

Combating Opium in Afghanistan

by Ali A. Jalali, Robert B. Oakley, and Zoe Hunter

Key Points

Opium continues to pose one of the most serious threats to stability and good governance in Afghanistan. Proceeds and protection fees from trafficking are funneled to terrorist and insurgent groups, including the Taliban and al Qaeda. Insurgents have successfully leveraged poppy eradication efforts to increase popular resistance to both the government in Kabul and the presence of coalition forces. Despite major increases in counternarcotics programs and resources over the past year, production has shot up 59 percent.

Opium production and trafficking in Afghanistan are multifaceted problems with no simple solutions. To achieve real progress in the fight against illegal drug production, targeted efforts will be necessary on several fronts. The first of these is strengthening the rule of law, with emphasis on building the judiciary. Traffickers and other criminals at all levels of government must be prosecuted, sentenced, and incarcerated. Equally important is combating corruption. Afghanistan's leaders must set an example by dismissing corrupt high-level officials.

The international community must continue to provide training to the Afghan National Police and Afghan National Army to professionalize and modernize these forces. The efficacy of existing programs

should be reviewed and adjusted to reflect local requirements.

Countertrafficking and interdiction efforts should be increased throughout the region, particularly in countries neighboring Afghanistan. Eradication efforts must continue but in a more transparent manner to offset potential downsides.

Another essential element in the counternarcotics effort focuses on alternative livelihoods. A long-term approach to ensure a lasting shift away from narcotics production is essential. Farmers should be offered the carrot of training, materials, and marketing assistance for alternative crops, to accompany the stick of eradication, which on its own cannot be effective.

A Narco-economy

Opium poses an enormous threat to stability and good governance in Afghanistan.¹ President Hamid Karzai put it well: "If we don't destroy poppy, it will destroy us."² However, the counternarcotics challenge is not one that the government of Afghanistan has been prepared to meet thus far.

The opium trade in Afghanistan is highly profitable. Of the total sales on the international market, only about 10 percent remains within Afghanistan, with 1 percent going to the farmers who grow

poppy and the remainder to foreign dealers and trafficking networks. Afghanistan produces 87 percent of the world's opium, comprising over half of its gross domestic product. It supplies three-quarters of the illicit opium used in Europe and almost all of that used in Russia.³ Rates of usage and addiction are increasing in neighboring countries, notably Iran, as well as in Afghanistan itself.

Approximately 10 percent of the Afghan population grows poppies as a subsistence crop. It is by far the most lucrative option for farmers, even when factoring in necessary bribes to officials and usury by traffickers. Farmers who claim that they would prefer a licit income protest that they have no option but to grow poppy to support their families.

Although drug usage is forbidden under Islam, opium and heroin use is surprisingly common and increasing significantly within Afghanistan itself. This habit exacerbates the severe poverty that many experience, with some addicts selling all their possessions to feed their addiction. Many farmers cite personal use as a contributing factor to their continued poppy production. Medical facilities are grossly inadequate, and the majority of addicts receive no treatment for their problem.

In the absence of a functional banking system, opium and heroin create

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a narco-economy for farmers. Blocks of heroin serve as currency and may be used to purchase goods or serve as bribes; they also act as savings and investment accounts, as blocks are set aside until needed or until the price of heroin rises. Through short-term loans (called *Salaam*), traffickers provide farmers a means to finance poppy planting. Such loans are generally at usurious rates, creating a debt cycle that can be difficult for farmers to break.

Widespread corruption is both a cause and result of the narcotics trade. The presence of drug traffickers at all levels of the Afghan government—from the local cop on the beat, to judges, to senior government ministers—severely hampers counternarcotic measures.

Gains for Terrorists

Terrorist and insurgent groups gain significant income by imposing repetitive transit and protection fees, generally in the range of 15 to 18 percent, on both drugs and precursor chemicals. Beneficiaries of materials passing into Pakistan include the Taliban, al Qaeda, and Hizb-e-Islami; fees on materials passing into Central Asia assisted the Islamic Jihad Group of Uzbekistan, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, and the East Turkestan Islamic Movement.

Resurgent Taliban elements, based primarily in the southern Afghan provinces of Helmand and Kandahar, and in the Pakistani border provinces of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas and Balochistan, are using eradication as a flashpoint to incite local populations to violence against coalition forces. The Taliban maintains a territorial interest in Afghanistan and is attempting to use the professed protection

of the farmers' livelihoods as leverage for fighting the "foreign occupation." This partnership might seem unconvincing, given the Taliban's previous draconian crackdown on poppy production; however, desperation breeds strange bedfellows.

Rampant drug production spawns a culture of impunity that consistently undermines the exercise of legitimate government control. It also creates significant instability, particularly in Helmand and Kandahar provinces, which were the scene of heavy fighting throughout

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the summer of 2006. The Taliban and traffickers have portrayed the new North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) operation as antifarmer rather than antiterrorist. To combat eradication efforts, traffickers in the south are actively encouraging the planting of poppy crops in designated areas, both for protection and to exercise greater control over the farmers themselves. Trafficking groups have begun to consolidate to fight eradication efforts, with a correlating rise in firefights with Afghan and coalition forces.

Policy Options

If there were easy solutions to Afghanistan's narcotics problem, it would have been solved along ago. How should policy options be prioritized to deal with this rampant epidemic?

Strengthening Weak Institutions.

The Afghanistan Compact gives priority to "the coordinated establishment in each province of functional institutions including civil administration, police, prisons, and judiciary." Reforming the justice system is of prime importance. The Compact aims at ensuring "equal, fair and transparent access to justice based upon written codes with fair trials and enforceable verdicts." Achievement of this hinges on a comprehensive "legislative reform of the public and private sector, building the capacity of judicial institutions and cadres, promoting human rights and legal awareness and rehabilitating the judicial infrastructure."⁴

The presence of drug traffickers at all levels of the Afghan government severely hampers counternarcotic efforts.⁵ Systematic police corruption facilitates the transport of opium across Afghanistan to heroin processing labs in the south, and from there across the Iranian border. While aware of the problem, the Afghan government has a tendency to move problems rather than remove them, simply relocating corrupt officials as their activities become public. Strong, decisive action against corruption is necessary. The government of Afghanistan must assume the leadership role and make examples of corrupt officials.

The justice sector suffers from limited human capacity and infrastructure. The court structure is outdated, many judicial personnel are unqualified, and corruption is deep-rooted. Years of fighting have destroyed the institutional integrity of the justice system and left a patchwork of contradictory and overlapping laws. Although some progress has been made, particularly in legislative reform, no strategy has been agreed upon for rebuilding the system.

The United States is working closely with the government of Afghanistan and with coalition partners to build enforcement and judicial capacities. The U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration

Ali A. Jalali is a Distinguished Visiting Fellow in the Institute for National Strategic Studies (INSS) at the National Defense University, as well as a Distinguished Professor at the Near East–South Asia Center for Strategic Studies. Ambassador Robert B. Oakley is a Distinguished Research Fellow in INSS. Zoe Hunter is a former Research Assistant in INSS.

(DEA) is integrally involved in this cooperation. In 2005, DEA deployed five foreign advisory support teams to Afghanistan to mentor Afghan counternarcotics officials. DEA is also assisting with the establishment of mobile detection teams, which have the potential to disrupt trafficking routes and vastly improve interdiction capacities through the use of K-9 officers and the ability to establish checkpoints and conduct vehicle searches. In total, DEA has trained over 138 counternarcotics police in tactics and operations.⁶ The United States is also providing broader based training to the Afghan National Police, including basic skills and information management as well as more sophisticated techniques such as stings.

Enhancement of enforcement capacities has led to several high-profile arrests. In October 2005, DEA successfully extradited Haji Baz Mohammed to New York for prosecution, a move that sent a chill throughout the Afghan trafficking community. A DEA-led investigation resulted in the arrest of Bashir Noorzai, who provided weapons and manpower to the Taliban in exchange for the protection of his drug crops in Afghanistan. These kinds of enforcement successes are precisely what Afghanistan needs and must be replicated many times over.

In tandem with enforcement comes the requirement for development of the judicial sector, leading to successful investigation, prosecution, and incarceration of offenders. The State Department's Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL) has been instrumental in establishing the Vertical Prosecution Task Force, which trains prosecutors and investigators in how to build cases, and the Central Narcotics Tribunal, which provides support (including needed protection) for judges. Although still in their initial stages, the successful functioning of both the task force and the

tribunal will be important to the full establishment of the rule of law in Afghanistan. Such initiatives, along with DEA enforcement training, require full U.S. support if they are to effect timely and lasting change.

International Cooperation.

The Afghanistan Compact was accepted as a blueprint for cooperation between the government of Afghanistan and the international community at the January 2006 London Conference on Afghanistan.⁷ In part, the Compact aims at achieving a sustained and significant reduction (and

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eventually, complete elimination) of the production and trafficking of narcotics. Essential elements of the counternarcotic strategy include:

*improved interdiction, law enforcement, and judicial capacity building; enhanced cooperation among Afghanistan, neighboring countries, and the international community on disrupting the drug trade; wider provision of economic alternatives for farmers and laborers in the context of comprehensive rural development; and building national and provincial counternarcotic institutions.*⁸

Until recently, the United Kingdom served as the Group of Eight lead nation for counternarcotics. The enormity of the opium challenge exposes the futility of the lead nation construct, which allows other contributing nations to shirk responsibility for participating in the counternarcotics effort. Given that Afghanistan is the source of most of Europe's opium, European capitals must alter the mandates of personnel

assigned to the International Security and Assistance Force (ISAF) to remove caveats preventing their forces from engaging in counternarcotics operations. The United Kingdom is an exemplar in this regard, training Afghan forces and developing an Afghan counternarcotic Criminal Justice Task Force, paralleling the U.S. DEA and INL initiatives. Moreover, the United Kingdom has committed over US\$502 million to support the pillars of Afghanistan's drug strategy.⁹

The updated National Drug Control Strategy of Afghanistan envisions that in the next 3 years, the government will focus on four vital areas: targeting the traffickers and the top end of the trade; strengthening and diversifying legal rural livelihoods; reducing the demand for illicit drugs and improving the treatment of drug users; and developing state institutions at the central and provincial governments.¹⁰

However, there is considerable disagreement among Afghan and international partners about strategic approaches and target priorities in counternarcotic operations. The main issue is whom to target first: producers and farmers, or processors and traffickers. The lessons learned over the past 4 years suggest that targeting traffickers and traders has fewer negative consequences and does not require the provision of alternative livelihoods.¹¹ The Afghan government's interdiction capacity, however, is limited, and the criminal justice sector responsible for processing drug-related crime is not up to the challenge.

International assistance to the judicial system, led by Italy, has been so slow as to be largely ineffectual. Starting with provincial police and rising through more senior ranks, there have been very few arrests of well-known traffickers. While interim arrangements to expedite the judicial process have been taken, the involvement of international forces is needed to enhance the interdiction capacity.

Unfortunately, the jury is still out on whether this will happen. On July 31, 2006, NATO–ISAF took command of operations in restive southern Afghanistan. British, Canadian, and Dutch forces have demonstrated fortitude and commitment to the Afghan mission in heavy fighting against a resurging Taliban. However, ISAF has shown reluctance to get involved in the drug war. As a security assistance force, it should play a role in counternarcotic operations that are part of a security-related effort. ISAF's role in targeting drug laboratories, opium stockpiles, and trafficking routes would not only help Afghan counternarcotic efforts but also curtail the flow of Afghan drugs to Europe. It is in Europe's own interest to fight the trafficking of opium; member nations should alter their mandates to encompass a broader range of counternarcotic activities.

Afghanistan's neighbors have their own role to play in interdiction. The trafficking routes used by criminals are long established and well known. Drugs travel primarily via Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan to Russia; and via Pakistan and Iran to Europe. Corrupt border guards and high-ranking officials within the Central Asian countries continue to facilitate trafficking.

The same is true in Iran and Pakistan. Recently, Iran has increased its interdiction efforts, largely because of its increasing domestic addiction problem. Iran has lost several thousand troops in its efforts to guard the porous border with Afghanistan. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld highlighted the importance of a regional approach—including efforts from Russia and Europe—in tackling the drug trade during his July 2006 trip to Tajikistan and Afghanistan. Tajikistan, Iran, and Afghanistan have established a trilateral agreement, in part to address the drug dilemma. While it remains to be seen what concrete actions these countries will take,

the agreement illustrates the international complications the drug trade creates.

The Durand Line, which forms the mountainous border between Afghanistan and Pakistan, is a historically ungoverned territory. The Taliban finds refuge in the Pakistani province of Balochistan, across the border from the Afghan provinces of Kandahar and Helmand. The Pakistani government has demonstrated a reluctance to take action against Taliban militants operating out of Balochistan, electing to focus on a low-level insurgency among the disenfranchised Baloch population. Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf's recent peace deal with pro-Taliban militants in North Waziristan has been criticized by

corruption plagues eradication efforts as government forces are bribed to leave poppy fields standing

the Afghan government. Kabul believes that the accord reduces pressure on the Taliban who use Pakistani territory for attacks in Afghanistan. There has been a significant increase in militants' cross-border attacks since the deal was signed.

Moreover, the border between Nangahar and the Pakistani Federally Administered Tribal Areas—where al Qaeda remnants have found sanctuary—also poses a problem. An increased military or enforcement presence in one of these areas simply prompts traffickers to reroute their efforts: between 2004 and 2005, there was a 20 percent overall shift in trafficking from the southern border with Pakistan to the western border with Iran. This was largely in response to the presence of U.S. troops participating in Operation *Enduring Freedom*. Denying the traffickers their smuggling routes will demand a coordinated effort on behalf of all parties.

The illicit drug trade is a low-risk activity in a high-risk environment. To eliminate this trade, the situation must be reversed. This will require the firm establishment of the rule of law. The culture of impunity that fosters opium production must be challenged.

Eradication. In 2005, under its Poppy Elimination Program, the Afghan government eradicated 5,100 hectares of poppies, or 5 percent of the total planted.¹² This resulted in only a small decrease in overall production, in part due to favorable growing conditions that produced a higher yield per hectare. Poppies must be replanted after every harvest, so the actual production impact of eradicating a given field is limited to the immediate harvest. Depending on their location within Afghanistan, farmers may be able to plant two crops a year; many follow a poppy harvest with a cannabis crop.

The projected cost of eradication in 2006 is \$175 million. However, efforts to date have been largely unsuccessful. Provincial governors overstate eradication efforts: for the 14,000 hectares claimed eradicated, the United Nations (UN) estimates that approximately 5,600 have actually been destroyed.¹³ This comes at a (hardly cost-effective) price of some \$30,000 per hectare. In the meantime, an estimated 120,000 additional hectares of poppy have been planted; the net increased production has driven down the market price of opium to less than \$100 a kilogram (50 percent lower than a year ago). Corruption plagues eradication efforts as government forces are bribed (typically \$50, or a month's salary) to leave fields standing. In many instances, the eradication process itself—which currently amounts to uprooting fields using bulldozers—has been haphazard and ineffective, leading to spontaneous poppy regrowth in fields supposedly eradicated. The increase in eradication has led to an upswing in violence as farmers resist the destruction of their livelihoods.

The credible threat of eradication appears to deter many farmers who fear losing their source of income. According to a recent UN study, of those who reduced poppy cultivation in 2005, 70 percent cited the fear of eradication as a main reason for not growing.¹⁴ The corollary of this is that the absence of a viable threat leads to a resumption of production. Where government forces are unable to eradicate or are easily bribed, eradication fails and poppy growth flourishes. Indeed, despite progress in 2005, the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) reports that opium cultivation has increased 59 percent in 2006. The UNODC reports further that in the province of Helmand, where NATO forces are engaging in heavy fighting against the Taliban, cultivation has soared 162 percent.¹⁵ As UNODC Executive Director Antonio Maria Costa put it:

*Political, military, and economic investments by coalition countries are not having much visible impact on drug cultivation. As a result, Afghan opium is fuelling insurgency in western Asia, feeding international mafias, and causing a hundred thousand deaths from overdoses every year.*¹⁶

There is strong political opposition to any airborne eradication method, both among NATO allies and within the Afghan government (particularly President Karzai). Conventional herbicides, being poisons, carry significant health hazards in any broad-based use and are not recommended.

Alternative Livelihood Development. Opium is seamlessly integrated into, and in fact forms the cornerstone of, the Afghan economy. Drug production is corrupting Afghanistan and disabling Afghans. While this problem itself is widely recognized, the question remains how to address it effectively. In the words of Afghan Minister of Counter Narcotics Habibullah Qaderi: ‘alternative livelihoods’ is not simply about crop substitution, but about facilitating access

*to credit, land, food, employment, and markets while maintaining a credible enforcement and eradication threat. . . . At the same time we recognize that unless we develop accountable, transparent, and effective institutions, our capacity to deliver on our counter-narcotics strategy will be severely limited.*¹⁷

Truffles, a fungi delicacy, are the only legal agricultural product whose value rivals that of opium poppy, and these are not suited to Afghanistan’s climate. Iran’s experimentation with saffron production in western Afghanistan has seen moderate success. Other possible crops, such as apricots, were destroyed during the Russian occupation to make way for poppy production; these trees take 7 years to bear fruit and are not viable sources of income over the short term.

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Wheat, a favorite substitute of Western aid agencies, does not provide a viable alternative for farmers. Income from poppy production is approximately \$5,400 per hectare, while wheat brings in \$500. Farmers claim that they cannot support their families on this income. Furthermore, neighboring Pakistan holds a comparative advantage in wheat production, making it cheaper for Afghans to import wheat than to produce it domestically.

In short, from a purely economic standpoint, there is no true alternative crop to poppy for the farmer. There is no silver bullet that will cause farmers to stop growing poppy. Indeed, where such aid as wheat seed and fertilizers are distributed, it is common for farmers to grow both poppy and the alternative crop. The solution here is to combine the carrot with a stick:

provide licit alternatives to opium while increasing interdiction and enforcement efforts.

Legalization of Poppy? Some groups—most vocally the Senlis Council, an international policy think tank—have proposed that the solution to the narcotics problem in Afghanistan is to legalize the production of drugs. Proponents of this theory suggest a variety of possibilities, from providing cheap narcotics to Third World countries to buying and destroying the poppy crops; they suggest that production could be controlled by providing “color-coded poppies” whose flowers would be a different color than those grown illicitly.

The morality of pushing narcotics on Third World countries aside, this suggestion reflects a complete lack of understanding of the situation in Afghanistan. The Afghan government is incapable of controlling poppy production. It would be even more difficult to regulate a dual system, featuring both licit and illicit production. Rampant corruption would only exacerbate this, as officials would be left to determine who could and could not grow the product legally. The illegal trade would certainly continue, along with an increase in opium production.

The National Economy Commission of the Upper House of Parliament of Afghanistan recently rejected the proposed legalization of opium as counter to Islam. It further declared that the activities of the Senlis Council should be legally banned.

Conclusions

The key to the long-term defeat of narcotics trafficking is to establish and enforce the rule of law throughout Afghanistan. Ultimately, the Afghans must achieve this for themselves. The international community can best contribute to this effort

by building Afghan capacities in interdiction, enforcement, and prosecution. Such training, already undertaken by the United States and other allies, should be reviewed and augmented to bring such capacities online as soon as possible, as they are the prerequisite to stability both in Afghanistan and in the region. In the short term, coalition forces should increase their interdiction operations and ensure that these criminals are held to account for their crimes.

Concurrent with strengthening the rule of law, Afghanistan must develop a licit economy, rather than one dependent on drug revenues. Although the Afghans must achieve this for themselves, the international community is well positioned to provide support in rural development, including alternative livelihoods and establishment of a banking system. However, given rampant corruption, economic support must be tied to a maturing of the rule of law if any progress is to be made. The leadership of Afghanistan must demonstrate zero tolerance for corruption at all levels. Solving the issue will facilitate needed private investment in the country and assist with all of the country's challenges.

All this is easier said than done, to be sure. Ridding Afghanistan of its opium dependency will take years of steady effort and realistic expectations. As one of us has said in another setting, a job of this magnitude "requires the life of Noah, the patience of Job, and the wisdom of Solomon."

Notes

¹ This essay draws in part from an earlier Institute for National Strategic Studies workshop entitled

"Afghanistan: Assessing the Counter-Narcotics Effort," held December 16, 2005. The authors are most grateful to participants at that session for their insights and to Michael Casey for editorial assistance on this essay. A copy of the workshop proceedings can be obtained at <<http://www.ndu.edu/inss/>>.

² Speech of Hamid Karzai at the Second Conference on Counternarcotics, Kabul, Afghanistan, August 22, 2006, available at <www.president.gov.af/english/news/220806_Secondconference2nc.msp>.

³ See Vanda Felbab-Brown, "Afghanistan: When Counternarcotics Undermines Counterterrorism," *The Washington Quarterly* 28, no. 4 (Autumn 2005), 55–72, available at <www.twq.com/05autumn/docs/05autumn_felbab.pdf>.

⁴ The Afghanistan Compact, available at <www.unama-afg.org/news/_londonConf/_docs/06jan30-AfghanistanCompact-Final.pdf>.

⁵ For example, see "Afghanistan Riddled with Drug Ties," *Christian Science Monitor*, May 13, 2005, available at <www.csmonitor.com/2005/0513/p01s04-wosc.html>.

⁶ Interview with U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration officials, March 2006.

⁷ For more information on the London Conference, consult <www.fco.gov.uk/servlet/Front?pagename=OpenMarket/Xcelerate/ShowPage&c=Page&cid=1133773247211>.

⁸ The Afghanistan Compact, 4.

⁹ The United Kingdom's efforts on counternarcotics may be tracked at <www.fco.gov.uk/servlet/Front?pa

gename=OpenMarket/Xcelerate/ShowPage&c=Page&cid=1050510446431>.

¹⁰ The Afghan National Drug Control Strategy is available at <www.ands.gov.af/admin/ands/goa/upload/UploadFolder/National%20Drug%20Control%20Strategy%20-%20%20English.pdf>.

¹¹ See, for example, Barnett Rubin and Omar Zakhilwal, "A War on Drugs, Or a War on Farmers," *The Wall Street Journal*, January 11, 2005, A20, available at <www.cic.nyu.edu/archive/pdf/WSJ%20War%20on%20rugs%20or%20War%20on%20Farmers.pdf>.

¹² See United Nations (UN) Office on Drugs and Crime, *World Drug Report 2006*, Volume 2, 211, available at <www.unodc.org/pdf/WDR_2006/wdr2006_volume2.pdf>.

¹³ UN Office on Drugs and Crime, "Weekly Report on Eradication Verification (Number 15)," May 5, 2006.

¹⁴ UN Office on Drugs and Crime, "Summary Findings of Opium Trends in Afghanistan, 2005," September 12, 2005, 11, available at <www.unodc.org/pdf/afg/2005SummaryFindingsOfOpiumTrendsAfghanistan.pdf>.

¹⁵ UN Office on Drugs and Crime, "Afghan opium cultivation soars 59 percent in 2006, UNODC survey shows," September 2, 2006, available at <www.unodc.org/unodc/press_release_2006_09_01.html>.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ "Message from Minister Engineer Habibullah Qaderi," available at <www.mcn.gov.af/Eng/Minister_Message.htm>.

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