

America's Opium War:

How the wrong approach to counternarcotics is undermining state-building in Afghanistan



U.S. DEA Special Agents burn hashish bunkers during Operation Albatross in Kandahar Province, June 9th 2008.

Source: U.S. Department of Justice, www.usdoj.gov

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Abstract:

The roots of Afghanistan's opium economy run deep and more than three billion US dollars that have been poured into counternarcotics operations there since 2001 have failed to stop record Afghan opium harvests. Instead, opium related corruption undermines the stability of the Afghan government and revenues from the opium economy feed the resurgent Taliban and other anti-government forces. Current US strategy links narcotics producers and insurgents under the single term "narco-terrorists," and efforts to stem the drug trade have become increasingly militarized. Yet this strategy is based on unrealistic goals for Afghanistan and the war on drugs in general. In Latin America, the employment similar techniques in costly operations such as "Plan Columbia" has failed to stop the flow of illegal drugs into the US and Europe and resulted in the spread of instability in the region. Lessons from more successful anti-drug campaigns in Turkey, Pakistan, and Thailand as well as success stories from some Afghan provinces demonstrate that the key to curbing illegal drug production in Afghanistan lies in the long-run processes of better governance and economic development. As international thinking on the world's drug problems shifts towards a more public-health oriented approach, conventional counternarcotics policies that seek to reduce world drug supply through armed intervention are beginning to be reconsidered.

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Afghanistan's status as the world's biggest supplier of illegal opium sets it apart from Iraq and most other post-conflict states, and the success of American counter-terrorism efforts as well as the survival of the Afghan National Government depend on how the narcotics issue is addressed. Some American officials have advocated an expanded role for U.S. and international troops to include taking on Afghan drug syndicates. Yet this strategy is based on faulty reasoning, which oversimplifies the problem by lumping together opium producers, the Taliban and Al-Qaeda into one broad group of "narco-terrorists." Instead of isolating and de-legitimizing the insurgency, this approach alienates the large number of ordinary Afghans who are involved in opium production, thereby strengthening the insurgency and undermining support for the already tenuous Afghan National Government. Rather than targeting narcotics producers directly, U.S. and international troops should focus on providing security and confronting anti-government forces, thereby directing the drug trade away from insurgents while alternative livelihoods and development incentives are employed to make narcotics production less attractive to the Afghan farmer.

It is not hard to see why combating narcotics production in Afghanistan has been so difficult. The opium-economy makes up an estimated 35 percent of Afghanistan's GDP and supplies over 90 percent of the world's illicit opium (World Bank, 2005 p.6). Drug cartels from this lucrative business penetrate Afghanistan's local and central governments, hampering the effectiveness of government sponsored enforcement and eradication efforts, while in spite of the more than 3 billion U.S. dollars spent on counternarcotics operations in Afghanistan since 2001, opium production in the country substantially increased during most of the period (*Counternarcotics Strategy*, 2007 p.2).

A fundamental rift in strategic thinking has developed between those who see narcotics as the root of instability, and those who see instability as a precondition for the illicit narcotics industry. Many U.S. officials take the former view, believing that elimination of Afghanistan's opium economy is the first step in creating stability in the country. Accordingly, they advocate escalating counternarcotics efforts and employing U.S. troops in source-control campaigns that include ground eradication and aerial spraying. Not only will this policy be ineffective, but since instability enables and promotes illicit narcotics production, merging counternarcotics and counterinsurgency efforts will escalate the conflict from an ethno-politically motivated insurgency into an all out drug war.

Years of U.S. efforts to stem the production and trafficking of cocaine produced in the Andes region of Latin America points to the ineffectiveness of eradication campaigns in reducing supply as well as the regional instability that such drug wars create. However more successful efforts in Turkey, Pakistan, Thailand, and some Afghan provinces demonstrate that the keys to curbing opium production lie in establishing good governance, promoting economic development and fostering higher incomes.

The ongoing review of U.S. policy in Afghanistan calls for a reassessment of priorities and the establishment of more realistic goals. Although internationally sponsored crop-eradication campaigns

may produce immediate results, in the long-run they are harmful to wider coalition goals and should be phased out. In their place, the U.S. should focus on building infrastructure and providing alternative livelihoods to poppy farmers as part of a broader effort to establish security, strengthen the Afghan government, establish rule of law and rebuild the Afghan economy. Yet these measures alone are unlikely to stop poppy cultivation in Afghanistan as long as it remains a pillar of the Afghan economy and as long as world demand for opium-based drugs remains constant. As new trends in international thinking recognize that drug abuse is more effectively addressed through the public health sector rather than the criminal justice system, policies aimed at reducing the world drug supply through armed-interventions in source-countries are beginning to be reconsidered (The Economist, March 7, 2009 p.15). Ultimately the world's drug problems can only be successfully resolved by addressing the demand side, but until then, the success of counterterrorism efforts in Afghanistan and the survival of the Afghan state strongly depend on whether or not the U.S. and international community take the right approach on the narcotics issue.

A Brief History of Afghan Poppy Cultivation

The cultivation of opium poppy has a long history in Afghanistan. The crop may have been introduced to the region as early as the fourth century BC either as a trade commodity from Egypt or by Greek soldiers under Alexander the Great (Macdonald, 2007 p.60). Traditionally, poppy in Afghanistan was cultivated on a small scale for medicinal or domestic use. During the 19th century, the British East India Company began procuring and exporting opium on a large scale from its colonial holdings in the region to China. This direct violation of Chinese drug laws precipitated the Opium Wars of the 1840s and contributed to the downfall of the Qing Dynasty. In the 20th century, Afghanistan's relatively small opium export market came under control of the royal family under Amir Habibullah Khan and later, King Zaher Shah. Afghanistan produced 75 tons of opium in 1932 when the first records became available, but in 1945 opium production was officially banned. By 1956, annual production had fallen to twelve tons, yet production increased again until by the 1970s, Afghanistan had become notorious as a producer of illegal opium (Macdonald, 2007, p.60). Several factors are responsible for this increase. First, a lucrative smuggling economy sprang up with the rise of the Afghan trucking industry enabled by better roads and European investment (Goodhand, 2005, p.197). This coincided with opium bans that went into effect in Turkey, Iran, and other nearby states, causing production to shift to Afghanistan where governance was weaker (Macdonald, 2007, p.60). Likewise, decline of opium production in the Golden Triangle of Southeast Asia during the same period contributed to this effect (Goodhand, 2005, p.197). Yet it was Afghanistan's instability and lack of government control starting in the 1980s that made it the ideal location for opium production.

Afghanistan's relatively sophisticated agrarian economy was destroyed during the years of war that followed the 1979 Soviet invasion. As the complex systems of irrigation canals were rendered useless by destruction and disrepair, the traditional Afghan economy based on the export of dried fruits and nuts was increasingly replaced by opium production as farmers resorted to their most viable alternative. The drought-resistant, non-perishable and high-value opium poppy was the ideal cash crop

for Afghan farmers. As American cash was poured into Pakistan to support mujahedeen rebel groups in the 1980s, it was reinvested in opium production on both sides of the border. The result was the establishment of smuggling pipelines that funneled weapons in and drugs out of Afghanistan and Pakistan's North West Frontier Provinces (NWFP) (Goodhand, 2005, p.198). By the late 1980s, Pakistan had also become a major opium producer, with drug syndicates operating under the cover of the CIA and Pakistani ISI. Although the CIA did not condone the opium trade, it turned a blind eye as opium was a major funding source for the anti-Soviet resistance. During the 1990s however, heavy American pressure and the infusion of 100 million in U.S. aid resulted in a Pakistani government crackdown and the displacement of regional opium production almost entirely to Afghanistan (Goodhand, 2005, p.198).

Opium's role as a cash crop in the Afghan war economy had become entrenched during the war with the Soviets in the 1980s. When the war ended in 1989, so did the monetary support to the mujahedeen from western financiers, and Afghan drug lords came to rely even more heavily on poppy to fund their internal conflicts. As the Taliban consolidated its hold on 90 percent of the country by the late 1990s, it also gained control over the opium trade. Production nearly doubled from 1,570 tons in 1990 to 2,800 tons in 1997, and by taxing both production and trafficking, the Taliban became the first government to levy an effective tax on Afghan agriculture (Rashid, 2008, p.319). Opium production continued to increase under the Taliban, with land under poppy cultivation reaching 82,000 hectares in 2000 (Mansfield & Pain, 2008, p.5). That year however, the Taliban announced a ban on poppy cultivation, and implemented it by bribing tribal leaders and terrorizing those who failed to comply (Macdonald, 2007, p.78). The result was that in 2001, poppy cultivation had been cut to only 8,000 hectares of land and 185 tons of production (Rashid, 2008, p.320).

While some commentators in the international community regarded the ban as one of the most successful anti-drug campaigns in history, it is widely recognized that the Taliban had ulterior motives in their decision to ban opium production. On one hand, the ban was an effort to gain recognition in the international community in order to secure international development assistance (Mansfield & Pain, 2008, p.6). More importantly, the ban was a response to years of overproduction which had flooded the opium market and resulted in a drop in opium prices. By slashing supply, the ban effectively raised prices to allow the Taliban to sell their existing stocks at a profit (Rashid, 2008, p.320, Macdonald, 2007, p.82). At any rate, the Taliban's opium ban was a temporary measure that could never be sustainable in the long run. It resulted in significant hardships for Afghan cultivators, many of whom were forced deeper into debt, and increased popular opposition to Taliban rule, especially after promised international aid was not forthcoming (Mansfield & Pain, 2008, p.6). At least one report holds that a Taliban radio address lifted the ban during the September 2001 planting season (Macdonald, 2007, p.82). If true, this would confirm the ban's temporary nature and reflect the difficulty of permanently stifling narcotics production even through the most draconian measures. Yet the Taliban never got a chance to implement its new opium policy, being routed and ousted from power by the U.S. led Northern Alliance in the wake of September 11, 2001. In the years since, opium production increased steadily until it peaked at 193,000 hectares under opium poppy cultivation in 2007 (UNODC, 2008, p.7).

Opium production makes up an integral part of the contemporary Afghan economy. Jonathan Goodhand identifies three key economic roles of micro-level opium production in Afghanistan, which he

describes as the “combat”, “shadow” and “coping” economies (2005, p.202). The combat economy refers to the utility of opium production as a revenue source for warring parties such as the mujahedeen, tribal warlords or Taliban insurgents who use the funds to buy weapons and carry on combat operations. The shadow economy refers to actors who use opium production to make a profit while remaining independent of government control or influence. The coping economy focuses on the resource poor, who make up the bulk of poppy farmers and work in poppy in order to survive and feed their families. For many such farmers, opium cultivation is the only viable option. According to Ahmad Jalali, “from a purely economic standpoint, there is no true alternative crop to poppy for the Afghan farmer” (2006, p.5). The combination of these factors has given Afghanistan a strong comparative advantage in opium production (World 2005 p.113). Given the deep seated role of opium in the Afghan economy, reducing opium production there can only be achieved as a long term-process with the establishment of a stronger and more functional Afghan government and a gradual process of economic reforms.

Counternarcotics Efforts in Afghanistan since 2001

One of the first acts of the Afghan Interim Authority was a ban on opium poppy cultivation on January 17, 2002, yet the Afghan government’s counternarcotics program got off to a slow and rocky start (Blanchard, 2006). Under the 2001 Bonn Agreement, the United Kingdom assumed leadership of the Afghan counternarcotics effort, and spent \$90 million in the first few years on a program designed to purchase and destroy Afghan opium poppy harvests. The program was regarded as a failure after it resulted in a perverse incentive that drove some Afghan farmers to plant more opium in the hope of benefiting from government money the following year (Danspeckgruber & Finn, 2007, p.140). This early failure demonstrated that the problem had deeper socio-economic roots and that quick fix solutions could often be counterproductive.

The U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) reopened an office in Kabul in 2002 to begin training and assistance to Afghan counternarcotics forces (DEA 2008, June 13). By January 2003 the Afghan Counternarcotics Directorate (CND) under the Ministry of Interior had become fully operational, and with international support, launched a two pronged counternarcotics initiative. The first part of this initiative consisted of the Central Poppy Eradication Force (CPEF), a force of 500 security personnel and 1,000 locally hired Afghan eradicators. Amid internal management issues and security incidents, including explosive devices placed in poppy fields that killed four eradicators, the force managed to eradicate about 4,000 hectares of poppy in 2004 (Braun, 2005). Part two of the initiative consisted of a governor-led eradication program. Although all governors had pledged to support President Karzai’s eradication program, this effort was fraught with corruption, as many governors used it as a political tool by protecting the poppy crop of their patrons while destroying the crops of their rivals or the politically weak (Braun, 2005).

Shortly after taking office as Afghanistan’s first popularly elected president in 2004, President Karzai intensified the Afghan government’s counternarcotics efforts by announcing a “Jihad against

poppy” (Lancaster, 2004, December 10). The CND was renamed the Ministry of Counter Narcotics (MCN) under Habibullah Qaderi. After the rather disappointing results of the 2004 counternarcotics efforts, in 2005 the British government pledged \$510 million for counternarcotics through 2008. The U.S. and British also expanded their roles in counternarcotics to include military participation in police training and interdiction mission support (Blanchard, 2006, p.23). With American and British support, nearly a half-dozen Afghan counternarcotics forces were established, most of which focused on eradication or interdiction. These included the Counternarcotics Police Afghanistan (CNP-A), the National Interdiction Unit (NIU), Afghan Eradication Force (AEF), Afghan Special Narcotics Force (ASNF) and the Central Eradication Planning Cell (CEPC) (Blanchard, 2006, p.26). The DEA also became more involved in 2005 when it began deploying Forward-Deployed Advisory and Support Teams (FAST), which were largely funded by the Department of Defense (DEA, 2004, November 17).

The increased international commitment to counternarcotics proceeded in tandem with stepped-up opium eradication efforts, with 4,007 hectares of opium poppy eradicated in 2005. Although eradication was intensified in 2006 to 13,378 ha and in 2007 to 15,989 ha, the UNODC reported that “Eradication did not contribute to an effective reduction in most of the [Afghan] provinces,” and fear of eradication was not a significant deterrent to most Afghan farmers (UNODC, 2007). Furthermore, resistance to eradication efforts resulted in a series of violent clashes between eradication forces and Afghan farmers, leaving a number of people dead (Blanchard, 2006 p.13).

By 2007, the UNODC reported a bifurcation between Afghanistan’s north-central provinces, many of which had emerged relatively poppy free, and the south-eastern provinces centered on Helmand where the most poppy was produced. The UNODC attributed this to an increasing link between the Taliban insurgency and poppy production, yet by increasing the costs of the illicit business, eradication and interdiction campaigns have encouraged the shift and ensured the capture of the industry by the country’s strongest and most well organized anti-government forces (Rubin, 2008, p.19). Estimates suggest that the Taliban skims anywhere from 100 to 400 million dollars annually from Afghanistan’s illicit opium revenues (Lobjakas, 2009, January 18).

In an effort to cut off this source of funding to the Taliban, the DEA has steadily increased its role in Afghan counternarcotics operations. In 2008, the DEA conducted “Operation Albatross,” in which FASTs were deployed to Spin Boldak in Kandahar province to burn piles of hashish in areas under Taliban control (DEA, 2008, June 13). The DEA has also captured and extradited a number of opium traffickers, including Baz Mohammed, arrested in 2005, and Khan Mohammed, arrested in 2006 (DEA, 2006, June 11). Two years later, Khan Mohammed was the first defendant to be convicted for “narco-terrorism” under a new Federal Statute enacted in 2006 (DEA, 2008, May 20). Although this particular defendant had committed two separate offenses, this dangerous precedent exemplifies the simplistic American vision that classifies drug producers, Al-Qaeda and Taliban under the single category “narco-terrorists.”

It is this simplified vision that has prompted some American officials such as U.S. Army General John Craddock to push for an expansion of the ISAF mandate to include targeting of the Afghan drug industry. Yet this has sparked controversy among NATO officials, especially given that international law on armed conflict prohibits military action against civilians, even if they are involved in drug trafficking

(Lobjakas, 2009, January 18). In what appears to be a growing rift between the American and European approaches to counternarcotics, some European states that contribute troops to ISAF such as Germany, Italy, Poland and Spain have expressed their reservations about expanding the ISAF mandate to include attacks on narcotics networks (Snyovitz, 2009, March 7).

Despite a review of U.S. policies in Afghanistan under the Obama Administration, U.S. counternarcotics programs became even more militarized after the new president took office. In early 2009, American troops were committed for the first time in direct support of a forced eradication mission as part of a security detachment for Afghan government eradication forces in Nadi-Ali district of Southern Afghanistan (Barker, 2009, Feb 2). This operation was part of a larger NATO initiative under General Craddock to engage drug lords and labs. Despite this intensification in counternarcotics efforts, U.S. envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan Richard Holbrooke referred to eradication as “the most wasteful and ineffective program I have seen in 40 years.” (BBC, 2009, 21 March). Thus, even as American soldiers prepared for a new season of fighting with Taliban insurgents and Afghan drug producers in the spring of 2009, the debate over counternarcotics policy in Afghanistan remained very much alive among U.S. policymakers.

Case Studies in Counternarcotics:

A brief review of the successes and failures in counternarcotics efforts in Columbia, Turkey, Pakistan, Thailand and the poppy-free Afghan provinces provides some important lessons for dealing with narcotics production in the rest of the country. Since the 1960s, the U.S. has confronted narcotics production in three major producer regions: the Andean region of Latin America, the “Golden Crescent” of south-west Asia and the “Golden Triangle” of south-east Asia. The tools employed in these anti-narcotics efforts have ranged from diplomatic pressure, political incentives, and military aid to direct intervention in the form of interdiction and eradication operations. Some of these methods have been more successful than others, but none succeeded in stopping drug use on American streets, which remained fairly constant over the entire period.

Columbia: Failed Policies and what not to do in Afghanistan

The northern Andean region of South America has been responsible for much of the drug supply that ends up on American streets, and U.S. counternarcotics efforts there have focused on Columbia. Like Afghanistan, Columbia has a long history of insurgencies and narcotics production. In the 1960s, the United States began providing military aid to back the Columbian government’s counterinsurgency efforts against the Marxist guerilla movement FARC and other insurgent groups. During the same period, increased U.S. demand for marijuana and cocaine began fueling a lucrative illicit narcotics industry in the region. With production occurring predominantly in areas out of government control, the FARC soon turned the illicit industry to its advantage by levying taxes on the coca trade (Livingstone, 2004, p.53). American authorities increasingly began to view drug control as an issue of national security and pushed for policies of “control at the source” (Perl, 1995 p.26). In 1978 U.S.-backed

Columbian anti-narcotics police began aerial fumigation campaigns against marijuana, coca and opium poppy fields (Livingstone, 2004, p.112).

The Reagan years saw increasing militarization of the U.S. anti-drug strategy, until a virtual acquiescence to constant low-intensity conflict was unveiled after the Cartagena drug summit in 1990 (Perl, 1995, p.28). The so-called “War on Drugs” continued, and intensified under the Clinton Administration with the introduction of “Plan Columbia.” Originally a plan for peace and economic revitalization drawn up by Columbian President Pastrana’s administration, the plan was revised by U.S. officials to become one of the most ambitious campaigns against drug trafficking in history (Livingstone, 2004). The plan proposed over 1 billion dollars in military aid for Columbia; the highest amount ever received by a Latin American country. By 2007, Washington had spent over 4.7 billion dollars, not including expenditures by USAID (Mondragon, 2007).

Plan Columbia achieved limited success in terms of reducing land under coca cultivation, but it failed to affect the overall flow of drugs out of the country or impact its availability on American streets. In its first three years, Plan Columbia saw a significant decrease in the amount of land under coca cultivation from 163,300 ha in 2000 to 80,000 ha by 2004 (UNODC, 2008). Yet cultivators responded to the eradication campaigns by dispersing cultivation into smaller plots over a larger area. The aerial fumigation campaigns reached the limit of their effectiveness in 2005, as the law of decreasing marginal returns took its effect. This meant that as cultivation become more and more dispersed, increasing the number of fumigation sorties or adding more fumigation planes could no longer result significant decreases in coca production. Thus land under coca cultivation stabilized, and by 2007 it had increased again to 99,000 ha. Strangely, as Columbian land under coca cultivation decreased in 2004, cocaine seizures in the U.S. jumped and purity increased the same year. Furthermore, wholesale prices of cocaine remained stable throughout the Plan Columbia era (Contreras, 2005 August 29). While this massive U.S. counternarcotics initiative failed to impact drug use on the streets of America, its negative side-effects were many. Not only did they include the damages caused by aerially sprayed pesticides on human health, livestock, food production and the environment; the increased militarization of the conflict resulted in refugees and violence spilling over into neighboring countries.

Overall, U.S. drug control efforts in Latin America have failed to reduce the supply of illicit drugs, and linking counternarcotics with counterinsurgency has led to capture of the illicit industry by insurgents and spiraling violence. By 2009, the drug war had spread to Mexico with deadly effects as Mexican President Calderon attempted to crack down on drug cartels involved in trafficking through his country. Clearly, U.S. policies intended to combat the drug trade through control at the source in Latin America have not succeeded in their objective of removing drugs from American streets. On the contrary, the increased instability generated by the drug wars in Latin America warns of the dangerous effects similar policies could have in Afghanistan.

Turkey: Political Pressure and the Legal Opium Market

Unlike American drug control efforts in Latin America, in the 1960s, the U.S. successfully applied political pressure to end narcotics production Turkey. With drug use on the rise in the United States, the Nixon Administration identified Turkey as a major supplier of heroin to U.S. markets and began exerting diplomatic pressure on the Turkish government to ban production. Although initial pressures were unsuccessful, by threatening military and economic sanctions and a cut in bilateral aid, the Nixon Administration succeeded in pressuring the Turkish government to impose a ban on opium production in 1972. In compensation, the Turkish government received \$35.7 million, which was only a fraction of Turkey's previous earnings from the opium trade (Booth, 1996, p.251). The ban saw an improvement in U.S.-Turkish government relations and the strong Turkish military regime was able to implement the ban, but only for a short period of time. Not only was opium used to produce heroin for export, but poppy seed oil was an important component of the Turkish diet. Amid domestic unrest and a worldwide shortage of medicinal opium, in 1974 the Turkish government introduced a licensing system that allowed production of opium for morphine and other medicinal purposes (Kamminga, 2006 p.8). By the end of the decade, Turkey and other traditional opium production countries had monopolized the medicinal opium market, and in 1981 the U.S. passed legislation granting Turkey and India "Special Protected Market Status," stipulating that 80% of narcotic raw materials must be purchased from these two traditional opium producers (Kamminga, 2006 p.9). Meanwhile, American and European drug mafias turned to other markets for heroin, namely Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Pakistan: a Combat Economy and a success for the development-based approach

The demise of illicit opium supply markets in Turkey and Iran during the 1970s and 1980s pushed opium production further east. During the 1980s, the CIA played a role in facilitating the rise of illicit opium production in the NWFP through financial and military support to the Pakistani based mujahedeen who were known to be highly involved in the opium trade. As American financed weapons were carried across the Pakistani border into Afghanistan, opium was brought back by the same supply trains to Pakistan which served as a major processing and transshipping center (Hardesty, 1992, p.337). The instability generated by the war and the financial needs of the mujahedeen drove a 300 percent increase in hectares under opium poppy cultivation from 1984 to 1988 (Hardesty, 1992 p.339). By 1989, heroin income was valued at more than all the rest of Pakistan's legal exports (Booth, 1996, p.290).

Although most of Pakistan was poppy-free, poppy cultivation thrived in the relatively autonomous and politically inaccessible NWFP where the government had little or no influence. The problem was exacerbated by high levels of corruption among Pakistani authorities which impeded progress in closing down heroin processing laboratories and stopping traffickers. In 1988, Pakistan and the U.S. signed the Tribal Areas Agreement, which provided U.S. development assistance in exchange for a gradual implementation Pakistan's existing ban on opium production over a 5 year period. Under this plan, the building of new roads and extension of government services allowed the Pakistani government to enforce its ban on poppy cultivation (Hardesty, 1992, p.341). The U.S. exerted heavy pressure on Pakistan to reduce its illegal poppy production and succeeded in extraditing several high level narcotics

traffickers to the United States in 1994-1995 (Booth, 1996, p.311). In 2000, Pakistan was publically declared poppy free, yet poppy cultivation in the NWFP rose again in 2003.

The U.S. continued to provide counternarcotics assistance to Pakistan in the form of monitoring, commodities, aviation assets and training to Pakistani counternarcotics forces through the 2000s. Additionally, U.S. financed construction of 450 kilometers of roads enabled security forces better accessibility to production areas and allowed farmers to transport legitimate produce to markets (Crocker, 2005 March 31). Nevertheless, the country continued to experience heavy trafficking with alleged ISI complicity (Kronstadt, 2005, April 27).

Two lessons can be drawn from U.S. counternarcotics efforts in Pakistan. First, the fact that the U.S. continues to provide counternarcotics assistance to Pakistan after more than 20 years reflects the long-term nature of fighting narcotics production. Second, ridding Pakistan of opium poppy cultivation was preceded by the development of roads, infrastructure and the extension of government services which made alternative livelihoods viable and enforcement efforts practicable.

Thailand: the key role of a strong Economy

The third major narcotics producing region has been the Golden Triangle, consisting of the unstable and insurgency-wracked areas of eastern Myanmar (Burma) and northern Thailand and Laos. The region drew the attention of U.S. officials in the wake of the Vietnam War where up to 11 percent of U.S. soldiers had become regular heroin users (McCoy, 1992, p.261). The Thai government became heavily involved in the drug trade after World War II, and maintained instability in the poppy producing Shan states in Burma as a buffer zone on its northern border. Revenue from opium cultivation was used by Burmese insurgent groups to fuel their campaigns against each other and the Burmese government. As opium was trafficked from the Shan states and northern Thailand to distribution centers in the south, the Thai capital Bangkok became the center of opium trafficking in southeast Asia by the mid 1950s (Booth, 1996, p.262). U.S. officials began to focus on Bangkok as the hub of the Golden Triangle, and in 1973-1974, Nixon sent 30 DEA agents to Bangkok to help stem narcotics flow to the U.S. The effect was to deflect heroin exports headed for the U.S. to Europe and other markets (McCoy, 1992, p.262).

The U.S. continued to back Thai efforts to implement drug-control and crop substitution programs, although as of the 1990s Thailand was still producing about 50 metric tons of opium annually (MacDonald, 1992, p.376). In the early 2000s, the Thai government launched an aggressive counternarcotics campaign with U.S. support. Although more than twenty-five hundred people were killed in the crackdown, by 2003 Thailand had been declared opium free, while opium production was rising again in neighboring Myanmar and Laos (Kramer et al, 2005 p.120, UNODC, 2009). Aside from the U.S.-backed Thai counternarcotics efforts, the decline in opium production in Thailand is explained by economic forces. High growth rates over the past three decades raised the opportunity cost of land and labor relative to neighboring Myanmar, creating a strong disincentive to opium cultivation (Reuter, 2004 p.131). Thus the regional comparative advantage in opium production has shifted to neighboring countries, while Thailand remains a major trafficking distribution center.

Afghanistan's Poppy-Free Provinces: Success Stories

As of 2009, 18 of Afghanistan's 34 provinces were listed by the UNODC as "poppy-free." These provinces are located primarily in the northern and central regions of the country where government control is strongest. In most of Afghanistan, UNODC surveyors found that 52 % of village headmen cited pressure from government authorities as a primary reason for deciding not to cultivate opium in 2009. In the Southern and Western provinces, however, this figure was only 16%, and ranked lower than other reasons, such as the high price of wheat and the opinion that opium production is against Islam.

One notable success is the northern province of Balkh, which cultivated 8,342ha of poppy in 2005, but emerged poppy free in 2008. Balkh province's success in eliminating poppy was attributed to successful government campaigns against poppy cultivation (UNODC, 2009). One such program is the "Good Performance Initiative," an Afghan Government program designed to reward provinces that have emerged poppy-free or significantly reduced poppy cultivation. In Balkh province, the Good Performance Initiative delivered tractors and farm equipment to 16 farm cooperatives after the province became poppy free in 2008 (GPI Newsletter, August 2008).

Other factors that contributed to the decline of poppy cultivation in Afghanistan's poppy free provinces included the low price of opium after a three year production glut, higher food prices and scarcity of irrigation water due to drought conditions in 2008 (UNDOC, 2009 p.8). While opium production in Afghanistan declined by 18% overall in 2008, without better alternatives, this trend could reverse itself in the future given higher demand or more favorable weather conditions. The presence of a legitimate government and its ability to offer services and effective incentives to coax Afghan farmers out of poppy production has been the most significant factor in eliminating narcotics production in Afghanistan's poppy-free provinces.

Conclusions from the Case Studies:

These case studies from the three major narcotics producing regions of the world and Afghanistan's poppy-free provinces underscore two main points about confronting drug production. First, instability creates the pre-conditions for illicit narcotics production. In the Andean region, the Golden Crescent and the Golden Triangle, opium production thrived in areas that were characterized by instability and lack of government control, and was utilized by insurgents to finance their campaigns. Second, states that successfully reduced narcotics production were able to do so by establishing a strong government presence, providing viable alternative livelihoods and improving economic conditions. In the case of Turkey, channeling production into a legal market was preferable to and more feasible than a total ban. In Afghanistan, the 18 provinces that have succeeded in eliminating poppy production have been able to do so primarily through the presence of a legitimate government. Keeping these provinces out of poppy production will depend on the government's ability to deliver services and development through programs such as the Good Performance Initiative.

Theories Behind the Current U.S. Counternarcotics Strategy

The current American counternarcotics strategy in Afghanistan is designed to offer both carrots and sticks to Afghan farmers and local leaders to eliminate opium poppy production. The “five pillars” of the strategy consist of: public information, alternative livelihoods, eradication, interdiction, and law enforcement/justice reform (Schweich, 2006 p.1). The public information campaign consists of messages from the Afghan government broadcasted in the public media and print materials designed to convince Afghans of the immorality of opium production. The State Department projected that the second pillar, alternative livelihoods, would only be effective at changing farmers’ behavior if the risks and costs of poppy cultivation are increased through the other pillars (Patterson, 2006).¹

Accordingly, the third pillar, eradication, is designed to serve as a credible threat to offset the high yields normally associated with opium cultivation. Rather than eliminate the entire crop, it is hoped that eradication will serve as a deterrent and induce Afghan farmers to plant other crops. Yet one fundamental miscalculation of this theory is that the farmers who stand to lose the most from eradication are not those who reap the high profits from its sale. Thus eradication generally hurts impoverished Afghan farmers and forces them to cultivate poppy again the following season, turn to the insurgency, or give up property and/or family members to the local strongmen who serve as their creditors. By effectively making the poor poorer and the rich richer, eradication strengthens the forces that continue to weaken the Afghan state (Felbab-Brown, 2005 p.63). Interdiction serves as the fourth pillar, and focuses on decreasing narcotics trafficking and processing in Afghanistan. Although less incendiary than eradication, interdiction is hindered by the deep corruption that permeates the Afghan government and it undermines the support of regional warlords that U.S. forces have depended on for security and intelligence since 2001. In order to seriously address narcotics trafficking through interdiction, the U.S. would have to end its reliance on local warlords (Felbab-Brown, 2005, p.65).

The last pillar, law enforcement/justice reform aims to fight corruption and increase rule of law by institution building and training police forces. This pillar is not only crucial to counternarcotics efforts but serves as a fundamental tenant of state-building in Afghanistan. Unfortunately, corruption will be almost inevitable so long as such a large segment of the Afghan economy remains criminal. Although the current U.S. strategy towards counternarcotics contains some productive elements, its most dangerous component is the increasingly militarized policy of forced eradication, which undermines the wider American objectives of defeating the Taliban insurgency and creating a viable Afghan state.

Additional Policy Prescriptions for Counternarcotics:

Most opponents of the current U.S. counternarcotics strategy offer a multi-faceted approach to countering opium production in Afghanistan, usually based on some combination of public information

¹ alternative livelihoods came under criticism after the link between poverty and opium production was challenged by the claim that Afghanistan’s poorest provinces had given up poppy while the wealthiest provinces such as Helmand and Kandahar remained the largest poppy producers.

campaigns, providing alternative livelihoods, interdiction, anti-corruption campaigns and police reform. While many recognize that building an effective Afghan state is an essential pre-requisite for stopping opium production in the country, there is very little agreement on how best to do this. The highly generalized concept of state-building becomes extremely complicated considering that the de-facto power-holders in opium producing regions are highly involved in the drug trade. Forcing government officials to implement unpopular counternarcotics measures essentially undermines the strong Afghan state envisioned by the international community by making it a puppet controlled by foreign powers (Rubin, 2008, p.40). Some have advocated following Thai model, which is portrayed as a successful implementation of development-based strategies. Joel Hafvenstein writes, “[t]he Thai government never legalized poppy, but nor did it aggressively enforce the law against farmers before they had real alternatives to opium. By 1990, Thailand’s opium crop dropped to negligible levels, thanks to a long-term development program” (2007, p.236). Hafvenstein also notes the importance of empowerment-providing access to education, land, assets and citizenship rights which enable locals to stand up to the regional power holders who are often key players in the drug trade (p.236).

Another proponent of empowerment, David Mansfield, is highly critical of the so-called “economic model” which underlies U.S. counternarcotics efforts as well as current popular opinion on opium production in Afghanistan. He points out, that most Afghan farmers are not motivated by pure economics. Instead, they are “constrained by insufficient assets, fragmented markets, concerns about food security as well as traditional mechanisms for accessing land and credit...[and therefore]...are not independent actors free to allocate resources in accordance with prevailing price signals” (2007, p.232). Accordingly, while universal eradication will exacerbate the social inequalities that underlie poppy cultivation, providing blanket development assistance will only reward the resource rich who already benefited disproportionately from opium production. Thus Mansfield advocates a “targeted approach” that does not treat poppy farmers as one homogenous group, but rather provides development assistance to the resource poor while applying social and legal pressure to wealthier poppy cultivators. Empowering the impoverished majority is not only a fundamental of successful state-building; it can also help reverse the pressures that make Afghanistan the ideal place for an illicit opium industry.

Recognizing similarities between opium production in Afghanistan and the case of Turkey in the 1970s, an international public policy think-tank called the Senlis Council,² proposed its “Poppy for Medicine” initiative in 2005. Following the Turkish model, the plan calls for legalizing poppy production for licensing and sale in the legal market for medicinal opiates. Although this initiative makes theoretical sense, several fundamental problems make the Poppy for Medicine plan infeasible. First, with India already stockpiling its oversupply, the market for legal opiates is simply too small to accommodate the massive amounts of Afghan opium that would flood the market (Hafvenstein, 2007, p.235). The price of legal opiates, four times lower than that for heroin would drop even further, and a black-market for illegal opium would remain (Macdonald, 2007, p.34). Second, the Afghan legal system is too underdeveloped to effectively license and regulate the opium market, and the plan would exacerbate the already overwhelming problems faced by the Afghan police and judicial system by making regulation

²Currently known as the International Council on Security and Development (ICOS)

even more complex. The Senlis Council plan was staunchly rejected by the Afghan government, which called it “senseless,” and announced that the group would be banned from Afghanistan (Afzali, 2008). Nevertheless, the Senlis Council should be commended for investigating a novel alternative to addressing drug production problem in Afghanistan, infeasible though it may be.

Although the Senlis Council was highly criticized for suggesting that Afghan opium could be licensed and produced for sale in the market for medicinal opiates, other alternative approaches to international drug control issues are gaining an ear. Disillusioned with the futility and ineffectiveness of the international war on drugs, a growing body of scholars and influential thinkers has called for a new paradigm in the form of drug legalization. Characterizing the international war on drugs as “illiberal, murderous, and pointless” *The Economist* calls legalization the “least bad” alternative, and argues for a public health oriented approach under which drugs would be legal but highly regulated and taxed so as to minimize use and addiction rates (2009, March 7). David Macdonald also supports this approach, and recognizes that drug addiction is no longer merely a western problem, as growing populations of drug addicts have emerged in Afghanistan as well as Iran, Thailand and many other non-western countries.

Others note the ethnocentric paradox of criminalizing the smoking of opium and cannabis, two centuries-old Afghan traditions, while tolerating or encouraging the use of alcohol, a drug forbidden under Islam as a harmful intoxicant (Macdonald, 2007 p. 13, Hafvenstein, 2007, p.123). Proponents of legalization recognize that the criminalized nature of the Afghan opium economy necessitates that business will be co-opted by the strongest anti-government actor in the region and in Afghanistan, this happens to be the Taliban. Thus while commentators often remark that opium production funds the Taliban, it is the illicit nature of the industry and not the product itself that makes this an inevitability. Even if counternarcotics programs are successful in Afghanistan, as long as demand persists, production will inevitably crop up again in other unstable and underdeveloped regions of the world, necessitating more expensive counternarcotics policies, and more instability and loss of life that result from the war on drugs. Nevertheless, despite influential proponents of legalization such as Harvard Economist Jeffrey Miron and advocacy groups such as “Law Enforcement Against Prohibition” (LEAP), given the current political climate, the international community is quite far from endorsing any policy other than criminalization of opium and other narcotic drugs.

Conclusion:

The U.S. must correlate its objectives in Afghanistan with the amount of time, resources and lives it is willing to expend in the country. Eliminating poppy production in Afghanistan is possible, but it must be recognized that reaching this goal will be expensive and will take decades. There is no short-term solution, and policies that attempt to achieve short term results such as forced eradication and buy-offs are counterproductive. As was the case in Thailand, to be poppy-free, Afghanistan will have to undergo a major economic transformation that raises incomes and increases the opportunity cost of using land and labor for opium cultivation. Although this is necessarily a long-term effort, there are things that can be done in the short term to start moving towards this long term end.

First, the U.S. must abandon its catch-all interpretation of the “narco-terrorist,” and distinguish between ordinary Afghans involved in the drug trade and the anti-government insurgents who are politically and ideologically motivated. The association between the Taliban and the opium industry stems from the industry’s criminalization and the resulting shared interests, not from greed or the nature of the product itself. Accordingly, the counterinsurgency must once again be disentangled from the counternarcotics issue. Doing so could drive a wedge between the Taliban and the large number of Afghans who depend on opium production for their livelihoods. U.S. and coalition military units should focus on providing security and stability, while eradication should be abandoned altogether as a strategy except when conducted by Afghan local civil authorities on their own initiative. Programs such as the Good Performance Initiative, which offer development aid as incentive for regions that can demonstrate a sustainable transition away from poppy production should be expanded: a strategy that has already succeeded in 13 out of 18 Afghan provinces (USAID, 2008). These efforts should be increased to include offers of major infrastructure investments for regions that have complied with the opium production ban. In areas where opium cultivation remains prevalent such as Helmand and Kandahar provinces, a targeted approach, as advocated by David Mansfield should be applied to empower impoverished workers who gain little from the opium trade but suffer the most from forced eradication. Part of this empowerment should take the form of microcredit provided to farmers in order to help break the debt cycle that compels them to work in the opium industry. The objective should be a gradual shift in the balance of power, away from traditional strongmen who monopolize the drug trade and towards a new class of Afghan citizens who have more to gain from a stable and legitimate Afghan state.

As judicial reform is implemented through sustained efforts, corruption of government officials and police forces must be confronted by long term international assistance and a policy of zero tolerance. Reform of regional and local police forces is essential, but this will require the odious process of imbedding American or other policemen from the international community into local Afghan police units to assist them in creating a more effective and transparent force. Interdiction should be carried out, not against ordinary Afghans who are involved in the narcotics trade, but against kingpins and public officials with links to the opium industry. These operations will certainly result in increased violence, and an increased U.S. and coalition troop presence will be necessary in order to maintain security and help enforce rule of law until the Afghan police are functional.

Expectations for an opium-free Afghanistan should be lowered to accommodate at least a 10 year time-frame, but a more realistic estimate would allow for decades. In the mean-time, the international community will have to accept the fact that opium will be produced in Afghanistan on some level while state-building occurs. By focusing resources on reducing demand at home, more will be done to address the drug problem than any measures conducted in the source- countries. Nevertheless, with the right approach to counternarcotics as part of a concerted state-building effort, the U.S. and international community can succeed in overcoming the insurgency, creating a viable state and reducing opium production in Afghanistan.

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