

December 2023

Opioid Market Trends in Afghanistan

Poppy Cultivation, Policy and Practice Under the New Regime

Prem Mahadevan, Maria Khoruk,
Alla Mohammad Mohmandzai and
Ruggero Scaturro¹

1. The Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime

All correspondence to: prem.mahadevan@globalinitiative.net



**GLOBAL
INITIATIVE**
AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL
ORGANIZED CRIME

Suggested citation

Mahadevan, P., Khoruk, M., Mohmandzai, A. M. & Scaturro, R. (2023). *Opioid Market Trends in Afghanistan: Poppy Cultivation, Policy and Practice under the New Regime*. SOC ACE Research Paper No. 27. University of Birmingham.

About the authors

Prem Mahadevan is a Senior Analyst at the Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC) specialising in research on organised crime, intelligence and irregular warfare. He has conducted fieldwork on terrorism in South Asia and been responsible for analysing crime trends in Southeast Asia. He has lectured on international relations at European universities and briefed parliamentarians and security officials from across Europe (including NATO) and Asia. He has co-authored policy studies for the Swiss foreign ministry and published in numerous academic journals and edited volumes.

Maria Khoruk is an Analyst at the GI-TOC. Her focuses include Afghanistan and Central Asia. She is a contributor to GI-TOC's Global Strategy against TOC. Maria holds a BA degree in art history from the University of Vienna and an MA in advanced international studies from the Diplomatic Academy of Vienna. Before joining GI-TOC, Maria supported strategic planning and resource mobilisation at the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).

Alla Mohammad Mohmandzai is a Consultant at the Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC). A native of Afghanistan, he has extensive experience managing research projects across Afghanistan and has worked with the UN, the World Bank, and USAID among others.

Ruggero Scaturro is an Analyst at the GI-TOC and a PhD candidate on criminal justice and security in Slovenia. At GI-TOC Ruggero serves as a key expert on drug markets and methodologies on data collection. In particular, he has spent years conducting research on eastern and south-eastern Europe, and on Italian mafia-related issues. His main areas of interest and expertise are drugs trafficking and consumption habits in Europe, as well as the history of Cosa Nostra and its ties with other criminal networks across the Mediterranean.

About SOC ACE

The Serious Organised Crime & Anti-Corruption Evidence (SOC ACE) research programme aims to help 'unlock the black box of political will' for tackling serious organised crime, illicit finance and transnational corruption through research that informs politically feasible, technically sound interventions and strategies. Funded by the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO), SOC ACE is a new component in the Anti-Corruption Evidence (ACE) research programme, alongside Global Integrity ACE and SOAS ACE. SOC ACE is managed by the University of Birmingham, working in collaboration with a number of leading research organisations and through consultation and engagement with key stakeholders.

SOC ACE is funded by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office. The views expressed here do not necessarily reflect the UK Government's official policies.

© Crown Copyright 2023.

Find out more

www.socace-research.org.uk



Follow us on X: [@SOCACE_research](https://twitter.com/SOCACE_research)



Follow us on LinkedIn: www.linkedin.com/company/socace-research

SOC ACE | University of Birmingham | Birmingham | B15 2TT | United Kingdom



UNIVERSITY OF
BIRMINGHAM

Contents

Acronyms and abbreviations	4
Summary	5
1. Introduction	6
Methodology	7
2. The Taliban and the Afghan drug economy: a brief history	9
3. Case study: Helmand	12
4. Case study: Nangarhar	17
5. The opium ban and its implications	23
6. Conclusion	26
References	27

Acronyms and abbreviations

FATA	Federally Administered Tribal Areas
GI-TOC	Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime
ISA	Inter-Services Intelligence
KPK	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
US	United States
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

Summary

How will the new Taliban regime change Afghanistan's illicit drug landscape in the coming years? Are the Taliban genuinely committed to combating the flow of narcotics within and outside Afghanistan, as signalled by the ban on opium cultivation issued by the Taliban leadership in April 2022?

Based on field research coordinated by the Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC) in the Afghan provinces of Helmand and Nangarhar, this paper analyses the changes to the Afghan drug economy since the Taliban's return to power on 15 August 2021, documenting the adaptation of local actors engaged in the opium economy to the events that had a profound impact on their lives. Historical analysis supplements the field research findings and aids our understanding of the shifting conditions of the illicit drug economy in Afghanistan. Given the institutional weakness of Afghan statehood after nearly five decades of civil war, the GI-TOC's approach represents a collation of provincial and district-level assessments rather than a comprehensive country-wide assessment. This research paper outlines the complexities of local conditions and reveals a regime fragmented among varied interests and power structures, seeking to reconcile the profitability of the drugs trade with the strive for legitimacy.

1. Introduction

This research paper set out to capture the implications of the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan in August 2021 for the local realities of the opium trade and the diverse actors whose lives are entangled in the country's pervasive drug economy. Focusing on a narrowly defined geography and period, the paper navigates the uncertainty that was omnipresent following the announcement of the Taliban's opium ban in the two important localities for the country's opium economy: Helmand – the source of more than half of Afghan opium before the April 2022 ban took effect – and Nangarhar, the key opium-producing province in the eastern part of the country. The paper documents a time when the future of the Taliban's drug control and the implications for the livelihoods of poppy-farming rural communities were unclear. All kinds of questions were being asked about the enforcement and sustainability of the opium ban issued by the Taliban in April 2022, its impact on the cohesion of the new regime, and its potential role in exacerbating the humanitarian crisis in the country.

Before the evidence based on remote sensing technologies began appearing in the summer of 2023, suggesting that the ban was resulting in a near-unprecedented reduction in the cultivation of opium poppy, many doubted the seriousness of the Taliban's intentions. With the fall of Kabul in August 2021, foreign funding for Afghan state institutions, amounting to 75% of their operating costs, had ceased. Given the dire economic situation, some saw the Taliban's 'ban' as a gesture intended to win goodwill in western capitals and prod American and European policymakers towards reopening cash flows towards Kabul. With Afghanistan already suffering from droughts which had crippled the agricultural sector, many believed that the Taliban simply could not risk following through with a ban on opium production, particularly as the harvesting season of opium poppy had just begun and farmers had already invested in hiring labourers. The ban, however, to a large extent did not apply to crops that were about to be harvested, but to the 2022-23 planting season which would begin in November 2022 (UN News, 2022).

Some point to the opium economy as a key factor in undermining NATO's statebuilding efforts in Afghanistan and its ultimate inability to roll back the Taliban (Faridi, 2022). However, the drug trade (which includes opiates, cannabis and synthetic drugs) was only one source of the Taliban's funding. The Taliban are believed to have earned revenue by 'taxing' legitimate developmental projects funded by Western governments, as well as truck drivers who transported cargo for Western military forces in Afghanistan. The Taliban saw extortion as a tool to generate revenue. For instance, independent Afghan media reported several instances of the Taliban charging electricity consumers for access to government-supplied electricity in the territories under the insurgency's control (Kohi, 2019; Salehi, 2021). According to such reports, the Taliban were able to collect between 20 to 30 million Afghani (amounting to approximately US\$250-380) from electricity consumers in four (out of fifteen) districts of Balkh province in February 2021 (Javed & Mohamadi, 2021). Finally, the Taliban's funding came from donors – which included both state and non-state actors – in the Persian Gulf (Giuztozzi, 2017; Blitz & Dombey, 2009). However, despite the existence of the

alternative revenue sources, the country's narco-economy has been often viewed as a mainstay of the Taliban's economic survival (Peters, 2009b).

The targeted research that informed this paper sought to document the local conditions of the drug economy in the winter of 2022, as the new Taliban regime was consolidating its control. The research found that:

- 1 The Taliban are profiting from the drug trade through a system of 'taxes' on opium cultivation as well as direct involvement in trafficking.
- 2 The nationwide ban imposed on opium poppy cultivation is being selectively enforced.
- 3 Local specifics of the drug economy vary with climatic conditions and different Taliban commanders.
- 4 The drug economy deals heavily in Pakistani currency, a sign of links to that country.

The paper begins with a brief historical background to the significance of the opium economy for Afghanistan and the Taliban, before moving to the two case studies – Helmand and Nangarhar. These provide a nuanced picture of the local opium economy and perceptions of the opium ban by those whose lives are entangled in it. It reveals a perspective on the new regime fragmented among varied interests and power structures, seeking to reconcile the profitability of the drugs trade with the strive for legitimacy. While indications of a major reduction in opium cultivation after the ban attest to the ability of the Taliban to exert control over the country's rural populations, it remains to be seen how far the pressure of the continuously enforcing the ban will exacerbate existing rifts and potentially challenge the Taliban's central authority.

Methodology

Given the institutional weakness of Afghan statehood after nearly five decades of civil war and two foreign interventions, a collation of provincial and district-level assessments helps draw a more nuanced picture of the illicit drugs economy than a comprehensive country-wide assessment. Based on this premise, 65 semi-structured key informant interviews were conducted for this study by a research team in two leading opium-producing provinces in Afghanistan – Nangarhar and Helmand (the latter accounted for just over 50% of Afghanistan's opium production in 2022) (UNODC, 2022, pp. 17-18). These interviews were triangulated against our initial literature reviews and publications on this topic as well as more immediate grey literature subsequently published which has sought to examine opium market changes. The study sought to gain a better understanding of the local condition of the opium economy through collecting accounts of the lived experiences of those actors who form the mainstay of the illicit opium market but who occupy low-level positions in the illicit supply chain. These are actors who largely lack the ability to shape the operations of the illicit economy but whose lives are profoundly affected by it. The research team interviewed farmers, local shopkeepers, money exchange brokers, taxi and bus drivers involved in the transportation of drugs, and community elders. Informants were selected through the snowball sampling technique, drawing on the interviewers' networks. The interviewers had close ties to and a shared ethnic background with the local communities, and were further embedded in the local context through their decade-long experience in

conducting field research in the country, which allowed them to develop a deep understanding of the local context and build a relationship of trust with the informants.

Interviews were conducted in the winter of 2023 by a field research team consisting of two interviewers in Nangarhar province and two interviewers in Helmand province. The limitations associated with conducting field research in a highly dangerous environment such as Afghanistan need to be acknowledged. Given the highly sensitive political context and the research topic, the research team could not seek the support of local authorities in ensuring the safety of the field research group as well as the interviewees. Hence, additional measures were taken to protect the confidentiality of the informants and their identities. In line with enhanced security measures, all interviews were conducted orally and were not recorded, but accounts of the interviews were written down as soon as possible after the interviews. The research team sought informed verbal consent to conduct the interviews. All participants were informed that no names or other identifying information would be disclosed. Each interviewer received training on the modalities of the interviews and a security briefing.

A comprehensive review of academic and grey literature, collected through public and academic databases and media reports, underpins and supplements the findings of the primary qualitative research.

2. The Taliban and the Afghan drug economy: a brief history

In 1980, Afghan opium accounted for 5% of the world's heroin supply. By 2003, that share had risen to 70% (Murthy, 2003). By 2005, it had risen still further to almost 90% due to a continuing rise in opium poppy cultivation (NATO, 2008). Afghanistan remained the world's largest opium producer, accounting for 86% of illicit opium cultivation globally in 2022 (UNODC, 2022a).

In July 2000, the then Taliban regime had imposed a comprehensive ban on opium cultivation in all territory that it controlled, which was about 90% of Afghanistan. A survey of over 10,000 villages found that this effectively reduced opium harvests by 94% (UNODC, 2001). With the Taliban ban on opium, prices had risen tenfold during 2000-01 and farmers were pushed into debt as their main source of livelihood was cut off. Then the 9/11 terrorist attacks occurred and the US invaded less than a month later.

At this time, American intelligence operatives provided funding to warlords who were opposed to the Taliban, to strengthen their ability to induce defections among Taliban supporters. However, there was an unforeseen side effect in that the sudden dumping of US dollars into the Afghan currency market created a surge of liquidity which was redirected towards investing in opium cultivation. One scholar writes:

[T]he CIA's policy of providing several hundred million US dollars to commanders to buy their support in the 'war on terror' essentially flooded the money market. The exchange rate of the dollar with Afghan currency was halved and this rapid deflation created incentives to unload US dollars into other currencies or other profitable investments. As the US offensive occurred during the poppy planting season, dollars were quickly recycled into loans to farmers to finance next spring's poppy crop. (Goodhand, 2008, p. 409)

The result was a perfect storm of conditions: high prices for opium, agrarian distress caused by the ban and a severe drought which had ravaged Afghanistan (and was beginning to end by the time of the US-led intervention). Adding to this, the US focused its programming in the country on counterterrorism over counter-narcotics, providing key enabling conditions for the Afghan drug industry to bounce back from the Taliban's short-lived ban.

The cultivation, production and use of narcotics are forbidden under Islamic law (Willems, 1997). However, in 1994 – the Taliban's first year in power in Kandahar – they issued a book containing the Taliban's interpretation of the rules of sharia law. According to the Taliban's rules, the consumption of opiates and production of heroin were forbidden – but the production and trade in opium were not (Peters, 2009a). An account of a farmer in Helmand province is helpful in explaining how the Taliban address this discrepancy.

The production of opium and its export to the West has material and spiritual benefits. We are a poor people and have always been subjected to military attacks and invasions by West countries. We retaliate by exporting drugs to them, not having the rockets and bullets needed to fight them on their own terms. Meanwhile, we benefit from the drug trade because it earns revenue for our people and keeps order over the youth by giving them work to do.¹

Given the prominence of the drug trade in the wartime economy of Afghanistan, questions arise as to the extent to which the revenues generated by drug trafficking became the primary motivation for the Taliban's goal of establishing a sharia state, rather than simply a means to that end. In 2009, Gretchen Peters and a team of local researchers surveyed 300 Afghan individuals involved in the opium trade: farmers, traders, smugglers, truckers, and workers at refineries. It is telling that over 80% of respondents believed that the Taliban were 'fight[ing] for profit rather than religion or ideology' (Peters, 2009b).

The importance of the Afghan drug trade has had a significance beyond a mere revenue-generation strategy. It serves as a job creation machine, and hence an important tool of preserving social order and political control in a country where governance and civil administration have been extremely fragile (but not entirely absent) since the collapse of the Soviet-sponsored government in 1992. Government-led crop substitution programmes after 2001 that sought to promote wheat failed to gain wide acceptance. This was because wheat cultivation was less labour-intensive than poppy (40 person days per hectare compared with 350 for opium). Although on the one hand, fewer farm workers mean lower costs, this also means greater rural unemployment and potential for discontent against the ruling regime. After the US-led invasion in 2001, opiate production might have provided a form of employment, tenuous and exploitative though it was, to as many as two million people or around 9% of the Afghan population at the time (Pandit & Basu, 2012, pp. 517-518). Furthermore, profit margins of opium and wheat crops did not compare: at various times over the last 15 years, opium prices have fluctuated between being three and 10 times higher than those of wheat (Malek, 2009). When the price is 'only' three times higher, that is seen as insufficient to justify the legal risks and labour costs of planting opium. When the price differential is much greater, for example 6:1, farmers are much more tempted to grow the illicit crop (Burch, 2011).

Yet, the farmers growing opium themselves are not integral components of criminal gangs (Siddique & Salih, 2007). To the extent that a drug 'mafia' with transnational connections exists in Afghanistan, it is dominated by wealthy businessmen and politicians. In Kabul's fashionable Sherpur neighbourhood, where Al Qaeda chief Ayman Al-Zawahiri was killed in August 2022, many large villas (up to 75, according to one report) are allegedly owned by drug lords. Known as 'narco-tecture' or 'poppy palaces', they had been rented out to American contractors during the two decade-long US military presence in the country. The going rate for these villas in 2010 was anything from US\$12,000 to US\$47,000 a month (Brulliard, 2010). Interestingly, until 2003, Sherpur had been an impoverished settlement comprising mud houses that were

¹ Interview with an opium poppy farmer in Sangin, Helmand province, winter 2023.

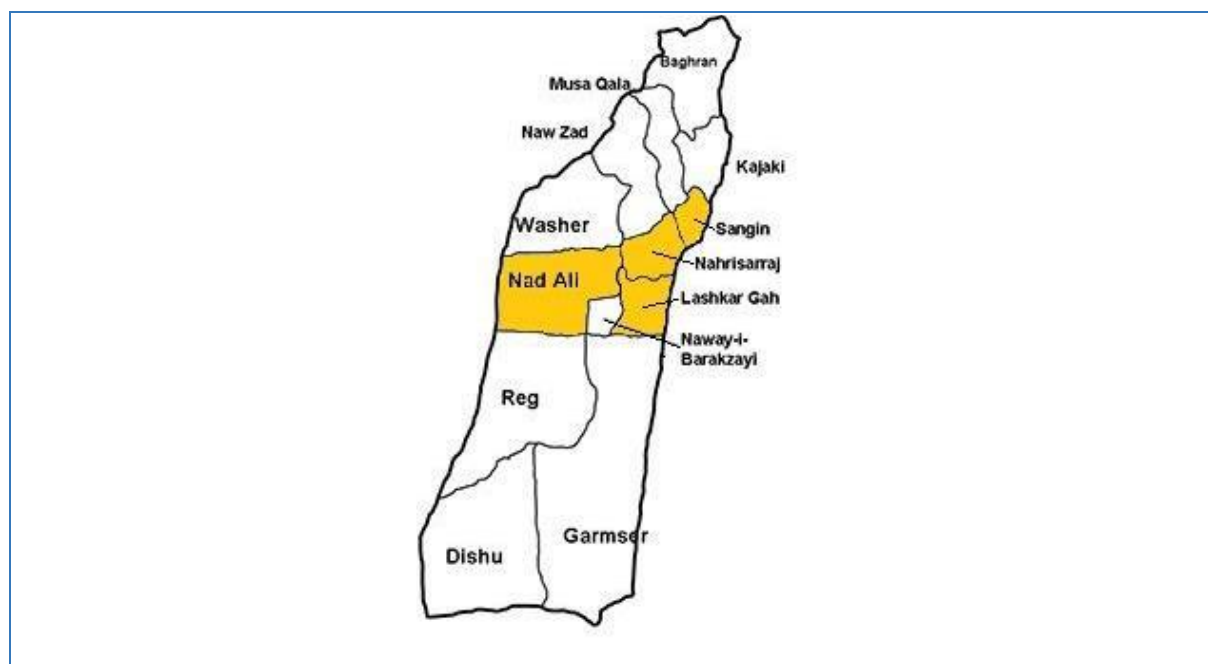
illegally built on real estate owned by the Afghan ministry of defence. That year, it was forcibly cleared of its original 250 inhabitants, with the land being reallocated to top-rank policymakers in the post-2001 Afghan government. The event was later perceived to have marked a turning point in the political evolution of Afghanistan, dashing early hopes that the then government consisted of politicians who would avoid overtly corrupt practices (Nathan, 2012). Instead, the new occupants of Sherpur hired Pakistani construction teams to build the kind of gaudy Romanesque villas that had come up in the Pakistani city of Peshawar during the 1990s. It was these villas that had given rise to the term 'narco-tecture' in the South Asian context, and which was imported into Kabul (Feenstra, 2010).

The research that formed the basis of this paper sought to understand the local-level dynamics of the opium economy since the Taliban's return and how those actors at the lower levels of the opium supply chain have been affected by these dynamics. These impacts are often less apparent than visible signs of drug wealth such as opium palaces – but are more profound, as they concern the livelihoods of a large portion of Afghanistan's population.

3. Case study: Helmand

In the winter of 2022, the research team in Helmand conducted interviews in four districts out of a total of 13: Lashkar Gah (where the provincial capital is located), Nahr-e-Saraj, Sangin and Nad Ali. All four had been identified by the UNODC as hotspots of opium cultivation (UNODC, 2022c, p. 14). The province also has areas where hemp and marijuana are grown. However, opium has been the main revenue earner of agricultural communities in the province. Helmand's importance to the drug economy stems from the fact that the Helmand river, Afghanistan's longest, flows through it. Poppy cultivation has traditionally been concentrated in the vicinity of this river, although groundwater pumped up by solar-powered borewells has since 2013 led to a notable diversification of poppy-growing areas (Rowlatt, 2020). The province is also the largest in the country by land area (Reuters, 2009). Most of its population is concentrated in the northern and central districts, the latter being where field research underpinning this paper was conducted.

Figure 1: Map of Helmand province with locations where GI-TOC conducted field research in the winter of 2022



Source: Naval Postgraduate School, <https://nps.edu/web/ccs/helmand>

Opium was first planted in Helmand during the 1910s, during the rule of Afghanistan's emir Habibullah Khan. Locals trace the origins of opium poppy cultivation to a farmer who learned of the crop's lucrative returns from Iranian traders. However, it was not widely cultivated at the time.² During the 1940s and 1950s, American developmental experts arrived in the province to improve irrigation systems. They built dams and

² Multiple interviews with community elders in Lashkargah, Helmand province, winter 2023.

canals on the river which significantly increased the amount of arable land (Kaufman, 1997). After the Soviet-Afghan War (1979 to 1989), the damage caused to infrastructure plunged rural communities into desperate poverty. Farmers needed to grow crops that required low levels of care and offered high returns. An opium poppy farmer in Nahr-e-Saraj district described how his father first took up opium cultivation:

One day, one of my father's friends came to our house from Naw Zad district [which borders Nahr-e-Saraj] and gave my father detailed information about poppy cultivation. He encouraged my father to engage in the sale of opium, which was many times the price of cotton seeds and other agricultural products. In the sowing season, my father then planted poppy on approximately 100 jeribs [one jerib is equivalent to 2,000 square metres] of land, for which he had bought poppy seeds from his friend in Naw Zad district. As a result, we obtained the opium product, which we sold to one of the local smugglers, and we received many times the profits we used to get from growing cotton seed. We continued to cultivate poppy for several years, and other farmers also started to cultivate poppy in this district. Finally, we were summoned by the district government, and the government announced the prohibition of poppy cultivation. As an incentive for the farmers, they distributed wheat and millet seeds. But some people used to grow poppy in the yard of their mansion, which was hidden from the government's view behind a perimeter fence.³

The interviews conducted with local vendors in Helmand reveal the continuing importance of Baramcha as a waypoint for drug trafficking. In 2006, *The Guardian* reported that two-thirds of the opium transiting through the town was dispatched to Pakistan's port city of Karachi or the Makran coast, much of which lies in Pakistan's politically fraught Baluchistan province. From here it was transported by sea. The remaining one-third travelled westward overland through Iranian territory (Walsh, 2006). This continues to be the case. Baramcha is a centre for opium processing (Peters, 2009b), with facilities spread across the rest of the area (Dishu district) as well as Musa Qala and Sangin districts. Besides heroin, drug laboratories also produce crystal meth. An Afghan individual directly involved in drug smuggling in Helmand claimed that refineries are widespread in Helmand:

For many years, the heroin and crystal [meth] factories in the remote districts of this province have provided job opportunities for young people, and most of the employees of these new factories are young people between the ages of 15 and 22 years old, and they earn a monthly salary of ten to fifteen thousand Pakistani rupees [between US\$44 and US\$67 in December 2022]. And they are given two meals a day. There are more than one thousand of these factories, most of them located in the town of Baramcha and in Sangin district.⁴

³ Interview with an opium poppy farmer in Nahr-e-Saraj, Helmand province, winter 2023.

⁴ Interview with a shopkeeper in Nad Ali, Helmand province, winter 2023.

Across at least four Afghan provinces, namely, Helmand, Kandahar, Zabul and Uruzgan⁵ (the first three of which lie adjacent to the Durand Line), Pakistani rupees (PKR) are the currency of choice in drug-related transactions. Even the purchase of raw opium at farm-gate prices occurs in Pakistani rupees, and farmers' expenses in drug cultivation are calculated in rupee terms rather than in the national currency of Afghanis.⁶ The use of the foreign currency on Afghan soil suggests that trafficking networks in southern Afghanistan are well integrated with Pakistan's financial system.⁷

Costs associated with opium production

Per jerib of land (the common unit used for landholdings, equivalent to 2,000 square meters), expenses for poppy farms in a single planting season in 2021 were:

- 6,000 PKR for hiring a tractor to till the land, including fuel costs
- 3kg of poppy seeds at a total cost of 600 PKR
- 100kg of chemical fertiliser which is used twice every season, costing 40,000 PKR
- medicine to protect the poppy from disease, used three to four times, costing 4,000 PKR
- labour costs of separating weeds from poppy, totalling between 40,000 and 50,000 PKR
- plastic bags to transport the opium, in 4.5kg, 9kg and 22.5kg sizes, costing 50 PKR apiece.

Based on the accounts of multiple farmers in Helmand's four districts, our research team could develop a picture of the costs associated with the planting and harvesting of opium poppy and the taxes imposed on cultivation (see Box above). According to the farmers interviewed in Helmand, wages for harvesting the opium poppy and collecting sap are not paid in cash but in kind. Each worker is said to receive a portion of raw opium, usually 1.125kg, for personal use or for selling on. Expenses for three meals daily for between four and six workers over a two-week period are said to be borne by the landowner on whose property the opium cultivation takes place, and the cost of workers' meals for a fortnight of harvesting amounts to 40,000 PKR.⁸

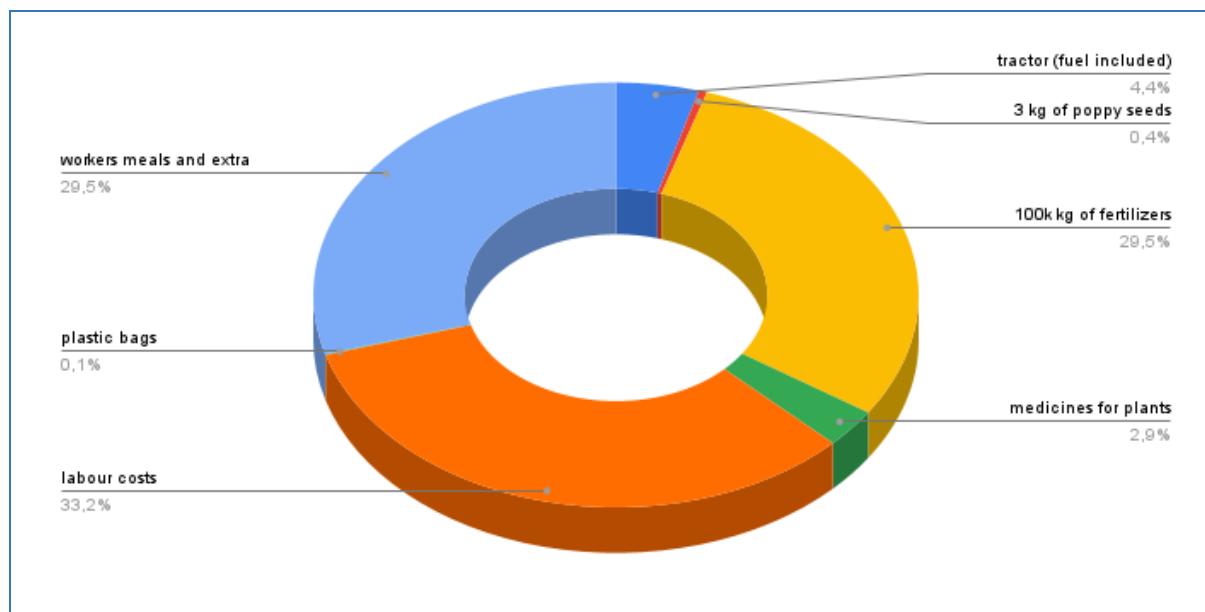
⁵ In 2008, these four provinces were among six provinces (with the addition of Farah and Kandahar) where virtually all opium poppy cultivation occurred. See Peters (2009b).

⁶ Multiple interviews with local shopkeepers and bus drivers in Helmand, winter 2022.

⁷ In 2014, a study by FATF/OECD found that Pakistani rupees were the primary foreign currency used for drug-related money transfers (FATF/OECD. (2014, June)).

⁸ Multiple interviews with local opium poppy farmers in Nahr-e-Saraj, Sangin, and Nad Ali, Helmand province, winter 2023.

Figure 2: Costs for the production of 18 to 22.5kg of opium per 1 jerib (2,000 square meters)



Source: GI-TOC.

Per jerib, the average yield in a single season is 18 to 22.5kg. In northern districts of Helmand, terrain and climatic factors allow two planting seasons, whereas in the eastern and southern districts of the province, three seasons is considered normal with four also being possible. In places where planting happens four times a year, the landowners get up to 90kg of opium per jerib. However, this is a very high estimate as diseases often affect the poppy and can sometimes push the opium yield per jerib down to as little as 13.5kg a season.⁹

With these statistics, one can move towards prices in the actual trading of opium. Before the new Taliban regime imposed a ban on opium cultivation in April 2022, 4.5kg of opium (equivalent to one 'Kandahari man' which is the standard unit of transactions) sold for 40,000 PKR. After the ban, prices shot up to between 340,000 and 350,000 PKR. This is roughly between US\$1,483 and US\$1,527 (although the amount may vary as the Pakistani rupee has shown high exchange rate volatility in recent months). Opium cultivation in Helmand for 2021 was estimated at 122,000 hectares. Since one hectare is 10,000 square meters and one jerib is 2,000 square meters, this means that 610,000 jeribs were used for growing opium in this one province.¹⁰

The Taliban tax poppy cultivation according to an ascending rate: those landowners with a poppy plantation smaller than one jerib were said to pay no taxes, those with holdings

⁹ Multiple interviews with local opium poppy farmers in Nahr-e-Saraj, Sangin, and Nad Ali, Helmand province, winter 2023.

¹⁰ According to the UNODC, as of August 2023, as a result of the sharp decline in opium cultivation after the announcement of the ban, less than 150 hectares of opium poppy was cultivated as opposed to 122,000 hectares in 2022 (UNODC (2023, p. 18).

between one and 10 jeribs pay 5% of the crop to the Taliban, and those with over 10 jeribs of land were allegedly charged over 10%.¹¹

In addition, the main buyers of the crop, who are local drug traffickers, pay a separate tax to the Taliban. The Taliban operate most of the opium processing facilities (colloquially called ‘factories’) in the province. There is also a customs ‘tax’ at the frontier with Pakistan at Baramcha, where opium, heroin and crystal meth are taxed according to the category of drug, as well as the weight that is being ‘exported’. The taxes here are paid in cash.¹²

As of January 2023, traffickers operating at Baramcha market sell 1kg of refined opium for US\$1,300, 1kg of heroin for US\$3,371, and 1kg of crystal meth for US\$575. The Taliban apply different taxes to the substances. According to a driver of a local trafficker interviewed by the research team in Helmand, for each kilogram of heroin passing through the town, the traffickers pay 3,000 PKR (equivalent to US\$16.7 US) to the Taliban. For crystal meth, the rate is lower at 1,000 PKR (US\$5.6). When contrasted with the selling price of drugs in the town’s market, these ‘taxes’ appear to be paltry amounts. A kilogram of heroin sells for the equivalent of nearly US\$3,400, while crystal meth sells for US\$575 dollars.¹³

These numbers suggest that it is not taxation of other parties’ involvement in the drug trade that generates the bulk of Taliban finances. The group, previously when operating as insurgents, and now more recently as the de facto regime in Kabul, have shown themselves capable of administering a relatively efficient taxation system in contrast with the foreign-supported regime that was in power until 2021 (Jackson, 2022). Although estimates vary and it is impossible to identify the exact numbers with any degree of certainty, the Taliban are thought to have earned 40 million dollars annually from taxes on opium. Other estimates cited by the UN are ten times that figure (Landay, 2021). But even the higher amount is only equal to the group’s revenue intake in the last quarter of 2021 alone, when it seized power in Kabul and took over the formal state machinery (Byrd, 2022). Put another way, even high estimates of the Taliban’s involvement in the drug trade fall short of its fundraising capability now that the group controls a sovereign state and has a greater capacity to extract taxes.

With the Taliban takeover in 2021, what held true locally in Helmand is likely to apply to varying degrees elsewhere in Afghanistan. In certain areas, counter-narcotics experts have noted in the past that the exact level of Taliban involvement in the drug trade depended on the personality and commercial interests of the local Taliban commander. The extent of Taliban complicity in those provinces where poppy continues to be cultivated differs from area to area, rendering a broad country-wide generalisation of limited value. Considering the internal fault lines and factionalism within the Taliban regime, a centralised and efficient ‘taxation’ system that operates uniformly according to centrally determined codes seems unlikely to be achieved.

¹¹ Multiple interviews with local opium poppy farmers in Nahr-e-Saraj, Sangin and Nad Ali, Helmand province, winter 2023.

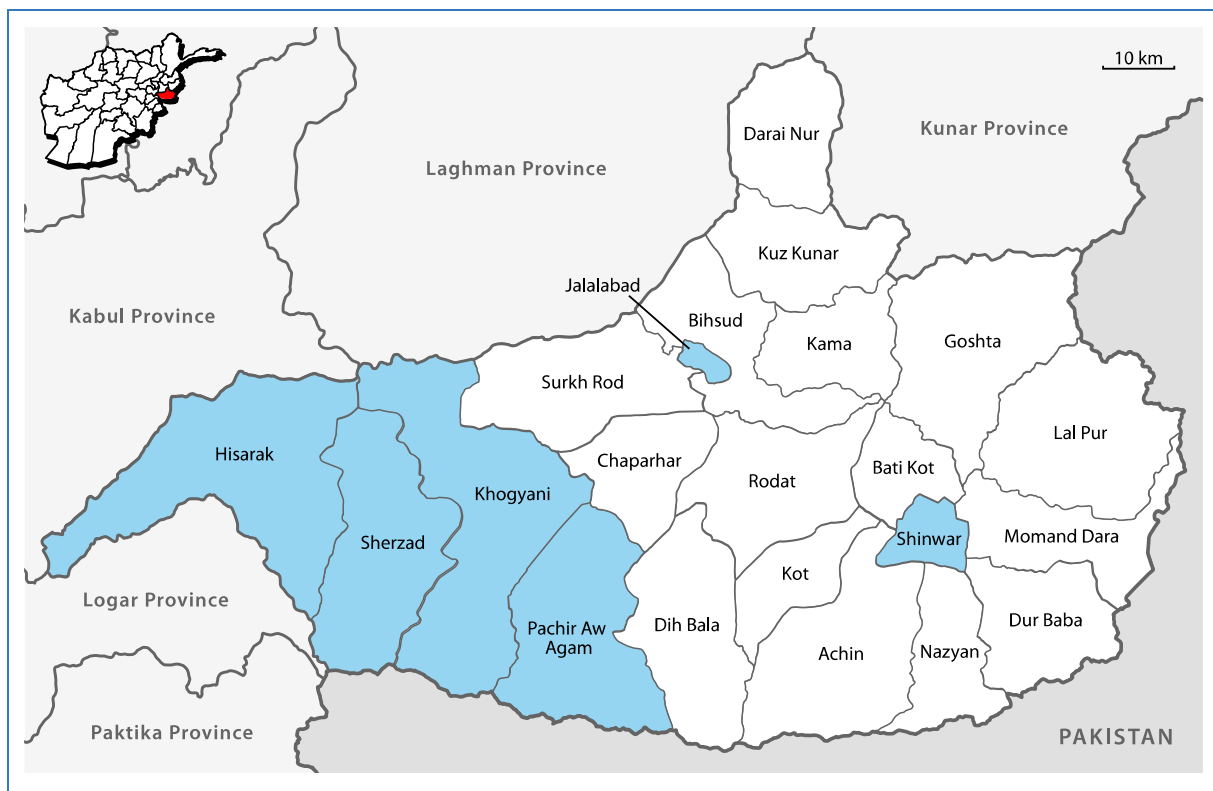
¹² Interview with a shopkeeper in Nahr-e-Saraj, Helmand province, winter 2023.

¹³ Interview with a taxi driver in Nahr-e-Saraj, Helmand province, winter 2023.

4. Case study: Nangarhar

Like Helmand, the province of Nangarhar lies adjacent to the Durand Line. It is located in eastern Afghanistan and divided into 22 districts, of which the research team conducted interviews in five: Khogyani, Shirzad, Hisarak Pachir Wa Agam and Shinwary. Also included in the fieldwork was the provincial capital of Nangarhar, Jalalabad. Nangarhar is the most prolific opium-producing province in eastern Afghanistan (UNODC, 2022c). It is something of an exception, since eastern Afghanistan lags overall behind the south-western and western provinces in poppy cultivation (UNODC, 2022b, p. 15).

Figure 3: Map of Nangarhar province with locations where field research for this study was conducted



Source: Wikipedia Commons, NordNordWest, Creative Commons by-sa-3.0 de, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Karte_Provinz_Nangarhar.svg.

Nangarhar was also the location of the US government's first counter-narcotics programme after the Soviet invasion of 1979. In 1989 Washington, acting through the US Agency for International Development (USAID), approved a small Pakistan-based project to be carried out in Nangarhar. The project came in response to a local mujaheddin commander's request for food and agricultural aid to offset the effects of a local ban he had introduced on poppy cultivation (MacDonald, 1992, p. 66). It marked the first instance of using a 'poppy ban' as a barter tool to extract foreign assistance in post-Soviet Afghanistan. The subsequent outright ban of 2000 can also be viewed as a tool to win favour with the international community and gain diplomatic recognition for the regime, with a view to creating channels for foreign aid (Collins & Tennant, 2022b).

As in south-western Afghanistan, Pakistan has played a crucial role in Nangarhar's opium economy. Areas adjoining the province, the Khyber and Kurram districts of Pakistan's own Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, have long had an indigenous history of poppy cultivation. The Tirah area of Khyber district is populated by Pashtuns, who share an ethnic tie with Pashtuns in Nangarhar and in much of eastern and southern Afghanistan (Babar & Khan, 2014). For these populations, the Durand Line is not a legal boundary but a mere administrative complication. Tirah has been an area of both large-scale poppy cultivation and cross-frontier migration, even though Pakistan has recently erected a fence to solidify its claim to the legitimacy of the Durand Line in the face of Afghan opposition.

Local deals are struck between opium farmers and police commanders to allow poppy to be grown. If a commander proved difficult to bribe, the farmers would not be able to plant poppy seeds or would risk having the plantation razed. Hence, farmers may have to wait until a new police official willing to strike a deal over poppy cultivation could be transferred to their jurisdiction. Due to this predicament, the annual opium harvest in Nangarhar is less predictable in its yield than in Helmand.¹⁴

Moreover, Nangarhar has only one planting season, unlike the two to three that are considered 'normal' in Helmand. This extends for three weeks, from the last week of October to just past the middle of November. Harvesting season lasts for four weeks, from the first week of July to the first week of August. In the past, the province has served as a testing ground for the effectiveness of counter-narcotics policies funded by Western governments. This means that under the US-supported Afghan national government, local officials faced a certain amount of pressure to carry out poppy eradication campaigns. Those farmers who could develop informal access to government officials were allegedly able to continue growing poppy, while those who were unable to gain access found their plantations being targeted.¹⁵ Such raids were showcased to the media, to impress on foreign donors that the Afghan government was committed in its fight against narcotics, and thereby sustain Western aid.

This is not to suggest that all counter-narcotics programmes were unsuccessful. One initiative funded by the German government, called 'Roses for Nangarhar', aimed to promote rose farming as an alternative to poppy. It gained some supporters among rural communities but was plagued by the risk of insurgent violence. The violence did not originate so much from the Taliban as from the local franchise of the so-called 'Islamic State', better known as Daesh (Gotev, 2018). Another programme aimed to promote the cultivation of saffron. Suited for Afghanistan's arid climate and being one of the most expensive spices by weight, the potential of saffron as opium poppy substitute seemed high. However, due to a lack of processing facilities and inadequate access to international markets, plus very low domestic demand, Afghan farmers who grew saffron struggled to compete (Peter, 2010). Moreover, cultivating saffron was a highly labour-intensive activity, which although good for employment generation, meant that a heavy initial investment had to be made for three to four years before the crop could turn profitable. This was partly because of a strong regional rival, Iran, which also produced saffron and had better market access (Woodcock, 2006).

¹⁴ Multiple interviews with opium poppy farmers in Khogyani, Hisarak Pachir Wa Agam, and Shinwary, winter 2023.

¹⁵ Multiple interviews with opium poppy farmers in Khogyani, Hisarak Pachir Wa Agam, and Shinwary, winter 2023.

Ultimately, positive efforts were offset by the Taliban's protection for opium farmers in other parts of the province. In some districts, between 70% and 80% of agricultural land was reportedly used for growing poppies after 2014. The average size of landholdings dedicated to poppy cultivation was between five and ten jeribs. Each jerib yielded between 15 and 21kg of opium.¹⁶ When the Taliban came to power in Kabul, there was a degree of uncertainty among farmers as to whether the opium trade would be allowed to continue. After the takeover, doubts were initially dispelled when landowners with close ties to the Taliban continued growing poppies unobstructed. This emboldened other, smaller farmers to do so as well.

It was in Nangarhar, even more than in Helmand, where Taliban links to the drug industry became most evident in our research. Taliban commanders control warehouses where opium is stockpiled for many years at a time (waiting for prices to rise), when the market is heading to a supply glut and the prices of opium seem too low.¹⁷

Although the Taliban central leadership banned the cultivation of opium in April 2022, they permitted it to be sold freely from existing stocks.¹⁸ Considering that many of these stocks were held by local commanders, flexibility of interpretation and implementation of the ban is not surprising. Opium produced in Nangarhar is dispatched to Helmand (possibly for onward shipment to Iran), to Kunduz in the north, near the border with Tajikistan, and across the Durand Line into Pakistan. When the drug is being transported, Taliban officials collect excise or customs duties and issue a receipt, which indicates that the duty has been paid. The receipt is meant to serve as a guarantee against further 'collection' by Taliban checkpoints along the national highways.¹⁹

Each receipt issued by the Taliban contains:

- 1 the Taliban's official stamp at the top;
- 2 the date of issue;
- 3 contact details of the transporter;
- 4 the name of the vehicle driver;
- 5 the quantity of the product being transported (in kilograms, with code words used for different types of drugs to obscure the real nature of the cargo); and
- 6 the amount of tax paid to Taliban officials.²⁰

¹⁶ Interview with an opium poppy farmer in Khogyani, Nangarhar province, winter 2023.

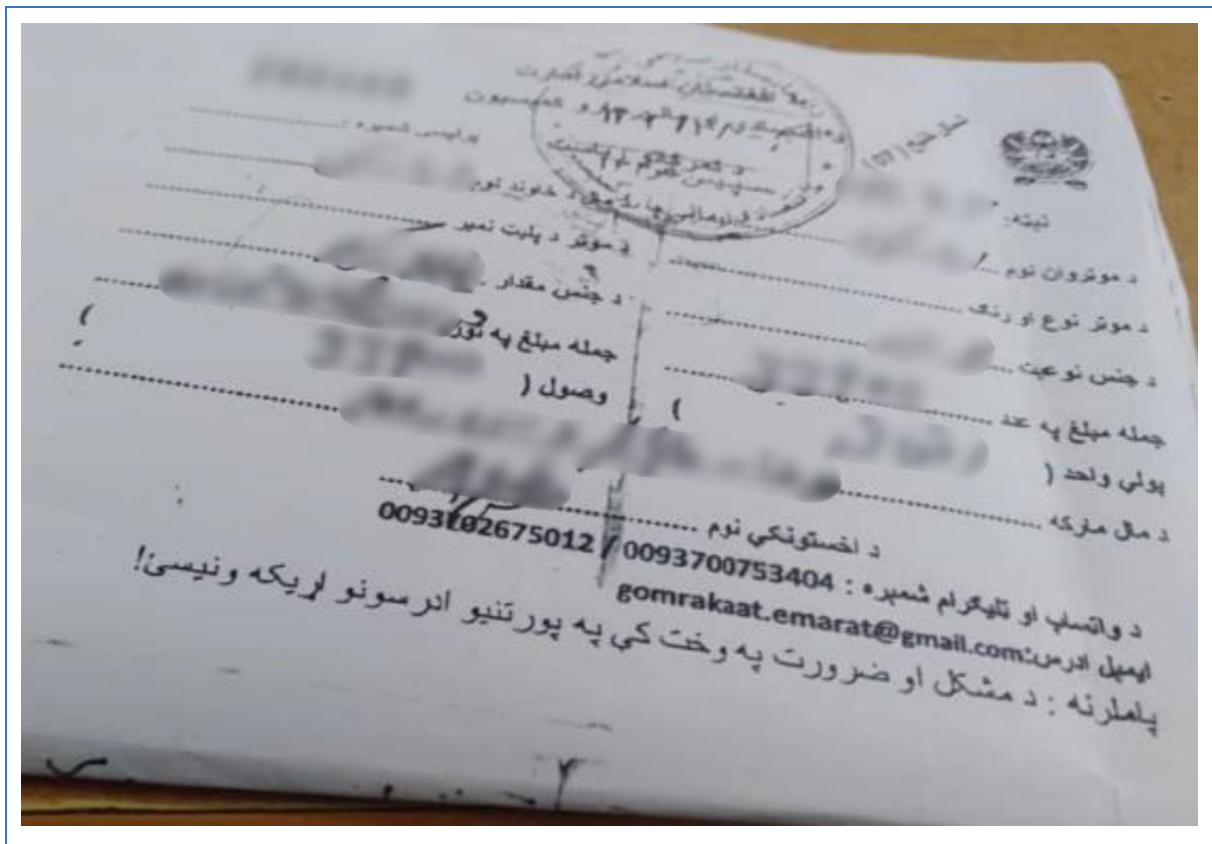
¹⁷ Interview with a local shopkeeper in Hisarak Pachir Wa Agam, Nangarhar province, winter 2023.

¹⁸ According to the media sources cited in the Afghanistan Opium Survey 2023 by the UNODC, in March 2023 the Taliban may have established, in some areas of the country, a 10-month grace period during which the traders could have exported opium from Afghanistan tax-free – allegedly to allow the stockpiles to be emptied out. However, these claims could not be verified (UNODC, 2023, p. 15).

¹⁹ Multiple interviews with taxi and bus drivers in Khogyani, Shirzad, and Hisarak Pachir Wa Agam, Nangarhar province, winter 2023.

²⁰ Interview with a taxi driver in Shirzad, Nangarhar province, winter 2023.

Figure 4: Receipt for 33,900 Afghani containing the Taliban's official stamp issued for the transportation of 56.5 kg of the product



Source: GI-TOC, shared by a taxi driver in Nangarhar province, winter 2023.

The interviews conducted with local shopkeepers in Nangarhar provide a more nuanced picture in relation to the hierarchy of drug trafficking operations. Shopkeepers purchase opium from farmers and store it in their shops alongside legitimate products on sale. They resell to both wholesalers and private individuals. According to an eyewitness report, shortly after the Taliban central leadership in Kabul imposed their poppy cultivation ban in April 2022, Taliban authorities in the city of Jalalabad told shopkeepers in a prominent market: 'You can sell opium, but you cannot display it in the front area of your shop. Keep it away from public view at the back and if a customer comes in and wants to buy, you can then take it out and sell it.'²¹ This anecdote is an example of the sorts of information derived from interviewees regarding how the Taliban authorities, being themselves heavily involved in the opium trade at levels just above poppy cultivation, are not extending their 'ban' to trading activities. Opium can still be freely bought and sold, with a requirement for discretion in transactions seemingly having been imposed to avoid immediate criticisms from the international community.

²¹ Interview with a *sarafi* in Jalalabad, Nangarhar province, winter 2023.

Wholesalers have the necessary financial means and bureaucratic contacts to move illegal cargo in bulk in a high-risk security environment.²² Afghanistan is an unforgiving place for criminal entrepreneurs in the illicit drug business, as the newcomers are likely to be wiped out by entrenched syndicates. The wholesalers typically operate trucking companies and import-export firms as a cover for their trade in narcotics. They have survived and prospered through 20 years of insurgency by maintaining close ties with individuals in the former Afghan political system on the one hand, and with rebel Taliban commanders fighting that same government on the other hand. Their contacts in the civil administration extended to the level of provincial governors, members of parliament and police chiefs.²³ By drawing key officials into business partnerships, wholesalers purchased a degree of impunity for their actions. When the Taliban swept to power in August 2021, their interests were not at risk due to the two-decade old investment they had made in preserving ties with the group through its most difficult years.

Most wholesalers enjoy some degree of local influence. They control the warehouses where opium is stored prior to transport for a period which can last many months or even years depending on the level of opium supply in the market. They also arrange the actual logistics of moving the cargo. Wholesalers derive funds from national and provincial-level financiers, who are usually politicians or wealthy businessmen (or both). The funds allow wholesalers to move drugs within the country and to overseas markets. Financiers are often involved in the foreign exchange business. Like wholesalers, they engage in drug trafficking behind a commercial cover. Unlike wholesalers however, the range of their business interests spans several sectors instead of being concentrated in just one or two. They may be engaged in import-export of legitimate products such as foodstuffs, as well as the construction sector and coal mining. Financiers put a lot of effort into maintaining a public image as devout Muslims and directing attention towards their legitimate business interests, often exaggerating the profitability of these.²⁴ The fact that many of them sport the title ‘Haji’, indicating that they have gone on the Haj pilgrimage to Mecca, demonstrates how important a show of piety remains in preserving respectability.

The necessity of having political contacts, or at least contacts in the civil administration and law enforcement apparatus, cannot be overstated. Our research team was informed that: ‘None of the local shopkeepers [in Nangarhar] are able to purchase or store even 1 kilogram of opium without first obtaining support from political or local authorities both in the current [Taliban] government and [this was also the case] in the previous government.’²⁵ Financiers run opium processing ‘factories’ in districts such as Shinwary and Pachir Wa Agam, where they also have large storage facilities. These factories operate under the protection of the Taliban and outsiders are not allowed to enter the surrounding area. The ‘factories’ themselves are believed to be rather unsophisticated, using basic farming tools and technologies for processing opium into heroin.

²² Interviews with multiple shopkeepers in Jalalabad, Shinwary, and Sangin, winter 2023.

²³ Interview with a *sarafi* in Jalalabad, Nangarhar province, winter 2023.

²⁴ Interview with a *sarafi* in Jalalabad, Nangarhar province, winter 2023.

²⁵ Interview with a shopkeeper in Shinwary, Nangarhar province, winter 2023.

Routes used to transport opium out of Nangarhar and into Pakistan avoid well-known crossing points on the Durand Line such as Tokram. Instead, obscure and informal waypoints, sometimes accessible through little more than donkey tracks, snake through such places as Sofi Kandaw, the Shilman Valley and the Spin Ghar Mountains.²⁶ Outsiders to the Afghanistan-Pakistan frontier region would struggle to locate these on a map, but they have been crossing points for decades.

Opium is also transported domestically from Nangarhar to Helmand. Nangarhar opium is reported to be of a higher purity and thus commands a higher price than Helmand opium. Since Helmand is a logical departure point for heroin consignments being sent westwards through Iran towards Türkiye and the European Union, storage facilities in the province are enormous. They need to have enough room to store heroin produced from local opium as well as that produced from other Afghan provinces. Most warehouses for drugs are in the Helmand districts of Musa Qala, Sangin and Baramcha. They are built underground to allow opium to be stored at a near-constant temperature of 25 degrees Celsius. Large warehouses are believed to have a storage capacity of 534 tonnes, but this is relatively unusual. It can take up to two years before a batch of raw opium is processed into heroin, due to the supply glut.²⁷ As in Nangarhar, in Helmand heroin refineries operate in remote rural areas where population movement is controlled by local militias and outsiders are forbidden to enter.

²⁶ Interview with a taxi driver in Khogyani, Nangarhar province, winter 2023.

²⁷ Interview with a shopkeeper in Sangin, Helmand province, winter 2023.

5. The opium ban and its implications

The cases of Helmand and Nangarhar were selected due to the large number of people involved in the opium economy. Drug production provides a source of employment to those who have no other option due to the devastation caused by decades of political conflict. Crop substitution efforts have not managed to reduce Afghanistan's economic dependence on opium cultivation. For the Taliban, extracting revenue from the industry at all levels has been essential for regime survival. The Taliban's ban on opium cultivation in 2000 had the effect of driving up opiate prices manifold and increasing the market value of roughly 3,048 tonnes of stockpiles previously built up within Afghanistan (Felbab-Brown, 2021). The same happened in 2022, as after six months, the price of opium had risen 50% (Parkin, 2022). As sizeable stockpiles were stored in facilities in Helmand and Nangarhar, and possibly elsewhere in the country, the revenues from heroin trafficking were not harmed in the short term by the ban. The main question is whether the Taliban will persist with the enforcement of the ban in the long term. A comparison with the previous ban may prove useful here.

The first ban on opium cultivation announced by the Taliban in 2000 came on the heels of a failed attempt in 1999 to reduce opium cultivation by one-third. For three years prior to the 2000 ban, UN officials had been dangling the prospect of providing US\$25 million annually for 10 years if the Taliban eradicated opium farms (Farrell & Thorne, 2005, p. 85). In response, the regime's then supreme leader had announced a substantial reduction in cultivation in September 1999 but when this goal was not achieved, the Taliban's credibility as a governing force came into question. It then set about enforcing the 2000 ban with some brutality because this ban was given the status of a *fatwa* or religious edict, which placed the supreme leader's personal authority at the forefront of the effort. The ban was enforced at district level by Taliban officials who had good local knowledge and who would face the same punishment as violators of the ban if they were found to be tolerating poppy cultivation. In other words, the 2000 ban was partly about consolidating the authority of the central leadership. A similar motive cannot be ruled out for the 2022 ban. The 2000 ban was ended one month before the US invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001, in the face of popular resistance plus a recognition that the Taliban would need a steady source of funds to fight the United States after 9/11. It remains to be seen what reason the current Taliban regime would provide for rescinding the ban, were it to do so of its own volition.

At the time of the announcement of the opium ban by the Taliban in April 2022, opinions about the consequences and the sustainability of the ban were divided. Some observers believed that it was an insincere move since the regime could not simply do away with an industry that had already accounted for 14% of Afghan's economy prior to August 2021. Others suggested that the ban was partly or even completely genuine, and for reasons of its own, the regime wanted to assert its authority over the same drug traffickers who had financed it. While the enforcement of the ban appeared unlikely given its potential to spark unrest among the rural southern populations, concerns were raised that synthetic opioids could emerge as alternative drugs of choice in the context

of a severe reduction in the supply of heroin. In the long term, synthetic opioids provide a cheaper alternative to heroin as they are not bound to a certain geography or climate, and are not subject to drought and disease (Greenfield et al., 2021).

Some observers might look to the Taliban's ban on ephedra harvesting as an indication of the seriousness of the regime's intentions but this could be a misreading. The Taliban banned collection of this naturally growing and abundant herb across central and northern Afghanistan in December 2021. From ephedra, drug traffickers produce ephedrine, which in turn is used to manufacture crystal meth (Collins & Tennant, 2022a). The production of ephedrine by Afghan drug traffickers is a very recent phenomenon, having only become widespread in 2017. Unlike heroin, the production of which is concentrated in the southern and eastern provinces of Afghanistan, meth is produced in the northern and western provinces (Siddique, 2023). As of yet, far fewer people are thought to be involved in the Afghan crystal meth industry than in the production of opiates. For this reason, the Taliban seem marginally more willing to police the trade, although it remains unclear whether this is out of any lasting commitment or is an effort to scope its profitability vis-à-vis opium. There are arguments both for and against the Taliban enforcing the ephedra ban. Ephedra harvesting is not as pervasive as poppy, but it does provide employment to some of the poorest rural communities in Afghanistan (Mansfield, 2022). Also, meth production is highly lucrative. To some extent, what might tip the balance is whether the Taliban consider the financial rewards of taking action against the synthetic drugs industry to be more lucrative than allowing that industry to operate and merely taxing it.

The Taliban's crackdown on people who use drugs seems to serve publicity and public legitimacy purposes. In February 2023, the new regime's interior ministry announced that 82,000 people who use drugs had been detained while another 5,000 people had been arrested for drug trafficking, and 200 drug 'factories' had been destroyed (Shinwari, 2023). The interviewees across Helmand confirmed that a measure of enforcement of the opium cultivation ban was indeed occurring but that it is also very selective. From the US-led invasion until around 2014, the Taliban lacked a centralised leadership that was capable of exerting direct operational control over units fighting on the ground. This meant that local commanders were given a free hand in raising funds however they could (Amiri & Jackson, 2022, p. 12). Deals were struck with opium farmers and traffickers that the top leadership were unaware of. Even after the Taliban had seized power in Kabul in 2021, the internal divisions between various factions remained a significant challenge in consolidating central control over all sources of revenue. This might explain why some farmers continue opium cultivation unobstructed while others – potentially, those with less powerful patrons – are targeted.

Another indication that the Taliban ban on opium cultivation is a tactical measure intended to impress foreign audiences rather than a sincere effort to change Afghan society is the paucity of drug treatment centres. In 2007, there were an estimated 101 such centres in the country (Schweinhart et al., 2022). By 2023, according to the Taliban's own estimate, that number had fallen to 60 (although the Taliban presented the statistic not as a comparative one but rather as a sign of their own achievements in rehabilitating drug users). Furthermore, only 10 of the 60 centres were dedicated to the treatment of women and children who use drugs despite a calculation that this demographic constituted over 40% of populations who use drugs in Afghanistan (BBC

Monitoring South Asia, 2021). While it is theoretically possible that women and children may be treated in centres for male detainees, given the Taliban's strict code of gender separation such a scenario appears highly unlikely. To be sure, the reduction in drug treatment facilities would have more to do with a lack of foreign funding than with Taliban policies, but that does not change the fact that addressing a domestic problem is not the same as shutting down a transnational trade that earns revenue for the regime. Just as the Taliban maintain a degree of separation from opium cultivation while preserving close ties with heroin traffickers, so too can there be an uneasy balance between observing sharia law that proscribes drug usage but permit the sale of drugs to foreign buyers.

The degree to which the opiate economy of Afghanistan is entwined with drug trafficking in neighbouring countries poses another question for further research: would powerful criminal actors, whose primary bases of operation lie outside Afghan territory, acquiesce in a Taliban move that undercuts their main source of revenue? Considering how loyalties in Afghanistan's civil war in the 1990s and during the 2001-21 insurgency shifted, it is far from clear that an opium poppy ban would remain uncontested beyond a certain point. Once existing stockpiles run low, one might see certain drug lords funding anti-Taliban forces and inducing local defections, not in order to see a change of regime in Kabul, but to keep parts of Afghanistan free of the regime's influence. Mindful of how quickly it was toppled in 2001 as a result of American money and local disaffection, the Taliban are unlikely to repeat the same mistake.

6. Conclusion

At the time of writing of this paper and after the fieldwork in Afghanistan had been concluded, reports began to emerge on a major reduction in opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan, including its near-complete elimination in key areas of the country such as Helmand – the province where more than half of Afghan opium had previously been produced (Mansfield, 2023). UNODC estimated a decrease of 95% in opium poppy cultivation, suggesting that the farmers' adherence to the opium ban rather than large-scale eradication resulted into the reduction (UNODC, 2023). While some eradication campaigns by the Taliban took place – most prominently in Nangarhar province (UNODC, 2023, p.33) – leading to isolated reports of local resistance, but there have been no signs of widespread discontent (Mansfield, 2023; Limaye, 2023). In the short term, the existing stockpiles will continue to supply the illicit trade in natural opiates. However, the reduction in cultivation represents a significant development with the potential to dramatically affect the trade in natural opiates in the long term.

While the Taliban continued to profit from the illicit activities, including drug trafficking, that used to constitute some of the key sources of its funding during its time as an insurgency, they were able to generate significantly larger revenues after seizing control of the state apparatus and the taxation system. If one operates under the assumption that the Taliban are seeking to leverage drug enforcement as a tool to increase the regime's international legitimacy, the attempt to distance itself from the drug economy may prove logical. However, establishing a central taxation system would be challenging given the internal divisions within the Taliban.

This research set out to explore the dynamics of the ground-level operations of the Afghan narco-economy since the Taliban returned to power in August 2021, through interviews with low-level actors and facilitators of drug trafficking, and to better understand how the takeover has influenced the situation of farmers, traders, and their communities. What came to light is a regime divided by diverging interests, power structures and economic needs and lacking a clear central authority for consistent drug enforcement across the country. As the paper has demonstrated, the Taliban's relationship to the opium economy is highly complex and often ambivalent. This ambivalence derives from the long history of opium cultivation in the country. On the one hand, many Afghans are dependent on opium production and trafficking for sustenance, and on the other hand there is pressure from the international community to address Afghanistan's key role in transnational drug trade, as well as pressure from the local population to address the opiate addiction crisis in the country. This research has offered a preliminary assessment of conditions on the ground in an extremely complex environment. Further research is clearly needed on all research topics highlighted within this paper, and a close evaluation of the veracity of claims by very recent analyses *vis-à-vis* the impacts of the reduction of opium poppy cultivation is required.

References

- Abbas, A. (2020, May 10). *Former missing person, Nazir Doda disappeared again*. <https://hrcbalochistan.com/former-missing-person-nazir-doda-disappeared-again/>
- Amiri, R. & Jackson, A. (2022). *Taliban taxation in Afghanistan (2006-2021)*. ICTD Working Paper 138, https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/bitstream/handle/20.500.12413/17193/ICTD_WP138_1.0.pdf?sequence=11
- Azami, D. (2021, August 28). Afghanistan: How do the Taliban make money? *BBC News*. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-46554097>
- Babar, M. & Khalid, K. (2014, May 19). *Displaced Pashtuns confront ruined homeland*. RFE/RL. <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/25390247.html>
- Baloch, B. (2022, December 5). *Tonnes of drugs seized in Gwadar, Pasni*. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1724726/tonnes-of-drugs-seized-in-gwadar-pasni>.
- BBC Monitoring South Asia. (2021, March 8). Insufficient funds to fight drug addiction in Afghanistan. Arzu (Arezo) TV, Mazar-e Sharif, in Dari 1400gmt 05 Mar 21. *BBC Monitoring*.
- Blitz, J. & Dombey, D. (2009, March 26). US claims Gulf donors fund Taliban fighters. *Financial Times*. <https://www.ft.com/content/b1787f4c-197a-11de-9d34-0000779fd2ac>.
- Boustati, A. (2022, March 24). *Narcotics flows through eastern Africa: the changing role of Tanzania and Mozambique*. K4D Helpdesk Report.
- Brulliard, K (2010, June 11). 'Poppy palaces' are blooming in Afghanistan. *The Washington Post - Sarasota Herald-Tribune*. <https://eu.heraldtribune.com/story/news/2010/06/11/poppy-palaces-are-blooming-in-afghanistan/28948631007/>.
- Burch, J. (2011, January 20). Afghan opium crop may rise after "cash bonanza". *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/article/cnews-us-afghanistan-opium-un-idCATRE70J4H120110120>
- Byrd, W. (2022, February 2). *Taliban are collecting revenue – but how are they spending it?* United States Institute of Peace. <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/02/taliban-are-collecting-revenue-how-are-they-spending-it>
- Collins, J. & Tennant, I. (2022a). *Future engagement with the Taliban on drug control and organised crime – mapping the Taliban's views, international options, and alternative approaches*. SOC ACE Briefing Note. University of Birmingham. <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/documents/college-social-sciences/government-society/publications/future-engagement-with-the-taliban-on-drug-control-and-organised-crime-briefing.pdf>
- Collins, J. & Tennant, I. (2022b). *Evaluating Afghanistan's past, present and future engagement with multilateral drug control*. SOC ACE Research Paper. University of Birmingham. <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/documents/college-social-sciences/government-society/publications/evaluating-afghanistans-past-present-and-future-research-paper.pdf>
- Corcoran, M. (2008, July 21). Afghanistan - back to the future with Obama. *ABC (Australia)*. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2008-07-21/afghanistan---back-to-the-future-with-obama/447182>
- Dakshina Murthy, K. S. (2003, April 24). War with drugs. *Al Jazeera*. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2003/4/24/war-with-drugs>
- Dawn. (2009, 31 May). *Pakistani on US list of drug barons*. <https://www.dawn.com/news/850521/pakistani-on-us-list-of-drug-barons>.

- Faridi, S. (2022, January 19). *Funding the insurgency: The Taliban in Afghanistan*. Gateway House (India). <https://www.gatewayhouse.in/funding-the-insurgency-the-taliban-in-afghanistan/>
- Farrell, G. & Thorne, J. (2005). Where have all the flowers gone? Evaluation of the Taliban crackdown against opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan. *International Journal of Drug Policy* 16. http://www.unawestminster.org.uk/pdf/drugs/UNdrugsfarrell_IJDP16.pdf
- FATF/OECD. (2014, June). *Financial flows linked to the production and trafficking of Afghan opiates*.
- Feenstra, A. (2010, 27 August). *Kabul's kitschy wedding cake architecture*. Afghan Analysts Network. <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/context-culture/kabuls-kitschy-wedding-cake-architecture/>
- Felbab-Brown, Vanda. (2021, 15 September). *Pipe dreams: The Taliban and drugs from the 1990s into its new regime*. Brookings. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/pipe-dreams-the-taliban-and-drugs-from-the-1990s-into-its-new-regime/>.
- Giuztozzi, A. (2017, December 22). *Why did Saudi Arabia and Qatar, allies of the US, continue to fund the Taliban after the 2001 war?* Scroll.in. <https://scroll.in/article/862284/why-did-saudi-arabia-and-qatar-allies-of-the-us-continue-to-fund-the-taliban-after-the-2001-war>
- Goodhand, J. (2008). Corrupting or consolidating the Peace? The drugs economy and post-conflict peacebuilding in Afghanistan. *International Peacekeeping*, 15(3), 405-423. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13533310802058984>
- Gotev, G. (2018, July 23). *Roses instead of opium: Afghan farmers enjoy sweet smell of success*. EURACTIV. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/development-policy/news/roses-instead-of-opium-afghan-farmers-enjoy-sweet-smell-of-success/>
- Green, M. (2012, September 5). Special report: Murder spotlights Pakistan's "heroin kingpin." *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-pakistan-kingpin-idUSBRE88401R20120905>
- Greenfield, V. A., Pardo, B. & Taylor, J. (2021, July). *Afghanistan in the era of fentanyl: Considering potential economic and political impacts of a collapse in demand for Afghanistan's opiates*. RAND Corporation.
- Jackson, A. (2022, August 23). *How the Taliban's more effective and 'fairer' tax system helped it win control of Afghanistan*. The Conversation. <https://theconversation.com/how-the-talibans-more-effective-and-fairer-tax-system-helped-it-win-control-of-afghanistan-184018>
- Javed, A. & Mohamadi, M. (2021, February 23). Balkh power consumers pay millions of afghanis to Taliban. *Pajwok Afghan News*. <https://pajhwok.com/2021/02/23/balkh-power-consumers-pay-millions-of-afghanis-to-taliban/>
- Kaufman, M. (1997, March 29). U.S.-built project waters Afghan heroin trade poppies: An American water project from the 1950s is helping Afghans grow poppies for the U.S. heroin trade. *Baltimore Sun*. <https://www.baltimoresun.com/news/bs-xpm-1997-03-29-1997088009-story.html>
- Kohi, Q. (2019, March 26). Taliban collect power bills from 40,000 Faryab families. *Pajwok Afghan News*. <https://pajhwok.com/2019/03/26/taliban-collect-power-bills-40000-faryab-families/>
- Landay, J. (2021, August 16). Profits and poppy: Afghanistan's illegal drug trade a boon for Taliban. *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/profits-poppy-afghanistans-illegal-drug-trade-boon-taliban-2021-08-16/>
- Limaye, Y. (2023, June 6). Inside the Taliban's war on drugs - opium poppy crops slashed. *BBC News*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-65787391>
- MacDonald, S. B. (1992, July/August). Afghanistan's drug trade. *Society*, 29(5), 61-66. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02697096>

- Malek, A. (2009, September 2). Hard times for Afghan opium farmers as price falls. *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSSP478829>
- Mansfield, D. (2023, June 6). *Unprecedented 85% reduction in opium production in Afghanistan*. Alcis. <https://www.alcis.org/poppy>.
- Mansfield, D. (2022, June 10). *Will the Taliban's efforts to control drugs succeed?* Alcis. <https://www.alcis.org/post/taliban-control-drugs>.
- Nathan, J. (2012, April 19). *Land Grab in Sherpur: Monuments to powerlessness, impunity, and inaction*. Middle East Institute. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/land-grab-sherpur-monuments-powerlessness-impunity-and-inaction>
- NATO. (2008, November 4). *Counter narcotics: Drug trafficking in and around Afghanistan*. Speech by John Reid, UK Secretary of State for Defence at the meeting of the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council, 9-10 June 2005. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/SID-3E6371A3-3BD4C484/natolive/opinions_21817.htm
- Nordland, R. (2014, November 12). Opium growing soars in Afghanistan. *The Seattle Times*. <https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/opium-growing-soars-in-afghanistan/>
- Pandit, S. D. & Basu, R. (2012, July-September). The retreat of the 'state': the case of Afghan opium. *The Indian Journal of Political Science*, 73(3), 509-526.
- Parkin, B. (2022, October 31). Drug prices rise in Afghanistan after Taliban outlaws trade. *Financial Times*. <https://www.ft.com/content/607df153-3a36-4abf-9932-9fee72f8f567>
- Peter, T. A. (2010, June 10). *Why some Afghanistan opium farmers turn from poppies to saffron*. The Christian Science Monitor. <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Asia-South-Central/2010/0610/Why-some-Afghanistan-opium-farmers-turn-from-poppies-to-saffron>.
- Peters, G. (2009a). *Seeds of terror: How heroin is bankrolling the Taliban and al Qaeda*. Thomas Dunne Books.
- Peters, G. (2009b). *How opium profits the Taliban*. Peaceworks 62. USIP.
- Reuters. (2009, July 15). *FACTBOX - Five facts about Afghanistan's Helmand province*. <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-afghanistan-helmand-factbox-sb-idUKTRE56E03G20090715>
- Rowlatt, J. (2020, July 27). What the heroin industry can teach us about solar power. *BBC News*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-53450688>
- Salehi, N. A. (2021, May 4). Where in control, Taliban collects electricity payments. *TOLO News*. <https://tolonews.com/business-171939>
- Schweinhart, A., Shamblen, S., Shepherd, C., Courser, M. W., Young, L., Morales, B. & Redpath, B. (2022). Gender differences in patient outcomes following drug abuse treatment in Afghanistan: Results from a new evaluation. *Journal of Substance Abuse Treatment*, 134, 108475–108475. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsat.2021.108475>
- Shinwari, N. (2023, 21 February). Over 80,000 Drug addicts collected after Islamic Emirate came to power: Mol. *TOLO News*. <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-182173>
- Siddique, A. & Salih, S. M. (2007, October 10). *Afghanistan: Poor Helmand farmers find themselves in eye of drug storm*. RFE/RL. <https://www.rferl.org/a/1078915.html>
- Siddique, A. (2023, February 16). *Impoverished Afghans turn to booming crystal-meth industry to eke out a living*. RFE/RL. <https://www.rferl.org/a/afghanistan-crystal-meth-booming/32274670.html>
- Synovitz, R. (2005, October 25). *Afghanistan: Alleged Taliban-linked drug lord extradited to United States*. RFE/RL. <https://www.rferl.org/a/1062390.html>

Thompson, G. & Rubin, A. J. (2011, February 18). Sanctions placed on Afghan exchange. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/19/world/asia/19ansari.html>

TOLO News. (2015, January 3). *Ishaqzai buys freedom with bribe thanks to official corruption*. <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan/ishaqzai-buys-freedom-bribe-thanks-official-corruption>

Trivedi, R. (2019, August 12). Dawood's D-Company partners Afghan drug lord to expand heroin trade. *Zee News*. <https://zeenews.india.com/india/dawoods-d-company-partners-afghan-drug-lord-to-expand-heroin-trade-2226752.html>

UN News. (2022, November 1). *Afghanistan: Opium cultivation up nearly a third, warns UNODC*. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/11/1130057>

UN Security Council. (2014). Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team on specific cases of cooperation between organized crime syndicates and individuals, groups, undertakings and entities eligible for listing under paragraph 1 of Security Council resolution 2160. https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_2015_79.pdf

UNODC. (2001). *Afghanistan: Annual opium poppy survey 2001*. United Nations International Drug Control Programme. https://www.unodc.org/pdf/publications/report_2001-10-16_1.pdf

UNODC. (2022a). *World drug report 2022 Executive summary: Policy implications*. United Nations publications.

UNODC. (2022b). *Afghanistan opium survey 2021: Cultivation and production*. UNODC Research. [https://www.unodc.org/documents/crop-monitoring/Afghanistan/Afghanistan Opium Survey 2021.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/crop-monitoring/Afghanistan/Afghanistan%20Opium%20Survey%202021.pdf)

UNODC. (2022c). *Opium cultivation in Afghanistan: Latest findings and emerging threats*. [https://www.unodc.org/documents/crop-monitoring/Afghanistan/Opium cultivation Afghanistan 2022.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/crop-monitoring/Afghanistan/Opium%20cultivation%20Afghanistan%202022.pdf)

UNODC. (2023). *Afghanistan Opium Survey 2023*. Research Brief. August 2023.

Walsh, D. (2006, April 7). Afghan drugs barons flaunt their wealth and power. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2006/apr/07/afghanistan.drugstrade>

Willems, P (1997, September). *Afghanistan's gold*. The Middle East 270.

Woodcock, S. F. D. (2006, October). *Socio-economic & psychological assessment of fluctuations and variations of opium poppy cultivation in key provinces in Afghanistan: Balkh, Kandahar, Nangarhar and Central Provinces*. UNODC. <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/UNODC-Socio-Economic-Psychological-Assessment-of-Fluctuations-and-Variations-of-Opium-Poppy-Cultivation-in-Key-Provinces-in-Afghanistan.pdf>