

**Dr. Vanda Felbab-Brown, Director, The  
Initiative on Nonstate Armed Actors  
Senior Fellow, The Brookings Institution  
– Written evidence (AFG0027)**

**House of Lords International Relations  
and Defence Committee's  
Inquiry into Afghanistan**

**October 29, 2020**

**"Drugs, Security, and Counternarcotics  
Policies in Afghanistan"**

Thank you for this opportunity to address the Committee through this written testimony.

I am a senior fellow at The Brookings Institution in Washington, DC where I specialize in counterinsurgency, counterterrorism, conflict mitigation and post-conflict stabilization policies, illicit economies, organized crime and urban violence. I am also the director of The Brookings Institution's Initiative on Nonstate Armed Actors. One of the areas I focus on is Afghanistan, where I travel regularly and about which I have published extensively, including the book *Aspiration and Ambivalence: Strategies and Realities of Counterinsurgency and State-Building in Afghanistan* (The Brookings Institution Press, 2013). I last conducted fieldwork in Afghanistan in the fall of 2019.

My testimony below represents my personal views only and does not reflect the views of Brookings, its other scholars, employees, officers, and/or trustees. As an independent think tank, The Brookings Institution does not take institutional positions on any issue.

### **Executive Summary**

- Afghanistan's illicit drug economy is unprecedented in its scale and has been deeply entrenched within the country since the 1980s.
- Temporary decreases in poppy cultivation and heroin production, driven by market forces, acts of nature, or policies, have not been sustained or sustainable.
- Structural drivers of the illicit drug economy – insecurity, political struggles, and a lack of economic alternatives – remain unaddressed and cannot easily be overcome for years to come.
- Although the illicit drug economy exacerbates insecurity, strengthens corruption, produces macroeconomic distortions, and contributes to substance abuse disorder, it also provides a vital lifeline for many Afghans and enhances their human security.
- Most counternarcotics measures adopted since 2001 have been ineffective or outright counterproductive economically, politically, and with respect to counterinsurgency and stabilization efforts.
- Eradication and bans on opium poppy cultivation, often suffered by the poorest and most socially marginalized communities, have generated extensive political capital for the Taliban and undermined the counterinsurgency efforts.
- The Obama administration's decision to defund centrally-led eradication was correct.

- Selective interdiction focused on Taliban-linked traffickers, conducted by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's International Security Assistance Force for Afghanistan between 2008 and 2014 and by the U.S. military again since 2017, did not break the Taliban's finances or its increasing battlefield potency.
- Alternative livelihoods efforts have often been poorly designed and ineffective and rarely generate sustainable income for poppy-production-dependent populations. In the past four years, many grounded to a halt.
- All counternarcotics policy options in Afghanistan are severely hampered and outright eviscerated by the intensifying civil war and the Taliban's strength on the battlefield.
- A peace deal between the Taliban and the Afghan government could in the future generate opportunities for more robust and comprehensive drug policy efforts. However, the odds of a peace deal are not high.
- More likely, civil war in Afghanistan will continue to escalate, whether or not the United States overstay the Doha agreement deadline of the full withdrawal of U.S. military forces from Afghanistan by May 2021.

#### *Policy Implications and Options*

- Counternarcotics policies in Afghanistan should be judicious, well-sequenced, and well-prioritized.
- Eradication should remain suspended until peace has been achieved, the Afghan government has stable reach throughout the Afghan territory, and legal livelihoods are in place, not simply promised. Such conditions will not exist in Afghanistan for years to come.
- If the United States withdraws all of its military forces from Afghanistan, the opportunities and capacity for even selective interdiction, focused against the Taliban and terrorist groups, will shrink dramatically.
- If the United States decides to overstay the May 2021 deadline by any significant amount of time and if it also increases its military forces beyond the level of 2,500 projected for early 2021, it could re-start its aerial interdiction efforts. Even so, the prospects remain poor for such interdiction to either robustly weaken the Taliban on the battlefield or reduce the size of the Afghan drug economy.
- If and when peace and stability eventually emerge, alternative livelihoods efforts should be streamlined into overall economic development and human capital development. Focusing on secure areas, such efforts must include both rebuilding the rural economy and creating off-farm opportunities.
- Like all counternarcotics policies, alternative livelihood efforts will be critically dependent on external donor funding.

- Yet the United States and European donors may not be willing to stomach funding a Taliban-dominated government if it significantly reduces political freedoms and protections of human rights and women's rights.
- Without robust external funding, the Afghan state, whether under the existing political dispensation or dominated by the Taliban, will collapse. The drug economy will become further entrenched.
- Improving the prevention of substance abuse disorder and access to treatment for Afghans who suffer from opioid-use disorder should be greatly elevated in policy and funded far more extensively than has been the case so far. Perhaps such policy efforts could be implemented even in Taliban-controlled areas.

In the following testimony, I first provide an overall description of the current drug and security situation in Afghanistan. I then detail developments and trends in the Afghan drug economy since 2002 and evaluate the current role of drugs in Afghanistan's security, economy, people's livelihoods, human security, and politics. Next I describe the actors in the Afghan drug economy, militants and powerbrokers linked to the Afghan government. I then describe the threats the drug economy generates and elaborate the economic and political significance of the Afghan drug economy. In the following section, I review counternarcotics efforts since 2002, including eradication, interdiction, alternative livelihoods, and demand reduction efforts. In the final section, I draw out policy prospects, implications, and options.

## **The Strategic Picture**

Perhaps nowhere in the world has a country and the international community faced an illicit drug economy as strong as the one in Afghanistan. In 2017, the drug economy in Afghanistan reached levels at that point unprecedented in the world at least since World War II, but very high levels of opium production had characterized Afghanistan's opium poppy economy since 2002. Moreover, neither opium poppy cultivation nor heroin production is a new, post-2001 phenomenon; each were engaged in robustly during the Taliban era and before. The decreases in poppy cultivation and opiate production that have periodically taken place over the past two decades have largely been the result of the saturation of global and local drug markets, poppy crop disease, inauspicious weather such as drought, or temporary coercive measures in certain parts of Afghanistan that could not be sustained economically or politically and rapidly broke

down. The structural drivers of the Afghan poppy economy, including, critically, insecurity, political power arrangements, and a lack of ready economic alternatives, remain unchanged or have intensified.

Narcotics production and counternarcotics policies in Afghanistan are of critical importance not only for internal and global drug control, but also for Afghanistan's security, its economic development, and rule-of-law efforts within the country.

Unfortunately, many of the counternarcotics policies adopted during most of the 2000s not only failed to reduce the size and scope of the illicit economy in Afghanistan, but also had serious counterproductive effects on the other objectives of peace, state-building, and economic reconstruction. In a courageous break with a previous counterproductive policy, the U.S. administration of President Barack Obama wisely decided in 2009 to scale back poppy eradication in Afghanistan, but it struggled to implement its new strategy effectively. The interdiction policy adopted in 2008 by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) International Security Assistance Force for Afghanistan (ISAF) and then Resolute Support (RS) neither bankrupted and weakened the Taliban, nor systematically altered the structural drivers or political dynamics of the poppy economy, the strength of organized crime, and corruption in the region or encouraged regional cooperation. The U.S.-Taliban Doha deal of February 2020 precludes the United States from mounting such aerial bombing of opium/ heroin and ephedra/ ephedrine depots, labs, and transportation trucks. Rural development policies similarly failed to address the structural drivers of poppy cultivation and many were not sustainable. Most have withered with the significant intensification of insecurity in the country and the Taliban accruing ever growing territorial control and influence.

Struggling with mounting insecurity, the Afghan government still has only little independent capacity and, for understandable reasons, political will to mount independent counternarcotics operations and policies, such as alternative livelihood efforts.

Indeed, no supply side suppression measures – whether eradication, interdiction, or alternative livelihoods – have ever been effective and lasting anywhere in the world in the context of an on-going war. Peace and security and extensive government presence are inescapable preconditions for successful supply reduction measures.<sup>1</sup>

Under conditions of intense and growing insecurity, demand reduction measures in Afghanistan, such as treatment and prevention, have for years been the most permissive and highly beneficial venue for drug

---

<sup>1</sup> Vanda Felbab-Brown, *Shooting Up: Counterinsurgency and the War on Drugs* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 2010).

policy interventions. Yet they have been never adequately funded or prioritized either by international donors or the Afghan government.

With increasing insecurity, and perhaps being on the cusp of a new and dramatically different political and social dispensation in Afghanistan, counternarcotics policy options have shrunk further. The Taliban is stronger on the battlefield than at any point since 2002 and poses an ever-increasing threat to the survival of the Afghan government. With or without U.S. military forces remaining in Afghanistan beyond the deadline of May 2021 (which the United States and the Taliban established in Doha in February 2020), the prospect for an intensified civil war in Afghanistan is high. The chance that intra-Afghan negotiations will generate a stable peace settlement is much smaller: Fighting and talking can easily go on for years to come.<sup>2</sup> A U.S. decision to withdraw from the February 2020 deal and continue fighting an open-ended war in Afghanistan will have little prospect for defeating the Taliban or reversing the Taliban's steady territorial and battlefield gains. It will only extend the life support provided to the Afghan government.

Without continued foreign aid, Afghan security forces will buckle, and the country's economic and security morass will deepen. And the Taliban would only more rapidly become the dominant actor in the Afghan government.

Intensified insurgency and civil war, diminished presence of international military forces (perhaps soon their full withdrawal), and reductions in foreign aid further curtail counternarcotics policy options. Eradication of drug crops that could be foisted on the Afghan government as a result of external pressure is deeply counterproductive to any counterinsurgency and civil war mitigation efforts and can critically destabilize any peace settlement eventually signed, regardless of whether or not U.S. and international troops withdraw in the spring and summer of 2021. However, their withdrawal further limits opportunities for systematic interdiction operations that the Afghan government is not capable of replacing. War will continue to eviscerate alternative livelihood efforts beyond the few pockets of stability.

Even after violent conflict will have ended in Afghanistan and stable government will have been established through negotiations or the Taliban's victory on the battlefield, a significant, sustained reduction of opium poppy cultivation and ephedra harvesting and

---

<sup>2</sup> Vanda Felbab-Brown, "After the U.S.-Taliban Deal, What Might Negotiations between the Taliban and the Afghan Side Look Like?" The Brookings Institution, February 19, 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/02/19/after-the-us-taliban-deal-what-might-negotiations-between-the-taliban-and-afghan-side-look-like/>

methamphetamine production would require decades of systematic and well-designed efforts and sustained funding. Yet there is a substantial possibility that a peace in which the Taliban is the predominant actor in the Afghan government would instead result in donors cutting off economic aid to Afghanistan, resulting in a significantly worsened economic and humanitarian situation overall, as well as a further entrenched drug economy.

Moreover, while, à la the 1990s, a Taliban-run government may be interested in suppressing poppy cultivation to obtain international legitimacy and international aid, any lasting suppression will face the same structural and political obstacles. The Taliban-run regime could ram through temporary poppy bans, but it would have to struggle to maintain them.

As has been the case for several years, for the foreseeable future much of what counternarcotics policies can currently accomplish and should emphasize is to avoid making a very difficult situation in Afghanistan worse. Supply-reduction and the counterterrorism objectives of the counternarcotics efforts will need to center on interdiction outside of Afghanistan's borders. More robustly supporting treatment and prevention, perhaps even in Taliban controlled territories, remains the most permissive and productive domain for drug policy interventions.

## **Drug Trends in Afghanistan**

In 2007 Afghan opium production climbed to what then was seen as a staggering 8,200 metric tons (mt).<sup>3</sup> As a result of the subsequent oversaturation of the illicit opiates market and the intense outbreak of a poppy disease, production fell to 3,600 mt in 2010. It then rose again to 5,800 mt in 2011, and remained with some fluctuations at this level. In 2014 the estimated opium production was 6,400 mt.<sup>4</sup> Yet in 2017, production climbed to a new record of 9,000 mt, then falling in 2018 to 6,400 mt as a result of drought in Afghanistan that hampered poppy cultivation and yields.<sup>5</sup> These levels of production are enough to supply most of the world's opiates market.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> See United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *Afghanistan Opium Survey 2007: Executive Summary* (UNODC, 2007), [http://www.unodc.org/pdf/research/AFG07\\_ExSum\\_web.pdf](http://www.unodc.org/pdf/research/AFG07_ExSum_web.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> UNODC, *Afghanistan Opium Survey 2014* (UNODC, 2014), 7, <http://www.unodc.org/documents/crop-monitoring/Afghanistan/Afghan-opium-survey-2014.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> UNODC, *Afghanistan Opium Survey 2018: Executive Summary* (UNODC, July 2019), 3, [https://www.unodc.org/documents/crop-monitoring/Afghanistan/Afghanistan\\_opium\\_survey\\_2018\\_socioeconomic\\_report.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/crop-monitoring/Afghanistan/Afghanistan_opium_survey_2018_socioeconomic_report.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> See UNODC, *World Drug Report 2011* (Vienna: UNODC, 2011), 45, <http://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and->

For two decades, opium has been one of Afghanistan's leading cash-generating economic activities. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) estimated the gross value of the Afghan opiate economy -- including cultivation of poppy, processing into heroin, and trafficking up to Afghan borders -- to be between US\$4.1 billion and US\$6.6 billion in 2017 and, due to drought and lower prices, between US\$1.2 billion and US\$2.2 billion in 2018.<sup>7</sup> UNODC then estimated that the opiate economy is worth between 6 and 11 percent of Afghanistan's GDP. But when one takes into account economic spillovers, with drugs underpinning much of the other legal economic activity (such as construction and the purchases of both durables and non-durables), drugs easily constitute a much larger portion of the Afghan economy.<sup>8</sup>

Moreover, even without taking into account the spillover effects of drug production which enable legal economic activities for many Afghans, the value of the drug economy in both years still surpasses the value of Afghanistan's record exports of legal goods and services.<sup>9</sup> It is also important to note that in 2018, the Afghan government raised only US\$2.5 billion of its own revenues (12.8 percent of the country's GDP).<sup>10</sup> Government-raised revenues thus essentially equal the value of the opium poppy economy. Moreover, grants finance 75 percent of Afghanistan's public expenditures that amount to \$11 billion. The grants also fully finance Afghan security forces. Afghanistan remains both extraordinary dependent on foreign aid and highly vulnerable to external shocks. If international aid dried up, the Afghan economy would head into a catastrophic freefall and the state would melt down, with drugs being all the more significant.

For much of the rural population, the opium poppy economy is an essential source of basic livelihoods and human security. When access to the opium poppy economy is cut off, such as through bans on

---

[analysis/WDR2011/World\\_Drug\\_Report\\_2011\\_ebook.pdf](#).

<sup>7</sup> UNODC, *Afghanistan Opium Survey 2018: Executive Summary*, 3.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Christopher Ward and William Byrd, "Afghanistan's Opium Drug Economy," South Asia Region PREM Working Paper Series, no. SASPR-5, World Bank, Washington, DC, December 2004,

<http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/2004/12/5533886/afghanistans-opium-drug-economy>. Since 2002, the percentage of drugs to licit GDP has oscillated between 60 and 30 percent, not because the illicit economy has been reduced, but due to the expansion of some sectors of the legal economy, such as telecommunications.

<sup>9</sup> UNODC, *Afghanistan Opium Survey 2018: Executive Summary* (UNODC, July 2019), 3.

<sup>10</sup> The World Bank, "Afghanistan, Public Expenditure Update," July 29, 2019, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/afghanistan/publication/afghanistan-public-expenditure-update#:~:text=Key%20findings%3A,revenues%20are%20around%20%242.5%20billion>.

cultivation or eradication or because of drought, large segments of the rural population face economic immiseration and deprivation, even in terms of access to food, medical treatment, and schooling for children.<sup>11</sup> Under the worst circumstances, the affected communities are not only forced to liquidate their productive and human development assets but also sell their even very young daughters as brides. Even urban populations are connected to the drug economy, with construction and trade in urban spaces often underpinned by the drug trade.

Also crucially, opium poppy and cannabis cultivation, ephedra harvesting, and the production of opium, heroin, hashish, ephedrine, and likely methamphetamine (it is not clear how much ephedra much processing takes place in Afghanistan)<sup>12</sup> are extensive sources of employment. In particular, poppy cultivation and capsule lancing for the collection of opium resin are highly-labor intensive, vastly surpassing employment opportunities in all other sectors of the economy except the security sector. For example, poppy cultivation and opium harvesting is five times more labor intensive than wheat cultivation. Thus, if all of Afghanistan's poppy cultivation were replaced with wheat, four fifths of the country's people would lose their employment. In 2017, poppy cultivation provided up to 590,000 full-time-equivalent jobs according to the U.S. Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), more than the number of people employed in the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF).<sup>13</sup> In a country where more than 50 percent of the population lives below the national poverty line<sup>14</sup> and unemployment periodically shoots up to 25 or even 50 percent,<sup>15</sup> employment in the drug economy is a lifeline for many. The evaporation of international and Afghan funding for anti-Taliban militias, such as the Afghan Local Police, currently under way, will further augment the significance of the drug economy's employment

---

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, David Mansfield, *From Bad They Made It Worse: The Concentration of Opium Poppy in Areas of Conflict in the Provinces of Helmand and Nangarhar* (Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU), 2014), [http://www.areu.org.af/Uploads/EditionPdfs/NRM%20CS6%20ver%20%20\(2\).pdf](http://www.areu.org.af/Uploads/EditionPdfs/NRM%20CS6%20ver%20%20(2).pdf).

<sup>12</sup> For details of the emergent methamphetamine production and ephedra harvesting in Afghanistan, see David Mansfield and Alex Soderholm, "The Unknown Unknowns of Afghanistan's New Wave of Methamphetamine Production," London School of Economics, September 30, 2019, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/usappblog/2019/09/30/long-read-the-unknown-unknowns-of-afghanistans-new-wave-of-methamphetamine-production/>.

<sup>13</sup> Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), "Counternarcotics: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan," July 2018, 5 <https://www.sigar.mil/interactive-reports/counternarcotics/index.html>.

<sup>14</sup> Shubham Chaudhuri, "Latest Poverty Numbers for Afghanistan: A Call to Action, Not a Reason for Despair," The World Bank, May 7, 2018, <https://blogs.worldbank.org/endpovertyinsouthasia/latest-poverty-numbers-afghanistan-call-action-not-reason-despair>

<sup>15</sup> "Unemployment Rate Spikes in Afghanistan," ToloNews.com, October 2, 2015, <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan/unemployment-rate-spikes-afghanistan>.

opportunities (as well as the militias' tendency toward predation on communities.<sup>16</sup>)

The past two decades of economic development and alternative livelihood efforts have not altered these realities and predicaments.

### **Actors in the Afghan Drug Economy**

Opium continues to underlie much of Afghanistan's economic and political life throughout the country. Poppy is deeply entwined in the socio-economic fabric of the country, and hence, inescapably, in its political arrangements and power relations.

The Taliban is profiting from the drug trade, as are various criminal gangs (sometimes connected to the government), the Afghan police, various militias, tribal elites, and many ex-warlords-cum-government officials at various levels of the Afghan government. Sometimes these layers, including of those nominally on the opposite sides of the violent conflict, strongly overlap and multiple intersections and connections exist among them. Police units, often highly abusive and criminalized, tax the drug economy. Local commanders and powerbrokers equally tax it and may own or sponsor poppy fields as well as rent land to poppy farmers and provide microcredit for cultivation. Border officials, such as at Kabul airport, let trafficking pass for a cut of drug profits.

With its widespread territorial influence and reach throughout the country, the Taliban taxes cultivation, processing, and smuggling of drugs; and units and members of the Taliban are deeply involved in all these elements. In various years, the Taliban allows its fighters to disengage from fighting in order to collect the drug harvest. The Taliban also collects taxes from independent drug traders and various criminal groups, while suppressing others.

In contrast, the attitude of the Islamic State in Khorasan toward the drug economy has been varied. Its western branch in Herat, now largely moribund, was deeply implicated in the drug trade. Its eastern branch in Nangarhar, surprisingly, sought to suppress opium poppy cultivation there, despite the highly negative economic impact on local populations.<sup>17</sup> That attitude was consistent with ruling through

---

<sup>16</sup> Vanda Felbab-Brown, "The Dubious Joys of Standing Up Militias and Building Up Partner Capacities: Lessons from Afghanistan and Mexico for Prosecuting Security Policy through Proxies," The Brookings Institution, July 21, 2015, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-dubious-joys-of-standing-up-militias-and-building-partner-capacity-lessons-from-afghanistan-and-mexico-for-prosecuting-security-policy-through-proxies/>.

<sup>17</sup> Shah Mahmud Shinwari and Abubakar Siddique, "Pakistani Militants Lead IS Push Into Eastern Afghanistan," *Gandhara*, June 30, 2016,

extraordinary brutality alone, without cultivating performance-based legitimacy, but it cost the terrorist group significant political capital.

Measuring the size of illicit economies and any derivative numbers, such as profit levels, is notoriously difficult, but it is estimated that somewhere between 20-40 percent of the Taliban's income comes from drugs, a number that could plausibly have grown higher, and that brings the Taliban tens of millions of dollars annually (perhaps as much as a hundred million).<sup>18</sup> It is important to note that drug income is still, at most, only about half of the Taliban's income. This fact has important implications for counternarcotics and counterinsurgency strategies, especially since eliminating the Taliban's financial base through counternarcotics efforts was often seen as a key element of the counterinsurgency strategy.<sup>19</sup>

But that policy premise has never been translated into reality, for many reasons, including the ease of evasion and rebuilding of the drug economy after eradication pushes or interdiction raids, as well that the Taliban's economic portfolio is highly diversified. In many locations of Afghanistan where it has influence, the Taliban taxes any type of economic activity, though there is some variation in taxation policies / *zakat* collection among Taliban's local commanders and shadow governors. The Taliban thus taxes government grants to local areas (as well as sometimes making sure they are not stolen by corrupt Afghan government officials), legal and illegal mining and logging, legal agriculture, cell phone tower operators, and various other forms of local economic activity. At the height of the U.S. and ISAF military surge in Afghanistan, the Taliban collected vast revenues, perhaps surpassing the drug income, from taxing NATO supply trucks.<sup>20</sup> Despite international efforts against terrorism financing, the Taliban also maintains a robust fundraising system in Pakistan and the Middle East.

Although time series, baselines, and reliable data are lacking, there is a widespread sense that opiate use and opioid use disorder have been on a dangerous rise in Afghanistan. In 2010, the U.S. government highlighted the "alarming prevalence of drug use among

---

<http://gandhara.rferl.org/content/afghanistan-pakistan-islamic-state-taliban/27102776.html>.

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, Christopher M. Blanchard, *Afghanistan: Narcotics and U.S. Policy*, Congressional Research Service (CRS) Report no. RL32686 (Washington, DC: Library of Congress CRS, 2009), [www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL32686.pdf](http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL32686.pdf); and Letizia Paoli, Victoria A. Greenfield, and Peter Reuter, *The World Heroin Market: Can Supply Be Cut?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 41-83, 111-4.

<sup>19</sup> See, for example, Thomas Schweich, *U.S. Counternarcotics Strategy for Afghanistan* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of State, 2007), <http://2001-2009.state.gov/documents/organization/90671.pdf>.

<sup>20</sup> For background, see, for example, Joshua Keating, "NATO Paying the Taliban for Safe Passage," *Foreign Policy*, December 12, 2008, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2008/12/12/nato-paying-the-taliban-for-safe-passage/>.

adult men and women, adolescents, and children.”<sup>21</sup> In 2015, the United Nations (UN) estimated that there were as many as 1.6 million drug users in Afghan cities and perhaps another 3 million in the rural areas.<sup>22</sup> In 2012, the Afghan Ministry of Counter Narcotics posited that 2.7 percent of the adult population in Afghanistan are regular opiate users, and that there had been substantial increases in the use of both opium and heroin in the last few years.<sup>23</sup> The U.S. Department of State assessed that in 2012 3.5 percent of Afghan adults used some of form of opioids.<sup>24</sup>

There is no reason to believe that both the absolute numbers and the drug use trends have changed significantly. A confluence of dangerous conditions spurs on drug abuse: a highly traumatized population dealing with economic deprivation, insecurity, and war; the availability of cheap drugs; and a regional setting of extensive drug use in Pakistan, Iran, Central Asia, and Russia, to which Afghan migrants and refugees are frequently exposed.

### **Threats the Drug Economy Generates and Its Economic and Political Significance**

The Taliban’s sponsorship of the illicit economy strengthens the insurgents physically, by enhancing their financial resources and simplifying their procurement and logistics. But it also greatly strengthens the Taliban politically. This is because the Taliban’s protection of the illicit economy allows the insurgents to protect the population’s basic livelihood. Because of the lack of security and a host of structural factors that prevent the population from accessing economic inputs and markets, opium remains frequently the only

---

<sup>21</sup> U.S. Department of State, Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement, *Media Factsheet: Drug Use and Treatment in Afghanistan* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of State, 2010), <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/142358.pdf>.

<sup>22</sup> United Nations data cited in Pamela Constable, “Heroin Addiction Spreads with Alarming Speed Across Afghanistan,” *The Washington Post*, January 8, 2015, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia\\_pacific/heroin-addiction-spreads-with-alarming-speed-across-afghanistan/2015/01/06/2cbb61ea-94e7-11e4-aabd-d0b93ff613d5\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/heroin-addiction-spreads-with-alarming-speed-across-afghanistan/2015/01/06/2cbb61ea-94e7-11e4-aabd-d0b93ff613d5_story.html); UNODC, *Drug Use in Afghanistan: 2009 Survey* (UNODC, 2009), 5, <http://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/Studies/Afghan-Drug-Survey-2009-Executive-Summary-web.pdf>. A 2009 UNODC drug use survey in Afghanistan suggested that the number of adult drug users in Afghanistan was close to one million, or about 8 percent of the population between the ages of 15 and 64.

<sup>23</sup> Ministry of Counter Narcotics, Government of Afghanistan, *Afghanistan Drug Report 2012* (Kabul: Ministry of Counter Narcotics, 2013), [http://mcn.gov.af/Content/files/13\\_11\\_07\\_English%20Afghanistan%20Drug%20Report%202012%281%29.pdf](http://mcn.gov.af/Content/files/13_11_07_English%20Afghanistan%20Drug%20Report%202012%281%29.pdf).

<sup>24</sup> U.S. Department of State, “Afghanistan National Urban Drug Use Survey 2012,” INL Demand Reduction Program Research Brief (December 2012), <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/212957.pdf>.

viable livelihood source for vast segments of the rural population. This political capital secured by the Taliban was augmented greatly during the time the Afghan government and international donors promoted eradication and bans on opium poppy cultivation.

A second set of threats that the opium poppy economy generates is intensification of local criminality and conflicts among criminal groups and powerbrokers not related to the Taliban. There is a risk that fighting over the spoils of the drug economy among these actors will intensify and further undermine local security, as their funding from other sources, such as from the usurpation of economic aid or contracts related to the presence of international military forces in Afghanistan, dries up when international forces withdraw. Already, insecurity throughout the country has risen due to pervasive criminality, not only the Taliban potent insurgency.

In a political system underpinned by patronage, where the central government for over a decade paid off warlords and powerbrokers by tolerating corruption and not enforcing rule of law, the opium poppy economy has been a key mechanism of keeping such actors anchored in the political system.

Such a political management approach contradicts the acute need to improve governance; but it is also driven by the weakness of the center. Thus, if middle-level powerbrokers in particular were to face a reduced access to the opium poppy economy, they might exhibit a greater willingness to rock the system, instigate instability, and even trigger intensified and highly complex violence outright, or simply defect to the Taliban. Already, many are engaged in negotiations with the Taliban, expecting that the Taliban will become a powerful and likely dominant actor in a future Afghan government. Striking deals with the Taliban is also a mechanism of immediate survival in the face of Taliban attacks.

In addition to the difficult and deteriorating security situation and intensifying civil war in Afghanistan, the pervasive lack of rule of law also undermines governance and fuels corruption. With strong origins in centuries of patronage, corruption is critically exacerbated by large inflows of money, not just from the drug trade, but also from foreign aid. Corruption and abuses of power also pervade all domains of the Afghan economy, including in legal commodities.

The drug economy's extensive corruption in turn severely hampers the efficiency of the state and the population's trust in government institutions. This has become critical in Afghanistan, where overall governance is poor, and abuses of power and usurpation of public resources and private money are extensive.

However, it is vital to understand that many forms of the Afghan economy are highly criminalized, including economies in legal commodities. Mining and logging are pervaded by evasion of rules and regulations from licensing to extraction and custom evasion. Many forms of the legal economy are associated with pervasive land and resource theft and monopolization by powerbrokers linked to the Afghan government. Such abusive exclusionary practices not only undermine the thriving of legal economies and reinforce local populations' dependence on illicit economies such as drugs, but also generate pervasive grievances that the Taliban exploits to gain important political entrenchment in local communities and tribes.<sup>25</sup>

In the years when eradication was promoted by the United States and other international donors and adopted by the Afghan government, the sense of grievance was particularly intense. Eradication-- itself perverted by corruption and directed against political rivals or communities that could not afford to pay bribes to the eradication teams and government officials -- emiserated local communities while powerbrokers got away with land theft and legal resource monopolization.

Yet the international community never adequately prioritized acting against, let alone meaningfully countering, the predatory economic activities of powerbrokers fighting the Taliban or Afghan government officials.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, donors systematically under-resource and sometimes altogether ignore street crime and predatory economic activity of government elites, despite their being a key source of the political capital of insurgencies, including of the Taliban.<sup>27</sup>

During the administration of President Hamid Karzai (December 2001 through August 2014), Afghans became disconnected and alienated from the national government and the country's other power arrangements. They became profoundly dissatisfied with Kabul's inability and unwillingness to provide basic public services and with the widespread corruption of the power elites. They intensely resented the abuse of power, impunity, and lack of justice that became entrenched over the prior decade. After an initial period of hope and promise following Taliban rule, governance in Afghanistan

<sup>25</sup> Vanda Felbab-Brown, "Afghanistan Affectations: How to Break Political-Criminal Alliances in Contexts of Transition," United Nations University, April 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/afghanistan-affectations-how-to-break-political-criminal-alliances-in-contexts-of-transition.pdf>

<sup>26</sup> Vanda Felbab-Brown, *Aspiration and Ambivalence: Strategies and Realities of Counterinsurgency and State-Building in Afghanistan* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution Press, 2013).

<sup>27</sup> Vanda Felbab-Brown, "The Hellish Road to Good Intentions: How to Break Political-Criminal Alliances in Contexts of Transitions," United Nations University, April 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/the-hellish-road-to-good-intentions-how-to-break-political-criminal-alliances-in-contexts-of-transition.pdf>.

came to be defined by weak-functioning state institutions unable and unwilling to uniformly enforce laws and policies.

Instead, official and unofficial powerbrokers have issued exceptions from law enforcement to their networks of clients, who have thus been able to reap high economic benefits and even get away with major crimes.

Despite initial public optimism, the administration of President Ashraf Ghani (September 2014 -) has not managed to significantly curtail corruption or reduce the abusive distortions of the overall criminalized economy, rein the abusive practices of various powerbrokers and government officials, or otherwise robustly increase accountability. Moreover, despite steady pressure from donors to move against corruption and strengthen accountability mechanisms, the will and capacity of the Ghani administration weakened over time as it became increasingly dependent for its survival on the very problematic powerbrokers whom the Taliban also courts. In a rare display of sticking to formal conditionality of aid, the U.S. government even took back \$100 million from the Afghan government in 2019 because of inadequate anti-corruption efforts.<sup>28</sup>

Third, even as the opium poppy economy is the source of basic livelihoods for many Afghans and is a very large component of the country's GDP, it has complex macroeconomic effects. On the one hand, the opium poppy economy is the principal economic activity and lifeline. On the other hand, the illegal economy also generates macroeconomic distortions such as inflation, real estate speculation, and the Dutch disease of making other sectors comparatively unproductive.

Finally, as already described, the low cost and easy availability of opiates is contributing to a serious and perhaps worsening public health crisis of drug use.

## **Overview of Counternarcotics Policies in Afghanistan since 2002**

The initial objective of the U.S. intervention in 2001 was to degrade al Qaeda capabilities and institute a regime change in Afghanistan. Dealing with the illicit economy was not considered to be integral to the military objectives. Thus, until 2003 U.S. counternarcotics policy in Afghanistan was essentially *laissez-faire*. The U.S. military understood that it would not be able to obtain intelligence on the

---

<sup>28</sup> Kathy Gannon, "US takes back \$100 million from Afghan govt over corruption," *The Associated Press*, September 19, 2019, <https://apnews.com/article/f40cf32c7e824fd6b4866be44ed98cc2>.

Taliban and al Qaeda if it tried to eradicate poppy. Meanwhile, it relied on key warlords, who were often deeply involved in the drug economy since the 1980s, not simply to provide intelligence on the Taliban, but also to carry out direct military operations against the Taliban and al Qaeda.<sup>29</sup>

Under a concept of “lead nations” for the international assistance mission in Afghanistan, with a specific country being responsible for reconstruction in a specific sector, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland was tasked in 2002 with counternarcotics. Sensitive to the political problems associated with eliminating the rural population’s livelihoods, Britain at first deployed a **compensated eradication** program. Thus, during the 2002-2003 poppy growing season, Britain promised to pay US\$350 to farmers for each *jerib* (unit of area) of poppy they themselves eradicated, with US\$71.75 million committed for the program.<sup>30</sup> But from the outset, the policy was plagued by numerous problems, including corruption and moral hazard, and thus the policy was aborted in less than a year.<sup>31</sup>

By 2004, increased **interdiction** was undertaken instead. Its goal was to target large traffickers and processing laboratories. Immediately, however, the effort was manipulated by local Afghan strongmen to eliminate drug competition and ethnic, tribal, and other political rivals. Instead of targeting top echelons of the drug economy, many of whom had considerable political clout, interdiction operations were largely conducted against small vulnerable traders who could neither sufficiently bribe nor adequately intimidate the interdiction teams and their supervisors within the Afghan government. The result was a significant vertical integration of the drug industry in Afghanistan.<sup>32</sup>

The other – again undesirable – effect of how interdiction was carried out was that it allowed the Taliban to reintegrate itself into the Afghan drug trade. Having recouped in Pakistan, the Taliban was once again needed to provide protection to traffickers targeted by interdiction.<sup>33</sup>

---

<sup>29</sup> See, for example, Anne Barnard and Farah Stockman, “U.S. Weighs Role in Heroin War in Afghanistan,” *Boston Globe*, October 20, 2004, [http://www.boston.com/news/world/articles/2004/10/20/us\\_weighs\\_role\\_in\\_heroin\\_war\\_in\\_afghanistan](http://www.boston.com/news/world/articles/2004/10/20/us_weighs_role_in_heroin_war_in_afghanistan).

<sup>30</sup> See Adam Pain, *Opium Trading Systems in Helmand and Ghor*, AREU Issue Paper Series (Kabul: AREU, 2006), <http://www.areu.org.af/Uploads/EditionPdfs/601E-Opium%20Trading%20Systems-IP-print.pdf>.

<sup>31</sup> See John F. Burns, “Afghan Warlords Squeeze Profits From the War on Drugs, Critics Say,” *New York Times*, May 5, 2002, <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/05/05/world/afghan-warlords-squeeze-profits-from-the-war-on-drugs-critics-say.html>.

<sup>32</sup> See Pain, *Opium Trading Systems*.

<sup>33</sup> See Carlotta Gall, “Taliban Rebels Still Menacing Afghan South,” *New York Times*,

Alarmed by the spread of opium poppy cultivation, some public officials in the United States in 2004 and 2005 also started calling for a strong poppy eradication campaign, including aerial spraying.<sup>34</sup> Thus, between 2004 and 2009, **manual eradication** was carried out by central Afghan units trained by DynCorp, as well as by regional governors and their forces. Violent strikes and social protests immediately rose up against it. Another wave of eradication took place in 2005, when reduction in poppy cultivation was achieved. Most of the reduction was due to cultivation suppression in Nangarhar province where, through promises of alternative development and threats of imprisonment, production was slashed by 90 percent.<sup>35</sup>

However, alternative livelihoods never materialized for many. The Cash-for-Work programs reached only a small percentage of the population in Nangarhar, mainly those living close to cities. The overall pauperization of the population there was devastating.<sup>36</sup> Unable to repay debts, many farmers were forced to sell their daughters as young as three years old as brides, or to abscond to Pakistan. Apart from incorporating the displaced farmers into their ranks, the Taliban also began to protect the farmers' opium fields, in addition to protecting traffic. In fact, the antagonized poppy farmers came to constitute a strong and key base of support for the Taliban, denying intelligence to ISAF and providing it to the Taliban.<sup>37</sup>

Just like interdiction, eradication was plagued by massive corruption problems, with powerful elites able to bribe or coerce their way out of having their opium poppy fields destroyed, or by direct eradication of the crops of their political opponents. And it was the poorest farmers, most vulnerable to Taliban mobilization, who bore the brunt of eradication.<sup>38</sup>

---

March 2, 2006,

<http://www.nytimes.com/2006/03/02/international/02taliban.html?pagewanted=all>

<sup>34</sup> *Afghanistan: Are the British Counternarcotics Efforts Going Wobbly? Hearing Before the House Committee on Government Reform Subcommittee on Criminal Justice, Drug Policy, and Human Resources*, 108th Cong. (2004) (statement of Robert B. Charles, Assistant Secretary of State for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs), <http://2001-2009.state.gov/p/inl/rls/rm/31039.htm>.

<sup>35</sup> See UNODC, *The Opium Situation in Afghanistan* (UNODC, 2005), [http://www.unodc.org/pdf/afghanistan\\_2005/opium-afghanistan\\_2005-08-26.pdf](http://www.unodc.org/pdf/afghanistan_2005/opium-afghanistan_2005-08-26.pdf).

<sup>36</sup> See David Mansfield, *Pariah or Poverty? The Opium Ban in the Province Nangarhar in the 2004/05 Growing Season and Its Impact on Rural Livelihood Strategies*, Project for Alternative Livelihoods (PAL), no. 11 (Jalalabad: PAL, 2005), [http://www.davidmansfield.org/data/field\\_work/gtz/finalcopingreport.pdf](http://www.davidmansfield.org/data/field_work/gtz/finalcopingreport.pdf); and David Mansfield, *From Bad They Made It Worse*.

<sup>37</sup> For details, see, Felbab-Brown, *Shooting Up*, 149-154.

<sup>38</sup> See, David Mansfield and Adam Pain, *Evidence from the Field: Understanding Changing Levels of Opium Poppy Cultivation in Afghanistan*, AREU Briefing Paper Series (Kabul: AREU, 2007), <http://www.areu.org.af/Uploads/EditionPdfs/722E-Evidence%20from%20the%20Field%20BP.pdf>; and Barnett Rubin and Jake

Temporary local poppy suppression frequently required a combination of buyoffs of influential *maliks* (tribal elders), promises of alternative livelihoods, and threats of poppy crop eradication and imprisonment of violators. Farmers close to the provincial capitals could sometimes manage to cope with poppy bans by switching to crops such as vegetables, increasing dairy production, and working in construction cash-for-work programs. Farmers away from provincial centers frequently suffered great economic deprivation. Since their income often crashed by a large percent and none of the promised alternative livelihoods programs ever robustly materialized speedily enough and in a lasting way, their political restlessness and outright support for the Taliban steadily grew.<sup>39</sup> Such areas also subsequently experienced great levels of instability; intensified tribal conflict over land, water, and access to resource handouts from the international community; rebellions of young men against the local maliks supporting eradication; physical attacks on eradication teams; intense Taliban mobilization; and increased flows of militants and Taliban mobilization. Not surprisingly, eradication teams frequently came under attack, an insecurity that prevented their further activities.

To recap, eradication and opium poppy bans had the following effects:

1. They did not bankrupt the Taliban.
2. Eradication strengthened the Taliban physically by driving economic refugees into its hands.
3. Eradication alienated the local population from the national government as well as from local tribal elites that agreed to eradication, thus creating a key opening for Taliban mobilization.<sup>40</sup>
4. Crucially, eradication critically undermined the motivation of the local population to provide intelligence on the Taliban to the counterinsurgents, while it motivated the population to provide intelligence to the Taliban. The Taliban's protection of poppy

---

Sherman, *Counternarcotics to Stabilize Afghanistan: The False Promise of Crop Eradication* (New York: Center on International Cooperation, 2008), <http://milnewstbay.pbworks.com/f/counternarcoticsfinal.pdf>.

<sup>39</sup> See, for example, David Mansfield, "The Ban on Opium Production across Nangarhar – A Risk Too Far," *International Journal of Environmental Studies* 68, no. 3 (2011): 381-95.

<sup>40</sup> For analysis of the social control structures, see Olivier Roy, *Islam and Resistance in Afghanistan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

fields against eradication was a source of the Taliban's political capital.

5. The local eradicators themselves were in the position to best profit from counternarcotics policies, being able to eliminate competition – business and political alike – and alter market concentration and prices, at least in the short term and within their area of operations.

Recognizing the counterproductive effects of eradication, the Obama administration broke with decades of U.S. counternarcotics policies and in 2009 defunded centrally-led eradication in Afghanistan. For several years, the United States government provided limited funding and technical assistance to Afghan governors who decided to proceed with eradication.<sup>41</sup>

Nonetheless, the Afghan government's own eradication efforts have progressively shrunk due to a lack of capacity amidst severely intensifying insecurity as well as a correct understanding that eradication would further weaken the Afghan government, alienate Afghan populations, and strengthen the Taliban. Thus in 2018, the Afghan government eradicated only 406 hectares of poppy, i.e., 0.15 percent of the total area of poppy cultivation.<sup>42</sup>

The core components of the Obama administration counternarcotics policy became ***interdiction of Taliban-linked drug traffickers and rural development***. Scaling back eradication strongly enhanced the new counterinsurgency policy focus of the Obama administration on providing security to the rural population. However, reducing instability and the size of the drug economy also depend on the actual operationalization of the strategy, and much of that faltered in design and implementation.

Going after Taliban-linked traffickers became the sole counternarcotics mandate of ISAF forces, though other international and Afghan counternarcotics units, with U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration assistance, could target other traffickers as well. ISAF's interdiction efforts sought to reduce the flows of weapons, money, drugs, precursor agents, and improvised explosive device (IED) components to the Taliban, with the goal of degrading the Taliban's finances and physical resources and dismantling its logistical networks. Although hundreds of interdiction raids were conducted,

---

<sup>41</sup> UNODC, *Afghanistan Opium Survey 2010: Summary Findings* (UNODC, 2010), 1, [https://www.unodc.org/documents/crop-monitoring/Afghanistan/Afg\\_opium\\_survey\\_2010\\_exsum\\_web.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/crop-monitoring/Afghanistan/Afg_opium_survey_2010_exsum_web.pdf). Provincial governors in Afghanistan can choose to engage in their own eradication efforts. During 2010, 2,316 ha were thus eradicated in Afghanistan under this governor-led eradication program.

<sup>42</sup> UNODC, *Afghanistan Opium Survey 2018: Executive Summary*, 36.

especially in southern Afghanistan, and large quantities of opium and IEDs were seized in these operations, the impact on the Taliban's resource flows was never more than local and temporary. Because of the Taliban's diversified economic portfolio and the adaptability of the drug economy and the Taliban's persisting access to it, the interdiction never changed the strategic battlefield picture.

At the same time, highly intense interdiction raids, such as in southern Afghanistan during NATO's military surge, resulted in U.S. military seizures and destruction of household stockpiles of opium. Under the premise that Taliban financing and its battlefield capacity would be weakened, the raids often wiped out the entire savings of a household. Thus, in areas that were subject to intense interdiction raids, the effects of supposedly selective and hearts-and-minds-oriented interdiction in fact resembled those of eradication.<sup>43</sup> They alienated local populations and thrust them into the hands of the Taliban. Indeed, the impact of the raids on the economic well-being of a household could even be more detrimental than that of eradication, because after eradication, a family still can have a chance to replant; but such interdiction seizures could eliminate at once all of a household's long-term assets. Meanwhile, the opium poppy economy frequently shifted to areas that were less intensely patrolled by ISAF and the Afghan government.<sup>44</sup>

While the implementation of ISAF's interdiction policy at various times failed to distinguish between small and high-level traders, its selectivity in targeting Taliban-linked traffickers only, while an appropriate choice, also generated problematic side-effects. One was to signal to Afghan power brokers that the best way to conduct the drug business in Afghanistan is to be closely aligned with the Afghan government and, better yet, to provide counterinsurgency services – such as intelligence, militias, and real estate property – to U.S. and international forces.

The very hard choice of pursuing only a certain type of trafficker – namely, those linked to the Taliban – may well be necessary and appropriate under conditions of insurgency and a very extensive drug economy that includes all types of actors, including government officials. But coupling such hard choices with indiscriminate seizure of opium stocks at the level of the household (frequently poor households) further alienated the population from the government.

---

<sup>43</sup> For details on counternarcotics policies in Helmand, see David Mansfield, *Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Counter-narcotics Efforts and Their Effects in Nangarhar and Helmand in the 2010–11 Growing Season* (Kabul: AREU, 2011), <http://www.areu.org.af/Uploads/EditionPdfs/1128E-Between%20a%20Rock%20and%20a%20Hard%20Place-CS-2011.pdf>; and Mansfield, *From Bad They Made It Worse*.

<sup>44</sup> For details on how the opium poppy economy shifted to northern Helmand, for example, see Mansfield, *From Bad They Made It Worse*.

Moreover, it inadvertently defined as a good policy the privileging of the most powerful actors, thus contradicting public claims of accountable governance. The international community and ISAF forces continually relied on problematic but “useful” powerbrokers who could deliver protection, intelligence, or military action against the Taliban even as these actors undermined governance, engaged in criminality, and instigated other forms of conflict. At the end of 2014, the U.S. military mostly stopped carrying out counternarcotics interdiction efforts.

Whatever counternarcotics **interdiction** efforts were undertaken by the Afghan military forces or special Afghan counternarcotics units, they were frequently warped by corruption. Even when big traffickers are captured, they often easily bribe their way out of prison.<sup>45</sup>

In 2017, when the Trump administration came to power and laid out its Afghanistan policy, the U.S. military once again mounted interdiction efforts against Taliban-linked drug traffickers. This time, interdiction centered on intensified bombing of drug labs, depots, and smuggling trucks.<sup>46</sup> When ephedra harvesting and ephedrine and perhaps methamphetamine production emerged and began expanding in Afghanistan in 2017, the aerial raids targeted both opiates and ephedra processing labs and transport. Like NATO’s prior interdiction efforts, the U.S. air interdiction campaign sought to deprive the Taliban of financing and weaken it. Interdiction was a much better policy choice than disastrous eradication and allowed synchronization with counterinsurgency efforts, particularly as early on the Trump administration sought to see counternarcotics efforts strengthened. Yet, as was inevitable for reasons described above, despite hundreds of presumed drug targets hit in peak years of 2017 and 2018 of the aerial interdiction effort, the interdiction neither succeeded in weakening the Taliban nor fundamentally changed the dynamics and drivers of the Afghan drug trade.<sup>47</sup> Like the use of airpower for direct counterinsurgency purposes, the air

---

<sup>45</sup>See Joseph Goldstein, “Bribery Frees a Drug Kingpin in Afghanistan, Where Cash Often Overrules Justice,” *New York Times*, December 31, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/01/world/asia/bribes-free-drug-kingpin-in-afghanistan-where-cash-often-overrules-justice.html>. Note the recent notorious case of a leading Afghan heroin trafficker on the U.S. kingpin list, Haji Lal Jan Ishaqzai, bribing his way out of prison.

<sup>46</sup> Dan Lamothe, “The U.S. Begins Bombing Taliban Drug Labs as Trump’s Afghanistan Strategy Takes Hold,” *Washington Post*, November 20, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2017/11/20/the-u-s-begins-bombing-taliban-drug-labs-as-trumps-afghanistan-strategy-takes-hold/>.

<sup>47</sup> For details of the air interdiction campaign, see David Mansfield, “Denying Revenue or Wasting Money: Assessing the Impact of the Air Campaign against ‘Drug Labs’ in Afghanistan,” London School of Economics, April 2019, <https://www.lse.ac.uk/united-states/Assets/Documents/mansfield-april-update.pdf>.

counternarcotics interdiction also posed the risk of civilian casualties and its high humanitarian and political repercussions.<sup>48</sup>

***Economic development efforts*** by the international community in Afghanistan, including alternative livelihood efforts, were plagued by a vacillation between two competing understandings of the purpose of economic development projects: to buy off the population and wean it off from the insurgents; and to produce long-term sustainable rural development.

The buy-off concept included so-called “quick-impact projects” carried out by the U.S. military, with money from the Commander’s Emergency Response Program (CERP), or through ISAF’s military-civilian Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs)<sup>49</sup> that operated in Afghanistan between 2002 and 2013, as well as through so-called “economic stabilization projects,” also known as the District Delivery Program or District Stabilization Framework, carried out by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The latter were designed as short-term cash-for-work programs, lasting weeks or at best months. Their goals were to keep Afghan males employed, so that economic necessities did not drive them to join the Taliban, and to secure the allegiance of the population who, ideally, would provide intelligence on the insurgents. Under this concept, U.S. economic development efforts prioritized the most violent areas.

Although U.S. government officials emphasized that these stabilization programs generated tens of thousands of jobs within southern Afghanistan, many of the efforts were unsustainable short-lived programs, such as canal cleaning and grain-storage and road building, or small grants, such as for seeds and fertilizers.<sup>50</sup> Characteristically, they collapsed as soon as the money ran out, often in the span of several weeks. Nor was adequate consideration given to the development of assured markets; consequently, much of the produce cultivated under the USAID-contracted programs sometimes did not find buyers and rotted.

There is also little evidence that these programs secured the allegiance of the population to either the Afghan government or ISAF forces, or resulted in increases in intelligence from the population on the Taliban.<sup>51</sup> But as many of these programs were budgeted to run

---

<sup>48</sup> Thomas Gibbons-Neff, “U.S. Disputes Finding That Airstrikes on Afghan Drug Labs Killed 30 Civilians,” *New York Times*, October 9, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/09/world/asia/afghanistan-airstrikes-civilians.html>

<sup>49</sup> PRT Team leaders had the authority to disburse up to \$25,000 for individual projects and up to \$100,000 per month.

<sup>50</sup> Author’s interviews with a USAID implementing contractor, NGO representatives, Afghan government officials, maliks, and businessmen in Kandahar and Kabul, Afghanistan, September 2010.

only for a few months (then to be replaced by long-term sustainable development, which the persisting insecurity continually prevented), their closure sometimes antagonized the population by disappointing their raised expectations.

Because of the complexity and opacity of Afghanistan's political, economic, and contracting scene, many of these international programs flowed to problematic, discriminatory, and corrupt powerbrokers, generating further resentment among the population, and intensifying Afghanistan's rampant corruption and lack of accountability. At other times, they have spurred new tribal rivalries and community tensions.<sup>52</sup>

Nor did the programs address the structural deficiencies of the rural economy in Afghanistan, including the drivers of poppy cultivation. A microcredit system, for example, continues to be lacking throughout much of Afghanistan. In fact, many of the stabilization efforts, such as wheat distribution or grant programs, directly undermined some of the long-term imperatives for addressing the structural market deficiencies, such as the development of microcredit or the establishment of local Afghan seed-banks, seed markets, rural enterprise, and value-added chains. Shortcuts such as the so-called "Food Zone" in Helmand, and similar wheat distribution schemes elsewhere in Afghanistan, were symptomatic of the minimal short-term economic and security payoffs (but substantial medium-term costs) made with which the international community often operated in Afghanistan. Because of land density issues in Afghanistan, the lack of sustainability of the favorable wheat-to-opium price ratios under which the program took effect, and the limited ability of wheat cultivation to generate employment, wheat turned out to be a singularly inappropriate replacement crop.<sup>53</sup> Indeed, much of the wheat seed ended up being sold in markets rather than sown.

The result: persisting deep market deficiencies, displacement of opium poppy cultivation to new insecure areas or Afghan deserts, and compromised rule of law.<sup>54</sup> The delicate three-way balance among

---

<sup>51</sup> See, for example, Andrew Wilder, "A 'Weapons System' Based on Wishful Thinking," *Boston Globe*, September 16, 2009, [http://www.boston.com/bostonglobe/editorial\\_opinion/oped/articles/2009/09/16/a\\_weapons\\_system\\_based\\_on\\_wishful\\_thinking/](http://www.boston.com/bostonglobe/editorial_opinion/oped/articles/2009/09/16/a_weapons_system_based_on_wishful_thinking/).

<sup>52</sup> Chandrasekaran, "In Afghan Region, U.S. Spreads the Cash to Fight the Taliban."

<sup>53</sup> For details, see, Felbab-Brown, *The Obama Administration's New Counternarcotics Policy in Afghanistan*; David Mansfield, *Responding to Risk and Uncertainty: Understanding the Nature of Change in the Rural Livelihoods of Opium Poppy Growing Households in the 2007/08 Growing Season*, Afghan Drugs Inter Departmental Unit of the UK Government Report, July 2008, [http://www.davidmansfield.org/data/field\\_work/uk/final\\_uk\\_drivers\\_report\\_08.pdf](http://www.davidmansfield.org/data/field_work/uk/final_uk_drivers_report_08.pdf); Ward and Byrd, *Afghanistan's Opium Drug Economy*; and Mansfield, *From Bad They Made It Worse*.

<sup>54</sup> For details of the problematic and inadequate nature of the wheat distribution

long-term development, the need to generate support among the population and alleviate economic deprivation in the short term, and state-building was never achieved.

Not all *efforts to suppress poppy cultivation* in Afghanistan were always exercised through the bulldozing of poppy plants. In Helmand, the province with the most intense poppy cultivation, where Mohammad Gulab Mangal, governor of the province from 2008 to 2012, was held up as the paragon of good governance, poppy suppression was at times carried out via the destruction of farmers' water pumps, especially in the poor, insecure, recently liberated poppy areas north of the Helmand River.<sup>55</sup> That approach, requiring the poppy to live purely on rain water, may reduce the amount that survives, but it also kills the production of legal crops and destroys the farmers' means of procuring water for consumption and other household use. Moreover, poppy farmers have adapted by buying new pumps, increasingly powered by solar energy. Although poppy cultivation in desert areas depletes Afghanistan's groundwater, the drug economy has thrived.

With the bulk of drug policy efforts by the Afghan government, foreign donors, and even non-state actors focused on the supply side measures, ***demand reduction policies*** have been grossly neglected and often misguided. Their mere extent has been highly inadequate to the public health challenge the country faces. Although 170 drug treatment centers existed in Afghanistan in 2014, their total service capacity was believed to be 39,000 patients, a tiny fraction of those in need of treatment.<sup>56</sup> The Afghan government demand reduction strategy itself estimates that 99 percent of Afghan addicts do not receive treatment.<sup>57</sup> As of the end of 2014, only the United States, Japan, Germany, Norway, and the World Bank funded drug treatment and prevention programs in Afghanistan. While the United States itself has spent more than US\$6 billion since 2001 to curb production and trafficking in Afghanistan, it has devoted only US\$12 million a year to fund treatment and prevention in the country.<sup>58</sup>

---

and similar programs, see, for example, David Mansfield, *Sustaining the Decline: Understanding the Nature of Change in Rural Livelihoods of Opium Growing Households in the 2008/09 Growing Season*, Afghan Drugs Inter Departmental Unit of the U.K. Government Report, May 2009; Mansfield, *From Bad They Made It Worse*; Vanda Felbab-Brown, *The Obama Administration's New Counternarcotics Strategy in Afghanistan: Its Promises and Potential Pitfalls*, Brookings Policy Brief Series, no. 171 (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2009) [http://www.brookings.edu/papers/2009/09\\_afghanistan\\_felbabbrown.aspx](http://www.brookings.edu/papers/2009/09_afghanistan_felbabbrown.aspx); and Joel Hafvenstein, "The Helmand Food Zone Fiasco," *Registan* (blog), August 26, 2010, <http://www.registan.net/index.php/2010/08/26/helmand-food-zone-fiasco/>.

<sup>55</sup> For details, see Mansfield, *Between a Rock and a Hard Place*.

<sup>56</sup> Constable, "Heroin Addiction Spreads with Alarming Speed across Afghanistan."

<sup>57</sup> Ministry of Counter Narcotics, *Afghanistan Drug Report 2012*, 84-85, 91.

<sup>58</sup> Azam Ahmed, "The Other Big Afghan Crisis, the Growing Army of Addicts," *New York Times*, November 2, 2013,

Moreover, the quality of treatment is often poor. Afghan NGOs tend to provide detoxification assistance, but post-detoxification support is far less robust. In 2011, the Afghan Ministry of Counternarcotics reported a 92 percent relapse rate for those who received treatment.<sup>59</sup> The Ministry has been opposed to methadone maintenance, inaccurately believing it merely replaces one form of addiction with another, and has even blocked methadone from entering the country. Prevention efforts have been even more inadequate.

## **Policy Prospects, Implications and Options**

To be synchronized with violence reduction and state-building, counternarcotics policies must be judicious, well-sequenced, and well-prioritized. In Afghanistan, this requires the policies to be guided by three objectives and principles: limiting the most dangerous security threats emanating from Afghanistan; increasing the stability and legitimacy of the Afghan government; and enhancing human security.

At the same time, the counternarcotics policies must be cognizant of the inescapable grip of the security realities on the ground. Amidst the steady worsening of the security situation, a poor prospect for a peace deal being achieved between the Taliban and the Afghan government, and a high chance of intensified civil war -- whether or not U.S. and international forces remain in Afghanistan -- the drug policy space in Afghanistan is highly constricted. The prospect is for the counternarcotics policy space to become even more profoundly constrained, at least until a stable government emerges and conflict has ended.

Accordingly, the key policy implications are:

- Eradication of drug crops should continue to be suspended and donors should not fund it.
- Eventually, in a future Afghanistan no longer wracked by violent conflict, eradication should only be undertaken in local areas where a legal economy already robustly sustains the local population are legal livelihoods are not simply promised to materialize in the future. Such a future is far off.

---

[http://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/03/world/asia/that-other-big-afghan-crisis-the-growing-army-of-addicts.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/03/world/asia/that-other-big-afghan-crisis-the-growing-army-of-addicts.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0); and "Fact Sheet – Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs' Counternarcotics Programs in Afghanistan," U.S. Department of State, Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement, May 4, 2012, <http://www.state.gov/j/inl/rls/fs/189317.htm>.

<sup>59</sup> Alissa Rubin, "Few Treatment Options for Afghans as Drug Use Rises," *New York Times*, August 27, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/28/world/asia/28kabul.html?pagewanted=all>.

- If U.S. forces withdraw from Afghanistan by summer 2021 without a stable peace deal in place, drug traffic interdiction efforts inside Afghanistan will radically shrink. The Afghan government will not have sufficient air assets for aerial interdiction, and ground interdiction will be severely hampered by increasing insecurity and ANSDF struggling to secure a shrinking territory under the Afghan government control. This lack of capacity will limit interdiction raids to government-controlled areas. The government's dependence on powerbrokers entangled in the drug trade will limit its will to carry interdiction raids.
- The continuation of U.S. military engagement in Afghanistan much beyond the May 2021 deadline (there may be wiggle room for some weeks or a few months) will very likely cause the Taliban to declare the Doha deal void and reopen the military conflict against the United States and NATO's Resolute support forces. The United States and NATO will find themselves in new open-ended war against the Taliban.
- If the United States then decides to increase its military deployment to Afghanistan once again, from the 2,500 U.S. troops to which the deployment is supposed to be reduced by early 2021, it would have the capacity for renewed aerial interdiction.
- In that case, interdiction operations should continue to predominantly target the most dangerous actors who might be plugged into, or are seeking to access, the opium poppy economy to increase their financial resources or political capital. Among such priority targets are international terrorist groups such as al Qaeda, the Islamic State, and Lashkar-e-Taiba.
- The United States could also resurrect aerial interdiction efforts to target Taliban drug trade assets and Taliban-linked traffickers. Strictly avoiding civilian casualties would be critical: For that as well as impactful targeting to shape the battlefield and political structures in Afghanistan, extensive intelligence and adequate reconnaissance assets would be required. Still, the prospects would remain poor for the aerial counternarcotics interdiction campaign to significantly weaken the Taliban.
- Interdiction could also target some of the most corrupt, abusive, violent, and unruly powerbrokers, who destabilize the political system, threaten the central government, and risk triggering intense local violence. Interdicting their drug assets and bringing some of them to justice would reduce the perception of their impunity, perhaps even send a potent

deterrent message, and enhance public support for the Afghan government. But such an interdiction effort could also stimulate and speed up their defection to the Taliban.

- Overall, any remaining interdiction in Afghanistan should not be obsessed with reducing drug flows, and should instead emphasize increasing the stability and legitimacy of the Afghan government and weakening the most pernicious terrorist groups and most destabilizing powerbrokers.
- Interdiction of drug flows from Afghanistan will mostly need to focus outside of the country for the foreseeable future. Counternarcotics interdiction can thus also be conceived as a mechanism for at least some regional cooperation and improved bilateral ties. At the same time, the extent of regional counternarcotics cooperation should not be overestimated; after all, the drug trade is deeply embedded within official power structures in Central Asian countries and Pakistan.
- Efforts to improve Afghanistan's economy and develop legal economic opportunities for the Afghan population depend on sufficient security. Areas that remain within government control can productively utilize foreign and Afghan government funding for legal rural development. However, they are unlikely to make significant dent into the Afghan economy as a whole. At best, they may over time be able to inoculate some areas of the country against the spread of drug cultivation. But even the economic development of those areas will be hampered and potentially eviscerated by increasing insecurity.
- If peace and stability are eventually achieved, alternative livelihoods efforts should be streamlined into overall economic development and human capital development. Such efforts must include both rebuilding the rural economy and creating off-farm opportunities. Rather than consisting of quick-impact projects and looking primarily for replacement crops, they should center on long-term sustainable efforts and on addressing structural drivers of opium poppy cultivation, including building up value-added chains for legal commodities. Development money should go to secure areas where projects can be monitored.
- Even under such an auspicious scenario, drug policy efforts will require patience and abandoning unrealistic expectations of how fast the opium poppy economy in Afghanistan can be reduced. A significant reduction in the size and significance of the drug economy in Afghanistan will take several decades of well-crafted and sustained policies once conflict has ended and

government territorial reach and stability are in place. Buying off warlords or farmers with quick “stabilization” programs will not address the structural drivers of insecurity or poppy cultivation, and hence will reduce neither. This will be the case even if the Taliban is the sole or dominant party in the Afghan government and promises international donors that it will ban poppy cultivation in order to obtain international legitimacy and foreign aid flows.

- However, counternarcotics efforts, like the rest of the Afghan state, will remain existentially dependent on foreign funding. If a radical drop in foreign funding were to occur because members of the international donor community, such as the United States, United Kingdom, and members of the European Union, were not willing to fund a Taliban-led government due to a reestablishment of unaccountable religious rule and severe decreases in protection of human rights and women’s rights, the entire Afghan state could collapse. Donors such as Russia, China, and Iran, all of whom have made their peace with the Taliban (even though they prefer a coalition government)<sup>60</sup> could step in and fund counternarcotics efforts, including eradication and interdiction. Russia, in particular, has long urged aggressive poppy eradication in Afghanistan. A Taliban government may court Russian support in exchange for poppy bans and perhaps even eradication. Even so, it is unlikely that donors such as Russia, China, Iran, and other Middle Eastern countries would replace the existing levels of foreign aid. Thus, any counternarcotics efforts would be further complicated by a further significant contraction of the legal Afghan economy.
- In the context of an escalating civil war, counternarcotics efforts would also be effectively disabled while drug use would expand.
- Both in the current situation and for the foreseeable future, improving access to treatment for Afghans who suffer from opioid-use disorder and undertaking smart approaches to prevention are likely to be the most fruitful domains of counternarcotics policy intervention. As such, funding should center on such programs far more extensively than has been the case so far. Apart from expanding and improving treatment centers, such measures can also include very simple interventions, like educating those who scrape the opium resin (many of whom are children) not to lick their fingers. Focus on

---

<sup>60</sup> Vanda Felbab-Brown, “A BRI(dge) Too Far: The Unfulfilled Promise and Limitations of China’s Involvement in Afghanistan,” The Brookings Institution, June 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/a-bridge-too-far-the-unfulfilled-promise-and-limitations-of-chinas-involvement-in-afghanistan/>.

rural women and their exposure to and (mis)use of opiates should be an important part of counternarcotics efforts. Since it is the Taliban's professed goal to reduce opium use, some of these interventions might be implementable even in areas under the Taliban's control. Opportunities for expanded international cooperation on public health approaches to opiate use also exist.

**Received 29 October 2020**