



Opium in Afghanistan: Lawlessness Thrives on Narcotics Trade

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The Situation

With a harvest in excess of 4,100 tons in 2005, the Islamic State of Afghanistan has become the world's leading opium producer. (Afghanistan Opium Survey 2005) A great cause for concern for the international community, this development threatens the country's already parsimonious democratic progress since the US-led invasion and defeat of the Taliban in October 2001. The correlation between the narcotics trade and organized crime, which has bred warlordism, lawlessness and terrorism, is of particular concern. As State Department Afghanistan Coordinator Maureen Quinn explains, 'Narcotics cultivation and trafficking is a corrupting influence on the Afghan government at virtually all levels and stunts the growth of the country's legitimate economy.' (Quinn 2005) Warlords, criminals, extremists and insurgents continue to fund their operations with the spoils of the country's lucrative opium trade.

Recent Problematic Developments

Since the fall of the Taliban, an extremist movement sponsored by Pakistan that emerged in 1994 to end Afghanistan's civil war, opium production has risen 657% from 2001 levels, prompting the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) to list Afghanistan as the world's leading opium producer in 2004. (Center for Advanced Defense Studies 2005) In 2006, 90% of the world's heroin could trace its roots to Afghanistan, resulting in trafficking revenues equivalent to around \$2.8 billion, or 1/3 of the country's domestic product. (Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs 2006) Despite modest decreases in production in 2005, cultivation is expected to increase in 13 of 34 provinces. A mere 3 provinces are projected to decrease production. (UNODC 2006) These numbers are startling for one of the world's most impoverished nations, with high unemployment, low life expectancy and a GDP amongst the lowest 15 worldwide. With over \$8 billion in international aid and investment in the country, international pressure has mounted to prevent Afghanistan from becoming a narcotic state.

The recent growth of the opium industry can be attributed to both geographic and economic conditions. In a country where deforestation, limited water resources, soil degradation, pollution and desertification are serious concerns, poppies—the crop necessary for opium production—are one of the most adapted crops for large-scale growth. Economically, poppy production is also a more viable crop than native cereals. The average poppy farmer stands to earn ten times more per hectare than a legitimate cereal and grain farmer (UNODC 2005). Furthermore, poorer farmers lacking access to sufficient expanses of fertile lands are often forced into sharecropping agreements, which generally require the cultivation of poppies (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan Ministry of Counter-Narcotics 2006). As efforts by the newly formed government have proven ineffective in curbing the cultivation of poppies, fewer farmers are dissuaded from pursuing cultivation of the crop. Perhaps even more detrimental to Afghanistan than the increased volume of domestic opium production has been the nation's transition from a mere cultivation state to a full-capacity processing state. (Willems 2004) This transition occurred simultaneously with the development of



clandestine laboratories that process raw opium into heroin, a much more lucrative product. (Charles 2004) The development of domestic drug processing capacity not only ensures the prolonged profitability of opium cultivation in Afghanistan, it also promotes the international crime syndicates that are already crippling the newly democratic republic and its ability to institute the rule of law.

Counter-Narcotics Efforts

In October 2002, the National Security Council of Afghanistan created the Counter Narcotics Directorate (CND), which enacted the nation's first-ever National Drug Control Strategy in May 2003. With aims to achieve a 70% reduction in domestic opium cultivation by 2008, the strategy focuses on the "elimination of processing, trafficking, distribution and consumption of all narcotic and psycho-tropic substances." (Afghanistan Counter Narcotics Directorate 2004) With over 37% of farmers growing opium for basic food and shelter needs and 20% due to a lack of government and NGO aid, alternative sources of income must be presented to prevent cultivation. (UNODC 2006) In response, the most recent strategy, propounded in 2006, has presented a list of four priorities. The strategy first proposes to disrupt traffickers and backers in an attempt to destroy the opium supply chain. To this effect, the Afghan Special Narcotics Force has arrested nearly 150 traffickers since May 2005. (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan Ministry of Counter-Narcotics 2006) The second priority is strengthening and diversifying legal rural livelihoods. The government has focused on work-for-pay programs and social safety nets to prevent the poverty that spurs opium production. Despite these government programs, NGO participation is still essential in presenting alternative lifestyles and crops. The third and fourth strategy points concern providing services to stop addiction and strengthening institutions to enforce drug laws. Both of these priorities have yet to be realized to any significant degree, as few programs for chronic users and government institutions' influence rarely reaching beyond major cities.

Short Term Results of Counter-Narcotics Efforts

Promising initial results of these counter-narcotics initiatives were a single-year phenomenon. UNODC's 2005 *Afghanistan Opium Rapid Assessment Survey* indicated a falling trend in opium cultivation in most of the nation's 34 provinces during 2004. However, low yields of opium poppy due to drought and disease in 2004 and increased wheat prices in 2005 are said to have influenced this shift. (UNODC 2005) Plantings for the 2006 season are equal to or exceeding 2005 levels and with no major eradication efforts reported during the planting season, opium production will likely eclipse 2005 figures. Although the fact that 86% of poppy farmers in 2005 chose to practice crop rotation—and thus, not grow poppies every harvest—is a positive development, it is somewhat offset by the failure of the eradication program to reach remote mountainous regions where poppy production is increasing.

Conclusion

The rampant narcotics industry in Afghanistan serves as an important reminder that the country must still tread a long and cautious path toward democratization. Specifically, the preponderance of the opium industry indicates the need for development initiatives in the newly democratic republic. Poverty is a root cause of the Afghan narcotics industry, as many poor farmers rely on poppy



cultivation as their only reliable and sustainable, albeit illegal, source of income. The “plea for a better life” takes precedence over respect for government rule or regulation in the struggle for survival still fought by many Afghans. (Suri 2005) Only once the country’s farmers dispose of more sustainable legitimate means to meet their basic needs will the lucrative opium trade—and the powerful warlords that the opium trade supports—significantly decline.

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