As a result, underage children have registered their ages falsely on national identification cards to be eligible for military recruitment to, in turn, send money home to their families.^{xxx} Additionally, Afghan security forces suffer a high number of casualties, creating a continual demand for new soldiers. This is particularly true of Afghan Local Police and Afghan National Police in remote districts.^{xxxi} The Afghan Local Police are more militia than traditional police force but are thought of as the first line of defense against the Taliban. Most members receive little training and compensation and many are killed on duty.^{xxxii}

The President of Afghanistan, Ashraf Ghani, has reportedly been trying to stop the use of child soldiers, but a lack of accountability at district and village levels hampers the central government’s ability to combat this crime.^{xxxiii}

Many children have been subjected to indoctrination, often as early as age six and have been placed in battle by age ten.

Terrorists and Insurgents

The Afghan Taliban makes extensive use of child soldiers. They view children as less likely to be targeted by the enemy, including the government and Western troops who do not engage in combat with children. The use of children is a strategic decision to give them a battlefield advantage.^{xxxiv} The Taliban also recruit children for suicide attacks as they are less conspicuous and easy to brainwash. Many children have been subjected to indoctrination, often as early as age six, and have been placed in battle by age ten.

ISIS emerged in Afghanistan in early 2015. Locally it is called ISKP. Most members were Pakistani Taliban who were displaced from Pakistan tribal areas by military operations. Afghan Pashtun tribes welcomed the guests and Eastern Afghanistan became an ISIS stronghold. ISKP recruited hundreds of kids who lived and trained with them.^{xxxv} The presence of the Islamic State, or militants aligned with it, will make it more difficult to protect children from recruitment.^{xxxvi} Additionally, Islamic State movements have emerged in neighboring countries threatening the overall security of Afghanistan and possibly prompting security forces to recruit more children.

Proxy Concerns & International Assistance

John Sims – Active Intelligence Intern

About the Author

John Sims



ACTIVE INTELLIGENCE INTERN

John Sims is a graduate student at The George Washington University pursuing a M.A. in Security Policy Studies with the Elliott School of International Affairs. John is focusing on transnational security and conflict and conflict resolution with specific interests in Russia, conflict in Eastern Europe, and global terrorism. John received a B.A. in Russian Language and Literature and International Studies from Indiana University.

Following completion of his B.A., John worked for three years with the Office of the Indiana Attorney General. Serving as an analyst and investigator, John was responsible for investigating Indiana consumer complaints filed against licensed professionals to determine if fraud or professional incompetence occurred in the course of a licensee's duties. Additionally, John was tasked with managing the Indiana database that listed blighted Indiana properties across the state.

Afghanistan is a linchpin in a region of incendiary geopolitical conflict. Regional actors continue to express concern about how Afghanistan is governed and which partners it supports. Terrorism and violent conflict remain overarching concerns. The United States' presence brings challenges to regional partners who do not like a global superpower in their backyard.

Afghanistan's neighbors have never been silent on its future. While these neighbors have sought to improve diplomatic ties and denounce the evils of terrorism, their words may not always be supported by their deeds. Iran, Russia, and Pakistan continue to play critical roles in altering the security environment. This section will focus on these three specific nations, their overt claims in Afghanistan, and their exacerbation of the conflict.

Iran

Iran has an extensive history of supporting terrorist organizations. It remains one of only four states listed as state-sponsors of terrorism by the U.S. State Department. The United States affirms that Iran has sponsored organizations like Hezbollah and Hamas with funding, weaponry, and training. Iran has had complicated relations with the Afghan government since the rise of the Taliban and that history has not precluded Iran from aiding combatant groups.

Iran has always placed strategic importance on Afghanistan and its position in South-west Asia. Iran has four strategic objectives regarding Afghanistan: ensure a minimal American, Pakistani, Saudi Arabian, and Taliban influence on the Afghan government, leverage the Shiite non-Pashtun

population, safeguard Iranian investments in western Afghanistan, and retain an economic sphere of influence.^{xxxvii} Iran remains concerned about the presence and intentions of US forces in Afghanistan and Iraq. Furthermore, Iran, a Shiite nation, frequently clashed with the Taliban and Al-Qaeda forces, both of which are Sunni extremist organizations.

Today, Iran's resistance to extremist organizations is changing. While it may remain a threat to the Iranian ideology, Iran has expressed an openness to permitting the Taliban a greater role in Afghan governance if it preserves stability. Although the Taliban may claim some type of legitimacy as a governing authority, al Qaeda cannot. Reports allege that Iran has released al Qaeda operatives to return to Afghanistan. Iran's openness to the presence of these groups in Afghanistan propagates of child recruitment as an extremism tool. The Taliban and al Qaeda have expressed little ambivalence about using children.

Iran's behavior, however, has not been limited to turning a blind eye to those who recruit Afghan children. Iran appears to engage in Afghan child recruitment itself. Human Rights Watch reports that the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps recruited Afghan immigrant children living in Iran to fight in Syria.^{xxxviii} Such children, Iran alleges, "volunteered." Iran has reportedly incentivized immigrants to fight in Syria by offering them citizenship. In so doing, it potentially increases the motivation for children to enlist and fight. By aiding the Taliban and recruiting Afghan children for foreign wars, Iran perpetuates the cycle that plays out when children are born and raised in violence.

Russia

Russia's interest remains a critical component of Afghanistan's security situation. Russia's interest in the region has never been trivial – the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan catalyzed many of the *jihadi* groups that have grown to prominence. Russia's geopolitical sphere of influence shrank significantly following the fall of the Soviet Union. It lost its control over Central Asian states and the Caucasus region. Under the Putin administration, however, Russia has expanded its influence in the Middle East in a reassertion of its global power.

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Russia's advances in Afghanistan are critical for two reasons: Russia's own national security and the nearness of US forces. In 2015, Russia intervened in Syria for the stated purpose of combating ISIL, but in fact to support the Assad regime. Since 2015, ISIL has been significantly reduced, but their call to arms was heard in Afghanistan. ISIL-affiliated groups have sprung up as another complication in a region already beset by challenges. Russia's interest in Afghanistan is more involved due to ISIL's presence and the influence it wields with regional terrorist actors. ISIL in Afghanistan can influence fundamentalist actors in Central Asia and the Caucasus to bring their campaign of violence to the Russian state.

United States involvement is the other reason for Russia's interest in Afghanistan's future. Despite that Russia and the United States often find common cause and cooperate on combating terrorist organizations, two realities deepen Russia's concern: the strategic placement of US forces in such close to proximity to Russia and the US's stated commitment to a long-term presence in Afghanistan. Given the absence of US leadership in the Syrian Civil War, Russia is challenging America's presence in the Middle East.

Russia's relations with the Taliban raise proxy concerns. Despite that Russia and the Taliban were opponents during the Soviet-Afghan War, they find a common foe in ISIL. Russia has allegedly turned to the Taliban for intelligence sharing on ISIL capabilities and in-field knowledge.^{xxxix} The United States has also accused Russia of funneling arms to the organization, risking conferring legitimacy upon the Taliban as a viable partner for Afghan security.^{xl} The Afghan Taliban remains a party that is frequently cited for recruiting children as soldiers in their conflicts.

Russia may claim to adhere to treaties and agreements that should preclude their support for organizations that recruit children, but their regional geopolitical goals trump their moral obligations. Russia does not require a defeat of Western forces in Afghanistan, for a wave of Islamist radicalism could follow. But Russia benefits from a continued Afghan stalemate that wastes American and NATO's blood and treasure. By providing material support to the Taliban and recognizing them as possible party to Afghanistan's future, Russia exacerbates an area long beset by conflict.

Pakistan continues to play a disruptive role in Afghanistan. It advocates for peace and stability there, provided it is on Pakistan's terms.

Pakistan

Pakistan is no stranger to Afghanistan's chaotic and extremist environs. Pakistan aided the Afghan mujahideen after the Soviet invasion and precipitated the Taliban's rise. Afghanistan served as a training ground for pro-Pakistani terror networks who launched attacks against India. Pakistan was one of three countries to recognize the legitimacy of the Taliban government – in other words, it turned a blind-eye to the terrorism that festered next door. The tragic events of 9/11 required abrupt changes in regards to Pakistan's support for the Taliban. Yet, those changes seem less than sincere.

Pakistan continues to play a disruptive role in Afghanistan. It advocates for peace and stability there, provided it is on Pakistan's terms. One of Pakistan's key terms is abnegating a pro-India Afghan government. Furthermore Pakistan, like Iran and Russia, remains ambivalent about the US forces' long-term military presence . Pakistan continues to blunt Afghanistan's economic freedom so Afghanistan will continue to depend upon Pakistan.^{xii}

Pakistan has not given up its connections to the Taliban and other terrorist networks operating out of Afghanistan. It has publicly announced that it does not support the Taliban and engages with Western forces to combat and defeat the organization. However, members of Pakistan's political and military elite continue to support violent extremist groups and believe the Taliban can serve as a legitimate political entity in Afghanistan's future.^{xiii} The Taliban can grow its operations, including recruitment, with a strong international backer like Pakistan. Pakistan's support for the Taliban as a political entity grants the Taliban greater authority to continue its extremist campaign and challenge the Afghan government's authority.

The Taliban's Recruitment of Children along the Pakistani Border

Matthew Wickizer – Intelligence Analyst Intern, Afghanistan

The Taliban's Presence Along Pakistani Border

Afghanistan's border with Pakistan has long acted as a safe haven and base of operations for the Taliban. Since the drawdown of US troops in 2014 however the Taliban has been able to expand its base of power in the region. Currently, the Taliban is recognized as holding complete control of much of Kandahar and Helmand provinces, as well as partial control of several districts in Ghazni, Nuristan, Paktika, Nangarhar, and Badakhshan^{xliii}. In addition to these provinces acting as Taliban strongholds, they also act as the group's primary sites of operation. Most Taliban attacks occur in the border provinces of Kandahar, Helmand, and Ghazni, with a total of 30 attacks reported in these provinces since June 2017^{xliv}.

With this increase in power has come a drastic increase in the group's influence. The Taliban has taken advantage of the region's economic hardships and loose ties with the Afghan government to establish itself as an integral part of the community. With its own court systems and armed militants, portions of the population have come to view the group as a legitimate regional authority, efficiently settling disputes and providing security where local government has failed^{xlv}. Also, with their expansive funding from the illicit opium trade, and economic support from foreign donors, the group has been able to establish a multitude of unregistered madrassas in the region, providing educational opportunities to the region's youth^{xlvi,xlvii}. These factors have pushed a number of Afghans along the Pakistan border to see the Taliban as a viable source of hope and opportunity. This section will focus on the Taliban's presence along the Pakistani border.

The Taliban's Recruitment Methods in The Border Region

This influence fuels the Taliban's growing practice of recruiting children along the border with Pakistan. As cited by the UN, the Taliban has been the most prolific recruiter of children in Afghanistan's ongoing conflict, and has only increased its use of children in combat roles since 2014^{xlviii}. With such sway over the communities, finding new recruits amongst the border region's youth

Finding new recruits amongst the border region's youth has proven easy for the group, promising its recruits economic and educational escapes from the region's crippling poverty

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has proven easy for the group, promising its recruits economic and educational escapes from the region's crippling poverty.

Afghanistan has faced a stagnant GDP and a dramatic poverty rate of 35.8% for 5 - 7 years now^{xlix}. These hardships are only amplified in the border regions where illegal markets like the drug trade act as the only viable income source^{li}. Seizing upon this struggle, the Taliban often frames itself as a potential source of economic relief to locals. In fact, in a 2010 study of Taliban fighters captured in Helmand province, more than half joined the Taliban for the economic incentives offered by the group^{lii}. This has yielded first-hand accounts of child recruits citing promised stipends, and free enrollment in madrassas as primary factors moving their families to give them to the Taliban^{liii}.

Once handed over to the Taliban and enrolled in their madrassas all hope falls to the wayside in the service of radicalization. These madrassas often function as hubs of indoctrination where the Taliban's extremist ideals are driven into children^{liv}. In addition to acting as hubs of indoctrination, these madrassas have been reported to function as Taliban training grounds where children are schooled in the basics of preparing and conducting attacks as well as the operation of various weapon platforms^{lv}.

It is important to note that along with this "voluntary" source of recruitment, the Taliban also utilizes kidnapping and human trafficking to recruit the region's youth^{lvi}. In 2016 alone, the UN reported 69 instances of the Taliban abducting children across the country^{lvii}. In this mode of recruitment, children are taken from their families and forcibly enrolled in madrassas like those described above. While less common as a methodology, this practice has seen attention in Ghazni province where government forces conducted successful anti-trafficking operations against the group in 2017^{lviii}.

No matter the source of recruitment, both methodologies have fueled Taliban violence across Afghanistan. After being radicalized and indoctrinated, the border region's youth are used to fill a number of roles within the Taliban. Perhaps the most alarming trend is the increasing use of these children as suicide bombers.

Conclusion

If these trends are to be sensibly combatted, and the group's recruitment of children successfully staved, then it is imperative that the government re-establish its presence and control in the region. Thereafter, efforts should be undertaken to provide the border region with a viable economic future. In such conditions locals may seek prosperity through legitimate means and markets. Both of these efforts would delegitimize the Taliban's hold over the border region, and stem their influence over local communities.

Recommendations

John Sims – Active Intelligence Intern

Sara Huzar – Research Analyst and Editor

Afghanistan has a long history of violence and foreign occupation. Solutions that are strictly military or strictly social will be insufficient to tide the violence or reduce the use of child soldiers. Child soldiers are recruited in the wake of state failures to address underlying economic, political, and societal factors that enable such violations of human rights. Policymakers must reevaluate existing counterinsurgency strategies and develop state infrastructure sufficient to establish Afghanistan as a viable state. Below, *Rise to Peace*'s John Sims offer policy recommendations, and his *Rise to Peace* colleague, Sara Huzar, offers counterpoints.

Point

- Reduce reliance on the military as a sole executor of political change

Military solutions alone have not worked to quell fundamentalist threats in Afghanistan. While the wholesale removal of international forces is impractical and would perhaps even be counterproductive to defeating terrorists, intervening actors must consider policies that mitigate the level of civilian casualties. Non-combatant deaths inflame costly passions against interventionist forces. Furthermore, interventionist forces should consider decreasing their military funding and redirecting resources to international aid programs and NGOs who address and prioritize Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) programs and education.

Counterpoint

If recent history has shown us anything, it is that a reduction in military presence needs to be handled delicately lest it leave behind more problems than it solves. Military solutions have not worked to quell fundamentalist threats in Afghanistan at least in part because military intervention ended before a viable alternative was put in place. While a drawback of foreign military presence in favor of CVE programs and NGO aid is undoubtedly in Afghanistan's long term interest, interventionist forces must take care to leave a stable military system, not a power vacuum, behind.

Point

- Disincentivize international entities' support for terrorist actors and punish perpetrators.

In many cases, international states are actively supporting organizations that recruit child soldiers or are ignoring their responsibility to crack down on said parties. Perpetrators of such war crimes must be held to account by the International Criminal Court (ICC), not provided arms and assistance as an alternative to ineffective governance. International bodies like the UN should consider steps including, but not limited to, imposing sanctions and economic barriers on states that support organizations that use children as soldiers. Further efforts must be taken to codify legal enforcement and raise awareness of the use child soldiers.

Counterpoint

Unfortunately, most of the groups using child soldiers fall outside the purview of the ICC and the UN. Sanctioning states that support them, which is all those bodies are able to do, may be too far removed from the problem to incentivize a change in those groups' policies. Moreover, sanctions are a serious measure, and will only be undertaken when evidence of a state's support of child recruitment is overwhelming, which it rarely is. Using international governing bodies to punish extremists' use of child soldiers leaves many critical loopholes.

Point

- Alter the current educational landscape.

Taliban madrassas continue to serve as recruitment centers ensnaring Afghan youth. To eliminate this influence, aid relief must fund and stabilize Afghanistan's education system and increase the number of teachers, the supply of materials, and the number of physical schools throughout all of its provinces. Resources must address this critical shortage as access to education is

Counterpoint

This measure is likely to encounter serious criticism from religious leaders in Afghanistan, and would need to be undertaken with the utmost cultural sensitivity. The secularizing influence of western culture and education is a common narrative in the region, and would only be enhanced if the U.S. begins funding schools and educational materials of its choosing while actively discouraging the use of madrassas. In this climate, those willing to

critical to the state's progress. The excision of fundamentalist recruitment centers must remain a priority.

attend a western-backed school are unlikely to have been candidates for radicalization anyway, while extremists may use these programs as further evidence of a U.S. assault on Afghan culture.

Point

- Bolster civil society and anti-extremist messaging.

Afghanistan is an amalgam of tribal and ethnic identities, yet leaders from disparate communities across the country can help prevention and deradicalization efforts. The United States can assist in the development of regional prevention and CSV (Countering Violent Extremist) programs, but such US support should be publicly inconspicuous. Afghans must feel a personal investment in facing the challenges of endemic corruption and fundamentalist recruitment. They must not feel as if they are merely serving as Western tools. With Western assistance, Afghanistan can challenge the Taliban and ISIL forces by broadcasting stories of child soldiers and their extremist, former captors' interpretation of Islam. Proactive measures can trim fundamentalist organizations' reach and, hopefully, decrease child recruitment.

Counterpoint

CSV initiatives in Afghanistan will need to work around suboptimal infrastructure. Only around 12.3 percent of the population has access to the internet. Additionally, 64% of Afghan households have access to a television and 72% have access to a radio^{lix}. While these numbers are expanding, it is worth noting that these resources are more concentrated in urban areas and in households with higher levels of education. Since extremist recruitment is more prevalent in rural areas and amongst the less educated, traditional CSV avenues may miss their target audiences. To be effective, a CSV campaign will need to take creative approaches to reach all Afghans.

Point

- Initiate economic and infrastructure development.

Economic and infrastructure development must be pursued as critical priorities. Afghans, children included, turn to the Taliban because it can offer economic incentives that are superior to those offered by the state. Western assistance can establish alternative employment opportunities to the opium trade. Western nations can support international corporate efforts by economically incentivizing investment in Afghanistan. International corporations can assist in establishing Afghan businesses, teaching valuable management skills, and helping raise the wages high enough to discourage the allure of the Taliban and opium work. Economic improvements and education are critical to state success.

Counterpoint

Economic deprivation and extremism are undeniably linked, but the relationship is more complicated than it appears. Afghanistan's GDP per capita has increased 64% since 2002^x, but at the same time Afghanistan went from experiencing 38 terrorist incidents in 2002 to 1,615 in 2016^{xi}. If increasing economic prosperity was helpful to limiting extremist recruitment, the number of terrorist incidents should not have increased so dramatically. This disparity indicates that economic growth exists in the aggregate, but certain populations are being left behind. In order to successfully leverage limited amounts economic aid into tangible security results, economic programs need to identify and target groups that are susceptible to recruitment out of economic necessity.

Point

- Eliminate corruption and underlying symptoms.

Corruption contributes to weakening the rule of law and it prevents societies from developing freely. Corruption inhibits economic, educational, and cultural development and encourages some citizens to turn to the Taliban due to disenchantment

Counterpoint

Historically, U.S. aid policies have exacerbated the corruption problem in Afghanistan, and any future anti-corruption policies need to account for those failings. Since 2001, Afghanistan's illicit economy has grown exponentially: poppy cultivation alone is estimated to have increased sevenfold from 2002 to 2014^{xii}. This can be attributed to

with the government. Central to preventing corruption is strengthening the rule of law, accountability and the possibility of punishment regardless of one's level in governance. Benefits provided to the country must go to all of the people instead of those sitting atop the ruling structure.

a lack of oversight, and prevalence of parallel institutions. A lack of central control made embezzlement and rent-seeking behavior easy and profitable. Further attempts by the U.S. to rebuild Afghanistan, including anti-corruption measures, must include steps to ensure they do not continue contributing to the problem.

Point

- Pursue disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration programs.

Reintegration poses risks, but rehabilitation of child soldiers must be pursued. In the past, UNICEF, in partnership with NGOs and the Afghan government, successfully provided education and training opportunities for vulnerable children. Such programs in Afghanistan must be reintroduced and allowed to proceed, unfettered.

Deprogramming militant ideology is not easy, but the alternative is to abandon indoctrinated children to a life on the battlefield or future imprisonment. Active participation by the community, including elders, tribal leaders, and women can help reintegrate children into communities they had lost.

Counterpoint

Deradicalization and reintegration programs are newcomers to the CVE scene. Programs have been attempted in Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Indonesia, and Singapore with mixed success^{lxiii}. In a situation like Afghanistan's, where resources are limited, pouring funds into relatively untested deradicalization programs may prove ineffective in the long run. While allotting some resources to pilot programs is undoubtedly in the interest of Afghanistan, unfettered deradicalization programs means expending much-needed resources on initiatives that have no guarantee of success.

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