

2.2 “MIRED IN DECEPTION” — NARCOTICS AND POLITICS IN AFGHANISTAN

*by Christoph Reuter**

I. Introduction

Since the arrival of US troops in Afghanistan in 2001, and later multinational North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) troops, the production of narcotics in the Hindu Kush has increased enormously. It is an amazing contradictory phenomenon that 10 years of well-funded counternarcotics activities have seen unprecedented levels of poppy and heroin production. Despite declarations to combat illegal drug production, the intervention even seems to have facilitated the poppy business. Today, Afghanistan is the supplier of more than 90 percent of global opium production – a position it only reached after the intervention of international troops. This study tries to explain why and how this happened.

In 2008, Thomas Schweich, a disillusioned former head of US counternarcotics efforts in Afghanistan, summed up his experience:

At the beginning of 2006, I went to the high-profile London Conference on Afghanistan. It was a grand event mired in deception. Everyone from the Afghan delegation and most in the international community knew that poppy cultivation and heroin production would increase significantly in 2006. But the delegates to the London Conference instead dwelled on the 2005 harvest, which was lower than that of 2004, principally because of poor weather and market manipulation by drug lords like Sher Muhammad Akhundzada, who had been the governor of [...] Helmand province and then a member of Afghanistan's Parliament. (Schweich 2008)

Official statements about narcotics in Afghanistan have often focused on the Taliban as being the main beneficiaries of the drug business, claiming a nexus between drug money and terror finance. This argument tends to overlook the deep involvement of Afghan government officials in the same trade. This study draws on classified documents of the US government (published 2011 by Wikileaks), “NATO secret” reports of the Swedish PRT in Mazar-e Sharif, intelligence

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reports,¹ “province profiles” as well as multiple interviews with experts in Kabul to describe the nature of this connection. The drug industry has permeated every sector of Afghanistan’s power system. While insurgents are involved mainly in poppy farming and the domestic trade, the lucrative heroin refining and cross-border smuggling are mostly controlled by those forces that control the border areas, that is, the border police, powerful militia commanders allied to Western troops, governors, or their proxies.

As this study will show, there is no such thing as an organized effort to curb the poppy business. In the cold light of day, many counternarcotics efforts of the Afghan government turn out to be fights with rivals over market shares. And even the international military forces openly follow a policy of neglecting counternarcotics for winning over Afghan powerbrokers as well as peasants. If production levels decreased in some of the past years (as was the case in 2009 and 2010), this was not due to effective counternarcotics policies, but to surplus production that the global consumer market could not absorb.

Today, the issue of Afghanistan’s narcotics industry has practically disappeared from the international agenda. It was hardly mentioned, for instance, in the Afghanistan conference in early December 2011 in Bonn, Germany – and this despite the fact that the narcotics trade remains the biggest single source of income in the Afghan economy. Tackling the issue of narcotics with more integrity would not immediately change the situation. But to ignore reality and to intentionally mislead decision-makers in parliaments and governments will only lead to a further increase in trafficking and the undermining of governmental structures in Afghanistan.

Research methodology

This study was compiled with the help of researchers in nine provinces. They conducted interviews with poppy farmers, drug dealers, and counternarcotics officials. Further sources are interviews the author conducted with UN, Western embassy, and NATO officials, as well as with Afghan government officials. The study also draws on extensive research of media reports, academic studies, and classified documents of diplomats and the military.

Some of the 85 prominent figures who play leading roles in the Afghan drug business and were identified are mentioned in this study, but their names are withheld for security reasons.

Chapters

The study starts by going back to the historical roots of opium and, subsequently, heroin production in Afghanistan. Chapter III gives an overview of the processes involved in the drug industry: from farming to trading, stocking, refining, and

1 | For example, the Swedish NATO secret report “Critical Infrastructure Protection Project” from Sept. 11, 2011.

cross-border trafficking. Chapter IV portrays the main beneficiaries of the drug industry and compares the role of the Taliban versus government officials. Chapter V analyses the counternarcotics efforts of the Afghan government and illustrates the conflicting agendas of various Western actors in Afghanistan in terms of counternarcotics policies.

II. How it all began – the historic context

Poppy cultivation in Afghanistan dates back centuries, but until the 1970s it was confined to a few areas and used only for the local consumption of opium and was not to be refined into heroin or trafficked internationally. Large-scale smuggling and the processing emerged during the time of the mujahedin resistance to the Soviet occupation after 1979. According to US historian Alfred W. McCoy, who has published extensively on international drug trafficking, the new business was initially controlled by the Pakistani intelligence service, Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) – and tolerated by its US counterpart, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). Both secret services cooperated during the Cold War in supporting the fight of the mujahedin against the Soviet Army and the communist Afghan government. With the profits from the trade, the ISI financed “separatist movements in India and the civil war in Afghanistan” (McCoy 2003, 649). Pakistani army trucks brought CIA-delivered weapons to the border and returned loaded with heroin.² Hizb-i Islami leader Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, a US ally at the time and now one of their fiercest enemies, reportedly was one of the first Afghans to run his own heroin laboratories (McCoy 2003, 621).

The former CIA director of the Afghan operation, Mr. Charles Cogan, later admitted turning a blind eye on the drug trade. In 1995, he told Australian television in an interview: “Our main mission was to do as much damage [as possible] to the Soviets. We didn’t really have the resources or the time to devote to an investigation of the drug trade. [...] There was fallout in terms of drugs, yes, but the main objective was accomplished. The Soviets left Afghanistan” (Chossudowsky 2001).

After the withdrawal of the Soviet troops in 1989, opium cultivation continued, as the mujahedin factions financed their civil war with drug money. One of the major drug lords at the time was the Jihadi commander Mullah Nasim Akhundzada from Helmand. His son, who became the first governor of Helmand under President Hamid Karzai’s government, inherited his drug networks.

During the time of the Taliban regime (1996–2001), the radical Islamic movement pursued a contradictory policy on drugs: They banned the consumption of drugs as *haram* (sin), but they initially did not object to the cultivation of opium. The head of the counternarcotics department of the Taliban in Kandahar, Abdul Rashid, argued that poppy – as opposed to hashish – was “only consumed by the

2 | Documented by Lawrence Lifschultz in *The Nation*, 1988, quoted in McCoy (2003, 621).

Kafirs in the west, not by Afghans and Muslims” and could therefore be cultivated legally (McCoy 2003, 657). Presumably, the real reason was the enormous profits that could be reaped from the trade. From 1996 to 1999 the annual opium harvest increased from 2,250 tons to 4,600 tons. There is also evidence that the Taliban collaborated with members of the Northern Alliance – their enemies in the civil war – to transport the poppy harvest through enemy territory and up to the Tajik border.

However, Taliban leader Mullah Omar tried to use a ban on poppy as a bargaining chip in exchange for international diplomatic recognition. In July 2000 he passed a religious edict declaring drug cultivation to be irreconcilable with the tenets of Islam. The ban was enforced vigorously and effectively in that season. For instance, in Nangarhar province, about 1,000 poppy farmers were arrested and jailed until they agreed to destroy their crops. A delegation of the United Nations International Drug Control Programme (UNDCP) confirmed that cultivation in Taliban-controlled areas had come to a nearly complete stop.³ However, the international community did not grant the Taliban regime the anxiously awaited international recognition, but only \$43 million as “humanitarian aid” (McCoy 2003, 668).

Apart from politics, there was probably an economic reason for the ban. The stores of the poppy traders and farmers were full due to overproduction, causing a decline in prices. The ban resulted in a tenfold increase in prices (UNODC 2006a). Thus, the move helped traders and stockholders become rich – especially those who had, due to insider knowledge, enlarged their stock at the right time. One of them later founded the Ansari Hawala scheme and the Afghan United Bank. At the same time, the ban had devastating effects on 3.3 million farmers, according to UNDCP estimates.

After the fall of the Taliban, interim President Hamid Karzai asked for help at the Bonn conference in December 2001 to fight the drug trade and finance alternative livelihoods (McCoy 2003, 672). Shortly before the donors conference in Tokyo in January 2002, Karzai declared a ban on drug production; in 2004 he called for a “jihad” against drugs – but seven years on it is clear that all measures have utterly failed.

III. The process

An explanation of the local cost-benefit chain (farming, harvesting, stocking)

Opium is an attractive cash crop for a number of reasons: It needs half as much water as wheat, brings several times its profit, can be easily transported, and even increases its value when stored. This is what makes any effort to curb it or replace it with other cash crops so difficult. Especially in Afghanistan, where large parts

3 | Author’s interview with a Bernard Frahi, the regional director for the UN program in Afghanistan and Pakistan, Islamabad, July 2002.

of the soil are only rain-fed, that is, without irrigation, the robust poppy plant that needs little water is an attractive choice.⁴ Still, growing poppy on irrigated land is even more profitable despite the higher costs. In the district of Koshka Kohna in Herat province, interviewed farmers estimated that they could harvest 7 to 10 kg of Taryak (opium paste) at a cost of 5,000 afghani on one *jirib* (approximately 200 sqm) of rain-fed land, while on irrigated soil they could harvest 15 to 20 kg of Taryak at a cost of 15,000 to 20,000 afghani.

In comparison to wheat, a farmer in Nangarhar estimated that he earned three times more with poppy. Other crops such as, for example, strawberries require better roads as well as storage and cooling capacity. Roses require a complicated technical infrastructure to extract the oil and a highly disciplined workforce to harvest the petals immediately after flourishing, which remains a challenge.⁵ Other high-value agricultural products often take a long time to mature. A pomegranate orchard takes between six and nine years, almonds up to four years, and apricots up to five. In contrast, poppy takes just six months.

This also means that poppy cultivation can be easily shifted to other areas, if pressure is locally increased. An example of this phenomenon is the district of Bakwa in Farah province, where cultivation rose from 39 ha in 2004 to 3,090 ha in 2008 (UNODC 2009a, 77). The dramatic increase was initiated by traders from neighboring Helmand province who offered advance payments as start-up capital to persuade farmers to grow opium.⁶ This points to another factor that draws farmers to poppy cultivation: the availability of low-interest credits. Especially after the Taliban cultivation ban, many farmers were dependent on loans and advance payments. In some areas such as in Farah province, traders have provided so called *salam* – loans without interest to poppy farmers. Such loans require the farmers to sell all their harvest exclusively to the trader who provided the loan – at the current market price of the time of the harvest.

Poppy cultivation is a labor-intensive process. For harvesting, the capsules are lanced in the evening and a latex-like opium gum oozes out, which is gathered by hand the next morning. This process requires skilled labor. Therefore, apart from farmers and traders, a large pool of migrant workers is also part of the poppy economy. As research for this study shows, laborers in Farah and Takhar province, for instance, can earn 300 afghani per day (approx. \$6–7), which is much more than is paid for other manual work. Many migrant workers travel across Afghanistan, following the harvest calendar from the south (April, May) up to Badakhshan in

4 | According to the Afghan researchers for this report, who worked in nine provinces (Badakhshan, Takhar, Kunduz, Nangarhar, Helmand, Farah, Herat, Kunar, Kandahar), and who interviewed farmers, local traders, and Afghan security personnel to get an in-depth overview of the local situation.

5 | Author's interview with the Afghan and international staff of the rose-oil project of German Agro Action in Jalalabad, May 2011.

6 | According to local researchers, March 2011.

the north (June, July) (UNODC 2009a, 95). Also, there seems to be a trend toward an increased division of labor, with specialized smugglers delivering the seeds from national centers to local markets.

The profit a farmer or trader can make depends on his ability to stockpile opium in order to sell when prices are highest. Since 2001, Afghanistan's opium production has consistently exceeded the entire global demand for opiates, despite all international efforts to stamp out the trade. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), in 2011 the stockpiled surplus was estimated at 12,000 tons, or more than twice the world demand, which is estimated at 3,700 to 4,400 tons a year. Since the fall of the Taliban, production in Afghanistan has consistently exceeded this demand, reaching 8,200 tons in a peak year like 2007 (UNODC 2009a, 25). As a result of overproduction, the "farm-gate" price for opium paste realized by farmers has seen a dramatic decrease, from \$425 in 2003 to \$64 in 2007 (UNODC 2009a, 95). After the crop failure in 2010 due to a blight that destroyed large parts of the harvest, the price rose significantly by 250 to 300 percent within one year.⁷

Seeing the obvious advantages of the poppy crop, an important question arises: Why are there certain areas with no cultivation? After all, opium is only cultivated on about 3 percent of the total agricultural land in Afghanistan (UNODC 2006b). According to local sources and counternarcotics officials in Kabul, religious sentiments are one of the main factors that discourage farmers from growing poppy. Many mullahs tell their constituents that poppy will curse their fields or that pilgrimage paid with drug money will not be accepted by God.⁸ But other mullahs collect *ushr* (tax) from poppy farmers and declare it *halal* (legal), arguing that only infidels consume the drugs or that the drug money is used to wage a holy war against infidels. Other mullahs abstain from condemning poppy out of fear. As one mullah from Koshka Kohna district in Herat said: "It is not *halal*, but when I say this in public, the Taliban will kill me."

Transport, refining, and smuggling

According to Afghan and foreign investigators, police officers, and ex-smugglers interviewed for this study, smugglers rarely use trails, mules, and clandestine routes, but main roads and official frontier crossing points into Iran, Pakistan, and Tajikistan, which are controlled by the police and the border police (UNODC 2007, 139).⁹ A 2007 United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) study on opiate flows concluded that approximately 70 percent of drug trafficking takes

7 | *Asia Times*, June 21, 2010.

8 | According to local researcher, April 2011.

9 | As mentioned in the Taliban chapter: "70 percent of drug trafficking takes place along the main roads, sustained by the strong support and involvement of the local governmental authorities."

place along the main roads, sustained by the strong support and involvement of the local governmental authorities (UNODC 2007).

In some cases, police have even provided uniforms and police vehicles to smugglers in order to cover up their operations. This was confirmed, for instance, by testimonies against a former commander of the border police in Herat, General Malham Norozi Khan, who was arrested in May 2008 and sentenced for drug smuggling to 10 years in prison. In the hearing, one of his battalion commanders, identified as Gulbuddin, testified that the general provided a regional drug boss named Jalil Farahi with border police uniforms and a police pickup truck so he could transfer narcotics across the frontier unopposed. He said he had witnessed the drug boss giving \$30,000 in cash to the general in return.¹⁰ In other cases, border police officials are bribed to allow smugglers to pass without being controlled.

While in the past, most of the raw opium was transported unprocessed across the border into Pakistan, Iran, and Tajikistan, for a few years now Afghan traffickers have increased their profit share by establishing labs inside the country. The UN estimates that two-thirds of all Afghan opiate exports are now refined into morphine base or heroin domestically.¹¹ Located in remote, mountainous border areas, the simple labs can be contained easily in any given compound, which makes them difficult to detect. However, the refining process requires a precursor – mostly acetic anhydride is used. The substance has to be illegally imported at very high costs, mainly from Pakistan. While the international licit price for acetic anhydride is approximately \$1–2 per liter, in Afghanistan prices have shot up over the past decade from \$24 to \$350 per liter. Although large quantities of the liquid are brought into Afghanistan, interdiction remains limited, as a study of the Afghan Research and Evaluation Unit notes: “In order to produce the required volumes of heroin [380 metric tons per year], as much as 1,000 tons of acetic anhydride are needed to be smuggled into Afghanistan in 2008. The interdiction of 14,233 liters in Afghanistan in 2008 remains marginal at a ratio of approximately 1 percent” (AREU 2009).

IV. The main beneficiaries

As a UNODC report states: “The intermediaries are not only shady characters linked to international Mafias. They are also (i.) white collar Afghan officials, who take a cut by protecting the drug trade, as well as (ii.) religious fanatics and political insurgents who do the same to finance their course.” (UNODC 2009a) This chapter looks at both groups of beneficiaries and analyzes their respective roles in the drug business.

10 | According to the Afghan researcher from Herat.

11 | Author’s interview with UNODC officials, Kabul, April 2011.

The role of government-affiliated powerbrokers

Back in 2005, a team of the former Minister of the Interior, Ali Ahmad Jalali, compiled a list (or various lists, this remains unclear) of alleged drug traffickers that contained about 70 names, according to one source familiar with the list – while another source claimed only 35 names. Shortly afterwards, the minister resigned after complaining about the impunity of senior officials involved in drugs and corruption. According to US sources, most of the people on the list, if not dead, are still involved in the business and are simply too powerful to be arrested.¹² The list included the president's murdered brother, Ahmed Wali Karzai, who was the head of the provincial council of Kandahar and the unofficial ruler of the province. Other people on the list were Jan Mohammed Khan, the ex-governor of Uruzgan, and Gen. Daud Daud, the head of the Afghan National Police in the northern provinces – both of whom were killed in 2011.

Similarly, the attorney general, Abdul Jabbar Sabit, told the then chief US counternarcotics official in Afghanistan, Thomas Schweich, that “he had a list of more than 20 senior Afghan officials who were deeply corrupt – some tied to the narcotics trade. He added that President Karzai – also a Pashtun – had directed him, for political reasons, not to prosecute any of these people.”¹³ Months later, Sabit was dismissed. In autumn 2011, he was kidnapped and disappeared without any demands for ransom, which indicates that he was probably killed.¹⁴

This wide range of state actors involved in the drug trade is confirmed by the research for this study, which identified 85 prominent figures who play leading roles in either their province or nationwide. Only such persons have been included who were named by various sources. Their names are being withheld for fear of reprisal.

Most of them had one thing in common: Apart from their drug business, they were also involved in licit businesses – and often worked as contractors for the US troops, ISAF, or the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). This seems to be a deliberate strategy to protect themselves against prosecution. In Helmand, one trafficker,¹⁵ who is the biggest trader of the Sangin district, holds a contract to supply the 215th ANA Corps with all necessary goods as well as the border police in Spin Boldak. In the Shinkay district of Zabul province, another trafficker and big trader from Sangin is the main contractor for a US-funded road-building project. In Kandahar, yet another one holds a contract to supply the 205th ANA Corps as well as other contracts with the Ministry of Defense. A trafficker from Kandahar owns a construction company that is working on several US-funded projects at the Kandahar airport. And in Nimroz, a trafficker who originally comes from

12 | Author's interviews with counternarcotics officials from the United States, Germany, the United Kingdom, and Afghanistan, February – June 2011.

13 | *New York Times Magazine*, July 27, 2008.

14 | Interview with international law enforcement personnel, Kabul, November 2011.

15 | Traffickers are being anonymized for the protection of the researchers.

Uruzgan has contracts to supply the border police and the ANA in Nimroz with food and other commodities. All these men have successfully developed an image among US and other ISAF officials of key allies in the war against the insurgency.

Additional reasons to invest in those businesses are money laundering and other forms of camouflage: Construction companies, for example, have fewer problems importing chemicals needed for processing. Profits from the trade can be laundered in large construction projects. Several big smugglers who also have businesses in Dubai often use the profits from the smuggling to buy used cars in Dubai and ship them to Afghanistan to maintain a legal cover.

Investigations into the trade are complicated by the fact that most financial transactions within the drug business are handled through *hawala*, an Islamic money transfer system that leaves hardly any paper trail. One of the wealthiest traffickers established the Ansari Hawala network and later founded the Afghan United Bank.¹⁶ About New Ansari, as the company was renamed, the US Treasury noted, it “used the billions of dollars it transferred in and out of Afghanistan to conceal illicit narcotics proceeds.”¹⁷

Case study: General Daud Daud, the “wolf in sheep’s clothing”

The relatively well-documented drug business of the deceased General Mohammed Daud Daud offers a good insight into the linkages between criminal and government networks. Born in the northern province of Takhar in 1969, Daud was an associate of Ahmed Shah Massoud, the murdered leader of the Northern Alliance. Due to the supportive role of the Northern Alliance in the US invasion in late 2001, people like Daud were integrated into the new leadership of Afghanistan. In 2004, he was appointed Deputy Minister of the Interior – in charge of the Counternarcotics Police of Afghanistan – despite his name being mentioned on an official list of the biggest drug traffickers in Afghanistan.¹⁸

Daud used his new position to eliminate business competitors under the pretext of doing his duty to fight narcotics. This, for instance, was the case with a mid-level trafficker from Daud’s home province of Takhar – the trafficker was arrested in 2006. Witnesses from the Ministry of the Interior claim that after his arrest, Daud’s family took over his business and he was released for \$200,000 shortly afterwards.

Another source who implicated Daud with the drug trade was the then head of the anti-drug squad of the Kunduz police. He told the *Los Angeles Times* in May 2005 that he saw traffickers arrested with up to 57 kg of heroin, only to be

16 | According to the local researchers in Kandahar and Kabul.

17 | *Wall Street Journal*, April 20, 2011.

18 | According to two persons, one of which was involved in researching and compiling the list for the Ministry of the Interior, and the other authored the list; interviews in May and June 2011 in Kabul.

released hours or days later without trial.¹⁹ Shortly after the report was published, he disappeared. Two sources familiar with the incident said British advisers to the Counternarcotics Police of Afghanistan scrambled to ensure the lieutenant's safety, holding a meeting in which General Daud admitted ordering his arrest.

In June 2005, a dealer named Sayyed Jan was arrested with 183 kg of heroin. A letter signed by Daud, dated March 15, 2005, urged the governor of Helmand province to assist the dealer. The governor seemed to have obeyed the counternarcotics chief, as investigators found a letter from the governor telling the police chief to allow safe passage for said dealer.²⁰ A relative of the dealer recalled a conversation in which he confided that he had paid the deputy minister \$50,000 for permission to run a single convoy through his zone of control.²¹ Gen. Daud repeatedly denied his involvement.

Western officials high up the chain of command were fully aware of the private drug business of the country's head of counternarcotics police: "Better you have someone peeing out than peeing in," a US official recalls from a conversation he had with Zalmay Khalilzad, the former US ambassador in Kabul.²²

In the meantime, Daud's drug business continued. In 2008, according to the local researchers of this study, Daud personally negotiated with traffickers in Helmand to have 6,000 *jirib* of poppy fields exempted from eradication, for which he was paid \$400,000.

In 2010, Daud was promoted to become the highest police general in northern Afghanistan. Weeks before Daud's assassination, a Western intelligence official in Kabul said that Daud had come clean: "He personally is no longer involved in the business. He wants to become a real politician, president if possible, and purge his record now. It's only his one brother who does the smuggling business now and another brother who runs the alcohol smuggling from Uzbekistan."²³

The role of the Taliban

The Taliban are also profiting from the drug business, but it is not the main source to finance the insurgency. UNODC officials as well as Afghan and Western counternarcotics experts all agree that the trade makes up for 8 to 12 percent of their budget (UNODC 2009a, 122). Other sources of income such as commissions from security companies guarding ISAF convoys, from construction companies, or *ushr* (tax) on other crops, are more important sources of income.

The Taliban are mostly benefitting in two ways from the drug trade: They collect *ushr* from the farmers, 10 percent of their harvest, and they take a percentage from owners of drug laboratories and smugglers for protecting them – and, ac-

19 | *Los Angeles Times*, May 28, 2005.

20 | *Globe and Mail*, March 21, 2009.

21 | *Ibid.*

22 | Author's interview, Kabul October 2010.

23 | Interview with international police investigator, Kabul, April 2011.

cording to one source, to make sure that in Pakistan the business partners pay for the shipments, “They function like an insurance company.”²⁴

No one knows the Taliban’s exact income from poppy cultivation. A US Senate report estimated an amount of \$70 million per year, UNODC puts its estimates at \$100 to \$400 million,²⁵ while a German government report calculates \$80 million²⁶ – less than 10 percent of the overall business, which amounts to between \$1.6 and \$1.9 billion (UNODC 2009b).

But for the Taliban, the opium cultivation generates a different profit than just money: political support. According to numerous reports, confirmed by the interviews conducted for this study, the Taliban use the governmental threat of eradication to offer protection – in exchange for support and loyalty. They acknowledge this openly: “This is a good opportunity for the Taliban to win local support. Our Taliban are ready to go anywhere in Helmand to help people fight the eradication campaign.”²⁷ Farmers in Helmand confirmed that poppy eradication has played a significant role in pushing locals into the hands of the insurgency in order to safeguard their income. In the district of Marja, known as the focus of the American offensive in 2010, a farmer says: “The Taliban have already promised us that they will keep fighting the government and foreign forces until we collect our harvest from the fields.”²⁸

V. Counternarcotics efforts

Counternarcotics efforts were one of the earliest demands of foreign governments after the US-led intervention in October 2001, and from the beginning, President Karzai declared the “war on drugs” a top priority of his government.²⁹ This chapter analyzes the announcements by international actors and the Afghan government to fight poppy cultivation – and why they all failed.

The role of ISAF and Western government agencies

Within ISAF as well as among the military and civilian organizations, there were conflicting agendas that prevented a coherent strategy from the start. On the one hand, there were those who argued for an aggressive campaign against drug cultivation, including aerial spraying and even targeted killings of kingpins. After the

²⁴ | Interview with Afghan counternarcotics official, Kabul, April 2011.

²⁵ | Senate Caucus on International Narcotics Control, 111th Congress second session, “U.S. Counternarcotics Strategy in Afghanistan,” July 2010.

²⁶ | *Spiegel online*, October 11, 2010.

²⁷ | *Washington Post*, January 4, 2011.

²⁸ | *New York Times*, March 20, 2010.

²⁹ | Karzai reiterated this promise once again at the International Afghanistan Conference in Bonn on December 5, 2011, whereas the European governments (except for Russia) and the United States did not stress this point.

resurgence on of the Taliban in 2006, this camp emphasized the link between the drug trade and terror financing, creating and circulating the pleasant fiction that mainly the Taliban were benefitting from the illegal business. On the other hand, there were those who saw eradication campaigns as a danger for their “hearts and minds campaign,” fearing that affected farmers would turn to the Taliban. And there were those who argued against taking on militia leaders and members of the ANSF because they were important allies in the counterinsurgency.

The assumption that drug business and insurgency were two sides of the same coin was promoted by the journalist and author Gretchen Peters in her book *Seeds of Terror* (Peters 2009) and became a prominent narrative among US officials in Washington. For instance, when US President Barack Obama unveiled his first strategy for Afghanistan, he said that the country’s economy “is undercut by a booming narcotics trade that encourages criminality and funds the insurgency.”³⁰

In 2008, US General John Cradock, NATO’s supreme allied commander, pressed for a more aggressive counternarcotics approach, saying that NATO had “recognized a clear nexus between drug trafficking and insurgency.”³¹ Cradock pushed for a resolution at the NATO summit in Budapest in October 2008, giving ISAF soldiers the authorization to attack Afghan traffickers. In August 2009, 50 Afghans who were believed to be drug traffickers with ties to the Taliban were placed on the “joint integrated prioritized target list” to be captured or killed.³²

However, Cradock’s approach met with fierce resistance from within ISAF. The German General Egon Ramms, head of the NATO command center in Brunssum and responsible for Afghanistan, as well as General David McKiernan, ISAF supreme commander in Kabul, vehemently questioned the legality of Cradock’s proposal, warning that it would “violate international law and rules governing armed conflict.”³³

Ramms argued against a role of the military in counternarcotics efforts in general. He said: “We would infuriate more Afghans against the US and endanger our mission – which is to fight the insurgency, not the drugs.”³⁴ Even the US administration in Washington was split over the issue: The State Department endorsed it vehemently, Special Envoy Richard Holbrooke argued against it, and the Pentagon was divided internally. As the chief US counternarcotics official in Afghanistan, Thomas Schweich noted:

In 2006, Benjamin Freakley, the two-star US general who ran the eastern front, shut down all operations by the DEA [Drug Enforcement Agency] and Afghan counternarcotics police

30 | *Associated Press*, March 30, 2009.

31 | *Spiegel online*, January 28, 2009.

32 | *New York Times*, August 10, 2009.

33 | For David McKiernan: *New York Times*, February 12, 2009; for Egon Ramms: *Stern*, Nr. 2/2009, interview by the author.

34 | Interview with the author, Mazar-e Sharif, Dezember 2008.

in Nangarhar – a key heroin-trafficking province. The general said that anti-drug operations were an unnecessary obstacle to his military operations.³⁵

The British forces in Helmand went as far as issuing leaflets and bought radio advertisements telling the local criminals that the British military was not part of the anti-poppo efforts, despite Britain being the lead nation within the counter-narcotics efforts.³⁶

When it comes to prosecutions, a number of kingpins have been arrested by, or with the help of, US officials. All of them were closely related to the Taliban – or co-operated with them. However, other powerful business operators like Daud (killed in 2011), Commander Raziq, Matiullah Khan, and Ahmed Wali Karzai (killed in 2011) were left untouched for obvious reasons: The international troops were dependent upon their cooperation, as the same people who trade drugs also operate security and construction companies, run police operations, and command proxy militias. Brigadier General Jonathan Vance, the Canadian commander of ISAF forces in Kandahar province, told a reporter about the then border police chief of Spin Boldak (the current provincial police chief of Kandahar) General Abdul Raziq:

We are completely aware that there are a number of illicit activities being run out of that border station. He runs effective security ops that are designed to make sure that the business end of his life runs smoothly, and there is a collateral effect on public order. Ideally, it should be the other way around. The tragedy of Kandahar is that it's hard to find that paragon of civic virtue. (Aikins 2009)

Afghan government's counternarcotics efforts

The various counternarcotics approaches of the Afghan government (worked out in cooperation with international experts) sounded nice on paper but were never meant to function – all their “pillars” were turned into dysfunctional structures (judicial reform), into half-hearted measures (alternative livelihood), or into the opposite of their intentions (crop eradication, which was used mainly as a tool to stop competing farmers without sufficient links to powerbrokers or as a method to extract bribes from farmers).

International money was not the problem – but rather the unwillingness of Afghan authorities on all levels to implement counternarcotics measures against their own economic interests. The British government, which spearheaded the fight against drugs, had pledged more than 850 million pounds, about \$1.7 billion, for the period from 2002 to 2009.³⁷

35 | Ibid.

36 | Ibid.

37 | Interviews with the author, 2010/2011.

Most of the pledged assistance went into the pockets of government officials and police officers and never reached its destination. Farmers who tried to plant, for example, saffron, wheat, or strawberries were left without the promised support in terms of fertilizers, financial aid, and seeds. For instance, in 2002 the British government promised to pay \$1,750 for each hectare of voluntarily destroyed poppy cultivation in Helmand. But, according to Afghan journalists, the farmers “never received” the money. Nevertheless, 10,000 hectares were officially accounted for and \$17.5 million went into the pockets of corrupt officials. “This strengthened the enmity against the British troops.”³⁸ The Institute for War and Peace Reporting wrote in 2010 that “According to a UN source, almost \$500 million have been given to alternative livelihood programs over the past two years.” But the counternarcotics ministry, whose job it is to implement the programs, denied that any such program was in place. A ministry spokesman told the reporter, “Poppy cultivation is a crime and we have no plans to reward criminals by giving them alternative crops” (IWPR 2010).

Similarly, eradication campaigns were undermined by corruption and enraged the population. This is confirmed by a report of UNODC:

In an environment of poor governance, weak capacity, and lack of rule of law, the significant albeit patchy eradication efforts [...] are a vehicle for corruption, with farmers being forced to pay in order not to have their opium poppy crop eradicated, police confiscating drugs and then selling them on and/or returning part of the seizure in return for a payment... (UNODC 2006b)

Eradication campaigns have been limited to a very small total of the poppy-cultivated land. For instance, in 2008–2009, less than 4 percent of plants was eradicated, according to UNODC. The real numbers are likely to be even lower, as many government officials tended to report higher numbers to pretend success. For instance, the governor of Helmand in 2006 stated that 7,000 hectares of poppy cultivation had been eradicated. Western observers estimated the number to be around 1,000 hectares.³⁹ A farmer from Nangarhar province describes how numbers are being inflated:

The police come, they destroy the most visible fields close to the main road and say, “We have eradicated 10 *jirib*!” But that is not true, only one *jirib* was destroyed, the head of the village or the militia commander make a deal with them and pay them. The villages even make deals with the police to bring in people who pretend to fight so the police have an excuse for not eradicating, while the others finish the harvest. This is like a game.

38 | Local official, according to: *die tageszeitung*, February 20, 2010.

39 | Interview with former UNODC investigator, Kabul, April 2011.

While farmers whose poppies were eradicated did suffer losses, many traders who still have stocks of poppy paste, benefitted from the campaigns. As a trafficker in Helmand declared, “If they don’t destroy poppy, I am afraid the price will come down” (IWPR 2007). Ironically, the biggest decrease of production in the past 10 years was not the result of any counternarcotics efforts, but of a blight that destroyed much of the harvest in 2010.⁴⁰ This resulted in a price hike and a dramatic increase in production levels the following year. According to UNODC, at least four formerly poppy-free provinces saw a “strong increase.” This shows that a temporary slump of production is not sustainable in Afghanistan, as long as counternarcotics measures are “treated as a parallel policy or strand of activity” and not “integrated within the wider process of state building and economic development” as demanded by David Mansfield and Adam Pain, two known experts on rural economy (AREU 2008).

Likewise, little has been achieved on the prosecution side for two reasons: the complicity of the police and the protection of perpetrators by political networks up to the highest levels of government. As UNODC states, “‘The majority of police chiefs are involved,’ stated a senior professional police officer, ‘if you are not, you will be threatened to be killed and replaced.’ [...] A judge agreed: ‘The top drug dealers are beyond the law. No one can touch them.’” (UNODC 2006b)

Two examples: In December 2005 British troops found nine metric tons of opium in the compound of Sher Mohammed Akhundzada, the governor of Helmand. Instead of being prosecuted (after he was dismissed due to British pressure), he was appointed to the upper house of the Afghan parliament. His younger brother was appointed as deputy to the new governor of Helmand, overseeing the family’s business. President Karzai also pardoned five border policemen who were caught with 124 kg of heroin in their border police vehicle – the five had been under surveillance by a special task force, which was established with millions of dollars from the US government. One of the five was a nephew of a close ally of the president, who had organized his reelection campaign in 2009.⁴¹

International actors have often claimed that it is hard to prove the involvement of government officials in the drug trade, but cables of the US embassy in Kabul, published by Wikileaks in 2011, show clearly that as early as 2005, US officials had in-depth knowledge of the systematic involvement of government officials in the drug trade.

For instance (excerpts):

E.O. 12958 N/A: “Since 2003, General Abdul Khalil Andarabi has been leading a government condoned drug cartel known as the North and Northeast Highway Police Brigade (also known as Second Brigade), controlling the roads and much of the narco-trafficking from Faryab to Badakhshan provinces.”

40 | *die tageszeitung*, October 1, 2010.

41 | Cable Reference ID 09KABUL2246, 2009-08-06, 05:05, Classification SECRET, Origin Embassy Kabul.

“The recurrent theme in the northeast region remains Kabul’s lack of political will to remove known warlords and drug traffickers from office, especially police chiefs.”⁴²

Needless to say that all officers and other power brokers mentioned in the cable still hold prominent positions within the Afghan government. Even when successful counternarcotics operations took place, they were often motivated not by fighting the drug business per se, but by clearing up the market and removing competitors. The few people in the Afghan government who seriously fought the narcotics business were removed sooner or later: General Sadat as head of the counternarcotics department in the Ministry of Interior; General Khodaidad as Minister for Counternarcotics. The latter is one of the very few people who agreed to be quoted regarding his experience: “The government was never really interested to arrest or even only to stop the big smugglers – because they were acting from within the government or had close relations to the ruling people.”⁴³

By now, Western support for Afghan counternarcotics has stalled, and the topic has been taken off the agenda. As one frustrated Western law-enforcement official in Kabul noted in April 2011, “most have given up on counternarcotics, since there are no successes to be expected.”⁴⁴ Jean-Luc Lemahieu, the Kabul representative of UNODC, said in early 2011: “In fact drugs didn’t even make it onto the list of Afghanistan’s 22 top issues from last year’s conference of the Afghan government and donors in Kabul.”⁴⁵

VI. Conclusion

Afghanistan is not a narco state. It is a narco imbroglio, since the trafficking is better organized than the state itself. The business permeates all levels of society and all political factions, which, under other circumstances, are in deadly conflict with each other.

The 10-year presence of the international forces in Afghanistan has not helped to curb this illegal business. In fact, it has rather contributed to its flourishing – due to questionable strategies informed by false assumptions and due to conflicting agendas of various international actors. The false assumption that the insurgency is mostly funded by the drug business has drawn attention away from the much larger involvement of government actors in the trade.

This bias is also the result of a dependence of the international forces on shady government officials linked to the drug trade. Big drug traders have actively

42 | Cable Reference ID 05KABUL5181, 2005-12-20, 12:12, Classification UNCLASSIFIED, Subject: “KUNDUZ POLITICS OF CORRUPTION IN THE BAGHLAN,” Origin Embassy Kabul.

43 | Interview with General Khodaidad in Kabul, June 2011.

44 | Several interviews by the author in Kabul, 2010/2011.

45 | Interview by the author, Kabul, May 2011.

sought a protective cover by infiltrating businesses that are central to ISAF and the ANSF, such as private security, logistics, and reconstruction services. The bigger the presence of international forces in Afghanistan, the bigger their vulnerability to attacks, cuts in their supply lines – and thus to blackmail.

At the same time, selective eradication campaigns undermined by corruption and the lack of alternative livelihoods have played into the hands of the Taliban, who managed to recommend themselves as protection guards against a corrupt police force. In this regard, counternarcotics efforts have undermined state-building efforts in Afghanistan.

The opium business contributes more than 50 percent to the Afghan economy. The country needs viable economic alternatives far beyond limited alternative livelihood programs. The Afghan population is by far too large to be fed with legal agricultural products only. And to transform Afghanistan's economy in a way so that it can compete with its more industrialized neighbors in the mid-term is something hard to imagine. To offer a comparable income, Afghanistan either would need a competitive industry, or a better infrastructure for agriculture, or a larger number of educated migrants who provide revenues from outside. None of these factors apply to the situation in Afghanistan so far. Economically, the situation will become worse once the international community pulls out its troops, with large parts of the legal economy depending on the service demands and employment their presence generates.

With the withdrawal of the international troops, the current equation of power is likely to collapse. As long as it is not clear who will rule the country in the future, no decisive steps against the most lucrative business can be expected. Ironically though, after the withdrawal, which will reduce the capacity of the traders to blackmail the international community, pressure to fight the drug trade can be more easily applied.

Glossary

ANA: Afghan National Army

ANSF: Afghan National Security Forces, i.e. ANA, ANP, ANCP, etc.

ANP: Afghan National Police

DEA: Drug Enforcement Administration (US gov. counternarcotics agency)

Halal: permitted by religious standards

Haram: not permitted by religious standards

Hawala: A traditional form of financial transaction without leaving any paper trail behind. Agents of a big *hawala* banker or partners contact each other by phone to disburse a payment made to the other contact person

ISAF: International Security Assistance Force of NATO in Afghanistan

ISI: Inter-Services Intelligence, Pakistan's intelligence service

Jirib: unit of land measurement, approximately 2,000 sqm, one-fifth of a hectare

Kafir: infidel

Malik: local authority

Marab: The person traditionally responsible for coordinating the water distribution in villages

Salam: A common form of advance payment where the amount is provided for a future harvest at an already fixed, normally low price

Taryak: the dried opium paste that is later refined into morphine and heroin

Ulama: Islamic religious scholars

UNDCP: United Nations International Drug Control Programme, predecessor of UNODC

UNODC: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

Ushr: traditional tax, 10 percent of the harvest or profit

Zakat: obligatory Islamic alms, the percentage varies

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