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SPECIAL REPORT

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Understanding and Countering Violent Extremism in Afghanistan

Summary

- Field studies and interviews were conducted in three provinces in Afghanistan, Nangarhar, Balkh, and Herat, to elicit views on extremist groups, both violent and nonviolent, and factors thought to induce youth to join such groups.

- The two strands of youth recruitment are a rural, less educated demographic, which has traditionally formed the primary recruiting pool for violent extremist groups such as the Taliban, and an urban, educated constituency, more amenable to nonviolent group recruitment.

- Nangarhar presents the most worrisome case, for violent extremist groups with cross-border support networks in Pakistan are proliferating faster here than in Herat or Balkh, in part a legacy of support provided during the anti-Soviet jihad to madrassas later found to be hotbeds of radicalization.

- The self-declared Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) is probing for entry points in both Herat and Nangarhar, particularly among disaffected Taliban commanders, with greater success so far in Nangarhar.

- The propaganda of violent extremist groups in Afghanistan often refers to grievances in the wider Muslim world, but the overarching narrative is jihad against the "occupying" U.S.-led coalition and the "un-Islamic" Afghan government. The violence is more about fighting *against* uninvited guests than *for* a particular ideology.

- Violent extremist groups appear broadly unpopular and mistrusted throughout the study area, being perceived as un-Islamic and controlled by foreign powers. Nonetheless, the activities and ideologies of such groups have not been effectively countered by the government of Afghanistan, civil society, or the international community.

- The international community has an important if limited role to play in advising Afghan civil society organizations on forming partnerships with moderate voices in the country to counter the messaging of violent groups, and in encouraging the state to engage in an outreach that clarifies to antigovernment but not yet violent extremists the Islamic basis of civil law.

Introduction

The current religious extremism in Afghanistan extends more than a century of Islamist activities and is part of the evolution of major strands of Islamist ideas and parties in that country.[1] The Anglo-Afghan Wars in the mid-nineteenth century were nationalistic wars of liberation that were sanctioned as "holy wars" by Afghan religious leaders to legitimize them and mobilize fighters. Through influential thinkers such as Sayd Jamaludin al-Afghani, Islamist ideologies gained traction beyond a simple rallying function in the late nineteenth century.[2] However, no Islamist party, movement, or ideology acquired a widespread following until the emergence of the Muslim Brotherhood–influenced parties in the 1960s.

After the outbreak of war against the communist Democratic Republic of Afghanistan and its Soviet backers in the late 1970s, and with support provided to the mujahideen by Pakistan, the Arab states, and the United States, a more aggressive extremism appeared in Afghanistan. Throughout the 1980s Saudi Arabia and other countries funneled considerable funds through Pakistan for the creation of religious seminaries for Afghans in Pakistan's tribal areas, and many of these seminaries began promoting extremist agendas. The Taliban movement that emerged in the mid-1990s was to some extent a product of these developments.

Even after the U.S.-led intervention in Afghanistan toppled the Taliban regime in 2001, madrassas in Pakistan's tribal areas still produce some of the most ideologically motivated Taliban cadres. But this is not a simple case of cross-border radicalization, nor is Pakistan (nor are Gulf Arab donors) solely responsible for the violent extremism in contemporary Afghanistan. Afghanistan currently hosts a variety of religious groups, ranging from violent extremist groups such as the Taliban and the militant wing of the political party Hezb-e Islami Gulbuddin, Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan, to groups that may espouse similar ideologies and advocate violence against the state but do not have armed cadres and have not been directly linked to violent attacks against the state or its supporters. The latter groups, those not linked to violent attacks against the state, include Jamiat-e Eslah (Society for Reform) and Hizb ut-Tahrir (Party of Islamic Freedom).[3] Wahhabist and Salafist preachers and ideologues are also active;[4] most remain nonaligned and do not engage in violence, but a few have become active in Afghanistan's insurgency and play a key role in the radicalization and recruitment process.

Programming dedicated to countering violent extremism (CVE) should take into account both violent extremist and nonviolent Islamist groups, for a better understanding of the nonviolent groups can form the basis for engagement and dialogue, in turn yielding a counterweight to the growing influence of violent extremists. In particular, knowledge of the circumstances that lead individuals to join extremist groups should prove helpful in developing CVE strategies.

Survey Results: Community Perceptions of Extremism

Field surveys and in-depth interviews of 441 individuals were conducted in Nangarhar, Balkh, and Herat provinces, Afghanistan, between July and September 2014 to ascertain the scope of violent extremist activities, drivers of radicalization, and CVE strategies.[5]

Respondents characterized extremists (*efratgara* or *efrati*, in both Dari and Pashtu) along three broad dimensions. First, violence: Those considered to be extremists were perceived as lacking in compassion and prepared to kill innocent people. Second, fanaticism: Extremists were described as holding "dark," "extreme," and "backward" views and were seen as actively disregarding and trampling on others' rights and as imposing their own religiosocial preferences. As one religious leader from Nangarhar explained, "Extremism is going beyond the Sharia and the State law and the [local] traditions."[6] Third, extremists were perceived as rejecting the post-2001 political order, without a narrower discrimination as to whether they were thought to reject democracy per se or only the current government.

A majority of those surveyed believed extremism was a growing problem in their area, and only a minority thought that extremist groups and actors were struggling for a just cause (in Nangarhar and Herat, however, this 22 and 17 percent minority, respectively, was significant). But survey results tell only part of the story. "When you look at those 22 percent of people in Nangarhar who say they support fundamentalist struggles," one Afghan political analyst said, "you have at most only 10 percent who are willing to really do anything at all in support of that cause. But the 10 percent have what the 60 percent [who say they are against extremism] don't, and that is the will to act aggressively for what they believe in."[7]

Moderate civil society activists and representatives of local nongovernmental organizations whom we interviewed in the study provinces were quick to admit they were being outmaneuvered by both violent extremist groups and nonviolent Islamist groups and charismatic mullahs with better organizational skills and better grassroots contacts and networks, particularly among youth. Attempts by "progressive" civil society to publicly question, much less campaign against, violent extremism were considered risky, especially in volatile Nangarhar, but also in relatively stable Herat and even in Balkh, one of the most secure provinces in Afghanistan. The inability to effectively mobilize constituencies is partly the result of the absence of a clear, indigenous anti-extremist narrative.

The major hurdle moderate groups face in advancing even a mild pro-democracy narrative is that the closest example of democracy, the Afghan government, has been defined by corruption and bad governance. Another difficulty is invoking anti-extremist rhetoric aimed at groups like the Taliban without being perceived as either anti-Islamic or anti-Afghan. More worryingly, a clear majority of respondents in each province believed that the government of Afghanistan has been unsuccessful in its CVE efforts, and many individual interviewees questioned whether the government had any strategy for dealing not only with groups like the Taliban but also with nonviolent but outspokenly antigovernment groups such as Hizb ut-Tahrir or groups like Jamiat-e Islah, which have a large youth base, espouse a conservative political agenda, and have been vocal critics of the government, but thus far have been nonviolent in their actions.[8]

However, residents said they were unsure whether groups such as Hizb ut-Tahrir might turn violent, for these groups face challenges on multiple fronts. "Right now the Taliban are as much a challenge for these [nonviolent] groups as [is] the government,"[9] a community leader in Nangarhar said. But given the historical record of violent political opposition in Afghanistan, some of the more moderate interviewees said that if the state were to get any weaker, the as yet nonviolent groups could be among a number of entities either to make a violent push to expel the government or to fight for control of the state in the vacuum that could ensue; others argued that a fear of anarchy in the event of state collapse and the rise of extremist groups such as ISIS would check these groups in violently opposing the government. In either case, the main concern of most of the interviewees was the confusion and lack of transparency concerning the nonviolent groups' goals, motives, and support networks outside Afghanistan.

Despite the continued weakness and occasionally predatory behavior of the state, interviewees' perceptions of violent extremist groups were overwhelmingly negative. To the question, "Do you think extremists struggle for a just cause?," 75 percent of respondents in Herat, 73 percent in Balkh, and 65 percent in Nangarhar said no. The same complaints that were consistently leveled at the government of Afghanistan—that it is "un-Islamic" and a puppet—were also laid against violent extremist groups and actors. In-depth interviewees described some obvious actions tied to violence and terrorism (civilian casualties, suicide bombings, beheadings) as un-Islamic, and expressed their understanding that religion was being employed by violent extremists to advance self-interest. As one interviewee said, "Given that the Taliban do not have a government or a constitution, their punishments are therefore based on their personal tastes rather than religious law."[10]

Even nonviolent firebrand mullahs and parties such as Hizb ut-Tahrir and Jamiat-e Islah were mistrusted by a significant number of those interviewed because their funding and agendas were seen as externally sourced. This complaint had less to do with the Islamic credentials of these groups or actors than with a perceived deficit in their "Afghanness." Indeed, both the government and the forces opposing it (whether violently or not) were seen as legitimate if they could prove not only their religious credentials but, perhaps more important, their inherent Afghanness.

Radicalization and Recruitment

In Afghanistan, radicalization—the process by which an individual adopts increasingly extreme ideals in opposition to the status quo[11]—and recruitment are not synonymous or necessarily linear. Radicalization often occurs after recruitment, and in some cases may not occur at all.[12] Nor is there evidence to suggest that members of nonviolent Islamist groups "graduate" to violent groups once they become sufficiently radicalized.

Taliban recruitment often follows a "traditionalist" method that works with and through family, tribal, and ethnic and local religious networks. Targets for recruitment are uneducated men in their late teens and early twenties, predominantly though not solely from rural areas. The Taliban recruit from madrassas run by clerics, and both madrassas and clerics may have a history of association with the movement dating back to the Taliban regime; this subset of fighters tends to be radicalized prior to joining the Taliban but does not appear to constitute the majority of those fighting with the Taliban. However, a decade of The Liaison Office's research on Taliban recruitment, as well as interviews with former and current Taliban conducted as part of the project, shows that in many cases, Taliban insurgent recruiting skips the radicalization/indoctrination phase and instead directly mobilizes fighters, appealing to both the family and community and the individual with incentives (protection, cash, motorcycles, cell phone credit) and coercion or direct threats.

An interview with a young former Taliban fighter from Balkh province highlights how individuals can take up arms against the government without having been radicalized at all.

> I had to join the Taliban. My brother was killed and the culprits escaped. Six months later, one of my paternal cousins was killed and I was accused of killing him. The police arrested me and some of my brothers. I was kept in prison for six months without trial. Finally they convicted me of murder and sentenced me to death, but I got out of prison through bribes and mediation by tribal elders. Upon release I was under constant government surveillance. The son of an MP [member of Parliament] sided with my cousins, and the police surrounded my home three times in the span of one month. I found a gun and operated independently alongside two other friends for the first three months. I began collecting money from wealthy people in the village; both the government and the Taliban opposed me. Finally the Taliban commanders [near my area of operation] summoned me to their commission meeting. They told me to start jihad and gave me an IED [improvised explosive device] to plant. I carried out the order and then became known as a Taliban commander.

During this period I was called up to Pakistan. I went to Chaman, where the Taliban gave me some money and sent me to training for forty days. Along with others I received military trainings and training in making IEDs—I already had some military training because before imprisonment I was an ANA [Afghan National Army] soldier in the Zafar Corps in Mazar. The Taliban also sent me for a week to see training camps and madrassas in Miran Shah.

One and a half years later I was sent to Jalrez district in Wardak. Three of my fighters accompanied me. There I commanded six fighters and operated along the Kabul-Bamiyan road. In my spare time I traded livestock and laid bricks. I spent three months in Jalrez. As pressure from the government and international forces increased it became difficult to operate, and I had to flee to Pakistan. I stayed two months in Pakistan and toured various cities. In prison in Mazar I had made acquaintance with Pakistani nationals who had come to Mazar for pilgrimage but were imprisoned by the government due to unknown reasons. In Pakistan they introduced me to Pakistani police officers in Swat, who hosted me and showed me different cities.

I returned to Kabul, but the Taliban called me up to Kandahar City. I spent twenty days there and carried out orders to assassinate and extort people. I returned [to my districts of operation in Balkh province] and continued fighting as the commander of ten fighters. I had a PK [machine gun], pistol, and Kalashnikovs, and four motorcycles. Three years ago [in 2011], I surrendered to the government, along with ten fighters. The government gave me a plot of land in Mazar, $1,000, and a monthly salary of $200. Now the Taliban keep [intimidating me] and the government does not pay my salary. If it does not pay I will have to rejoin the Taliban. Back then I had a lot of power.

So far I have killed one of my cousins; I want to also kill the one who has killed my brother. To protect themselves my cousins have now established contact with the Taliban.

The somewhat opportunistic nature of the Taliban insurgent recruitment as expressed in this history stands in contrast to that of nonviolent groups such as Jamiat-e Islah and Hizb ut-Tahrir, which rely on a more institutionalized party structure than the Taliban. This structure appeals to a cross section of ethnicities and sects and to an educated, urban demographic. Family ties matter. For instance, if a recruit is from a family with older male relatives who fought in the anti-Soviet jihad, this legacy is leveraged to encourage the individual to join the group. On the whole, however, family, tribe, and ethnicity are invoked for recruitment purposes much less by nonviolent Islamist groups, which instead rely on a mixture of shared grievances that are relevant to the majority of Afghans (state corruption, the presence of foreign forces) and of concern to the global ummah, or Muslim community (such as the Israeli occupation of Palestine).

What the violent extremists and the nonviolent groups have in common is that both target youth for recruitment—less educated and often rural in the case of the former, better educated and predominantly urban in the case of the latter.

Push and Pull Factors

Guilain Denoeux and Lynn Carter in the USAID publication *Guide to the Drivers of Violent Extremism* define push factors as "those characteristics of the societal environment that are alleged to push vulnerable individuals on the path of violence." Push factors, they find, are usually overstated, while pull factors, "the emotional or spiritual benefits which affiliation with a group may confer," are often underestimated.[13] This analysis notwithstanding, field data acquired during the study indicated a predominance of push factors over pull factors when respondents discussed violent extremist group recruitment and radicalization, with one notable exception: The emotional benefit from "being honorable," in the sense of fulfilling one's religiocultural duty to fight against uninvited guests or occupying forces, was a significant pull factor.

Several overarching factors drive recruitment to violent extremist groups in Afghanistan. Although this research identified several consistent push factors, such as the presence of foreign forces and government corruption, and some recurring pull factors, such as gaining power and status within one's immediate community or even extended family, the actual

multivariable processes of radicalization and recruitment in Afghanistan are best illuminated by the experience of one Taliban recruit in Herat. The following account was assembled from interviews with the recruit and his family.

Usman's Recruitment. In 2007, at the age of sixteen or seventeen, Usman was arrested by the police with several kilograms of opium. (His name has been changed in this account.) He was tried and sentenced to eight years in prison. In the Herat City prison he shared a cell with other inmates, who included criminals and captured Taliban commanders and fighters. He got along well with the Taliban commanders and, according to his family members, fell under their influence. Usman memorized the Quran in prison, held discussions with Taliban members, and tacitly accepted the Taliban offer of a position of power in the insurgency if he was willing to join. In mid-2014 he was among the scores of prisoners pardoned by presidential decree.

Upon his release, Usman was engaged to be married, and spent several months looking for a job to pay the high cost of a wedding and dowry. In the meantime, he kept in touch with Taliban commanders in Herat and Quetta (Pakistan) with whom he had been connected by fellow inmates. Usman said that he could not return to school for his twelfth grade studies because of economic problems.

While recounting his story, Usman appeared distraught and seemed to be weighing his decisions. After that meeting, and against the opposition of his family, Usman traveled to Quetta to meet with Taliban leaders, who had promised to appoint him shadow governor in a district of Herat. In May 2015 the survey team reestablished contact with Usman, who had returned from Quetta apparently without a fixed position in the insurgency but who was maintaining close contact and regularly meeting with Taliban commanders in Herat.

Honor and Legacy. According to his family members, an important influence in Usman's increasing tendency toward insurgency was his father's legacy. Usman's father had been a mujahid—literally, holy warrior—commander who fought against the Soviet forces in the 1980s. Taliban inmates reportedly invoked that legacy and urged Usman to fill his late father's position. Thus, of the wide range of factors that can be discerned at work in Usman's recruitment narrative—the original crime that put Usman in jail, the failure of the state to segregate criminals from insurgents in provincial prisons, an active strategy of socialization and recruitment on the part of the Taliban, an appeal to religion through the memorization of the Quran (perhaps as much to purify Usman after his conviction as it was a means of blunt indoctrination per se), the need to earn money to fulfill the social obligation of marriage, and finally shame at not living up to the legacy of his father—the idea of legacy is especially potent. Legacy as a construct combines issues of status, identity, history, and religion, and then situates this amalgam squarely in a personal, familial, and cultural context. This then sets the stage for a direct appeal to one of the most fundamental, pervasive, and persuasive pull factors in the life of an Afghan male—honor.

The sixteen- to thirty-year-old demographic is too young to have participated directly in the anti-Soviet jihad but has come of age in a society shaped by this period and is constantly reminded of the just sacrifices made by the preceding generation, their fathers. This mix of naivety and guilt makes for a fertile recruiting ground. As one interviewee noted, "The reason why these groups focus on the youth is that their fathers know the jihad of the 1980s was corrupt and bloody and had nothing to do with religion at all. But this idea [of a righteous jihad] can still be sold to the younger generation, who have a second-hand understanding."

Push and Pull Factors Identified by Interviewees

When asked to identify drivers of radicalization and extremism in their communities, survey respondents consistently emphasized the importance of push factors, particularly structural issues linked to marginalization, and poor governance.

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Push Factors. Survey respondents most often cited socioeconomic factors as driving violent extremism. Respondents named unemployment, general poverty, and lack of education or illiteracy as primary push factors. However, in-depth interviews qualified these survey findings. For instance, "unemployment" might be understood as a proxy dimension for marginalization more generally. Marginalization applies both to the rural poor—that is, those living in the districts with limited services and access to regular waged employment opportunities—and the comparatively mobile nouveau elites from the urban areas that have livelihood security and education but are peripheral to the main power networks.

The impact of poverty on radicalization was often described in structural terms. For instance, families with limited resources are forced to enroll their children in madrassas, the cheapest form of education available, even though parents know there is a risk their children will become radicalized. Individual interviews revealed that illiteracy usually meant ignorance, rather than strictly the inability to read and write. For example, respondents tended to mention illiteracy in the context of potential extremist recruits not having enough education to distinguish right from wrong or the ability to determine when extremists are putting forward inaccurate religious messages. Unemployment and illiteracy might also be taken as signifiers of marginalization more generally, perhaps as realized in a young man without a job or education, and hence having limited prospects and little voice in his community or even his family. It is important to note, however, that while the majority of Afghans, an estimated 62 percent, are illiterate,[14] few of these become radicalized, and the vast majority of poor and under- or unemployed do not join the insurgency.

The second major push factor identified by respondents was corruption within or involving the Afghan state. Variations included "bad governance," the impunity of power-holders, injustices perpetrated by the state, and favoritism in government appointments, or even the ethnicization of government (such as the periodic marginalization of Tajiks or Pashtuns, in Herat and Balkh). The presence of foreign forces also appeared to be related to bad governance as a push factor. Interviewees noted anger at International Security and Assistance Force (ISAF)–inflicted civilian casualties. Almost certainly, anger at these casualties then spills over onto the government for allowing foreign forces' presence.

Yet respondents were hard-pressed to cite a specific government policy or action that they believed was driving violent extremist groups or filling the ranks of nonviolent groups that oppose the government. The only prominent exception noted came during the 2013 Loya Jirga to debate over signing the bilateral security agreement (BSA) with the United States, when some Islamist circles in Herat and Nangarhar in particular periodically registered objections and initiated what turned out to be short-lived protests. To a large extent the muted protest response reflected the considerable popular support for the BSA, to the point that those outspokenly opposing the BSA came to be dubbed agents of Pakistan and Iran, and the anti-BSA movement never gained any real momentum. The absence of widespread public protest against the BSA by nonviolent fundamentalist organizations underscores a point that was often raised in interviews, namely, that a fear of the anarchy that would be triggered by a power vacuum keeps these groups from tipping into violence. For violent extremists like the Taliban, however, just the opposite could be true: The movement needs the BSA to justify fighting.

The appeal to religion constitutes the third major category of push factor. Some interviewees pointed to the role of unaffiliated radical mullahs who, even if not formally connected to insurgent or nonviolent extremist groups, encourage their followers to join such groups or commit violence. These mullahs are said to target youth, to whom they selectively quote Quranic passages that they interpret as justifying violence.[15] They also multiply the effect of other push factors, in particular by denouncing the corruption of the Afghan state and the presence of foreign forces. In other words, when religion is used by these individuals it is highly contex-

tualized, and an appeal to religious teachings appears to be most effective at radicalizing supporters when it advances the idea of protecting the homeland (*watan*) and expelling occupiers. This context-specific and ultimately nationalistic impetus, more than the lure of any particular ideology, is a key component of radicalization and recruitment in contemporary Afghanistan, as it has been at least since the Anglo-Afghan wars of the mid-nineteenth century.

Pull Factors. Pull factors identified by interviewees largely related to the increase in social capital that could accrue from being a fighter, as well as the aforementioned appeal to one's honor. These emotional pull factors are, however, grounded in material things. Access to or the ability to distribute money, motorcycles, arms, and cell phone credit, among other items, underpinned any psychosocial benefits.

Several respondents mentioned a desire to satisfy religious longing as a pull factor for nonviolent Islamist groups such as Jamiat-e Islah or Hizb ut-Tahrir, but not for violent groups such as the Taliban or ISIS. Yet no respondents mentioned the desire to establish an Islamic government (of any sort) as a pull factor for either violent or nonviolent groups, a lacuna suggesting either that such justifications emerge after recruitment and radicalization occur or that there is a disconnect between what parties espouse as their ultimate goals—an Islamic emirate, for the Taliban, and a caliphate, for Hizb ut-Tahrir—and the reasons individuals actually join those parties.

Sites of Radicalization and Recruitment: Madrassas, Mosques, Universities, and Prisons

Throughout the three provinces studied, a number of physical points of radicalization and recruitment were mentioned repeatedly, especially religious and educational institutions. In Herat and Balkh, individual religious leaders with no known direct links to extremist groups but with personal networks in Kabul, neighboring countries, and Gulf countries were noted to be operating madrassas and preaching from mosques that were cited repeatedly as points of radicalization or gateways to funnel individuals into violent groups. Nangarhar University in particular was identified as a point of radicalization for violent extremist groups such as the Taliban and, more recently, ISIS.

Madrassas and Mosques

In Herat, a single charismatic mullah, just over thirty years old, was repeatedly mentioned as the principal source of radicalization in the province. His mosque attracts the largest Friday sermon crowds in Herat City, in part because he is a powerful orator. Interviewees said that the madrassa network operated by this individual had a powerful reach among the youth of Herat, and many civil society activists said this individual and his network constituted the biggest impediment to their efforts to promote democracy and human rights.[16] For example, the charismatic mullah blocked the popular Afghan singer Shafiq Murid from giving a concert that had been backed by local civil society organizations in Herat City.

Similarly, in Balkh, it is unaffiliated extremist mullahs, rather than the Taliban or other organized groups, who are believed to be the principal sources of radicalization. For instance, the 2011 mob attack on the United Nations Assistance Mission Afghanistan (UNAMA) compound in Mazar-e Sharif that resulted in the death of seven internationals is believed to have been organized and instigated by at least two prominent mullahs from the provincial capital.[17] Interviewees also noted that the outreach of these mullahs extended beyond the mosque and the madrassa, citing computer and English-language courses run by one cleric and naming several poor neighborhoods of Mazar-e Sharif as places where violent thought was being taught along with Excel and PowerPoint. The religious leadership in Balkh has

been criticized by the government for not speaking out strongly enough against violent extremism, particularly the suicide attacks perpetrated by the Taliban, even as insurgent presence and levels of intimidation remain comparatively low.[18]

The relationship between some religious institutions and violent extremist groups appears even more developed in Nangarhar, where its roots go back decades. Here, respondents focused less on the activities of individual religious leaders and more on direct Taliban outreach through religious networks, and on well-established extremist institutions in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. Nangarharis described mosques and madrassas as among the most common venues of recruitment for violent groups. Mosque recruitment should be understood as in part an aspect of Taliban intimidation. According to interviewees living outside provincial centers, mosque recruitment takes place most frequently in high insurgency areas, where the population has already experienced mass intimidation. The Taliban in Nangarhar appear to be appropriating public religious institutions in order to create a sense of their omnipresence.

Mosque recruitment in Nagarhar, as also in Herat and Balkh, begins with mullahs propagating extremist messages. These mullahs propagandize on behalf of the Taliban, and then direct individual recruits to local Taliban authorities for formal induction. Unlike in Herat and Balkh, however, Taliban representatives often speak directly to congregants, with recruits approaching them afterward. In these cases, the local mullah may be a Taliban supporter, or may have simply been intimidated into letting the local mosque be used for recruitment purposes. Interviewees reported that mosque recruitment most often occurs at Friday prayers or during Eid prayers and, especially, at funerals, when attendance at the mosque is particularly high.

Madrassa-based recruitment in Nangarhar, by contrast, takes place in a much less public fashion and often at a considerable physical remove from the main areas of Taliban operations. Respondents described cross-border Pakistani madrassas as prominent venues of extremist recruitment, with Afghan madrassas less so (though extremist madrassas appear to be operating even in Jalalabad). Recruitment through madrassas began during the anti-Soviet jihad,[19] when the population of rural Nangarhar underwent mass displacement to Pakistan. There, primarily Gulf Arab donors supported madrassas propagating an extremist form of Islam and encouraging graduates to join one jihadi faction or another. Poor Nangarharis often turned to these madrassas as the only education option available for their children.

Although the Nangarhar population returned from Pakistan in large numbers after the fall of the Taliban, many families, perhaps a majority, maintain strong cross-border ties. Extremist madrassas, including those in Pakistan, remain an educational option of last resort. These madrassas are reported by interview respondents to still receive funding from donors in the Gulf, as well as from the Pakistani intelligence services, though at a lesser level, and to maintain formal sponsorship with extremist elements and religious leaders. Just as during the anti-Soviet jihad, these madrassas still inculcate extremist messages and encourage graduates to join the Taliban or another extremist group.[20] It is important to note that not all Pakistani madrassas follow this model. Respondents characterized a substantial number of madrassas as "apolitical" and focusing on traditional religious education, not extremist inducement, while other madrassas, targeting wealthier families, are more akin to elite private schools.

Universities

Almost all of the nonviolent and violent extremist groups identified by The Liaison Group have networks inside state and private institutions of higher education. These networks go beyond just student activism to include faculty members and administrators, some of

whom are affiliated with the groups and dispense patronage (good grades) based on student affiliations. According to the author of a recent study on radicalization within Afghanistan's university system, this begs the question: "Are students really being radicalized, or are they joining these groups and allowing themselves to be mobilized for some protests so that they can get passing grades and get out of school and get a job, which is what they are ultimately concerned with."[21]

Postgraduate motives aside, the research conducted in Nangarhar found students and teachers supporting both nonviolent Islamist groups and violent extremist movements in a well-organized manner, with the administration imposing few if any limits on their activities. Particularly worrisome is an off-campus student housing compound on the outskirts of Jalalabad, cited by multiple interviewees as a point through which bomb-making materials and weapons were being smuggled by students. The two most important extremist groups at the university are Hizb-e Islami and the Taliban. Hizb-e Islami is the strongest party among the faculty—these faculty members are apparently pro-government, and some might be members of the registered faction of Hizb-e Islami, but they do not hide their allegiance to the Hizb-e Islami insurgent leader Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, according to students from Nangahar University who were interviewed. Some students are perceived to back these two groups out of fear of their teachers who are supporters, as failing to do so would risk failing grades. Many interviewees noted that Hizb-e Islami supporters consistently graduated with higher marks than their peers. Such a practice was not reported from the universities in Balkh and Herat.

At Balkh University, what extremist thought exists is concentrated in the Sharia department. Recently it has taken the form of a struggle against *behijabi* (women's dress perceived to be improper, based on Islamic values) and for religious Islamic values. Extremist support at Herat University appears scant. Rather, ethnic politics appear to play a greater role in student life. Pashtun students have coalesced around the Afghan Millat (Pashtun nationalist) political party, while Tajik and Hazara students have joined the Hope and Change platform of Dr. Abdullah. At least for Tajik and Pashtun students, this division predates the recent elections and continues to this day.

Prisons

Prisons were mentioned peripherally in interviews as sites of significant radicalization and direct violent extremist group recruitment. Prison authorities do not sufficiently separate inmates who are members of extremist groups from the general prison population. As a result, extremist groups propagate their messages among the inmate population, offering physical protection and religious education in return for loyalty.

Messaging

Taliban messaging focuses heavily on grievances surrounding foreign occupation and government corruption, often capitalizing on local examples (night raids, a district governor's siphoning of development funds) of these grievances, and places less emphasis on issues facing the "Muslim world." This local emphasis tends to win the Taliban a measure of legitimacy as an Afghan movement, especially among tribal leaders who are mistrustful of external doctrines such as Wahhabism and Ikhwanism, which are less accommodating of local power structures, though some strict Afghan nationalists view the Taliban ultimately as Pakistani puppets.

The bulk of Taliban messaging is crafted to appeal to the lowest common denominator with simple (and incomplete or incorrect) religious interpretations and justifications and relatable local imagery. Though educated and urban Taliban cadres still constitute a relative-

Taliban messaging focuses heavily on grievances surrounding foreign occupation and government corruption.

ly small part of the Taliban movement, more recent Taliban messaging has sought to present the movement as welcoming of this demographic. For instance, one video making the rounds on cell phones in 2014 showed interviews with individuals who claimed to be suicide bombers testifying that they were educated and, if not rich, at least not destitute. These self-described suicide bombers claimed their actions were driven by ideology, but neither the recruits nor the Taliban propagandists were able to articulate what this ideology was.

The narrow vision of the Taliban should not be confused with a narrow communications strategy. In the three provinces surveyed, the Taliban were using face-to-face communication, proxy mullahs, night letters, spectacular attacks and assassinations, AM radio, social media, and video clips and ringtones loaded on micro-SD memory cards at cell phone kiosks and disseminated via Bluetooth to get their messages across. Cell phone messaging has grown in scope and appears to be especially powerful, especially in light of the penetration of cell phones in rural areas and their increasing use among literate and illiterate alike. Where the Taliban differ from nonviolent fundamentalists is in their ability to combine technology with violence to create potent messages. As a resident of Nangarhar explained, "[The Taliban] capture somebody, record a video saying that that person had converted to Christianity to denigrate him, and then tell people that this [person's conversion] is the work of the Afghan government, so that the gap between the government and people is widened. This is how they encourage people to rise against the government."[22]

Among the nonviolent groups, Hizb ut-Tahrir has the most clearly articulated message. Interviews with former and current members and a review of Hizb ut-Tahrir literature disseminated locally uncovered the following messages: Democracy is *haram* (forbidden), and the khalifa (leader of the caliphate) should be selected by the Muslim community, not as a candidate in an open election; Pakistan's atomic bomb capacity should be made available across the caliphate and used as a deterrent against aggression by the United States; economic benefits similarly should be shared across the caliphate ("Two barrels of oil from Saudi Arabia then would also benefit the people of Afghanistan"[23]); the last legitimate Islamic polity was the Ottoman Empire; sharia is not enforced in Afghanistan in part because of endemic corruption; the government of Afghanistan, including its elections, is un-Islamic (and there is no Islamic government in the whole world); the Islamic emirate of the Taliban is not legitimate; and suicide attacks are forbidden.

In addition to the messaging of the groups researched for this report, several unaffiliated organizations and publications promote violent extremism at the provincial level. For example, the images in the composite artwork (see figure 1) show excerpts from the monthly magazine *Sangar* (Trench), produced by the Adam Khan Cultural Center in Nangarhar province, an organization not officially associated with any group discussed here. The center is named after a well-known local mujahid killed during the anti-Soviet jihad. Beyond its context-specific name, the publication uses local references, such as Hizb-e Islami insurgent leader Gulbuddin Hekmatyar (upper left of front cover, left panel) in combination with pan-Islamic symbols such as the Muslim Brotherhood seal and photographs of the movement's founding fathers, Hassan al-Banna and Sayed Qutb (middle right of front cover). The imagery and text also contrast the historical photographs of mujahideen in battle during the 1980s (back cover, center panel) with contemporary images of the jailed Muslim Brotherhood leader Mohammed Morsi. The publication uses images of Afghan children with real and fake weapons (right panel, interior page), and makes a direct appeal, apparently aimed at their fathers, to ensure that their sons grow up loving jihad. The text focuses on terms such as "crusader," painting the Afghan situation as one battle in the greater war against Islam perpetrated by the West. Among other topical content, the articles in this issue focused on the 2014 Afghan presidential election dispute as a case against democracy.

Figure 1. The front, back, and inside covers of the monthly magazine *Sangar* (trench), produced by the Adam Khan Cultural Center in Nangarhar province.

Media Usage by Nonviolent Groups

Although the nonviolent groups in the three study provinces have stayed clear of engaging in violence, it is widely perceived that they do contribute to radicalization and, either intentionally or unintentionally, promote the cause of extremist groups by publicizing international issues at a local level and providing fodder for violent extremist recruiting. Indeed, it is through media and messaging more than through any direct operational links that the nonviolent and violent groups are connected, at least rhetorically. As of October 2014, the Jamiat-e Islah national Facebook page had received just over 64,000 likes,[24] far more than any more moderate youth group surveyed in the study, all of which had received well below 10,000 likes.

However, just as the Taliban's media savvy should not be underestimated, the traditional outreach activities and traditional media of groups such as Jamiat-e Islah should not be discounted in developing CVE strategies. Public advertising highlighting the service aspect of the group, in addition to the public service events themselves, provides an important means of recruiting and messaging. In Jalalabad the group holds Quran study groups on a weekly basis, runs a *darul ulum* (an advanced Islamic school) and about ten small madrassas, and since 2013 has operated an online radio station. Despite their socially conservative stance and often anti-Western, antigovernment rhetoric, the influence of groups like Jamiat-e Islah, especially their media reach, is undeniable. Though they may not conform to a strict idea of what the face of CVE might like look, outreach to these socially conservative but thus far nonviolent Islamist groups is preferred over the present (nonexistent) engagement strategy.

Recommendations

The recommendations in this section are based on a series of focus group discussions carried out with stakeholders—including youth-led civil society groups, religious leaders, and journalists—from the three survey provinces. These discussions were held following the data collection for this report and were directly informed by the ways in which violent extremists currently use media and develop messages, as well as by the actual conditions and various push and pull factors that lead to recruitment. Recommendations were also informed by lessons learned from recently completed CVE pilot projects USIP is supporting in Afghanistan.

Role of the International Community

CVE activities are carried out on a timetable of years. Any attempts at a quick fix would pose a significant risk of exacerbating trends toward violent extremism in Afghanistan, whether through unfulfilled promises, a backlash against CVE efforts, or the exposure of individuals to reprisals. Nevertheless, some practical measures can be taken to push back against violent extremists and their messages.

The international community has an important if limited role to play in CVE efforts in Afghanistan. It is limited because the Afghan government is already seen by some as a puppet of foreign interests, and if CVE engagement is also thought to be imposed by outside groups, this would be expected to further entrench the "puppet" critique of the Afghan state. However, the Afghan government is and for the foreseeable future will be dependent on foreign aid. Thus CVE efforts, although often not inherently expensive, are likely to be funded internationally.

Foreign funding of CVE initiatives where foreign interference is resented poses a dilemma. According Afghan partners a primary role in project implementation and a major voice in project design and messaging, with the international organizations remaining in the background as projects are carried out, might ameliorate the problem. Afghan ownership of CVE initiatives would also facilitate the locally appropriate design of such programs and reaching groups not readily visible to outsiders—a task the international community is poorly positioned to do.

In addition to funding CVE initiatives, the international community may have a broader role to play in strengthening state structures. Afghan state legitimacy and performance are often crucial issues in CVE, and to the extent that the international community can influence Afghan government activity, it should use that influence to promote anticorruption and other legitimacy-enhancing efforts. So long as the Afghan government relies on international funding, the benchmarks for that funding should be rigorous but achievable, and the penalty for not meeting them should be real.

Recommendations for CVE Practitioners (Afghan Civil Society, Religious Leaders) and Donors

It is unrealistic to try to develop a single national CVE strategy for Afghanistan. Conditions vary considerably across Afghanistan, and grievances and messages are often context-specific. Success requires identifying intermediaries who can reach out to populations vulnerable to extremist recruitment, or to extremist groups amenable to engagement. As such, detailed CVE programs should be developed on a provincial or regional basis only. A few practical recommendations follow.

- Because youth are the target demographic for extremist recruitment, alternative (nonextremist) meeting spaces and activities that attract youth should be provided, such as sport, cultural, educational, and especially faith-based places and events where youth can congregate outside the home. Marginalized youth are hungry for social connections and group identification but often have little experience in self-organization. One of the many activities offered—though not the main one, as this would raise suspicion—could be a discussion of extremism and its meaning in society.

- Messaging materials that focus on shared values, such as peace and unity within Islam, should be created after consultation with target beneficiaries and leaders in their communities (religious leaders, tribal elders). Some organizations, including USIP, have had preliminary success in providing information on Afghanistan's constitution and laws, especially information underscoring that the Afghan legal system is sharia-based and provides rights to the people. These messages and information will need to be tailored to the target beneficiaries but should not be overtly political.

- Nonviolent Islamist groups should be brought into a constructive debate with respect to their critique of the Afghan state, which they may articulate by not participating in elections, and of state policy. Public debate with moderating elements in society, and particularly with moderate religious scholars whose Islamic credentials are difficult to impugn, may be able to counter the antigovernment rhetoric of the nonviolent extremist groups.

- Islamist groups have a role to play as partners in developing programs to counter the ideas of violent extremist groups. Though such a partnership is ambitious, that nonviolent groups are united in their stance on not using force suggests they can be engaged to make youth (potential recruits) understand that the use of force is un-Islamic. Working with nonviolent extremist groups on messages designed to condemn violence could help reach segments of the population that might resist messaging from persons or groups deemed overly liberal.

- Mullahs and other religious leaders similarly should be engaged as partners in CVE, especially through dialogue and messaging. Mullahs are key to CVE programming: Though some may continue to propagate extremist views, others are expected to become key partners in developing anti-extremism and antiviolence messages and community-level programming; some mullahs will also be the direct beneficiaries of such programming. Many religious leaders disinclined to speak *for* the government may be willing to speak out *against* the un-Islamic practices of violent extremists. In Kandahar, USIP funded a local civil society organization to create context-specific CVE messages disseminated through micro-SD cards at cell phone kiosks. As a component of this project, the civil society organization recorded Kandahari mullahs speaking against suicide bombers and for basic human rights, such as women's education. Analysis at the completion of the nine-month pilot program showed that the peaceful religious messages eroded the market share of extremist messages in all of the distribution points in Kandahar province.

- Support should be given to moderate youth progressive political parties or cultural or media associations that have developed a clear narrative and have the ability to work at the provincial level. Though Kabul-centric youth political groups have gained the most attention in recent years, there are a number of less internationally known but more active parties that could be supported.[25]

Recommendations for the Afghan Government

- The government of Afghanistan must first recognize extremist groups as a threat to the stability of the Afghan state and devise a long-term, holistic strategy to counter such forces. Second, but no less important, to counter extremism the Afghan state must engage in outreach to the general public (not just extremist elements) and reform to improve service delivery and reduce corruption. Without committed state reform, other key CVE components may be rendered unachievable or ineffective over the medium to long term as those who have newly engaged with the Afghan state become disillusioned.

- In addition to basic reforms, the Afghan government can improve its legitimacy as being grounded in Islam, such as by working with civil society organizations on messaging and civil education that emphasize that Afghan law and the Afghan constitution are both grounded in Islamic law. Anecdotally, few Afghans are aware of the state's Islamic foundations. A specific focus of the Afghan government might thus be legal outreach and education in the rule of law, which may reduce suspicion of the state and so act as a CVE mechanism.

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- Awareness-raising programming, both in rule of law outreach and other areas, might therefore begin with engaging the most prominent religious leaders (ideally moderate ones at first, then over time proceeding to those with more fundamentalist or extremist tendencies), first for information provision and then to engage in dialogue about the state and its legal system. If successful, these leaders could facilitate meetings at the subprovincial level to help spread these messages further. These leaders might also help in arranging for more isolated, rural religious leaders to travel outside their home areas, perhaps for seminars and workshops, so that they might meet government officials and the wider civil society.

- Government engagement of youth, the population most vulnerable to extremist recruitment, needs to be systematic and direct. As with engagement of religious leaders, initial efforts might target relatively prominent youth leaders at the provincial level and then, in partnership with youth leaders, address more isolated youth at the subprovincial level. Again, as with mullahs, young adults themselves should be deeply involved in developing and approving outreach messages and should be treated as partners in these efforts.

- The Afghan state should at this time not try to act alone but with the broader civil society as a trusted partner, especially in outreach to religious leaders and youth. If the Afghan government is to work with groups such as religious leaders and youth, it must be able to identify voices within those communities that are credible and trusted. Though some of this information is known, much of it is not. These individuals and networks frequently exist in comparatively isolated rural areas and regularly work with neither the Afghan government nor civil society organizations. As a first step, Afghan civil society organizations are probably the entities best positioned to identify and reach out to such groups, first for dialogue and outreach, and then potentially as partners in anti-extremism efforts.

Notes

1. "Islamist" is a sensitive and often misused term. It broadly refers to a vision in which the political and social order runs in accordance with Islamic law, delinked from violent movements. The terms "Islamism" and "Islamist" in and of themselves do not denote violence. However, as Gulain Denoeux and Lynn Carter point out in *Guide to the Drivers of Violent Extremism* (Washington, DC: USAID, 2009), "VE [violent extremism] organizations active in the Muslim world frequently invoke concepts or symbols from Islamic texts, practices, or history, in order to articulate their political agenda and justify their actions. 'Islamist'—and not 'Islamic'—is used in order to underscore that the VE in question is not inherent to Islam, but entails the manipulation of Islamic referents by political actors. Similar exploitations of religious imagery and traditions can be found in other cultures" (p. ii). This report adopts Denoeux and Carter's definition approach.

2. Sayed Jamaludin al-Afghani was an Islamist ideologue in the nineteenth century. He advocated modernizing Islam and pan-Islamic unity against the European colonial powers.

3. Jamiat-e Islah traces its roots back to the 1960s and Nazhat Islami, the Islamist organization from which Afghanistan's mujahideen factions later emerged. During the 1980s, Jamiat-e Islah emerged as a refuge for former Jamiat-e Islami and Hizb-e Islami Gulbuddin members disaffected with these groups' seeming lack of commitment to forming an Islamic state. It was registered as a social organization in 2003 with the Afghan Ministry of Justice. The organization advocates for nonviolent Islamic change at the personal level, within the family, and within society.

4. Wahhabism is a form of Sunni Islam first promoted by Muhammad ibn abd al-Wahhab in the seventeenth century in present-day Saudi Arabia. Wahhabis espouse an ideology based on a strict constructionist view of Islam, with only those ideas and rules found in the Quran and the sayings of the Prophet considered valid in an Islamic society. They advocate doing away with practices such as dowry and the veneration of saints; they have also stated that God will not listen to the prayers of persons in occupied countries such as Afghanistan. Wahhabis see themselves as fighting against social ills by creating a pure Islamic society and are known to be highly critical of most other modes of Islamic thought. In Afghanistan, the terms Wahhabist and Salafist are used interchangeably.

5. The provinces of Balkh, Herat, and Nangarhar were chosen because they are the three economic and population hubs in the north, west, and east of Afghanistan, have immense political, social, and economic influence on their surrounding provinces, and are the centers of learning of both religious and nonreligious education within larger multiprovince regions. Of the 441 individuals interviewed, 305 were male and 136 female. Three hundred thirty-two individuals were administered closed-ended surveys and 109 participated in open-ended in-depth interviews. For security reasons, interviews were conducted in provincial centers, which resulted in a literacy rate of interviewees above 90 percent for the three provinces combined. Though respondents hailed from all districts

of each province, in Herat 37 percent of interviewees were residents of Herat City, in Nangarhar 4 percent were residents of the provincial capital Jalalabad, and in Balkh 73 percent resided in the capital city, Mazar-e Sharif. The ethnic and tribal breakdown of interviewees corresponded to estimated demographic figures collected in previous The Liaison Office studies of each province. University and madrassa students and teachers constituted the majority of interviewees in each province, followed by journalists, tribal and religious leaders, civil society activists, taxi drivers, shopkeepers, laborers, and members of particular violent extremist or Islamist groups.

6. Interview, religious leader from Goshta district, Nangarhar province, August 2014.

7. Interview, Afghan political analyst, Kabul, Afghanistan, August 2014.

8. A transnational Islamist group founded in Jerusalem in 1953, Hizb ut-Tahrir calls for a caliphate spanning all Muslim-majority countries.

9. Interview, community leader, Jalalabad City, October 2014.

10. Interview, community leader from Khogyani district, Nangarhar province, July 2014.

11. Wilner and Dubouloz, "Homegrown Terrorism and Transformative Learning: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Understanding Radicalization," *Global Change, Peace, and Security* 22, no. 1 (2010): 38.

12. See, for instance, Sarah Ladbury, *Radicalisation in Pakistan and Afghanistan: Taking a Joined Up Perspective*, Independent Report for the Department for International Development (London: DFID and United Kingdom Foreign and Commonwealth Office, September 10, 2009).

13. Denoeux and Carter, *Guide to the Drivers of Violent Extremism*, iii.

14. Some 62.8 percent of Afghans over the age of fifteen are estimated to be illiterate. See www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/fields/2103.html.

15. Unlike state-sponsored schools, mosques in rural Afghanistan are community sponsored, including the salary of the mullah, who is paid to offer prayer services by the community and also for teaching the village children. However, it is largely the prerogative of the individual mullah to decide what is taught to students.

16. His madrassa network is funded through personal wealth collected from property taxes and alleged donations originating in Saudi Arabia, where he currently spends at least half the year. He is now constructing a university in Herat.

17. One of these mullahs was reportedly at the UNAMA compound wielding an axe. He for a time fled to Baghlan under pressure from provincial government authorities but has since returned, and cassettes of his sermons are widely available in the bazaars of Mazar-e Sharif. See also Mir Sediq Zaliq, "Preaching against the Allies," *Afghanistan Today*, April 4, 2011 (www.afghanistan-today.org/article/?id=101), which provides details on the Imams' involvement in the UNAMA attack.

18. Zaliq, "Preaching against the Allies."

19. "Holy war," a term used locally to refer to the war against the Soviets and Communist government.

20. In 2002 Pakistan had 10,000 to 13,000 unregistered madrassas with 1.7 to 1.9 million students. Christopher Candland, "Pakistan's Recent Experience in Reforming Islamic Education," in *Education Reform in Pakistan: Building for the Future*, ed. Robert M. Hathaway (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2005), 151–53. According to a *New York Times* article, as of 2009 there were more than 12,000 registered madrassas and more unregistered ones in Pakistan. Sabrina Tavernise, "Pakistan's Islamic Schools Fill Void, but Fuel Militancy," *New York Times*, May 3, 2009, www.nytimes.com/2009/05/04/world/asia/04schools.html?pagewanted=all&_r=2&.

21. Interview, Abdul Ahad Mohammadi, November 2014. Mohammadi is co-author of *Trends in Student Radicalization across University Campuses in Afghanistan* (Kabul: Afghanistan Institute for Strategic Studies, October 2014).

22. Interview, government official from Khogyani district, Nangarhar province, August 2014.

23. Interview, Karokh district, 5 September 2014.

24. The webpages and counts were as follow: Official Facebook webpage: www.eslahonline.net/; Official Facebook page: www.facebook.com/EslahOnline1 (64,851 likes as of October 2014); Unofficial Facebook page: www.facebook.com/EslahOnline.net (844 likes as of October 2014).

25. For more on Wadan and other youth political movements, see Gran Hewad and Casey Garret Johnson, "A Rough Guide to Afghan Youth Politics," Special Report no. 344 (Washington, DC: U.S. Institute of Peace, April 2014), www.usip.org/publications/rough-guide-afghan-youth-politics.

Of Related Interest

- *Managing Conflict in a World Adrift* edited by Chester A. Crocker, Fen Osler Hampson, and Pamela Aall (USIP Press, 2015)

- *Getting It Right in Afghanistan* edited by Moeed Yusuf, Scott Smith, Colin Cookman (USIP Press, 2013)

- *Afghan Youth and Extremists: Why Are Extremists' Narratives So Appealing?* by Belquis Ahmadi (Peace Brief, August 2015)

- *Creating Spaces for Effective CVE Approaches* by Georgia Holmer (Peace Brief, September 2014)

- *Countering Violent Extremism: A Peacebuilding Perspective* by Georgia Holmer (Special Report, September 2013)