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U.S. Can't Stop Afghanistan's Opium Economy

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[The 2010 Afghanistan Opium Survey](#) ^[3], which the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime recently released, is a classic case of bad news and illusory good news. The principal piece of faux good news was that the production of opium (the raw ingredient for heroin) had declined a whopping 48 percent over the past year. However, that decline was not because of any decision by Afghan farmers to abandon the cultivation of opium poppy crops or because the Afghan government's drug eradication efforts were more successful. The amount of acreage devoted to opium poppies was unchanged from 2009, and the Karzai regime's eradication campaign (largely a response to Washington's prodding) [remained as desultory as ever](#) ^[4]. The report concedes that the production decline was entirely the result of a fungal blight that dramatically reduced crop yields. Needless to say, drug warriors can't count on that factor every year.

The blight actually appears to have been a financial blessing for poppy farmers, since it diminished the supply glut that had developed over the previous two years. With the onset of a modest shortage, prices are soaring. The income to drug crop farmers this year was \$604 million—up from \$438 million in 2009. In essence, the blight had the same economic effect as U.S. Agricultural Department price support programs that bribe American farmers to take acreage out of production.

The drop in supply has also restored the gap between what Afghan farmers can earn growing opium poppies and growing competing crops. Because of the glut in 2008 and 2009, the price advantage of opium over wheat—the main competitor—had shrunk to 3 to 1. It's now back up to 6 to 1. Although that is still a long way from the heady initial years of the U.S.-led occupation when the ratio reached as much as 12 to 1, it is still clear that Afghan farmers can make far more money growing poppies than any alternative.

And therein lies the principal problem for those in the Obama administration and Congress who press U.S. military commanders to make anti-drug efforts a high priority in the overall mission in Afghanistan. The brutal reality is that opium is a huge part of the country's economy. Most estimates place the commerce in illegal drugs at between one-quarter and one-third of Afghanistan's gross domestic product. UN surveys over the years have concluded that nearly half a million Afghan farmers are directly involved in the drug trade. Given the role of extended families and clans in that society, about 30 percent of the population has some stake in the trade.

Such economic realities mean that calls to make anti-drug efforts a higher priority jeopardize the more important anti-terrorism mission. Proponents of a crackdown argue that a vigorous eradication effort is needed to dry up the funds flowing to the Taliban and al-Qaeda. Those groups do benefit financially from drug trafficking, but they are hardly the only ones. NATO forces rely on opium poppy farmers to provide information on the movement of enemy forces, especially in southern Afghanistan. Escalating the counter-narcotics effort would risk alienating those vital sources of intelligence.

Equally important, many of President Hamid Karzai's key political allies also profit from drug trafficking. [5] Indeed, cynical Afghans refer to the elegant homes of those power brokers in Kabul and other cities as "poppy palaces." Karzai's allies include regional warlords who backed the Taliban when that faction was in power, switching sides only when it was clear that the U.S.-led military offensive in late 2001 was going to succeed. Targeting such traffickers creates a powerful incentive for them to switch sides yet again.

Although it might gall a good many U.S. officials, the best course of action is to avert one's eyes to the pervasive commerce in illegal drugs. Our primary objective must remain the weakening of al Qaeda and a prompt exit of American forces from Afghanistan. The last thing we need to do is become bogged down in a futile crusade against opium poppies. [6]

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