

An Analysis of the Opium Situation in Afghanistan.

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On May 23, 2005, Afghan President Hamid Karzai, together with President Bush, held a press conference in the East Room of the White House to discuss the current state of Afghanistan. Inevitably, questions arose regarding opium, which currently accounts for 52 percent of Afghanistan's gross domestic product (GDP).¹ Karzai announced that cultivation of poppies, which are grown and processed to create opium, could be eradicated in "five or six years".² Therefore, opium's vast stake in the economy of Afghanistan, which is already greatly impoverished, must be replaced. President Bush believes crop substitution is a viable option. Bush believes crops such as pomegranates, honeydew melons, wheat, and corn are all practical alternatives to poppy cultivation. In a perfect world, legal crops would constitute all of Afghanistan's agricultural products, but the simple fact remains that poppy is far more valuable. In 2004, for example, wheat yielded gross profits of about \$390 per hectare. Conversely, poppy cultivation yielded gross profits of about \$4,600 per hectare under the same conditions.³ Aside from the feasibility of the aforementioned timeline and the numerous logistical problems involved with eradication, one gravely important, and widely ignored, question arises: will the quality of life be improved if poppy cultivation is eradicated? This paper argues that Afghanistan would benefit greatly from a significantly slower eradication program than the current one proposed. A gradual program would give Afghanistan's economy time to grow and absorb the impact suffered by opium withdrawal; Afghanistan's economy is simply too fragile to withstand eradication.

Prior to further discussion, three important factors should be considered when attempting to understand why farmers are pressured into cultivating opium: it is

¹ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, "Summary Findings of Opium Trends in Afghanistan, 2005," http://www.unodc.org/pdf/afghanistan_2005/annex_opium-afghanistan-2005-09-09.pdf ., 1.

² U.S. Department of State, "President Welcomes Afghan President Karzai to the White House," <http://www.state.gov/p/sa/rls/rm/2005/46626.htm> .

³ United Nations, "United Nations Drugs Office Reports Major Increase in Opium Cultivation in Afghanistan," <http://www.un.org/news/press/docs/2004/afg269.doc.htm> .

extremely valuable, it is cheap to plant, and poppy is ideally suited for Afghanistan's arid climate. Also, in a few select areas, poppy allows for two growing seasons (two crops) per year; wheat typically bears only one crop per year. Poppy is also able to withstand extended periods of drought better than typical staple crops. Poppy cultivation is also very labor intensive but does not require expensive, burdensome machinery. If one disregards the obvious detrimental effects of opium, poppy is the ideal crop for Afghanistan. Unfortunately, farmers are forced to borrow money from illegal drug traffickers at exorbitant rates, which forces farmers, in turn, to continue planting poppy to repay the loans. The drug traffickers typically receive their payment in the form of poppy.⁴ This cycle is repeated *ad nauseam*.

At the aforementioned press conference on May 23, 2005, President Karzai presented a rather one-sided view of the eradication progress. Karzai vaguely proclaimed that a "20 to 30 percent reduction in poppies" could be expected.⁵ A 21% reduction in net hectares devoted to poppy cultivation was achieved but total production of opium was only reduced by 2.4%, which is modest considering the \$780 million the U.S. devoted to opium eradication (although not all of the \$780 million was spent by May of 2005).

	2004	Variation on 2004	2005
Net opium poppy cultivation	131,000 ha	- 21%	104,000 ha
in percent of actual agricultural land	2.9%		2.3%
number of provinces affected ¹	32 (all)		25
Average opium yield	32 kg/ha	22%	39 kg/ha
Production of opium	4200 mt	-2.4%	4,100 mt
in percent of world illicit opium production	87%		87% ²

Figure 1. Opium Yield (Source: Summary Findings of Opium Trends in Afghanistan, 2005, 1.)

Karzai pointed to the great progress made in the province of Nangarhar, which saw a 96% decrease in total hectares of farmland devoted to opium, but he failed to mention that numerous provinces observed a stark increase. For example, the province of

⁴ Farah Stockman, "Women Pay a Price in War on Afghan Drug Trade," http://www.boston.com/news/world/middleeast/articles/2005/09/28/women_pay_a_price_in_war_on_afghan_drug_trade/?page=1 (accessed November 4, 2005).

⁵ U.S. Department of State, "President Welcomes Afghan President Karzai to the White House," <http://www.state.gov/p/sa/rls/rm/2005/46626.htm>.

Nimroz witnessed a 1,370% increase in total hectares.⁶ Karzai also failed to mention that the United States deliberately disregarded his wishes in regard to eradication techniques. On numerous occasions prior to the press conference, Karzai vehemently expressed that he did not want planes to spray poison on opium fields. But in January, reports began to leak that planes were indeed spraying poison on opium fields, especially in Nangarhar.⁷

A rise in various illnesses was reported in the area soon after the spraying.⁸ Christian Parenti, a reporter that interviewed an Afghan opium farmer whose son was poisoned by the spraying, received an ominous response regarding his son's illness. According to the Afghan farmer, "If my son dies, I will join the Taliban, and I will kill as many Americans as I can find."⁹ Karzai was acutely aware that spraying, especially in eastern (Nangarhar in particular) and southern areas could lead to dramatic hostility in the region due to Taliban influences.¹⁰ On numerous occasions, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) has stated that narcotics breed instability and terrorism but have failed to mention that counter-narcotics operations may have the exact same debilitating effect.

The UNODC recently released a report, entitled "The Opium Situation in Afghanistan as of 29 August 2005", which presented a misleading view of current conditions in Afghanistan. The article gave three reasons for the drop in opium cultivation in 2005: presidential respect (unspecified as to which president they are referring to) for anti-opium policies, fear of law enforcement, and lower opium prices.¹¹ An opinion poll released in September of 2005 does support the idea that Afghans are fearful of law enforcement, but the data fails to support the UNODC's suggestion that poppy reduction is related to presidential respect. In fact, the September opinion poll cites "fear of eradication" as the biggest deterrent to poppy production. Also, the UNODC has failed to acknowledge that the correlation between opium supply and demand is a two-

⁶ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, "Summary Findings of Opium Trends in Afghanistan, 2005," http://www.unodc.org/pdf/afghanistan_2005/annex_opium-afghanistan-2005-09-09.pdf, 4.

⁷ Christian Parenti, "Afghan Poppies Bloom," *The Nation*, January 24, 2005. n.p.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ CNN, "Afghanistan Sets Up Trust Fund to Fight Drugs Trade," <http://channels.isp.netscape.com/pf/story.jsp?id=2005102905430002383407&dt=20051029054300&w=RT&rcoview=> (accessed November 4, 2005).

¹¹ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, "The Opium Situation in Afghanistan as of August 2005," http://www.unama-afg.org/docs/_UN%20Docs/_planning&dev/Opium%20Situation%2029Aug05.pdf, 2.

way street. As poppy production is drastically reduced, which is the ultimate goal of the UNODC, the temptation and desire to grow poppy may greatly increase due to higher potential profits. In essence, the cost to fight poppy production may increase exponentially as cuts in production cause opium prices to skyrocket. The September opinion poll suggests that monetary support for alternative crops and livelihood is considerably inadequate; only 0.1 percent of Afghans reduced poppy cultivation because of government assistance. The exact figures are presented in the following chart:

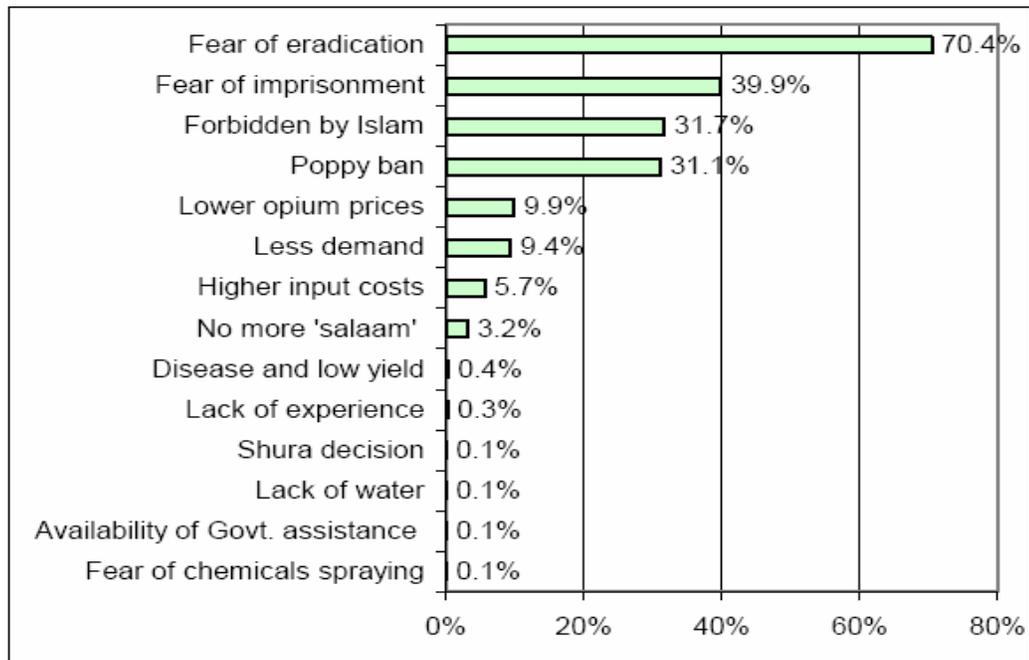


Figure 2: An opinion poll (1,922 farmers polled) regarding why poppy production was reduced or stopped entirely. More than one vote for each reason was counted. (Source: Summary Findings of Opium Trends in Afghanistan, 2005, 11.)

The data suggests that fear of governmental or religious reprisals are the primary reasons for the reduction of poppy. Afghans are curtailing production because they are fearful that their crop will be destroyed, and they will not be able to repay loans from drug traffickers; they are not stopping production because they believe it is in their best long-term interest to do so. Development of alternative livelihood programs should progress at an equal pace with eradication. Unfortunately, alternative livelihood programs

require substantial time and money. Infrastructure, namely roads and irrigation systems, must be built before switching to crops such as wheat, which requires more water and investment capital than poppy, are feasible. Either eradication efforts should be slowed or alternative programs should be accelerated to provide the best environment for Afghans to succeed without opium.

Success in Afghanistan should not merely be judged by how much poppy cultivation is reduced. If that was the case the Taliban should be praised because their opium ban in July of 2000 resulted in an 89.75% reduction of poppy cultivation (in terms of hectares devoted to poppy cultivation).¹² Numerous other factors should be considered, such as quality of life. Early indicators show that eradicating poppy has resulted in a drastic downturn for many families, women in particular. In Nangarhar, which saw a dramatic decrease in poppy production in 2005, there have been numerous reports that indebted farmers were forced to sell their own daughters to repay loans.¹³ Farah Stockman, a reporter embedded in Shinwar, Afghanistan in September of 2005, spoke to numerous people involved in the tragic practice of selling women. Girls as young as fourteen, and some as young as six, were offered to repay loans from drug traffickers.¹⁴ Those who refused to pay their debt were forced to flee the country, typically to surrounding areas such as Pakistan. In 2002, the opium industry recovered rapidly from the Taliban's opium ban. With recovery came an increase in the quality of life for women. The labor-intensive nature of poppy cultivation gave Afghan women a place of employment in an otherwise barren, desolated nation. Women employed in opium fields can make approximately twice as much as the average laborer in Kabul.¹⁵

The eradication of poppy fields left thousands jobless and, like in most times of need, looking to the government for help. In February of 2005, The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs reported that tens of thousands have applied to join the Afghan National Army (ANA) but only a portion can be accepted. General Mohammad Ibrahim Ahmadzai, the chief of staff for ANA recruitment, commented on

¹² United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, "Summary Findings of Opium Trends in Afghanistan, 2005," http://www.unodc.org/pdf/afghanistan_2005/annex_opium-afghanistan-2005-09-09.pdf, 2.

¹³ Farah Stockman, "Women Pay a Price in War on Afghan Drug Trade," http://www.boston.com/news/world/middleeast/articles/2005/09/28/women_pay_a_price_in_war_on_afghan_drug_trade/?page=1 (accessed November 4, 2005).

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Christian Parenti, "Afghan Poppies Bloom," *The Nation*, January 24, 2005. n.p.

the situation: “We have 20,000 people on standby in 34 recruitment centers despite recruiting 3,000 every month.”¹⁶ The boom in ANA applicants is generally a good sign, but it may also highlight the fact that opportunities in the private sector are extraordinarily low. The government simply lacks the funds to supply everyone with jobs.

This paper is not arguing that outside organizations and governments are wrong in their attempt to eliminate illegal opium from Afghanistan and, ultimately, the world. But, Afghans should be given adequate alternative programs before eradication is strongly implemented. Rapidly converting farms from poppy to less valuable crops could result in poverty and starvation if one bad growing season (or disease) occurs. Also, governments and organizations controlling drug policy in Afghanistan should consider alternative proposals to eradication. The Senlis Council, which is based in France, is currently examining whether legalizing opium production in Afghanistan for medicinal purposes could succeed.¹⁷ However, the UN and Afghan government are worried that Afghanistan is not stable enough for the plan to succeed. They are worried that legally produced opium could easily make its way to the illegal sector.¹⁸ It is a justified concern, but, in regard to the risk that legal opium may fall into the wrong hands, the Senlis Council accurately concluded the following: “The risk of diversion exists but it would be minimal compared with 100% diversion occurring outside of a licensing system.”¹⁹

In 2005, Afghanistan accounted for 87 percent of the world’s illegal opium production and efforts made by outside organizations and governments should be applauded.²⁰ However, efforts need to be made to ensure that eradication of poppy does not lead to starvation and further indebtedness. Afghanistan’s economy and GDP is

¹⁶ UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, “Afghanistan: Thousands Choose Army After Abolition of Poppy Cultivation,” <http://www.irinnews.org/report.asp?ReportID=45622&SelectRegion=Asia&SelectCountry=AFGHANISTAN> (accessed November 6, 2005).

¹⁷ The Senlis Council, “Feasibility Study on Opium Licensing in Afghanistan for the Production of Morphine and Other Essential Medicines,” *The Senlis Council Drug Advisory Forum*, http://www.senliscouncil.net/modules/afghanistan_initiatives/feasibility_study/fs_study/, 1.

¹⁸ Anon. “Asia: Not What the Doctor Ordered; Afghanistan,” *The Economist*, October 8, 2005, 74.

¹⁹ The Senlis Council, “Feasibility Study on Opium Licensing in Afghanistan For the Production of Morphine and Other Essential Medicines,” *The Senlis Council Drug Advisory Forum*, http://www.drug-policy.org/modules/afghanistan_initiatives/feasibility_study/fs_study/1, 19.

²⁰ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, “Summary Findings of Opium Trends in Afghanistan, 2005,” http://www.unodc.org/pdf/afghanistan_2005/annex_opium-afghanistan-2005-09-09.pdf, 1.

already startlingly depressed, and it should be the ultimate goal of everyone involved in shaping the future of Afghanistan to ensure that poppy eradication does not drag both even lower. As of June 2005, \$486.2 million has been approved to provide Afghans with alternatives to opium.²¹ Currently, it appears that alternative programs are falling woefully short and eradication is proceeding far too rapidly. However, it remains to be seen if alternative program funding is merely insufficient or that infrastructure improvements simply need to be given more time. Regardless, very few opportunities are available for farmers who have either chosen or been forced to halt poppy production. Equal attention needs to be devoted to opium and non-opium producers alike to ensure the success of Afghanistan.

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²¹ Ibid, 13.

United Nations, “United Nations Drugs Office Reports Major Increase in Opium Cultivation in Afghanistan.” <http://www.un.org/news/press/docs/2004/afg269.doc.htm> (accessed November 2005).

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