

The Taliban, Al Qaeda, the Global Drug Trade, and Afghanistan as a Dominant Opium Source

Frank Shanty

It has been claimed that during the past twenty-five years the opium trade has provided a vast source of funding to the Afghan Mujahideen, the Taliban, and possibly Al Qaeda. Today drug revenue empowers local and regional warlords and provides revenue for their personal militias. The extent to which it also empowers Al Qaeda and other like groups still remains an open question. This is despite the fact that the United States has achieved successful military intervention in Afghanistan for several recent past years. Because there is a general contention throughout much of the multinational organized crime and international terrorism literature that such connections are commonplace, it is important to validate such assertions are indeed a matter of material fact or are instead more the product of mere speculation. This article is an attempt to explore the relationship between the Taliban, Al Qaeda, and the opium trade in the Golden Crescent region of the Middle East.

Introduction

The trade and trafficking of illicit narcotics is an international enterprise involving producers, distributors, money launderers, and the consumer. It is a multinational business, which employs tens of millions of people. Those involved in this business include the peasant farmer whose sole motivation is to feed and care for his family to international criminal syndicates and drug cartels attempting to enrich themselves from a product whose demand is steadily increasing.

The lack of alternative livelihoods, especially in the agricultural sector, and the need to sustain the bare essentials of life are major factors which contribute to illicit drug cultivation throughout many parts of the world. "The principal drug growing regions are among the most impoverished and economically stagnant in the world, and in many of them levels of living are declining...illegal drug growers can make from 10 – 50 times more in provisioning the illegal drug market than they can in any other agricultural pursuit" (UNRISD, 1994, p. 15). This is true in a variety of regions such as South America and South Asia. Naturally, many citizens of Afghanistan would also fall within this category.

Though the Cold War produced a very tense atmosphere of détente between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R., there was a sense of predictability in determining relations between various nations. Indeed, the need to focus on this international schism between two superpowers tended to diminish the importance of other international issues that might develop. In most cases, these issues (in one way or another) simply tied into the bigger picture that consisted of the standoff between both superpowers. With the end of the Cold War, borders between nations relaxed, allowing for an interchange of people, commerce, and ideas. As tensions between these two nuclear powers abated a new era in international relations was thought by many to be on the horizon. The previously well-defined authority of the state began to take on less significance and the emergence of non-state actors as threats to state integrity and international security became a major global concern.

Indeed, one of the most significant developments to occur at this time was the growing presence of insurgencies and/or extremist groups. These groups often consisted of both military (or quasi military) personnel involved in revolutionary warfare as well as common criminals who sought to benefit from the associate conflict and strife in less stable and more poverty ridden nations. Although various insurgent and extremist groups had been involved in traditional criminal activities prior to this (including the drug trade in particular), their role tended to consist of extortion activities or virtual protection rackets for drug traffickers and transporting drug products through areas that they controlled. Partnerships that some of these insurgent or extremist groups had with drug traffickers and other criminal organizations were often short-lived and more a product of happenstance and convenience rather than being planned and methodical.

Amidst the confusion and sense of chaos that came at the close of the Cold War (chaos being largely experienced by prior Soviet benefactors), there was a resulting loss of Soviet and Cuban support for a variety of causes that had previously enjoyed substantial military and economic support. Many of these insurgent revolutionaries and even extremist groups had benefited from prior financial incentives and arrangements with former Communist states. Given the lack of aid from Communist-related sponsors, many of these insurgent and/or extremist groups sought alternative sources of funds to maintain their sustained military activities and other operational concerns. It was with this intent that many such groups turned to the international drug trade (as well as other lucrative criminal activity) as a source of much needed revenue.

Further, as the globalization of trade and commerce began to impact the economy of nations, cross border criminal activity not only increased but also was transformed into an international phenomenon. Throughout the 1990s, transnational organized crime has evolved into a major international security concern, which threatens the integrity of governments and undermines the economies of developed and developing countries. The evolving nature of transnational organized crime threatens all facets of global commerce and state security from the subversion of international banking regulations to the smuggling of human migrants and nuclear materiel. Nowhere has the transnational character of organized crime manifested itself more than in the global trade of illicit drugs. Estimates of the size of this activity range from 100 to 400 billion dollars (US) annually.

Much remains unknown about national and international drug distribution networks not only within Afghanistan but globally. There is less known of the organizational complexities of these groups and their interrelationships and possible links to international terrorist networks and organizations. The network form of organizational structure exhibited by drug trafficking and terrorist groups is highly adaptive and very difficult to penetrate or from which to gather meaningful data. "Networks can come together when it is convenient or beneficial without this being in any way a threat to their identity or *raison d'etre*... Networks are a highly efficient and effective organizational structure for drug traffickers" (Williams, 1998, p. 159). Additionally, the clandestine nature of these activities coupled with the possibility of government involvement makes hard evidence very difficult to access. "The complex multinational character of drug trafficking is also evidenced in more recent times by the descriptions of indigenous, government-linked, heroin-trafficking systems in Southeast Asia" (Martin & Romano, 1992, p. 57).

Another reason for this apparent lack of "hard data" is the failure of governments and national enforcement agencies to adequately enforce drug trafficking laws. For example, in Myanmar (Burma) poppy cultivation has been banned for a number of years but this has only been enforced on an intermittent basis

due to central government fears of provoking an intensification of ethnic resentment (Young, 2002). Additionally, some governments have been and/or are presently directly involved with and profit from the cultivation, processing and trafficking of heroin (Young, 2002; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2005). Afghanistan and Myanmar are cited as the two primary opium producers within the global community; both are characterized by weak, unstable governments that are plagued with a great deal of internal violence (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2005).

Finally, Afghanistan is an example of a country that still lacks full political control over vast portions of its territory. This is coupled with the fact that certain members of the present [Afghan] central government allegedly profit from and have direct ties to the country's drug trade (Curtis, 2005). Afghanistan is currently the world's major producer and exporter of opium and its morphine derivative, heroin. The next section of this article will provide data and discussion that clearly demonstrates Afghanistan's involvement with heroin production. This will then be followed by a corresponding section that discusses whether a true connection exists between the Taliban, Al Qaeda, and heroin production, examining whether quantitative proof or evidence through common legal procedures have sufficiently substantiated this as a causal connection to funding for Al Qaeda's terrorist operations.

Golden Crescent (Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan)

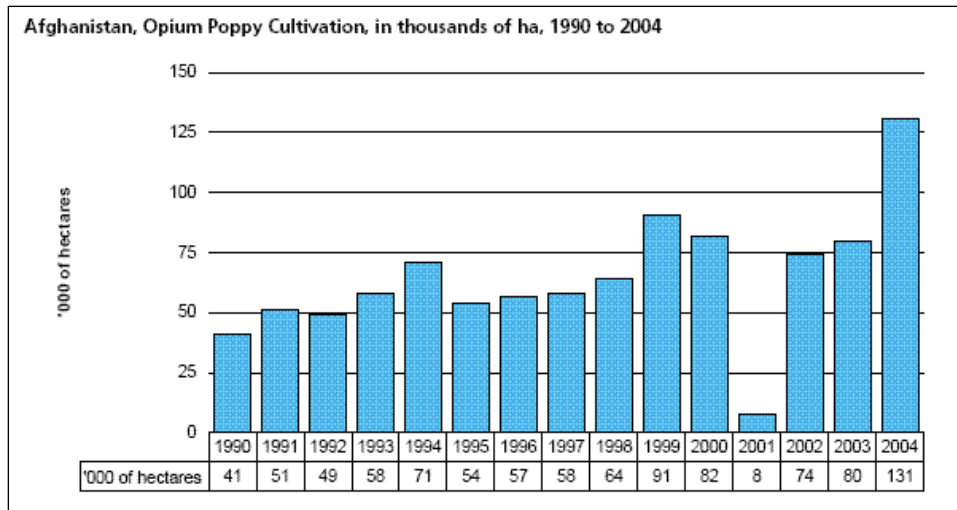
The opium rich region known as the Golden Crescent is an area encompassing the mountainous border areas of Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan. Opium has been cultivated in this region (Southwest Asia) "since at least the sixteenth century" (Booth, 1996, p. 251). "The distribution of opium in the Golden Crescent was a by-product of early commerce along the Silk Road and of Arab maritime trade. Indeed, places such as Kunduz and Kabul in Afghanistan, Peshawar in Pakistan, and the Makran coast of Pakistan served as commercial relays for merchants who undoubtedly traded in opium as early as the first century of the Common Era" (Chouvy, 2002, p. 337).

However, the production of opium has also left a bad mark upon those in the region, as opiate drug addiction has become a commonplace concern for regional governments. For example, during the 1950s the drug problem became so bad in Iran that steps were taken to ban the cultivation of opium poppy (Lamour & Lamberti, 1974). Iran, by that time, had become the Golden Crescent's main producer as well as a consumer of opium. This was a very significant step in international efforts to curb the abuse of illicit drugs. However, thirteen years later the ban on the cultivation and production of opium was rescinded and cultivation was resumed albeit under strict government controls.

The reason for this drastic change in policy was primarily economic. A statement made by the Iranian Foreign Affairs Minister to the General Secretary of the U.N. Commission on Narcotics Drugs cited the following reasons for this action, "...our measures called for corresponding action on the part of our neighbours'. No such action was taken. An ever-rising tide of illicit opium flowed into Iran, while gold left our coffers to swell the invisibles in the balance of payments of adjacent countries. From the Iranian government's perspective, it was simply not reasonable to go on suffering these losses caused by their neighbours' refusal to change their policy in regard to opium" (Lamour & Lamberti, 1974, p. 225). Thus, it

was not until the 1979 Iranian Revolution that measures were again taken to eradicate the opium poppy. This event, coupled with increased opium cultivation during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, triggered a market for Afghan-produced opium to feed the addict population in Iran.

Figure 1: Afghanistan Opium Poppy Cultivation (1000's Hectares) 1990-2004. .



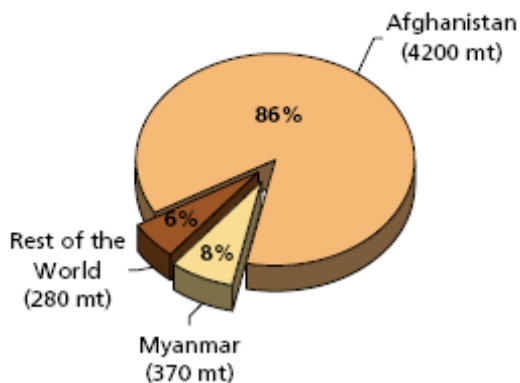
Source: UNODC, World Drug Report 2005

Agriculturally, the Golden Crescent is well-suited for poppy cultivation and although laws have been passed forbidding its production they are difficult to enforce. Since the late 1980s and more specifically since the 1990s, Afghanistan has emerged as the world's principal supplier of opium. Only in 2001 did production levels fall. This was due in part to the July 2000 Taliban ban on opium crop production. Following the U.S. led invasion, opium poppy cultivation returned to pre-2001 levels (see Figure 1).

In 2004, the main opium producing regions of the world, Afghanistan and Myanmar, combined to produce 94% of the world's opium with Afghanistan weighing in at 4200 metric tons or 86% of the world's total (Figure 2). Naturally, speculation emerges among many government and non-governmental officials that the Taliban (and Al Qaeda) are the primary culprits behind the heroin trade in Afghanistan. If this were indeed the case then it would seem that heroin production would have *decreased* (given the fact that the Taliban was no longer in power and Al Qaeda operations were significantly disrupted during this period) rather than increasing to an all-time high in production during 2004. This truly is contradictory to the claims that have been made regarding past Taliban involvement with the heroin trade (i.e., that they were deeply involved). Indeed, evidence suggests that during their reign the Taliban derived some income from taxing the trade (as they did other commodities) but were not involved in production or trafficking. It should be made clear that this author's position is not intended to exonerate or glorify the Taliban nor Al Qaeda. Rather, this data and the narrative surrounding this data is simply intended to demonstrate that information must be accurate if one is to have effective national and international policies. The need for appropriate and accurate information is particularly relevant when fighting terrorism.

Figure 2: Opium Production in Afghanistan (Metric Tons).

2004



Source: UNODC, *World Drug Report 2005*

While production of opium declined substantially following the 2000 ban it did little to curtail the trafficking of the crop. In their 2001 report, *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report (INCSR)*, the U.S. Department of State cited that "Neither the Taliban nor the Northern Alliance has taken any significant action to seize stored opium, precursor chemicals or arrest and prosecute narcotics traffickers. On the contrary, authorities continue to tax the opium poppy crop at about ten percent, and allow it to be sold in open bazaars, traded and transported" (Perl, 2001, p. 2). Perl goes on to state that, "Some members of the U.S. drug enforcement community suggest that a new strategy may have been adopted by the Taliban in the wake of their July 27, 2000 announced ban on cultivation. This strategy would reflect a desire by the Taliban to use their 'monopoly' position to maximize profits, i.e. restrict supply by restricting cultivation; drive prices up dramatically; and sell from an extensive supply of stockpiled opium. According to the United Nations Drug Control Program (UNDCP) personnel, in the past, up to 60% of opium stock has been stored for sale in future years" (p. 2).

It is perhaps appropriate to reanalyze the common wisdom that has been attached to many of the underlying presuppositions surrounding the connection between the Taliban, Al Qaeda, the heroin trade, and the financing of terrorist activity. With this in mind, it may well be that the Taliban could have truly and genuinely ordered legitimate bans on opium production. However, just as with every form of social control institution, the Taliban may have simply had difficulty in achieving perfect compliance and enforcement in the region. This is not at all unreasonable to speculate, after all even industrialized countries in North America and Europe cannot seem to achieve such compliance with illegal drug distribution and use within their own borders. Further, the Taliban certainly encountered resistance as it had to contend with age-old customs and habits surrounding opium production and opium use. Indeed, as has been illustrated, the opium/heroin trade has been a past and current destabilizing factor in Afghanistan and a grave regional and international security concern. Further, Afghanistan is ethnically diverse with strong kinship bonds relating to tribe, family, and geography. Continued conflict, the challenges posed by outside state and non-state actors,

the country's dependence upon external sources for revenue, and basic humanitarian needs are factors which promote the continued cultivation and processing of opium.

The emergence of Afghanistan as a dominant opium source

The drug trade in Afghanistan is an intricate and complex economic system cloaked in secrecy and run by clandestine sophisticated networks operating internationally. The drug industry in Afghanistan has evolved into a global enterprise supplying close to 90% of the world's heroin. Knowing that this dubious distinction has occurred in the wake of a multinational military intervention, this begs the question: how has Afghanistan emerged to become the world's number one producer and supplier of opium and its derivative heroin?

Reliable statistical information on the country is virtually non-existent. A leading authority on Afghanistan, Louis Dupree refers to this issue by stating that, "statistics on Afghanistan abound, but most consist of 'intelligent estimates,' i.e., wild guesses based on inadequate data" (Dupree, 1973, p. 43). Indeed, herein lays the problem. By way of empirical data not much has changed since Dupree penned this statement. In order to understand the question posed above it becomes necessary to review Afghanistan's turbulent past beginning with events preceding the Soviet invasion and occupation of December 1979. "During the 1970s, Afghanistan produced a mere 90 to 270 tons of opium per year, almost the same yield as neighboring Pakistan, before the latter achieved 720-metric ton crop in 1979" (Chouvy, 2003, p. 348).

By the late 1970s, Afghanistan had become a major opium producing country and global supplier of heroin. Opium, cultivated for primarily domestic consumption and regional markets prior to 1979, expanded into an international enterprise that today accounts for 87% of the world's heroin and opium supply (Maitra, 2005). Primarily three events precipitated this turn of events. The Iranian revolution of 1979 spurred domestic production of opium and curtailed shipments of the drug from Afghanistan and Pakistan. Concurrently, the Russian invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979 sealed off supply routes into the country. This initiated a further surge in opium production in both Afghanistan and Pakistan and hence the necessity to find new markets (i.e. United States and Western Europe). Finally, the 1978 drought in Southeast Asia was an additional driving factor which spawned increased opium cultivation in Southwest Asia, specifically Afghanistan (Chouvy, 2003). Since the Soviet invasion of 1979, the country has experienced a continual cycle of conflict, state collapse, social and political upheaval, and a war economy which is heavily reliant on the opium trade. This hostile environment has made serious research of the country very difficult. In the past two decades opium cultivation and production has increased more than 15-fold (UNODC, 2003). This escalation can be attributed to a number of factors: extreme poverty, the lack of alternative livelihoods, infrastructure decimation, and thirty years of political turmoil. Over the past three decades, Afghanistan has confronted profound and often violent realities. The lack of security and stability coupled with dire socioeconomic conditions has fostered an environment conducive to exploitation by extremists, criminals, and corrupt public officials.

Though it may well be true that revenue generated from the sale of drugs from Afghanistan has in the past helped finance Taliban efforts against the Northern Alliance, it is not clearly established that such funding sources were actually associated with Al Qaeda. Rather, the use of these funds may simply be "the natural order of things" in this region of the world, with or without Al Qaeda. This does indeed seem likely

when one considers that Afghanistan's illicit opium economy represented as much as 52% of the country's legal gross domestic product in 2004, according to UNODC (Curtis, 2005).

Amidst the chaos and instability which followed the Taliban's ouster by a U.S.-led invasion force in October 2001, local and regional warlords, many of whom are allied to Coalition forces, are suspected of engaging in and profiting from the revenue generated from the post-Taliban surge in poppy cultivation, relying on the trade to fund their private militias. Production of opium has increased exponentially since the U. S.-led invasion in October 2001.

The opium problem in Afghanistan extends far beyond its borders. Its tentacles reach across national and international borders. This suggests that it is unlikely that Afghanistan's opium problem can be truly attributed to the Taliban or to Al Qaeda. While we certainly need to consider that other extremist groups (such as FARC in Colombia) may indeed be directly connected with financing generated through illicit drugs, we need to ensure that such connections are established with objective information and evidence. The costs to human lives and/or national budgets can otherwise be enormously misused. In a sense, we must ensure that we avoid the "false positives" that can occur in determining if such a connection exists since this can perhaps be just as costly as a "false negative" where we fail to find such a connection.

Conclusion

The illicit drug industry is a complex, multidimensional and multifaceted enterprise which spans the globe. Obtaining evidence-based information on the people and organizations that profit from this enterprise is very difficult due to the clandestine and secretive nature of the business. What we do know is that it is invasive; it directly threatens states as well as international security and has become a major global public health concern. To get a handle on the magnitude of this problem, national enforcement and international oversight agencies collect data on cultivation, production, consumption, seizures, and drug purity/pricing. This combined data can provide a macro picture of the problem. However, since there are many variables which can impact the final numbers the data that is made available is often unreliable.

The following three facts are clear. First, Afghanistan has been and continues to be a prime producer of heroin. Secondly, it is clear that the Taliban is an Afghanistan-based insurgency and has been gaining strength, particularly in Helmand, a leading opium producing province. Finally, Al Qaeda operatives are still active in the region. However, this does not "prove" that there is a link between the Taliban, Al Qaeda, and heroin trafficking. This may actually be a "guilt by association" form of implication. This is especially worth considering when one notices that trends in heroin production do not support the notion of such a nexus. More empirical work needs to be done before a determination can be made that a nexus does indeed exist.

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