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America's drug war failed in Afghanistan

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The U.S. government has failed to stop the drug trade at home. Washington also has not created a competent, effective, and honest central government in Afghanistan. How effective will Kabul be in limiting opium production when American troops go home?

Not very. A new report from the Office of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) reports that opium production last year was the highest ever, 209,000 hectares, up 36 percent from 2012. The average yield per hectare rose 11 percent over the preceding year. Potential production was up 49 percent.

Alas, the sky is the limit. SIGAR warned: "With deteriorating security in many parts of rural Afghanistan and low levels of eradication of poppy fields, further increases in cultivation are likely in 2014."

Drug money permeates the economy, enriching friend and foe alike. Last year the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime estimated that opium exports accounted for 14 percent of the country's GDP.

Unfortunately, explained SIGAR: "the narcotics trade poisons the Afghan financial sector and undermines the Afghan state's legitimacy by stoking corruption, sustaining criminal networks, and providing significant financial support for the Taliban and other insurgent groups."

The Afghan public is understandably cynical. When I visited the country Afghans called large homes behind high walls lining Kabul streets "poppy palaces."

Drug production exploded despite \$7.6 billion spent by Washington alone to stop cultivation and distribution. All for naught. Unfortunately, noted SIGAR, "the recent record-high level of poppy cultivation calls into question the long-term effectiveness and sustainability of those prior efforts."

The State Department's response to SIGAR was a marvel of delusion. Production "is only one indicator of counternarcotics progress." And "we are making good progress in building the capability of our Afghan partners," even as cultivation surges.

This is the best case for years of expensive efforts? Even UNODC admitted that Afghanistan is beset by “fragmentation, conflict, patronage, corruption and impunity.” The Pentagon stated that “the failure to reduce poppy cultivation and increase eradication is due to the lack of Afghan government support for the effort.” Nevertheless, State said it looked “forward to the new Afghan government assuming a leadership role in this regard.”

Eradication was difficult enough when backed by a strong allied military presence. Wrote Vanda Felbab-Brown of the Brookings Institution, early programs were “manipulated by local Afghan strongmen to eliminate drug competition and ethnic/tribal rivals.”

Moreover, the eradication campaign, explained Felbab-Brown, “ignited violent strikes and social protests.” Antagonistic “poppy farmers came to constitute a strong and key base of support for the Taliban.” This discontent enabled the Taliban to rebuild popular support by defending rural farmers. The Senlis Council’s Emmanuel Reinert said eradication was “the single biggest reason” Afghans opposed allied forces.

Eradication efforts also inflated Taliban revenues. As economist Jeffrey Clemens pointed out, the counter-narcotics campaign both redirected opium production to Taliban-controlled areas and raised poppy prices. Thus, drug revenues actually *rose* where guerrillas ruled.

Operating on their own, the Afghan National Army and Afghan National Police will be hard-pressed to fulfill their most important responsibility to sustain the Kabul government against the Taliban. Drug interdiction inevitably will be a secondary objective. The security forces already suffer from corruption and will be less inclined than foreigners to challenge drug traders who are co-nationals.

One possible approach is to reduce demand for drugs in Western societies to discourage production in Afghanistan. However, only the most Draconian enforcement has much effect on drug use. Most Western societies are moving in the opposite direction, choosing liberty over paternalism.

The West must set priorities in Afghanistan. Attempting to eradicate poppy production is almost guaranteed to lose the battle for hearts and minds. Instead, allied policymakers should consider strategies to drain money and profit from the drug trade. Western governments should scale back the drug war.

Afghanistan could be allowed to produce opium for the legal morphine market. Ultimately, the entire market should be legalized or at least decriminalized for adults.

Afghanistan is merely one front in a global drug war. There are no good solutions. But Afghanistan and its Western-backers should recognize reality and abandon the futile and counterproductive campaign against the opium trade.

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