

# Why Opium Cultivation Has Not Ended in Afghanistan and What Is the Solution?

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## Introduction

Afghanistan is one of the poorest countries in the world. Geographically landlocked with untapped natural resources estimated at US\$3 trillion, for the estimated 40 million Afghan population, agriculture still remains the primary source of income. For Afghan farmers, however, long-term armed conflict, poor governance, and nationwide poverty have created a dilemma (Ward & Byrd, 2004): should they move away from cheaper food production to now focus on the more lucrative opium poppy cultivation?

Given the significance of opium poppy cultivation for the production and supply of drugs, various efforts have been made from time to time to persuade or coerce Afghan farmers to stop the cultivation of opium poppy. But none of these efforts have been very effective. In this commentary, I analyze the reasons as to why opium cultivation has not ended in Afghanistan despite many attempts particularly in the past two decades. I also look at the strategy that the Taliban government has taken to root out opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan.

## Why Opium Poppy Cultivation Has Not Ended in Afghanistan?

Historically, Afghanistan's economy has been highly dependent on traditional agriculture. About 70% of people in Afghanistan live and work in rural areas, mainly in farmlands and livestock (World Bank Group, 2018). However, the traditional agriculture sector has failed to increase rural households' income, mainly due to shoddy infrastructure, harsh climate, and incessant conflict in the country for the past 40 years. This has encouraged rural communities, particularly village

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farmers, to focus on opium poppy harvesting, which potentially offers them higher livelihood and well-being.

The push towards opium poppy cultivation initially resulted from the devastating drought in Afghanistan in the early 1970s. The drought was caused by a decrease in rainfall. For instance, rainfall decreased in Afghanistan by 2% per decade since the 1960s. This resulted in intense climate changes in different years, which undermined seasonal crops throughout the country by making the spring season drier and summer and fall seasons wetter. This resulted in low yields, which negatively affected farmers' household income and livelihood (Parenti, 2015). Afghan farmers, therefore, started to shift towards opium poppy cultivation. Compared to tradition crops like wheat, the opium poppy harvest needs one-fifth times less water. Essentially, opium poppy is a drought-resistant plant that is an ideal crop to grow in the harsh climate of Afghanistan. It also requires little capital investment and is a fast-growing and easily traded plant (McCoy, 2021; Parenti, 2015, p. 183).

After the Soviet Union invaded and occupied Afghanistan in late 1979, over the next 10 years the Soviet forces systematically damaged farmlands and forced rural populations to move to the urban centers where they could be more easily controlled. The Soviet forces also destroyed 36% of Afghanistan's irrigation system and caused a 70% decline in livestock across the country. Large tracts of arable land were mined and bombed between 1979 and 1989, which inflicted severe hardships on the Afghan people, particularly the rural peasantry. Many Afghan families died, or were internally displaced, or forced to migrate to neighboring countries as a result of the Soviet Union's invasion and occupation of Afghanistan. This significantly affected the agricultural industry. Wheat production, for instance, fell from 80% to 30%, which sharply reduced farmers' income. Afghan farmers therefore began to switch to opium poppy cultivation, which was much more lucrative for them. The various Afghan mujahideen factions that were created to fight the Soviet occupation also encouraged the cultivation of opium poppy, which could then be processed to make drugs. Drug trafficking became a principal source of funding for the mujahideen and Afghan warlords during the Soviet occupation and the post-Soviet civil war era (Crisis Group, 2001; Douglas, 1997).

During the American occupation of Afghanistan between 2001 and 2021, the manufacture and trafficking of narcotic drugs were a major concern for the international forces and the Afghan government. Efforts to eradicate the cultivation of opium poppy and the manufacturing of narcotic drugs like opium were not very successful, however, and production had remained high since 2001 (Parenti, 2015). For instance, opium production was around 180 tons per year in 2001; it increased to 3,000 tons a year after the US invasion and further surged to 8,200 tons by 2007 (McCoy, 2021). In 2009, the Obama administration adopted a counternarcotic policy, focusing on: (a) interdiction of opium cultivation synchronized with a counterinsurgency strategy and (b) rural development to support economic projects for village farmers and communities. This policy failed despite the American forces raiding farmlands and confiscating and destroying large quantities of opium poppy (Felbab-Brown, 2013). Afghanistan thus remained the preeminent producer of opium poppy, responsible for a staggering 90% of the world's supply (Chuck, 2015). Between 2001 and 2021, the US government spent \$9 billion on different

community-based programs to ban opium cultivation in Afghanistan. But due to endemic corruption and waste, these programs did not address the root causes of the problem and therefore were not effective in preventing and discouraging farmers from opium poppy cultivation (Whitlock, 2019).

To tackle the growing problem of opium poppy cultivation and drug trafficking, the Karzai government officially declared a ban on opium cultivation and consumption of heroin in 2002. The Afghan government also established the Counternarcotics Directorate in 2002, introduced a National Drugs Control Strategy in 2003, created the Counternarcotics Police within the Ministry of Interior, and adopted a National Drugs Law (RUSI, 2007). President Karzai declared a *jihad* (holy war) against poppy cultivation, stating that it was against Islam. His strategy to end opium cultivation in Afghanistan included four principles: “disrupting the drug trade, strengthening and diversifying legal rural livelihoods, reducing the drug demand and treatment of problem drug users, and developing state institutions at the central and provincial level” (Glaze, 2007, p. 8).

All these efforts failed to prevent and discourage opium poppy cultivation because they did not address the root causes of the problem: (a) the motivation behind of opium poppy cultivation of Afghan farmers is economic aims and (b) pressures on Afghan farmers from war groups to cultivate opium poppy for financial needs. Moreover, it also came to light that many corrupt Afghan government officials were directly involved in the lucrative drug trade (Ahmed, 2016). Afghan farmers therefore continued to harvest opium poppy, particularly in the Helmand province. The Helmand province is the largest provider of narcotic drugs in Afghanistan today (Ward & Byrd, 2004).

## **What Is the Solution to Opium Cultivation in Afghanistan?**

Under the Taliban 2.0, opium poppy cultivation soared further, especially in the year 2022, in terms of land area, production, and income. As per a report of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crimes (UNODC, 2022), 233,000 hectares of land (mostly in the western and south-western parts of the country) were used to cultivate opium poppy in 2022. Compared to the previous year (2021), this marked an increase of 32% or 56,000 hectares of land area that was used for opium poppy cultivation. The report also found that Afghan farmers’ income from opium poppy cultivation surged from US\$425 million in 2021 to US\$1.4 billion in 2022 (UNODC, 2022). The UNODC data further revealed that income from opiates (opium, morphine, and heroin) was the largest share of the Afghan economy. A lion’s share of this income went into the pockets of non-state actors, with Afghan farmers receiving a smaller portion to meet survival needs such as purchasing food, paying for medical expenses, and buying other products and services (UNODC, 2022).

To counter global criticism, the Supreme Leader of the acting government of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA) banned opium poppy cultivation across the country through a decree in 2022. The IEA also launched a campaign, under

the Counternarcotics Police of the Ministry of Interior, to forcefully destroy opium poppy plants in various farms located mostly in the Helmand, Farah, Kandahar, Badakhshan, and Nangarhar provinces (Limaye, 2023).

According to an UNODC (2023) survey, the measures taken by the IEA administration managed to reduce opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan by a whopping 95% in all parts of the country (i.e., a reduction of opium poppy cultivation from 6,200 tons in 2022 to 333 tons in 2023). While this reflected a remarkable reduction in opium poppy cultivation following the supreme leader's edict, it aggravated the economic difficulties faced by rural farmers (UNODC, 2024). Afghanistan has already suffered an economic meltdown due to political changes since 2021, with more than half of the population at risk of hunger, malnutrition, disease, and death. The drastic reduction in opium poppy cultivation, by aggravating rural poverty, has made the economic situation faced by the Afghan people even worse. This, in turn, may further deepen the poverty and unemployment rates in Afghanistan and induce people to migrate to other countries, thus creating a humanitarian crisis (Byrd, 2023).

There is thus an urgent need for an effective long-term economic strategy for Afghanistan. In designing and implementing this strategy, the role of the international community will be crucial. If Afghanistan has to move away in a sustainable way from opium poppy cultivation, which will generate major economic hardship for the people, it will require meaningful support from the international community, particularly from donor states who have been affected by the Afghan drug trade. It is fairly obvious that economic, political, and security drivers were principally behind the opium poppy cultivation culture in Afghanistan. Now that Afghanistan has a stable government that has taken drastic steps to reduce opium poppy cultivation, it has once again aggravated deep economic hardship for the already impoverished rural poor in the midst of severely curtailed national economy. If the economic situation in Afghanistan does not improve quickly, it may again incentivize the cultivation of opium poppy (Kamminga, 2019).

Thinking long-term, the Afghan government must convince farmers to replace opium poppy crops with other legal crops. Afghanistan holds ample water resources and agricultural land. However, it must better manage and harvest these resources to achieve maximum farm output, which will increase farmers' income. This will be a tough challenge since the agrarian infrastructure in Afghanistan has been "completely or partially" destroyed by armed conflict for the past four decades (Meng et al., 2024). This is where international donors will have to play a big supportive role.

This is easier said than done. No country has yet officially recognized the Taliban government in power in Kabul, although a few have cautiously reopened their embassies and consulates. Moreover, some of the major agrarian infrastructure projects that remain incomplete must be completed speedily. Other projects are in need of major upgrades. For instance, the Salma Dam in Herat, Kamal Khan Dam in Nimroz, and the Qosh Tapa Canal are in need of upgrades and proper maintenance. These dams and canals are crucial for sustainable agriculture growth in Afghanistan. International donors must also help the Afghan government rebuild devastated irrigation systems, operate water management initiatives, and reboot the agricultural sector with modern equipment.

## Conclusion

Afghanistan has enjoyed security and stability under the IEA, which provides a good opportunity for international donors to work with the Afghan government to create a long-term sustainable agrarian system where rural farmers are encouraged and supported to grow wheat, fruits, vegetables, and livestock. But this requires firm determination and commitment of the Afghanistan government, the international community, and relevant stakeholders to gradually build and expand irrigation systems, better manage water resources, and focus on rural development and capacity-building programs for farmers. The aim to efficiently end opium poppy cultivation cannot be achieved without foreign aid and direct investment from donor countries and humanitarian aid agencies (Ahmed, 2016; García-Yi, 2019).


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