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Extreme Violence and the Rule of Law: Lessons From Eastern Afghanistan

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Paper
The international community's approach to building the rule of law in situations of extreme violence can be improved. These contexts demand a strategy that reduces the strength of armed nonstate groups and restores stability so governance-building activities can take hold. Lessons from a program implemented by the Natural Resources Counterinsurgency Cell (NRCC) in Afghanistan can help inform a more holistic strategy.

Problems With the Current Approach

- International programs to improve governance in violent states rely on training foreign security services and sometimes directly intervening with military and civilian stabilization programs, including quick-return development projects.
- Most civilian rule-of-law development projects are based on a flawed assumption that there is a legitimate government in the host country seeking to improve governance and quell violence.
- In many cases of extreme violence, governments rule for self-interest, not the good of their citizens, creating a populace that views the state as illegitimate. These contexts require interventions that can turn people away from violent actors when they cannot be turned toward the government.
- International efforts also assume that most of the local population is uncommitted rather than supportive of insurgents. But citizens in disaffected communities often back violent groups, not just against the state but also toward goals inimical to rule-of-law values.
- In such situations, international development projects designed to win hearts and minds fail to address the deeper reasons citizens support violent groups.

Lessons for International Assistance Providers

Create a locally driven program based on indigenous values and psychology. The NRCC reduced violence while changing the methods of governance by creating a psychologically astute program that recognized what motivated individuals likely to be recruited as commanders of violent groups and providing them an alternative path to reach these goals.

Ensure an adequate period of time for program design. Intensive study of local cultural, socio-political, and, if applicable, battlefield dynamics should occur prior to program design.

Develop the ability to catalyze and assist indigenous civil society organizations. These groups can support local programs in areas under insurgent control or where the population is hostile to international intervention.

Integrate programs to change hearts and minds into a broader strategy. Programs aimed at turning the population away from violent nonstate groups can be integrated into an approach that features not only the use of force but also efforts to build government accountability so that citizens will eventually turn to the state as a source of legitimacy.

Introduction

How can the international community help establish the rule of law in places facing insurgency or extreme violence?

In such contexts, military action to counter violent groups is often necessary. Yet force alone is rarely sufficient to end violence by nonstate actors. Kinetic activities can also create backlash that strengthens insurgencies and makes it easier for violent groups to recruit individuals.

Meanwhile, civilian agencies in the international community generally implement governance programs and economic development projects to promote stability. Governance programs are essential to establishing strong, functioning states that are based on the rule of law and citizens who can hold such states accountable. Yet these initiatives take decades to bear fruit, while violent armed groups grow, spread, splinter, and become more difficult for even the strongest, most legitimate states to tackle.

Quick-return development programs and income-generation opportunities may also fail to move citizens away from violence. Designed to turn the population toward the government and away from violent actors, many income-generation and development projects are based on economic drivers whose materialist assumptions may fail in communities whose support for armed nonstate actors is based on more complex factors.

A more psychological and culturally focused program piloted in eastern Afghanistan by the Natural Resources Counterinsurgency Cell (NRCC), a joint effort of U.S. defense and civilian agencies, tackled this conundrum by working to deny violent nonstate groups their best recruits: mid-level commanders driven by a desire to improve their communities. These people, seen as outstanding men in their villages, played outsized roles in expanding violence in Afghanistan because they could recruit others to armed nonstate groups who were not radical but did aspire to increased status. By changing the paths of these key individuals, communities as a whole could be “turned” to resist support for violent actors.

This type of intervention is appropriate for only a limited number of situations and, even then, can serve as only one pillar of a more holistic strategy incorporating force and a broad governance-building agenda. But its success deserves analysis and attention, especially given the shortcomings of current governance and income-generation projects in contexts of extreme violence. The lessons of the NRCC’s program in Afghanistan, if properly and carefully adapted, could help improve projects designed to reduce violence in other states grappling with armed nonstate groups, increasing stability so that initiatives to promote the rule of law have a chance to take effect.

Problems With the Current Approach

Civilian and military leaders have a number of tools at their disposal to fight insurgencies and restore law and order in other countries. At the maximum level of engagement, civilian leaders may authorize their military to engage in a particular type of warfare: counterinsurgency (COIN) operations in which foreign troops directly combat insurgents in another country. At the same time, civilian and military actors on the ground work through political, economic, psychological, and civic methods to improve state security forces and help governments redress core grievances that started the insurgency.

At lower levels of engagement, civilian and military agencies might offer external advisers to train and assist local governments and their security forces to help states protect their societies from violence. These foreign internal defense (FID) missions are intended to help a legitimate governing body address internal threats and their underlying causes.

At still lower levels of activity, the United States or other countries might offer security forces assistance (SFA), providing a handful of military trainers to advise a legitimate government's security forces so that the local government may tackle the violence directly. In extremely limited circumstances, unconventional warfare (UW) activities may be conducted by Special Forces to enable a local movement to resist an occupying power or hostile government in a denied area to bring about greater freedom and community security.

In any of these operations, civilian and military agencies might buttress kinetic activity, training, or assistance to security forces with internal defense and development (IDAD) programs to help governments redress grievances within their populations and improve a country's economic development. These include the traditional rule-of-law building activities of civilian agencies to equip law enforcement officials, build courts, train judges, and otherwise improve governance by providing funds, training, and technical assistance to local governmental and nongovernmental bodies.

When a Government Is Not Working Toward the Rule of Law

Many military leaders and civilian rule-of-law practitioners recognize that failed or predatory governments are often the catalysts for violent nonstate groups. However, as these individuals begin to design programs for COIN, FID, SFA, IDAD, or traditional rule-of-law building programs, they tend to recast the government as the legitimate core of the state to which citizens should want to turn for succor and protection. While acknowledging the problem of illegitimate governments intellectually, program design for the majority of civilian rule-of-law development projects undertaken by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the U.S. Department of Justice, and the U.S. Department of State, as well as for U.S. Defense Department stabilization initiatives, is based on a key, and flawed, assumption—that there is a legitimate government that wishes to build effective governance structures in order to serve its people and quell violence.

In many cases, however, citizens have turned to violence precisely because they see their government as illegitimate. Instead of serving citizens, officials may be focused on maximizing their personal, familial, or ethnic group's interests. They may put themselves above the law in order to gain wealth through corruption, theft of state assets, smuggling rackets, or collusion with criminal forces. Or they may be working to expand their power base through partiality in distributing state resources to their in-groups. Often, individuals and agencies within the government are themselves involved in violent activity, from selling police or military armaments to gangs or insurgents to extrajudicial killings to moonlighting as members of the organizations they officially work to eradicate.

It is the failure to govern for the benefit of all citizens through the rule of law that often generates violent insurgency from political militants seeking to unseat those in power.[1] Where political groups have not formed to capitalize on public grievances, government rule-of-law failures open space for violent criminals to provide some of the goods generally offered by officials, such as justice and social services.

Some in the population may find these armed nonstate groups attractive right away. Others may begin by disliking the general beliefs of these actors but come to see them as functioning more effectively and predictably than government. Even if the majority of the population does not like armed violence, government predation makes citizens willing to allow these groups to function. Over time, as scholar David Kilcullen describes in his theory of competitive control, violent armed actors control these geographies through a mixture of norm diffusion, identity politics, persuasion, and attractive social offerings that yield ambivalent support, as well as through coercion.[2]

When violence gains a foothold, citizens of such illegitimate states rarely turn to the government for protection. After all, the state is seen as acting with as much impunity as the violent groups but often with more corruption. Instead, individuals may look to vigilantes to exert order. Such groups frequently start

with popular support and then, over time, often use their power and armaments to prey on the same communities they emerged to protect, further fueling the overall levels of violence.[3]

At this point, the United States may provide training to partner militaries to contain insurgency, or it may work to build the capacity of law enforcement in other states to tackle extreme violence by criminal groups, gangs, terrorist organizations, or other nonstate actors. In extreme situations, such as Afghanistan, U.S. and international military forces may engage directly, at the same time supporting capacity-building programs for state institutions to increase their efficiency and effectiveness and help turn the population back toward the government.

Yet, the self-interested motives, habits, and relationships of individual government bureaucrats and politicians do not end when insurgency or massive criminal violence begins. In fact, the realization that their time in office may be limited can increase rapaciousness. Leaders at any level of government may obstruct technocratic solutions and efforts to improve the rule of law because they either directly benefit from rents from crime or gain power from state weakness that allows them to personalize rule and directly deliver benefits to their patronage systems.

Even if it may be in the government's long-term, enlightened interest to create stable countries with some public services that they can tax and rule as autocratic "stationary bandits" (largely predatory governments who rationalize theft through taxes), they face a collective-action problem in getting to that situation.[4] For each individual engaged in violent or corrupt behavior, it will rarely be in his or her personal self-interest to create good government in which leaders are considered equal to other citizens and subject to the law.

Spending millions of dollars on technical-assistance and capacity-building programs does little to address these core challenges. In fact, these initiatives can create stronger states that are simply more efficient and adept at harming their publics or extracting rents. What is needed, as many second-generation reformers have acknowledged, are programs that recognize that the core problem of governance lies in incentives and desire, not capacity. These projects must also work to build local sources of accountability, both institutional and within an organized citizenry, and they should be combined with international diplomatic efforts to end impunity for the government.

Such politically aware interventions can work. Yet there are two problems. First, even when the international community may be as frustrated as citizens by government nefariousness, by working through the government to build state capacity, foreign actors put themselves on the "side" of the government in the population's eyes. In other words, simply by trying to solve the problem, the foreign community has aligned itself with an actor that much of the population views as illegitimate and the source of their grievances.

Second, it can take decades to turn a state around when government leaders themselves are the problem. In the meantime, violence is raging. Killing or jailing existing violent actors does not staunch the sources of citizen anger and disaffection. Something must be done to improve the situation before the violence becomes worse.

When a Community Supports Violence and Values Inimical to the Rule of Law

Thus, many stabilization programs look for quick-return ways to convince populations to turn their "hearts and minds" toward the government and to stop active or passive support for violent armed groups.

Civilian development programs meant to show speedy returns and U.S. military strategies for FID, SFA, and COIN efforts share some rules of thumb about where a population's hearts and minds reside:[5]

- An active minority of a given population supports violent armed groups, an active minority is vocally against them, and the majority is passive or uncommitted, with most citizens simply wishing to keep

their heads down and get out of the conflict alive.[6]

- Many people are helping violent armed groups because they have no other economic options. These poor individuals, willing to place bombs in front of convoys or join narcotrafficking organizations to make a few dollars, can be moved to support the government if alternative livelihood options are offered, such as income-generation and cash-for-work programs.

- People wish to improve the well-being of their communities along lines accepted by the West. Hearts will be won for the government when outsiders provide collective goods such as electricity, water, roads, schools, and hospitals.[7]

By showing citizens that positive rewards for their communities flow from supporting the government and the external actors that back it, and that supporting armed nonstate groups brings increasing costs (through collective punishment, imprisonment, and lethal use of force), internal defense and development strategies enacted as part of FID, SFA, and COIN seek to turn the population against violent actors. Using such positive and negative inducements, the government and the international community work to gain the population's trust and help in providing intelligence, reducing militants' access to goods, and even warfighting.

When applied to the right communities, with effective, holistic governance assistance that gradually makes government control a viable option, these assumptions may be correct. If the international community's projects have enough staying power and force so that communities believe the violent actors will be beaten and the population will not be exposed to later reprisals, the strategies may work.

But what happens in situations where these assumptions are wrong?

In some cases, communities are supporting nonstate armed groups out of identity, ideology, or a desire for order based on swift, summary justice and traditional values that fits poorly with Western rule-of-law institutions. In these situations, development strategies to win hearts and minds will fail. In some cases, they can even fuel militancy.

Communities cannot be assumed to want to repudiate violent armed groups.[8] In disaffected communities, a plurality or majority of a population may support such groups, not just against the state but also in pursuit of goals inimical to U.S. or international interests or values. For instance, the majority of a community may support violence to achieve a radical Islamist state that denies rights to its inhabitants and engages in violent terrorism abroad. Or, using an example closer to home, in the Southern United States of the nineteenth century, hundreds of thousands of men were willing to fight a civil war to protect a way of life built on enslaving other human beings.[9] It is also possible that some individuals may not love all aspects of violent armed groups but might appreciate the swift justice and clear rules they enforce.

In such situations, foreign- or government-led development projects to win hearts and minds fail to address the deeper reasons citizens support or acquiesce to violent groups. Economic drivers do not go far enough to make communities comfortable turning toward their government.

In some cases, economic incentives can even backfire. Development efforts can be viewed as the meddling of condescending outsiders. Cash-for-work and income-generation projects may make people better off—but they can also yield indignation at foreigners trying to "buy off" a deeply held set of beliefs. Particularly where the work provided is considered unbefitting of a grown man, these projects can also breed an individual sense of shame, lost dignity, and resentment that can further fuel violence. In addition, poorly delivered aid can increase the corruption that turned people away from the government and toward violent armed actors in the first place.[10]

Helping everyone equally—including women, those who are poor, or those in marginalized groups—can be viewed as overturning local values. It may also be perceived as upsetting a power balance that is supported by the community or even one that is divinely sanctioned. Building schools to educate women

in patriarchal societies such as those in parts of Afghanistan, for example, or minorities, as was the case with African Americans in the pre–civil war Southern United States, can yield violent rage.

In these communities, traditional development projects and programs to help the poor, minorities, and women may, at best, fail to achieve their aims in the short term, in which conflict is occurring. At worst, they may drive those wishing to uphold the honor of their communities into more violent insurgency.

There are also those people who support violent actions against U.S. or international norms and interests for reasons other than material need. In traditional areas of the Sahel where al-Qaeda is taking root, Salafist Islamists look with horror at the decadence of the West. Gender equality is seen as a deep threat to the roots of certain cultures, which are worth defending through violence. In areas from Mindanao, Philippines, to Yemen, there are communities in which violent movements against what others would consider human rights, equality, and even economic development are popular and supported by a majority or plurality of the population.

So what interventions can be used when a people must be turned away from violent actors but cannot, in the short term, be turned toward their own government or attracted by the rule-of-law goals of the international community?

A radical, and potentially successful, model to reduce violence in such communities was attempted in Afghanistan by the NRCC.[11] This model may hold lessons for replication in other parts of the world.

Curbing Popular Insurgency in Afghanistan: The NRCC Experience

Thucydides, in his famous account of the Peloponnesian War, describes three reasons people initiate combat: for profit, for fear, and for honor. Many recent civilian and military strategies to reduce support for violence are based on economic drivers that may be appropriate to uncommitted individuals supporting violent actors out of economic necessity. Fear of anarchy leads others to support violent nonstate groups that often deliver order more effectively than the state. Rule-of-law building programs have only partially tackled this major issue, and initiatives that are effective take decades to bear fruit, while violence grows in the near term.

The NRCC strategy draws on the third, crucial, motivation: the psychology of honor for the few, key individuals who are recruited by armed groups precisely because they are not profiteers or radical ideologues but are driven by a desire to be seen as good men within their communities. Because they are driven by honor and are attractive community figures, they can play an outsized role in buttressing the normative system that armed groups are building to compete with the state.[12]

Since this psychological driver can still function even when the government itself is viewed as illegitimate, the techniques developed by the NRCC can be applied to a broad range of civilian programs working in situations of extreme violence and military operations in support of FID, COIN, or UW. This is because the program pioneered by the NRCC was able to gain access to a denied area, conduct operations in an austere environment without extensive support; assess the local situation and report rapidly; work closely with civilian populations; organize people to solve local problems; and provide options for addressing ambiguous situations.

From January 2010 to May 2011, the NRCC united U.S. government, military, and civilian elements in portions of eastern Afghanistan, where at least six separate insurgent groups operated.[13] The goal of this organization was to prevent violent insurgents working against U.S. interests from accessing the human and financial resources necessary to survive. In addition to kinetic and intelligence activities, the NRCC developed a unique approach to reducing violence and the appeal of insurgency in those rural Pashtun communities that supplied manpower and resources to insurgent organizations out of popular support for the militants' goals.[14]

The NRCC created a psychologically astute program that recognized the roles played by honor, status, and a desire for respect—rather than economic gain or political ideology—in fueling violence.

Consider a typical locale in which violence against international goals and rule-of-law norms is widespread and popularly supported—whether in a gang-controlled barrio in Latin America or a Pashtun village in eastern Afghanistan. According to World Health Organization statistics, young men make up the vast majority of those engaged in violence.[15] Many may wish for economic success, but the most ambitious want status.[16] Even more than material wealth or love, they wish to be seen by their

communities as respected, valued, and powerful.[17] This hierarchy of values is apparent in their choice of lifestyle, which by definition favors violent paths inimical to gaining wealth or sustaining romance.[18]

Perhaps most of all, they wish to be seen as men—in patriarchal cultures where that word connotes distinct values, status, and actions. Living up to locally determined ideals of status and manhood is a potent driver for many adolescents and young men, so strong that they are willing to subject themselves to painful initiation rituals or engage in violence themselves to be accepted.[19] In fact, some theorists suggest that in poor and marginalized communities, men are more likely to create exaggerated, hypermasculine subcultures as a response to the emasculation caused by poverty and disempowerment.[20]

The NRCC program in Afghanistan used this logic to create a counternarrative for the type of men who were most heavily recruited by violent insurgents to serve as local commanders. It then created immediate opportunities for these men to make contributions to their communities that were popularly valued and recognized, creating an alternative path to social status and recognition that provided personal esteem and outcompeted the path offered by violent insurgency. At the same time, it reinforced the more positive aspects of traditional male culture, using those values as a counterweight to some of the aspects of male culture that contributed the most to violence, whether criminal, in the form of wanton killing, political, manifested as insurgency, or domestic, such as wife beating.

The NRCC learned that insurgents were seeking a very specific type of man for their mid-level commanders. They wanted people who were wise in judgment, slow to become angry or excited, and, ironically, somewhat skeptical of radicalism. If such a man could be recruited, he would be extremely effective in mobilizing his community because of his ability to set a normative tone that would attract, rather than coerce, others to the insurgents' side. In fact, such men were far more important in community mobilization than the already-radicalized "true believers," who, like many activists, can be rather off-putting to the unconverted.

Thus, the NRCC set about trying to find these "good men," as defined by the community, and giving them a path to local recognition before the insurgents did.

Assessment and Program Building

The process of creating such a locally driven program based on indigenous values and psychology requires deep study of a community's unique value system. It does not come quickly, and the NRCC effort was no exception.

After evaluating the social landscape, the NRCC concluded that it was attempting to defeat genuinely popular movements in which the plurality, and possibly even an outright majority, of the population supported one or another insurgent group. The NRCC then engaged in six months of intensive study to gain an in-depth understanding of the communities in which it was operating.[21]

This research involved interviews with traditional community leaders in the locality and use of confidential informants. It also included observations by NRCC personnel during field operations and combat patrols, discussions with Afghan academics and government officials, assessments of community dynamics provided by cultural advisers, and information obtained during interrogations with captured insurgent militants.[22]

The NRCC community-assessment process required team members to

1. identify the shared characteristics of the men that violent organizations seek to recruit as mid-level commanders (that is, not as pawns or foot soldiers);
2. learn the process used by armed groups to recruit these men;
3. identify the reasons why these individuals were willing to join the insurgency or criminal group;
4. determine what of personal value these men obtained from joining a violent organization;
5. identify the reasons why some men in the community who possessed the same characteristics sought by violent actors did not join the armed groups;
6. ascertain how the local community valorized and reinforced the men's decision to join the violent actors;
7. create alternate opportunities that target those individuals sought by violent actors in a manner that

1. appeals to these men, whether they were susceptible or resistant to militant recruitment,
2. provides benefits of similar value to those offered by the violent groups,
3. will be valorized and respected within the community through its traditional social structures, and
4. is consistent with military or law-enforcement operations that may need to take place, as well as with long-term governance and development programs.[23]

In the Afghan case, the NRCC assessment process led to the realization that kinetic missions, though necessary, were insufficient: the international coalition under the International Security Assistance Force could not simply kill its way to victory. In addition, the NRCC found that typical socioeconomic development programs were ineffective in these specific districts, a fact also recognized in the USAID literature.[24]

The assessment determined that the high-value men the insurgents wished to recruit were not motivated by money or material advancement. Instead, they wished to protect the local culture from outside influences, believed in a theocratic social order threatened by U.S. values, or were members of social-obligation networks requiring loyalty to individuals, families, places, and organizations. The men also wished to be acknowledged for character attributes that they saw as important and valuable: integrity, piety, physical ability, intellect, and honor.

Though these specific characteristics will differ depending on the environment, the process to determine the actual drivers of hearts and minds is crucial and replicable.[25] However, this kind of assessment requires real time. The six months the NRCC was granted to investigate and design programming is a rarity in most U.S. programs, especially outside of this war zone. In COIN operations, troops are typically deployed for approximately a yearlong rotation. Most USAID programming takes place on a two-year cycle, with just two or three weeks for an in-country assessment before programs must be created.

The NRCC recognized that given these characteristics, the international coalition could not attempt to "buy men's souls" or change the basic culture of these regions fast enough to prevent rapidly spreading violence. Alleviating poverty, improving education, reducing isolation, and making the government function on behalf of its people were all crucial long-term goals, but they would not reach the target population of potentially violent young men quickly enough to prevent or alleviate imminent insurgent activity. Instead, the NRCC needed to provide an inspiring alternative that promoted the same goals of status, manhood, and community recognition that the men sought for themselves. Achieving these aims through a different path would obviate the need to join the militants.[26]

The NRCC built a program to create this alternative that was highly specific to Afghan circumstances. However, it followed a five-step process that is replicable:

1. Determine a locally accepted manner for identifying potential recruits, focusing on those categorized as the target population because they fit three overlapping criteria (see figure 1)[27]
2. Subject the recruits to a merit-based system of rigorous training with a significant attrition rate so that the community would view these men as elite
3. Set tasks for the men that reflected the traits they sought to be recognized for within the community
4. Determine ongoing work for the recruits to perform that contributed to local needs and did not disrupt existing traditional social institutions, which could have created backlash against the program
5. Develop a common code of principles that built esprit de corps while defining manhood in a traditionally acceptable way that still managed to push the men away from militant groups, indiscriminate use of violence, and domestic abuse

All of these elements had to combine and create a narrative that was more powerful than the path offered by the violent actors looking to recruit the same young men.

Finally, while the program could be designed by international community members learning from local informants, it could not be executed by foreigners. By definition, in a community in which the majority supports violent nonstate groups working against U.S. or international interests, a program run by those external, discredited, and disliked powers would not be accepted. Thus, any U.S. or international entity

working on such a program would need to either support an existing indigenous organization or catalyze the creation of such a group to run the project.

Each aspect of program design required local specificity. For instance, birth order was highly prized in the NRCC's target Pashtun society of rural, eastern Afghanistan. Families could not be shamed by having revered first-born sons outcompeted by some other family's fifth-born son, so efforts were made to restrict membership, to the extent practicable, to those sons who were first, second, or third born. Women clearly could not be part of such a program in this patriarchal society. And the NRCC paid assiduous attention to tribal, clan, subclan, and family affiliations in the recruitment process to avoid posing a threat to established local power structures held by certain groups within a village—again, very much in opposition to traditional, individualistic rule-of-law importation into such cultures.

Training was crucial. To create a sense that these men were the elite of the village, the NRCC program designed an arduous training regimen with an attrition rate of nearly 40 percent—a process that differed in particulars but not in its team-building effect from U.S. Marine boot camp. A merit-based program with high attrition was important: performance-based standards created a respected cadre of men with high morale who each knew their companions had "made the cut," fulfilling some of the status markers of gang-initiation rituals and insurgent recruiting. It also avoided influence-peddlers working to get their preferred candidates into the program. When the men put forth as recruits by these individuals failed to complete the training process, the influence-peddlers were shamed and therefore stopped putting their reputations at risk by offering to guarantee positions. Finally, the gains from selectivity were not offset by negative backlash. Those rejected from the program did not attempt violent reprisal on the men who were selected or the projects they built.

The training itself emphasized qualities of manhood accepted by the local community. In the case of eastern Afghanistan, this included activities such as physical endurance (laboring in the extreme heat of summer without shade) and piety (tests of indigenous Islamic practices were created by a local imam). By holding these trainings in public, the men gained immediate respect and glory from the community.[28]

Projects were chosen through a process of deliberation with elders and community leaders so that they would be valued by the community. In Afghanistan, projects included building water-conservation and soil-erosion-control dams, planting trees, creating terraces, and conducting assessments of natural resources. Elders had to agree that the village would maintain the infrastructure the men built as long as it continued to provide the community with the intended benefits. The village was also responsible for ensuring the men's security and attending to any logistics while they worked, and a mullah was required to minister to them. Failure to provide this support would result in the immediate termination of the project in the village.

In Afghanistan, NRCC teams deliberately used technologies and techniques that were locally available in communities lacking access to electricity, roads, and manufactured supplies. Reliance on technologies that did not require outside subsidies did not insult Afghans—on the contrary, it contributed to local pride and sustainability.[29] These men wanted to accomplish goals for their community without relying on outsiders. They took satisfaction in the fact that all projects were selected, designed, and implemented by the community without interference from international development programs or control by centralized national government bureaucrats.

In addition, all projects were located within 5 miles of the home village of the men who constructed them. This emphasis on locality helped make the process logistically more feasible and satisfied the people in the communities, who were pleased that the projects were built by their own men and could be maintained by the village itself without the assistance and presence of outsiders.

As with the amount of time allowed to create this program, the ability to use local labor and materials was a departure from normal U.S. practice. Most U.S. development programs force procurement officers to "buy American" or to build to U.S. codes. The result is that a development program to improve the capacity of law enforcement, for instance, will require the purchase of American cars that are impossible to fix locally. Another project may mandate the use of building materials that must be imported. In both cases, infrastructure and equipment are far more expensive than what is locally available and often cannot be maintained by the receiving community.

Finally, the men involved in the NRCC program needed to create a code of conduct that used local values and beliefs about manhood to build esprit de corps while militating against violence. This required walking a careful line between reinforcement and redefinition of values. For instance, importing a value of female equality was a step too far and would have been dismissed by the men and the community. But it was possible to build a code that portrayed a man who regularly beat his wife as showing a lack of self-control that was unmanly. Similarly, in Afghanistan, it was impossible to break the link equating manhood with carrying a weapon—yet using one's gun indiscriminately to shoot someone perceived to have spoken

disrespectfully could be portrayed as childish and undisciplined, rather than manly. Thus, the training and organization of these men began to generate a code of conduct and principles that complimented local social mores but subtly began to change them in a more positive direction.

Once a man successfully became a member of the group, peer pressure and fear of being ostracized prevented him from participating in insurgent operations that could damage or destroy the groups' work and its benefits to the community. As time went on and the social status of these men grew, they were increasingly viewed by the community as leaders who could be counted upon for advice and wisdom. They came to be seen as respected agents of reconciliation.

Just as important, it became more difficult for insurgent organizations to attempt to coerce, threaten, or harm these men because such efforts by militants would be viewed as dishonoring the community as a whole. This shift created enmity between the village and insurgents—exactly what was needed to break the link between community support and the violent actors.

Outcomes

It is difficult to determine this program's precise effectiveness within the broad set of military and development efforts to quell insurgency in Afghanistan and within the other programs the NRCC itself worked on in these areas. Moreover, long-term effects are difficult to measure: other dynamics of the war, such as Pakistani support for militants, the time limit set for U.S. troop withdrawal, and the insurgents' own internal dynamics, play a significant role far beyond the scope of this intervention. As a whole, eastern Afghanistan remains highly unstable. It is impossible to say that this small intervention changed the course of the war for this region—there are simply too many other factors at play.

This program could, at best, have had a local impact on the insurgency. And anecdotal observations suggest that it did successfully change the communities in which it worked.

Perhaps the most telling indicator of success is the lack of insurgent attacks on personnel involved in the NRCC-sponsored program and their projects when compared to the rest of Afghanistan during the same time period. Throughout the NRCC community mobilization project, no member of the program was killed, injured, kidnapped, or threatened by either insurgent organizations or criminal elements.

This is in marked contrast to what was happening among the nongovernmental organization (NGO) community in the country—and particularly in eastern Afghanistan—at the same time. In 2010, international assistance agencies and the United Nations reported more than 100 NGO workers killed and 80 kidnapped in Afghanistan. Most were local Afghans working with international and domestic NGOs, and approximately one-third of all attacks occurred in eastern Afghanistan. The rate of attacks during the first half of 2011 increased by 70 percent over the same period in 2010.[30]

Of course, the lack of attacks on members of the NRCC-sponsored NGO could indicate that the program did not matter. This is unlikely to be the case. The men in this program became so respected that in some of the most dangerous districts of eastern Afghanistan, the United Nations World Food Program (WFP) contracted exclusively with them for the delivery of food, oil, and other essential commodities. The head of the WFP's area office in eastern Afghanistan at the time, Baker Mukeere, commented that it was only when the WFP worked with these men that there would be no loss of food from corruption or incompetence. He also noted that the food was delivered on time, to everyone for whom it was intended, and in every village where it was supposed to be provided.[31]

Eventually, many of the men became important in their communities as mediators who served to prevent and mitigate intra- and inter-village conflict. Time and again, these individuals were called upon to mediate disputes related to land, grazing rights, use of water, and access to development projects. This work was doubly important for quelling violence because it not only resolved the dispute at hand but also prevented insurgents from exploiting such community conflicts to gain support by providing shadow governance services themselves.[32]

Meanwhile, of course, these men—who were prime recruits for violent groups—instead found an avenue to contribute to their communities and achieve social status without resorting to insurgent violence.

Finally, the actual development projects, while not the primary goal of the program, were maintained beyond the life of the NRCC initiative and were not attacked—again, unlike the vast majority of development projects in Afghanistan. The program built 5,000 structures in a number of communities across sixteen volatile districts for a total expenditure of less than $500,000, generally producing greater results at a lower cost than other development projects in the country. Military civil affairs personnel estimated that the NRCC program created conservation check dams, for example, at a rate 40 times faster and at a cost of about 5 percent of most international development programs in Afghanistan.[33] These projects continued to be run and maintained by local communities after completion with no additional international assistance, as verified by a combination of unmanned aerial surveillance, ground inspections, and photographic overflights.

Expansion and Other Applications

In countries facing high levels of violence where the government is seen as illegitimate and some subcommunities support violent nonstate groups, it is hard to know where to begin the work of building a functional, legitimate state with effective rule of law—an endeavor that takes decades. Meanwhile, in that time period, violence spreads, grows, and becomes harder for even a functional and legitimate state to tackle.

These situations require an intervention that can rapidly turn people away from violent actors when they cannot yet be turned toward the government. This is particularly necessary if the people in these areas hold cultural values that are inimical to the international community's rule-of-law beliefs.

Over the long term, reducing the strength of violent nonstate groups requires a broad spectrum of activities that meld persuasion, coercion, and creation of a more attractive government. One pillar of such a strategy that can yield rapid results is providing alternative paths of honor and status for the individuals likely to be recruited as lynchpin commanders of violent nonstate groups. Denying insurgents these key men is a step toward pulling communities out of armed groups' control.

The techniques used by the NRCC are not intended for widespread applicability—but neither are they confined to eastern Afghanistan. They are suited to a narrow niche of conditions in which violent groups are working against the values and interests of the international community and a plurality of the population is supportive of the violent groups for reasons other than simple economic need. In these areas, such as parts of the Philippines, the Sahel, and Yemen, where conventional military operations and traditional socioeconomic development programs are ill-suited or ineffective, the NRCC's techniques offer a path for reducing insurgent recruitment in the short term, giving other strategic operations to build an effective and legitimate government some time to take hold.

The techniques used by the NRCC may also be applicable as a subset of "prevention programs" intended to inhibit recruitment to gangs and vigilante groups in places where the government is seen as illegitimate or absent.[34] In many gang-controlled areas, recruitment is voluntary and can thus be resisted through programs that enhance a sense of identity, personal status, and community recognition.
However, care must be taken in moving such programs from a rural to an urban setting and in amending program design for such a different context. Applying the moniker of insurgency to Latin American conflicts, for example, is problematic. Most violence is criminal, often working with corrupt governments, rather than political and seeking to overthrow governments.

Moreover, gang recruitment has an economic edge to it that is more significant than that suggested by the NRCC program. Economic need plays a greater role in gang than insurgency recruitment, although status and respect remain significant drivers. While programs to prevent gang recruitment would need to start young (the average age in a ten-nation study for joining a gang was thirteen and a half), as children grew up, the projects would need to provide avenues for legitimate employment to continue to prevent recruitment.
And, of course, there are other issues that would require modification, such as addressing gang surveillance of recruits to ensure against retaliation and factoring in the potentially lower levels of community cohesion in marginalized urban neighborhoods versus rural villages, which could reduce the effectiveness of the status-bequeathing elements of the program.

In adapting the NRCC's program, creating just and effective governments ruled by law must be given as much attention as implementing coercive measures. Such projects must also be designed with an acknowledgement that the government itself may be the problem. Force must be accompanied not only by technical assistance and equipment but also by equally robust efforts to build government

accountability to its citizens and reduce impunity. Throughout much of Central America and Mexico, governments have turned to militarized mano dura—"iron fist"—style strategies based on warfighting models, but they have failed to attack the corruption and veniality in their own agencies that is fueling violence. U.S. and international support for capacity building and technical assistance to such governments has, in fact, strengthened gangs, abetted the rise of some narcotrafficking organizations by disabling rivals, and occasionally increased death squads and human rights abuse.

The NRCC program in Afghanistan shows potential to change the hearts and minds of key individuals—and through them, communities. This is an essential, but not sufficient, part of what must be a more holistic strategy. It is inevitably small-scale. Even if it were possible to expand the program, denying recruitment of local commanders to violent nonstate groups does not fix the root causes of the violence or stop those who have already joined insurgent groups.

Instead, programs such as the NRCC's may be used to create some level of peace and stability within a community so that effective activities to build governments ruled by law can take hold. These rule-of-law-building activities must engage in the slow work of creating power structures that enhance accountability: building citizen capacity to work peacefully to hold their governments accountable, creating institutions of government oversight with teeth, and supporting an international community willing to ensure that its interactions with a government prevent impunity.

Effective rule-of-law programs in communities whose values are at cross-purposes with rule-of-law ideals also require time-consuming cultural change. The slow internalization of new ideas, such as equality before the law, the rights of minorities and women, and a reduction in socially acceptable violence, must come from within rather than being imposed by fiat. These changes take time.[35]

Programs of this sort must begin with the level of local understanding and institutional creativity evident in the NRCC experience. It offers a model of small-scale success that can be further developed and expanded upon to form one pillar of a new strategy to more effectively reduce violence, counter insurgency, and increase the rule of law in places facing extreme violence and where the population sees the government itself as illegitimate.

Notes

[1] Countries that are not at the hardest edge of autocracy but have not provided political freedom and the rule of law are most at risk for terrorism according to Alberto Abadie, "Poverty, Political Freedom, and the Roots of Terrorism," *Economics of National Security,* 96:2, 50–56.

[2] Violent groups from the mafia in Sicily to narcotraffickers in Latin America to the Taliban in Afghanistan frequently pose as "Robin Hoods," providing services and social order that corrupt governments fail to offer and that help convince communities to support the existence of these armed nonstate actors. For a good overview of this process, see David Kilcullen, *Out of the Mountains* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 116–68.

[3] Luke Dowdney, *Neither War Nor Peace*, (Rio de Janeiro: Children in Organised Armed Violence, 2005), 29–30, http://resourcecentre.savethechildren.se/sites/default/files/documents/5014.pdf chronicles multiple violent gangs from Nigeria to Central America that began as movements to curb violence and protect their communities. Similar cases can be seen with the Knights Templar and vigilante movement in Michoacan, Mexico, in 2014 and with the Colombian vigilantes at the height of that drug war.

[4] See Mancur Olson, "Dictatorship, Democracy, and Development," *American Political Science Review,* 87:3, September 1993, on state formation and the choice of criminals to become "stationary bandits."

[5] The term "rules of thumb" is used here because while some counterinsurgency theorists have been more nuanced in their writings, in practice their theories have generally been boiled down to the ideas

listed.

[6] *U.S. Army/U.S. Marines Counterinsurgency Field Manual, 1–108*. Republished by the University of Chicago Press, 2007, at pg 35.

[7] See, for example, *United States Government Integrated Civilian-Military Campaign Plan for Support to Afghanistan*, signed by Ambassador Eickenberry and General Stanley McCrystal, August 10, 2009, www.defense.gov/pubs/pdfs/October_2009.pdf; Jerry Meyerle, Megan Katt, and Jim Gravilis, Counterinsurgency on the Ground in Afghanistan: How Different Units Adapted to Local Conditions, July 2010, CAN Analysis and Solutions Report CRM-D002894.A2/Final; C. Paul, C. P. Clarke, and B. Grill, Victory Has a Thousand Fathers: Detailed Counterinsurgency Case Studies, RAND National Defense Research Institute Report Contract W74V8H-06-C-0002[b] (Santa Monica, Calif.: Rand, 2010). P. K. Davis and K. Cragin, eds., Social Science for Counter Terrorism, RAND National Defense Research Institute Report no. W74V8H-06-C-0002[a] (Santa Monica, Calif.: Rand, 2009).

[8] This is not to say that communities prefer war to peace; in fact, most people will accept immense brutality in order to have predictability and order. See Kilcullen, *Out of the Mountains*, as well as Vanda Felbab-Brown, Aspiration and Ambivalence (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2012). It is simply to say that some individuals will begin or continue violence to reach other end states that are even more desirable to them, including maintaining their roles in violent societies once those systems are established.

[9] Indeed, preservation of the social order, not economic opportunity, explains in large part the support of non–slave-owning whites in the South for the Confederacy. Slavery and its attendant race-supremacy ideology may have harmed the economic interests of poorer whites, whose crop prices were kept low by slave labor. However, it provided social benefit to non–slave-owning Southerners, allowing even the poorest white, under the most difficult of circumstances, to be legally and feel socially superior to one-third of the population. “The loss of slavery would call into question a white man’s right to rule over blacks . . . [and once that] was weakened, [white male status] became suspect in every sphere.” The entire social order would unravel for slave-owners and non-slave owners alike. See Chandra Manning, *What This Cruel War Was Over: Soldiers, Slavery and the Civil War* (New York: Random House, 2007), 36–38.

[10] For instance, in the Southern United States, anger at occupation and corruption under Reconstruction revived guerilla fighters, many of whom eventually became criminal actors whose violence continued for decades.

[11] This case study is based on unclassified findings regarding the NRCC. The NRCC was originally created within Task Force Mountain Warrior in response to an initiative by the brigade commander and the senior civilian representative. Operations conducted by the NRCC were designed, planned, and implemented by two designated co-team leaders: one from the Department of Defense and the other from the USAID/Civilian Response Corps-Active. The civilian components of the NRCC were subject simultaneously to both Combatant Command and Chief of Mission authority in an arrangement loosely evocative of the Civil Operations and Rural Development Support program during the Vietnam War. Overall responsibility for the NRCC was placed under the Brigade S-9 (civil affairs) commanding officer. For more on the program, see Harry R. Bader, C. Hanna, C. Douglas, and D. Fox, “Illegal Timber Exploitation and Counterinsurgency Operations in Kunar Province of Afghanistan: A Case Study Describing the Nexus Among Insurgents, Criminal Cartels, and Communities Within the Forest Sector,” *Journal of Sustainable Forestry,* 32:4 (2013): 329–53.

[12] For more on the normative theory of control, see Kilcullen, Out of the Mountains, 116–68. For the mixed motives most communities bring to supporting armed nonstate groups see Kilcullen, Out of the Mountains, and Felbab-Brown, *Aspiration and Ambivalence*.

[13] The NRCC brought together Special Forces, members of the short-lived Civilian Response Corps-A within USAID, entities within the Department of Defense, and the Counterinsurgency Advisory and Assistance Teams. It worked in areas within the Kunar, Nangarhar, Nuristan, and Laghman provinces. Insurgent groups active within these four provinces included: Hizb-i-Islami Gulbuddin, the Taliban, Lashkar-e-Taiba, al-Qaeda, the Haqqani Network, and Hizb-i-Islami Khalis. See United States Department of State Cable, 07-08-2010 *Civilian-Military Collaboration in the Eastern Zone: Activities of the Natural Resources Counterinsurgency Cell* [UNCLASSIFIED], NRCC Project Description and Scope of Work—CENTCOM CERP Proposal for Continuing Activities 15 February 2011 [UNCLASSIFIED], and Harry Bader, “USAID Civilian Response Corps,” *Foreign Service Journal,* 90(10): 28–32.

[14] See Bader, “Illegal Timber Exploitation and Counterinsurgency Operations in Kunar Province of Afghanistan,” note 9.

[15] Young men between the ages of fifteen and twenty-nine are predominantly the perpetrators and victims of violence in the developing world. See World Health Organization, “WHO Mortality Data and Statistics (2008),” www.who.int/healthinfo/statistics/mortality/en/index.html.

[16] Even in Japan, the desire for heroic feeling and status within the community was a key driver for those who joined the violent Aum Shinrikyo cult. “We have been raised on a theory of superheroes. We all want to be like Luke Skywalker,” explained one cult member interviewed by former U.S. Navy Secretary Richard Danzig. “When we’re doing mundane things, we lose track of our ambition but when someone comes along, like Asahara, the head of the cult, and presents himself as a messiah and gives us a picture of progress that is ordained by heaven and that we are carrying out a saintly mission on earth that is for us extraordinarily evocative.” See Danzig’s speech at the Center for National Security annual meeting, June 2008.

[17] Adam Baird, for instance, writes, “Gangs are not necessarily for the weakest or most desperate youths, they can be seen as the ‘best’ livelihood opportunity; the best way for ambitious young men to accumulate masculine capital and to achieve status when the other options around them are unattractive, undignified or few and far between.” Adam Baird, “The Violent Gang and the Construction of Masculinity Amongst Socially Excluded Young Men,” *Safer Communities,*11:4 (2012): 185. Irving A. Spergel, “Youth Gangs: Continuity and Change,” *Crime and Justice,* 12 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 171–275, also sees recognition, participation, and identity as the key drivers of youth into gangs. However, gang recruitment also depends on fear, poverty, and a state that cannot offer protection.

[18] Central American gangs require more nuanced treatment, since status may be pursued as a means to wealth, sex, and security. For instance, in Anthony Fontes’s (forthcoming) book on Guatemalan gangs, a gang member explains, “Here death plays into to so many social necessities, to your very identity, that it becomes an addiction—addiction to the *barras* (cash money), the pleasure of it, but it’s a pleasure that comes from the respect you get, from your name entering the myth of the street.” In addition to the status and recognition created by killing, Fontes describes alternative motives that would need to be addressed for successful programs in Central America, “Children and young adults join the maras to gain a sense of belonging, to have the economic benefits that gang membership promises, and to protect themselves from gang aggression (both from the gang they join and rival groups).” Or, as Baird writes: “the gang became a pathway to manhood, serving as both a reputational and economic project, a mechanism to obtain status, respect, notoriety, sexual access to women, and to access the relative ‘riches’ of gang crime.” Baird, “The Violent Gang and the Construction of Masculinity Amongst Socially Excluded Young Men,” 184.

[19] Consider, for instance, the male adolescent initiation ritual practiced by the Kalenjin tribe in Kenya, which involves ritual circumcision of an adolescent boy who is not allowed to make a sound during the procedure. In some communities, the boys are caked with mud that is allowed to dry, so that the slightest wince appears in the mud and results in stigmatization by the entire community. This is hardly as exotic as it may seem: in many maras gangs in Central America, murder, often with ritual torture and brutality, is the means of entry into the gang, as is the case in some mafia families.

[20] See Baird, “The Violent Gang and the Construction of Masculinity Amongst Socially Excluded Young Men,” 183.

[21] Indeed, the NRCC could act in such a hostile environment only because its information collection and intelligence analyses were covert, long-term, and integrated into existing systems and programs so that they were not detectable as a new and separate effort within these communities.

[22] The methodology employed by the NRCC to understand communities was not inconsistent with much of the existing “cultural competency” literature. See, generally, Allison Abbe and S. M. Halpin, “Cultural Imperative for Professional Military Education and Leader Development,” *Parameters* (Winter 2009–2010): 20–31.

[23] Unwittingly, the NRCC drew on many of the same techniques recommended by a ten-nation study for denying child recruits to violent organizations, see Dowdney, Neither War Nor Peace.

[24] For the social science literature addressing the failure of socioeconomic aid as the principal tool against violent insurgency, see generally: United States Agency for International Development, “Development to Counter Insurgency: Promoting Stabilization Once an Insurgency Has Emerged,” Evidence Summit Information Packet—Analysis for Development, 2011. See also E. Berman, J. Felter, J. Shapiro, and M.

Callen, *Insurgency and Unemployment in Afghanistan, Iraq, and the Philippines*, unpublished report from the Institute on Global Conflict and Cooperation for the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2010, Grant# 2007-ST-061-000001.

[25] For instance, violent gangs tend to also offer their members financial opportunities. While status and recognition play major roles and money is not the sole driver of recruitment (in fact, many gangs also charge fees for membership), a program in such an area would also have to offset income lost. However, unlike traditional militarized operations that rely on force or economic development programs that provide microloans alone, economic assistance would need to be a part of a broader program to address these sociocultural drivers of respect, self-esteem, and public recognition.

[26] Jacob Shapiro and C. Christine Fair, "Understanding Support for Islamist Militancy in Pakistan," *International Security,* 34:3 (2010): 79–118; Bueno De Mesquita, "Terrorist Factions," *Quarterly Journal of Political Science,* 3:4 (2008): 399–418; Eli Berman and David Laitin, "Religion, Terrorism, and Public Goods: Testing the Club Model" *Journal of Public Economics,* 92 (2008): 1942–1967; Claude Berrebi, "Evidence about the Link Between Education, Poverty, and Terrorism Among the Palestinians," *Peace Economics and Peace Science,* 13:1 (2007).

[27] It is necessary to point out that in the eastern Afghanistan communities where the NRCC operated there were a host of prerequisites, such as birth order, important for community respect but not for terrorist recruitment.

[28] Many programs that work to prevent gang recruitment also rely on traditional masculine pursuits, such as martial arts, or honor codes that require discipline and hard work. See, for instance, Luke Dowdney's martial arts programs in Rio de Janeiro and London, created after his anthropological studies on child soldiers and child gang recruits.

[29] H. Bader and C. Douglas, *NRCC Project Evaluation Report* CERPRCOG00694-PROJECT #20100402124325, (UNCLASSIFIED), November 4, 2010, 3.

[30] Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, "Responses to Information Requests AFG103924.E (2012), http://irb-cisr.gc.ca/Eng/ResRec/RirRdi/Pages/index.aspx?doc=453740 (accessed March 21, 2014).

[31] For illustration, in just one delivery for the WFP, these men successfully shipped 60,000 kilograms (kg) of wheat, 7,170 kg of chickpeas, 4,760 liters of cooking oil, and 597 kg of salt to 239 families in eighteen different districts in a single day without the loss or theft of any of the commodities, according to WFP.

[32] One example of how the group's involvement helped to prevent a local crisis from escalating into a regional conflict involving International Security Assistance Forces and Afghan forces against insurgents centered on a land dispute over several thousand acres of grazing land. The dispute had erupted into open warfare among competing clans in Nangarhar Province early in 2011. Because of the presence of NRCC projects within the tribal areas of both combatants, timely and accurate reporting on the competing claims, leaders, motivations, history, and arms was available in the fast-accelerating crisis. This information was then analyzed and sent to the brigade commander. No other U.S. government agency within the area of operations could provide information that was similarly comprehensive, detailed, and current. Men from both sides of the crisis worked on NRCC projects and reported to their neutral Afghan NRCC leadership what was happening. This data provided the type of information that allowed the coalition, in working with the Afghan national government representatives, to help settle the dispute before excessive bloodshed had occurred and before insurgent organizations could mobilize to capitalize on the crisis. See H. Bader, C. Douglas, C. Hanna, D. Poplack, and J. Fox, "Operations of the Natural Resources Counterinsurgency Cell: Theory and Practice Implementing Non-Lethal Unconventional Warfare in Eastern Afghanistan," Occasional Research Paper no. 1, U.S. Military Academy Center for the Study of Joint Civil Military Operations. Submitted for Publication and under peer review as of March 2014.

[33] ADR 10136 for Project #20110321110136 executed on 25 MARCH 2011 [UNCLASSIFIED].

[34] In many gang-controlled areas, recruitment is also voluntary and can thus be resisted through programs that enhance a sense of identity, personal status, and community recognition. Due to surveillance issues in neighborhoods, local understanding would be crucial to ensure that gangs did not retaliate against those in such a program. Moreover, economic need also plays a greater role in recruitment, although status and respect remain significant drivers.

[35] Dowdney, *Neither War Nor Peace*, 31–32; there are clear correlations between generalized societal violence and individuals using violence to attain power.

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