

# The Drug Trade in Afghanistan: Understanding Motives behind Farmers' Decision to Cultivate Opium Poppies

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## Introduction

As heroin consumption recently increased around the globe, newspapers reported a similar rise in opium cultivation in Afghanistan, which produces around 90 percent of the heroin consumed worldwide. According to the United Nations, in 2014, poppy cultivation reached its highest level since the 1930s and many studies foresee that the country will remain the primary source of opium in the coming years.<sup>1</sup>

Many programs aiming at eradicating opium cultivation and focusing on providing alternatives to farmers have failed. The high level of corruption which permeates the Afghan system offers only a partial explanation for the failure. Opium cultivation is such a profitable business that offering attractive alternatives to farmers is difficult and costly. Us-

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ing basic human needs theory to understand the flourishing of the drug trade since the 1990s, this essay examines implications for policy making. It argues that programs aimed at reducing poppy cultivation and the production of heroin need to adopt a more diverse and imaginative lens, taking into account economic and security basic human needs, as they often did, but also stressing social human needs.

## **From the late 1990s to mid-2000s: poppy cultivation as the only viable option for farmers to answer basic human needs**

In the 1990s, poppy cultivation appeared in war-torn Afghanistan. With the lack of a stable and centralized government, the country was the perfect candidate to become the next producer of extensive poppy cultivation. In a report published by the United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC), “the rise of opium cultivation has occurred parallel to an 87 percent decline in poppy cultivation in Southeast Asia’s ‘golden triangle,’”<sup>2</sup> comprised of Laos, Thailand and Myanmar. Poppy cultivation first started in Pakistan, however, the United States poured \$100 million into the country to help eradicate opium. As explained by Ahmed Rashid, author of the books *Taliban* and *Descent into Chaos*, in 1999, “Pakistan became virtually drug-free, as opium production shifted ... to Afghanistan, now under the Taliban regime”.<sup>3</sup>

Production rose to 2,800 tons in 1997. Yet, as written by Graham Farrell and John Thorne in an essay published by the International Journal of Drug Policy, “in the face of international pressure plus diplomacy from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the Taliban regime enforced an existing ban on opium poppy growing from July 2000 onwards”.<sup>4</sup> They were told that such a ban would win them international sympathy. Ahmed Rashid writes that “after three consecutive bumper crops, the Taliban suddenly banned poppy cultivation in 2001. Harshly imposed on farmers, the ban was highly effective—opium production that year slumped to just 185 tons—and was termed ‘the most effective drug control action of modern times’”.<sup>5</sup> Yet, this deprived many farmers from the revenues necessary to feed their families, and eventually increased opposition to the regime. Right after the collapse of the Tal-

iban regime following the US-led war, farmers started again to cultivate opium.

The international community's role in fighting the drug trade has however been ambiguous most of the time, due, in part, to a lack of awareness about the importance of drugs in fueling the conflict. In their search for Osama Bin Laden, the United States relied heavily on warlords who they knew were involved in the trafficking of drugs, in order to gain information on al Qaeda, thus sending, according to Ahmed Rashid, "the first and clearest message to the drug lords: that they would not be targeted".<sup>6</sup>

After the Taliban lost most of their support from farmers due to the harshly-imposed ban on poppy cultivation, they realized that authorizing the growing of opium would win them support and bring them funds necessary to continue the insurrection. While they reauthorized the cultivation of opium in the areas they ruled, Wali Jan, an elderly farmer cultivating opium, explained to Ahmed Rashid that "we cannot be more grateful to the Taliban. ... [They] have brought us security so we can grow our poppy in peace. I need the poppy crop to support my 14 family members".<sup>7</sup> By enabling farmers to feed their families, poppy cultivation answered farmers' basic human needs in a way that could not be met before. According to Johan Galtung, president of the Galtung-Institute for Peace Theory and Peace Practice, "the term 'basic' serves to further qualify the notion of a need as a necessary condition, as something that has to be satisfied at least to some extent in order for the need subject to function as a human being. When a basic human need is not satisfied, some kind of fundamental disintegration will take place".<sup>8</sup> Therefore, basic human needs constitute irreducible and non-negotiable essentials in human life. Human beings would do whatever is in their power in order to satisfy such needs that are necessary for their survivals. In the Afghan case, Vanda Felbab-Brown, a senior fellow in the Center for 21st Century Security and Intelligence in the Foreign Policy program at Brookings, states that "although the illicit drug economy exacerbates insecurity, strengthens corruption, produces macroeconomic distortions, and contributes to drug use, it also provides a vital lifeline for many Afghans and enhances their human security".<sup>9</sup>

Abraham Maslow, a psychology professor at Brandeis University in the 1960s, established a hierarchy amongst basic human needs and the ways human beings look for their satisfaction. Although the importance of a need may vary depending on many factors affecting people differently, amongst others culture and religion, I agree with Maslow's statement that physiological needs tend to come first. These consist of what the body needs to function, such as food and water. As Maslow writes: "if all the needs are unsatisfied, and the organism is then dominated by the physiological needs, all other needs may become simply nonexistent or be pushed into the background".<sup>10</sup> As the cultivation of opium brought more money to farmers, it enabled them to access basic goods needed for their survival. In contrast, other jobs and the cultivation of other crops did not appear as attractive or even viable alternatives: according to Ahmed Rashid, in 2000, "Average salaries [were] around US\$ 1-3 a month. As a result of grinding poverty and no jobs, a large percentage of the urban population [was] totally dependent on UN agencies for basic survival and subsidized food supplies".<sup>11</sup> Therefore, and as written by Ahmed Rashid, "after 9/11, growing opium was a matter of prudent judgment".<sup>12</sup> Since the demand for heroin—especially in Western countries at this time—was so high, there was a demand for farmers to grow opium.

Wali Jan's testimony also highlights a need for safety that could, according to him, be met only under the Taliban, and was a necessary factor in enabling him to grow poppy and feed his family. Safety needs, according to Maslow, come second. To satisfy these needs, farmers were therefore dependent on the Taliban, on warlords or government officials protecting them so that they could take advantage of the drug trade in exchange.

Other testimonies highlight a need that has often been overlooked in understanding farmers' motivations to cultivate opium, at least at the beginning, when heroin was not consumed in Afghanistan and in neighboring Muslim countries. It consists of the need to find an ideological and, in the present case, a religious justification to one's actions. As stated by Ahmed Rashid, "Rashid tells me without a hint of sarcasm, 'Opium is permissible because it is consumed by *kafirs* [unbelievers] in the West

and not by Muslims or Afghans”.<sup>13</sup> This explanation highlights the need to make one’s action look permissible and in line with one’s values. If growing poppy would not have fitted in the farmer’s conception and understanding of their religion, it would have created a dichotomy with their cultures and beliefs, which are essential for people to give a meaning to their lives. This echoes Maslow, who writes: “gratification becomes as important a concept as deprivation in motivation theory, for it releases the organism from the domination of a relatively more physiological need, permitting thereby the emergence of other more social goals”.<sup>14</sup>

### **In the 2000s: Afghan society and economy become addicted to opium cultivation while the consumption of heroin by fellow Muslims rises**

As the production of heroin kept rising, the international community became much more concerned with opium cultivation. However, in 2004, action against the drug trade in Afghanistan became very complicated, as drugs now permeated all parts of Afghan politics, society and economy.

Facing the increase in opium cultivation and its consequences on the situation in Afghanistan and at home, the international community was forced to take action. Yet, the programs implemented didn’t take the rampant corruption and power relations at play into account, which eventually amounted to alienating farmers even more. This echoes Ahmed Rashid, who writes that “some ground eradication did start but only made matters worse. Among the Pashtun tribes, any kind of eradication was considered unfair because the poor farmer would be hit first while the rich ones could bribe their way out of trouble”.<sup>15</sup>

The failure of such policies, and the continuous increase in opium production implied that new markets had to be found to distribute the increasing production of heroin. The justification that only non-believers were consuming fell apart, as heroin addiction rose amongst Muslims in Afghanistan and neighboring countries. According to a survey funded by the US government, “there are an estimated 2.9 million drug users in [Afghanistan]—one of the highest per capita in the world”.<sup>16</sup> Opium cultivation, taking place in rural areas, was first impacting rural

populations, as the rate of drug use was far higher in these areas than in urban ones. In addition, the Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs states that “the prevalence of addiction and severity of consumption among Afghan children is the highest documented in the world”.<sup>17</sup> As explained by Mohammed Ibrahim Azhar, the deputy minister of counternarcotics in Afghanistan, in an interview to Pamela Constable for *The Washington Post*: “people used to assume that we cultivated poppy but only for export. Today ... at least 5 percent of the drugs produced in Afghanistan are consumed here”.<sup>18</sup>

In addition, farmers were earning more than they would have with other jobs, and were slightly above the subsistence level. Indeed, the United Nations published a report in 2008 titled “Is poverty driving the Afghan opium boom?” “It rejected the idea that farmers would starve without the poppy, concluding that ‘poverty does not appear to have been the main driving factor in the expansion of opium poppy cultivation in recent years’.”<sup>19</sup> As the years passed and the drug trade developed, the geography of poppy cultivation evolved too, being limited to southern areas where institutions were the weakest and instability was very high.

With the increase of fellow Muslims’ addiction to heroin, the justification for allowing opium cultivation could obviously not be considered valid anymore. We could understand the constant growth in poppy cultivation as an illustration of many farmers’ alienation from their religion and culture. The social and spiritual link between farmers and their fellow Muslims, taken into account at the beginning of the flourishing of poppy cultivation, was broken, as they were cultivating what would be detrimental to many fellow Afghans and Muslims. Farmers were also under much pressure from traffickers to continue cultivating opium and for many, leaving the cultivation of opium for another job was now an almost impossible choice to make.

Individuals’ needs satisfaction—the farmers and their families—became separated from their community fulfillment, leading to a vicious cycle. The gap between the different groups involved in the drug trade—traffickers, farmers, and consumers—grew, further dividing Afghan society.

## A vicious cycle for development aid

The drug trade is now imbedded in all parts of Afghan politics, and maintains the corruption at very high levels. In 2012, Transparency International ranked Afghanistan 174 out of 176 countries in its Corruption Perceptions Index.<sup>20</sup> The revenues from the drug trade permeate all factions involved in the conflict. As government officials, warlords and the Taliban are involved the drug trade, its profits in turn fuel the conflict.

Mainstream media tend to focus on the ways the Taliban profit from the drug trade. Indeed, as Thom Shanker, a correspondent for *The New York Times*, writes: “United Nations figures show that Afghan insurgents reap at least \$100 million a year from the drug trade, although some estimates put the figure at five times as much”.<sup>21</sup> In addition to revenues from the drug trade, many eradication programs have had grave consequences on the poorest farmer’s livelihoods. Farmers view the implementation of such programs as unfair, and this in turn decreases the level of trust for future programs, leading the Taliban to recruit more people. Yet, the Taliban receive only a small portion of the benefits generated by the drug trade. Indeed, as explained by Jonathan Caulkins, Jonathan Kulick and Mark Kleiman in *Foreign Policy*: “The Taliban take 2 to 12 percent of a \$4 billion industry; farmers, traffickers, smugglers, and corrupt officials collectively earn much more”.<sup>22</sup>

Poppy cultivation also permeates Karzai government, which was criticized for being kind to poppy farmers and drug lords, trying to maintain its popularity in areas where the population was heavily dependent on the drug trade. This leads Thomas Schweich to write that, as a result, “more than 95 percent of the residents of ... the poppy-growing provinces—voted for President Karzai”.<sup>23</sup> At all levels, the Karzai administration was involved in the trade: “a lot of intelligence ... indicated that senior Afghan officials were deeply involved in the narcotics trade. Narco-traffickers were buying off hundreds of police chiefs, judges and other officials. Narco-corruption went to the top of the Afghan government”.<sup>24</sup> Ahmed Wali Karzai, President Karzai’s half-brother, was repeatedly accused of profiting from the drug trade.<sup>25</sup>

After the election of the new President Ashraf Ghani in 2014, some hopes started to emerge due to Ghani's promises to fight corruption and poverty, and to strengthen institutions. Talking about the government of Afghanistan, the Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs writes that it "does not encourage or facilitate illicit drug production or distribution, nor is it involved in laundering proceeds from the sale of illicit drugs. However, there are credible allegations that many central, provincial, and district level government officials directly engage in and benefit from the drug trade".<sup>26</sup> Rampant corruption is a main obstacle in fighting against illicit drugs and implementing programs. Moreover, authorities have little access to very rural areas, where farmers grow opium.

Hence major research on eradication programs now advise to maintain them only in areas where legal economy dominates and where institutions are strong. In areas where instability is still very high, other programs should be prioritized, focusing first on weakening the insurgency and implementing better governance and security.<sup>27</sup> Projects should be better monitored so as to ensure that the money does not fuel the Taliban nor government officials and warlords.

While legitimate economic sector has been destroyed by the long-lasting conflict, the illicit sector has developed to unprecedented levels. As funding was not available in the licit economy, politicians came to rely on the illicit sector in order to secure funding.<sup>28</sup> This, in turn, strengthened the illicit economy, while weakening the legal sector. According to Rod Nordland, an international correspondent for *The New York Times*, "drug trafficking suffocates the normal economic sector", leaving the economy "heavily dependent on criminal enterprises, rising corruption that undermines efforts to promote democracy".<sup>29</sup> Indeed, "the World Bank reports that the estimated opium GDP of Afghanistan is between \$2.6 and \$ 2.7 billion, which amounts to 27 percent of the country's total GDP (both licit and illicit)".<sup>30</sup>

This directly impacts development aid and its attempts to fight the drug trade. Development programs had to rely on traffickers in order to be carried out. The result, as stated by Ahmed Rashid was that "drug money paralyzed the building of a legal economy, as no industry, ag-

riculture, or trade could compete with drug profits. People could not be persuaded to take ordinary jobs because the drug industry provided better salaries".<sup>31</sup> Programs aimed at providing farmers with other alternatives to answer their physiological needs failed. While growing opium enabled farmers to better satisfy their basic human needs, by bringing them more money and more protection, farmers were rarely convinced to give up poppy cultivation for programs which would not fulfill their families' needs as well as growing opium. In addition, since most of the money from these programs was redirected to traffickers, farmers were very distrustful of their implementation.

Adapting the theories of Herbert C. Kelman, Director of the Program on International Conflict Analysis and Resolution at Harvard's Weatherhead Center for International Affairs from 1993 to 2003, to the present case, being able to help farmers answer their basic human needs through the legal system is of primary importance for social and political institutions to function. Programs should put more emphasis on other basic needs, such as social ones. Since farmers cannot hold on to the justification that heroin is only consumed by non-believers anymore, this deprives them from answering their need for identity, belonging and religion. Programs aimed at decreasing opium cultivation should therefore, while still focusing on the satisfaction of physiological needs, focus on what Kelman calls "collective psychological needs", which include the "needs for identity, security, recognition, participation, dignity, and justice".<sup>32</sup> He adds that "failure to fulfill these needs or threats to them contribute significantly to the causes of conflict, and perhaps even more so the escalation and perpetuation of conflicts".<sup>33</sup> By being alienated from their culture and religion, farmers are further separated from their culture and identity. Programs facilitating their reconnection to values important to them should be developed. The fight against opium cultivation needs to happen on many fronts including through enhancing democratic participation, improving access to justice, increasing security, and restoring human dignity through, amongst others, reconnecting to religion.

As we have seen, the Taliban's statement that opium cultivation was allowed only if not consumed by believers was appealing to farmers who

engaged in poppy cultivation. Highlighting the failure of such reasoning, by raising awareness in rural areas about the impact of drug addiction on fellow Muslim, could enhance farmers' desire to dissociate themselves from poppy cultivation. Such programs could also involve farmers who decided not to take part in the trade since the beginning, as they would be the best advocates for the cause. Indeed, Matthew Lacouture, from Wayne State University, writes that "drug use, and by extension its production, is prohibited in the Quran, and this prohibition serves as one of the most common reasons given by those who choose to not cultivate opium".<sup>34</sup> Hence, according to Liana Rosen and Kenneth Katzman, the importance of "dissemination of public information programming, community engagement efforts, and media campaigns designed to inform, educate, deter, and dissuade the general population as well as those identified as potential opium poppy farmers, from involvement in the drug trade".<sup>35</sup>

The failure of the present enforcement regime also brings the issue drug legalization. While rejected by U.S. officials, several British officials have advanced arguments in favor of legalizing drugs. Following William Patey, British ambassador to Afghanistan from 2010 to 2012, "if we cannot deal effectively with supply, then the only alternative would seem to be to try to limit the demand for illicit drugs by making a supply of them available from a legally regulated market".<sup>36</sup> This would help provide drug addicts with a better healthcare, while empowering the Afghan government through a better control of the drug trade. This, in turn would provide drug addicts with better healthcare, since, still according to William Patey, "in the unregulated prohibited market, there is no quality control, no purity guide, and no safer use advice".<sup>37</sup>

Yet, this raises once again the issue of corruption. Indeed, since many government officials personally benefit from the illicit drug trade, we could expect them to strongly oppose drug legalization.

## **Conclusion**

As the drug trade flourished, farmers cultivating opium were taken into a vicious cycle ultimately affecting all parts of Afghan society, politics and economy. Defusing such a cycle requires providing alternatives to

satisfy physiological needs, as has been the focus of most programs. Yet, it should also involve reconnecting farmers to their society, culture and religion and thus rely more heavily on the satisfaction of social basic needs, which have often been overlooked by such programs.

Most discussions regarding the drug trade in Afghanistan state that stopping the cultivation of opium would defuse the conflict by reducing the Taliban's funding. Yet, this statement is only partly true, as it minimizes the role of the trade in fueling other warlords and in increasing corruption within the Afghan government. We should think of the implementation of the legalization of drugs, as well as of the empowerment of the Afghan government in implementing such programs, as top priorities. This would ultimately enable to better tackle traffickers and corruption, while still providing farmers with viable alternatives.

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