

The Opium Wars in Afghanistan

Can Anyone Pacify the World's Number One Narco-State?

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In ways that have escaped most observers, the Obama administration is now trapped in an endless cycle of drugs and death in Afghanistan from which there is neither an easy end nor an obvious exit.

After a year of cautious debate and costly deployments, President Obama finally launched his new Afghan war strategy at 2:40 am on February 13, 2010, in a remote market town called Marja in southern Afghanistan's Helmand Province. As a wave of helicopters descended on Marja's outskirts spitting up clouds of dust, hundreds of U.S. Marines [dashed](#) through fields sprouting opium poppies toward the town's mud-walled compounds.

After a week of fighting, U.S. war commander General Stanley A. McChrystal choppered into town with Afghanistan's vice-president and Helmand's provincial governor. Their mission: a media roll-out for the general's new-look counterinsurgency strategy based on bringing government to remote villages just like Marja.

At a carefully staged meet-and-greet with some 200 villagers, however, the vice-president and provincial governor faced some unexpected, unscripted anger. "If they come with tractors," one Afghani widow [announced](#) to a chorus of supportive shouts from her fellow farmers, "they will have to roll over me and kill me before they can kill my poppy."

For these poppy growers and thousands more like them, the return of government control, however contested, brought with it a perilous threat: opium eradication.

Throughout all the shooting and shouting, American commanders seemed [strangely unaware](#) that Marja might qualify as the world's heroin capital — with [hundreds of laboratories](#), reputedly hidden inside the area's mud-brick houses, regularly processing the local poppy crop into high-grade heroin. After all, the surrounding fields of Helmand Province produce a remarkable 40% of the world's illicit opium supply, and much of this harvest has been traded in Marja. Rushing through those opium fields to attack the Taliban on day one of this offensive, the Marines missed their real enemy, the ultimate force behind the Taliban insurgency, as they pursued just the latest crop of peasant guerrillas whose guns and wages are funded by those poppy plants. "You can't win this war," said one U.S. Embassy official just back from inspecting these opium districts, "without taking on drug production in Helmand Province."

Indeed, as Air Force One headed for Kabul Sunday, National Security Adviser James L. Jones [assured reporters](#) that President Obama would try to persuade Afghan President Hamid Karzai to prioritize "battling corruption, taking the fight to the narco-traffickers." The drug

trade, he added, “provides a lot of the economic engine for the insurgents.”

Just as these Marja farmers spoiled General McChrystal’s media event, so their crop has subverted every regime that has tried to rule Afghanistan for the past 30 years. During the CIA’s covert war in the 1980s, opium financed the *mujahedeen* or “freedom fighters” (as President Ronald Reagan called them) who finally forced the Soviets to abandon the country and then defeated its Marxist client state.

In the late 1990s, the Taliban, which had taken power in most of the country, lost any chance for international legitimacy by protecting and profiting from opium — and then, ironically, fell from power only months after reversing course and banning the crop. Since the US military intervened in 2001, a rising tide of opium has corrupted the government in Kabul while empowering a resurgent Taliban whose guerrillas have taken control of ever larger parts of the Afghan countryside.

These three eras of almost constant warfare fueled a relentless rise in Afghanistan’s opium harvest — from just 250 tons in 1979 to [8,200 tons](#) in 2007. For the past five years, the Afghan opium harvest has accounted for as much as 50% of the country’s gross domestic product (GDP) and provided the prime ingredient for over 90% of the world’s heroin supply.

The ecological devastation and societal dislocation from these three war-torn decades has woven opium so deeply into the Afghan grain that it defies solution by Washington’s best and brightest (as well as its most inept and least competent). Caroming between ignoring the opium crop and demanding its total eradication, the Bush administration dithered for seven years while heroin boomed, and in doing so helped create a drug economy that corrupted and crippled the government of its ally, President Karzai. In recent years, opium farming [has supported](#) 500,000 Afghan families, nearly 20% of the country’s estimated population, and [funds](#) a Taliban insurgency that has, since 2006, spread across the countryside.

To understand the Afghan War, one basic point must be grasped: in poor nations with weak state services, agriculture is the foundation for all politics, binding villagers to the government or warlords or rebels. The ultimate aim of counterinsurgency strategy is always to establish the state’s authority. When the economy is illicit and by definition beyond government control, this task becomes monumental. If the insurgents capture that illicit economy, as the Taliban have done, then the task becomes little short of insurmountable.

Opium is an illegal drug, but Afghanistan’s poppy crop is still grounded in networks of social trust that tie people together at each step in the chain of production. Crop loans are necessary for planting, labor exchange for harvesting, stability for marketing, and security for shipment. So dominant and problematic is the opium economy in Afghanistan today that a question Washington has avoided for the past nine years must be asked: Can anyone pacify a full-blown narco-state?

The answer to this critical question lies in the history of the three Afghan wars in which Washington has been involved over the past 30 years — the CIA covert warfare of the 1980s, the civil war of the 1990s (fueled at its start by \$900 million in CIA funding), and since 2001, the U.S. invasion, occupation, and counterinsurgency campaigns. In each of these conflicts, Washington has tolerated drug trafficking by its Afghan allies as the price of military success — a policy of benign neglect that has helped make Afghanistan today the world’s number one narco-state.

CIA Covert Warfare, Spreading Poppy Fields, and Drug Labs: the 1980s

Opium first emerged as a key force in Afghan politics during the CIA covert war against the Soviets, the last in a series of secret operations that it conducted along the mountain rimlands of Asia which stretch for 5,000 miles from Turkey to Thailand. In the late 1940s, as the Cold War was revving up, the United States first mounted covert probes of communism's Asian underbelly. For 40 years thereafter, the CIA fought a succession of secret wars along this mountain rim — in Burma during the 1950s, Laos in the 1960s, and Afghanistan in the 1980s. In one of history's ironic accidents, the southern reach of communist China and the Soviet Union had coincided with Asia's opium zone along this same mountain rim, drawing the CIA into ambiguous alliances with the region's highland warlords.

Washington's first Afghan war began in 1979, when the Soviet Union invaded the country to save a Marxist client regime in Kabul, the Afghan capital. Seeing an opportunity to wound its Cold War enemy, the Reagan administration worked closely with Pakistan's military dictatorship in a ten-year CIA campaign to expel the Soviets.

This was, however, a covert operation unlike any other in the Cold War years. First, the collision of CIA secret operations and Soviet conventional warfare led to the devastation of Afghanistan's fragile highland ecology, damaging its traditional agriculture beyond immediate recovery, and fostering a growing dependence on the international drug trade. Of equal import, instead of conducting this covert warfare on its own as it had in Laos in the Vietnam War years, the CIA outsourced much of the operation to Pakistan's Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI), which soon became a powerful and ever more problematic ally.

When the ISI proposed its Afghan client, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, as overall leader of the anti-Soviet resistance, Washington — with few alternatives — agreed. Over the next 10 years, the CIA supplied some \$2 billion to Afghanistan's *mujahedeen* through the ISI, half to Hekmatyar, a violent fundamentalist infamous for throwing acid at unveiled women at Kabul University and, later, murdering rival resistance leaders. As the CIA operation was winding down in May 1990, the *Washington Post* published a front-page article charging that its key ally, Hekmatyar, was operating a chain of heroin laboratories inside Pakistan under the protection of the ISI.

Although this area had zero heroin production in the mid-1970s, the CIA's covert war served as the catalyst that transformed the Afghan-Pakistan borderlands into the world's largest heroin producing region. As mujahedeen guerrillas captured prime agricultural areas inside Afghanistan in the early 1980s, they began collecting a revolutionary poppy tax from their peasant supporters.

Once the Afghan guerrillas brought the opium across the border, they sold it to hundreds of Pakistani heroin labs operating under the ISI's protection. Between 1981 and 1990, Afghanistan's opium production grew ten-fold — from 250 tons to 2,000 tons. After just two years of covert CIA support for the Afghan guerrillas, the U.S. Attorney General announced in 1981 that Pakistan was already the source of 60% of the American heroin supply. Across Europe and Russia, Afghan-Pakistani heroin soon captured an even larger share of local markets, while inside Pakistan itself the number of addicts soared from zero in 1979 to 1.2 million just five years later.

After investing \$3 billion in Afghanistan's destruction, Washington just walked away in 1992,

leaving behind a thoroughly ravaged country with over one million dead, five million refugees, 10-20 million landmines still in place, an infrastructure in ruins, an economy in tatters, and well-armed tribal warlords prepared to fight among themselves for control of the capital. Even when Washington finally cut its covert CIA funding at the end of 1991, however, Pakistan's ISI continued to back favored local warlords in pursuit of its long-term goal of installing a Pashtun client regime in Kabul.

Druglords, Dragon's Teeth, and Civil Wars: the 1990s

Throughout the 1990s, ruthless local warlords mixed guns and opium in a lethal brew as part of a brutal struggle for power. It was almost as if the soil had been sown with those dragons' teeth of ancient myth that can suddenly sprout into an army of full-grown warriors, who leap from the earth with swords drawn for war.

When northern resistance forces finally captured Kabul from the communist regime, which had outlasted the Soviet withdrawal by three years, Pakistan still backed its client Hekmatyar. He, in turn, unleashed his artillery on the besieged capital. The result: the deaths of an estimated 50,000 more Afghans. Even a slaughter of such monumental proportions, however, could not win power for this unpopular fundamentalist. So the ISI armed a new force, the Taliban and in September 1996, it succeeded in capturing Kabul, only to fight the Northern Alliance for the next five years in the valleys to the north of the capital.

During this seemingly unending civil war, rival factions leaned heavily on opium to finance the fighting, more than doubling the harvest to 4,600 tons by 1999. Throughout these two decades of warfare and a twenty-fold jump in drug production, Afghanistan itself was slowly transformed from a diverse agricultural ecosystem — with herding, orchards, and over 60 food crops — into the world's first economy dependent on the production of a single illicit drug. In the process, a fragile human ecology was brought to ruin in an unprecedented way.

Located at the northern edge of the annual monsoon rains, where clouds arrive from the Arabian Sea already squeezed dry, Afghanistan is an arid land. Its staple food crops have historically been sustained by irrigation systems that rely on snowmelt from the region's high mountains. To supplement staples such as wheat, Afghan tribesmen herded vast flocks of sheep and goats hundreds of miles every year to summer pasture in the central uplands. Most important of all, farmers planted perennial tree crops — walnut, pistachio, and mulberry — which thrived because they sink their roots deep into the soil and are remarkably resistant to the region's periodic droughts, offering relief from the threat of famine in the dry years.

During these two decades of war, however, modern firepower devastated the herds, damaged snowmelt irrigation systems, and destroyed many of the orchards. While the Soviets simply blasted the landscape with firepower, the Taliban, with an unerring instinct for their society's economic jugular, violated the unwritten rules of traditional Afghan warfare by cutting down the orchards on the vast Shamali plain north of Kabul.

All these strands of destruction knit themselves into a veritable Gordian knot of human suffering to which opium became the sole solution. Like Alexander's legendary sword, it offered a straightforward way to cut through a complex conundrum. Without any aid to restock their herds, reseed their fields, or replant their orchards, Afghan farmers — including some 3 million returning refugees — found sustenance in opium, which had historically been

but a small part of their agriculture.

Since poppy cultivation requires nine times more labor per hectare than wheat, opium offered immediate seasonal employment to more than a million Afghans — perhaps half of those actually employed at the time. In this ruined land and ravaged economy, opium merchants alone could accumulate capital rapidly and so give poppy farmers crop loans equivalent to more than half their annual incomes, credit critical to the survival of many poor villagers.

In marked contrast to the marginal yields the country's harsh climate offers most food crops, Afghanistan proved ideal for opium. On average, each hectare of Afghan poppy land produces three to five times more than its chief competitor, Burma. Most important of all, in such an arid ecosystem, subject to periodic drought, opium uses less than half the water needed for staples such as wheat.

After taking power in 1996, the Taliban regime encouraged a nationwide expansion of opium cultivation, doubling production to 4,600 tons, then equivalent to 75% of the world's heroin supply. Signaling its support for drug production, the Taliban regime began collecting a 20% tax from the yearly opium harvest, earning an estimated \$100 million in revenues.

In retrospect, the regime's most important innovation was undoubtedly the introduction of large-scale heroin refining in the environs of the city of Jalalabad. There, hundreds of crude labs set to work, paying only a modest production tax of \$70 on every kilo of heroin powder. According to U.N. researchers, the Taliban also presided over bustling regional opium markets in Helmand and Nangarhar provinces, protecting some 240 top traders there.

During the 1990s, Afghanistan's soaring opium harvest fueled an international smuggling trade that tied Central Asia, Russia, and Europe into a vast illicit market of arms, drugs, and money-laundering. It also helped fuel an eruption of ethnic insurgency across a 3,000-mile swath of land from Uzbekistan in Central Asia to Bosnia in the Balkans.

In July 2000, however, the Taliban leader Mullah Omar suddenly ordered a ban on all opium cultivation in a desperate bid for international recognition. Remarkably enough, almost overnight the Taliban regime used the ruthless repression for which it was infamous to slash the opium harvest by 94% to only 185 metric tons.

By then, however, Afghanistan had become dependent on poppy production for most of its taxes, export income, and employment. In effect, the Taliban's ban was an act of economic suicide that brought an already weakened society to the brink of collapse. This was the unwitting weapon the U.S. wielded when it began its military campaign against the Taliban in October 2001. Without opium, the regime was already a hollow shell and essentially imploded at the bursting of the first American bombs.

The Return of the CIA, Opium, and Counterinsurgency: 2001-

To defeat the Taliban in the aftermath of 9/11, the CIA successfully mobilized former warlords long active in the heroin trade to seize towns and cities across eastern Afghanistan. In other words, the Agency and its local allies created ideal conditions for reversing the Taliban's opium ban and reviving the drug traffic. Only weeks after the collapse of the Taliban, officials were reporting an outburst of poppy planting in the heroin-heartlands of Helmand and Nangarhar. At a Tokyo international donors' conference in

January 2002, Hamid Karzai, the new Prime Minister put in place by the Bush administration, issued a *pro forma* ban on opium growing — without any means of enforcing it against the power of these resurgent local warlords.

After investing some three billion dollars in Afghanistan's destruction during the Cold War, Washington and its allies now proved parsimonious in the reconstruction funds they offered. At that 2002 Tokyo conference, international donors promised just four billion dollars of an estimated \$10 billion needed to rebuild the economy over the next five years. In addition, the total U.S. spending of \$22 billion for Afghanistan from 2003 to 2007 turned out to be skewed sharply toward military operations, leaving, for instance, just \$237 million for agriculture. (And as in Iraq, significant sums from what reconstruction funds were available simply went [into the pockets](#) of Western experts, private contractors, and their local counterparts.)

Under these circumstances, no one should have been surprised when, during the first year of the U.S. occupation, Afghanistan's opium harvest surged to 3,400 tons. Over the next five years, international donors would contribute \$8 billion to rebuild Afghanistan, while opium would infuse nearly twice that amount, \$14 billion, directly into the rural economy without any deductions by either those Western experts or Kabul's bloated bureaucracy.

While opium production continued its relentless rise, the Bush administration downplayed the problem, outsourcing narcotics control to Great Britain and police training to Germany. As the lead agency in Allied operations, Donald Rumsfeld's Defense Department [regarded](#) opium as a distraction from its main mission of defeating the Taliban (and, of course, invading Iraq). Waving away the problem in late 2004, President Bush [said](#) he did not want to "waste another American life on a narco-state." Meanwhile, in their counterinsurgency operations, U.S. forces worked closely with local warlords who proved to be leading druglords.

After five years of the U.S. occupation, Afghanistan's drug production had swelled to unprecedented proportions. In August 2007, the U.N. [reported](#) that the country's record opium crop covered almost 500,000 acres, an area larger than all the coca fields in Latin America. From a modest 185 tons at the start of American intervention in 2001, Afghanistan [now produced](#) 8,200 tons of opium, a remarkable 53% of the country's GDP and 93% of global heroin supply.

In this way, Afghanistan became the world's first true "narco-state." If a cocaine traffic that provided just 3% of Colombia's GDP could bring in its wake endless violence and powerful cartels capable of corrupting that country's government, then we can only imagine the consequences of Afghanistan's dependence on opium for more than 50% of its entire economy.

At a drug conference in Kabul this month, the head of Russia's Federal Narcotics Service [estimated](#) the value of Afghanistan's current opium crop at \$65 billion. Only \$500 million of that vast sum goes to Afghanistan's farmers, \$300 million to the Taliban guerrillas, and the \$64 billion balance "to the drug mafia," leaving ample funds to corrupt the Karzai government in a nation whose total GDP is only \$10 billion.

Indeed, opium's influence is [so pervasive](#) that many Afghan officials, from village leaders to Kabul's police chief, the defense minister, and [the president's brother](#), have been tainted by the traffic. So cancerous and crippling is this corruption that, according to [recent U.N.](#)

[estimates](#), Afghans are forced to spend a stunning \$2.5 billion in bribes. Not surprisingly, the government's repeated attempts at opium eradication have been thoroughly compromised by what the U.N. has called "corrupt deals between field owners, village elders, and eradication teams."

Not only have drug taxes funded an expanding guerrilla force, but the Taliban's role in protecting opium farmers and the heroin merchants who rely on their crop gives them real control over the core of the country's economy. In January 2009, the U.N. and anonymous U.S. "intelligence officials" estimated that drug traffic provided Taliban insurgents with \$400 million a year. "Clearly," [commented](#) Defense Secretary Robert Gates, "we have to go after the drug labs and the druglords that provide support to the Taliban and other insurgents."

In mid-2009, the U.S. embassy [launched](#) a multi-agency effort, called the Afghan Threat Finance Cell, to cut Taliban drug monies through financial controls. But one American official soon compared this effort to "punching jello." By August 2009, a frustrated Obama administration had [ordered](#) the U.S. military to "kill or capture" 50 Taliban-connected druglords who were placed on a classified "kill list."

Since the record crop of 2007, opium production has, in fact, [declined somewhat](#) — to 6,900 tons last year (still over 90% of the world's opium supply). While U.N. analysts attribute this 20% reduction largely to eradication efforts, a more likely cause has been the global glut of heroin that came with the Afghan opium boom, and which had depressed the price of poppies by 34%. In fact, even this reduced Afghan opium crop is still far above total world demand, which the U.N. [estimates](#) at 5,000 tons per annum.

Preliminary reports on the 2010 Afghan opium harvest, which starts next month, indicate that the drug problem is not going away. Some U.S. officials who have surveyed Helmand's opium heartland see signs of an expanded crop. Even the U.N. drug experts who have predicted a continuing decline in production are [not optimistic](#) about long-term trends. Opium prices might decline for a few years, but the price of wheat and other staple crops is dropping even faster, leaving poppies as by far the most profitable crop for poor Afghan farmers.

Ending the Cycle of Drugs and Death

With its forces now planted in the dragon's teeth soil of Afghanistan, Washington is locked into what looks to be an unending cycle of drugs and death. Every spring in those rugged mountains, the snows melt, the opium seeds sprout, and a fresh crop of Taliban fighters takes to the field, many to die by lethal American fire. And the next year, the snows melt again, fresh poppy shoots break through the soil, and a new crop of teen-aged Taliban fighters pick up arms against America, spilling more blood. This cycle has been repeated for the past ten years and, unless something changes, can continue indefinitely.

Is there any alternative? Even were the cost of rebuilding Afghanistan's rural economy — with its orchards, flocks, and food crops — as high as \$30 billion or, for that matter, \$90 billion dollars, the money is at hand. By conservative estimates, the [cost](#) of President Obama's ongoing surge of 30,000 troops alone is \$30 billion a year. So just bringing those 30,000 troops home would create ample funds to begin the rebuilding of rural life in Afghanistan, making it possible for young farmers to begin feeding their families without joining the Taliban's army.

Short of another precipitous withdrawal akin to 1991, Washington has no realistic alternative to the costly, long-term reconstruction of Afghanistan's agriculture. Beneath the gaze of an allied force that now numbers about 120,000 soldiers, opium has fueled the Taliban's growth into an omnipresent shadow government and an effective guerrilla army. The idea that our expanded military presence might soon succeed in driving back that force and handing over pacification to the [illiterate](#), drug-addicted [Afghan police](#) and [army](#) remains, for the time being, a fantasy. Quick fixes like paying poppy farmers not to plant, something British and Americans have both tried, can backfire and end up actually promoting yet more opium cultivation. Rapid drug eradication without alternative employment, something the private contractor DynCorp tried [so disastrously](#) under a \$150 million contract in 2005, would simply plunge Afghanistan into more misery, stoking mass anger and destabilizing the Kabul government further.

So the choice is clear enough: we can continue to fertilize this deadly soil with yet more blood in a brutal war with an uncertain outcome — for both the United States and the people of Afghanistan. Or we can begin to withdraw American forces while helping renew this ancient, arid land by replanting its orchards, replenishing its flocks, and rebuilding the irrigation systems ruined in decades of war.

At this point, our only realistic choice is this sort of serious rural development — that is, reconstructing the Afghan countryside through countless small-scale projects until food crops become a viable alternative to opium. To put it simply, so simply that even Washington might understand, you can only pacify a narco-state when it is no longer a narco-state.

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