



Does Youth Employment Build Stability?

**Evidence from an
Impact Evaluation of
Vocational Training
in Afghanistan**

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ACRONYMS

ANA – Afghan National Army

ANSF – Afghan National Security Forces

ALP – Afghan Local Police

ANP – Afghan National Police

AOG – Armed Opposition Groups

DfID – United Kingdom Department for International Development

GoIRA – Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan

INVEST – Introducing New Vocational Education and Skills Training Program

ISAF – International Security Assistance Force

NATO – North Atlantic Treaty Organization

TVET – Technical and Vocational Education and Training

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1.1. Rationale and Objectives

Promoting stability is one of the primary objectives of nearly all major development actors operating in Afghanistan. The United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DfID) defines stabilization as an approach used in violent situations where it is difficult or impossible to pursue conventional programs; its aims are explicitly political: to help establish and sustain a legitimate government. Aid actors have long seen employment to be the primary means for addressing the myriad of challenges facing stabilization in Afghanistan. As such, many employment and job training programs have been tied to stability-related outcomes, such as reducing support for armed opposition groups. Stabilization through economic development and employment programs in Afghanistan and other conflict-affected contexts relies on the assumption that improving economic opportunities will reduce young people's incentive to be mobilized by, or support, violent movements. However, recent studies have begun to question the link between the economic incentive offered through employment and a reduction in political violence (e.g. Berman et al., 2009; Beber & Blattman, 2013).

Starting in late 2013, Mercy Corps carried out research to test the theories of change that link unemployment, poverty and economic deprivation to support for political violence, terrorism and insurgency. The study was conducted as part of Mercy Corps' *Introducing New Vocational Education and Skills Training* (INVEST) program in Helmand Province in Southern Afghanistan. The INVEST program, funded by DfID, increases youth employment in Helmand by offering vocational and technical training courses in nine technical vocational education and training (TVET) centers across Helmand Province. Since its inception in 2011, over 25,000 students have graduated from the program, including 7,700 young women, with an average postgraduate employment rate of over 65 percent.

It is important to note that the INVEST program's original theory of change hypothesized a relationship with economic outcomes only; the social, political, and violence-related outcomes were not conceived as part of the program's original design. However, given Mercy Corps and DfID's shared interest in understanding how interventions like INVEST may contribute to broader stability goals in the region by targeting a population that is traditionally sympathetic to the Taliban, the program provided a unique opportunity to determine if improved economic outcomes could decrease individuals' propensity towards political violence and insurgency.

1.2. Hypotheses and Methodology

The study examined multiple mechanisms through which the program was hypothesized to have had an effect on young Afghans' propensity toward violence and support for the Taliban insurgency:

- Direct program effects on participants' propensity towards political violence
- Indirect effects on participants' propensity towards political violence through improvements in employment status and economic conditions
- Indirect effects on participants' propensity towards political violence through social status and connections
- Indirect effects on participants' propensity towards political violence through perceptions of government performance

The study utilized a quasi-experimental, mixed methodology impact evaluation design to test the program's hypotheses. Surveys were administered to a treatment and comparison group of male and female INVEST participants from February to April 2014. The treatment group consisted of recent graduates from the INVEST program while the comparison group was comprised of incoming students who had enrolled in the program but had not yet started classes. Propensity score matching was used to create treatment and comparison groups that were similar along observable characteristics

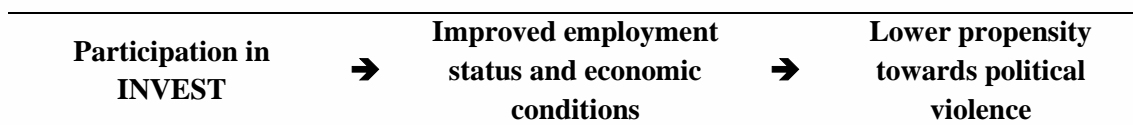
in order to establish a valid counterfactual. Additionally, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions were conducted with employed male and female INVEST graduates, current INVEST students, teachers, business owners and community and religious leaders.

The research first assessed if there were any direct program impacts on outcomes of political violence. Then turning to the three hypotheses, the analysis worked in two stages: first, we estimated INVEST’s impact on economic, social, and political outcomes; second, the analysis tested the relationship between these factors and two political violence outcome measures. By combining an impact evaluation of the INVEST program with an assessment of mechanisms of change underpinning the expected stabilization outcomes, the study was able to assess both the attributable effects of the program while identifying the mechanisms through which attitudes and behaviors towards political violence can be influenced.

1.3. Key Findings

The INVEST program had strong positive impacts on most of its intended economic outcomes, as well as on several of the social and political outcomes explored in this study. However, based on the tests of program effects, INVEST had limited impacts on participants’ willingness to engage in political violence or their belief that violence is sometimes justified in Afghan politics. The research unpacked these contrary findings by testing the individual hypotheses linking INVEST to propensity towards political violence. The findings on all three hypotheses were mixed and produced little evidence to support the major assumptions tested. Overall, the results suggested that the INVEST program did not contribute to stabilization through decreasing support for political violence and the Taliban.

Hypothesis 1:



The greatest impacts of the INVEST program were on economic outcomes. Participation in the program was associated with decreased unemployment, increased income and greater economic optimism amongst participants. Analysis showed a highly significant and positive effect of INVEST on employment status: those that participated in INVEST were 35.7 percentage points more likely to be employed than those who had not yet participated. INVEST participants were 12.7 percentage points more likely than the comparison group to have undertaken paid work in the past month. They also reported higher levels of satisfaction with their main job. Additionally, INVEST was linked with a 0.17 point increase in participants’ 1-5 scale of economic optimism and a 19.5 percentage point increase in the likelihood of engaging in economic activity with another tribe. Given the counterfactual analysis, the study can confidently attribute the increase in employment among INVEST graduates to the program as opposed to any other outside events, such as growth in the local economy. These were notable results within the context of other youth TVET programs, which have been shown on average to produce far lower effects on paid employment (Tripney et al; 2013).

However, few of the economic outcomes to which the program contributed were found to be strong predictors of support for political violence and armed opposition groups. Based on the quantitative analysis, neither employment status nor cross-tribal economic activity was linked to young people’s reported willingness to use violence for political or other causes. Only economic optimism was found to be significantly related to a lesser acceptance of the use of violence.

Taken together, these results suggest that young people’s current economic circumstances are not a major driver of propensity towards political violence within the context of Southern Afghanistan.

However, improving youth’s perceptions of their future economic prospects may hold potential to decrease their support for or participation in violent movements.

Hypothesis 2:

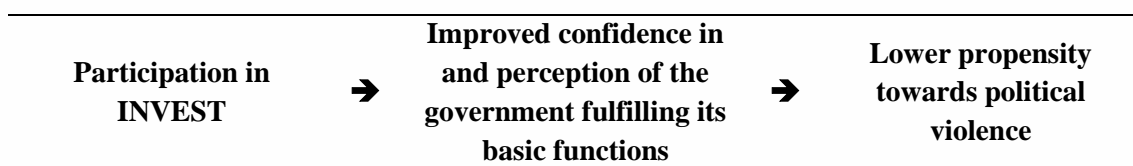


The INVEST program had mixed impacts on social outcomes. The program contributed positively to participants’ social connectedness, increasing the likelihood that respondents felt they had more friends to turn to for help or advice by 10.7 percentage points. The program strongly impacted participants’ probability of identifying as an Afghan above a tribe or religion, increasing it by 8.1 percentage points. INVEST had a slightly significant positive effect on participants’ social interactions with people from other tribes, as well as a positive effect on a measure of discrimination–frequency of being treated unfairly or with prejudice decreased by 0.22 points on a 4-point scale. But the program had no impact on participants’ feelings of being respected, personal confidence, or their perceived social standing in their community.

Many of the social factors analyzed were found to be linked to respondents’ attitudes towards the use of political violence, though the relationships were often opposite than expected. Contrary to assumptions, respondents with higher personal confidence, more social connections, and who identified as an Afghan before a tribe or religion were more likely to be willing to use violence for a political cause and believe violence was sometimes justified.

These results show that employment programs can contribute to increasing participants’ social networks and social identities. In the context of Helmand, such impacts may not be desirable, as they appear to be perversely associated with propensity towards political violence. Furthermore, it is perhaps unrealistic to expect interventions focused exclusively on economic outcomes to address deep and systemic issues around social status. Interpreting the findings as a whole suggest that even though employment programs impact a number of social outcomes, it is unlikely that those outcomes will alter social status motivations in such a way that reduces propensity towards political violence.

Hypothesis 3:



Participation in the INVEST program was associated with a 0.125 point increase in the 1-5 scale of perceptions of local government institutions–particularly their ability to create job opportunities. This may be because program participants gave some credit to the local government for improving vocational education opportunities. However, INVEST had no impact on participants’ views of the national government’s effectiveness in fulfilling its basic functions.

Increased confidence in local, informal institutions, including traditional leaders (*shuras*), civil society organizations and religious leaders was not found to predict lower support for and willingness to engage in political violence. Likewise, no such relationship was found between people’s confidence in formal Afghan institutions—including the national, provincial, and local government—and their willingness to engage in political violence.

These findings do not support the assertion that young Afghan's negative views of the effectiveness of local or national government bodies are a major driver of support for insurgent movements. The results also raise doubts regarding the ability of employment generation programs to influence young Afghans' propensity towards political violence and support for the Taliban by creating more confidence in the government.

1.4. Implications and Recommendations

The research presents new evidence on young Afghan's micro-level motivations for political violence. The results of this study shed light on the potential and limitations of economic development programs in fragile and conflict affected contexts. The insights generated have important implications for improving the effectiveness of investments in youth employment and stability interventions in Afghanistan and similar fragile states.

For policy makers:

Decouple employment and stabilization interventions: Our evidence cautions against assuming youth employment achievements will increase stability. Specifically, stabilization interventions that are based on cash for work and economic reintegration for young people may not produce the desired reduction in violence. Further, tying employment programs to stabilization outcomes may force such interventions to pursue the political goals at the expense of economic objectives, potentially achieving neither. Before investing significantly in stabilization programs in complex crises, more in-depth analysis is required to understand and respond to the drivers of conflict, why individuals support political violence, and the roles that employment and poverty play.

Replicate models for youth employment that have been successful in complex, kinetic environments. Policy makers should not expect economic development interventions alone to address deep and systemic issues that drive violence and instability. Yet supporting job creation for youth is important to economic development and growth in and of itself. The INVEST model has proven that it is possible to foster job creation, even in highly kinetic environments. This success was achieved by directly addressing the needs of the local market, employing local master trainers and business owners and providing practical, hands-on skills training. Future TVET programs should endeavor to adapt and include these strategies into their designs.

For researchers:

Invest in studying the long-term effects of employment on political violence. The significance of increased economic optimism on lower propensities for political violence suggests that employment programs like INVEST could have long-term effects on stability if their successes continued. Panel and longitudinal studies on trends of employment and impacts of employment programs are needed to fully assess the roles of long-term employment and improved economic conditions on political violence.

Examine the counterintuitive drivers of violence. Contrary to our expectations, having more business and social connections, being more confident, and identifying as an Afghan before one's tribe or religion were all associated with greater propensity towards political violence. Programs that affect these outcomes, which are often viewed as positive, may inadvertently exacerbate instability. Further research should be conducted to confirm or deny these relationships, better understand the underlying reasons for them, and help programs determine how they can, at a minimum, do no harm in these areas.

2. INTRODUCTION

Promoting stability is one of the primary objectives of nearly all major development actors operating in Afghanistan. The United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DfID) defines stabilization as an approach used in violent situations where it is difficult or impossible to pursue conventional programs; its aims are explicitly political: to help establish and sustain a legitimate government. Development policy to stabilize and reduce support for violence and armed opposition is often based on the assumption that the root cause of political violence, terrorism and insurgency lies in poverty and resource deprivation (DfID, 2005).

Youth play a critical role in this context as they are the largest demographic group in Afghanistan and the key pool of potential recruits for insurgent groups. Nearly 55 percent of the Afghan population is under 25 years old and 75 percent are under age 35 (CIA; NPR). The official youth unemployment rate stands at 12 percent -- but this figure masks the widespread under-employment and vulnerable employment (ILO, 2013). Many analysts fear this youth bulge, when combined with a high youth un/under-employment, and deep ethnic and social fragmentation, will lead to a significant increase in insurgent recruitment, violence, and a decrease in state legitimacy and capacity. Contributing to this concern is the perception of government elites and state institutions further entrenching existing inequalities and exacerbating grievances. In fact, Mercy Corps' previous analysis in Southern Afghanistan confirmed that youth's perception of corruption among government officials – and the Afghan society as a whole – is a strong predictor of sympathy towards armed opposition groups (Mercy Corps, 2013).

In response to these concerns, development actors have invested hundreds of millions of dollars in interventions aimed at improving economic opportunities for young Afghans. In Afghanistan, these kinds of interventions are often used as alternative livelihood initiatives to pull youth away from illegal sources of income like poppy cultivation, as this is seen to exacerbate destabilization in the region.

Stabilization through economic development and job creation programs in Afghanistan and other conflict-affected contexts relies on the assumption that improving economic opportunities will reduce young people's incentive to be mobilized by, or support, violent movements. However, recent studies have begun to question the link between the economic incentive offered through employment and a reduction in political violence (e.g. Berman et al., 2009; Beber & Blattman, 2013).

Mercy Corps has been working to test these links through impact evaluations and other forms of rigorous research in Somalia, Kenya, Liberia and most recently in Afghanistan. The impact evaluation in Afghanistan was conducted as part of Mercy Corps' *Introducing New Vocational Education and Skills Training* (INVEST) program. The objective of the DfID-funded INVEST program has been to increase youth employment in Helmand Province in Southern Afghanistan. This has been achieved by offering vocational and technical training courses in nine TVET centers across Helmand Province that link students to various career choices through private sector actors and business leader mentorship. Since its inception in 2011, over 25,000 students have graduated from the program, including 7,700 young women, with an average postgraduate employment rate of over 65 per cent.

It is important to note that the INVEST program's original theory of change hypothesized a relationship with economic outcomes only; the social, political, and violence-related outcomes were not conceived as part of the program's original design. However, given Mercy Corps and DfID's shared interest in understanding how interventions like INVEST may contribute to broader stability goals in the region by targeting a population that is traditionally sympathetic to the Taliban, the program provided a unique opportunity to determine if improved economic outcomes could decrease individuals' propensity towards political violence and insurgency.

2.1. Conflict in Helmand

Helmand is one of the most kinetic, dangerous, and poorest of the country's 34 provinces. With a population of 1.7 million where 94 percent are rural and 85 percent are under or unemployed, people are at risk of becoming involved in illicit activities such as poppy cultivation and harvesting. Moreover, weak state capacity has crippled the state's public service delivery. Eighty-four percent remain illiterate and 28 percent of households have a family member with a disability. Despite huge investments by the international community in education and health over the last 13 years – approximately \$20 billion in development from the US Government alone – adults have an average of 0.49 years of schooling and over 98.6 percent of adult women have never attended school. Only 3.5 percent of births are attended by a healthcare professional and access to improved water sources and sanitation facilities only reach 64 and 29 percent of the population, respectively (AREU Yearbook, 2013; World Bank database, 2012).

Helmand, where tensions between the Taliban and government remain, is also one of the major spiritual and physical homes of the Taliban. During their rise to power, the Taliban decimated existing tribal structures of power to ensure their own dominance in the region. After the ousting of the Taliban from Kabul in late 2001 by NATO-led forces, a process of “de-Talibanization” of the government in Helmand was enacted by the Karzai administration. As a result, former warlords and tribal leaders who had been pushed out of power by the Taliban rose to power and prominence. Much like the de-Baathification of Iraq, this forced restructuring of power dynamics led to a systemic disenfranchisement of those with any ties to the Taliban regime. In the early to mid-2000s under this new power dynamic, “lines of conflict between, on the one hand, warlord patronage networks that benefited from government largess and, on the other, disfranchised and downtrodden tribal communities, formed and hardened” (Farrell & Giustozzi, 2013, p. 848). Those in the former group reaped the benefits of development aid and support from NATO and International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) countries for virtue of being “anti-Taliban.” This disparity worsened divisive grievances between tribes and communities, pushing many who were previously neutral into the arms of the Taliban.

Increased fighting between the Taliban, the Afghan government and ISAF forces has led to increased instability and violence. ISAF night raids, civilian casualties, internal population displacement and the destruction of productive infrastructure by ongoing fighting further fuel grievances and the conflict in Helmand. The grievances felt by the local population, in addition to large swaths of ungoverned and uncontrolled spaces, allowed the Taliban the relative freedom to regroup and resurge.

Compounding these dynamics are cultural and social norms that limit young people's involvement in their communities. Young men crave status and power in their community, but the hierarchical norms create numerous barriers for achieving it. Additionally, the lack of employment limits their status in two ways—the status that a job in itself brings, but also that young men do not have enough money to pay a dowry, and therefore cannot get married. The Taliban and other militant groups become the only means for achieving status. Social and cultural norms also keep young women isolated within their homes, with little hope or knowledge of a different future.

The complex dynamics of the conflict in Helmand have made it nearly impossible for stabilization initiatives to gain traction. While there have been some major successes - the provincial capital of Lashkar Gar has been relatively free from violence - the majority of the province remains unstable. In the summer of 2014, the Taliban launched a major offensive in Helmand, making unprecedented gains in territory. Though a surge of Afghan troops aided remotely by ISAF seemed to slow the gains made by the Taliban in July and August of 2014, the offensive continues to move forward.

Given the confluence of poverty, weak service delivery and a conservative social structure, Helmand has provided an opportune environment to confirm or deny the theories of change surrounding political violence reduction through improved employment status and economic conditions.

2.2. INVEST in Helmand

INVEST is a youth vocational training program based in Helmand that trains young men and women across the province in a range of vocational skills. Over 80 percent of students that enrol in the program are functionally illiterate and most come from families that have been adversely affected by the decades of conflict that have ravaged Southern Afghanistan. The primary goal of INVEST is to help these youth develop skills that are responsive to local labour market needs and to support them with economic opportunities. In this respect, INVEST offers a range of more than 30 vocational and technical training courses in nine TVET centres across Helmand Province. The courses build practical skills and link participants to various career choices, including tailoring, embroidery, mobile phone repair, information technology, English, auto repair, carpentry, and other employment or self-employment ventures.

INVEST offers three and six month technical training courses across 32 technical skills that are complemented by transferable life skills such as communication and informal business mentoring. Students must attend classes regularly in order to graduate. If an individual is absent for more than 15 days during a 3 month course, or 25 days during a 6 month course, he/or she will fail the course. Except for extreme cases of poverty, participants are asked to pay a small fee ranging from 50-200 AFN (0.60 - 2.70 EUR), depending on the type of course taken. The strategy of payment for courses was introduced once the value of the course offerings was established with the community.

Depending on the course, students may receive start-up kits upon graduation. As the program progressed the graduation kits were slowly phased out for the majority of courses. The average cost of a start-up kit is approximately 90 EUR and can include items such as a toolbox or a sewing machine. If graduates could prove that their business was growing six months after graduation, they were then eligible to apply for a second start-up kit valued at around 150 EUR, which may have included larger items such as a generator.

The program targets vulnerable youth with limited alternative incomes, who are unemployed, widows, or female heads of households. Mercy Corps works through established community structures to identify eligible participants. Students are recruited via a range of methods: through *shuras* (or village councils), through government, or through schools. In addition to being recruited, participants can also directly register for the program at the INVEST program office. Participants are selected based on criteria established by the INVEST Program Steering Committee, comprised of representatives from all the key stakeholders in the program, including DfID, local leaders, and government line ministries. The same selection procedures and criteria are used for each incoming cohort of students.

2.3. Research Objectives and Hypotheses

The goal of this research is to examine the causal relationship between participation in youth employment programs and propensity towards political violence. To achieve this, we tested if the INVEST program impacted broader economic, social, and political stabilization outcomes. In order to generate findings applicable to other programs and contexts, the study examined three specific mechanisms through which the program is hypothesized to have had an effect on young Afghans' propensity toward political violence and support for the Taliban insurgency:

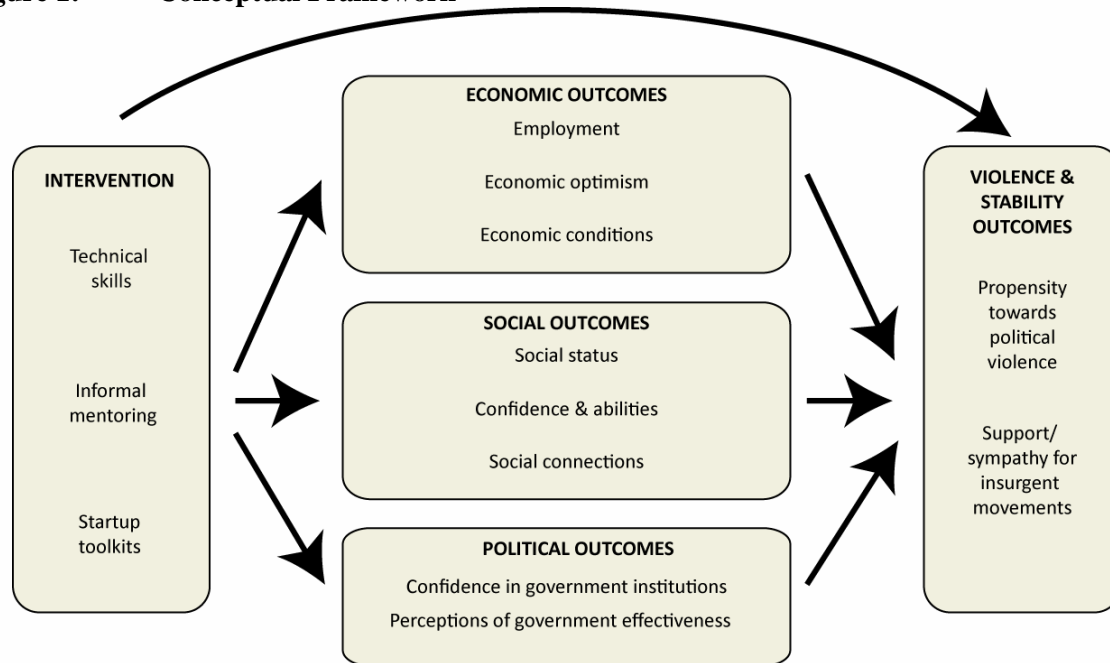
H₁: Participation in a TVET program will improve young people's employment status and economic conditions, thereby decreasing their financial incentive to support or engage in political violence.

H₂: Participation in a TVET program will improve young people's connection to and status within their community, thereby decreasing their social incentive to support or engage in political violence.

H₃: Participation in a TVET program will improve young people’s confidence in and perceptions of government performance in fulfilling basic functions, thereby decreasing the likelihood they will use violence to address grievances towards the government.

These hypotheses are illustrated in the conceptual framework for this research presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework



2.4. Theories of Change

We articulate three mechanisms through which the INVEST program potentially affected stability in Helmand. While the program was not designed explicitly to improve stability, the program’s interventions reflect a number of relevant theoretical frameworks that illuminate how the program may improve stability.

Supporting the research’s first hypothesis, the first theory of change explains how TVET participation will improve employment and reduce the attractiveness of financial incentives to support or engage in political violence. Historically, poverty, material deprivation and unemployment have been seen by policymakers and academics as the key structural driver of political violence (Russett, 1964; Feierabend et al., 1969; Hibbs, 1973; Fearon & Laitin, 2003; Collier & Hoeffler, 2001). The theory that links poverty and unemployment to an increased risk for political violence is that poverty increases the financial incentives for individuals to join and support politically violent movements (i.e., greed) (Collier & Hoeffler, 2001). The related theory of opportunity costs posits a rational actor model where people consider the costs and benefits of engaging in violence. In places where there are few jobs, especially for low-skilled labor, the cost for participating (risk of injury or death) is much lower than the benefit of participating (income, daily survival of self and family). Moreover, a greater number of unemployed youth increases the available pool of recruits while at the same time reducing “labor” costs of recruitment (Berman et al., 2011, p. 496). Based on these theories, programs that increase employment opportunities reduce the attractiveness of financial incentives (i.e., greed) and increase costs of participation (i.e., the assumption being you can either fight or work but not both).

This theory, found in civil wars and rebellion literature, is based on cross-national studies on macro-level motivators for violent collective action. While the literature on macro-level economic explanations of political violence is relatively abundant, it does not always translate to an individual-level explanation for drivers of conflict (e.g. Sambanis 2004; Berman et al., 2011; Beber & Blattman,

2010; Blattman & Miguel, 2010). Scholars have argued that a more nuanced look at sub-national data, which include both general trends and specific cultural and ideological contexts that could better explain why and how people are recruited into violent movements (Sambanis, 2004; Blattman & Miguel, 2010).

Recent studies examining individual, micro-level data on poverty and unemployment and support or engagement in violence illustrate the need for a more nuanced understanding of the drivers of violence. For example, studies on poverty and support for Islamic militancy in Pakistan have shown that an individual's wealth is not significantly correlated with their level of support for political violence (Fair et al., 2009; Blair et al., 2011). Mercy Corps' own research has found similar patterns. A Mercy Corps study in 2014 examined 13 sub-Saharan countries and only found a correlation between employment and participation in political violence in Liberia (Tesfaye, 2014). A separate Mercy Corps study in Somalia also showed no significant relationship between employment and participation in political violence (Wolfe & Kurtz, 2013).

Given the mixed evidence on causal links between employment, economic incentives, and individual motivations for political violence in the literature, we explored two additional mechanisms. The second theory of change reflects the study's second hypothesis and posits that employment will increase connection and status within the community, thereby decreasing the incentive to gain status or succumb to peer pressure to engage in political violence. Employment and financial resources help young men gain respect and move into adulthood by being able to get married and buy land. That status plays a main role for explaining the relationship between economic opportunities and participation in insurgent groups, and may explain some of the disparate results in the literature (Berman, et al., 2009; Beber & Blattman, 2010). In a study in Kenya, Mercy Corps (Kurtz, 2011) found that having a full- or part-time job was associated with less likelihood for youth to condone or have participated in political violence. However, the amount of income they earned showed no such relationship. This finding highlights the importance on the non-financial benefits of employment for youth, including the status and dignity that comes with having a decent job.

Additionally, role models and peer networks are often predictive of the types of behaviour youth engage in. They pull youth into groups, both negative groups such as gangs and militant organizations, as well as pro-social groups such as youth community service clubs (Hogan, 2008). For example, research in developmental psychology has shown that peers have more influence on young people's behaviour than their parents. Additionally, Humphreys and Weinstein (2008) found in Sierra Leone that whether youth had a friend in one of the militant movements - state or rebel - predicted whether they would become involved.

For the third theory of change, we examined perceptions of government performance, and whether improved employment opportunities provided by INVEST reduced grievances toward the Afghanistan government and therefore reducing participation in political violence, as suggested by the study's third hypothesis. As with employment, the literature is mixed as to whether reduction of governance-related grievances increases stability. While Collier and Hoeffler do not support this argument, others show that weak state capacity to provide services increases political grievances and instability (Fearon & Laitin, 2003; Baird, 2010). While the 2011 World Development Report argues that improved delivery of services will enhance stability, few studies have empirically examined whether improvements in specific service provision reduces grievances and political violence (Kooy, Wild & Mason, in press).

While there is a multitude of literature that links relative economic, political and social deprivation to political violence, empirical evidence on the ability of employment to overcome that deprivation is lacking. This study aims to contribute to filling this knowledge gap by empirically examining if and how the provision of vocational education and employment generation programs affects grievances and whether or not that can, in turn, affect individual attitudes towards political violence.

3. METHODOLOGY

The research first analyzed the part of the hypotheses that links participation in the INVEST program to the economic, social and political outcomes. Then the research examined the second part of each hypothesis by testing the explanatory power of each of the intermediary factors on outcomes of propensity towards political violence. By combining an impact evaluation of the INVEST program with an analysis of the theories of change underpinning the expected stabilization outcomes, the study was able to assess both the attributable effects of the program and identify the mechanisms through which attitudes and behaviors towards political violence may be influenced.

Randomly assigning participation in the INVEST program to some but not other eligible youth was not possible due to political and security considerations in Helmand. To approximate random assignment, the study employed a mixed-method quasi-experimental design to test the impact of participation in the INVEST program on propensity towards violence and to identify the factors that contribute to propensity towards violence amongst Afghan youth.

3.1. Data Collection

For the quantitative data collection, we carried out face-to-face surveys for a random sample of 1,129 previous and incoming students from the INVEST program between February and April 2014. The treatment group consisted of graduates from the INVEST program while the comparison group consisted of future students who had enrolled in the program but had not yet started classes. Since the INVEST's 3-month vocational training courses are offered to eligible youth once every three months, we employed a pipeline (or phased-in) design whereby a cohort who had graduated from the INVEST program 12 months prior to the study was compared to a cohort of incoming INVEST students. Because the selection process for cohorts of INVEST students remained the same over time, the treatment and comparison groups were similar on many observed and unobservable characteristics.

The qualitative data collection and analysis used individual and group-based interview techniques that took place in May 2014. Focus group interviews were conducted separately for male and female participants by trusted, local Mercy Corps staff. Being sensitive to gender dynamics in this region, only male staff facilitated focus group discussions with male participants while only female staff facilitated focus group interviews with female participants. Additionally, in-depth interviews were conducted with employed INVEST graduates (male and female), teachers, business owners and community and religious leaders.

3.1.1. Survey Instrument

Survey data was collected using mobile tablets to decrease errors in data recording and increase the ability to remotely monitor and back check information. Building on existing intake and program completion forms, the survey included modules with questions specifically aimed at measuring economic, social and political outcomes to measure the impact of participation in INVEST, as well as a module aimed at capturing propensities and attitudes towards political violence to measure the outcomes' association with violence. We then combined related survey questions into scaled measurements to operationalize concepts such as locus of control, respect, satisfaction with government services, economic outlook, employment and support and participation in violence. These operationalized outcomes were used to in both stages of each hypothesis, and are provided in Appendix B.

One key limitation of using survey data to measure support for violence is that respondents may distort or conceal their underlying beliefs on sensitive questions due to social desirability bias (Tourangeau & Yang, 2007). Especially in a place like Helmand Province, it is difficult to collect valid and honest responses on questions related to political violence and support for the Taliban. To

address this issue, in addition to asking these sensitive questions directly, we employed a list experiment to gauge the level of support for armed opposition groups using the following question:

“I’m going to read you a list with the names of different groups and individuals on it. After I read the entire list, I’d like you to tell me how many of these groups and individuals you broadly support, meaning that you generally agree with the goals and policies of the group or individual. Please don’t tell me which ones you generally agree with; only tell me how many groups or individuals you broadly support.”

Half of the sample was randomly selected and asked the question with only three options: *Karzai Government, National Solidarity Program* and *Local Farmers*. The other half of the sample was given the same three options plus *Armed Opposition Groups*. Examining the mean difference in the number of items chosen by the two groups allowed us to assess the overall support for armed opposition groups as a proxy for support for political violence.

Due to the highly sensitive nature of conducting primary research on topics of political violence in Afghanistan, the survey only assessed perceptions and attitudes towards political violence and the Taliban as a proxy for the potential to engage in political violence. It should be noted that favorable perceptions and attitudes towards political violence or an insurgent group may not lead to the actual use of violence. However, studies have shown that such beliefs are an important precursor to individual radicalization and recruitment into violence and can help increase the safe operating space for insurgent groups.

3.2. Identification Strategy

To create a comparison group, we used propensity score matching (PSM) to match graduated students with incoming students. We matched youth on baseline covariates that affect the outcome and are associated with being eligible for INVEST, including age, gender, education, literacy, religion, location (rural vs. urban), household poverty (measured through the Afghanistan Progress Out of Poverty Index) and household size. Variables that are not included in matching are used in the regression analyses as control variables.

The analysis uses kernel matching to create a counterfactual for each treatment observation by forming a weighted average of all the comparison observations. This approach makes use of all available information to reduce variance and does not depend on a larger sample size. If treatment and comparison observations are similar to each other on observable characteristics, then it is assumed they are similar across unobservable characteristics, as well. When this is the case, they fall under what is called common support. If a substantial number of treatment observations fall outside of common support, then the impact estimates are at risk of being biased. In this analysis, using a bandwidth of 0.05, only two treatment observations out of 465 fell outside of common support.

The balance tests in Table 1 below show that after matching, the treatment and comparison groups were comparable on key baseline indicators. The full results of the PSM can be found in Appendix A.

Table 1: Balancing Results

	Treatment Mean	Control Mean	P-value
Age	20.515	19.617	0.009***
Matched	20.509	20.729	0.456
Female	0.606	0.394	0.000***
Matched	0.604	0.611	0.817
Education	0.707	0.742	0.305
Matched	0.706	0.679	0.385
Literate	0.672	0.716	0.224
Matched	0.671	0.646	0.423
Sunni	0.679	0.784	0.002***
Matched	0.680	0.665	0.640
Rural	0.254	0.250	0.898
Matched	0.253	0.241	0.659
HH PPI	24.720	23.917	0.359
Matched	24.578	23.785	0.294
HH Size			
1st 25%	0.166	0.170	0.876
Matched	0.167	0.191	0.340
2nd 25%	0.356	0.360	0.909
Matched	0.357	0.315	0.176
3rd 25%	0.256	0.265	0.798
Matched	0.258	0.265	0.810

3.3. Analysis

3.3.1. Impact Analysis

The objective of the impact analysis was to measure if participation in the INVEST program resulted in attributable changes on economic, social, and political outcomes. To do this, we measured how participation in INVEST directly impacted outcomes of political violence. The impact estimate for the direct effects of participation in the program on violence outcomes was found by comparing mean responses between matched treatment and comparison groups on the list experiment responses.

In addition, we measured the degree to which participation in the program affected key intermediate outcomes thought to be linked to support for violence in three areas: employment, social status and connections, and perceptions of government performance. Logit regressions were used for models with binary outcomes and ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions were used for those with continuous scaled outcomes. In all models we control for factors such as ethnicity, distance from town and roads, marital status, household head characteristics (employment, gender, and education), religion, and access to transport. The coefficients in the impact analysis represent the effect of participation in INVEST on intermediate outcomes. For example, having participated in INVEST increases the likelihood of being employed by 35.7 percentage points. The full results for the tests of INVEST program effects can be found in Appendix C.

3.3.2. Correlation Analysis

Following a theory-driven approach, we used correlation analysis to estimate the relationship between economic, social, and political factors with propensity towards political violence. The study used the responses from two key questions in the political violence module of the survey in order to measure these correlations:

- **Willingness to Engage in Political Violence:** *Would you use violence to fight against an unfair law or regime or decision of the State? [1 = would not use violence; 0 = would use violence]*
- **Support for Political Violence:** *If a citizen of your country uses violence to fight against an unfair law or regime or decision of the State, is it justified? [1 = it is never justified; 0 = it is sometimes justified]*

We tested several different model specifications:

1. Regressing intermediate outcomes and propensity towards violence separately on demographic characteristics. The set of demographic characteristics was revised to include only those which were significant for at least one outcome, or which were considered theoretically important (such as exposure to violence). This final set of controls was then used in subsequent steps.
2. Regressing propensity towards violence on each group of intermediate outcomes (employment, perceptions of government performance, social status and connections) separately, controlling for demographic characteristics. For each of the three groups, the regression was repeated with only outcomes that were significant, or which were considered theoretically important and distinct from other outcomes (for example, perception of national government was included although not significant, as it is logically different than perception of local government or confidence in primarily local institutions.).
3. Regressing propensity towards violence on all intermediate outcomes together, controlling for demographic characteristics. Several iterations of the model were used to examine whether the intermediate outcomes were interacting with each other, but the final model used contained all those carried over from Step 2.

The best-fit model with the largest number of significant variables and the highest adjusted R-squared is used in the findings section of this report. As all the dependent variables for propensity towards violence were binary, we used logit and robust logit estimations to identify explanatory variables that were significant in both cases. The coefficients in the correlation analysis represent the marginal effect of the intermediate outcome on the political violence outcome. For example, a one unit increase anywhere along a participant's scaled 5-unit locus of control increases the likelihood that the participant would use violence against an unfair state decision by 11.3 percentage points. The full regression models for the correlation mapping can be found in Appendix D.

3.4. Limitations

A few limitations apply to the results of the evaluation, stemming from the structure of the study and the highly sensitive nature of topics explored:

- **Response Bias:** As all outcomes are self-reported, we acknowledge the possibility of bias in responses as respondents may be suspicious of why the data was being collected, especially if being gathered by a stranger. For employment and income variables, this bias could include underreporting in the hopes of receiving additional training or resources, or over-reporting to

validate Mercy Corps' perceived desires. The bias could be severe for political and violence outcomes, as respondents may have feared reprisal from either government or opposition forces for opinions for or against either group. Admitting to have used violence, in particular, is likely to have been drastically affected by the respondents' fear of how the information could be used. Even using such techniques as the list experiment to help to reduce bias, estimations may not fully relay underlying beliefs, particularly if respondents are familiar with such experiments (Imai, 2011).

- *Limited Baseline Characteristics:* Because the data for economic factors such as income and expenditures was not available prior to participation in the INVEST program, we match the treatment group largely using time-invariant characteristics. These economic characteristics may have influenced the likelihood of program participation, outcome variables, or both. As such, there may be bias in estimates of program impact, particularly impact on economic outcomes.
- *Generalizability:* The results of this evaluation apply to a specific cohort and environment. In particular, participants in the INVEST program met certain criteria in order to enter the training. In many cases, this included approval by their *shura*. Both the treatment and comparison groups may therefore have different characteristics than the general population, such as having more influence in their communities. Training may have also affected them differently than it would a truly random selection of Afghan youth.

4. FINDINGS

4.1. Did participation in INVEST affect propensity towards political violence?

The overall relationship between participation in the INVEST program and attitudes towards political violence were inconclusive. Multiple questions were used in the survey to gauge respondents' attitudes towards political violence and the results across them were mixed. Participation in INVEST was found to significantly decrease youth's likelihood to engage in political violence if provoked, but significantly increase their likelihood to use violence against an unfair law or state decision. Furthermore, participation in INVEST had no significant effect on beliefs regarding whether political violence is ever justified. The results from the list experiment questions suggest that the participation in INVEST shows a slight but not statistically significant decrease in the support for the Taliban.

The seemingly contradictory patterns of responses to several of the violence-related questions indicate that response bias is likely to be present. For example, there is a well-established high level of popular support for the Taliban as an organization in Helmand, though there is less support for their campaigns. Given this, it was questionable to see an almost 100 percent lack of support amongst the comparison group respondents to the question regarding their sympathy for armed opposition groups. The treatment group's responses to this question were low, but are closer to what one would expect from valid responses in the general population. The significant differences between the comparison and treatment groups on the sympathy question – and possibly others – can most likely be attributed to respondents' unequal levels of trust and comfort with the Mercy Corps' surveyors. Given that comparison respondents were just entering the INVEST program and largely unfamiliar with the program staff, they may have felt less secure than the treatment respondents to reveal their true preferences¹.

¹ This was confirmed by cognitive interviews during which we debriefed with a sample of respondents during piloting of the survey to understand their level of comfort and honesty with the more sensitive questions.

Table 2: Impact of INVEST on Violence Outcomes

Outcome	Impact
List Experiment: Support armed opposition groups	-0.128
Believes using violence against an unfair law or State decision is unjustified	-0.087**
Would not use violence to fight an unfair law or State decision	-0.081*
Agrees that violence is never justified in Afghan politics	-0.040
Has no sympathy for armed opposition groups	-0.232***
Would not use violence for a political cause, even if provoked	0.082***

The findings from the list experiment to assess support for armed opposition groups produced more realistic results for both the treatment and comparison groups.² The analysis found a slight, but not statistically significant, difference in the means (0.128) suggests that the treatment group showed a lower level of support for armed opposition groups than the comparison group.

Figure 2: List Experiment Results: Support for Armed Opposition

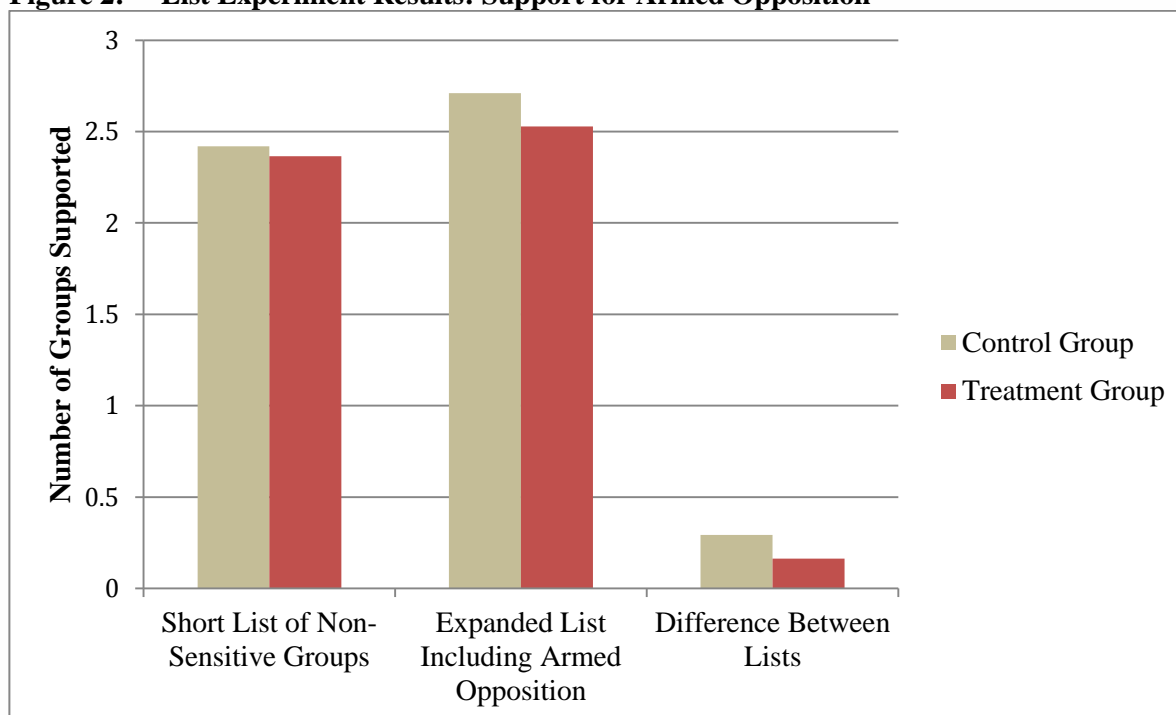


Figure 2 shows the results of the list experiment. The first set of columns shows the number of groups respondents reporting supporting on the neutral, short list, which included Karzai government,

² The results of the list experiments do not capture marginal, individual-level effects. In other words, the differences in support for armed opposition groups found by the list experiments can only be interpreted for the treatment and comparison groups as a whole, as opposed to how INVEST changed an individual's support for armed opposition groups.

National Solidarity Program, and local farmers. The second set of columns shows the number of groups respondents supported when armed opposition groups are added to the list. An average increase of 1 between the short and long lists would reveal that all respondents supported the armed opposition groups, while no change at all would mean no support for them. As can be seen graphically, there is a *smaller* increase for the treatment group versus the control group when opposition groups are added to the list. However, the difference-in-difference for treatment versus control is not statistically significant.

Overall, INVEST had limited impacts on changes in attitudes towards political violence and insurgent groups. The following sections unpack these findings by testing individual theories of change that were believed to link INVEST to decreased propensity towards political violence through intermediate outcomes.

4.2. Economic Outcomes and Political Violence

H₁: Participation in a TVET program will improve young people’s employment status and economic condition, thereby decreasing their financial incentive to support or engage in political violence.

The analysis finds that INVEST was successful in increasing employment for its participants. These findings strongly support the first stage of the first hypothesis that links INVEST to intermediate economic outcomes. These results are not surprising given economic development was the primary focus of the program and the employment rates reported in the program’s internal evaluations were high. The analysis then turns to the second stage of the hypothesis that links employment with propensities towards political violence. While unemployment was highlighted by many participants and community members through focus groups and interviews as a key factor in Taliban-led political violence and recruitment in the area, results from the survey showed employment status had no effect on support for political violence. The only outcome to yield significant results for both stages of this hypothesis was economic optimism: INVEST significantly and positively impacted economic optimism, which is significantly associated with a decrease in willingness to engage in and support for political violence.

4.2.1. Did INVEST improve participants’ employment status and other economic conditions?

Analysis shows that participation in INVEST increased the likelihood of being employed by nearly 36 percentage points. The effects on employment were driven largely by urban males, as they were predicted to have a 57 percentage point increase in the probability of employment after participation in INVEST. Given the counterfactual analysis, the study can confidently attribute the increase in employment among INVEST graduates to the program as opposed to any other outside events, such as growth in the local economy.

Participation in INVEST increased the probability of having done paid work in the previous four weeks by 12.7 percentage points. Not only were INVEST participants more likely than the comparison group to have undertaken paid work in the past month, they also reported higher levels of satisfaction with their main job.

The results showed that INVEST was associated with a 0.171 point increase in the 1-5 scale of participants’ economic optimism, which includes participant’s beliefs they can find work or start a new business locally. Program participants saw a 19.5 percentage point increase in the likelihood of having engaged in economic activity with another tribal group in the past week. Like the effect on employment status, this effect was also driven primarily by urban males. As a whole, INVEST did not have an effect on the number of business connections participants had.

Table 3: Impact of INVEST on Economic Outcomes

Outcome	Impact
Currently Employed	0.357***
Earned income in past 4 weeks	0.127***
More economically optimistic	0.171**
More business connections	0.014
More frequent cross-tribal economic activity	0.195***

Further research into the impact of INVEST revealed three key reasons for its success in improving economic outcomes. According to the interviews with program managers and master trainers, one reason for success was the program’s strategy to link training to the current needs of the local market. The INVEST team conducted iterative market studies to assess labor market needs and gaps, then subsequently created courses that specifically addressed those needs. This meant that participants graduated with demand-driven skills, thus making it easier for them to secure employment and increase income.

The second reason for success was to employ local master trainers and established business owners as teachers for the INVEST courses. These private sector actors were reported to be able to impart valuable technical skills to their students. The master trainers know what fundamental skills are needed for a person to be immediately employable and add value to an existing shop. For example, a tailoring assistant must know how to cut and sew in order to be an attractive hire. The teachers are able to use this knowledge in designing their curriculum. Furthermore, many of the instructors informally mentored and stayed in contact with their students post-graduation.

Thirdly, interviews of shop keepers and business owners showed that local employers preferred to hire INVEST graduates over their peers. When asked why they had this preference, they answered in a version of the following:

I want to hire [INVEST] students because they come knowing what they need to know. With [others] it takes two years before they can sew. They [INVEST students] can start right away. It makes me more productive and able to sell more. (Owner of a Tailoring shop in Lashkar Gah, interview May 2014)

One major difference between the INVEST program and traditional apprenticeships was that INVEST students were *practically* trained in market driven skills which allows them to engage in productive work immediately upon hire. Traditional off-the-street hires and apprentices take between two and four years to be able to engage in productive work. For example, because a shop may only have two sewing machines and needs those to produce output, the shop owner cannot spare the time to teach an apprentice to sew. Bringing practical skills immediately to the job increases the incentives and benefits for employers to hire the INVEST students, resulting in high levels of employment after graduation.

In the past, I didn’t know any skill and I couldn’t work with others because the workshops owners said that they don’t need unskilled partners who destroy their business. But now they ask me to work in their workshops as a partner and are trying to be in touch with me to learn something from me. But I am trying to have my own business and pass this skill to my younger relatives. (Participant 1, *Male Graduate Focus Group*, Lashkar Gah, May 2014)

These three aspects allowed INVEST to achieve employment rates of up to 65 percent for the first cohort studied (Alcis, 2013). This is far higher than evaluations of other TVET courses (Tripney et al.,

2013). These employment rates dropped, not unexpectedly, as INVEST introduced more and more skilled workers to the market place, thus increasing competition for jobs. However, even with the increase in competition, our research found that INVEST graduates had significantly higher levels of economic optimism than their peers in the comparison group.

It is important that to be always optimistic, hopeful and think positively. We should never use the term “I can’t” because it gives you a sense of desperation and if you say I can’t do this or that so you lose your resistance... I think a year later my business will be enhanced compared to now, and there will be remarkable progress in my business because I will obtain more experience and will have more clients too.” (Participant 2, *Male Graduate Focus Group*, Lashkar Gah, May 2014)

The optimism epitomized by these graduates’ responses was echoed throughout the focus group discussions and graduate interviews. Even for those who had yet to find employment, their acquisition of skills and sense of worth seemed to make them hopeful for the future.

4.2.2. Does being employed decrease young people’s propensity towards political violence?

While we found strong evidence that INVEST positively impacted participants economic outcomes, analysis of the survey data showed that these changes are not necessarily associated with a reduction in young Afghans’ sympathy for political violence or the insurgency.

The results were mixed across the different relationships tested. Being employed was not significantly associated with either a willingness to engage in or support for violence against the state. Nor was there a relationship between propensity towards political violence and cross-tribal economic activity.

Interestingly, each additional point on the scale of business connections significantly increased the probability of being willing to use violence to fight an unfair law or state decision by 4.4 percentage points; and the probability of believing that violence is justified against an unfair law or state decision by 4.6 percentage points. However, the link to INVEST is incomplete since INVEST did not significantly impact participants’ business connections.

The link from INVEST to reducing propensity towards political violence was completed only through economic optimism. Each additional point on the scale of economic optimism decreased the likelihood of being willing to engage in political violence by 9.7 percentage points and decreased the support for violence against the state by 9.4 percentage points. These results indicate that economic optimism may serve as an important mechanism linking employment programs like INVEST to propensities towards political violence. However, they should be interpreted as long-term effects as economic optimism focuses on the perceived future economic conditions and opportunities of participants.

Table 4: Association of Economic Outcomes with Violence Propensities

Outcome	Unwillingness	Unjustified
Currently Employed	0.036	0.039
More economically optimistic	0.097**	0.094**
More business connections	-0.044**	-0.046**
More frequent cross-tribal economic activity	0.000	-0.007

Overall, the inconclusive findings call into question the idea that the jobs and income gained from TVET programs like INVEST can reduce propensities towards political violence. More fundamentally, the lack of correlation found between employment status and our two political violence outcomes challenges one of the most frequently referenced links in stabilization literature and policy.

Academics and policy makers are not the only ones to be laboring under a false perception of employment's explanatory power. The qualitative data found that unemployment was perceived by nearly all focus group participants and interviewees as the primary root cause of political violence, criminality and the insurgency.

These unemployed youth, who are uneducated, who haven't any skill and occupation, can commit crimes such joining the Taliban, using drugs, even suicide attacks and many other thoughts can mislead them because they are under [financial] pressures." (Participant 3, *Male Graduate Focus Group*, Lashkar Gah, May 2014)

[The Taliban] control the poor and provoke them to suicide attacks and usually the rich people misuse the poor and have destroyed Afghanistan. So, the main problem is unemployment (Participant 1, *Control Focus Group*, Lashkar Gah, May 2014)

This disconnect between the qualitative data and the survey results may be a result of the difference between perceived versus actual economic conditions. As Fair (2013) explained, although there may not be a direct causal link between the tangible benefits of employment – such as increased income – and violence, there may be a very real link between one's perception of their economic situation and their attitudes towards political violence. In other words, the perceived relative deprivation of an individual may be just as important as their actual deprivation in explaining their likelihood to engage in or support violence for a political cause. The positive impact of economic optimism on decreasing political violence adds credence to this assumption. Participants' perception of their opportunity to better their own economic circumstance in the future was strongly associated with decreased support for political violence.

Given the weak association between better economic conditions and decreased political violence outcomes, the analysis rejects the assumption in the second stage of the first hypothesis that links economic outcomes to violence. Unemployment does not appear to be a major driver of young Afghans' propensity towards political violence – at least the forms of violence examined through this study.

4.3. Social Outcomes and Political Violence

H₂: Participation in a TVET program will improve young people's connection to and status within their community, thereby decreasing their social incentive to support or engage in political violence.

The INVEST program had a significantly positive impact on five of the eleven measured social outcomes. The program had the largest magnitude impacts on participants' social connections and respondents' perceptions of being treated unfairly, and the most significant impact on identifying as an Afghan above a tribe or religion. The results showed no effects on participants' personal confidence, locus of control, their perceived position in society, or their feelings of being respected in their community. The analysis then turns to the second stage of the hypothesis that links the same indicators of social standing to support for political violence. The analysis finds little evidence that social outcomes can decrease support for political violence. Higher respect within the community was the only social factor found to be positively associated with a decrease in support for political violence. Personal confidence, social connections, and identifying as an Afghan were also highly significantly associated with the two violence outcomes, but the relationship was opposite of what

was predicted in the theory of change. Given the relatively weak connections between the INVEST program and social outcomes, and between social conditions and a decrease in propensities towards political violence, the analysis rejects the second hypothesis.

4.3.1. Did INVEST improve participants’ social status or connections?

The INVEST program was found to increase participants’ social connections, increasing the likelihood that participants felt they had more friends than most people that they could turn to for help by about 11 percentage points. However, when controlling for gender and location, the results find that this effect is mostly due to urban males. Similar results after disaggregation were also found in the likelihood of having engaged in social activities with another tribe in the previous week. For urban males, that likelihood increased 33.8 percentage points, whereas it decreased 29.2 percentage points for females – both significant at the 1 percent level. These contradictory results yielded a less significant, smaller effect for the treatment group as a whole. For all of those who participated in INVEST, the likelihood of cross-tribal social activity increased 10 percentage points.

Perceived discrimination was also impacted by participation in INVEST. Having participated in the INVEST program increased the perception of having been treated unfairly in the previous three months by 0.22 points on a 1-4 scale. Participation in INVEST did not impact perceived levels of respect within a community, nor did it impact personal confidence and feelings of control over one’s life.

Major differences are seen in the impacts of INVEST on perceived position in society when controlling for gender – though these were only slightly significant. INVEST is observed to increase urban males’ perceptions of their position in society by about 0.43 points on a 1-3 scale, but decrease the same perceptions for urban females by 0.54 points. This difference is not unexpected given that there are deeply entrenched gender norms and behaviors in Helmand that adversely affect women. By most accounts, women have low social standing within their communities. The negative association between INVEST and female perceptions of positions within society may be attributed to the fact that women are more likely to feel constrained by these gender norms, and so reduce their own perception of their position after completing the INVEST program.

Table 5: Impact of INVEST on Social Outcomes

Outcome	Impact
Higher personal confidence	0.040
Locus of control	0.037
Treated unfairly less often	0.217**
Higher respect among community	0.042
Higher perceived social standing at present	0.001
Higher predicted social standing in future	-0.004
More social connections	0.107**
More frequent cross-tribal social activity	0.100*
Identify as an Afghan above tribe or religion	0.081***

Lastly, INVEST had strong, significant and positive effects on participants identifying as an Afghan above a tribe or religion. The program increased the likelihood of this nationalistic identification by 8.1 percentage points.

The least surprising of these results was INVEST's impact on increasing social networks and making new friends. Participation in INVEST is itself a social activity and the INVEST facilities help to maximize that utility by providing spaces for students to pray, eat and take breaks together. It is expected, therefore, that individuals in an environment like INVEST would be more likely to expand participants' social networks.

The qualitative findings helped provide explanations for the wide variation in the survey results. Key informants reported that age is key to respect and value within Afghanistan, especially in rural areas of Helmand where Pashtunwali traditions are almost unbreakably strong. Within this tradition, elders are trusted to resolve conflicts and make other important decisions that affect families and communities, often to the exclusion of youth voices. Within this value system is an inherent lack of respect for and bias against youth, who are traditionally seen to be wild, irrational and untrustworthy. This sentiment is shared by both youth and elders.

I want to say that always young people and teenagers do suicide attacks because they can be easily enticed by others they have strong senses and mentalities so I haven't seen an old man in doing suicide attacks (Participant 3, *Male Control Group Focus Group*, Lashkar Gah, May 2014)

Although prevalent, this system is less rigid in urban areas. During the interviews, employers (including master trainers) noted that INVEST graduates are more respectful, disciplined and hardworking after completing the program. The interviews showed that prior to INVEST, students who had little skills and were previously unemployed exhibited a myriad of anti-social behaviors and general laziness. The interviewees pointed to the rigor of INVEST courses combined with the skilled leadership and teaching of the master trainers that helped rein in antisocial behavior among the INVEST students and increase their feelings of self-worth and ability.

While there are instances where employment might help increase youth standing in their families and communities, most of the time it is still age and gender, not employment or education or other westernized traditional leadership qualities that determine respect, especially in more traditional rural communities.

The differences between urban and rural locations and men and women in the analysis suggest that social inclusion has roots that are deeper than simply being employed or unemployed. INVEST did aim to increase youth's standing within the community through employment, but the link between employment and respect was not strong enough to overcome the historical and cultural biases facing youth, especially in rural Helmand.

4.3.2. Is a higher social status and stronger social networks linked to a lower propensity towards political violence?

Very few of the social outcomes were observed to be associated with a reduction in either one of the violence propensity outcomes. In fact, three social outcomes – personal confidence, number of friends, and identifying as an Afghan – were found to be highly significant and perversely associated with propensity towards political violence. Only an increase in respect in the community was seen to be associated with lower propensity towards violence, as measured through the two outcomes.

Table 6: Association of Social Outcomes with Violence Propensities

Outcome	Unwillingness	Unjustified
Higher personal confidence	-0.133***	-0.137***
Locus of control	0.113*	0.095
Treated unfairly less often	-0.016	-0.013
Higher respect among community	0.154***	0.141***
Higher perceived social standing at present	0.096	0.102
Higher predicted social standing in future	0.001	-0.006
More friends	-0.056***	-0.056***
More frequent cross-tribal social activity	-0.007	0.004
Identify as an Afghan above tribe or religion	-0.298***	-0.318***

Contrary to theoretical assumptions, higher personal confidence and more social connections were observed to have a significant relationship with a greater willingness to engage in and support violence against the state. Specifically, each additional point on the scale of confidence in one's personal abilities is associated with an approximate increase of 13 percentage points in both of the outcomes of propensity towards political violence. Likewise, having more friends than most increases the probability of being willing to engage in or support violence against the state by 5.6 percentage points each. These findings mirror our results from Somalia (Wolfe and Kurtz 2013). One potential explanation for the results related to confidence is that those who believe they can change things will use what tools are available. In Afghanistan, one common tool is violence. Those with less confidence may feel helpless that things can change and not even try to influence others (Maier, S, Peterson, C. & Schwartz, B., 2000). With regard to findings related to peers, who the peers are has been found to be more important than number of peers (Humphreys, M & Weinstein, 2004). Future research should look at who peers are and whether the affiliations of peers shift as a result of youth programs.

Surprisingly, identifying oneself as an Afghan above a tribe or religion is associated with a 29.8 percentage point increase in the probability of being willing to engage in political violence and a 32 percent point increase in believing violence is sometimes justified against unfair state decisions. This finding runs counter to what we have found in previous studies. For example, Kenyan youth who give greater priority to their national identity than their tribal were shown to be less likely to engage in or approve of political violence (Kurtz, 2011). In contrast to Kenya, however, youth who identify with being Afghan may feel their nation is at risk and will defend it from insurgents and outsiders at all costs, especially considering the historical context of being invaded repeatedly by outsiders.

The analysis strongly show that youth with greater respect in the community are less likely to be willing to engage in political violence and to believe violence is justified in Afghan politics. However, the link to INVEST is incomplete as the program was not found to have had a significant impact on participants' perceived levels of respect.

Overall, INVEST did achieve some impact on its key social outcomes, mainly on urban males. The findings show moderate support the first stage of the second hypothesis, that participation in INVEST increases a participants' connection to and status within their community. However, the analysis of the association of these social outcomes with propensities towards political violence ran contrary to our theoretical assumptions. The findings show interesting connections that cannot be explained by this study's theory of change and would benefit from further research.

4.4. Political Outcomes and Political Violence

H₃: Participation in a TVET program will improve young people's confidence in and perceptions of government performance in fulfilling basic functions, thereby decreasing the likelihood they will use violence to address grievances towards the government.

As with previous sections, this section begins with an analysis of INVEST's impact on three political outcomes: youth's perceptions of the performance of the (1) national government and (2) local/municipal government in fulfilling basic functions, including providing education, health care, job creation, and fighting corruption; and (3) their confidence in institutions and officials in performing their jobs. Results showed only slightly positive impacts of INVEST on the perceptions of local government performance. The analysis then examines the link between political outcomes and propensities towards political violence and does not find any significant associations.

4.4.1. Did INVEST improve participants' confidence in and perception of government performance?

Participation in INVEST did not appear to improve youths' perceptions of the performance of the Afghan National Government or confidence in institutions. This result is not surprising, as perceived widespread corruption and inefficacy in both the national and local governments of Afghanistan has led to pervasive negative views of the government within the Afghan population. Issues of service delivery at a national level are difficult to address through a short-term localized employment intervention like INVEST. Likewise, perceptions towards governmental performance on foreign policy, corruption, and long-term security are difficult to address through employment programs. Indeed, the data show that participation in INVEST had no significant impact on perceptions towards national government performance or confidence in institutions.

Participation in INVEST did have a slightly significant positive impact on perceptions of *local* government performance. Those who participated in INVEST were found to show a 0.125 point increase on the 1-5 scale of opinion of local government performance. This was driven largely by more favorable views on local governments' abilities in job creation. The differences in the program's impacts on perceptions between national and local government performance suggests that participants acknowledge local government's attempt to make employment a priority by supporting programs like INVEST.

INVEST did not have any impact on participants' confidence in governance institutions when combined as a single measure. The insignificant results were in part driven by a large divide between urban and rural respondents. Participation in INVEST significantly decreases confidence in Afghan institutions amongst urban males by 0.284 points, but increases the same outcome for urban females by 0.252 points - significant at the 1 and 10 percent levels, respectively. In addition, the effects on confidence in institutions were split by the type of institution. The program had positive effects on participants' confidence in local government officials, but these were offset by participants having less confidence in national government officials, the Afghan police, and religious leaders.

Unemployment and a stagnant economy is, of course, one of the largest complainants lodged against the government and it would seem likely that an employment program would be well-poised to impact perceptions on these key issues. However, the data show that participation in INVEST had no significant impact on changing attitudes toward national government performance, even on job creation.

Table 7: Impact of INVEST on Political Outcomes

Outcome	Impact
Improved perception of national government performance	0.068
Improved perception of local government performance	0.125*
Higher confidence in community and government institutions	-0.041

4.4.2. Are positive perceptions of government performance associated with a lower propensity towards political violence?

Analysis of the relationship between political outcomes and propensities towards political violence did not yield significant results on either violence measure. No relationship was found between confidence in Afghan institutions – including the national, provincial, and local government – and their propensity towards political violence.

Although INVEST did have a slight impact on participants’ perception of local government performance, this outcome was not significantly associated with a willingness to engage in or support for political violence, thus leaving the link from INVEST to violence through political outcomes incomplete. These results raise doubts regarding the ability of employment generation programs to influence young Afghans propensity towards political violence and support for the Taliban by creating more confidence in the government.

Table 8: Association of Political Outcomes with Violence Propensities

Outcome	Unwillingness	Unjustified
Improved perception of national government performance	0.019	0.033
Improved perception of local government performance	0.046	0.038
Higher confidence in community and government institutions	0.018	0.019

5. CONCLUSION

The INVEST program was highly successful in impacting economic outcomes amongst participating youth in one of the most violent provinces of Afghanistan. However, the INVEST program had only minor impacts on the type of social changes examined, and nearly zero impact on political outcomes hypothesized to be linked to youth propensity towards political violence.

A significant link from the INVEST program to violence was only completed through three outcomes across the entire analysis: economic optimism, social connections and identifying as an Afghan. The social connections and identifying as an Afghan were both perversely associated with propensity towards violence. The analysis is summarized in table 9, which matches intermediate outcomes to the INVEST program impacts, as well as to the association with the political violence outcomes.

Table 9: INVEST's Impact on Outcomes and their Association with Violence Propensities

Economic Outcomes	INVEST's Impact	Association with Political Violence	
		Unwillingness	Unjustified
Currently Employed	0.357***	0.036	0.039
Earned income in past 4 weeks	0.127***		
More economically optimistic	0.171**	0.097**	0.094**
More business connections	0.014	-0.044**	-0.046**
More frequent cross-tribal economic activity	0.195***	0.000	-0.007
Social Outcomes			
Higher personal confidence	0.040	-0.133***	-0.137***
Locus of control	0.037	0.113*	0.095
Treated unfairly more often	0.217**	-0.016	-0.013
Higher respect among community	0.042	0.154***	0.141***
Higher perceived social standing at present	0.001	0.096	0.102
Higher predicted social standing in future	-0.004	0.001	-0.006
More friends	0.107**	-0.056***	-0.056***
More frequent cross-tribal social activity	0.100*	-0.007	0.004
Identify as an Afghan above tribe or religion	0.081***	-0.298***	-0.318***
Political Outcomes			
Improved perception of national government performance	0.068	0.019	0.033
Improved perception of local government performance	0.125*	0.046	0.038
Higher confidence in community and government institutions	-0.041	0.018	0.019

These results suggest that the lack of impact on stabilization was not a failure of the design of the INVEST program, but a failure of the theory that links these outcomes to employment. These results reinforce the need to further study root causes of violence and indicate that perhaps Stohl and Sambanis were correct in that psychological and ideological drivers of political violence, which were not addressed in this study, might have more explanatory power on individual motivations for political violence. Alternative in-depth qualitative studies on drivers of political violence in Afghanistan give credence to this assumption. In their study on the Taliban in Helmand, Theo Farrell and Antonio Giustozzi found that of the Taliban and ex-Taliban fighters they interviewed, it was mainly ideological and religious motivations, “such as an Islamic duty to fight against the *kafirs* [infidels]” that led them to political violence (Farrell & Giustozzi, 2013, p. 853). A recent Mercy Corps qualitative study substantiates these findings; rather than instrumental reasons, such as financial support, as the main driver of youth participation in or support of violence, youth revealed that it was emotions related to injustice and discrimination that drove their support and participation in violence (Proctor, 2015). The significance of increased economic optimism on decreasing propensities for

political violence suggest that there is a possibility that employment and programs like INVEST could have longer-term effects on stability if their successes continue. Further panel and longitudinal studies on trends of employment and impacts of employment programs are needed to fully assess the roles of long-term employment and economic stability in political violence.

Though tempting from a policy perspective and an academic standpoint, an employment-related silver bullet approach to stabilization in Helmand province is not likely to yield results, given the complexities of the conflict in Helmand. While improvements to the economic conditions of Helmandi youth may ease some of the pressure they feel in day to day life, it might not be enough to overcome deep seeded social and ideological grievances or motivations that lead some to engage in political violence.

5.1. Recommendations

The results of this study shed new light on the potential and limitations of economic development programs in fragile and conflict affected contexts. The insights generated have important implications for improving the effectiveness of investments in youth employment and stability interventions in Afghanistan and similar fragile states.

For policy makers:

Decouple employment and stabilization interventions: Our evidence cautions against assuming youth employment achievements will increase stability. Specifically, stabilization interventions that are based on cash for work and economic reintegration for young people may not produce the desired reduction in violence. Further, tying employment programs to stabilization outcomes may force such interventions to pursue the political goals at the expense of economic objectives, potentially achieving neither. Before investing significantly in stabilization programs in complex crises, more in-depth analysis is required to understand and respond to the drivers of conflict, why individuals support political violence, and the roles that employment and poverty play.

Replicate models for youth employment that have been successful in complex, kinetic environments. Policy makers should not expect economic development interventions alone to address deep and systemic issues that drive violence and instability. Yet supporting job creation for youth is important to economic development and growth in and of itself. The INVEST model has proven that it is possible to foster job creation, even in highly kinetic environments. This success was achieved by directly addressing the needs of the local market, employing local master trainers and business owners and providing practical, hands-on skills training. Future TVET programs should endeavor to adapt and include these strategies into their designs.

For researchers:

Invest in studying the long-term effects of employment on political violence. The significance of increased economic optimism on lower propensities for political violence suggests that employment programs like INVEST could have long-term effects on stability if their successes continue. Panel and longitudinal studies on trends of employment and impacts of employment programs are needed to fully assess the roles of long-term employment and improved economic conditions on political violence.

Examine the counterintuitive drivers of violence. Contrary to our expectations, having more business and social connections, being more confident, and identifying as an Afghan before one's tribe or religion were all associated with greater propensity towards political violence. Programs that affect these outcomes, which are often viewed as positive, may inadvertently exacerbate instability. Further research should be conducted to confirm or deny these relationships, better understand the underlying reasons for them, and help programs determine how they can, at a minimum, do no harm in these areas.

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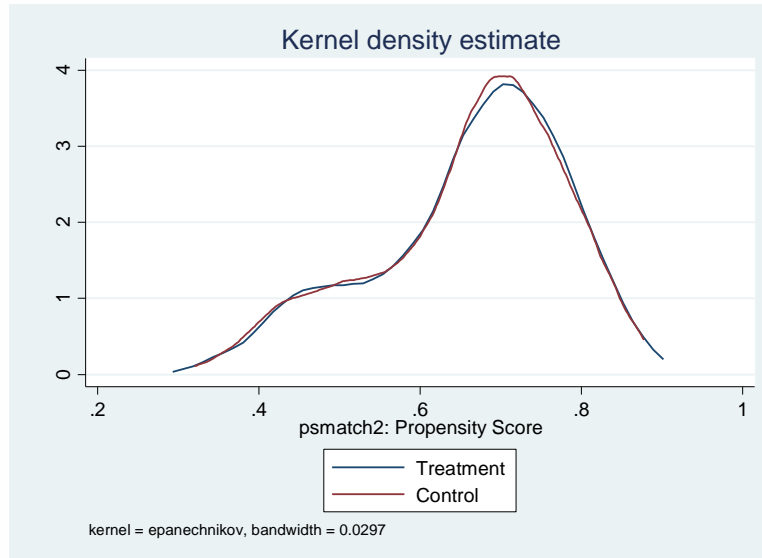
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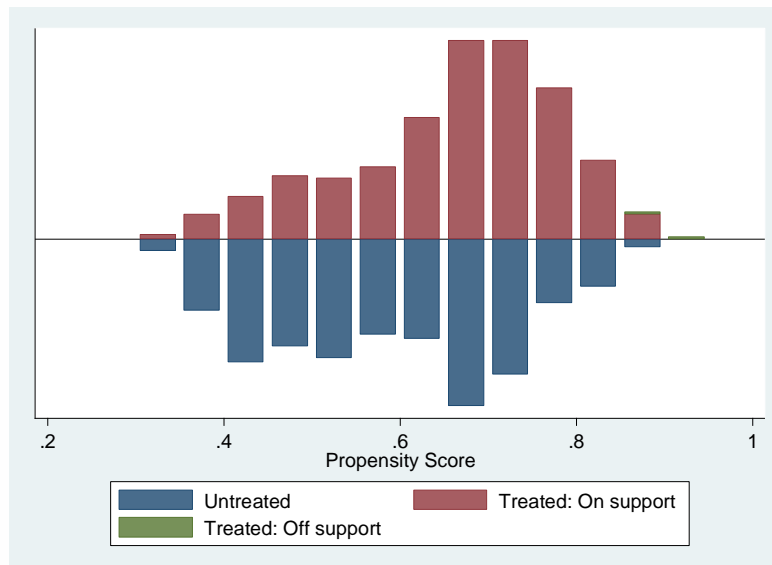
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APPENDIX A: RESULTS OF PROPENSITY SCORE MATCHING

Kernel Density Function



Graph of Propensity Score



Count of Observations on Common Support

	Treatment	Control
Supported	462	264
Off Support	2	0

Balancing Tests (comparing before and after matching)

		Treatment Mean	Control Mean	T-Test	P>[T]
Age	Unmated	20.515	19.617	2.64	0.009***
	Matched	20.509	20.729	-0.75	0.456
Female	Unmated	0.6056	0.39394	5.61	0***
	Matched	0.6039	0.61134	-0.23	0.817
Education	Unmated	0.7069	0.74242	-1.03	0.305
	Matched	0.70563	0.67921	0.87	0.385
Literate	Unmated	0.67241	0.71591	-1.22	0.224
	Matched	0.671	0.64598	0.8	0.423
Sunni	Unmated	0.67888	0.78409	-3.04	0.002***
	Matched	0.67965	0.66517	0.47	0.64
Rural	Unmated	0.25431	0.25	0.13	0.898
	Matched	0.25325	0.24072	0.44	0.659
PPI Shor	Unmated	24.72	23.917	0.92	0.359
	Matched	24.578	23.785	1.05	0.294
Household Size: 1st 25%	Unmated	0.16595	0.17045	-0.16	0.876
	Matched	0.16667	0.19072	-0.95	0.34
Household Size: 2nd 25%	Unmated	0.3556	0.35985	-0.11	0.909
	Matched	0.35714	0.31502	1.36	0.176
Household Size: 3rd 25%	Unmated	0.25647	0.26515	-0.26	0.798
	Matched	0.25758	0.26452	-0.24	0.81

APPENDIX B: DESCRIPTION OF OUTCOME VARIABLES

Dependent Variable	Operational Definition	Score Range
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Violence Outcomes

Violence against state not justified	Belief that citizens are never justified using violence against an unfair state decision	1 = Yes, 0 = No
Would not use violence against state	Respondent themselves would never use violence against an unfair state decision	1 = Yes, 0 = No
Violence not justified in politics	Belief that violence is never justified in politics	1 = Yes, 0 = No
Would not use violence in politics	Respondent would not use violence for a political cause, even if provoked	1 = Yes, 0 = No
No sympathy for armed opposition	Report no sympathy for the motivations of armed opposition groups	1 = Yes, 0 = No

Economic Outcomes

Employed	Currently employed or self-employed	1 = Yes, 0 = No
Job satisfaction*	Respondent is satisfied with job	1 = Yes, 0 = No
Earned income*	Earned income in the past 4 weeks	1 = Yes, 0 = No
Economic optimism	Score on 4 questions addressing ease of finding employment and starting a business	1-5 scale, where 5 is most optimistic
Business connections	Able to turn to family, peers, and acquaintances for assistance financing and organizing business ventures	0-4 scale, where 4 is the highest access to assistance
Cross-tribal economic activity	Engaged in social activity with members of another tribe over the past week	1 = Yes, 0 = No

*These outcomes were only measured for those respondents reporting employment.

Governance Outcomes

Identify as Afghan	Identify as Afghan above tribal or religious identity	1 = Yes, 0 = No
National government performance	Perception of national government performance across a range of functions, including: education, healthcare, job opportunities, international relations, anti-corruption, security, and managing terrorism	1-5 scale, where 5 is a very good job
Local government performance	Perception of local government performance across a range of functions, including: education, healthcare, job opportunities, international relations, anti-corruption, security, and managing terrorism	1-5 scale, where 5 is a very good job
Confidence in institutions	Confidence in institutions involved in community governance, including national, provincial, and local government officials, religious and traditional leaders, police, INGO's, and civil society organizations	1-4 scale, where 4 is a great deal of confidence

Social Outcomes

Personal confidence	Score on 7 questions regarding respondent's ability to perform tasks and achieve outcomes	1-5 scale, where 5 is most confident
Locus of control	Score on 8 questions regarding respondent's belief in people's general ability to control their life direction	1-5 scale, where 5 is highest belief in control
Unfair treatment	Frequency of unfair treatment in community	1-4 scale, where 4 is always treated

		unfairly
Experienced prejudice	Frequency of experiencing prejudice	1-4 scale, where 4 is always treated with prejudice
Respect in community	Perception of respect from groups in the community: family, peers, religious leaders, professional community, local authorities, and elders	1-5 scale, where 5 is a very respected
Present social standing	Standing in community at present	1-3 scale, where 3 is highest step
Future social standing	Standing in community in 5 years, if current plans are successful	1-3 scale, where 3 is highest step
More friends	Have more friends to turn to for help or advice than most other people	1 = Yes, 0 = No
Cross-tribal social activity	Engaged in social activity with members of another tribe over the past week	1 = Yes, 0 = No

APPENDIX C: IMPACT OF INVEST ON SELECT OUTCOMES (estimated using propensity score matching)

Violence Outcomes	List Experiment: Support armed opposition groups	Citizens are never justified in using violence against unfair state decision	Respondent would not use violence against unfair state decision	Violence is never justified in politics	Respondent has no sympathy for armed opposition	Respondent would not use violence for political cause, even if provoked
Effect of INVEST	-0.128	-0.0874**	-0.0809*	-0.0399	-0.232***	0.0824***
T-Statistic		(-2.74)	(-2.55)	(-0.94)	(-4.07)	(3.91)
Outcome Scale	Yes/No	Yes/No	Yes/No	Yes/No	Yes/No	Yes/No

Economic Outcomes	Currently Employed (including self-employment)	Satisfied with job	Earned Income (past 4 weeks)	Economic Optimism	Cross-tribal economic activity (past week)	More business connections
Effect of INVEST	0.357***	0.133*	0.127***	0.171**	0.195***	0.140
T-Statistic	(15.14)	(2.27)	(5.10)	(3.29)	(5.13)	(1.07)
Outcome Scale	Yes/No	Yes/No	Yes/No	1-5 Scale (5 = Most optimistic)	Yes/No	0-4 Scale (4 = Most connections)

Social Outcomes (1 of 2)	Personal confidence	Locus of control	Respondent treated unfairly	Respect among community
Effect of INVEST	0.0398	0.0369	0.217**	0.0419
T-Statistic	(0.72)	(1.18)	(3.00)	(0.86)
Outcome Scale	1-5 Scale (5 = Highest Confidence)	1-5 Scale (5 = Highest Control)	1-4 Scale (4 = Always Treated Unfairly)	1-5 Scale (5 = Highest Respect)

Social Outcomes (2 of 2)	Social standing at present	Predicted social standing in future	Have more friends to turn to for help or advice than most other people	Engaged in cross-tribal social activity (past week)	Identify as Afghan above tribe or religion
Effect of INVEST	0.00837	-0.00419	0.107**	0.0999*	0.0812***
T-Statistic	(0.24)	(-0.09)	(2.70)	(2.44)	(5.21)
Outcome Scale	1-3 Scale (3 = Highest)	1-3 Scale (3 = Highest)	Yes or No	Yes/No	Yes/No

Government Outcomes	Perception of national government performance	Perception of local government performance	Confidence in community and government institutions
Effect of INVEST	0.0684	0.125*	-0.0406
T-Statistic	(1.06)	(2.05)	(-0.70)
Outcome Scale	1-5 Scale (5 = Very Good Job)	1-5 Scale (5 = Very Good Job)	1-4 Scale (4 = Great Deal of Confidence)

APPENDIX D: CORRELATES OF PROPENSITY TOWARDS POLITICAL VIOLENCE

		Violence Outcomes	
		Unwillingness: Would not use violence against state	Unjustified: Violence against state not justified
INVEST Participation		-0.0882** (-2.63)	-0.0970** (-2.91)
Economic Outcomes	Currently Employed	0.0363 (1.06)	0.0394 (1.15)
	More economically optimistic	0.0969** (3.17)	0.0942** (3.07)
	More business connections	-0.0437** (-3.24)	-0.0459*** (-3.35)
	More frequent cross-tribal economic activity	0.000280 (0.01)	-0.00734 (-0.19)
Social Outcomes	Higher personal confidence	-0.133*** (-3.89)	-0.137*** (-3.88)
	Locus of control	0.113* (2.21)	0.0951 (1.75)
	Treated unfairly more often	-0.0156 (-0.74)	-0.0130 (-0.59)
	Higher respect among community	0.154*** (6.17)	0.141*** (5.49)
	Higher perceived social standing at present	0.0962 (1.82)	0.102 (1.88)
	Higher predicted social standing in future	0.00146 (0.03)	-0.00575 (-0.13)
	More friends	-0.0562*** (-5.67)	-0.0558*** (-5.65)
	More frequent cross-tribal social activity	-0.00727 (-0.20)	0.00376 (0.10)
	Identify as an Afghan above tribe or religion	-0.298*** (-4.35)	-0.318*** (-4.54)
Governance Outcomes	Improved perception of national government performance	0.0187 (0.43)	0.0326 (0.75)
	Improved perception of local government performance	0.0463 (1.09)	0.0379 (0.88)
	Higher confidence in community	0.0178	0.0189

	and government institutions	(0.77)	(0.83)
Demographics*	Log(expenditure)	-0.0140 (-0.54)	-0.00872 (-0.33)
	Experienced attack	0.0657* (2.05)	0.0596 (1.84)
	Age	-0.00200 (-0.41)	-0.00105 (-0.21)
	Female	0.150** (3.06)	0.165*** (3.30)
	Completed some education	0.122*** (3.37)	0.117** (3.14)
	Sunni	0.0660 (1.45)	0.0762 (1.67)
	Rural	-0.0226 (-0.61)	-0.0252 (-0.66)
	N	651	651

*These models also control for household size, marital status, education and employment of the head of household, access to roads and transport, and region. T-Statistics are shown in parentheses.

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