

How the Afghan Opium Business Grew into a multi-billion dollar enterprise from 1992-2008

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When Americans imagine what the country of Afghanistan looks like, they create an image of a desolate arid land scattered with some dried shrubs. Although this may be accurate for some areas in Afghanistan, a significant part of Afghanistan is a beautiful field of crimson, pink, and white poppy flowers that stretch as far as the eye can see. To an average person, this is a picture of absolute beauty, to an Afghani, this looks like a bountiful harvest, to the United States, United Kingdom, and United Nations officials, and it is a monument to all their failures in Afghanistan. Every May, Afghan farmers head into the field and harvest a light brown to black damp paste, called opium from the poppy pod. This opium is then given to a local warlord or insurgent group, in exchange for enough money to feed the farmer's family, and a year's worth of protection against rape, kidnapping, or death. This is the opium business in Afghanistan, and there is nothing the combined force of the US, UK, NATO and UN can do to stop it. This is exacerbated by the fact that the US allowed the opium business to thrive in the first place.

Throughout history, opium has been one of the most popular narcotic drugs in the world. Dating all the way back to 3400 BCE, opium was used as a painkiller, antidepressant, sleeping aid, and stress reliever amongst its many uses. A favorite of pre-modern doctors, opium has been called the "king of narcotics" and "God's medicine" due to the soothing feelings of peaceful and painless

sleep that the drug provides. Today, Opium is used in morphine, heroin and various cannabis concoctions.¹ Despite the wide effective uses, opium is highly dangerous. The drug can be used professionally in hospitals through controlled and highly monitored doses as morphine, however prolonged uses makes the body resistant to the sedative and soothing effects. This leaves the user with an insatiable craving for higher doses and more powerful opiates like heroin to receive the desired effect. Heroin overdoses result in hypoxia forcing the user into a coma while the body shuts down from lack of oxygen in the lungs and brain. With such dangerous and addictive applications, heroin and other opiates are illegal in many countries around the world with the only exception being morphine in controlled doses.² Though many countries ban the illegal production and sale of heroin and opium, countries like Afghanistan, Mexico, Myanmar, Columbia and Laos all have large opium business and supply the world with illegal heroin.

Afghanistan became an opium growing country during the 1980s when the Mujahedeen first began cultivating opium to fund their campaign against the Soviet Union. However, only an average of 200 metric tons were being produced during the 1980s.³ The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) World Drug Reports shows that it was only after the Soviet retreat that Afghanistan became the world leading producer of opium,

contributing to an annual average of 75% of the world's opium supply by the early 1990s.⁴ In 1994 the UNODC began annual ground surveys on the cultivation and production of Afghan opium. Therefore, despite being the leading anti-drug agency recording Afghanistan's drug activity, it is important to note that before 1994 all figures are estimates and account for only a portion of total opium production.⁵ The reason the UNODC started its surveys in 1994 and not in the 1980s was because various American intelligence agencies like the ISI and CIA kept international anti-narcotic agencies out of Afghanistan until after the Mujahedeen defeated the Soviets. In the 1980s, the US Drugs Enforcement Administration (DEA) had identified 40 major heroin collectives in Pakistan, including some headed by top government officials, none of which were sanctioned at the time. The CIA and ISI, did not want the world to see the drug links between the "heroic" Mujahedeen, Pakistani officials, and the drug traffickers. Several of the seventeen DEA officials in Pakistan had received suspicions orders to relocate and at least one was forced to resign for unspecified reasons. Despite these suspicious incidents some documents show the CIA's and ISI's guilt. In 1986, Major Zahooruddin Afridi was caught shipping 220 kg of high-grade heroin within Pakistan, the largest drug interception in Pakistan's history. Two months later, Air force Officer Flight Lieutenant Khalilur Rehman was caught on the same route with another 220 kg of heroin. He confessed this was his fifth mission. The US street price of the 440 kg confiscated from these two high-ranked military personnel was about \$600 million, which corresponds to the amount the US gave Pakistan that year.⁶

In 1992 after General Asif Nawaz appointment as Army Chief a vigorous campaign to root out the narcotics mafia within the Pakistani Armed Forces began.⁷ In 1992, the UNODC estimated that Afghanistan had cultivated 49,000 hectares (ha) of opium and would increase by 10,000 ha annually until 1994 when it reached 71,000 ha.⁸ Coincidentally, the UNODC's ground surveys had begun the same year the Taliban had taken Kandahar, the first province to fall to the Taliban

and a year after the drug lords were rooted out of Pakistan's National Assembly.⁹

The civil war that began after the Soviet retreat decimated Afghanistan's infrastructure causing its economy to rely almost solely upon agriculture. With Afghanistan's infrastructure and economy already weak because of the Soviets, the Mujahedeen sold anything of value to support their internal conflict with rival warlords; factory equipment, road rollers, telephone poles and wires, bricks, and they even sold young children into slavery.¹⁰ This decimated Afghanistan's economy and prevented any hope of creating non-agricultural jobs. With only agriculture to keep the economy afloat, many farmers and warlords resorted to cultivating opium as their primary crop lacking the equipment or seed to produce other crops. In addition, much of the farmable land became giant minefields during the civil war. This civil war had also made any chance of trade impossible, as nearly as every convoy of shipment from neighboring countries would be raided.

For Pakistan, this was an economic catastrophe and the government needed to find a solution to open trade routes in Afghanistan in order to trade goods with the Central Asian Republics of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan.¹¹ They saw an opportunity to achieve this by hiring the Taliban, which at this time were living around the Afghan-Pakistan boarder in refugee camps and represented a highly radical form of Pakistan's conservative right-winged political party, the Jamiat-e Ulema-I Islam. In 1995 the Pakistani government hired the Taliban in protecting transport convoys going through Afghanistan. At this time, the Taliban had not yet gained a reputation for violence but were still capable of protecting the Pakistani convoy against an onslaught of Mujahedeen soldiers. Having proven their potential in protecting the trade routes, the Pakistani government increased its support to the Taliban by providing millions of dollars in financing and supplies to ensure the continued relationship with the Taliban and security to the trade routes.¹²

This was the beginning of the Taliban's campaign to end the civil war and become the de facto

leader of Afghanistan. The Taliban decided to remove the Warlords from power and restore security and peace in the war torn country of Afghanistan. Right after the Taliban first took Kandahar, they declared that they would eliminate all drugs, a declaration that made some US diplomats ally with the Taliban and to immediately offer support. However, a few months later, the Taliban realized they desperately needed the income from the poppies and lifted the ban for farmers. The Taliban had no other means to fund their regime. "We cannot be more grateful to the Taliban," said Wali Jan, a toothless elderly farmer as he weeded his fields, "The Taliban have brought us security so we can grow our poppy in peace." Wali's farm could produce 45 kilograms of opium per year and earned \$1,300 from it. Although Wali knew the drug dealers would be able to sell his opium for fifty times more than what he received, he needed the money to feed his 14 children.

The Taliban allowed Pakistan to establish trade routes through Afghanistan. However, the US was still wary of Pakistan's support of the Taliban due to "Taliban's brand of Islam... might infect Pakistan."¹³ While the Pakistani government continued to foster relations with the Taliban, the transport mafia in Quetta and Chaman assured the Taliban that if they secured the trade routes for smuggling convoys the mafia would pay handsomely. Many members of the Quetta transport mafia were from the same Pashtun tribes as that of the Taliban. The Taliban were paid a large sum for the protection smuggling routes and as more and more provinces fell to the Taliban, more and more revenue began flooding in from drug smugglers. In 1995, the Taliban had been paid \$150,000 from the smuggling trucks going through Afghanistan. The transport mafia's revenue increased dramatically as their annual turnover was \$2.5 billion in 1995.¹⁴ Although the Taliban was not the mastermind behind the opium trade, it began a mutually beneficial partnership between the Taliban and the transport mafia, which would serve as the key component in the growth of the Afghan opium business.

Smuggling fees were not the only profit the Taliban made while they took over Afghanistan. With the Taliban seizing control of each province throughout the mid to late-1990s they had gained control of the poppy fields and their respective profits. On the surface, the Taliban preached eradication of opium however the condemnation stayed within the borders of Afghanistan. Abdul Rashid, head of the Taliban's

counter-narcotics force explained, "Opium is permissible, because it is consumed by *Kafirs* [infidels] in the west and not by Afghans."¹⁵ The Taliban also understood that opium was a major part of the country's economy and if they banned opium production the people would retaliate.¹⁶ For the next four years, the Taliban's relationship with the mafia and the local drug traffickers in Afghanistan kept the Taliban's policy against opium from gaining momentum as a steady flow of around 2,500 metric tons of opium per year were produced.¹⁷ After the Taliban took Kabul in 1996, the annual production yield rose another 500 metric tons. Drug dealers became a powerful force in Afghanistan during this time while Afghanistan became the top producer of opium throughout South-West Asia. In addition to the 2,500 metric tons of opium, the US and Pakistani government were taking out Afghanistan's opium competitors. From 1989-1999, the US would give Pakistan \$100 million to curtail their opium production. In 1997, opium production in Pakistan fell to only 24 metric tons and stayed under 10 metric tons until 2002.¹⁸

The rise of Taliban and the opium trade stirred up increased activity in the US government. US Federal Narcotics Agents based in Pakistan privately expressed strong hopes that the Taliban would bring an end to the booming opium trade.¹⁹ However, the opium business continued to grow each year because despite the reduction in Pakistan's opium yield, Afghanistan was still producing around 2,500 metric tons of opium each year. In February 1998, the Clinton administration accused Pakistan of failing to control the export of heroin from Afghanistan through their borders. However, the Clinton administration was unaware of the Taliban's smuggling routes that stretched throughout Southwest Asia.²⁰ During this time, the Taliban recorded revenues of \$20 million from the opium tax alone. Total profits of the opium business were distributed between Afghanistan's and Pakistan's dealers, the Transport Mafia, and the heroin labs along the Golden Crescent. In addition about 1 million Afghan farmers received over \$100 million each year from the opium trade, less than 1% of the total profits that the European dealers made from the heroin.²¹

Afghanistan and its opium business would go through a massive shift beginning in 1999 and 2000. The Taliban had taken over nearly all of Afghanistan while relegating the Northern Alliance to the province

of Badakhshan. The UNODC Drug Reports showed Afghanistan's opium yield reached up to 4,565 metric tons from the harvest season of 1999.²² The Taliban, Afghan drug lords, and farmers were receiving billions of dollars in revenue. The United Nations began to panic as illicit heroin from Afghanistan's opium business began appearing in various European countries, notably the United Kingdom. In March 1999, the UNODC successfully convened a meeting in Pakistan with high-ranking Taliban officials and Islamabad drug liaison officers. The Taliban assured the UN that they would take significant steps toward the total elimination of poppy opium. In exchange, the UN would send \$25 million each year for ten years, and help the Taliban integrate acceptable alternative cash crops to subsidize Afghanistan's economy. The meeting resulted in a positive relationship between the Taliban and the UNODC.²³

In July 2000, the Taliban supreme leader Mullah Omar issued a *Fatwa* stating that poppy cultivation and opium production violated fundamental Islamic traditions. Any overt objection against the degree would reflect poorly upon the religious leadership of Mullah Omar and the strength of Taliban rule. Therefore, with personal reputation and international political favor at stake, there was a strong incentive for the Taliban to restrict poppy cultivation and opium production.²⁴ To the pleasure of world leaders, Afghanistan's annual opium yield dropped to 185 metric tons of opium in 2001 from 3,276 metric tons in 2000.²⁵ The Taliban had used three principal techniques to reduce to production of opium: the threat of Taliban-style punishment, the close local monitoring and eradication of continued poppy farming, and the public punishment of transgressors. These methods allowed the Taliban reduce the world's opium supply by 65% within one year. Also in 2000, the Taliban was aided by a drought that helped to eradicate remaining poppy fields. To many devout Afghans the drought was perceived as a gift from Allah to help the Taliban eradicate poppy fields and opium production. Afghans considered the drought redemption for their sins of producing or imbibing intoxicants. Yet, there was a different theory for the eradication of poppy fields that had nothing to do with a drought. The BBC had reported that the *Pleospora* fungus, an effective killer of the opium poppy, had finally been developed. Development of the *Pleospora* fungus began in Uzbekistan under the support of the

UN with funding from the British. At the time matters of the legality and environmental impact of this biological warfare were unsure. The credibility of this theory is quite strong due to Afghan farmers complaining that their poppies were mysteriously dying, rather than slowly from prolonged drought.²⁶

By spring of 2001, the Taliban had destroyed their largest source of income, and caused widespread anger amongst Afghanistan's population along with members of the opium industry across Southwest Asia. Thousands of farmers and drug traffickers sought refuge in the Northern Alliance, the only remaining source of poppy fields in Afghanistan. However, the Taliban decimated much of the Northern Alliance's territory. The Taliban had put their hopes in the UN and their allies to support them in their time of need. Still, the UN, UK, and US were hesitant due to some UNODC's findings. These findings stated that despite Afghanistan's decline in poppy fields and further opium production, the Taliban had refused to destroy the major stockpile of opium they had in their possession. For the Taliban, this was most likely in order to have some source of income outside the shaky revenues from the UN. Whatever the reason, after the attack on the World Trade Center in New York any ties between the UN and the Taliban were swiftly severed as blame was placed on the Taliban. Whether the Taliban knew about the attacks or not, they certainly were not prepared when the US as well as dozens of other countries initiated Operation Enduring Freedom on October 7th 2001.²⁷

Ironically, Operation Enduring Freedom was the best thing to happen for the Opium industry since the CIA and ISI shrouded the Mujahedeen's poppy fields from the DEA's radar. With little support from local Afghans the Taliban struggled to fight invading forces. President Bush's speech on Operation Enduring Freedom detailed the Afghani people as being "Oppressed people, and that they will know the generosity of America".²⁸ Two months later, the Taliban fell to American and other allied forces known as the Coalition. The Taliban retreated to Kandahar and northern Pakistan where they would sell their opium stockpile to begin their insurgency against the Coalition and Afghan forces. As a result of the Taliban's reduction in opium supply, raw opium prices were inflated to the point where 1kg of raw opium sold for \$700.²⁹ The Taliban was able to sell their 3,000 metric tons of opium supply for \$2.1 billion.

Although Afghanistan's illicit economy and the US' invasion of Al Qaeda bases were not directly connected; they did play an indirect role in the ability for the US and NATO forces to work efficiently throughout the invasion.³⁰ In 2002, the UNODC and UK began to worry as Afghanistan's annual opium yield rose to 3,400 metric tons. This matched pre-Taliban yields in 2000 with 3,276 metric tons.³¹ Donald Rumsfeld's Lead Nation Strategy assigned the anti-narcotics taskforce to British agencies. MI5, MI6 and the UNODC immediately began taking action against the growing opium industry in Afghanistan. However, this growth was inevitable for three reasons. The first was that the interim Afghan government, supported by the US, and could not enforce the ban in the rural provinces of Helmand, Kandahar, and Nangarhar where most of Afghanistan's opium was produced.³² Secondly, the US, who assisted the interim Afghan government, decided to support various ethnic leaders and former Mujahedeen warlords, all of who profited from the opium industry.³³ The third and the most frustrating reason was that the US shifted resources to Iraq. Donald Rumsfeld and other conservative American officials argued that the economic resources needed to stop the drug trade in Afghanistan would detract too much from efforts against Al Qaeda and other terrorist groups.³⁴

While the US focused on Iraq, the remaining NATO forces in Afghanistan struggled to quell the ever-growing opium trade, destroying any Coalition progress along the way. The CIA reported approximately three million refugees returned to Afghanistan after being exiled by the Taliban. Approximately one million of those refugees had heroin or opium addictions. The Taliban had outlawed the use of opium and heroin even before the crackdown in 2000-2001 but with the Taliban gone there was an obvious increase in heroin labs around the Afghan border.³⁵ In 2003, the annual opium yield rose to 3,600 metric tons, which is 200 metric tons more than the previous year.³⁶

Another issue was the amount of corruption within Afghanistan's own anti-narcotics agency. Afghan units, trained by DynCorp and the British Government would initially go out to various villages and cut down poppy fields with sticks. But, the Afghan anti-narcotics units would be bribed by large and politically powerful drug lords to only cut the poppy fields of their competitors. This rose suspicions of close ties between

the Afghan government and opium drug lords.³⁷ In 2004 and 2005 the opium yield exceeded 4,000 metric tons, levels not previously reached since 1999.³⁸ It was during this time that the Taliban gained back significant territory lost to the Coalition. They intimidated and coerced isolated villages into supporting the Taliban due to the lack of military support from the Coalition aided government.

From 2006 to 2008: Afghanistan's annual opium yield increased 2000 metric tons each year. This was due to the radicalization of the Taliban and their need to fund growing operations. In 2010, Afghanistan celebrated 30 years of poppy based agriculture.³⁹ To conclude, the Afghan opium business grew into a multibillion-dollar from 1992-2008 primarily due to the US using the opium business as a bridge with the Mujahedeen warlords to take out the Soviets in the 1980s and the Taliban in the 2000s.

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Appendix

Chart 1:

UNODC, “Table 3. Global illicit cultivation of opium poppy and production of opium, 1986–1998.” *World Drug Report 1999*, pg. 23 http://www.unodc.org/pdf/report_1999-06-01_1.pdf

Chart 2:

UNODC, “Global illicit cultivation of opium poppy and production of opium, 1990–2007” *World drug report 2008*, pg. 38 http://www.unodc.org/documents/wdr/WDR_2008/WDR_2008_eng_web.pdf

Chart 3:

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Endnotes

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