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Can Afghanistan's Counternarcotics Efforts Survive NATO Withdrawal?

Matthew C. DuPee | Thursday, July 14, 2011

On June 26, at a gathering in Kabul marking World Counter Narcotics Day, the mood was somber. Gone was the positive spin of last year's event, when Afghanistan's minister of counternarcotics, Zarar Ahmad Moqbil, proudly announced that poppy cultivation had been reduced by up to 50 percent and that 23 out of 34 provinces were then free from poppy cultivation. Sadly, the significant decrease in opium production last year has since been attributed to a convergence of environmental and climatic variables (</articles/5577/afghanistans-poppy-blight-could-mean-trouble-for-war-effort>) that devastated the crops late in the season, not to effective counternarcotics measures. According to the United Nations, Afghanistan remains the world's largest producer of illicit opiates and cannabis resin, known as hashish.



With the recent announcement from the U.S. and its NATO allies that they would begin a phased security transition to the Afghan government in anticipation of announced troop withdrawals, many questions remain regarding the establishment of an effective counternarcotics policy and Afghanistan's ability to implement sustainable anti-drug strategies. Most importantly, how will the scale-down of NATO forces and increased responsibility of the Afghan National Security Forces affect the newest iteration of U.S. anti-drug strategies in Afghanistan?

Beginning in 2009, the Obama administration transitioned away from the Bush administration's "Five Pillar Plan" -- a focus on public information, judicial reform, alternative-livelihood development, interdiction and eradication -- toward countering the link between narcotics and the insurgency and

attacking the narcotics-corruption-insurgency nexus. Another key difference in President Barack Obama's counternarcotics strategy was the termination of U.S.-contracted forced eradication programs and a renewed emphasis on a costly and complicated expansion of agricultural development assistance. Using the current situation in Afghanistan as a litmus test of how well these strategies might play out during the predicted three-year security transition that kicked off this month, fears over Afghanistan transforming into a full blown narco-state are well-founded.

Alarming, alternative crop schemes and pilot programs, such as the much-touted saffron plan, are beginning to unravel. According to a BBC Pashto report in June (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-13806062>), prices for saffron inside Afghanistan have dropped by 60 percent, with supply outstripping demand. Last year, saffron sold for \$4,500 per kilogram inside Afghanistan, but now the price has dwindled to \$1,500 per kilogram.

In western Herat province, where the saffron pilot program initially flourished, with some 1.5 tons of saffron harvested in 2010, insurgent attacks against saffron fields and farming supplies have left some communities resorting to poppy cultivation as a means of survival. In December, the Taliban targeted trucks carrying saffron bulbs in the same area, killing two drivers and torching their vehicles. Attacks such as these, as well as market oversaturation and continued interference by Iran - a major saffron producer, Iran has allegedly flooded local markets to help drive down demand for Afghan-produced saffron -- will likely exacerbate the decline of saffron prices in 2011 and beyond.

Without long-term support and effective security, local communities are forced to rely upon staple cash crops (</articles/4393/afghanistans-other-narcotics-nightmare>), such as opium poppies or cannabis, to maintain a standard of living above the poverty line. Currently, market prices for both opium and cannabis are well above 2009 levels. According to the United Nations Office for Drugs and Crime (UNODC), Afghan farmers' gross income from cannabis per hectare in 2010 increased 130 percent, to \$9,000 per hectare. Farmers' gross income from opium over the same time period was \$4,900 per hectare. Both far outstrip gross income from wheat, at \$770 per hectare.

Worsening the picture is the fact that the current government in Kabul, hampered by corruption, is a significant obstacle to long-term counternarcotics policies. In part because of its limited reach into rural communities, the central government is unable to effectively carry out agriculture assistance and development without foreign support.

Meanwhile, although U.S. forces no longer conduct poppy eradication, the U.S. does provide financial support for the Afghan government's eradication effort, called the Government-Led Eradication (GLE) program. Results from the GLE program are telling as an indicator of the scale on which an Afghan-led security and counternarcotics policy could be implemented. Last year, Afghan officials eliminated 2,316 hectares under the GLE program, down 54 percent compared to 2008, with no targeting of fields occurring in Kandahar province at all in 2009. The UNODC estimates Kandahar province is the second-largest producer of illicit opiates and cannabis resin in the country. During the GLE program of 2009, eradication teams were attacked at least eight times, with 24 policemen and three farmers killed, 21 police and six farmers injured, and five tractors used in eradication destroyed.

The scale-down and eventual withdrawal of international security forces from Afghanistan, and their replacement by host-nation security forces, particularly in Afghanistan's unstable southern provinces, will have a dramatic impact on local socio-economic conditions, strongly influencing decisions at the farm gate. This year, Afghanistan is expected to produce around 123,000 hectares of poppy, or approximately 6,500 metric tons of opium, and between 1,200-3,700 metric tons of hashish -- an 18 percent increase from last year's output, according to a recent report by the UNODC (http://www.unodc.org/documents/crop-monitoring/Afghanistan/Afghanistan_Cannabis_Survey_Report_2010_smallwcover.pdf) (http://www.unodc.org/documents/crop-monitoring/Afghanistan/Afghanistan_Cannabis_Survey_Report_2010_smallwcover.pdf) (.pdf). Since 2002, the United States has appropriated more than \$4.5 billion for counternarcotics programs in Afghanistan. Despite this effort, plans to transition Afghan communities into producing licit crops and revitalize Afghanistan's historically vibrant agricultural sector remain unattainable.

It remains unlikely that the Afghan government's current counternarcotics efforts will be robust enough to create the conditions needed to wean rural farming communities off of the narco-economy in the short or medium term, or, more importantly, by 2014, when all coalition forces are expected to withdraw. That means that the narcotics being produced in Afghanistan will continue to plague international and domestic efforts to stabilize the country and negatively impact relations with regional states desperately trying to prevent the tidal wave of illicit drugs and violence from flowing over their borders.

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Photo: Afghan villagers sit beside a poppy field, Markhanai, Afghanistan, May 2002 (Defense Department photo by USAF Staff Sgt. Jeremy T. Lock).

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