

Prospects for a Post-2014 Counter-Narcotics Strategy in Afghanistan (/2/post/2013/07/prospects-for-post-2014-counter-narcotics-strategy-in-afghanistan.html)

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By **Mohammad Reza Amirkhizi, PhD**

As the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) prepares to withdraw from Afghanistan over the next 18 months, the international community has been meeting to develop a comprehensive and cohesive counter narcotics strategy that will provide a sound basis for regional stability and economic growth post departure. Underlying many of the security and diplomatic concerns is the extent of illicit drug production and drug trafficking, the expected increase in the links between drug trafficking, terrorism and extremism, the impact of drug related organized crime abetted by state

institutions, the challenges in obtaining bilateral and regional cooperation, and the role of international and regional organizations in addressing these issues.

However, if history is any guide, drug control after the withdrawal of foreign forces will be no more effective than it has been over the past thirty years (including the past 12 years of military engagement) and wouldn't improve even if international forces were to stay beyond 2014.

Setting

In its World Drug Report (<http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/frontpage/2013/June/2013-world-drug-report-stability-in-use-of-traditional-drugs-alarming-rise-in-new-psychoactive-substances.html>), released on June 26, 2013 in Vienna, Austria, UNODOC reports that seventy five percent of the world's illicit opium originates in Afghanistan. Although opium production fell thirty five percent to 3,700 tons in 2012, this was in large part due to a plant disease affecting the opium poppy, rather than a result of control or interdiction efforts.

Economically, Afghanistan continues to be dependent on the cultivation and trafficking of opiates. The revenues and profits generated from poppy production can't be easily replaced with other agricultural activities. In 2003, more than a year after the arrival of ISAF, the opium economy was generating in excess of 2.5 Billion USD - 50 percent of Afghanistan's GDP. Nine years later, and despite ISAF's presence, the gross export value of opium was still estimated to be 2 Billion USD. There is good news in that opiate production and trade represented only eleven percent of Afghanistan's GDP in 2012 but cultivation of opium in each hectare is still between four and eleven times more profitable than cultivation of wheat.

With the exception of the last year of Taliban rule, production of illicit opium in the country has increased some 30-fold in the past 30 years. In 1980, the first year of the Soviet invasion, Afghanistan was producing about 19% of the world's opium. By the time the Soviets left in 1989, the country was producing 35% of the world's opium. Production levels hit 50% in 1993, a year before the Taliban were created in Pakistan, increased to 52% in 1996, when the Taliban took control of Kabul and reached about 80% in 1999 at the peak of Taliban rule.

In 2001 the Taliban implemented a total ban on opium production in regions where they were in control and production levels quickly dropped to 12% of world's total. That changed when ISAF initiated Operation Enduring Freedom in October 2001 and the Islamic Emirate was ousted. Afghan farmers who were previously forced to abide by the Taliban opium ban were now able to take advantage of the power vacuum to plant extensively so that by 2002 opium production in Afghanistan reached 76% - just shy of its 1999 level.

The cultivation of opium in Afghanistan has become a strategic decision for farmers in the insurgency areas. Moreover, limitations in rule of law, rampant corruption and absence of security and good governance have added to the complexity of the problem. All aspects of drug cultivation, production, trafficking, and consumption are increasing in Afghanistan especially in the southern and western areas where the central

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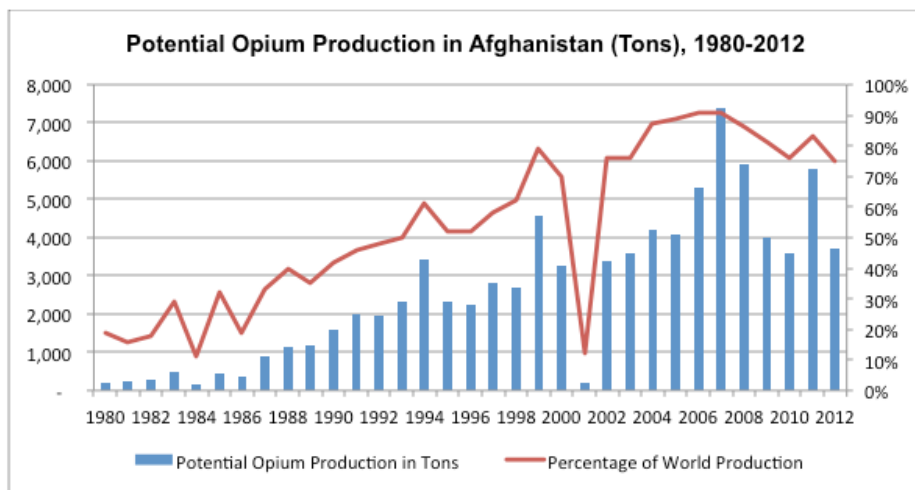
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government has less control. According to UNODC reports, these regions now account for about 95% of illicit poppy cultivation in the country.

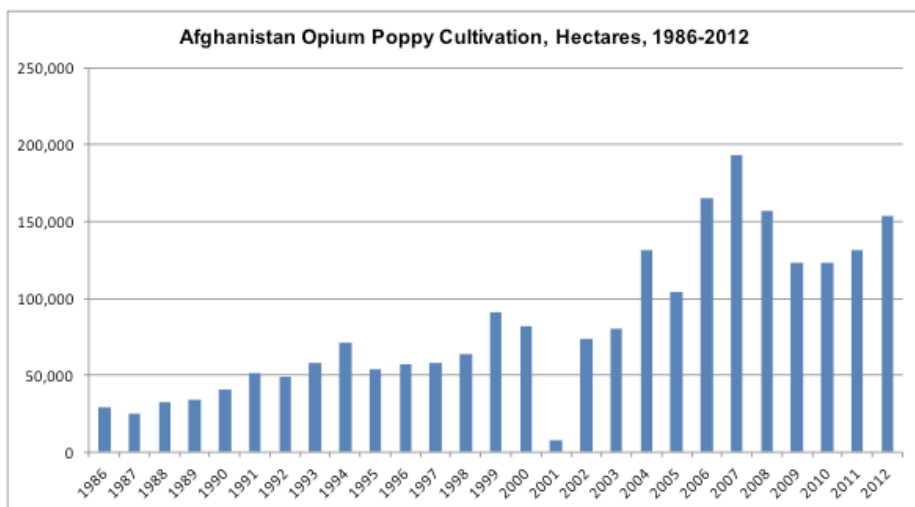


Source: Annual UNODC Opium Surveys

Areas Under Cultivation

While poppy production in 2012 has only increased by 300 tons since 2002, production levels don't tell the whole story. To really understand how bad the drug problem is in Afghanistan, it's important to consider the extent to which areas of cultivation have grown over the past ten years. In 2002, the area actively being farmed was estimated at 74,000 hectares with a potential production level of 3,400 tons. By 2012, the area under cultivation was estimated at 154,000 hectares with a potential production of 3,700 tons - an 18 percent increase since 2011. So, while the production has been estimated to increase by only ten percent (which has been explained (<http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/frontpage/2013/June/2013-world-drug-report-stability-in-use-of-traditional-drugs-alarming-rise-in-new-psychoactive-substances.html>) as the result of a naturally occurring crop disease), the area under cultivation has more than doubled since 2002. In fact, looking at the peak years in the past decade, areas under illicit opium cultivation have nearly tripled since first year of the Interim Government.

(Note: According to the United States government's 2013 assessment (<http://www.state.gov/j/in/rls/nrcrpt/2013/>), cultivation increased by 57%, from 115,000 hectares in 2011 to 180,000 hectares in 2012, while potential opium production remained the same at 4,300 tons, compared to 4,400 tons in 2011. The U.S. and UNODC estimates differ due to dissimilar methodologies for estimating poppy cultivation and opium yields.)



Source: Annual UNODC Opium Surveys

Presence Of ISAF

In the 1980's, illicit drug production in Afghanistan was largely a local issue. Three decades later, it is a major security concern for the international community in general and the neighboring countries and the major coalition forces in particular.

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The efforts by ISAF in Afghanistan have been focused mainly on short-term military victories against insurgencies so the rules of engagement have not included fighting corruption and drug trafficking. Although it would be logical to implicate the central government and fault them for failing to control corruption, the fact remains that the coalition partners kept their eyes closed to the power and influence of drug dealers and traffickers in high level provincial positions. As early as 2003, the names of key drug traffickers and smugglers were known to the authorities but their assistance was needed in the fight against the Taliban and terrorism. The justification was that if the drug traffickers could help defeat the Taliban quickly, other ills could be taken care of in due time. Contrary to that belief, the Taliban are still there, corruption is still rampant and traffickers are going all out to prevent the institutionalization of rule of law and good governance. In other words, both the traffickers and the Taliban want to maintain the status quo because it serves their respective needs and strengthens their relative positions.

Counter-Narcotics and Counter-Insurgency

Instability, terrorism, and lack of security go hand in hand with the illicit production and trafficking of drugs. The absence of security and stability provide the atmosphere for increased production and trafficking of narcotics and in turn, the revenues from such activities cause the intensification of instability and lack of security. According to the 2013 International Narcotics Control Strategy Report (<http://www.state.gov/j/inl/rls/nrcrpt/2013/>) "traffickers provide weapons, funding, and other material support to the insurgency in exchange for the protection of drug trade routes, fields, laboratories, and their organizations. Some insurgent commanders engage directly in drug trafficking to finance their operations. The trade in narcotics undermines governance and rule of law in all parts of the country where poppy is cultivated and traffickers operate." Current opium production levels will not be reversed without the establishment of peace, rule of law and stability but there is no indication that these conditions will exist any time soon.

This is not to say that the Government of Afghanistan has not attempted to control the production and distribution of drugs entirely. Steps have been taken to address the root causes of the drug economy such as economic instability, poverty, unemployment and organized crime. The Criminal Justice Task Force (CJTF) has had over 97% conviction rate of all drug cases that reach a certain threshold and Afghan authorities have made progress in interdicting large quantities of narcotics and arrest narcotic traffickers. However, according to the State Department, while "the Government of Afghanistan does not encourage or facilitate illicit drug production or distribution, nor is it involved in laundering proceeds from the sale of illicit drugs, (m)any central, provincial, and district level government officials are believed to directly engage in and benefit from the drug trade. Corrupt practices range from facilitating drug activities to benefitting from drug trade revenue streams."

Certainly there are numerous additional steps the Government of Afghanistan could take to mitigate the source and flow of drugs in the region including strengthening the Ministries of Counter Narcotics and the CJTF, expanding interdiction programs in areas of the country controlled by the central government and developing bilateral programs with neighboring countries to prevent cross border smuggling. But ultimately, unless Afghan forces are able to bring security and stability to the country after the departure of ISAF in 2014, there is a strong likelihood that any progress that has been made in the control of drug production and distribution will slow or stop entirely.

Conclusion

During the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, illegal drug production increased steadily and the international community could do little to control it. During the civil war, both the world powers and Afghanistan's neighbors took a hands-off approach and production predictably increased. During the reign of the Taliban, no one, not even those who created and funded the Taliban, thought it was worth more than a token effort to try to limit production. Even ISAF in conjunction with the Government of Afghanistan hasn't been able to materially reduce the devastating effect that illicit drugs have on the country's economy and stability.

Now the coalition forces are planning to leave and expectations, not surprisingly, are that not much will change. All the foreign actors will continue to support their allies inside the country. The Taliban will be kept alive by its creators to continue their insurgency. The central government will still need the support and assistance of the warlords in the volatile regions to fight Taliban. And the degree of illicit drug production and trafficking will for the most part remain the same or increase.

It's difficult to overstate just how ingrained opium is in the fabric of Afghanistan. Over the past 10 years, the opiate economy has been valued at about two billion dollars per year. Some two million people are employed in the illicit opium industry. Efforts to eradicate the crop in government-controlled areas have had the unintended effect (<http://www.forbes.com/sites/realspin/2013/04/19/when-the-u-s-cracks-down-on-afghan-heroin-it-aids-the-taliban/>) of increasing prices in Taliban controlled areas. And as interdiction efforts have been increasing in other parts of the world, Afghanistan remains one of the few places that that can source opium to heavily addicted users.

Three things need to happen before there can be any meaningful progress in the effort to eliminate opium production and trafficking:

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1) The economic supply side approach needs to be coupled with intense interdiction efforts. By itself, an economic solution is unrealistic in a country where the incentives to grow opium vastly outweigh the penalties. Until such time as there is a modicum of stability in the region, there is no practical way for the Afghan Government to steer the course of production from a high-priced, high-demand product to alternative crops. However, this does not mean that the Afghan forces should focus solely on pursuing the same short-term military objectives that have typified ISAF efforts since 2001. On the contrary, ISAF should be doing everything possible to train Afghan forces in interdiction and eradication technologies and methods because opium is one of the key reasons for the continuing violence and instability in the region. There have been numerous reports (<http://www.csmonitor.com/2006/1121/p04s01-wosc.html>) that new Taliban recruits are less fervent in their religious ardor than their predecessors and more motivated by the prospect of a quick buck. Ideologically driven movements may be sustainable over long periods of time, but financially driven movements will hesitate when the costs exceed the benefits.

2) Efforts to eradicate global drug syndicates have to be increased. There needs to be a significantly greater effort on the part of major world powers to crack down on organized crime syndicates that are exploiting the weakness and corruption endemic to Afghanistan's ruling elite. The Taliban's power to profit from opium production is wholly dependent on the resources and assistance of these ex-Afghan cartels. Without them the Taliban insurgency would be weakened...not defeated perhaps, but severely hampered. The longer it takes for the West and its partners to address this, the more sophisticated and the more integrated these foreign cartels will become and the harder it will be to defeat the insurgency.

3) The US/Afghan cooperation plan needs better alignment. While US forces have emphasized the importance of providing incentives to farmers not to grow opium, the Afghan Government has concentrated on controlling the size of the areas that could be used to production (<http://www.mideasti.org/content/afghanistans-opium-poppy-economy>). Failure to take into account the needs of farmers to have access to alternative economic solutions only serves to force the local population to seek support and assistance from the Taliban. At the same time, too much focus on area control does not sufficiently account for the fact that opium prices will rise to make up for the loss of supply, resulting in a failure to starve the beast. A careful, measured balance between US and Afghan approaches will be critical to an effective counter-narcotics strategy post 2014.

In summary, there needs to be a wholly pragmatic policy to fight the production and trafficking of illicit drugs in Afghanistan; a policy that takes into account the complex security and political situation in that country; a policy that does not simplify what needs to be done; a policy that does not over-state what is feasibly possible to achieve and a policy that focuses on establishing peace, prosperity, security and rule of law in the country.

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