

Afghanistan, Garden of Empire: America's Multibillion Dollar Opium Harvest

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By [resolution 42/112](#) of 7 December 1987, the UN General Assembly decided to observe 26 June as **the International Day against Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking** as an expression of its determination to strengthen action and cooperation to achieve the goal of an international society free of drug abuse. The UN General Assembly is committed to developing awareness regarding the Illicit trafficking of narcotics.

Excerpted from [Cruel Harvest: US Intervention in the Afghan Drug Trade](#) (Pluto Press, 2013), by **Julien Mercille**.

As Obama proclaims that the US adventure in Afghanistan will draw to a close over the next couple years, we may look at the balance sheet with respect to one of the occupation's alleged justifications: the fight against Afghan heroin. The outcome has been a total failure. In fact, whereas Afghanistan is sometimes referred to as the "graveyard of empires" because throughout history, big powers have attempted, unsuccessfully, to invade and control it, the country can already be labeled as the "garden of empire" because the US/NATO occupation has resulted in a drastic increase in drug production.



Opium production in Afghanistan skyrocketed from 185 tons to 8,200 tons between 2001 and 2007 (today it is down to 3,700 tons). Most commentary glosses over Washington's large share of responsibility for this dramatic expansion while magnifying the Taliban's role, which available data indicates is relatively minor. Also, identifying drugs as a main cause behind the growth of the insurgency absolves the United States and NATO of their own role in fomenting it: the very presence of foreign troops in the country as well as their destructive attacks on civilians are significant factors behind increases in popular support for, or tolerance of, the Taliban. In fact, as a recent UNODC report notes, reducing drug production would have only a "minimal impact on the insurgency's strategic threat," because the Taliban receive "significant funding from private donors all over the world," a contribution that "dwarfs" drug money.

A UNODC report entitled [*Addiction, Crime and Insurgency: The Transnational Threat of Afghan Opium*](#) provides a good example of the conventional view of the Taliban's role in drug trafficking. It claims that they draw some \$125 million annually from narcotics, resulting in the "perfect storm" of drugs and terrorism heading toward Central Asia and endangering its energy resources. UNODC maintains that when they were in power in the second half of the 1990s, the Taliban earned about \$75-100 million per year from drugs, but since 2005 this figure has risen to \$125 million. Although this is presented as a significant increase, the Taliban play a lesser role in the opium economy than the report would have us believe as they capture only a small share of its total value. Moreover, drug money is likely a secondary source of funding for them: UNODC itself estimates that only 10 percent to 15 percent of Taliban funding is drawn from drugs and 85 percent comes from "non-opium sources" such as private donations.

The total revenue generated by opiates within Afghanistan is about \$3 billion per year. According to UNODC data, the Taliban get only about 5 percent of this sum. Farmers selling their opium harvest to traffickers get 20 percent. And the remaining 75 percent? Al-Qaeda? No: the report specifies that it "does not appear to have a direct role in the Afghan opiates trade," although it may participate in "low-level drugs and/or arms smuggling" along the Pakistani border. Instead, the remaining 75 percent is captured by traffickers, government officials, the police, and local and regional power brokers - in short, many of the groups now supported or tolerated by the United States and NATO are important actors in the drug trade.

Therefore, claims that "Taliban insurgents are earning astonishingly large profits off the opium trade" are misleading. Nevertheless, UNODC insists on the Taliban-drugs connection but pays less attention to individuals and groups supported or tolerated by Washington. The agency seems to be acting as an enabler of coalition policies in Afghanistan: when asked what percentage of total drug income in Afghanistan is captured by government officials, the UNODC official who supervised the above report quickly replied: "We don't do that, I don't know."

Mainstream commentary blames the size of the narcotics industry and much of what goes wrong in Afghanistan partly on corruption. But to focus on bad apples in the Afghan government and police misses the systemic responsibility of the United States and NATO for the dramatic expansion of opiates production since 2001 and for their support of numerous corrupt individuals in power. The United States attacked Afghanistan in association with Northern Alliance warlords and drug lords and showered them with weapons, millions of dollars, and diplomatic support.

The empowerment and enrichment of those individuals enabled them to tax and protect opium traffickers, leading to the quick resumption of narcotics production after the hiatus of the 2000-2001 Taliban ban, as many observers have documented. Ahmed Rashid has written that the whole Afghan Interior Ministry “became a major protector of drug traffickers, and Karzai refused to clean it out. As warlord militias were demobilized and disarmed by the UN, commanders found new positions in the Interior Ministry and continued to provide protection to drug traffickers.” The United States was not interested in cleaning Afghanistan of drug traffickers either. Thus, to blame “corruption” and “criminals” for the current state of affairs is to ignore the direct and predictable effects of US policies, which have followed a historical pattern of toleration and protection of strongmen involved in narcotics.

In 2004, Afghan forces found an enormous cache of heroin in a truck near Kandahar, but both Wali Karzai, the president’s brother, and an aide to President Karzai called the commander of the group that had made the discovery to tell him to release the drugs and the truck. Two years later, American and Afghan counternarcotics forces seized more than 110 pounds of heroin near Kabul, which US investigators said were linked to Wali Karzai. But Wali Karzai was only the tip of the iceberg, as a former CIA officer asserted that virtually “every significant Afghan figure has had brushes with the drug trade.” In private, American officials acknowledge ties with drug-linked Afghan figures. A Wikileaks cable recounting US officials’ meetings with Wali Karzai in September 2009 and February 2010 stated that while “we must deal with AWK [Ahmed Wali Karzai] as the head of the Provincial Council, he is widely understood to be corrupt and a narcotics trafficker.” But in public, the ties are denied. As Senator John Kerry, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, said: “We should not condemn Ahmed Wali Karzai or damage our critical relations with his brother, President Karzai, on the basis of newspaper articles or rumors.”

Of the annual \$65 billion global market for opiates, only 5 to 10 percent (\$3 to \$5 billion) is estimated to be laundered by informal banking systems, while two-thirds (\$40 to \$45 billion) is available for laundering through the formal banking system. A recent UNODC report estimated that about \$220 billion of drug money is laundered annually through the financial system. However, only about 0.2 percent of all laundered criminal money is seized and frozen, as governments have other priorities than regulating the banking industry, which benefits from this extra liquidity.

US COUNTERNARCOTICS POLICY

Until about 2005, American policy in Afghanistan was, by and large, not concerned with drugs. General Tommy Franks, who led the initial attack, declared in 2002 that US troops would stay clear of drug interdiction and that resolving narcotics problems was up to Afghans and civilians. When Donald Rumsfeld was asked in 2003 what the United States was doing about narcotics in Helmand, he replied: “You ask what we’re going to do and the answer is, I don’t really know.” A US military spokesman at Bagram base, Sergeant Major Harrison Sarles, stated: “We’re not a drug task force. That’s not part of our mission.” Moreover, the DEA had only two agents in Afghanistan in 2003 and didn’t open an office in the country until 2004.

Several reasons explain the early opposition to counternarcotics on the part of the White House and the military. First, Afghanistan was attacked to show that Washington should not be challenged, and destroying poppy crops and heroin labs contributes nothing in this

respect. Therefore, there is no reason why any effort should have been directed toward that task. In late 2005, Lt. Gen. Karl Eikenberry, then commander of US forces in Afghanistan, made it clear that “drugs are bad, but his orders were that drugs were not a priority of the U.S. military in Afghanistan.” Furthermore, Washington’s most important target at that time was Iraq, whose oil resources and strategic location in the Persian Gulf region ensured that it would take priority.

Second, many of the United States’ local Afghan allies were involved in trafficking, from which they drew money and power. Destroying drug labs and poppy fields would have been, in effect, a direct blow to American operations and proxy fighters on the ground. As Western diplomats conceded at the time, “without money from drugs, our friendly warlords can’t pay their militias. It’s as simple as that.” According to James Risen, this explains why the Pentagon and the White House refused to bomb the 25 or so drug facilities that the CIA had identified on its maps in 2001. Similarly, in 2005, the Pentagon denied all but 3 of 26 DEA requests for airlifts. Barnett Rubin summarized the US attitude well when he wrote in 2004 that when “he visits Afghanistan, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld meets military commanders whom Afghans know as the godfathers of drug trafficking. The message has been clear: Help fight the Taliban and no one will interfere with your trafficking.” As a result, US military officials closed their eyes to the trade. An Army Green Beret said he was “specifically ordered to ignore heroin and opium when he and his unit discovered them on patrol.” A US Senate report mentioned that “congressional committees received reports that U.S. forces were refusing to disrupt drug sales and shipments and rebuffing requests from the Drug Enforcement Administration for reinforcements to go after major drug kingpins.”

Third, the Department of Defense thought that eradicating crops would upset farmers and hurt attempts at winning Afghan hearts and minds. Indeed, since 2001, the Taliban have sought to capitalize on resentment caused by eradication schemes. For example, in Helmand “they appear to have offered protection to the farmers targeted by eradication” and in Kandahar “they were even reported to have offered financial assistance to farmers whose fields were being eradicated, in exchange for support in fighting against the government.” Thus, it is far from certain that eliminating drugs would weaken the insurgency. In fact, the opposite is more likely, as it would only add to the opposition already generated by NATO operations in the country, as noted by a well-informed analyst: “As the conflict progressed, victims of abuses by both Afghan and foreign troops and of the side-effects of US reliance on air power began to represent another important source of recruits for the Taliban.”

From 2004, counternarcotics started slowly moving up the US agenda. In 2005, Washington developed its first counternarcotics strategy for Afghanistan, composed of five pillars: elimination/eradication, interdiction, justice reform, public information, and alternative livelihoods (although the pillars were not weighted equally: alternative development was relatively neglected, while eradication/elimination was the priority). The Afghan government incorporated this strategy into its own 2006 National Drug Control Strategy, which was later updated and integrated into its National Development Strategy in 2008. Around 2005, counternarcotics operations were still relatively isolated from the broader counterinsurgency strategy. Nevertheless, the Pentagon started to consider the possibility of getting involved in counterdrug missions and issued new guidelines authorizing the military to “move antidrug agents by helicopters and cargo planes and assist in planning missions and uncovering targets,” among other things. A number of counternarcotics units were set up, such as Task Force 333 (a covert squad of special agents) and the Central Poppy Eradication

Force, an Afghan team trained by the American private contractor Dyncorp at a cost of \$50 million and supervised by the United States through the Afghan Ministry of the Interior, where Washington's main contact was Lieutenant General Mohammad Daoud. It didn't seem to be a problem that Daoud was "an ex-warlord from the north who was reputed to have major connections with the drug trade."

Since 2007, the United States has intensified its counternarcotics efforts and sought to integrate them more closely with the counterinsurgency campaign. In particular, in late 2008, the Pentagon changed its rules of engagement to permit US troops to target traffickers allied with insurgents and terrorists, and soldiers were allowed to accompany and protect counternarcotics operations run by Americans and Afghans. This shift was also adopted by NATO, whose members were allowed to participate in interdiction missions.

Since 2009, the Obama administration's strategy has deemphasized eradication by ending support for the Afghan central eradication force while focusing on interdiction and the destruction of heroin labs, based on the reasoning that this "would more precisely target the drug-insurgency nexus." A focus on rural development has also been announced because, as Richard Holbrooke declared, eradication is a "waste of money," it alienates farmers, and it "might destroy some acreage, but it didn't reduce the amount of money the Taliban got by one dollar. It just helped the Taliban." The number of permanent DEA agents in Afghanistan has increased from 13 to over 80 in 2011 and the Pentagon has established a Combined Joint Interagency Task Force-Nexus in Kandahar to provide coordination support and intelligence for DEA interdiction missions and ISAF counterinsurgency operations that target insurgents with links to the drug trade.

Overall, an interesting question is to explain the emergence, intensification and militarization of US counternarcotics operations in Afghanistan. Although such a discussion remains somewhat speculative, what follows discusses possible reasons that may account for the evolution of the anti-drug strategy over time. Some have pointed to the resignation of Donald Rumsfeld as secretary of defense in 2006. Rumsfeld had always been strongly opposed to military involvement in drug control and thus his departure is thought to have contributed to a "sea change" in the Department of Defense's attitude, which then became more engaged in counternarcotics. However, the significance of staff changes should be downplayed when explaining the broad outlines of policy. It is not as if Rumsfeld had prevented single-handedly an army of drug warriors in the US government from carrying out counternarcotics operations in Afghanistan. As seen above, there were clear strategic reasons for the lack of military involvement in counternarcotics in the years immediately after 2001.

Congressional pressures have also been identified as a reason. This political pressure, the argument goes, eventually led the Pentagon and CIA to accept publicly that the insurgency was funded by drugs and to approve the 2005 counternarcotics strategy. Indeed, in 2004-05, a host of critical pieces in the media urged more action in light of the large 2004 opium harvest. For example, Henry Hyde, Illinois Republican, stated that there was "a clear need at this stage for military action against the opium storage dumps and heroin laboratories" and that if the military did not get involved, the United States would need to send "troops from places like Turkey to take on this challenge." The Democrats also pitched in, as when John Kerry criticized Bush for failing to eliminate narcotics in Afghanistan.

Such explanations might be correct in terms of immediate causes, in that congressional pressures and debates contributed to putting the issue on policymakers' agenda and

generating media coverage. However, they beg the question of why the narcotics issue became a more prominent debate within government circles in the first place? Some have pointed to the explosion of poppy cultivation in Afghanistan and the political pressures it has generated in the United States to do something about the problem. For example, Ahmed Rashid noted how the greater emphasis on drugs in US policy from 2005 onwards was prompted in part by the fact that it had become too obvious that Afghan poppy cultivation was getting out of control. The United States could less easily afford to be seen as doing nothing, for public relations purposes. The 2004 massive opium harvest embarrassed Washington and London enough for them to begin addressing narcotics more seriously: farmland under poppy cultivation had just increased by 64 percent and for the first time poppies were cultivated in all 34 of Afghanistan's provinces. Similarly, opium production rose to 6,100 tons in 2006 and to 8,200 tons in 2007, the highest amount ever recorded, and Afghanistan now accounted for 93 percent of global heroin production. The skyrocketing of drug production in 2006 and 2007, publicized in UNODC reports, could not be ignored indefinitely.

There is probably some truth to this interpretation. Even if drug control is not a US objective, the discourse that has been created around the issue has acquired a force of its own. Therefore, when poppy cultivation spread in Afghanistan to a point that it became difficult to ignore, Washington was forced to make some gesture seemingly addressing the problem, otherwise, its image as a government allegedly concerned with drug harms could have been tarnished.

Finally, another possible reason is that from 2004-05, it became useful politically to talk about a war on drugs to make the resurgent Taliban look evil by associating them with narcotics. Indeed, the intensification of counternarcotics rhetoric and operations "took place against the backdrop of an upsurge in armed opposition" to the US-backed Afghan government. That is to say, whereas in the years immediately after 2001, the drug trade was largely controlled by US allies (warlords), from the time the Taliban reemerged as a significant force partly financed by drugs, narcotics became an issue that could be used to cast a negative light on them. Indeed, it is interesting that since 2004, the intensification of drug war rhetoric has grown in parallel with the rise of the insurgency.

In sum, while from 2001 to 2005, drugs were simply not part of the US agenda in Afghanistan, since 2005, there has been more talk about drug control, and more counter-narcotics operations have taken place. However, this does not mean that the United States is moving closer to conducting a real war on drugs. It is not the intensification of militaristic counterdrug missions per se that makes a drug war real, but the implementation of strategies known to reduce drug problems. On that count, Washington has failed. Further, the United States has continued to support allies involved in trafficking, and Obama stated explicitly that his drug war is instrumental in fighting the insurgency and not about eliminating drugs per se. Indeed, in 2009, his administration presented its new approach to narcotics and elaborated a target list of 50 "major drug traffickers *who help finance the insurgency*" to be killed or captured by the military. Therefore, if traffickers help the Taliban, they will be attacked - but if they support government forces, they apparently will be left alone. This suggests that the drug war is used to target enemies.

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