

**OPIUM AND AFGHANISTAN:
REASSESSING U.S. COUNTERNARCOTICS STRATEGY**

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PREFACE

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ABSTRACT

Cultivation and production of opium in Afghanistan have skyrocketed since the Taliban were toppled in 2001 such that Afghanistan now supplies 92 percent of the world's illicit opium. The expanding opium trade is threatening to destabilize the Afghan government and turn the conflict-ridden country back into a safe haven for drug traffickers and terrorists. This paper examines the nature of the opium problem in Afghanistan and analyzes the allied strategy to counter this growing crisis. In analyzing the current counternarcotics strategy, it points out pitfalls including the counterproductive aspects of opium eradication. Finally, changes to the strategy are proposed, which include increasing troop levels and eliminating national restrictions, substantially increasing financial aid, deemphasizing opium eradication, focusing on long-term alternative livelihoods, aggressively pursuing drug kingpins and corrupt government officials, and exploring the possibility of Afghanistan's entry to the licit opium market.

OPIUM AND AFGHANISTAN: REASSESSING U.S. COUNTERNARCOTICS STRATEGY

Either Afghanistan destroys opium or opium will destroy Afghanistan.¹

– President Hamid Karzai

The epigraph above emphasizes the important link between opium production and the future security of Afghanistan. Opium production in Afghanistan has skyrocketed since the U.S. military teamed with the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and Afghanistan's Northern Alliance in toppling the Taliban in 2001, with Afghanistan now supplying 92 percent of the world's illicit opium.² This growing opium trade is threatening to destabilize the Afghan government and turn the conflict-ridden country back into a safe haven for drug traffickers and terrorists. Afghan President Hamid Karzai calls the opium problem "the single greatest challenge to the long-term security, development, and effective governance of Afghanistan."³ This paper examines the nature of the opium problem in Afghanistan and analyzes the current strategy to counter this growing crisis. It then points out pitfalls in the U.S. counternarcotics strategy and recommends changes to the strategy so as to better address the complex issues associated with the opium trade. To provide a clearer picture of the opium problem and strategic challenges, this paper first examines the cultural and political characteristics of Afghanistan and its agricultural economy.

BACKGROUND

Afghanistan.

The history of Afghanistan reveals a country marred by conflict and lacking in stable self-governance. Afghanistan was founded in 1747, but the country was ruled by the British from 1826 until 1919, when it regained its independence. In 1964, Afghanistan's King Zahir introduced a constitution and implemented democratic reforms. However, a military coup ended the brief period of democracy in 1973, and a second coup 5 years later installed a communist regime. The following year, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, only to withdraw in defeat and frustration after 10 years of stiff resistance from the U.S.-backed Mujahedin rebels. The communist regime crumbled in 1992, sparking a civil war between rival Mujahedin factions. By 1998, the Taliban—a hardline, Islamic-based, Pakistani-sponsored movement—had emerged in control of most of the country. Following the September 11, 2001 (9/11), terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the United States joined Afghanistan's Northern Alliance in toppling the Taliban for their role in harboring terrorists, including al-Qai'da's leader, Osama Bin Laden.

Although the Taliban were ousted relatively quickly, the country was left in economic ruin and political chaos. In December 2001, a number of prominent Afghans met in Bonn,

Germany, under United Nations (UN) auspices to develop a plan to reestablish the State of Afghanistan, including provisions for a new constitution and national elections. As part of that agreement, the United Kingdom (UK) was designated the lead country in addressing counternarcotics issues in Afghanistan. Afghanistan subsequently implemented its new constitution and held national elections. On December 7, 2004, Hamid Karzai was formally sworn in as president of a democratic Afghanistan. Since then, with Western support, he has struggled to rebuild the country and establish a functioning government.

Although it has been more than 5 years since the fall of the Taliban, Afghanistan's infrastructure remains devastated, its economy weak, and the security environment increasingly unstable. To manage this turmoil, over 40,000 foreign troops still occupy Afghanistan. Of this total, some 32,000 troops from 37 countries make up the North American Treaty Organization (NATO)-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), while approximately 8,000 U.S. troops, mostly special operations forces, operate independently. NATO and U.S. troops continue to face stiff resistance from anti-government elements, including a resurgent Taliban which is particularly active in Afghanistan's southern region. The situation has continued to deteriorate, with 2006 marking the bloodiest year of conflict since U.S. forces originally ousted the Taliban. NATO military officials reported that the number of attacks against coalition forces in Afghanistan more than tripled in 2006 to approximately 5,000, up from 1,500 in 2005.⁴ Antonio Maria Costa, Executive Director of the U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), described the situation this way: "There is no rule of law in most of the southern parts of Afghanistan – the bullets rule."⁵

Complicating efforts to provide governance and stability is the decentralized structure of Afghanistan's government. The country is made up of 34 provinces, 300 districts, and over 30,000 villages.⁶ Despite the emergence of democracy, the country never had a strong central government. Village, tribal, and regional leaders tend to have significant influence over the local population. Some of these leaders, referred to as "warlords," have their own militias. These warlords often hold high political offices within the government, including provincial governorships. Due to the central government's weakness, President Karzai relies heavily on his warlord associates to govern Afghanistan.

Geography and climate also pose economic challenges which are difficult to overcome. Afghanistan is a landlocked country, roughly the size of Texas with a great deal of extremely rugged terrain, few natural resources, and an arid climate with harsh winters. As one of the poorest countries in the world, its 31 million people have an average per capita income of just \$800, with 80 percent of its rural population living in poverty.⁷ Only 23 percent of Afghans have access to safe drinking water, and only 6 percent to electricity.⁸ The 2004 U.N. Development Program ranked Afghanistan number 173 of 177 countries, using a human development index, with Afghanistan near or at the bottom of virtually every development indicator including nutrition, infant mortality, life expectancy, and literacy.⁹

The high rate of return on investment from opium poppy cultivation has driven an agricultural shift in Afghanistan from growing traditional crops to growing opium poppy. Despite the fact that only 12 percent of its land is arable, agriculture is a way of life for 70 percent of Afghans and is the country's primary source of income.¹⁰ During good years, Afghanistan produced enough food to feed its people as well as supply a surplus

for export. Its traditional agricultural products include wheat, corn, barley, rice, cotton, fruit, nuts, and grapes. However, its agricultural economy has suffered considerably from years of violent conflict, drought, and deteriorating infrastructure. In recent years, many poor farmers have turned to opium poppy cultivation to make a living because of the relatively high rate of return on investment compared to traditional crops. Consequently, Afghanistan's largest and fastest cash crop is opium.

Opium.

Opium poppy is a hardy, drought-resistant plant easily grown in most parts of Afghanistan, with a growing cycle that conveniently spreads the farmer's workload throughout the year. Opium poppy is usually planted between September and December and flowers after approximately 3 months. The flower's petals then fall away, leaving the plant's seed capsule containing an opaque, milky sap known as opium (see Figure 1). Harvested between April and July, the plump seed capsules are then lanced, allowing the opium sap to ooze out for collection after it has dried into a black tar-like substance. The opium sap is then refined into opiate-based products.



Figure 1. Opium Poppy Capsule.¹¹

Opium is grown legally in some countries for medical purposes, but huge demand in the illicit market, coupled with saturation of the licit market, is driving Afghanistan to supply illegal opium. In 2004, approximately 523 tons of morphine were produced

worldwide from opium for medical purposes.¹² Opium is also refined for use in legal prescription painkillers such as OxyContin and Vicodin.¹³ However, Australia and France currently produce about half the world's opium used for medical purposes, with India, Turkey, Spain, and Hungary producing a majority of the rest, leaving little flexibility for Afghanistan to enter this market. Despite its legitimate uses, most of the world's opium is illegally grown and processed in countries with limited governmental control. Hence, virtually none of Afghanistan's opium poppy harvest is used for licit opiates. Instead, almost all of it ends up on the international market as heroin.

Heroin addiction is a global problem, and worldwide demand for heroin is increasingly being met by Afghanistan's farmers and drug traffickers. Heroin is a highly addictive drug, and prolonged use can result in a variety of social and health-related problems. Sharing of contaminated heroin needles is a major contributor to the spread of HIV/AIDS and other infectious diseases such as Hepatitis C. According to the U.N. World Drug Report, there are approximately 16 million illicit opiate users worldwide, including 11 million heroin users. The primary opiate-using countries in the world include India (3 million users), Russia and Eastern Europe (2.3 million), China (1.7 million), Western Europe (1.6 million), Iran (1.2 million), the United States (1.2 million), and Pakistan (0.7 million).¹⁴ Afghanistan has approximately 150,000 opium and 50,000 heroin users, but consumes just 3.3 percent of its own harvest.¹⁵ Afghanistan is the source of nearly 90 percent of heroin in Europe and Russia,¹⁶ while approximately 14 percent of heroin in the United States comes from Afghanistan, up from 7 percent in 2001.¹⁷ According to the UNODC, as many as 100,000 people die annually directly or indirectly from abuse of Afghan heroin.¹⁸ Furthermore, the UNODC predicts that increasing opium production in Afghanistan will result in an increase in heroin overdoses worldwide because greater supply traditionally leads to a higher level of heroin purity on the international market.¹⁹

AFGHANISTAN'S OPIUM ECONOMY

Cultivation and production of opium have significantly increased in Afghanistan since 2001. Afghan farmers have grown opium poppy for generations; however, not until the 1970s did they grow it in significant amounts for export. With the exception of 2001, when the Taliban strictly enforced a moratorium on poppy cultivation with such harsh tactics as beheadings, opium poppy cultivation has been steadily increasing for over the past 2 decades as is shown in Figure 2.²⁰ Today, poppy cultivation and opium production are at all-time highs. According to the UNODC, opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan covered an estimated 165,000 hectares during the 2005-06 growing season, a 59 percent increase from the previous year. The UNODC also estimated that opium production in 2006 was 6,100 metric tons, up from 4,100 metric tons in 2005, which makes Afghanistan by far the world's largest producer.

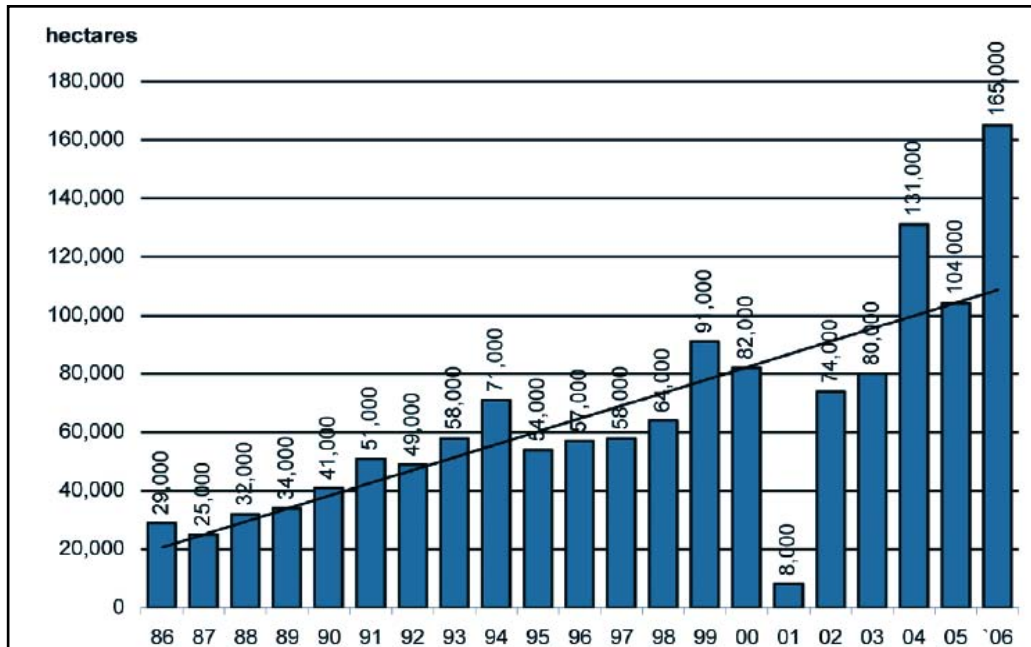


Figure 2. Afghanistan’s Opium Poppy Cultivation from 1986 to 2006 (in hectares).²¹

Cultivating opium poppy makes powerful economic sense to the impoverished farmers of Afghanistan. It is the easiest crop to grow and the most profitable. Even though the Karzai government made opium poppy cultivation and trafficking illegal in 2002, many farmers, driven by poverty, continue to cultivate opium poppy to provide for their families. Indeed, poverty is the primary reason given by Afghan farmers for choosing to cultivate opium poppy.²² With a farm gate price of approximately \$125 per kilogram for dry opium,²³ an Afghan farmer can make 17 times more profit growing opium poppy – \$4,622 per hectare, compared to only \$266 per hectare for wheat.²⁴ Opium poppy is also drought resistant, easy to transport and store, and, unlike many crops, requires no refrigeration and does not spoil. With Afghanistan’s limited irrigation, electricity, roads, and other infrastructure, growing traditional crops can be extremely difficult. In many cases, farmers are simply unable to support their families growing traditional crops; and because most rural farmers are uneducated and illiterate, they have few economically viable alternatives to growing opium poppy.

Afghanistan’s economy has thus evolved to the point where it is now highly dependent on opium. Although less than 4 percent of arable land in Afghanistan was used for opium poppy cultivation in 2006, revenue from the harvest brought in over \$3 billion – more than 35 percent of the country’s total gross national product (GNP).²⁵ According to Antonio Costa, “Opium poppy cultivation, processing, and transport have become Afghanistan’s top employers, its main source of capital, and the principal base of its economy.”²⁶ Today, a record 2.9 million Afghans from 28 of 34 provinces are involved in opium cultivation in some way, which represents nearly 10 percent of the population.²⁷ Although Afghanistan’s overall economy is being boosted by opium profits, less than 20 percent of the \$3 billion in opium profits actually goes to impoverished farmers, while

more than 80 percent goes into the pockets of Afghan's opium traffickers and kingpins and their political connections.²⁸ Even heftier profits are generated outside of Afghanistan by international drug traffickers and dealers.

Traditionally, processing of Afghan's opium into heroin has taken place outside of Afghanistan; however, in an effort to reap more profits internally, Afghan drug kingpins have stepped up heroin processing within their borders. Heroin processing labs have proliferated in Afghanistan since the late 1990s, particularly in the unstable southern region, further complicating stabilization efforts. With the reemergence of the Taliban and the virtual absence of the rule of law in the countryside, opium production and heroin processing have dramatically increased, especially in the southern province of Helmand. In 2006, opium production in the province increased over 162 percent and now accounts for 42 percent of Afghan's total opium output.²⁹ According to the UNODC, the opium situation in the southern provinces is "out of control."³⁰

PROBLEMS WITH AFGHANISTAN'S OPIUM ECONOMY

While revenues from the opium trade are stimulating the economy, there are significant negative consequences. Two major problems associated with the opium economy are widespread corruption, which is eroding the rule of law; and the link between the opium trade and the recoument of the Taliban and the insurgency.

Corruption and the Erosion of the Rule of Law.

Corruption associated with the opium economy has spread to all levels of the Afghan government from the police to the parliament, and is eroding the rule of law. Farmers routinely bribe police and counternarcotics eradication personnel to turn a blind eye. Law enforcement personnel are also paid off by drug traffickers to ignore or, in some cases, protect their movements. Afghan government officials are now believed to be involved in at least 70 percent of opium trafficking, and experts estimate that at least 13 former or present provincial governors are directly involved in the drug trade.³¹ Furthermore, up to 25 percent of the 249 elected members of parliament are also suspected of being involved in the drug trade.³² When referring to Afghanistan's Ministry of Interior, Syed Ikramuddin, Afghan's Minister of Labor, said: "Except for the Minister of Interior himself, all the lower people from the heads of department down are involved in supporting drug smuggling."³³ For example, in a single raid, nine tons of opium were recovered from the offices of the Governor of Afghan's Helmand Province. While the governor was eventually replaced, no punitive action was taken against him, and he moved on to a high-level position in parliament.³⁴ This case is not unusual, with corrupt officials routinely being simply reassigned rather than removed from office.

For many of Afghanistan's warlords, the opium trade brings money and power. Therefore, several of Afghanistan's powerful warlords are also top drug-lords. In some cases, these warlords are the same individuals who cooperated with the United States in ousting the Taliban in 2001. In some provinces, the warlords are now promoting the opium industry by bribing government officials and providing protection to farmers and traffickers. In sum, political corruption is so widespread in Afghanistan that it is

undermining public institutions, eroding the rule of law, and creating widespread instability and volatility. President Karzai himself has complained that “drugs in Afghanistan are threatening the very existence of the Afghan State.”³⁵

RENEWED TALIBAN/INSURGENCY

The resurgence of the Taliban in Afghanistan, particularly in the southern provinces, is also closely linked to the opium industry. Despite their draconian strictures against the poppy trade when they were in power, the Taliban are now using Afghan’s opium industry as a source of funds as well as an avenue to gain the allegiance of the Afghan people, particularly poor rural Afghans discontented with the U.S. and NATO-supported Karzai government. Muhammad Daud, former governor of Helmand Province, in describing this linkage to the Taliban, stated: “The Taliban have forged an alliance with drug smugglers, providing protection for drug convoys and mounting attacks to keep the government away and the poppy flourishing.”³⁶ For example, an estimated 70 percent of the Taliban’s income now comes from protection money and the sale of opium.³⁷ Furthermore, the situation appears to be getting worse as evidenced by a Kabul Police Anti-Criminal Branch report stating, “Evidence is growing that the Taliban and their allies are moving beyond taxing the trade to protecting opium shipments, running heroin labs, and even organizing farm output in areas they control.”³⁸

The Taliban are exploiting the opium industry to garner additional power in Afghanistan. Ann Patterson, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Narcotics and Law Enforcement, reports that the Taliban are encouraging farmers to cultivate opium poppy and are protecting drug routes and traffickers.³⁹ British General Richards, ISAF Commander, stated that the violence in southern Afghanistan was inextricably linked to drugs.⁴⁰ The UNODC reports that the Taliban have distributed leaflets ordering farmers to grow poppy.⁴¹ Further, they are paying Afghan men up to \$200 a month to fight alongside them against U.S. and NATO troops, compared to a mere \$70 a month that the average Afghan police officer is paid by the Karzai government.⁴²

Further complicating the security situation, Taliban and al-Qai’da fighters, who routinely operate back and forth between Pakistan and Afghanistan, are being joined by an increasing number of Afghan insurgents opposed to the Karzai government and U.S. and NATO forces. There is strong evidence of a connection between the insurgents’ increase and the expansion of opium cultivation as anti-government elements leverage opium money to fund the insurgency.⁴³ The U.S. Congress is aware of the linkage, with Representative Henry Hyde writing in a letter to Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld: “We all know the drugs fuel the violence and insurgency.”⁴⁴ President Karzai again best sums up this issue: “The question of drugs . . . is one that will determine Afghanistan’s future. . . . If we fail, we will fail as a state eventually, and we will fall back in the hands of terrorism.”⁴⁵

CURRENT COUNTERNARCOTICS STRATEGY

Shortly after taking office, President Karzai declared a “jihad against poppy,” stating that growing opium poppy was against Islam and was destroying Afghanistan.⁴⁶ He

backed up his strong words by implementing a strict “zero-tolerance” counternarcotics law, making it illegal to traffic in any quantity of opium and by introducing the Afghan National Drug Control Strategy (NDCS). The strategy is based on four principles: disrupting the drug trade, strengthening and diversifying legal rural livelihoods, reducing the drug demand and treatment of problem drug users, and developing state institutions at the central and provincial level. These principles are supported by eight pillars: public awareness, international and regional cooperation, alternate livelihoods, reduction in demand, law enforcement, criminal justice, eradication, and institution building.⁴⁷

President Karzai directed the central government and provincial governors to support the counternarcotics strategy. He ordered provincial governors to eradicate opium within their provinces, and assigned responsibility for counternarcotics to two of his ministries, the Ministry of Counternarcotics and the Ministry of Interior.⁴⁸ The Ministry of Counternarcotics, established under the guidance of the UK, is responsible for the policy and coordination of the government’s counternarcotics efforts. The Ministry of Interior, with strong U.S. backing and involvement, has the lead in implementing counternarcotics policies. Within Afghan’s Ministry of Interior, the Counternarcotics Police of Afghanistan (CNPA) and the Afghan Special Narcotics Force (ASNF) execute these policies. While these organizations are responsible for implementing the central government’s counternarcotics efforts, Afghanistan relies on the United States, UK, and other countries to provide the funding necessary to support these efforts.

Working with the UK and the Afghan government, the United States developed its own strategy to counter the opium problem in Afghanistan, which has the following five pillars: alternative livelihoods, elimination and eradication, interdiction, law enforcement and justice reform, and public information (see Figure 3). The Department of State (DoS), the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the Department of Defense (DoD), and the Department of Justice (DoJ) are the primary organizations involved in carrying out this counternarcotics strategy.



Figure 3. Five Pillars of the U.S. Counternarcotics Strategy.⁴⁹

These U.S. organizations are involved in numerous programs and projects to support the counternarcotics strategy in Afghanistan. US AID is implementing cash-for-work programs, distributing seed and fertilizer to farmers for growing alternate crops, improving irrigation and storage facilities, implementing a rural credit program, and supporting business development in targeted areas.⁵⁰ The DoS, DoJ, and DoD support provincial and central governmental poppy elimination

and eradications programs. DoD provides intelligence, planning assistance, and air transportation to Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) agents in Afghanistan and is in the process of training Afghan pilots and supplying them with eight MI-17 helicopters.⁵¹

The DEA is leading the effort to build Afghan's capacity to seize drug shipments, destroy heroin labs, confiscate precursor chemicals, and arrest major drug traffickers. The DEA Foreign-Deployed Advisory and Support Teams, on 120-day rotations to Afghanistan, are training Afghan counternarcotics forces and participating in drug raids and eradication efforts. DoS is working to improve border security between Afghanistan and its neighbors. DoJ is supporting efforts to increase Afghan's capacity to arrest and prosecute drug traffickers and corrupt officials and help implement new counternarcotics laws, refurbish courthouses, and train guards. Furthermore, several U.S. agencies are working with Afghan authorities on a public information campaign, using posters as well as radio and television spots to persuade the Afghan people to reject opium poppy cultivation and trade.

To provide support for these programs and projects, the United States in 2005 spent a total of \$782 million.⁵² Of that amount, \$532 million was administered by DoS and USAID, while the remaining \$250 million was administered by DoD and the DEA.⁵³ The DoS and USAID expenditures, as associated with each pillar of the U.S. drug control strategy, were as follows: \$180 million, alternative livelihoods; \$258 million, elimination and eradication; \$65 million, interdiction; \$24 million, law enforcement and justice reform; and \$5 million, public information.⁵⁴ DoD and DEA funds were focused primarily on elimination and eradication.

While there have been some success stories, the counternarcotics strategy has been ineffective in curbing opium cultivation and production in Afghanistan. True, the CNPA, working together with the DEA, was successful in seizing 47.9 metric tons of opium and 5.5 metric tons of heroin in 2005, while the ASNF destroyed 100 metric tons of opium and 30 tons of heroin.⁵⁵ However, while 15,300 hectares, or approximately 10 percent, of the opium poppy crop was eradicated by counternarcotics forces, the overall levels of opium poppy cultivation, opium production, and heroin processing still dramatically increased in 2006 and are forecasted to be as high if not higher in 2007.⁵⁶

PROBLEMS WITH CURRENT COUNTERNARCOTICS STRATEGY

U.S. counternarcotics strategy has been ineffective for three key reasons. First, Afghanistan lacks the security environment necessary to conduct a successful counternarcotics strategy. Second, the current emphasis on eradication is counterproductive. Third, the five-pillar counternarcotics strategy is not adequately prioritized or resourced. These three areas will now be explored in detail.

Lack of Security.

The security situation in much of Afghanistan is simply inadequate to carry out an effective counternarcotics campaign. While some regions of Afghanistan are relatively stable and free of violence, other regions, including the southern provinces, have had

marked increases in violence directed at the Karzai government, as well as NATO and U.S. troops. The total number of direct attacks by insurgents increased to 4,542 in 2006 from 1,558 in 2005.⁵⁷ In addition, the number of roadside bombs more than doubled to 1,677 in 2006 from 783 a year earlier, while suicide bombings increased five-fold to 139.⁵⁸ Many of these incidents were related to the eradication campaign.⁵⁹

To counter anti-government elements, NATO and U.S. forces have stepped up the number of kinetic attacks. In the last 6 months of 2006, U.S. forces conducted over 2,000 air strikes, killing hundreds of insurgents and Taliban fighters along with many innocent civilians.⁶⁰ In June 2006, President Karzai expressed his concern regarding the security situation and the escalation in violence: "It is not acceptable that in all this fighting, Afghans are dying. In the past 3 to 4 weeks, 500 to 600 Afghans were killed. Even if they are Taliban, they are sons of this land."⁶¹

Security voids in Afghanistan are being filled by insurgents, criminals, corrupt officials, and terrorists, many of whom employ the opium trade for funding. The Taliban have helped fill the security void left by the weak central government by providing Afghan citizens an alternative source of security. While most Afghan citizens were happy to see the Taliban fall, many of them are now disillusioned with U.S. and NATO forces for failing to restore security or to improve their quality of life. In addition, many Afghans are upset with U.S. and NATO forces for what they consider to be excessive collateral damage from the fighting and bombing. As a result, more and more Afghans are turning to the Taliban to meet their security needs.

The United States finds itself in the immensely difficult and tricky position of trying simultaneously to provide security, win the hearts and minds of the people, and dismantle the opium industry. There is great pressure to show progress in addressing the opium crisis because of the widely-held belief that the opium trade is fueling instability and insecurity. Mr. Costa recently called for "robust military action by NATO forces to destroy the opium industry in southern Afghanistan," adding that the counterinsurgency and counternarcotics efforts "must reinforce each other so as to stop the vicious circle of drugs funding terrorists and terrorists protecting drug traffickers" that are "dragging the rest of Afghanistan into a bottomless pit of destruction and despair."⁶² Essentially, the pressure for quick results in the "war on drugs" in Afghanistan has driven the United States to support a strategy that overemphasizes eradication as a means of curbing opium production.

Counterproductive Eradication Effort.

The U.S.-backed opium poppy eradication efforts have not succeeded in reducing the production of opium and have, in many cases, been counterproductive. The aggressive pursuit of eradication has alienated many peasant farmers and resulted in some of them turning against U.S. and NATO forces. The Senlis Council, an international drug policy think tank, argues that the U.S.-backed eradication effort was "the single biggest reason many Afghans turned against the foreigners."⁶³

While 98 percent of Afghan opium farmers are ready to stop opium poppy cultivation if access to an alternate livelihood is provided, relatively few of them have realistic alternatives available.⁶⁴ Moreover, the lack of requisite infrastructure such as roads,

irrigation systems, and storage facilities makes growing alternative crops extremely difficult. Many peasant farmers find themselves trapped by debt and are left with no alternative but to grow opium poppy.

Efforts to eradicate opium are also fueling resistance from drug traffickers, warlords, and corrupt officials who are currently profiting from the opium trade. Consequently, some opium farmers and traffickers have teamed with anti-government forces to strengthen the insurgency in Afghanistan. The Taliban have also exploited U.S.-backed eradication efforts to their benefit by providing protection to Afghan farmers and drug traffickers in exchange for their loyalty. The Senlis Council argues that eradication not only ruins small farmers, but drives them into the arms of the Taliban, who offer loans, protection, and a chance to plant again.⁶⁵ Instead of improving the quality of life for Afghan citizens, the U.S.-backed opium eradication efforts are instead alienating many Afghans, strengthening the Taliban, and increasing instability.

Unbalanced Approach.

The U.S. five-pillared approach to counternarcotics addresses the key factors necessary to solve the opium problem in Afghanistan; however, the current strategy disproportionately emphasizes and resources the eradication pillar at the expense of the strategy's other pillars. Anne Patterson, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, acknowledged as much: "While we agree that we must improve our interdiction capacity, the simple truth is that eradication is much easier."⁶⁶ While eradication may seem like a quick and easy fix, it is alienating small farmers while many of the largest drug traffickers, kingpins, and corrupt officials in Afghanistan continue to prosper. With eradication getting most of the attention and resources, the alternative livelihoods, interdiction, law enforcement and justice reform, and public information pillars of the U.S. counternarcotics strategy have been neglected, resulting in an ineffective counternarcotics program.

RECOMMENDATIONS

I would offer six recommendations for improving the effectiveness of the counternarcotics strategy in Afghanistan, based on treating Afghanistan's opium situation as a systemic problem rather than a series of isolated, individually addressable tasks. If implemented with a piecemeal, cherry-picking approach, these recommendations may be ineffective because the opium industry in Afghanistan will likely adapt with work-around improvisations. Therefore, all of the following recommendations should be implemented together as part of a unitary campaign, thus maximizing the effectiveness of the total strategy.

Increase Troop Levels and Eliminate National Restrictions.

The total number of U.S and NATO troops in Afghanistan should be increased to at least 50,000, which approximately represents a 10,000-soldier increase over the current level, to counter the growing number of aggressive anti-government elements, particularly in

the southern provinces. Robert Hunter of the RAND Corporation states flatly that “40,000 foreign troops in Afghanistan are not enough,” and that some provinces have “little or no ISAF presence.”⁶⁷ These 10,000 additional troops are needed to defeat anti-government forces that have put up stiff resistance and have co-opted support from local Afghans. Increasing troop levels in Afghanistan will help provide security needed in the regions with the highest level of conflict and opium production.

NATO countries should supply at least half of the 10,000-soldier increase, and they need to drop individual national stipulations that limit where and how their troops can be employed. The ISAF Commander has been asking for more troops, but has thus far received only lukewarm responses from NATO countries reluctant to get involved in the fighting. Several NATO countries have refused to send more troops and have imposed rules limiting their forces’ participation in actual combat.⁶⁸ Due to a lack of troops, especially line units assignable to combat, the ISAF commander essentially has been forced to abandon portions of southern Afghanistan to Taliban and insurgent forces. In many areas of Helmand Province, the Taliban operate freely, and opium cultivation is flourishing. The United States should continue to press fellow NATO countries to increase troop levels in Afghanistan and eliminate operational limitations on their use, which impair flexibility and are unfair to their compatriots who must bear the burdens and hazards of combat.

Substantially Increase Financial Aid.

The United States should increase aid to Afghanistan by more than three-fold to approximately \$8 billion per year for at least the next 3 years in order to “kick-start” the licit Afghan economy and ensure that the pro-U.S. Karzai government survives. Currently, the Afghan government is not mature enough, nor does it have enough resources, to provide proper governance to its people. The United States has provided only around \$9 billion in reconstruction aid in the 5 years since the fall of the Taliban, an amount less than one-third of the amount dedicated for reconstruction in Iraq even though Afghanistan is a larger and more populous country with far greater infrastructural needs.⁶⁹ Afghanistan’s infrastructure has been devastated by decades of conflict and is currently inadequate to support an opium-free economy. Energy production facilities, water systems, and roads need to be rebuilt and expanded to enable the country to support true long-term alternate livelihoods for Afghan citizens currently dependent on the opium trade. Part of the increase would of course be used to strengthen the Karzai government’s law enforcement capability, judicial system, and border security.

Deemphasize Opium Eradication.

The United States should deemphasize opium eradication efforts. U.S.-backed eradication efforts have been ineffective and have resulted in turning Afghans against U.S. and NATO forces. The Council on Foreign Relations in New York has warned, “Elimination of narcotics will take well over a decade, and crop eradication is a counterproductive way to start such a program.”⁷⁰ While the process of eradication lends itself well to the use of flashy metrics such as “acres eradicated,” eradication without provision for long-

term alternative livelihoods is devastating Afghan's poor farmers without addressing root causes. The United States should put less emphasis on eradication and focus more attention and resources on the other pillars of the counternarcotics strategy.

Focus on Long-Term Alternative Livelihoods.

The United States should focus on a longer-term solution to the opium problem that emphasizes true alternative livelihoods for the 2.9 million Afghans who currently rely on the opium industry for income. William Byrd of the World Bank says: "Expectations about what can be accomplished in the short run must be kept reasonable. Overly inflated expectations inevitably lead to disappointments which, given the political sensitivity of narcotics, in turn can lead to overreaction and policy mistakes."⁷¹ The "alternative livelihoods" supported by the current U.S. strategy are too often short-term "cash-for-work" projects that do not provide a lasting incentive for farmers to give up opium cultivation.

Aggressively Pursue Drug Kingpins and Corrupt Government Officials.

The United States should aggressively pursue drug kingpins and corrupt government officials involved in Afghanistan's opium trade. While there have been a handful of successful prosecutions of high-level drug traffickers—including the recent extradition and conviction of Afghan heroin kingpin, Baz Mohammad—the Afghan government has failed to go after drug kingpins and corrupt government officials aggressively enough.⁷² Consequently, these bad apples have gained power within Afghanistan and are threatening to destroy the fabric of its government and society. Without aggressive pursuit of kingpins and corrupt officials by the government, the Afghan public will continue to lack confidence in the country's political leadership and system. This lack of confidence—coupled with the slow pace of infrastructural improvements, strengthened security, and imposition of the rule of law—has created an environment that remains conducive to a thriving opium economy.

Explore the Possibility of Afghanistan's Entry to the Licit Opium Market.

The United States should explore the possibility of assisting Afghanistan in joining other countries in the production of legal opiates. Selling opium for legal uses is by itself no answer to Afghanistan's opium problem because the market for licit opium is simply too small. Afghanistan's 2006 opium crop alone is equivalent to 5 years of global morphine demand.⁷³ Making things worse, the current market price for opium used for medical purposes is only about 20 percent of the price of illicit opium. However, legal opium production is still worth exploring. The Senlis Council recommends a strictly supervised licensing system in Afghanistan for the cultivation of opium for the production of essential opiate-based medicines such as morphine and codeine.⁷⁴ Such a licensing scheme is already being administered in Turkey, India, France, and Australia.⁷⁵ While cultivation for legal uses is not a "silver bullet" solution to Afghanistan's opium problem, it could eventually become a viable source of income for some farmers.

CONCLUSION

Afghanistan's history of violent conflict, weak central government, poor agricultural economy, rugged geography, and harsh climate are all factors contributing to the dramatic increase in opium cultivation and production since the toppling of the Taliban in 2001. The profitable characteristics of Afghanistan's opium economy, as well as the lack of negative consequences associated with opium trade and widespread government corruption, are fueling the opium economy and a reinvigorated Taliban and insurgency. The U.S. counternarcotics strategy in Afghanistan has not been successful in countering these adverse trends. Consequently, six broad recommendations for improving the effectiveness of the counternarcotics strategy in Afghanistan are proposed: (1) increase troop levels and eliminate national restrictions; (2) substantially increase financial aid; (3) deemphasize opium eradication; (4) focus on long-term alternative livelihoods; (5) aggressively pursue drug kingpins and corrupt government officials; and (6) explore the possibility of Afghanistan's entry to the licit opium market.

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