

U.S. Opposes Efforts To Legalize Opium in Afghanistan

In recent months, several articles and reports have advocated the legalization of opium in Afghanistan. While this idea may have surface appeal to some, legalization would be a severe mistake that would undermine efforts to bring a stable democracy to Afghanistan. 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.

I. The Case Against Legalization

- **The licit opium market is not lucrative enough to entice Afghan farmers** – The price difference between licit and illicit opium is so substantial that Afghan farmers would not quit the black market. To make up for the price difference, exorbitant subsidies would have to be offered, which would prove prohibitively expensive.
- **There is no legitimate world demand for legally produced opium from Afghanistan** – According to the United Nations International Narcotics Control Board, world demand for opium-based medicines is fully met. World stockpiles are also sufficient to meet any conceivable future or increased demand.
- **It is not feasible** – Countries which produce licit opium have strict controls, sophisticated law enforcement, and licensing systems – and still admit to significant illegal diversion. The lack of law enforcement and security in Afghanistan has led to the explosion of the current illicit poppy crop, so a licit industry which relies on legal controls could not work. Without safeguards, licit and illicit opium would be indistinguishable.
- **Historical experience argues against this approach** – Lessons from India, Pakistan, Bolivia, and other countries show the often disastrous effects of legalizing drug production without the requisite market demand or law enforcement and control mechanisms. Each of these countries attempted to regulate a legal trade in narcotics and, as a result, saw an increase in cultivation or significant diversion into the black market.
- **Legalization is ultimately counterproductive and dangerous** – Legalization would expand and entrench the drug trade, undermining ongoing efforts to bring security and sustainable economic development. This would benefit insurgent groups such as the Taliban who have been known to profit from the trade, as well as criminals and corrupt government officials. Afghanistan would suffer from more violence, lawlessness, and corruption as a result of legalization, not less. Expanding opium cultivation would also come at the expense of important efforts to diversify Afghanistan's economy, making the country's welfare dangerously reliant on one commodity.

II. Conclusion

There are no shortcuts to fighting opium production in Afghanistan. Based on the experiences of other nations in this fight, the international community and the

governments of Afghanistan, the United Kingdom, and the United States support a mix of deterrence, prevention, and economic development assistance to combat the drug trade in Afghanistan.

The Senlis Council, which has been quoted by mainstream media, has published a report with dangerous conclusions, which are based on the misleading use of statistical information and sources, often simplistic methodologies, and an inattention to the complexities of Afghanistan and the international market for licit opiates.

