

# Fighting the Opium Trade in Afghanistan: Myths, Facts, and Sound Policy

We, the governments of the United States and the United Kingdom, in conjunction with the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, ISAF and international partners, and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, are now engaged in a comprehensive initiative to fight the production and trafficking of opium in Afghanistan. There is significant skepticism among the public and the media regarding the counternarcotics effort. We therefore provide the following paper to correct some of the myths about the illegal drug trade in Afghanistan, and to clarify how our programs address the situation on the ground.

In summary:

1. Wealthy land owners in the fertile South increasingly control Afghan poppy cultivation.
2. Concentration of poppy cultivation is directly correlated with insecurity.
3. Poppy cultivation is not expected to increase substantially this year.
4. Poppy has largely disappeared from traditional growing areas, and is now cultivated largely on land where legitimate crops once grew.
5. The number of provinces in which poppy cultivation is found has decreased.
6. Counternarcotics activities are led by the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, not international contractors.
7. U.S. support of aerial eradication is contingent upon the consent of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan.
8. The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the international community agree that forced, targeted, non-negotiated eradication of the fields owned by the wealthy land owners is a necessary law enforcement and counterinsurgency tool.
9. Four high-value drug traffickers have been removed from Afghanistan and indicted abroad.

## Poppy Cultivation: Myths and Facts

**Myth: Opium poppy cultivation is skyrocketing throughout Afghanistan.**

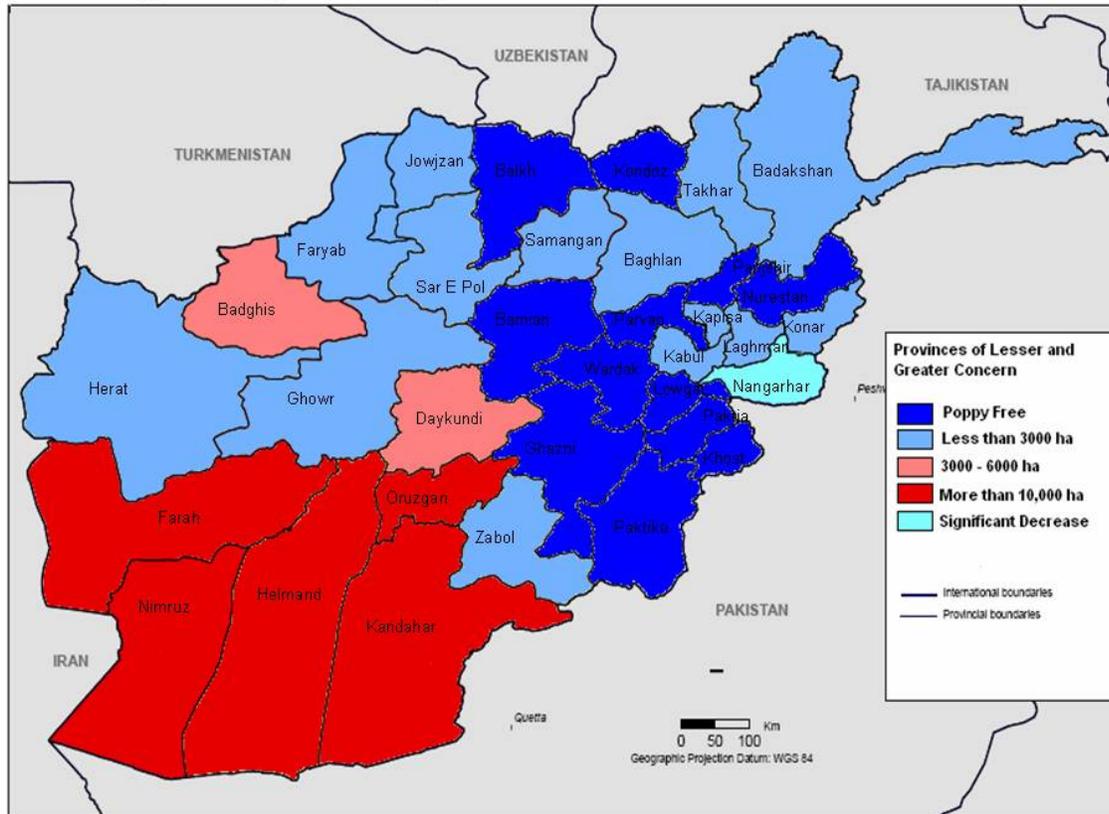
**Fact:**

**While overall opium poppy cultivation has increased in Afghanistan over the last two years, the number of provinces cultivating poppy has in fact decreased.**

- In 2008, 26 of Afghanistan's 34 provinces are expected to have less than 3,000 hectares of cultivation according to the UNODC Opium Rapid Assessment Survey (ORAS).
- Only 4% of agricultural land in Afghanistan is used for poppy cultivation.

- According to the 2008 ORAS, three formerly major poppy-growing provinces – Balkh, Badakhshan, and Nangarhar – have slashed or eliminated cultivation altogether.
- As demonstrated by the map below, poppy cultivation is now confined almost entirely to Afghanistan’s insecure South, where it helps fund the Taliban and other insurgent and criminal groups and where the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan has difficulty delivering counternarcotics programs.

USG All Source Poppy Cultivation Projections for 2008 in Afghanistan



**Myth:** Afghan poppy is only grown by poor farmers.

**Fact:**

The poor farmers in Afghanistan’s mountainous North and East who grew poppy two to three years ago have now mostly stopped, as security, governance and development opportunities have improved in these areas. In the South, where most of the poppy is now grown, cultivation is organized by wealthy traffickers and big landowners who plant poppy because of high profits and the absence of law enforcement in insecure areas.

- Concentration of poppy cultivation and processing is now correlated with insecurity and insurgency, and most Afghan poppy is now grown by wealthy land-owners, corrupt officials and Taliban sympathizers—not

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poor farmers. The UK and the U.S. are helping the Afghan Government to target eradication at the wealthy, not the poor.

- Research indicates that, on average, wealthy Southern landowners could give up opium poppy and still earn more than most farmers elsewhere in the country.
- Research indicates that in Helmand, Afghanistan's wealthiest province, 41% of families' derived income from poppy cultivation in 2007, versus a national average of 4%.
- Subsistence and tenant farmers in Helmand live on \$1 a day, according to the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU). The high profits from the drug trade do not necessarily reach poor people in Helmand, but insecurity caused by the narcotics trade does prevent some of them from receiving alternative development assistance.
- According to the 2007 UNODC opium survey, the number of poppy-free provinces increased from 6 to 13, as cultivation is increasingly concentrated in the insecure South and West, which represent over 70% of total cultivation.
- USAID has accomplished the following:
  - Trained 1.5 million farmers in modern farming practices
  - Provided \$49 million in credit
  - \$878 million of economic impact
  - Repaired over 1,000 km of rural roads
- DFID has supported the Afghan Government to build roads, irrigation, provide finance for agriculture and schools, and provided \$40M of support to Helmand Province.

**Myth: The United Nations is predicting another significant increase in the Afghan poppy crop in 2008.**

**Fact:**

**On the contrary, recent reporting suggests that poppy cultivation will not increase significantly and that the poppy crop is increasingly contained in five contiguous Southern provinces.**

- The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime February 2008 Opium Rapid Assessment Survey (ORAS) predicts that Afghanistan's 2008 poppy cultivation may be equal to or slightly lower than 2007.
- With effective counternarcotics efforts over the coming months, 2008 could herald an overall drop in cultivation and an increase in the number of poppy-free provinces, according to the 2008 ORAS report.

**Myth: Farmers plant poppy because they have been doing so for generations; it is part of their culture, and they have no alternatives available.**

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**Many Afghan farmers who previously grew viable traditional crops have abandoned traditional crops in the last seven years in order to grow poppy.**

- According to UNODC, more than half the poppy farmers in Afghanistan started planting poppy after 2001, and in Helmand, 70% of poppy cultivation is new in the last three years.
- Reports suggest that in some areas, well-financed narco-farmers are now irrigating previously fallow desert lands in order to grow more poppy—expanding poppy fields in wide-open plains near cities and irrigation infrastructure.

**Myth: Many farmers are coerced by drug traffickers into planting poppy.**

**Fact:**

**We have seen very little to suggest that poor farmers are coerced at gunpoint to plant poppy with any regularity. It is more common that financial incentives rather than physical pressure from traffickers keep farmers planting.**

- While there is limited anecdotal evidence of drug traffickers forcing farmers to grow opium poppy, there is no information to suggest that this practice is widespread.
- Reporting suggests that farmers enter financing and sales agreements with drug traffickers.
- Because some farmers become indebted to drug traffickers, the UK, Canada, U.S. and other ISAF countries are helping the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan expand micro-credit programs to offer farmers licit pre-planting loans on better terms than they can receive from drug traffickers.

## **Poppy Eradication: Myths and Facts**

**Myth: The U.S. thinks the best way to solve Afghanistan's drug problem is to simply eradicate the poppy fields.**

**Fact:**

**Successful counternarcotics campaigns in the Andes, Thailand, Burma, Pakistan and India have taught us that a balanced and coordinate effort is the only way to achieve sustainable reductions in drug production. The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan has developed a comprehensive counternarcotics strategy widely supported in the international community, and the U.S. Government has a similarly balanced supporting strategy.**

- The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan is implementing an eight-pillar National Drug Control Strategy that comprises institutional capacity-building, law enforcement and interdiction, demand reduction, criminal justice reform, public education, regional cooperation, alternative livelihoods, and poppy eradication.

- According to the Atlantic Society Report, “The drug issue must be addressed now in a comprehensive and effective way if Afghanistan is to become a successful state. Bold thinking and a holistic approach combining development and enforcement tools are essential.”
- Virtually every successful anti-opium campaign in history has required a downside risk to deter poppy cultivation at the level of the individual farmer, and eradication is just one risk factor among many.

**Myth: The U.S. is planning to execute an aerial spray eradication program in Afghanistan despite opposition from the sovereign Afghan government.**

**Fact:**

**The U.S., the UK, the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, and ISAF partners collectively advocate a policy of forced, non-negotiated, targeted poppy eradication in Afghanistan, to be carried out exclusively by force-protected ground teams employing manual eradication methods.**

- Force protection is critical to enable eradication teams to eradicate the fields of the wealthiest and most powerful narco-traders, many of whose profits directly feed the insurgency.
- Aerial spray eradication is the other method through which to accomplish forced non-negotiated poppy eradication, but there are no plans to carry out this method of eradication in Afghanistan.

## **Narcotics and the Insurgency: Myths and Facts**

**Myth: The narcotics trade and the Taliban-led insurgency are unrelated or only tangentially related. The counternarcotics effort wastes precious resources that would be better spent fighting the insurgency.**

**Fact:**

**The opium trade and the insurgency are closely related. Poppy cultivation and insurgent violence are correlated geographically, and opium now provides the Taliban with a portion of its revenues.**

- In December 2007, ISAF troops retaking the former Taliban stronghold of Musa Qala seized approximately 11,000 kg of opium and 32 kilograms of heroin, drug processing equipment, and drug ledgers.
- ISAF Commanding General Dan McNeill has publicly stated, “When I see a poppy field, I see it turning into money and then into IEDs [improvised explosive devices], AKs [assault rifles], and RPGs [rocket propelled grenades].”
- The U.S., UK, UNODC, ISAF and other major international stakeholders all acknowledge that the Taliban-led insurgency and the Afghan drugs trade are increasingly linked.
- The Joint Monitoring and Coordination Board (JCMB) led by the Afghan Government and the international community recently agreed that

narcotics production is now strongly linked to the insurgency and that decisive action must be taken against narcotics.

## **Interdiction: Myths and Facts**

**Myth: Everyone knows who the high-value drug traffickers are in Afghanistan. Why don't we just arrest them?**

**Fact:**

**When there is sufficient evidence, drug traffickers are brought to justice, either in Afghan or U.S. courts. More importantly, the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan remains focused on disrupting the trade and cutting off the funding that supports the traffickers and the insurgency in Afghanistan.**

- The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan seized approximately 40,000 kg of opium, morphine base, and heroin in 2007.
- In 2007 there were over 278 convictions for narcotics offences, up from 182 convictions in 2006.
- The U.S. Department of Justice has indicted four high-value Afghan narco-traffickers with ties to the Taliban-led insurgency: Khan Mohammad, Haji Bashir Noorzai, Mohammad Essa and Haji Baz Mohammad.
- Because of the necessity of building the capacity to gather evidence, remove suspects, and try complex cases, it will take some time until the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan is able to systematically prosecute major drug traffickers.
- This reality makes other law enforcement operations such as interdiction of drug shipments, removal of corrupt officials and eradication of poppy crops particularly critical in the near term.

## **Political Will to Fight the Drug Trade: Myths and Facts**

**Myth: Counternarcotics is a fight waged by certain outside countries, not the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan.**

**Fact:**

**The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan leads the fight against Afghan poppy cultivation and trafficking, with unified allied support. Drugs harm Afghanistan. The trade fuels insecurity and the insurgency. It weakens governance and drug addiction in Afghanistan is increasing.**

- The Afghan Ministry of Counter Narcotics, operational since December 2004, leads this effort in accordance with the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan's National Drug Control Strategy (NDCS).
- UNODC estimates that in 2005, there were 920,000 drug users in Afghanistan.

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- Eradication and interdiction operations are carried out by the Counter Narcotics Police of Afghanistan, a specialized branch of the Afghan National Police.
- According to UK government estimates, the major markets for Afghan heroin are in Central Asia, Iran, Russia and China, where demand is increasing. The UK receives less than 4% of total production, the US almost none.
- Afghanistan and its neighbors have signed the Good Neighborly Relations Declaration to help end the trafficking of opium in the region.

**Myth: The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan lacks the will or the capacity to take serious action against the drug trade. Why doesn't the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan remove corrupt officials from line ministries, and appoint strong provincial governors able to crack down on drugs in the provinces?**

**Fact:**

**Where the security situation allows, the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan can and does take action on the drug trade; as the recent successes in Balkh, Badakhshan and Nangarhar demonstrate. All of these provinces are expected to show significant decreases in poppy cultivation in 2008 and are taking significant steps to go after traffickers as well.**

- Some governors have reduced poppy cultivation, improved alternative livelihood programs, and extended the rule of law, where the security situation allows.
- There are governors who lack the capacity to fight drugs within their province or district, and many who do tackle the problem aggressively and effectively. We will help the Afghan Government tackle corruption.

**Myth: The easiest way to solve the drug problem is to buy all the opium, a solution the U.S. and the U.K. refuse to consider.**

**Fact:**

**The Afghan National Drug Control Strategy (NDCS) rejects magic bullets like buying crops from farmers. The governments of Afghanistan, the United Kingdom, and the United States are opposed to the legalization of opium in Afghanistan, as are the relevant technical agencies of the United Nations.**

- There is no legitimate world demand for legally produced opium from Afghanistan.
- The price for legal opium is significantly lower than the price for illegal opium. As a result, any buy-out scheme would have to be heavily subsidized.
- A crop buyout would be incredibly costly; the current estimated Afghan poppy crop is worth \$1 billion, with 14% of the population involved in

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opium cultivation. If we introduced an incentive to grow poppy, a buyout would cost billions of dollars per year as more farmers began growing.

- Countries which produce licit opium for the pharmaceuticals market—namely Turkey and India—have strict controls, sophisticated law enforcement, and licensing systems – and still admit to significant illegal diversion. Afghanistan has less regulation capacity than either of these countries, virtually guaranteeing that an unacceptable amount of government-subsidized opium would be diverted to the illegal drug market.
- In sum, legalization would expand and entrench the drug trade, retarding economic diversification, undermining rule of law, and ensuring a steady flow of funds to the Taliban-led insurgency.