

COUNTER-TRAFFICKING & COUNTERINSURGENCY: A (Counter) Productive Relationship

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The 2023 Caretaker System's joint-ops comprising of the Rangers, Armed Forces, and the Police were solely but not uniquely targeted at the 'deadly menace' of drug circulation. From Sindh to Balochistan, this move had been ratified into existence via an expedited order granting the Rangers acting powers in Sindh from September 2023 to February of 2024. Around the same timeframe, Qila Abdullah district in Balochistan became a battleground between drug dealers and Pakistan forces, including Levies, Anti-Narcotics Force (ANF) and regional and federal law enforcement personnel. In the resulting operations, processing plants, manufacturing hubs, and acreage of drug cultivation was handicapped if not eradicated. Couple together the precarious percolation of the Afghan-Pakistan border and the profiling of certain Afghan immigrants as central to this drug nexus and you can determine the threats vulnerable communities living in borderlands now face. Such an operation, against a 'societal menace', is not unique – these interventions have taken place before – but it is almost always uniquely presented as a panacea to end all evils. That is optimistic to a fault.

Social factors are key to the rise of the drug nexus; meanwhile, the political expediency of the drug trade also means that political conditions can change its necessity – the 2021 ban by the Taliban on opium cultivation as they sought to reorient themselves as a legitimate enterprise is one example of how political maneuvers have not translated into cultural dogma. It also means that social factors in the border communities with Afghanistan in particular can aid in incentivising – socially, culturally, religiously – the farmers to move out of the debt trap of opium cultivation. Otherwise, blanket policies aimed at destruction rather than rehabilitation sidestep the vertical integration of the drug industry, leading to the rise of a hybrid crop of prominent drug dealers with regional political power.

The drug trade is a circuit governed by the government, drug lords, local warlords, farmers, and labourers – it is not a carrot, nor a stick, but a dynamite in disguise.

For years, the local warlords – “into the shawl of democracy”¹ – allowed operations with impunity, exerting economic control on farmers and itinerant labourers, and exercising economic and political power over these constituencies. A second zone is that of transnational organised crime such as poppy trading – declared illicit by the new Taliban mandate: “the Taliban ordered a halt to poppy production, and the production, use, and transit of other narcotics.”² Afghanistan's role as a drug transit State combined with its vulnerable economy, statehood, and populations, makes for a disenfranchised poppy trade replete with exploitation.

As a result of an extensive regularising climate molded by the UNODC and the US's investment in counter-narcotic (CN) strategies – “more than \$8 billion over 15 years on efforts to deprive the Taliban of their profits from Afghanistan's opium and heroin trade,”³ the opium landscape has not only endured but thrived under different ruling factions. For President Karzai, the strategy satisfied various capacities. Presently, Afghanistan leads not just the global opium trade, but has also been declared the kingpin of the methamphetamine trade, although it has acquired little purchasing power. Afghanistan's lead in narcotics does not convert into public abundance, albeit the funds procured as a duty by non-state entrepreneurs were instrumental in supporting the insurgency movement when “taxes on it became a source of revenue”⁴ to fuel the insurgency prior to 2021.

¹Farhana Schmidt, “From Islamic Warriors to Drug Lords: The Evolution of the Taliban Insurgency,” *Mediterranean Quarterly* 21, no. 2 (January 2010): pp. 61-77, <https://doi.org/10.1215/10474552-2010-005>.

²James Durso, “Is the Taliban's Halt of Poppy Production Too Good to Be True?,” *The Diplomat* (for *The Diplomat*, April 13, 2022), <https://thediplomat.com/2022/04/is-the-talibans-halt-of-poppy-production-too-good-to-be-true/>.

³Jonathan Landay, “Profits and Poppy: Afghanistan's Illegal Drug Trade a Boon for Taliban,” *Reuters* (Thomson Reuters, August 16, 2021), <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/profits-poppy-afghanistans-illegal-drug-trade-boon-taliban-2021-08-16/>.

⁴Secunder Kermani, “Meth and Heroin Fuel Afghanistan Drugs Boom,” *BBC News* (BBC, December 12, 2021), <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-59608474>.

The idea of the opium exchange has in this manner changed fundamentally. Succeeding the mid-nineteenth century, the prevailing superpowers took part in significant drug trade; today, Afghanistan has acquired a critical situation in this nexus viz-a-viz its internal security and external relations with Pakistan.

Afghanistan's rise to the world's driving opium provider – “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”⁵ and “accounting for 85 percent of the global total in 2020”⁶. The economic trade is intimately connected with insufficient State control on national policies combined with a destabilising political situation. Furthermore, strong provincial groups inside the ‘Golden Crescent’ compete with each other for proxy power over the trade. Territorial warlords interpolate with arms providers and drug dealers, accordingly funding and balancing out their quasi-regimes inside the nation-state.

Accordingly, the Pakistani-Afghan borderlands have stayed contentious since the Durand Line appeared and bisected the settlements of the Pashtuns. Afghan lawmakers have utilised the irredentist case for Pashtunistan – guaranteeing that this significant piece of Pakistan where Pashtuns are residing should have a place with Afghanistan. The significant outlet for arriving at the European market was the southern course to Iran and Pakistan, bifurcating the sea route by means of the Gulf States and the earthly course through Turkey and the Balkans. These connections have led to socioeconomic and political realities, on ground and at the sea ports. For Pakistan, it means a precarious border situation.

Surprisingly, the Taliban government seems to be fully aware of the gravity of both homegrown and foreign stakes of the chronic drug usage in the country. Furthermore, because of the critical help with respect to the global local area, Kabul has mounted significant endeavors to battle the creation and appropriation of opiates. Global associations, for example, the UNODC, the EU and the OSCE are executing their own mitigation programmes. To start with, intergovernmental organisations are generally helpful apparatuses for getting to itemised data about a given country. In this vein, the UNODC (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime), explicitly issued public reports concerning the effect of police activities in the periphery, “however, the strategy seems to have been drafted predominantly by the UK and the UNODC, with only limited Afghan input.”⁷ Therefore, the principal stakeholders are absent from the equation.

Instead of guerrilla or rather, bulldozer, operations against these drug centres, a multi-agent model of the drug trade may answer for the numerous players in the opiate industry. This is to show that participating in the drug exchange gives temporary yet risky stability to farmers who need elective jobs. Strategic mediations do

not essentially alter the worth of the drug business, although they may reallocate the drug income stream among the players, for instance, a few interventionist approaches might just drive dealers to pay off government authorities more. The strength of the drug nexus originates from the way that the choice to partake in the drug network at any stage is rational despite the risk. Therefore, it is necessary to frame its physical, authoritative, and social conditions before planning interventions that may create even more instability. These agents are as follows.

Farmers. Farmers are the labourers who either sublet or lease the land or cultivate it themselves, thus being a crucial component of the multi-agent drug chain. A few harvests, for instance, poppy, are very impervious to weather patterns, thus being an optimal choice for the Afghan farmer. Farmers allot harvests to the land they develop to augment their normal yearly pay. Farmers are the labourers of the land, who might claim the land or lease it from khans or warlords. Furthermore, through the ancestral ‘salaam’ means of loaning, farmers can get sufficiently close to credit. They are given a settlement ahead of time on speculative earnings and opium, with its dependable rate of return, is inclined toward ancestral moneylenders. Assuming farmers decide to develop poppy, the government's strategists can present cash incentives or subsidies to discourage opium production. The problem is that “the farmers end up owing more than the value of their harvests. . . the farmers find themselves increasingly unable to escape the yoke of debt.”⁸

Dealers. Dealers are farmers themselves; farmers are merchants. Every dealer has an ideal supply of each harvest. This is mostly subsistence farming. By altering the vector of supplies of yields, we separate farmers, dealers, wholesalers, and so on. For years before the Taliban's incorporation into the Afghan government, they operated through local networks like warlords and local normative agents. Clamping down on these agents through brutal tactics curbs any potential for rehabilitation and increases, rather than decreases, potential for criminality in these spaces.

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF ERADICATION

Exploring the impacts of a CN strategy on the behavior of farmers and dealers and other elements in the supply chain involves looking at profit-oriented intercessions, adding elective administration, and shaping governmental approval against authentic, verifiable sources. Thus, one needs to find an ideal mix of CN approaches,

⁵Vanda Felbab-Brown, “Drugs, Security, and Counternarcotics Policies in Afghanistan,” Brookings (Brookings, March 9, 2022), <https://www.brookings.edu/testimonies/drugs-security-and-counternarcotics-policies-in-afghanistan/>.

⁶Rupert Stone, “‘Business as Usual’: Afghan Drug Trade Continues under Taliban” (TRT World, November 23, 2021), <https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/business-as-usual-afghan-drug-trade-continues-under-taliban-51942>.

⁷Bewley-Taylor, 2014.

⁸Farhana Schmidt, “From Islamic Warriors to Drug Lords: The Evolution of the Taliban Insurgency,” *Mediterranean Quarterly* 21, no. 2 (January 2010): pp. 61-77, <https://doi.org/10.1215/10474552-2010-005>.

prohibition and development endeavors that yield national decrease in drug production and increase yields in alternative crops. Thirdly, one would need to regulate the supply chain to get rid of arbitrary prohibition by regional players which do not represent the writ of the State.

Furthermore, the thought processes and techniques utilised by each stakeholder differ in view of their geographic area, financial conditions, associations with ethnic clans and outside parties, and political circumstances. In this contextual analysis, I centre around the coterie of stakeholders that are associated with the cultural climate and political economy of any ordinary town in the Afghan/Pakistani border locale. These descriptions were collated from Mansfield (2017)⁹:

Malik: Maliks are the mediators and agents between the town local area and focal power/government, and are responsible for addressing shared questions and keeping up with collective property.

Khan: The title conversationally signifies a landowner who controls numerous assets locally alongside giving positions to workers and land to tenant farmers. Khans may also be key to conflict resolutions.

Ulema: The Ulema shura is a gathering of leaders who lead petitions, give religious sermons, and have the force of moral judgment locally. They are likewise associated with dispute resolution according to the perspective of Shariah (Islamic regulation).

Since the focal government is still generally feeble in these peripheral areas, these stakeholders are effective sources of collusion between the public authority and the public itself. Thus, these two factions can be co-opted to change the channel of drug trade towards a mutually-beneficial dynamic. Maliks act as the broker between the locals and the central government, and Ulemas (gatherings) and the Shura are assembled to referee neighbourhood clashes and direct numerous public works and town wide issues. In any case, strains do exist between the conventional social design and the new drug economy, as the vast majority of the new policies is constrained by delinquents or independent contractors.

PROPOSED ACTIONS:

1. Gathering support from locals — those warlords who have command over towns on the Afghan-Pakistani boundary are probably going to gather additional duties from those brokers endeavoring to pirate opium through designated supply routes. Because of the overall financial benefit of cultivating poppies instead of different yields, Khans have a huge motivation to drive their tenant farmers to develop poppies for drug exchange. Moreover, if the Ulema publicly and unequivocally announced opium to be un-Islamic, Khans might consider executing the same order.

2. Acting on the Taliban's propaganda tools: Using religion to exert pressure on the masses to follow a certain course of action is not new to the Taliban which "follows a Salafist egalitarian model that seeks to emulate the life and times of the Prophet Mohammed."¹⁰

Local farmers have developed their skillsets to depend progressively on the development of poppies for their endurance and vocation. Since opium dependably brings more income than other legitimate harvests, informal moneylenders give special credits to farmers developing opium. Indeed, even farmers who might want to agree with the CN regulations are majorly influenced by the strong Khan whose land they consider home and who controls the vehicle and exchange of illicit contraband; as a rule, then, the cultivation of illicit substances may not really be a decision for the farmers themselves.

Emulating a drug supply chain as a circuit which when disturbed or distended, will exhibit the normal functions of supply and demand. A disturbance in the drug exchange is a disruption for the insurgencies since most of the insurgents are subsidised by the drug exchange. By concentrating on drug exchange according to a stakeholder analysis, effective policing may be facilitated — this time by 'co-opts' instead of 'co-opts'.

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⁹David Mansfield, "Understanding Control and Influence: What Opium Poppy and Tax Reveal about the Writ of the Afghan State / David Mansfield ; Editor Jill Suzanne Kornetsky and Matthew Longmore.," ed. Jill Suzanne Kornetsky and Matthew Longmore, 2017 Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, 2017, https://doi.org/10.29171/azu_acku_pamphlet_hv5840_a23_m355_2017.

¹⁰Thomas H. Johnson, Taliban Narratives: The Use and Power of Stories in the Afghanistan Conflict (Oxford University Press, 2019).