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Narcotics smuggling in a new Afghanistan, and the Afghanistan-Pakistan nexus¹

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Summary

This briefing note summarises research that examines trends in Afghanistan's opium and heroin trade and the Afghanistan-Pakistan drug smuggling nexus. It begins with a brief overview of a collapsing formal economy that lends itself to transnational organised crime, before a specific discussion about a drug trade that is deeply entrenched in the Afghan economy and its politics. It traces the Taliban's historic stance towards narcotics, from its First Emirate (1996–2001) to its almost 20-year insurgency against international forces and the Republic (2004–21) those forces backed. In doing so, it assesses the prospects of the Taliban's 3 April 2022 edict prohibiting poppy cultivation and the use and trade of all types of narcotics across Afghanistan, which could have grave implications for a collapsing economy.

The research highlights how the poppy is the country's most valuable cash crop, where labour-intensive cultivation employs several hundred thousand people, pushing up wages and living standards of those directly and indirectly involved. Requiring relatively little water, the poppy's resilience in adverse agricultural conditions makes it an attractive long-term investment, especially during one of the worst droughts in decades. The new ban would affect farmers in the rural south-west region, where many Taliban leaders are from, and influential players across the opium and heroin supply chain. While exploring possible motivations for the edict, the paper concludes that in the absence of significant financial incentives for these constituencies, the risks of a major backlash probably outweigh any benefits of enforcing a poppy ban.

1 For the full research paper, see Fazli, S (2022). *Narcotics smuggling in Afghanistan: Links between Afghanistan and Pakistan*. SOC ACE Research Paper No. 9. Birmingham, UK: University of Birmingham.

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Background

On 3 April 2022, the Taliban banned poppy cultivation and the 'usage, transportation, trade, export and import of all types of narcotics across Afghanistan'.³ If implemented, this prohibition would have grave implications for a collapsing national economy.

On the surface, this appears to be a repeat of Taliban policies from its first regime (1996–2001), when it banned poppy in July 2000. The measure was remarkably effective, prompting a massive reduction in cultivation,⁴ yet it covered too brief a period – from July 2000 to October 2001 – to draw definitive conclusions about its long-term prospects, including whether the prohibition would have sustained political support.

Past failed eradication efforts are useful in trying to assess the prospects of the new ban. During the Republic, the US, UK and other international partners determined that the opium and heroin trade was feeding the Taliban insurgency. Many Afghan stakeholders, however, inside and outside the government, viewed poppy as a source of stability – and eradication efforts a source of instability. Indeed, the Taliban exploited grievances among local communities that were hardest hit by the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF)-backed eradication efforts.⁵

Poppy cultivation certainly has fuelled past conflicts in Afghanistan, but it has also provided steady and much-needed rural income, starting with poppy farmers in the rural south-west.⁶ Thus, for a young Taliban regime, the leaders of which are from the same region, the risks of a major backlash probably outweigh any benefits of enforcing a ban. Curbing the opium trade could provide armed rivals with the same opportunity to tap rural discontent that eradication efforts under the Republic provided to the Taliban insurgency.

Iran, Pakistan and Tajikistan have long been the key transit points for the illicit movement of drugs from Afghanistan. Afghanistan's longest border is with Pakistan, believed to provide most of the trafficking routes from the opium production hotbeds of Helmand and Kandahar.⁷ Thus, Pakistan-based networks that transport drugs from the Durand Line to ports and other land and maritime boundaries – from where they reach markets in Asia, the Persian Gulf, Africa, and eastern and western Europe – also require close examination. By understanding the context and trends, policymakers will be better positioned to assess policy options and their implications, especially in Europe, which is the destination of significant volumes of heroin from Afghanistan.⁸

3 'Decree of Amir al-Momenin regarding prohibition of poppy cultivation in the country', Office of the leadership of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, 3 April 2022. Text available at: <https://alemarahenglish.af/?p=51207>.

4 UNODC (2003). *The Opium Economy in Afghanistan: An International Problem*.

5 See Felbab-Brown, V (2021). 'Pipe dreams: The Taliban and drugs from the 1990s into its new regime', *Small Wars Journal*, September 15, 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/pipe-dreams-the-taliban-and-drugs-from-the-1990s-into-its-new-regime/>; and Gopal, A (2014). *No Good Men Among the Living* (Picador: New York). For earlier detailed reporting of the impact of eradication efforts on the Taliban, see: Anderson, JL (2006). 'The Taliban's opium war', *New Yorker*, 9 July 2007, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2007/07/09/the-talibans-opium-war>.

6 See Fishstein, P (2014). 'Despair or hope: rural livelihoods and opium poppy dynamics in Afghanistan', Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit synthesis paper, August 2014.

7 Six of the nine major drug trafficking routes from Afghanistan pass through Pakistan's Balochistan province, according to one report: Jain, S (2018). 'On the International Drugs Super Highway', *Strategic Analysis*, 42(5), 2018, pp. 545-553. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09700161.2018.1523077>. Also see Eligh, J (2021). 'A synthetic age: The evolution of methamphetamine markets in Eastern and Southern Africa', Global Initiative Against Transnational Crime, March 2021. <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.12581.63208>.

8 By some estimates, 95% of Europe's heroin comes from Afghanistan's opium, most probably already processed in Afghanistan, though with some manufactured from opium in European labs. UNODC, *Afghanistan Opium Survey: Cultivation and Production*, March 2022.

Key findings

1. Economic context

Even before the Taliban's victory, drought and the COVID-19 pandemic had weakened Afghanistan's rural and urban economies alike. The Taliban takeover created a new crisis, accompanied as it was by a shrinking of the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces and civil service, restrictions on women in the workplace, halting of infrastructure projects, and major reductions in foreign aid, trade, and investment.

By January 2022, half a million workers had lost their jobs, according to the International Labour Organization (ILO).⁹ The international response to the forceful seizure of Kabul, including freezing of around \$9 billion central bank foreign reserves, held mostly in the US, and aid cut-offs, triggered a collapse of the local currency, a liquidity crisis, and hyperinflation, including of food. Feeding on a population desperate to leave, human smugglers and related criminal networks proliferated, charging significantly higher sums than before to move people across the borders with Iran and especially Pakistan.

Tough economic times make poppy cultivation all the more attractive. Requiring little water, the crop's resilience in adverse agricultural conditions makes it a valuable long-term investment. Its labour-intensive cultivation employs several hundred thousand people, pushing up wages and living conditions of those directly and indirectly involved. Warlords and traffickers lend money to farmers to plant poppy, collecting the opium

paste directly from them.¹⁰ Poppy cultivation thus provides ready access to credit and easy sales, avoiding the risks of transporting the crop to market. It also offers tenant farmers access to land, and daily wage labourers significant opportunities during the harvest seasons. Poppy farmers have been able to use profits to invest in deep wells, water pumps, and solar panels.¹¹ Secondary and tertiary markets and sectors that have grown around poppy cultivation include fertilisers, herbicides, tractors, transport, construction, rest stops, food, and fuel stations.¹² For many Afghans, food security, children's education, and meeting everyday costs would be impossible without the poppy.

UNODC has reported that since 2020 poppy cultivation has risen, quality heroin exports are in the hundreds of tons, and Afghanistan's illicit opiate economy's gross output was an estimated \$1.8 to \$2.7 billion.¹³ The total value of opiate is thought to exceed 'the value of [Afghanistan's] officially recorded licit exports of goods and services'.¹⁴

2. The Taliban and the drug trade

More often than not, the Taliban has benefited from illicit narcotics. Before banning cultivation during its First Emirate, it would apply a 2.5% *zakat* (almsgiving) and a 10–20% *ushr* (an Islamic agricultural tax) on opium production and trade, and even on heroin labs. This brought millions of dollars annually to Taliban coffers.¹⁵ Many experts believed that the Taliban's eventual ban on poppy cultivation was motivated by a desire for international legitimacy.¹⁶ Market factors

9 'Afghanistan: 500,000 jobs lost since Taliban takeover', *UN News*, 19 January 2022. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/01/1110052>.

10 Farrell, T (2017). *Unwinnable: Britain's War in Afghanistan, 2001-2014*. Penguin Random House: London.

11 SIGAR (2021). *What We Need to Learn: Lessons from Twenty years of Afghanistan Reconstruction*. U.S. Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), August 2021. Available at: <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/lessonslearned/SIGAR-21-46-LL.pdf>.

12 Felbab-Brown, V (2021).

13 *Afghanistan Opium Survey: Cultivation and Production*, op. cit.

14 UNODC (2021). *Drug Situation in Afghanistan 2021: Latest findings and emerging threats*.

15 Rashid, A (2008). *Descent into Chaos: The United States and the Failure of Nation Building in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia* (Allen Lane: New York).

16 Mansfield, D (2016). *A State Built on Sand: How Opium Undermined Afghanistan*. Oxford University Press: New York; Berry, PA (2021). 'What is the Future of UK Drugs Policy for Afghanistan?' Royal United Services Institute, 10 September 2021. <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/rusi-newsbrief/what-future-uk-drugs-policy-afghanistan>; Clemens, J (2021). 'An unforced error: how US attempts to suppress the opium trade strengthened the Taliban'. Modern War Institute at West Point, 30 August 2021. <https://mwi.usma.edu/an-unforced-error-how-us-attempts-to-suppress-the-opium-trade-strengthened-the-taliban/>; and Felbab-Brown, V (2021).

may have also contributed to the decision, as overproduction had depressed opium prices.¹⁷

A power vacuum, and other security and political dynamics after NATO toppled the Taliban in late 2001, produced an enormous poppy revival.¹⁸ A haphazard mix of policies and strategies to curb Afghanistan's drug trade, which included aerial spraying of poppy fields, bombing and other interdiction of labs, depots and transportation, and rural development programmes, had limited success. Warlords and drug barons backed both by the US and Kabul exploited eradication policies to target the competition and keep prices high. The efforts also fed the Taliban's propaganda mill.

Helmand and Kandahar were the geographic heart of both the insurgency and poppy production. As one military affairs expert said: 'The Taliban were able to draw support from growing popular discontent at Afghan government efforts, with international backing, to eradicate opium poppy in Helmand'.¹⁹ Although the Taliban maintained sanctuaries in Pakistan, and received some funding from Pakistani and Arab donors, the funds were not enough to sustain what became a two-decade insurgency. The drug trade was one activity that met that gap.²⁰ Some insurgents were directly involved, while the Taliban leadership benefited by taxing farmers, labs, traffickers, and other actors.²¹ Applying *zakat* and *ushr* to poppy cultivation not only brought the insurgency a major and reliable financial source, but also a religious justification for it. US officials estimated that the drug economy was generating an annual \$200 million for the Taliban.²²

Yet, on assuming power in August 2021, the Taliban announced its intention to restrict Afghanistan's illicit drug economy, echoing its policy in the final fifteen months of its previous regime. On 3 April 2022, it announced its prohibition of poppy cultivation and drug trafficking and use.

Several factors will shape the implementation of the ban. Some prominent experts and commentators infer that international legitimacy or favour was the Taliban's primary motivation.²³ There are no signs yet, however, that the move will generate such a response. The Taliban's record on women's rights and other human and civil rights has so far dictated the level of western engagement with Kabul. The Taliban's 23 March 2022 reversal on allowing girls' secondary schools to reopen has made deep international engagement with Kabul, including on counter-narcotics, even less likely.

How willing and able the Taliban is to enforce its edict, in the absence of international support, may remain unclear for several months. In the south, opium poppy planted in October and November is harvested in April and May. As one analysis concluded, '[i]t is likely only to be in the autumn, therefore, when farmers in poppy-growing areas are deciding what to sow that it will be clear how serious the Taliban are in enforcing this ban, and farmers in obeying it'.²⁴

Two other factors make implementation more challenging today than in 2000–01. In 2000, Afghanistan's population was just over 20 million; today, it is almost 39 million.²⁵ In addition, poppy

17 Rashid, A (2008); Felbab-Brown, V (2021).

18 SIGAR (2021).

19 Farrell, T (2017) p. 226. For a similar account, see Giustozzi, A (2007). *Koran, Kalashnikov and Laptop: The Neo-Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan*. Hurst: London.

20 Taxing the movement of ordinary goods through areas under Taliban control was another major revenue source. Mansfield, D & Smith, G (2021). 'War gains: How the economic benefits of the conflict are distributed in Afghanistan and the implications for peace: A case study on Nimroz province.' *Lessons for Peace Afghanistan*, ODI. <https://14p.odi.org/resources/war-gains-in-afghanistan-and-the-implications-for-peace>.

21 Kerry, JF (2010). 'Afghanistan's narco war: Breaking the link between drug traffickers and insurgents: A Report to the Committee on Foreign Relations'. United States Senate, DIANE Publishing.

22 Whitlock, C (2019). 'Overwhelmed by opium'. The Afghanistan Papers series, *Washington Post*, 9 December 2019. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2019/investigations/afghanistan-papers/afghanistan-war-opium-poppies-production/>.

23 Bjelica J & Clark K (2022). 'The new Taleban's opium ban: the same political strategy 20 years on?' *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, 14 April 2022. <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/economy-development-environment/the-new-talebans-opium-ban-the-same-political-strategy-20-years-on/>; Durso, J (2022). 'Is the Taliban's Halt of Poppy Production Too Good to be True?' *The Diplomat*, 12 April 2022. <https://thediplomat.com/2022/04/is-the-talibans-halt-of-poppies-production-too-good-to-be-true/>.

24 Bjelica J & Clark K, (2022).

25 World Bank (undated). 'Population total, Afghanistan', : <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL?locations=AF>.

cultivation has spread considerably, from an estimated 64,500 hectares in 2000 to an estimated 177,000 hectares in 2021.²⁶ The ban would therefore have to be enforced over significantly more territory, against a crop that is sustaining more people.²⁷

Enforcement will also depend to some extent on the Taliban's cohesion. Amid an ISAF bid to fragment the insurgency, the Taliban leadership took pains to integrate disparate parts of the movement. Maintaining internal coherence has, however, been a dynamic process, requiring shifts in power arrangements and devolution of authority to local commanders.²⁸ This has implications for trafficking. Depriving powerful local factions of a major revenue stream would be risky. Furthermore, to offset the risk of foot soldiers joining other armed groups such as Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K), the leadership may be inclined to grant such fighters space to indulge in local criminal enterprises and rent-seeking from illegal mining, logging and, perhaps above all, the drug trade.

Given the potential for social unrest or even violent opposition to a ban, the Taliban regime is unlikely to pursue aggressive opium poppy eradication efforts if viable alternatives remain limited. Monitoring the flow of poppy already harvested in the south-west, and the upcoming autumn planting season, will help gauge whether poppy cultivation, and opium and heroin trafficking, will maintain an upward trend in the long term, despite the 3 April edict.

3. Pakistan's role

Afghanistan's opiates follow various routes to European markets, including a Balkan route that first passes through Iran and Turkey, and a southern route that passes through Pakistan and

Iran, and onward to Asian, African, and western and central European markets. Afghanistan's longest border, at roughly 2,640 kilometres, is with Pakistan, the main destination for the country's exports. Even when Afghanistan is at its most politically and economically isolated, its geographic and community links with Pakistan serve to some extent to mitigate some of the attendant hardships. This applies to legitimate and illegitimate activities alike. It is indeed difficult to provide a full accounting of landlocked Afghanistan's illicit markets without examining the Pakistan channel.

Organised crime in Pakistan was built around the wars in Afghanistan, from the 1980s to the present, and the disruptions and mass movement of people and goods that resulted from them. Inherently transnational, it depends on networks that: i) traverse borders with Afghanistan, Iran, and India (in the latter case, drugs are then trafficked to East and Southeast Asia and Australia), and ii) move illicit goods by sea off the Makran coast and Karachi port in the south (westwards to East Africa and eastwards to Southeast Asia and Australia).²⁹

Border areas in the two provinces that abut Afghanistan – Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) – have long been tenuously governed, insurgency-hit and, in large parts, inaccessible to civilian institutions and civil society.³⁰ While this border has often been described as porous, a combination of perilous terrain and new infrastructure to control cross-border movement has made illegal crossing, especially of large cargo, reserved for those with sufficient financial and logistical resources, and connections to officials and other power brokers.³¹

26 Bureau of South Asian Affairs (undated). 'Fact Sheet: The Taliban And The Afghan Drug Trade 1997-2001', U.S. Department of State, https://1997-2001.state.gov/www/regions/sa/facts_taliban_drugs.html; and *Afghanistan Opium Survey 2021*, op. cit.

27 Bjelica, J and Clark, K (2022).

28 Two Afghanistan Analysts, personal communication, March 2022. Also see Watkins, A (2020, 23 March) *Taliban Fragmentation: Fact, Fiction, and Future*, United States Institute of Peace. <https://www.usip.org/publications/2020/03/taliban-fragmentation-fact-fiction-and-future>.

29 UNODC (2015) *Afghan Opiate Trafficking Through the Southern Route*, June 2015.

30 International Crisis Group reports: *Women and Peacebuilding in Pakistan's North West* (2022, February 14); *China-Pakistan Economic Corridor: Challenges and Opportunities*, (2018, June 29); *Pakistan: Countering Militancy in FATA* (2009, October 21); and *Pakistan: The Worsening Conflict in Afghanistan* (2006, September 14).

31 These findings draw on the author's earlier unpublished research on narcotics and other smuggling in Pakistan's border regions from 2020–21.

Cross-border informal trade and smuggling is a way of life and financial lifeline for communities on both sides of the Durand Line.³² Pakistan's unilateral fencing along the Durand Line has reduced but not eliminated illegal cross-border movement of people and goods.³³ Fraught relations with Afghanistan during the Republic, a result of Pakistani support to the Afghan Taliban, along with Kabul's historic refusal to recognise the Durand Line, constrained border security and management efforts. Border tensions have continued even after the Taliban's return to power, with the new regime in Kabul regularly protesting the border fence's construction.

While the fence has significantly curtailed illicit cross-border movement, the large volumes of narcotics produced in Afghanistan mean that traffickers are able to pay significant sums to counter-narcotics, paramilitary, customs and other border security personnel. Also factoring in mountainous terrain that is difficult to police, the usual quantities of raw and processed opium from the most recent harvest will probably continue entering Pakistan.

Implications

Insecurity explains only part of the failure of international and domestic efforts to eradicate or reduce Afghan poppy cultivation after the Taliban's 2001 ouster. The fact that farmers and other stakeholders could see few long-term alternatives to a lucrative and resilient crop was far more significant. Those alternatives are even more elusive today. As rural and broader economic development will take time, and make barely any progress at all without considerable foreign support, counter-narcotics policy analysis should start with accepting that a significant reduction

of Afghanistan's poppy economy is unlikely in the near term.

Western political and institutional support to build Afghan counter-narcotics capacity is inconceivable in the short term. To the extent that the US and UK governments and the European Union (EU) engage with the Taliban on security, it will probably not extend beyond Al Qaeda and IS-K-oriented counter-terrorism.³⁴ Nor has the international community set poppy eradication as the price of legitimacy.

The Taliban's ability to revive the economy without major donor funding will be severely limited. It is, however, important that reviving and supporting livelihoods remain objectives in and of themselves rather than means to a counter-narcotics end, which would again risk warping the metrics of success.

With the Taliban in power, western counter-narcotics activities to curb drugs emanating from Afghanistan will be likely to focus on transit countries, as was the case before the Taliban's 2001 ouster. Pakistan is already among the countries that receive the highest level of international counter-narcotics assistance. While interdiction figures prominently, it hinges on Islamabad's willingness and ability to prosecute high-level, politically connected traffickers and senior officials who facilitate them. In Pakistan's corrupt and weak criminal justice system, such prosecutions are rare. In a highly punitive legal regime that focuses on possession, the upshot is that low-level mules and peddlers are punished, in some cases with the death penalty, rather than suppliers and their powerful bosses. As a result, major traffickers continue to operate. Nor is international counter-narcotics support conditioned on investigative and prosecutorial success.³⁵

32 Most of this smuggling has been of licit goods, a by-product of the Afghanistan–Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement. International Crisis Group (2014). *Resetting Pakistan's relations with Afghanistan*. Crisis group. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/pakistan/resetting-pakistan-s-relations-afghanistan>.

33 Pakistan began constructing the border fence in earnest in 2017, despite Kabul's protests.

34 The February 2020 US–Taliban accord committed the Taliban to various measures preventing Al Qaeda and others from using Afghan territory to threaten the US and its allies, with no references to drug trafficking. *Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban and the United States of America*, February 29, 2020. <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Agreement-For-Bringing-Peace-to-Afghanistan-02.29.20.pdf>.

35 This finding draws on the author's unpublished research into Pakistan's drug trade, including international counter-narcotics assistance, from 2020 to 2021.

Donors may achieve important results by looking beyond law enforcement. Donor and civil society access to Balochistan is limited, as is the potential for rigorous oversight. Opportunities are more promising in the other border region, the erstwhile Federally Administered Tribal Areas, which in 2018 were integrated into KP with full constitutional, political and economic rights – and thus important stabilisation opportunities. Three areas stand out for deeper donor engagement: high-level UK and EU advocacy with both the federal and KP governments to revive a successful FATA-KP merger, including full economic as well as political enfranchisement, as a top national policy priority; supporting the development of a nascent police force and judicial system in the tribal districts, part of the broader KP provincial criminal justice sector; and supporting victims of and those most susceptible to traffickers' influence, including addicts seeking treatment, and those arrested for low-level drug offences. Making the latter more of a policy priority could help enhance the public discussion about the adverse impact of drugs, on youth in particular, and those who traffic them.

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The Serious Organised Crime & Anti-Corruption Evidence (SOC ACE) research programme aims to help 'unlock the black box of political will' for tackling serious organised crime, illicit finance and transnational corruption through research that informs politically feasible, technically sound interventions and strategies. Funded by the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO), SOC ACE is a new component in the Anti-Corruption Evidence (ACE) research programme, alongside Global Integrity ACE and SOAS ACE. SOC ACE is managed by the University of Birmingham, working in collaboration with a number of leading research organisations and through consultation and engagement with key stakeholders.

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