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WILLIAM BYRD

E-mail: wbyrd@usip.org

Phone: 202-420-3856

Afghanistan and the International Drug Control Regime Can the "Tail" Wag the "Dog"?

Summary

- A variety of factors point toward increasing opium poppy cultivation and especially rising opium and heroin production in Afghanistan over the next several years.
- The international community needs to be prepared for such trends, resist the temptation to seek simplistic and one-dimensional solutions, and avoid major policy blunders that would make the situation worse.
- Neither aerial spraying nor licensing of opium cultivation for medicinal purposes will work. On the contrary, either of these extreme opposite approaches would be counterproductive and damaging.
- In the absence of major changes in the current international drug control regime—which carries high costs with uncertain and doubtful benefits and arguably is not working well—Afghanistan can only have a marginal impact and strive for gradual improvements on the counternarcotics front.
- Under these circumstances effective, sustained rural development is essential for enabling farmers to move away from dependence on opium poppy cultivation over the longer term.
- In summary, just as the "tail" cannot wag the "dog," neither can Afghanistan serve as an effective vehicle for enforcing current international counternarcotics policies from the supply end, and nor can major reforms in the international drug control regime be catalyzed from Afghanistan.

“Afghanistan can neither be an effective vehicle for enforcing the current global drug control regime from the supply end, and nor can it be the source of innovation and change that would catalyze broader changes in the global narcotic control system.”

Counternarcotics Prospects in Afghanistan

Despite extensive counternarcotics interventions and reductions in poppy cultivation in certain regions, Afghanistan remains by far the largest supplier of illicit opiates, normally accounting for around 90 percent of global production. In 2012, the area cultivated with poppy is estimated to have risen by 18 percent, although bad weather and other factors held down yields, and opium production declined significantly.¹

Afghanistan's ongoing transition will have adverse implications for the country's and its international partners' ability to continue implementing counternarcotics policies along the lines of the recent past.²

First, withdrawal of U.S. and other international military forces, especially from key opium-producing provinces like Helmand and Kandahar in the south, will reduce the overall security presence and associated pressure to reduce poppy cultivation. Even though international troops are not involved in eradication of opium poppy fields, their presence has been used by Afghan officials and security forces to dissuade local leaders and farmers from cultivating poppy, sometimes including the threat to link them to the Taliban if they do not heed opium bans.³ Such threats and pressure will increasingly lack credibility as the drawdown continues, and nor would large-scale ground-based eradication be a realistic option under these circumstances.

Second, financial resources for counternarcotics, including for payments and provision of agricultural inputs, as well as for other support at provincial and local levels, will be sharply reduced. This will leave a much smaller “carrot” for farmers and other local actors to go along with the “stick” of eradication and the threat thereof.

Third, concomitant with foreign troop withdrawals and reductions in international funding, the political leverage to exert pressure for counternarcotics actions most likely will decline over the next several years. Moreover, the drug issue is likely to be distinctly secondary on the list of political priorities for the U.S. and other international partners. The recent retraction by the U.S. government of the U.S. military’s ban on contracting Kam Air due to allegations that the airline was involved in drug transportation suggests, *inter alia*, that the U.S. government may not expend much political capital on drug issues.⁴

Domestic political, climatic, and economic trends in Afghanistan also may weaken the ability to contain, let alone curtail, the opium economy. These include the upcoming 2014-2015 election cycle, distracting from drug issues and possibly leading to avoidance of politically sensitive counternarcotics actions, weakening or removal of some stalwart anti-opium provincial governors, recovery from the unusually low yields in 2012, and continuing fairly high prices for opium.

Thus overall, a variety of factors point toward increasing opium poppy cultivation and rising opium and heroin production over the next several years. While positive achievements—such as continuing to maintain poppy cultivation bans in better-off localities, enhanced interdiction efforts and prosecutions by special counternarcotics courts, and improvements in the capacity of Afghanistan’s Ministry of Counternarcotics—also need to be kept in mind, these most likely will be far outweighed by the adverse factors discussed above.

Policy Alternatives: No Silver Bullets

The international community needs to be prepared for such adverse trends and how to respond. Previous approaches—dependent as they were on presence of international troops, large amounts of money, and strong political pressure—are not sustainable, and earlier achievements in reducing opium poppy cultivation in some provinces and in some years will no longer be replicable. What are the alternatives?

Although past experience in Afghanistan and elsewhere abundantly cautions against simplistic solutions and overly ambitious expectations about what can be achieved especially in the short run, expanding poppy cultivation may well generate temptations to seek drastic actions in response. These would likely prove counterproductive and if anything make the situation even worse.

If cultivation significantly expands there may be renewed calls for aerial chemical spraying of poppy fields, an extreme measure which has been avoided in the past. While this may seem superficially attractive and might even appear in some quarters to provide a technological solution substituting for on-the-ground presence, there are very strong, even overwhelming arguments against aerial spraying. First, it will not succeed in reducing opium cultivation in a sustained

manner over time; as an annual crop that can be grown in a variety of climate zones, opium is “footloose” and planting would relocate and expand in response to spraying. Second, juxtaposition of opium poppy fields with other crops, inter-cropping, and the proximity of dwellings and villages to poppy fields mean that it would probably be impossible to spray poppy without also spraying other crops and dwellings. Third, aircraft conducting spraying operations might be vulnerable to small arms fire, requiring military air support—whether that would be on the cards as the security transition proceeds may be in doubt.

Finally, there would be enormous public relations problems: Irrespective of the objective safety of the chemicals being used, illnesses, childhood mortality, and all sorts of human and animal health problems would be attributed by the local populace to aerial spraying, and the international community and Afghan government would be blamed; such sentiments would be exploited by the Taliban and other anti-government forces.

At the opposite extreme, there may be renewed calls for a radically different approach involving licensing or the purchase of Afghanistan’s opium output for licit medicinal purposes. As in the case of aerial spraying, such proposals have been made before,⁵ but this approach will not work under current circumstances. First, licensing of opium production and trade, and in particular effective controls to prevent leakages into the illicit market, requires a significant degree of government presence and capacity, rule of law, and effective governance, which are lacking in Afghanistan’s rural areas. Thus the leakage from licensed to illicit markets would be enormous, and Afghanistan easily could accommodate a large increase in total opium production to cater to both legal and illegal markets. Such a situation would be completely unmanageable and would quickly break down. Second, established licensed producers of opiates (Australia, India, France, Turkey, and others) would strongly oppose engagement by Afghanistan in licensed cultivation, to protect their own agricultural interests. And finally, Afghanistan does not have a comparative advantage in licensed production, as compared with large-scale mechanized farming of opiates in countries like Australia.

Afghanistan and the International Drug Control Regime⁶

Consideration of both of these extreme options highlights the more general point that Afghanistan can neither be an effective vehicle for enforcing the current global drug control regime from the supply end, and nor can it be the source of innovation and change that would catalyze broader changes in the global narcotic control system. In summary, the “tail” cannot wag the “dog,” and in the absence of changes in international drug control policies, Afghanistan can have only a marginal impact and strive for gradual improvements on the counternarcotics front.

As emphasized in a recent World Bank study,⁷ the costs of the current prohibitory international drug control regime—direct enforcement costs, human costs of lives lost and ruined by incarceration, public health costs, development costs borne by low-income drug-producing countries (despite modest incomes accruing to farmers cultivating drug crops), entrenchment of organized crime, erosion of governance and political stability, and associated violent conflict—are very high and in many respects quantifiable, whereas any benefits (for example in terms of reduced problem drug use) are uncertain, doubtful, and hard to pin down. Thus basic cost-benefit analysis strongly suggests that the international drug control regime is not working well and that it should be revisited with a view to reforming it.⁸

In the absence of changes at the global level, countries like Afghanistan can only strive to make gradual improvements and to avoid disastrous policy blunders that could make the situation even worse. In this context, and based on the experience of other developing countries that have suc-

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

William Byrd is a development economist and has worked on Afghanistan in various capacities over the past decade and longer. During 2002–2006, he was stationed in Kabul, Afghanistan, where he served as the World Bank's country manager for Afghanistan and then as economic adviser. He is currently an Afghanistan Senior Expert at the U.S. Institute of Peace. This paper builds on his earlier work on illicit narcotics in Afghanistan from a development perspective, including several books, reports, and papers. The views expressed in this brief do not necessarily represent the views of the U.S. Institute of Peace, which does not take policy positions.

cessfully eliminated drug crop cultivation on a sustainable basis (e.g., Thailand and Pakistan), there is no substitute for a long-term rural development approach to increase non-drug incomes and livelihoods over time,⁹ while judiciously using law enforcement instruments such as eradication as and after rural development progress is achieved, not in its absence.¹⁰

Endnotes

1. See UNODC and Afghan Ministry of Counter Narcotics, *Afghanistan Opium Survey 2012: Summary Findings*.
2. This was discussed in William Byrd and David Mansfield, "Drugs in Afghanistan: A Forgotten Issue?" (USIP PeaceBrief No. 126, May 2012). See David Mansfield, *All Bets are Off! Prospects for (B) reaching Agreements and Drug Control in Helmand and Nangarhar in the run up to Transition* (AREU, January 2013) for a detailed empirical analysis of these two key provinces.
3. See AREU Briefing Paper by Paul Fishstein and David Mansfield (forthcoming).
4. See, among others, *The Wall Street Journal*, January 25, 2013, and *The New York Times*, February 4, 2013.
5. The Senlis Council (subsequently renamed the International Council on Security and Development) has strongly advocated for a licensing regime for opium in Afghanistan. See *Feasibility Study on Opium Licensing in Afghanistan for the Production of Morphine and Other Essential Medicines—Initial Findings* (September 2005) and *Afghan Poppy for Medicine Projects: An Economic Case Study* (November 2007).
6. The international conventions on narcotic drugs and their historical background are discussed in Julia Buxton, "The Historical Foundations of the Narcotic Drug Control Regime," in Philip Keefer and Norman Loayza (editors), *Innocent Bystanders: Developing Countries and the War on Drugs* (Washington, DC: Palgrave Macmillan and The World Bank, 2010), chapter 2.
7. See Keefer and Loayza, especially chapter 1. Also see *The Alternative World Drug Report: Counting the Costs of the War on Drugs* (2012).
8. Where existing public policies carry high costs but reap uncertain benefits, a standard prescription would be to try out different approaches on a pilot basis to gain better information about what works and what doesn't, rather than sticking with the existing policy regime in its entirety (Keefer and Loayza, chapter 1). The *Report of the Global Commission on Drug Policy* (2011) makes a strong plea for debate and reform, arguing that the global war on drugs has failed.
9. A 2008 report of the U.K. Department for International Development and the World Bank—*Afghanistan: Economic Incentives and Development Interventions to Reduce Opium Production*—put forward a medium-term rural development program to reduce Afghanistan's dependence on opium poppy cultivation.
10. In Afghanistan itself there are localities (typically characterized by proximity to urban markets for agricultural products and labor, and by good per-capita land and water resources) where there are plentiful farm and non-farm income generating opportunities and poppy bans have been effective, that have moved away from opium poppy cultivation on a sustained basis.



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Washington, D.C. 20037

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