

# PROHIBITION ON OPIUM POPPY CULTIVATION IN AFGHANISTAN: A CASE STUDY OF TALIBAN BAN - ITS SECURITY IMPLICATIONS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR SOUTH ASIA

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## Abstract

*Afghanistan is home to the largest illicit drug industry in the world. The depth, influence, and impact of its narco-economy remain unparalleled. Illicit drug production has become a dominant feature of Afghanistan's landscape. The opium economy is pervasive and deeply entrenched. Afghanistan's opium economy has become the source of security rather than the state. Therefore, the degree of dependence on the opium economy has thus become unprecedented in the modern history of drug production. The dependence means any immediate attempt toward opium poppy prohibition/eradication will result in political and socioeconomic crises not only in Afghanistan but the transit states in the region as well. In context of narco-economy, this paper expostulate that the construction of security in traditional and nontraditional discourse are linear, i.e. detached from reality or suffers from moralistic constraint, and therefore, needs to be revisited in line with ground reality of Afghanistan and transit states at large. Deviating from conventional literature on drug-security nexus, the paper argues that a complete prohibition of poppy cultivation in Afghanistan is by far a larger security concern than its retention. This research paper, therefore, takes a cursory examination of the security implications and challenges that may ensue as a result of a diminished production capacity of Afghanistan's opium economy either experienced through complete prohibition, eradication programs or through natural calamity.*

**Keywords:** Afghanistan, Opium Economy, Pakistan, Prohibition, SAARC, Security Implications.

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## Introduction

Afghanistan has been ‘off-and-on’ on the international security agenda for decades now. The world’s focus tends to oscillate on the decade’s long conflict in Afghanistan, the narcotic dimension, however, remains a pervasive academic and security policy discourse. Although, the world became aware of the Afghanistan’s mammoth narcotic production in the 1980s, however, opium cultivation and production would date back to centuries. Regional colonial experiences, Cold War rivalries and regional geopolitics were instrumental in navigating the opium economy of Afghanistan. The inter-Afghan conflict in 1990s would make the opium economy completely interwoven in the political and socio-economic fabric of Afghanistan. This interdependence makes it difficult to dissect opium production from the power and the socio-economic dynamics in Afghanistan.

For Afghans, the vast landscape of opium poppies has become the ideal commodity. It has become the most viable option for sustaining a large rural population. The opium economy, accounting for more than half of the Afghanistan’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP)<sup>1</sup> provides critical human security than the state is unable to provide for.<sup>2</sup> A staggering 15% of the total population of the country is directly involved in poppy cultivation with another significant section of its population part of the narco-ecosystem. The drug economy also resists traditional moral philosophy of an individual’s security. The ever increasing number of Afghan men and women turning to drugs consumption, provides mental security in impoverish and destructive environment.<sup>3</sup> Ironically, the opium economy has also led to feminist emancipation trends, witnessed in enhancing the social and economic stature of the Afghan’s women cultivators. The equation is not limited to Afghanistan, but transcends its physical boundaries and has for decades also transformed the socio-economic realities of transit states in the region.

However, attempts have been made by the local as well as regional and global community to diminish the capacity of the Afghanistan’s opium economy. Nonetheless, such efforts remain futile. In the decades following the post 2001 international military intervention and the attempted multilateral counternarcotics efforts with interdiction and alternative livelihood programs as its core would collapse highlighting the complexity of the opium-economy equation existing in Afghanistan. Moreover, with the virtual decline of western funds for Afghanistan’s reconstruction in the post-

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<sup>1</sup> UNODC. "Afghanistan Opium Survey 2008." (2008): 1

<sup>2</sup> The drug industry now provides crucial jobs, income and security than the state is unable to provide for, a concept neglected in Buzan’s societal security paradigm or the traditionalist moral security imperatives.

<sup>3</sup> Which in Burroughs’s (2003), and De Quincey’s (1898), drug addiction philosophy helps them in their transition from suffering to a spiritual plane of relief?

United States withdrawal and subsequent Taliban takeover, its socio-economic landscape has become more unstable. In the presence of decreasing social and economic opportunities, the recent Taliban announcement of the ban on opium cultivation may plunge Afghanistan into deep political and socio-economic turmoil. The crisis has the potential to produce serious security implications not only for Afghanistan itself, but for its immediate South Asian neighbors. The ban would further mean abject poverty for many Afghans, traditionally dependent on the opium-economy as a vital lifeline and a necessary component of their human security. The South Asian countries, particularly Afghanistan's immediate neighbor Pakistan, could again be confronted with a mass migration of Afghans and a dramatic increase in synthetic opioid production in the region. However, the ban on opium cultivation presents challenges; it also brings opportunities; to get rid of production, drug trafficking, and even significantly decrease drug consumption in the South Asian region. However, the western template of counter-narcotics implemented in Afghanistan for decades that failed to produce substantial results cannot be solely relied upon. The SAARC Convention on Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances regime is no different. Any framework to address these challenges should be based on the empirical realities of Afghanistan's political and socio-economic situation. It would require a condition for meaningful economic opportunities and basic human security on the ground. The South Asian countries' own individual experiences in confronting the poverty or drug eradication efforts would provide a better opportunity for a concerted approach. Regional cooperation in this context could represent the most effective means to address these challenges.

The existing pool of counternarcotics policies and security discourses in particular with nontraditional security framework constructs drug production and trafficking as a multidimensional issue that distorts political, social and economic dynamics at local, national, and transnational levels.<sup>4</sup> In this context, political, social and economic implications of drug production and trafficking have acquired their own individual genre with numerous subsets of fields of inquiry. The main recurring themes generated by these studies are the negative effects on public health, the economy and political stability. Moreover, in the post 2001 environment, narco financed terrorism became an overriding entry in the growing vocabulary of narco-crime nexus. Security-related discourses and counternarcotics policies have subsequently developed a grand narrative that is mostly based on the assumption of ramification and the ensuing challenges of the mushrooming Afghanistan's opium economy. The focus of the research studies or

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<sup>4</sup> Niklas Swanstrom, "The Narcotics Trade: A Threat to Security? National and Transnational Implications." *Global Crime* 8, no. 1 (2007): 1-25.

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counternarcotics policies has been overwhelmingly directed towards the examination of Afghanistan's opium economy and how to curtail its production and flow rather than addressing the root causes of the opium cultivation in the country. The opium prohibition would pose larger security implications rather than the existing challenges of the opium economy.<sup>5</sup> It neglects a vital element in the security dimension of opium economy; of what are its implications if it diminishes or ceases to exist? The present study, therefore, is an attempt to understand and examine how the opium ban in Afghanistan could produce security implications for the South Asian countries particularly Pakistan? The secondary focus remain on how countries within the South Asian region can integrate their efforts to not only support the Taliban initiative, but also address the structural drivers of Afghanistan's illicit drug economy – insecurity and a lack of economic alternatives.

### **Road to Afghanistan's Hegemonic Opium Economy**

Historically, Afghanistan, both as a territorial location and as a nation-state has seen waves of foreign invasions. These invasions brought forth the leitmotif 'graveyard of empires' to be famously inaugurated with the defeat of Alexander the Great, British Empire, Soviet Union and the leitmotif is being again baptized with the withdrawal of the United States. But the leitmotif "graveyard of empires" belies its ontological and epistemological construction. The graveyard buries not only the defeating empires and armies, but per se is a graveyard of Afghanistan's own history, people and its economy. Ironically, the devastation of the political and economic order in Afghanistan has been perpetuated in the name of the peace & development. The interventionist peace framework at different phases of its history was largely conceptualized through Elphinstone's episteme, Soviet socialism, and American western democracy. However, the interventions also sowed the seeds of poppies that would epitomize the tragedy in many respects applicable to the graveyard of Afghanistan's history. In this graveyard, Alexander the Great brought the seeds of opium poppies<sup>6</sup>; the British Empire opium policies navigated the political and economic terrain of Afghanistan.<sup>7</sup> The British-India policies of annexation, political interference would restructure Afghanistan's socio-economic

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<sup>5</sup> Barnett R, Rubin, and Jake Sherman. *Counter-narcotics to stabilize Afghanistan: The false promise of crop eradication*. (UNDP, 2008).

<sup>6</sup> David Macdonald, *Drugs in Afghanistan: Opium, Outlaws and Scorpion Tales*. (Pluto Press, 2007).

<sup>7</sup> Hanifi, Shah Mahmoud. *Connecting Histories in Afghanistan: Market Relations and State Formation on a Colonial Frontier*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011)

landscape, leading it to emerge as a regional illicit drug production center.<sup>8</sup> In this graveyard, Soviet policies of scorched earth would ruin its rural economy and force more than half of its local population to increase illicit opium poppy cultivation<sup>9</sup> - a coping mechanism for the imminent poverty and destruction that ensued. Afghanistan hegemonic narcotics industry since 1990s onwards would further acquire a political dimension. The possession of hectares of illicit crops became the measuring unit of power for a multitude of fiefdoms populated by various competing tribal and ethnic warlords and militias in the Afghan civil war. The rapid expansion of opium cultivation and ultimately the Afghanistan's hegemonic position in global illicit drug production also partly owe to these local forces of disorder and chaos. In the post 2001 USA intervention would unplug the illicit drug production. Its subsequent state reconstruction and counterterrorism efforts, to be focused on a template of the western eradication program further coagulate Afghanistan's status as the world's principal producer of heroin.<sup>10</sup>

### **Historical Prologue to the Opium Prohibition in Afghanistan**

The 2022 Taliban's ban on opium poppy cultivation<sup>11</sup> or post-2001 counternarcotics efforts by the Afghan government at the national and provincial level were not the first attempts to reduce opium production. The Afghan state made its first attempts at prohibition in 1945. However, despite the 1945 prohibition, opium from Afghanistan continued to be smuggled, inferring large-scale opium cultivation continued unabated. A more serious attempt was made in 1957, when Muhammad Daud Khan government announced a nationwide prohibition of opium. In the context of the historical role of opium in Afghanistan's state formation, prohibition was nonetheless strategic, rather than nationwide, i.e. as prohibition was only limited to the province of Badakhshan only. The prohibition invited serious

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<sup>8</sup> M. Emdad-ul Haq, *Drugs in South Asia: From the Opium Trade to the Present Day*. (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2000)

<sup>9</sup> Ghanie Ghaussy, "The Economic Effects of the Soviet War in Afghanistan. , 20(1-2), 117-136." *Internationales Asien forum* 20, no. 1-2 (1989): 117-136

<sup>10</sup> Alfred W. McCoy, "How the Heroin Trade Explains the US-UK Failure in Afghanistan." *The Guardian*, January 6, 2018: 9. When USA invaded Afghanistan, it had to depend on anti-Taliban Afghan warlords and militias to defeat the Taliban. However, this reliance meant as Rubin (2004) remarked the opium economy was now provided with new powerful protectors.

<sup>11</sup> Ayaz Gul, "Taliban Ban Opium Poppy Cultivation in Afghanistan." VOA. Voice of America (VOA News), (April 3, 2022). <https://www.voanews.com/a/taliban-ban-opium-poppy-cultivation-in-afghanistan/6513193.html#:~:text=Afghan%20farmers%20harvest%20poppy%20in,pr ovince%2C%20April%201%2C%202022.&text=The%20Taliban%20have%20o utlawed%20cultivation,85%20percent%20of%20global%20production.>

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challenges to the political stability of the state as Badakhshan rose in rebellion.<sup>12</sup> A number of unsuccessful prohibition measures were also launched in the late 1970s and early 1980s by the Soviet backed governments of *Khalq* and *Parcham*. The most effective prohibition in history of counternarcotics, however, was implemented during the Taliban first regime (r. 1996-2001) in 2000, which, according to Davis (2001) “resulted in some 70% of the world’s illicit opium production being wiped out virtually at a stroke”. The prohibition was later reverted few months before 9/11 as it was neither economically sustainable nor politically feasible.<sup>13</sup> Later, two decades of counternarcotics efforts were made by all levels of Afghanistan government. The counternarcotics efforts were supported financially and technically by USA and other western powers. However, despite spending more than 9 billion dollars from 2002 it could not totally eliminate the opium cultivation nor would diminish the drug production capacity in Afghanistan. The post 2001 counternarcotics efforts were based on a variety of prohibition strategies, that included interdiction, crop eradication-substitution programs, or the increased militarization of the ‘drug war’, no matter what the specific configuration, could not decrease the production or supply to Europe or the United States. The failure of counternarcotics efforts, hence, points to the highly complex nature and dynamics of Afghanistan’s opium economy. The problem also points to the fact that security policies, whether counterterrorism, counternarcotics or even developmental issues has been largely conceptualized through the prism of Elphinstone episteme, or recent framework for peace and development imposed from the western template of peace and security. The episteme of the past or the framework of the present is detached from the ground realities that have existed in Afghanistan.

### **Obverse Reality of Security: A Case of Afghanistan’s Opium Economy**

The opium poppy is drought tolerant and a high-value commercial crop in Afghanistan today. With a devastated economy and society, opium poppy cultivation and production in Afghanistan has become the only viable source of income for its population.<sup>14</sup> In other words, Afghanistan with its condition of extreme poverty and insecurity, opium production becomes a source of human security. The opium economy, secures the livelihood of 3.3 million people directly involved in poppy cultivation, accounting for nearly

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<sup>12</sup> James Tharin Bradford, *Poppies, Politics, And Power: Afghanistan And The Global History Of Drugs And Diplomacy*, (Cornell University Press, 2019): 85-115

<sup>13</sup> The Taliban faced similar situation experienced by the previous governments in Afghanistan when a large section of the opium poppy cultivators rose in rebellion against the regime.

<sup>14</sup> Vanda Felbab-Brown, "PIPE DREAMS: The Taliban and Drugs from the 1990s into Its New Regime." *Small Wars*, (2021).

15 percent of the total population of the country. Moreover, a large section of the population also benefits from the narco-ecosystem. However, it's not all illicit but licit businesses have sprung around the opium production centers, including transport, tea houses and other activities are now dependent on narcotics industry. This ecosystem also extends beyond Afghanistan to the traditional transit routes in the tribal districts of Pakistan. As one interviewee remarks: <sup>15</sup> "social and economic deprived class has always benefited from the drug traffic in the region. The vast majority of the poor, whether they are truckers, loaders, owners of small tea shops, rest stops, etc depended on it in one way or another".

In Afghanistan's opium economy, women now play an important role in opium cultivation.<sup>16</sup> Surprisingly, the security emanating from opium economy has helped most oppressed and neglected segment of Afghan society gain financial freedom and a rise in social stature in a patriarchal and ultra-conservative religious environment. Views are expressed by the Afghan woman cultivator:<sup>17</sup>

*It is not an illicit crop, but rather a blessing which saves the lives of my children, grandchildren and two widowed daughters. In general, it is the only means of survival for thousands of women-headed households, women and children in our villages whose men are either jobless or were killed during the war.*

The same phenomenon was witnessed in the tribal belt of Pakistan in the 1980s. A former woman cultivator in Mohmand District says<sup>18</sup> "for us opium poppy was not only a source of income, but financial freedom from our male relatives including spouses and male children".

In this matrix of human security, moreover, the interpretation of reality of drug addiction by the traditional and nontraditional security paradigms becomes more contested. Numerous studies have found links between armed conflict and vulnerability to drug use disorders.<sup>19</sup> One of the primary risk factors for rising drug use is exposure to trauma and a lack of economic prospects. In this context the decades long conflict have led 2.5 to

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<sup>15</sup> Ghulam Nabi, interview by author, Khyber District, April 29, 2021. The interview was conducted as part of the researcher PhD dissertation.

<sup>16</sup> David, Mansfield, "The Economic Superiority of Illicit Drug Production: Myth and Reality---Opium Poppy Cultivation in Afghanistan." *International Conference on Drug Control and Cooperation*, (Feldafing, 2002)

<sup>17</sup> Ankara. "Afghan Women and Opium." *The New Humanitarian*, (December 1, 2015). <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/report/24804/afghanistan-afghan-women-and-opium>

<sup>18</sup> Gul Bibi, interview by author, Mohmand District, April 30, 2021. The interview was conducted as part of the researcher PhD dissertation.

<sup>19</sup> UNODC. "World Drug Report 2020, Booklet 5: Socioeconomic characteristics and drug use disorders," (Vienna, 2020)

3.5 million Afghans to become directly or indirectly addicted to drugs. Research shows heightened euphoria and pleasure, bringing a feeling of supreme tranquility, peace, and a sense of security that can last for hours for opioid users.<sup>20</sup> In context of Afghans desolated by the conflict, drugs provide temporary escape from their predicament.<sup>21</sup> Another facet ignored in the human security debate is the use of synthetic vs. natural occurring drugs. Though heroin is a semi-synthetic,<sup>22</sup> however, the rising prevalence of the most deadly and potent synthetic methamphetamine-known as crystal meth is becoming a larger concern in Afghanistan and South Asia.

The obverse security, however, not only limited to society alone, but historically, it has helped in Afghanistan attempts for state formation or forging political control and stability.<sup>23</sup> In the post Soviet defeat in Afghanistan, opium became a conflict security commodity. In the absence of central government in Kabul, the quasi-state or non-state actor's drug-security approach was also principally aimed at banditry state formation. In the context of conflict, banditry is a phenomenon that is integral to the growth of markets and essential for state formation.<sup>24</sup> In other words, organizing a disorganized market and monopolizing strategic resources which in the case of Afghanistan was opium was the key in the attempt to form a central authority. Therefore, the 1990s was mainly characterized by a civil war fought by different warlords for the control of the territories where opium poppy was cultivated. These quasi-state authorities became even more dependent on opium production and its trafficking for revenue generation and expansion of their power base.<sup>25</sup> Another facet of the importance of the strategic resource i.e., in the Afghan state formation in the 1990s was that any effective prohibition would in fact derail the aforementioned attempt. The case in hand was the Taliban ban on opium cultivation in 2000.<sup>26</sup> However, the ban on opium was not only

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<sup>20</sup> C Ferreiro, & D. J. Trigg, *Heroin*, (Infobase Publishing, 2009)

<sup>21</sup> This study should not be misinterpreted in the sense that it endorses drug abuse, as there is no denying the fact that drugs can have a devastating impact on people's lives, on the lives of their families or friends, and on the society as whole. This study is not denying that drug use poses serious risks to its users, but simply pointing to the paradox of the experience of drugs use vs. components of human security.

<sup>22</sup> Heroin is a derivative of morphine which itself is extracted from opium.

<sup>23</sup> For a detail review on how the British and global powers interacted and help transform the Afghan opium industry from local to regional to global industry, see the works of Haq (2000) and Bradford (2019).

<sup>24</sup> Thomas W. Gallant, "Brigandage, Piracy, Capitalism, and State-Formation : Transnational Crime from a Historical World-Systems Perspective." In Josiah McC. Hayman, *States and Illegal Practices*, (Berg, 1999): 25-62

<sup>25</sup> David Macdonald, *Drugs in Afghanistan: Opium, Outlaws and Scorpion Tales*, (Pluto Press, 2007):88

<sup>26</sup> Why Taliban imposed the banned-on opium poppy cultivation has been a source of extensive debate. Some commenter's have argued that Taliban ban on opium poppy cultivation was to seek international legitimacy and aid. Others comment that it was an



economically infeasible but would politically weaken the Taliban regime. Besides the importance of the strategic resource in the internal state formation, it also helped the quasi-state authorities in the establishment of better local and regional linkages.<sup>27</sup> The drug trade has not only helped establish close ethnic links between Afghanistan and the neighboring countries, but has locally forged close cooperation between the otherwise deeply divided multiethnic society in Afghanistan.<sup>28</sup>

### **Implications of Immediate Prohibition of Opium for Afghanistan**

Though opium has come to be a natural metaphor for conflict and destruction in Afghanistan, however, the opium economy is not all destructive. The central premise of traditional and nontraditional security narrative or counternarcotics policies is that opium economy has created political insecurity and social disarray in Afghanistan, however, the reality stands differently. Nevertheless, the ability of the state to totally eradicate opium poppy cultivation is not something that is impossible. Historically, the Taliban government in 2000-1 was able to eliminate illicit crops in a very short timeframe. However, their success came at very high human costs.<sup>29</sup> In Afghanistan, attempts were again made to curtail the opium cultivation. In the post 2001 Afghanistan landscape, NATO and UN agencies had focused their efforts on a war on drugs. The interdictions and alternative livelihood programs marred by allegations of rampant corruption and selective targeting failed to produce positive results. The failure was evident when record levels of opium production in 2014 and 2015 were registered.<sup>30</sup> The counternarcotics policies and strategies were customized to prevent the supply of narcotics to western countries rather than respond to its growing use within Afghanistan or the adjoining transit countries. The policies and strategies primarily unconnected to the long-term repercussions on local economies also were devoid of the socio-economic reality, which in

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attempt on the part of drug syndicates having close ties with the top leadership of Taliban to dispose of old stocks and jack up the falling prices in view of the glutted market.

<sup>27</sup> James Tharin Bradford, "The Consequences of Coercion in Badakhshan: The 1958 Prohibition of Opium and the Issue of Culture in Drug Control Policy." In *Poppies, Politics, and Power*, (Cornell University Press, 2019): 85-115

<sup>28</sup> UNODC. *The Global Afghan Opium Trade: A Threat Assessment*. (Vienna: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2011)

<sup>29</sup> Corti, Daniela, and Ashok Swain. "War on drugs and war on terror: Case of Afghanistan." *Peace and Conflict Review* 3, no. 2 (2009): 41-53

<sup>30</sup> Behsat Ekici, "Why Does The International Drug-Control System Fail?" *All Azimuth: A Journal of Foreign Policy and Peace* 5, no. 2 (2016): 63-90

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the words of Andre D. Hollis<sup>31</sup> (interview by author, email, November 11, 2021):

*The AFGHANS [emphasis added by the interviewee himself] wanted realistic alternative livelihoods [that would at least be feasible in drought conditions and have the potential to pay back debts]. But the Afghan Government at all levels along with their incompetent international backers failed to provide them opting instead to implement programmes dreamed up in United States, United Kingdom and other places.*

In the post Western-backed government collapse following the United States and NATO-led foreign troops withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021, the Taliban's new government under pressure from neighboring and regional countries to combat the production as well as trafficking of drugs announced to outlaw cultivation of drugs, including opium poppy, across Afghanistan. With the already humanitarian crises developing in Afghanistan the prohibition will have the greatest effect on a large segment of Afghanistan rural population, rendering them further destitute and inexorably indebted.<sup>32</sup> As the economy spirals into decline, there are already reports that families are increasingly resorting to selling young girls into forced marriages. The situation is further made deplorable when the case of Afghan drug addicts is also taken. With an estimated 3.5 million addicts, accounting for nearly 10 percent of the total population, many rehabilitation centers are shutting down as foreign aid dwindles. There are several news accounts of thousands of addicts being apprehended, beaten, and marched off to prison, receiving no treatment or medication as they go through withdrawal among hardened criminals for months.<sup>33</sup> Despite the prohibition, drug addiction is projected to rise or be sustained as alternative sources of drugs such as synthetic opioids and methamphetamine

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<sup>31</sup> Dr. Andre D. Hollis was a Senior Advisor to the Afghanistan's Minister for Counter Narcotics from 2010 to 2011. He previously also served as U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Counternarcotics. He is also an author of a chapter "Narcoterrorism: A Definitional and Operational Transnational Challenge" in the book *Transnational Threats: Smuggling and Trafficking in Arms, drugs and human life* (2007), ed. Kimberly L. Thachuck.

<sup>32</sup> A recently release report by UNDP shows a dismal picture of the extent of the crises in Afghanistan. In post August 2021 licit economy has shrank significantly, with rising inflation effecting almost 20 million people who face high and critical levels of food insecurity. Major businesses have shut-down with loss of staggering 700 jobs. For more details see UNDP, *One Year in Review-Afghanistan since August 2021* (UNDP, 2022) <https://www.flipsnack.com/77777E5569B/one-year-in-review-afghanistan-since-august-2021-a-socio-ec/full-view.html>.

<sup>33</sup> Ebrahim Noroozi, "AP Photos: Despair and Poverty Fuel Drug Use in Afghanistan." *AP NEWS*. (Associated Press, July 20, 2022). <https://apnews.com/article/afghanistan-health-asia-pacific-poverty-kabul-a09066367bc58a934a2360dbbd0958f4>.

are readily available. The situation becomes more complicated as the licit economy is projected to decrease significantly. The UNODC warns that “shrinking the licit economy can make drug markets a larger share of the national economy” and, “without alternative avenues for income generation, stimulate more illegal activities”.<sup>34</sup> Since the Taliban took back power in 2021, international aid has been suspended, which has drastically decreased Afghanistan's legal economy and is expected to reduce the nation's GDP by 20% within the year (Westendorf 2022).<sup>35</sup> The record levels of hunger, persistent droughts, deteriorating health and basic services, declining employment opportunities coupled with the Taliban attempt to dismantle the illicit opium economy will exacerbate socio-economic crises. However, the crises will not be limited to the socio-economic sphere. As discussed, the opium economy has been navigating the political and conflict dynamics in Afghanistan. In post 2001 Afghanistan's political landscape, counternarcotics attempts were also cited as a major reason for the failure of western back central government to establish its control. At official level this was even conceded in Afghanistan's Government first Drug Report 2012 (Ministry of Counter Narcotics 2013, 21) that “eradication can be responsible for insecurity and loss of Government support”. In the context, Felbab-Brown<sup>36</sup> also remarks that:

*Counternarcotics efforts either on the part of the Afghanistan government or the U.S. and its allies would alienate a large section of the rural population dependent on opium cultivation. This in turn contributes to majority of opium poppy cultivator's sympathizing with the cause of the insurgents.*

In other words, the insurgent's namely Taliban integration into the drug trade would strengthen it politically. The 2021 prohibition on opium cultivation by the Taliban would in theory also will likely turn rural communities suffering from income loss toward its rivals, the ultra-radical

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<sup>34</sup> UNODC. *Drug Situation in Afghanistan 2021*. Research Brief , (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2021): 7

<sup>35</sup> From 6–11% of GDP in November 2021, the opium economy rose to 7.5–14% of GDP in 2022.

<sup>36</sup> Dr. Vanda Felbab-Brown, interview by author, Zoom, October 12, 2021. Dr. Vanda Felbab-Brown, is a Senior Fellow at Brookings Institution. She is considered expert on the subjects of international and internal conflicts and nontraditional security threats, including insurgency, organized crime, urban violence and illicit economies. The communication with Felbab-Brown was conducted via face to face video call interview and an extended interaction through emails. The interview was conducted as part of the researcher PhD dissertation.

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Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K) group. This will improve the group's ability to project threats in the region and beyond.<sup>37</sup>

### **Implications and Challenges of Afghanistan's Opium Prohibition for South Asia: A Case Study of Pakistan**

With the most geographically populated region, the South Asian countries are located between the world's top two heroin producers, Afghanistan and Myanmar. As a potentially important destination market, South Asia's geographically outreach means it is also a primary trans-shipment hub of Afghanistan's opiates for international market.<sup>38</sup> Among the South Asian countries, Pakistan's geographical proximity to Afghanistan makes it the most significant country for analyzing the implications and challenges of the presence or attempts of prohibition on opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan. Sharing a 2,400 km long and active border with the world's largest producer of illicit opium means knowledge of implications becomes a critical component to Pakistan's own political and socioeconomic security. Pakistan's geographical vulnerability accounts for 45% of the Afghan illicit opiates trafficked through its territory.<sup>39</sup> The sheer volume of the illicit drugs trafficked into Pakistan from decades has profoundly impacted and shaped its socio-economic landscape. Pakistan with almost no heroin addiction in 1979, witnessed a dramatic increase of heroin users. By 1986 the number of heroin users rose to half a million and by the time Soviet withdrew from Afghanistan almost three million. This trend continues unabated and within two decades reported to cross the five million levels.<sup>40</sup> The heroin addiction also witnessed a surge in the tribal space primarily concentrated along the trafficking routes. Moreover, during the Soviet-Afghan War, the Afghanistan's opium economy integrated Pakistan's apolitical tribal space with regional and international illicit drug market or the vice versa.<sup>41</sup> Nevertheless, the integration would escalate the opium poppy cultivation on even a larger scale in the tribal region of

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<sup>37</sup> Both Taliban and ISK are perceived by the world as radical militant organizations, however, the two groups' objectives stands in stark contrast. While the Taliban's ideology is an amalgamation of Islamic and *Pashtunwali* code with the objective of establishing Islamic rule over Afghanistan only, the ISKP follows a Salafi-jihadi ideology governed by Islamic jurisprudence and seeks to establish a caliphate across Afghanistan, Pakistan, and parts of Iran and India. Hence, any potential increase of ISK power is bound to destabilize the entire region.

<sup>38</sup> UNODC. *Afghan Opiate Trafficking Through the Southern Route*. (Vienna: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2015)

<sup>39</sup> UNODC. *The Global Afghan Opium Trade: A Threat Assessment*. (Vienna: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2011): 28

<sup>40</sup> UNODC. *Drug use in Pakistan*. (United Nations, 2013)

<sup>41</sup> There are alternative accounts that it was tribal areas of Pakistan which integrated Afghanistan's drug industry to the world market.

Pakistan. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and Baluchistan would also become the most affected provinces in terms of opiate users.<sup>42</sup> However, any curtailment of Afghanistan's opium economy will result in tremendous stress on the already limited infrastructure and rehab services existing in Pakistan.<sup>43</sup>

Moreover, as discussed Afghanistan's opium ecosystem also extends beyond its physical boundaries into the tribal space of Pakistan. The ecosystem has produced almost identical socio-economic and political security implications for Afghanistan as well as Pakistan. Therefore, any immediate prohibition attempts to dismantle the Afghanistan's opium industry have the potential to bring similar implications and challenges for Pakistan security as well. In Pakistan, one key concern is a major refugee crisis may become imminent. The Taliban decision to implement prohibition/eradication in the country without viable economic alternatives, will force the majority of the Afghan rural population into deep economic debt and desperation. In an environment of less economic opportunities, migration of the farmers and their families could swell the numbers of Afghans refugees already living in Pakistan.

Of the serious implications of immediate prohibition will be a shift of cultivation from Afghanistan in the less economically developed areas of Pakistan. A similar phenomenon has been witnessed in Pakistan tribal areas in early 2000s. The case at hand was the successful eradication program in Nangahar that registered a tremendous drop in 2004 from the opium poppy cultivation levels of 2003. This period, however, led to an intra-regional shift with the opium poppy cultivation finding fecund soil and conducive environment, literally in adjacent Khyber Agency and including regions which had never been known to grow the crop. In 2003-4 resurgence of opium poppy cultivation was reported in the tribal belt and for the first time in the Kila Abdullah and Gulistan districts of Baluchistan province.<sup>44</sup> Therefore, any attempt for an immediate prohibition resulting in an expected shortfall in supply of opium from Afghanistan and price hike would further induce more farmers in the tribal region of Pakistan to return or increase poppy cultivation.

Moreover, the drug trade has its own dynamics operating on the laws of supply and demand. If the supply of narcotics is disrupted, the ecosystem could adapt to new sources. In the context of Afghanistan's decades long

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<sup>42</sup> UNODC. *Drug use in Pakistan*. (United Nations, 2013)

<sup>43</sup> Shazia Mehboob, "The Deteriorating State of Rehabilitation Centres and Pakistan's Reluctance to Own the Drug Problem." *Images*, (November 16, 2020). <https://images.dawn.com/news/1186022>

<sup>44</sup> Shanty, Frank C. *The Nexus: International Terrorism and Drug Trafficking from Afghanistan*. (Praeger, 2011): 119

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counternarcotics strategy, Ullah (interview by author, Peshawar, June 11, 2022),<sup>45</sup> argues that

*"Afghanistan's opium economy already the main source of the world's heroin supply is on the verge of becoming a significant global producer of methamphetamine. One of the consequences of the decades long eradication policies adopted by the West in Afghanistan was it could push the expansion of the manufacture of methamphetamine and other synthetic drugs further. And if the current Taliban regime really goes through their plans and opiate production diminishes then to address the gap in supply, there is a high probability that the entire region will shift to synthetic drug production."*

In other words, the production of synthetic drugs is, however, not limited to, certain geographic locations as it can be manufactured anywhere. As synthetic drug production surged in Afghanistan during the late 2010, geography would once more pre-determine the tribal areas as the traditional transit route and Pakistan as a substantial market for Afghanistan's synthetic drugs. From 2016 onwards, Ice (crystal meth) was the third-largest substance that Pakistan's Anti-Narcotic Force (ANF) to be seized.<sup>46</sup> The use of synthetic drugs, particularly crystal meth or ice, has also been claimed to have dramatically increased, with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa emerging as the province most afflicted.<sup>47</sup> The quantity of synthetic drugs being smuggled and consumed, which the local media has termed the "ice age," drove Khyber Pakhtunkhwa legislators to adopt more severe regulations to target the sellers and smugglers of ice.<sup>48</sup> In case where Afghanistan's capacity to produce opium becomes limited, the manufacture of synthetic opioids and meth will increase, not only in tribal districts but also across Pakistan.

In political security context, the implications of prohibition are observed with similar patterns. As Inkster, Nigel, and Comolli (2012) note that the prohibition/eradication efforts had been a major cause of violence and instability not only in Afghanistan but the transit countries as well. In

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<sup>45</sup> Mr. Ullah is a high ranking official at the Excise, Taxation and Narcotics Control Department, who has carried out extensive research on consumption and production of synthetic drugs particularly in KP province and across Pakistan. The interview was conducted via face to face.

<sup>46</sup> ANF. *Anf Seized 3.98 Ton Drugs Valuing Us\$ 148.75 Million Internationally In 23 Operations, Arrested 23 Culprits Involved In Drug Trafficking & Also Impounded 11 Vehicles*. Press Release , (Pakistan Anti Narcotic Force, 2020)

<sup>47</sup> Javed Aziz Khan, "4980kg drugs seized, 12 factories unearthed in Peshawar, Khyber in 7 months." *The News International*, (July 30, 2020).

<sup>48</sup> The synthetic drugs have virtually flooded the KP province including its provincial capital, leading to proliferation in addiction rates and also correlating to surging crimes across the province. In 2022, reports are still pouring in of new ice factories and opium cultivation in erstwhile tribal agencies being discovered or dismantled.

Pakistan, evidence suggests nexus of the drug trade, insurgency and violence in tribal areas.<sup>49</sup>

### **Imagining South Asia Regional Response to Opium Prohibition in Afghanistan- Gaps and Opportunities**

As a geopolitical union, South Asia<sup>50</sup> has become a major source, destination market and transit route for the illicit drugs including heroin and synthetic drugs. The source of the illicit drugs is the South Asian region's most impoverish, conflict ridden and socially devastated country, namely Afghanistan. Many of the issues in Afghanistan are complex and long standing requiring an integrated multidimensional regional response. Since its inception, South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (henceforth, SAARC) has been striving to achieve its political and economic goals of peaceful relations and economic integration amongst its members, however, such efforts remain to be materialized.<sup>51</sup> The prohibition attempt in Afghanistan, therefore, presents an opportunity for SAARC member states to realize its political and economic objectives as well as goal of a drug-free region. In post 2001, South Asian countries particularly Pakistan and India were already invested in counternarcotics efforts in Afghanistan through bilateral, regional and international instruments.<sup>52</sup> In 2005, under the sponsorship of UNODC, Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), underscoring the need for elimination of poppy cultivation, destruction of drug production facilities and exchange of information/intelligence on international drug traffickers.<sup>53</sup> India on the other hand lacking a direct land border with Afghanistan took a developmental-focused strategy to its counternarcotics engagement in Afghanistan.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Gretchen Peters and Don Ressler. Crime and insurgency in the tribal areas of Afghanistan and Pakistan. (Military academy west point ny combating terrorism center, 2010)

<sup>50</sup> The geopolitical union is translated through SAARC which includes the following member countries: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka.

<sup>51</sup> Jham Kumar Bishwakarma, and Zongshan Hu. "Problems and prospects for the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC)." *Politics & Policy* (2022).

<sup>52</sup> These measures include 2003 Paris Pact, the 2005 Memorandum of Understanding on Poppy Elimination, Border Control, and crackdowns on trafficking groups and processing infrastructure, and SAARC Convention on Narcotic Drugs.

<sup>53</sup> UNODC. "Afghanistan - United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime," January 2006. [https://www.unodc.org/pdf/afg/updates/cnle\\_update\\_05.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/pdf/afg/updates/cnle_update_05.pdf)

<sup>54</sup> To prevent Afghan farmers from growing poppies, the development strategy focused on giving agricultural technical help and supplies of vegetable seeds in Sadika Hameed, *Prospects for Indian-Pakistani Cooperation in Afghanistan*. (Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2012).

However, as discussed that in the midst of economic and social insecurities, opium poppy cultivation provides a vital lifeline for many Afghans. Nevertheless, Afghanistan's opium industry for many years has also become a source of political and economic destabilization or a disruptive factor in the development of Afghanistan as well as a threat to the overall regional security. This cacophony of security/insecurity linked to Afghanistan's opium economy needs a holistic approach in the formulation of a viable counternarcotics or security policies. Moreover, the implications and challenges of the prohibition of opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan should be viewed as a developmental issue and must be recognized as such.<sup>55</sup> The drugs and development nexus should be balanced with the conceptualization of narcotics as a transnational security concern and a conflict commodity. The prohibition of opium poppy cultivation represents an opportunity for South Asia to transform into illicit drug-free region. However, to effectively cope with the implication and challenges, existing political, social and economic ground realities in Afghanistan must be recognized by the region if not the world. Individual experiences of countries in South Asian region in counternarcotics efforts are valuable. The development and eradication programs backed by the UN and other development organizations contributed to a diminishing trend of drug cultivation and production in Pakistan.<sup>56</sup> Since 2001 Pakistan would follow a 'zero tolerance policy' toward poppy cultivation on its territory. The cultivation of opium poppy in Pakistan would largely decline during the 1990s to near-zero levels in 1999 and 2000.<sup>57</sup> The strategy would be two-pronged centering on alternative development and law enforcement measures, was incredibly successful, almost completely eliminating poppy cultivation in Pakistan. However, the magnitude of the implications and challenges that would result from any attempt to prohibit opium poppy cultivation and production is beyond Pakistan's political and economic capacity. In this context, a regional solution will be the most viable.

In the context of illicit drugs free region, free of their production, processing, trafficking and use, the South Asian regional response is primarily channeled through the SAARC Convention on Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (henceforth, Convention). However, the scope of the Convention is largely restricted to legislative and administrative measures with an overwhelming emphasis on eradication and interdiction activities in 'producer' and 'transit' states, imposing disproportionate costs on its member countries. The Convention emphasizes the individual responsibility of each member country rather than a collective approach.

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<sup>55</sup> Julia Buxton, "Drugs and development: The great disconnect." *Policy Report 2* (2015): 12

<sup>56</sup> Development programs were often completed through continual discussion and cooperation with tribal leaders. For more details see Gillett (2001) and Windle (2012).

<sup>57</sup> UNODC. *Illicit Drug Trends in Pakistan*. United Nations, 2008



Though the Convention is cognizant of the “links between illicit drug trafficking and other related organised criminal activities, which undermine the economies and threaten the stability, security and sovereignty of States” however, it does not offer any economic and political solutions. On counternarcotics efforts, although there remains limited scope for collaboration beyond information sharing and cooperative measures through SAARC, future cooperation should remain a possibility. As Hameed (2012) argues “implementation of antidrug cooperation remains a challenge, but there are enough common interests in the region to cooperate on drugs”.

### **Conclusion: Recommendations for South Asia Regional Approach towards Prohibition in Afghanistan**

In conclusion the curtailment of the drug industry has profound implications for state, societal and individual security not only for Afghanistan but the connected regions at large. However, this aspect of security has not been explored in-depth and seems to form a narrow niche in the security discourses on Afghanistan’s opium economy. The study, therefore, was a modest attempt to examine some of the security challenges that may arise as a result of complete prohibition of opium poppy cultivation and drug production in Afghanistan. In the light of some implications examined, the research study concludes with a set of rudimentary recommendations for regional framework aimed at strengthening cooperation within South Asia to effectively cope with any prospects of curtailment of Afghanistan’s opium economy. The research study suggests the following:

1. The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) needs to develop a broader consensus on accepting the political reality in Afghanistan. This would require extending some form of political reorganization to support a Taliban government in its prohibition efforts.
2. The prohibition attempts in Afghanistan should be extended to the level of a regional ownership.
3. The member states of SAARC should pool funds for the reconstruction of Afghanistan with major input from the regional financial powerhouse India to continue to invest in the infrastructure and development projects.
4. The prohibition should be phased wise program rather than abrupt imposition with socio-economic cost. Those areas where prohibition is scheduled can also be ratified through its recognition as legit commodity since the world demand for medicinal opium exceeds the Afghanistan’s annual opium output.
5. The current economic crises in Afghanistan have been exacerbated by the freeze of funds by international community. Lacking strong external funding, the government dominated by the Taliban, may

collapse. This will lead to further conflict and its drug economy becoming more entrenched. Therefore, SAARC needs to work with the international community to help unfreeze the funds and particularly make it available for development and prohibition efforts.

6. SAARC should critically reflect on the limitations of the Convention and incorporate feasibility of development objectives within a prohibition oriented drug control framework. It should further help Afghanistan in rehabilitation and treatment, preventive education, and research to help combat illicit drug abuse.
7. The need to reduce poverty and foster development should be central to SAARC strategies for drug control. SAARC too should promote alternative sources of livelihood for people who are expected to be adversely affected by the curtailment, and eventually, stoppage of drug production. Collective regional efforts to develop alternative livelihoods should be integrated into overall economic and human capital development program. Such efforts must include both rebuilding Afghanistan's rural economy and generate off-farm opportunities.
8. Improving substance abuse prevention and treatment access for Afghans suffering from opioid use disorder should be prioritized in policy and funded far more broadly than has been the case so far.

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