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Afghan Youth and Extremists

Why Are Extremists' Narratives So Appealing?

Summary

- Afghanistan's population is among the world's youngest and fastest growing: half its population is under eighteen and more than three-quarters under forty.
- The need is dire for strategies and policies to respond to the largest and fastest-growing segment of the population and to enable these citizens to meaningfully engage in their country's affairs.
- Many young men are frustrated with real and perceived injustice, regular and observable impunity and corruption, and lack of basic infrastructure and community support facilities.
- All those who want to learn more about radical and violent extremist ideologies do not necessarily become violent extremists.
- Violent extremist groups such as the Taliban use traditional and modern media tools and platforms to lure youth into jihad.
- Being proactively opposed to extremism not only undermines the appeal of such messages but also offers alternative narratives.
- To address grievances appropriately, the international community must continue to provide assistance to the Afghan state on fundamental issues, such as corruption and rule of law.

“Unfortunately, life has lost its meaning for many Afghans. They have been taught to believe that this life is temporary and one must invest in life after death and jihad is the fastest way to lead one to eternal life in paradise.”

Introduction

In Afghanistan, youth participation in violence has grown dramatically over the last several decades as political and religious groups have taken advantage of vulnerable youth to advance political and religious ideologies. This has been a cause of increasing concern, but no national strategy or discrete public policy has been crafted in response. Numerous studies focus on youth radicalization, and particularly Muslim youth, but few on Afghan youth.

The issue is increasingly important both because radicalism remains a significant source of violence in Afghanistan and because its youth population is among the world's youngest and fastest growing. Half are under eighteen.¹ According to the Afghan Central Statistics Organization, in 2014 almost 47 percent of the country's 27.1 million people were under fifteen and 37 percent between fifteen and thirty-nine.² Combined, 84 percent were under forty. In comparison, 61 percent of the U.S. population is under forty-four.³

The steady and seemingly endless stream of potential radicals recruited during childhood and adolescence has only recently been the subject of close study. The few existing studies suggest that religious ideologies, socioeconomic and political grievances, poor governance, and personal hardships drive some people, mostly youth, to radicalize and join violent extremist groups.

Four decades of political instability, violent conflict, and socioeconomic crisis has had a devastating impact on the well-being of Afghan men, women, and children. Short-, medium-, and long-term strategies are needed to better respond to the needs of the population and to enable these citizens to meaningfully engage in their country's civic and economic affairs. Understanding the process of radicalization and the drivers of violent extremism is vital to designing effective counter strategies.

Young Afghan men and boys have a great deal of unsupervised time. Those who do attend schools spend only two to four hours in school or madrasa. Madrasas have been under the spotlight for training terrorists, but policy-level debate about the quality of education in public schools has been limited. As in madrasas, most public school teachers have full autonomy on what and how they teach, especially religious subjects. In most cases, school and madrasa teachers rely on the most conservative interpretation of religious books that are easily accessible and available in markets. The Afghan government has little control over the contents of these private publications. A person does not need to be a student of a madrasa run by extremists or member of a radical group to be exposed to radical and violent ideologies.

The most vulnerable are those susceptible to family or peer influence who embrace the invite and are curious to learn more about the next steps. Not all those who have grievances or are curious about such ideologies become violent extremists, but those who are unable to find nonviolent ways to express their frustrations are most likely to take up violent extremism.

Radicalization does not happen overnight or through one or two meetings with extremist recruiters. It happens over time. Throughout the process, parents can play an important role in identifying the signs before the situation gets out of control. Although some parents do encourage their sons to engage in violent acts and others manage to convince their sons to reject violent extremist ideologies, not all have a strong influence. Still other parents do not know what to do or who to go to for guidance once they realize that their sons have been radicalized.

How Are Narratives Targeted at Young Men and Boys?

In Afghanistan, the typical explanation for violent extremism is that it arises in response to large-scale poverty and endemic high unemployment.⁴ A 2015 study by Mercy Corps, however, suggests that “the principal drivers of political violence are rooted not in poverty, but in experiences of injustices.”⁵

Young people tend to be adventurous and to search for purpose, meaning, and status in their lives. They have energy, passion, and the physical and mental capability to improve their lives and their surroundings. When the government and society in general fail to channel this energy into positive actions, young people look for other sources of purpose.

Political and social change over the many years of instability has changed every aspect of Afghan lives, yet family and societal expectations of young men and women remain the same. Young men are expected to provide for their immediate and extended families and abide by strict social norms. In rural, predominantly Pashtun areas, young men must abide by their community's code of conduct, which often varies depending on family status, tribal standing, and geographic background. One of the principles of the code is to protect one's land and family honor with all means and at any cost. Frustration over real and perceived injustice, impunity and corruption, and

a lack of basic infrastructure and community support facilities is widespread, especially among young men. These factors make it impossible for them to uphold their responsibilities, yet they are still blamed for undermining the family status.

In such situations, extremists' narratives can resonate. They are in fact carefully crafted to harmonize with today's Afghanistan. The messages offer youth a constructive role in society. A particularly powerful image is the glorification of past heroes and the sacrifices they made for their country. The narratives declare that victory is near and injustices will soon be reversed if only one joins the noble cause.

Violent extremist groups such as the Taliban use both traditional and modern media platforms to lure youth into violence. Messages are widely disseminated using CDs, cassettes, SD cards, and cell phone ringtones. Taliban narratives are short, powerful, emotional, patriotic, and ideologically appealing. Most of their audio messages are sung as chants and folk poetry by teenage boys. The songs—known as Tarana-e-Taliban—refer to historic religious battles, heroes and events, current grievances, and the need to take action against the government and the “invaders.” The narratives encourage youth to sacrifice their lives for their country. They justify suicide bombing, given that self-killing is forbidden in Islam, because suicide bombers die in the cause of Islam and country.

Messages also instruct mothers to encourage their sons to join the armed struggle against the infidels and to be proud of their sons who sacrifice their lives for their religion and country. Other messages express pity for mothers of Afghan National Army soldiers. They ask why these mothers are allowing their sons to die for the material world and claim that on the Day of Judgment these sons will ask their mothers, “Why didn't you guide me to the path of righteousness? Did you want to destroy my chance of going to paradise?”

Still other messages, to those who have accepted the invitation to jihad, paint a gruesome picture of the injustices and brutality committed against the innocent, which the armed struggle will correct. Youth are invited to “man up” and take action.

What About Parents And Family Influence?

The Taliban appeal to family because they know that family members can play a decisive role in dissuading youth from being radicalized. In an eastern Afghan village, when a farmer and his wife learned that their son had been approached by a recruiter, they decided that the only viable solution was to move to a city, Kunar, and thus prevent their son from interacting with radical relatives and villagers. That young man was saved but his cousin of the same age joined the Taliban and became a suicide bomber.

Other parents, mostly fathers and older male family members, encourage their sons to join extremist groups. When asked how parents can do this to their own children, a youth activist in Nangarhar responded, “Unfortunately, life has lost its meaning for many Afghans. They have been taught to believe that this life is temporary and one must invest in life after death and jihad is the fastest way to lead one to eternal life in paradise.”

One interesting note in this sad psychological assault on young men and boys is the relatively limited success extremists have had in luring young women and girls—unlike, for example, the success that IS has had in the Middle East. Male youth have free and unsupervised time; women and girls do not. It is culturally acceptable for young men to mingle with strangers, to explore ways to earn an income, and to be adventurous. They can be away from their immediate family for an extended period without raising any suspicions. In traditional rural families, a widowed mother has very little say in her son's decisions. Uncles and older cousins often have more influence.

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

This Peace Brief is derived from analysis of Taliban propaganda and from meetings with Afghan youth groups, civil society organizations, and government officials. It is part of efforts by the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) to implement CVE-related projects in Afghanistan. Belquis Ahmadi has more than twenty years of experience in Afghanistan on issues related to gender, human rights, civil society, rule of law, governance, and democracy. She earned her LLM in international human rights law from Georgetown University and her LLB from Kabul University.

Young women, on the other hand, have strict schedules in both urban and rural settings and are supervised by their mothers or other female and male relatives. This limited mobility and outreach restricts their opportunities to become radicalized.

Countering with Alternative Narratives

To counter Taliban and other extremist narratives, it is critical to take a proactive approach to understand, and thus be better able to undermine, the appeal of their messages. Locally developed and tailored initiatives can both prevent and counter recruitment and radicalization. Schools and madrassas can become the breeding grounds for peace and conflict resolution activists rather than for radicals. Community-level nongovernmental organizations and civil society organizations are well positioned to take the lead. The most effective messengers would be from victims, mothers, former extremists, charismatic local leaders, and influential religious leaders who denounce violence and suicide bombings.

Government and civil society should also have programs for the general public as well as for those who may be sympathetic toward extremist ideology or have already been radicalized. Local and national programs should focus on shared historic and cultural values, unity, nonviolent civil resistance, peacebuilding, and the advantages of peace. Community elders should also be engaged. Creating watch groups to identify early signs of radicalization is one example. Parents should be educated to identify early signs of radicalism and provided with relevant guidance to counter such ideologies. Last, safe recreational spaces should be provided for youth.

Notes

1. Monica Das Gupta and Richard Kollodge, *The Power of 1.8 Billion: Adolescents, Youth and the Transformation of the Future*, UNFPA State of World Population 2014 report, www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/EN-SWOP14-Report_FINAL-web.pdf.
2. Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, "Afghanistan Living Conditions Survey 2014" (Kabul: Central Statistics Organization, 2014), <http://cso.gov.af/en/page/1500/1494/nrav-report>.
3. Lindsay M. Howden and Julie A. Meyer, "Age and Sex Composition: 2010," U.S. Census Brief, May 2011, www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/briefs/c2010br-03.pdf.
4. Sarah Ladbury et al., "Testing Hypotheses on Radicalisation in Afghanistan" (Kabul: Cooperation for Peace and Unity, 2009).
5. Keith Proctor, ed., "Youth & Consequences: Unemployment, Injustice and Violence" (Portland, OR: Mercy Corps, 2015), www.mercycorps.org/research-resources/youth-consequences-unemployment-injustice-and-violence.



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