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## *How the Drug War in Afghanistan Undermines America's War on Terror*

by Ted Galen Carpenter

### **Executive Summary**

There is a growing tension between two U.S. objectives in Afghanistan. The most important objective is—or at least should be—the eradication of the remaining Al Qaeda and Taliban forces in that country. But the United States and its coalition partners are now also emphasizing the eradication of Afghanistan's drug trade. These anti-drug efforts may fatally undermine the far more important anti-terrorism campaign.

Like it or not, the growing of opium poppies (the source of heroin) is a huge part of Afghanistan's economy—roughly half of the country's annual gross domestic product. As long as the United States and other drug-consuming countries pursue a prohibitionist strategy, a massive black market premium exists that will make the cultivation of drug crops far more lucrative than competing crops in Afghanistan or any other drug-source country. For many Afghan farmers, growing opium poppies is the difference between prosperity and destitution. There is

a serious risk that they will turn against the United States and the U.S.-supported government of President Hamid Karzai if Washington and Kabul pursue vigorous anti-drug programs. In addition, regional warlords who have helped the United States combat Al Qaeda and Taliban forces derive substantial profits from the drug trade. They use those revenues to pay the militias that keep them in power. A drug eradication campaign could easily drive important warlords into alliance with America's terrorist adversaries.

Even those Americans who oppose drug legalization and endorse the drug war as a matter of general policy should recognize that an exception needs to be made in the case of Afghanistan. At the very least, U.S. officials should be willing to look the other way regarding the opium crop and recognize that the fight against radical Islamic terrorists must have a higher priority than anti-drug measures.

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## **The war on drugs is interfering with the U.S. effort to destroy Al Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan.**

### **Introduction**

The war on drugs is interfering with the U.S. effort to destroy Al Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan. U.S. officials increasingly want to eradicate drugs as well as nurture Afghanistan's embryonic democracy, symbolized by the pro-Western regime of President Hamid Karzai. They need to face the reality that it is not possible to accomplish both objectives.

An especially troubling indicator came in August 2004 when Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld stated that drug eradication in Afghanistan was a high priority of the Bush administration and indicated that the United States and its coalition partners were in the process of formulating a "master plan" for dealing with the problem.<sup>1</sup> "The danger a large drug trade poses in this country is too serious to ignore," Rumsfeld said. "The inevitable result is to corrupt the government and way of life, and that would be most unfortunate."<sup>2</sup>

The secretary skirted the issue of what specific role U.S. troops would play in the intensified drug eradication effort. It soon became clear that U.S. military commanders in Afghanistan were less than thrilled at the prospect of becoming glorified narcotics cops. Less than a week after Rumsfeld's statement, Maj. Gen. Eric T. Olson, the commander of Combined Task Force 76 in Kandahar, stated bluntly that "at this point in time, U.S. troops will not be involved in counterdrug or counternarcotics operations at all."<sup>3</sup>

Olson seemed to be out of step with his boss, but his comments reflect the longstanding reluctance of U.S. military personnel to complicate their mission of eradicating the remaining Al Qaeda and Taliban forces by becoming entangled in the complex issue of drug trafficking. Drug eradication "wasn't high on the list" admitted a Green Beret officer in 2003. "We pressured the warlords not to engage in the activity, but with all the opium in their caches, we knew . . . that they were not going to let it rot."<sup>4</sup> The official U.S.

military policy has been to destroy drug processing facilities (not crops) only if they are discovered "incidental to military operations and if the mission permits."<sup>5</sup> German troops, operating in Afghanistan as part of a NATO peacekeeping force, have adopted an even more laissez-faire attitude. They maintain a small garrison in the town of Kunduz, which lies in the middle of opium country, but the garrison's orders have been to refrain from interfering with the drug trade.<sup>6</sup>

To the extent that the coalition forces in Afghanistan have pursued anti-drug initiatives at all, the United States has pushed its British partners to assume primary responsibility. The British effort, launched in 2002, consisted largely of offering Afghan farmers financial inducements to give up the cultivation of opium in favor of other crops. The strategy has not worked any better than it has in other parts of the world where it has been tried. Most farmers participating in the British program simply pocketed the money and continued to grow opium. Indeed, many of them seemed to regard the stipend as additional operating capital and actually expanded their production.<sup>7</sup> One British critic described the effort as "a failure of farcical proportions."<sup>8</sup>

Teresita Schaffer, a former U.S. diplomat who now directs the South Asia Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, agrees that the U.S. military has been unenthusiastic about anti-drug missions from the moment it entered Afghanistan in the autumn of 2001. "They feel it's a bottomless pit, and they don't want to put a bottomless supply of troops in Afghanistan."<sup>9</sup> Schaffer also noted, though, that the military had initially resisted other attempts to broaden its mission in Afghanistan, and yet ended up adopting those expanded roles within a few months. For example, the military command insisted that it would not take part in nation-building activities and would not try to maintain security on the country's far-flung road network. It has since embarked on both projects. That same pattern now seems to be happening with the drug issue.

## Washington's Rationale for Making Drug Eradication a High Priority

There are several reasons why Washington is now making the anti-drug campaign a high priority. Congressional pressure is mounting on the Bush administration to make counternarcotics goals a significant part of the U.S. military mission in Afghanistan. Influential members of Congress, such as Rep. Henry Hyde (R-IL), chairman of the House International Relations Committee, have made it clear that they want action on the drug front. Although not specifically advocating crop eradication measures, Hyde has urged the Pentagon to treat all opium labs and storage areas in Afghanistan as "legitimate military targets and utilize narcotics-related intelligence to locate other such targets."<sup>10</sup>

Another factor is that the United States is coming under increasing pressure from Afghanistan's neighbors in Central Asia and from drug-consuming nations in Europe to "do something" about the flood of narcotics coming out of that country.<sup>11</sup> Russia has been especially outspoken. More than a year ago, Gen. Viktor Cherkessov, the head of Russia's new drug enforcement agency, stated that drug production in Afghanistan had increased "catastrophically" and that the United States was not using its resources "to the fullest extent" to curtail production of Afghan opium.<sup>12</sup> Russian president Vladimir Putin was considerably less diplomatic in criticizing U.S. and NATO forces in September 2004. "They're doing almost nothing, not even just to reduce the drugs problem," Putin fumed. "They should get more involved and not just watch as caravans roam all over Afghanistan."<sup>13</sup>

The Bush administration is sensitive to both congressional pressure and criticism from foreign capitals. The latter is especially true when it comes from an important ally in the war against radical Islamic terrorism. But other factors are even more important. Rumsfeld alluded to a critical reason for

heightened U.S. concern—the potential for the drug commerce to corrupt Afghanistan's entire economic and political structure. Robert B. Charles, assistant secretary of state for international narcotics and law enforcement affairs, emphasized the same point:

Stability in Afghanistan cannot be achieved without addressing the drug issue, and counternarcotics programs cannot be deferred to a later date. Afghanistan is already at risk of its narco-economy leading unintentionally but inexorably to the evolution of a narco-state, with deeply entrenched public corruption and complicity in the drug trade undermining stability, containment of other threats, and all our assistance programs.<sup>14</sup>

There are ample reasons for those concerns. Although arrests for narcotics trafficking are made from time to time, one police official admitted that "one thousand dollars gets you out of any trouble."<sup>15</sup> Indeed, even some high level officials of the Karzai government (including the vice president who was assassinated last year) are reputed to have ties to the drug trade. One senior Afghan official, speaking privately, told an American reporter: "The drug trafficking has corrupted everything in today's Afghanistan, from the central Transitional Authority in Kabul to the warlords who really run the country."<sup>16</sup>

In addition to the general problem of corruption caused by drug money, U.S. officials are deeply concerned about the opium trade providing a lucrative source of revenue for the Taliban, Al Qaeda, and other enemies of the U.S.-backed Karzai government. Charles noted that the drug trade had helped the Taliban regime stay in power during the late 1990s. Indeed, the DEA estimated that the Taliban collected more than \$40 million a year in profits from the opium trade, with some of the cash going to terrorist groups that operated out of that country.<sup>17</sup> Today, according to Charles, "there are strong indications that these heroin drug profits pro-

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vide funds, to varying degrees, to Taliban remnants, al Qaeda, destabilizing regional warlords, and other terrorist and extremist elements in the region.”<sup>18</sup> Concerns about that factor were heightened last year when the U.S. Navy intercepted at least two drug shipments and detained merchant crews that included individuals directly linked to Al Qaeda.<sup>19</sup>

There is little doubt that terrorist and other anti-government forces profit from the drug trade. What anti-drug crusaders refuse to acknowledge, however, is that the connection between drug trafficking and terrorism is a direct result of making drugs illegal. Not surprisingly, terrorist groups in Afghanistan and other countries are quick to exploit such a vast source of potential funding. Absent a worldwide prohibitionist policy, the profit margins in drug trafficking would be a tiny fraction of their current levels, and terrorist groups would have to seek other sources of revenue.

In any case, the United States faces a serious dilemma if it conducts a vigorous drug eradication campaign in Afghanistan in an effort to dry up the funds flowing to Al Qaeda and the Taliban. Those are clearly not the only factions involved in drug trafficking. Many of Karzai’s political allies are warlords who control the drug trade in their respective regions. Some of these individuals backed the Taliban when that faction was in power, switching sides only when the United States launched its military offensive in Afghanistan in October 2001. There is a serious risk that an anti-drug campaign might cause them to change their allegiance yet again. Even the pro-drug-war *Washington Times* conceded that “a number of heavily armed Tajik tribal leaders that have not been hostile to U.S. forces could lash out if their drug interests are directly and aggressively challenged.”<sup>20</sup> In addition to the need to placate cooperative warlords, the U.S.-led coalition relies on poppy growers to spy on movements of Taliban remnants and Al Qaeda units. Disrupting the opium crop might alienate those crucial sources of information.<sup>21</sup>

## **The Importance of the Drug Trade in Afghanistan**

The drug trade is a central feature of Afghanistan’s economy. That was not always the case, however. Before the Soviet invasion in 1979, Afghanistan was not a major factor in the drug trade. But the Soviet occupation and resulting insurgency by Islamic forces devastated the country’s infrastructure, making it nearly impossible to continue the traditional forms of agriculture and other economic activities. As analyst Doug Bandow notes, “By destroying established social institutions and creating widespread economic chaos, the Soviets turned Afghanistan into a model environment for the drug trade. Villages were bombed, crops were destroyed, livestock was killed and people were displaced.”<sup>22</sup>

In addition, various factions in the anti-Soviet Afghan resistance discovered that trafficking in drugs was a reliable and extensive source of revenue. Afghanistan gradually became one of the leading sources of opium poppies and, therefore, the heroin supply. Indeed, there has been a steady upward trend in opium production for more than two decades.

Very little has changed on the drug front following the end of the Soviet occupation. Violent political factionalism convulsed Afghanistan in the 1990s, gradually coalescing into a civil war between the radical Islamic Taliban regime in Kabul (dominated by the Pashtuns, the largest ethnic group in the country) and the predominantly Uzbek and Tajik Northern Alliance. Both sides were extensively involved in the drug trade to finance their war efforts.

The only significant interruption to the upward trend in drug commerce occurred in 2001 following an edict by the Taliban regime banning opium cultivation on pain of death. (Taliban leaders had an ulterior motive for that move. They had previously stockpiled large quantities of opium and wanted to create a temporary scarcity to drive

up prices and fill the regime's coffers with additional revenue.)<sup>23</sup> Since U.S. forces and their Northern Alliance allies overthrew the Taliban in late 2001, the drug commerce has been even more prominent. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, the trade now amounts to approximately \$2.3 billion—more than half as much as impoverished Afghanistan's legitimate annual gross domestic product.<sup>24</sup> The International Monetary Fund calculates that the drug trade makes up at least 40 percent and perhaps as much as 60 percent of the country's entire GDP.<sup>25</sup>

Today, Afghanistan accounts for approximately 75 percent of the world's opium supply. Production is soaring. The country's poppy crop this year is set to break all records. CIA figures reportedly show cultivation approaching 250,000 acres, up more than 60 percent from the 2003 levels. The previous record was 160,000 acres in 2000.<sup>26</sup> Such record acreage could produce perhaps as much as 7,200 metric tons of opium gum (the raw ingredient for heroin). A survey of farmers' intentions published by the UNODC in February 2004 pointed to the likelihood of a record crop. Sixty-nine percent of all poppy farmers surveyed indicated that they intended to increase the acreage under cultivation, whereas only four percent intended to reduce it.<sup>27</sup>

Some 264,000 families are estimated to be involved in growing opium poppies. Even measured on the basis of nuclear families, that translates into roughly 1.7 million people—about 6 percent of Afghanistan's population.<sup>28</sup> Given the role of extended families and clans in Afghan society, the number of people affected is much greater than that. Indeed, it is likely that 20 to 30 percent of the population is involved directly or indirectly in the drug trade. For many of those people, opium poppy crops and other aspects of drug commerce are the difference between modest prosperity and destitution.<sup>29</sup> They will not look kindly on efforts to destroy their livelihood.

That is especially true of the Pashtun farmers in southern and eastern Afghanistan, the

core of Karzai's political constituency. As one Western diplomat in Afghanistan told Reuters news service: "If he bulldozes in and destroys crops, if he arrests and punishes farmers, they're definitely going to think that the Taliban have a point when they say the government is bad."<sup>30</sup> Another Western official associated with the anti-narcotics effort conceded that U.S. drug war hawks who want to see U.S. troops become involved in interdiction and eradication efforts do not fully understand the possible ramifications. "It is all well and good them saying they want to do that to save junkies in America from killing themselves. But try telling that to an Afghan farmer. Try telling him that Washington wants to destroy his crop—which provides for his family—because they want to save the lives of American junkies."<sup>31</sup>

The response of the United States and its coalition partners to this dilemma is to emphasize crop substitution programs as well as eradication of the opium crop. The idea is to bribe farmers into growing legal crops instead of poppies. Crop substitution is a strategy with a long and undistinguished pedigree. Since the mid-1980s, Washington has pursued a similar policy in the drug-source countries of South America. Virtually all of those programs have failed—most of them dismally.<sup>32</sup>

Economic realities doom crop substitution schemes. Afghan farmers can typically make between 10 and 30 times as much growing opium poppies as they can any legal crop.<sup>33</sup> The prohibitionist policy that the United States and other drug-consuming countries continue to pursue guarantees a huge black market premium for all illegal drugs. Drug traffickers can pay whatever price is necessary to get farmers to cultivate drug crops and still enjoy an enormous profit for their portion of the supply pipeline. Legal crops simply cannot compete financially.

The same problem undermines more ambitious economic development schemes to give drug crop farmers nonagricultural alternatives. Indeed, the South American experience indicates that such programs

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often simply provide additional capital and other benefits to those who have no intention of abandoning the drug trade. For example, aid monies to improve the transportation infrastructure in recipient countries by building modern roads into remote areas (an effort now underway in Afghanistan as well) make it easier for drug farmers to get their crops to market and may open new areas to drug cultivation.<sup>34</sup>

## Conclusion

Despite those daunting economic realities, the U.S. government is putting increased pressure on the fragile Karzai government to crack down on drug crop cultivation. And the Afghan regime is responding. In late September 2004, Afghan police and security forces destroyed 47 laboratories used to refine heroin from opium and seized 61 tons of narcotics in a series of raids near the border with Pakistan.<sup>35</sup> (Although the seizure sounds impressive, Afghanistan produced more than 3,600 tons of opium last year.)

U.S. pressure on the Karzai government is a big mistake. The Taliban and their Al Qaeda allies are resurgent in Afghanistan, especially in the southern part of the country. If zealous American drug warriors alienate hundreds of thousands of Afghan farmers, the Karzai government's hold on power, which is none too secure now, could become even more precarious. Washington would then face the unpalatable choice of letting radical Islamists regain power or sending more U.S. troops to suppress the insurgency.

U.S. officials need to keep their priorities straight. Our mortal enemy is Al Qaeda and the Taliban regime that made Afghanistan into a sanctuary for that terrorist organization. The drug war is a dangerous distraction in the campaign to destroy those forces. Recognizing that security considerations sometimes trump other objectives would hardly be an unprecedented move by Washington. U.S. agencies quietly ignored the drug-trafficking activities of anti-communist fac-

tions in Central America during the 1980s when the primary goal was to keep those countries out of the Soviet orbit.<sup>36</sup> In the early 1990s, the United States also eased its pressure on Peru's government regarding the drug eradication issue when President Alberto Fujimori concluded that a higher priority had to be given to winning coca farmers away from the Maoist Shining Path guerrilla movement.<sup>37</sup>

U.S. officials should adopt a similar pragmatic policy in Afghanistan and look the other way regarding the drug-trafficking activities of friendly warlords. And above all, the U.S. military must not become the enemy of Afghan farmers whose livelihood depends on opium poppy cultivation. True, some of the funds from the drug trade will find their way into the coffers of the Taliban and Al Qaeda. That is an inevitable side effect of a global prohibitionist policy that creates such an enormous profit from illegal drugs. But alienating pro-Western Afghan factions in an effort to disrupt the flow of revenue to the Islamic radicals is too high a price to pay. Washington should stop putting pressure on the Afghan government to pursue crop eradication programs and undermine the economic well-being of its own population. U.S. leaders also should refrain from trying to make U.S. soldiers into anti-drug crusaders; they have a difficult enough job fighting their terrorist adversaries in Afghanistan. Even those policymakers who oppose ending the war on drugs as a general matter ought to recognize that, in this case, the war against radical Islamic terrorism must take priority.

## Notes

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23. That is a conclusion reached by both independent experts and the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration. See Statement of Karen B. Tandy, Administrator, Drug Enforcement Administration, Before the Committee on International Relations, U.S. House of Representatives, February 12, 2004, "United States Policy Towards Narco-Terrorism in Afghanistan," p. 2. Copy in author's possession. See also Richard Wolffe, "U.S. Prepares for Long Battle against Heroin," *Financial Times*, January 10, 2002, p. 4.
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