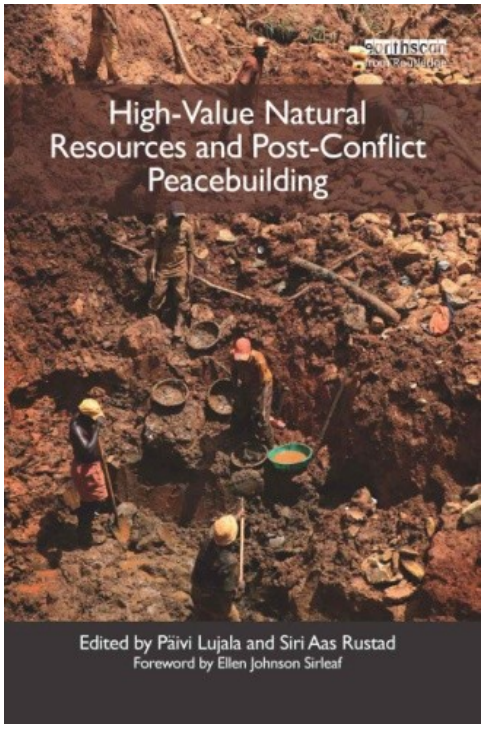

Counternarcotics efforts and Afghan poppy farmers: Finding the right approach

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Counternarcotics efforts and Afghan poppy farmers: Finding the right approach

David M. Catarious Jr. and Alison Russell

Afghanistan's opium trade provides funding for insurgents, corrupt government officials, regional warlords, and criminal elements; it also undermines political stability. Despite efforts to stem the trade, poppy cultivation has not only persisted but expanded: in 2009, Afghanistan's poppies produced approximately 95 percent of the world's opium, and the total export value of opium and its refined products—that is, morphine and heroin—was estimated to be US$2.8 billion (UNODC and GOA 2009).[1]

This chapter, which focuses largely on U.S. and Afghan counternarcotics efforts,[2] argues that these initiatives have failed because they have ignored the motivations and needs of farmers, who are the most vulnerable and victimized link in the opium trade: of all of the links in the opium value chain, farmers make the least amount of money; domestic and international traffickers, drug processors, and criminal organizations make far more (Martin and Symansky 2006). In 2009, over 6 percent of Afghanistan's population cultivated poppy (UNODC and GOA 2009), and in many regions of the country, poppy cultivation is critical to supporting farmers and their families. But because poppy cultivation is simultaneously a source of economic security and political instability, policies to stem cultivation must be designed and implemented with care: the goal must be to support Afghan farmers rather than to punish them, and to protect the stability and viability of the central government and the rural population. It is

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[1] Opium has been used for thousands of years, both for medicinal purposes and for its psychological effects. Since the 1800s, opium has been processed to create more powerful derivatives, including morphine, codeine, and heroin (DEA 2001).

[2] The chapter focuses on the actions of the U.S. and Afghan governments because they have been the most engaged in the country since the Afghan conflict began in 2001.

also important to recognize that counternarcotics programs cannot be judged in a vacuum; they are just one element among the many that must fall into place if farmers are to move away from poppy.

This chapter is divided into seven major sections: (1) a brief overview of the relationship between conflict and narcotics in Afghanistan; (2) an analysis of factors that affect poppy cultivation; (3) a description of the principal Afghan and U.S. counternarcotics policies and programs; (4) a discussion of factors that undermine counternarcotics efforts; (5) a description of counternarcotics efforts in Uruzgan Province; (6) a list of lessons learned; and (7) a brief conclusion.

CONFLICT AND NARCOTICS IN AFGHANISTAN

Once traversed by the ancient Silk Road, Afghanistan has historically been a key location along the trade route between East and West. It is a geographically, ethnically, linguistically, and religiously diverse country: Pashtuns make up the largest ethnic group (about 40 percent of the population), followed by Tajiks (27 percent); other ethnic groups include Hazaras, Uzbeks, Aimaks, Turkmens, and Balochs. Dari and Pashto are the predominant languages (CIA 2010). Since 1979, Afghanistan has been witness to extraordinary upheaval and political unrest—and, amid the chaos, the country's opium trade has rapidly expanded.

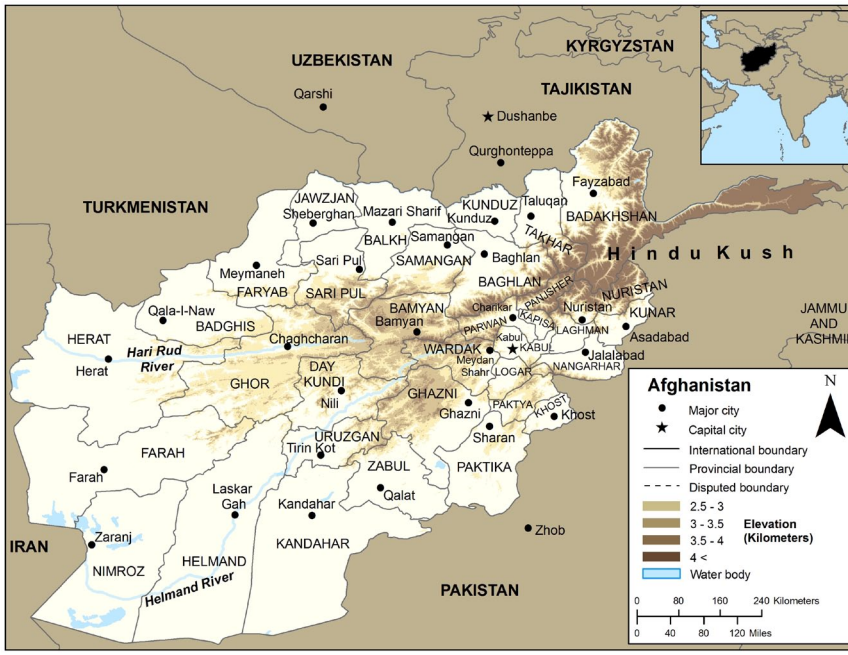
From Soviet invasion to civil war: 1979–1994

In 1979, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, provoking a ten-year war between Soviet forces and armed factions—known as mujahideen—who opposed the Communist government and were supported largely by the United States, China, Iran, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia (Goodhand 2005). The late 1970s saw a marked increase in poppy cultivation—and, during the conflict, opium producers and drug traffickers strengthened their position in Afghanistan. Opium production continued to increase throughout the decade: by the end of the 1980s, opium producers—including mujaheddin groups—were producing about 1,570 metric tons of opium each year, more than six times the rate of annual production during the previous decade (Goodhand 2005; Martin and Symansky 2006).

The defeated Soviets withdrew in 1989, but conflict subsequently erupted among major ethnic groups. The resulting disorder and burgeoning illegal economy provided room for the opium trade to grow: from 1992 to 1995, annual production ranged from 2,200 to 2,400 metric tons (Goodhand 2005; Shaw 2006).

The emergence and rule of the Taliban: 1994–2001

The Taliban, an Islamic fundamentalist group, arose amid the disorder, conquering the southern city of Kandahar in 1994 and Kabul, the capital, in 1996. By 1998, the Taliban controlled 90 percent of Afghanistan; the only military opposition came from a group of former mujaheddin in the northern regions, who were known as the United Front or Northern Alliance (Rashid 2000).



Over 96 percent of the land used for poppy cultivation was governed by the Taliban, who allowed cultivation to continue. In 1999, the peak year for production, 4,500 metric tons of opium were produced: three-quarters of the world's supply (Goodhand 2005; Shaw 2006). But in 1999, Taliban leader Mullah Omar ordered poppy cultivation to be cut by one-third (Goodhand 2005). The following year, the Taliban issued an unconditional ban on poppy cultivation (Davis and Chouvy 2002); the resulting drop in opium production (to 185 metric tons, a decrease of more than 90 percent) wiped out 70 percent of the world's supply (Goodhand 2005; Martin and Symansky 2006; Davis 2001).[3]

The overthrow of the Taliban and the post-conflict insurgency

In September 2001, al Qaeda operatives attacked the United States. In October of that year, in a mission dubbed Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), a coalition

[3] The exact reason for the poppy ban is unknown. Some experts have speculated that the ban was not intended to stop opium production but to increase the value of the Taliban's own opium stockpile. (Between 1994 and 2000, opium prices ranged from US$23 to US$40 per kilogram. After the Taliban's poppy ban, prices spiked tremendously, reaching $380 per kilo by April 2001 and US$700 by September 2001.) Others believe that the ban was an effort to win approval and development aid from the international community (Goodhand 2005, 2008; IMF 2003).

led by the United States and the United Kingdom (UK) invaded Afghanistan and removed the Taliban—which had harbored al Qaeda—from power. The Taliban leadership fled, seeking refuge in Pakistan.

In December 2001, the United Nations convened a group of prominent Afghans in Bonn, Germany, to determine how Afghanistan should be governed in the post-Taliban era. What came to be known as the Bonn Agreement set up an interim government—the Afghan Interim Authority—and established a process for determining future governance. As part of the agreement, the Afghans requested that the UN and other international bodies assist the interim government in its efforts to "combat international terrorism, cultivation and trafficking of illicit drugs and provide Afghan farmers with financial, material and technical resources for alternative crop production" (Bonn Agreement 2001, annex III, sec. 6).

The Bonn Agreement also established the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan, a UN-mandated peacekeeping force that was commanded on a rotational basis by individual governments (including Germany, Turkey, and the UK). Although the initial focus of ISAF was on Kabul and the surrounding areas, its activities expanded beyond Kabul over time. In August 2003, NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) forces took command of ISAF, and in October 2003, the UN expanded ISAF's mission to include all of Afghanistan. Over the ensuring years, ISAF took command of military forces throughout the country—culminating in October 2006, when the final American-led coalition forces were transferred to the command of ISAF (NATO n.d.). Currently, ISAF's mission is to assist the Afghan government with security, stability, and reconstruction.

Meanwhile, within a year of having been routed, the Taliban launched an insurgency campaign; by 2005, they had regained control of many districts in the southern provinces, which had traditionally been their stronghold (Malkasian and Meyerle 2009a). As of this writing, the Taliban continue to have a destabilizing effect on the new, internationally supported Afghan government.

Until 2004, the resources and energy of the U.S. military were focused on locating and destroying Taliban and al Qaeda forces in Afghanistan; in that year, however, OEF's mission was expanded to include counternarcotics operations. The international community, particularly under the auspices of the UN, has also been engaged in stemming the flow of illegal narcotics in Afghanistan. One of the most notable entities involved in this work is the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)—which, since 1994, has used survey teams and satellite imagery to monitor poppy production and verify eradication efforts in Afghanistan (UNDCP 2000).

Since 2001, the drug trade in Afghanistan has undergone a number of changes. Probably because of increasing prices, more people have become involved in the trade. In addition, the loose networks that benefited from the opium trade in the 1990s have been replaced by more professional traffickers, who have streamlined smuggling operations. The changes to the narco-trade have increased the complexity of Afghanistan's security situation—which has, in turn made the

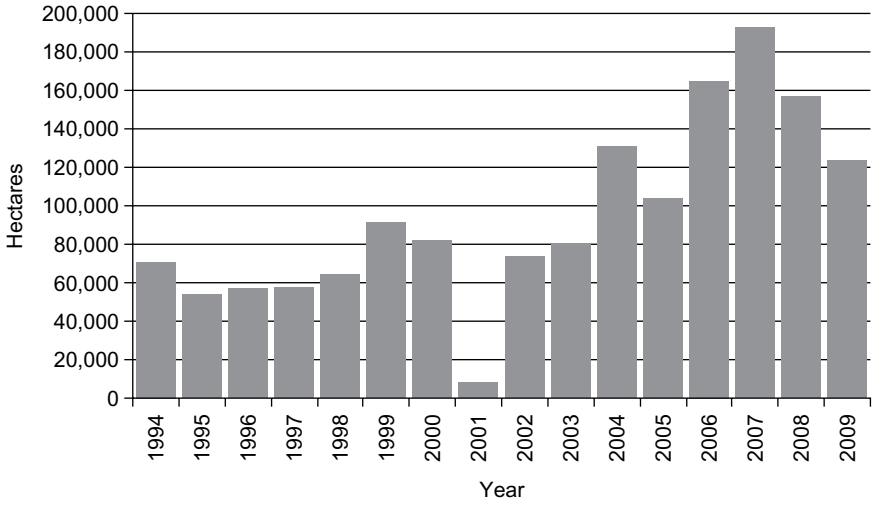


Figure 1. Poppy cultivation in Afghanistan, 1994–2009

Source: Data from UNODC and GOA (2005, 2009).

fight against the Taliban more difficult (UNODC and GOA 2009; Peters 2009b; Wright 2006).

Despite the counternarcotics efforts undertaken by the Afghan government, the United States, and the international community, poppy cultivation has proliferated since 2001 (figure 1). After the defeat of the Taliban, a number of factors, including insecurity and high opium prices, contributed to this growth, particularly in the south and east. Since 2004, cultivation has become increasingly concentrated in the southern and western provinces that are both Taliban and criminal strongholds: in 2009, the seven provinces in the south and west that were controlled by the Taliban produced 99 percent of the country's poppy. As of 2009, overall opium production remained high (6,900 metric tons), but had decreased from its 2008 level (7,700 metric tons) (UNODC and GOA 2009).

FACTORS AFFECTING POPPY CULTIVATION

National and international counternarcotics efforts in Afghanistan must be understood in a broad context that includes the most fundamental figures in the poppy trade: the poppy farmers themselves. In 2008 surveys conducted by UNODC, farmers who had never cultivated poppy cited a number of reasons, the most widespread being that the Koran prohibits the use of narcotics and that the production of narcotics is widely believed to be un-Islamic (UNODC and GOA 2008). Other reasons also cited were (1) the illegality of poppy cultivation, (2) respect for the instructions of elders and local councils, and (3) respect for the government's ban on poppy production. But farmers who *do* choose to

cultivate poppy do not, by and large, lack respect for Islam or for their local leaders; nor do they cultivate poppy in order to support the insurgency or to assist corrupt politicians, drug traffickers, or other criminal elements.[4] In fact, the presence of these groups in the poppy trade has prevented some farmers from engaging in poppy cultivation (Crawley 2007).[5]

Instead, Afghan farmers who cultivate poppy base their decisions on a complex mix of agricultural, economic, and security considerations (Mansfield and Pain 2008). The pattern of cultivation in Nangarhar Province between 2004 and 2007 exemplifies the range and complexity of the influences on farmers' decisions. In 2004 and 2005, the number of hectares being used for poppy cultivation dropped by 96 percent—from 28,213 hectares to 1,093. The change resulted from a combination of factors—primarily, leadership on the part of the governor and local officials, development support for alternative agricultural crops, and cooperation from farmers (UNODC and GOA 2009). But by 2007, the area under cultivation had rebounded to 18,739 hectares. Researchers have attributed this increase to several factors (Mansfield and Pain 2007). First, although crops such as wheat were initially substituted for poppy, they could not provide sufficient income to support the farmers' basic needs. Second, because poppy cultivation is more labor intensive than wheat cultivation, the decrease in income associated with the transition to wheat was exacerbated by a decrease in income from labor. Third, because development aid was not sufficient to account for income shortfalls, farmers were forced to sell their production equipment and seek loans to provide for their families. With mounting pressures from income loss, lack of equipment, and debt, farmers turned back to poppy to generate income.

Agricultural factors

In many parts of Afghanistan, poppies are an ideal agricultural crop (IRIN 2004). Although they thrive in the well-irrigated regions of the south, poppies are also more drought resistant than other crops, which makes them attractive during water shortages (DEA 2001). Afghanistan's history of producing poppies means that a trained workforce is available to harvest them. Because transportation infrastructure is inadequate in much of Afghanistan, particularly in rural areas

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[4] In the southern provinces, where there is an increasing concentration of Taliban, there have been many reports of farmers being pressured to grow poppy through threats and intimidation—not only from the Taliban, but from other sources as well, including warlords, tribal leaders, traffickers, drug barons, local militias, and landowners. Despite the prevalence of such reports in the literature (Crawley 2007; GAO 2006; NATO n.d.; UNODC and GOA 2004), survey results indicate that only 1.9 percent of farmers regarded external pressure as the primary cause of their decision to cultivate poppy (UNODC 2005).

[5] In interviews undertaken between 2006 and 2008, several former officials who had worked on counternarcotics programs in Uruzgan Province noted that many farmers and local officials are eager to be free of their ties to regional warlords and the Taliban, even if that means losing some income by turning away from poppy.

far from population centers, the journey from farm to market can be hot and time-consuming. The dried latex that is scraped from poppy pods can withstand long trips and heat, is easy to transport, and can be stored for months at a time.[6] The portion of the poppies remaining after the latex is harvested can also provide cooking oil, winter fuel, and animal fodder (Pain 2008). Finally, their relative hardiness and ability to generate income make poppies work well as a hedge against the failure of other crops. Even if poppy is not their primary crop, many Afghan farmers are willing to include poppy in their fields.

Economic factors

For many of the growing seasons since 2001, poppy provided farmers with the level of income they needed to support themselves and their families.[7] In late 2001, for example, poppy was planted heavily because the Taliban's 2000 ban on cultivation had created a tenfold increase in prices, making it the most lucrative crop available (IMF 2003; Goodhand 2008). Only in late 2008 did prices drop to the levels characteristic of the late 1990s (UNODC and GOA 2009).

Because poppy is a labor-intensive crop, it provides employment for many workers who do not own land themselves (Mansfield 2002; Mansfield and Pain 2007). In fact, poppy is the only means for landless farmers in many areas to gain access to land, which they do through sharecropping arrangements (sharecroppers lease plots, then grow crops on them in order to pay for the use of the land). Once sharecroppers have access to land, they can also grow food crops to support themselves and their families.

Poppy cultivation is also a means of obtaining loans. Many farmers do not have access to official lending institutions (or to the collateral that is required in order to receive a legal loan), so they turn to other individuals and organizations (including insurgent groups and drug traffickers) for informal loans (Pain 2008; GAO 2006). Although poppy-related loans are commonly viewed as driving farmers into debt,[8] field research has found that loans obtained in exchange for poppy cultivation have a net positive result for Afghan farmers—and have brought more Afghans out of debt than into it. Particularly in rural areas, debt is a critical means for farmers, especially the poorest ones, to support their families when crops are not in season (Pain 2008). It also provides access to the capital that farmers need to buy seeds, fertilizer, and food; to pay workers; and to make (illicit) payments to local officials (Pain 2008; UNODC and GOA 2004).

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[6] Farmers harvest opium (latex) directly from the pods, without removing them from the plants, then sell the raw opium to traders. Morphine is extracted from the raw opium at small laboratories (DEA 2001).

[7] In a 2008 UNODC survey, 92 percent of farmers cited "poverty alleviation" as their motivation for growing poppy; 66 percent also cited the high price of opium. The survey also showed that the incomes of farmers who grew poppy were 53 percent higher than the incomes of those who did not (UNODC and GOA 2008).

[8] See, for example, Martin and Symansky (2006).

This is not to say that all debt has been good for poppy farmers; whether debt benefits farmers often depends on other variables, such as opium prices, agricultural conditions, and government actions. For example, after the Taliban's poppy ban in 2000, some lenders in Kandahar and Nangarhar monetized debt that had previously been denominated in opium. But because of the price increase that had occurred in response to the ban, farmers whose debt was converted from opium to dollars owed far more than they had when they first took out the loans; many defaulted or lost their property. Farmers whose poppy fields have been eradicated have also been forced deeper into debt by the resulting loss of income (Pain 2008).

Security factors

Particularly in Taliban-occupied regions, Taliban forces and affiliated insurgent groups, corrupt officials, and criminal elements recognize the lack of security as an opportunity and use it to their advantage with the rural and farming population. The Taliban, for example, have gained popular support by protecting farmers' fields against the government's eradication efforts (*Jane's Islamic Affairs Analyst* 2008). Taliban propaganda emphasizes the value of such protection, portraying the group as caring more about the livelihoods of the local population than the national government does (*Jane's Terrorism and Security Monitor* 2007). Protection is provided through bribery, by means of political arrangements with allied or sympathetic officials, or through a show of force. In exchange for protection, the Taliban and other drug trafficking and criminal groups charge farmers a tax (known as *zakat* or *ushr*) of at least 10 percent on the value of the poppy they produce (Pain 2006).[9]

The Afghan government's inability to enforce the rule of law affects farmers in other ways as well. Because the lack of infrastructure and the presence of the Taliban and drug traffickers can make trips dangerous, farmers are reluctant to incur the risk and expense of traveling to markets. But opium traders are willing to purchase the crop at the farm gate—an important advantage in an insecure environment (Mansfield and Pain 2007). Farmers in Helmand and Kandahar provinces, for example, continued to cultivate poppy even in 2008, when opium prices dipped below those of wheat, because checkpoints and harassment had

[9] By protecting the drug traffickers' convoys and heroin laboratories, the Taliban is able to extract further funds from the trade. Various organizations estimate that the Taliban, al Qaeda, drug traffickers, and other nonstate armed groups (such as warlords and transnational criminal organizations) collect between US$200 million and US$500 million annually from the opium trade (Kraeutler 2008; Peters 2009; Orszag-Land 2004; Makarenko 2002; Wright 2008). These groups also make money by smuggling the chemical precursors for heroin production into Afghanistan from Central Asia and Pakistan (Wright 2008).

made it dangerous and prohibitively expensive to transport crops to market (Mansfield and Pain 2008).[10]

COUNTERNARCOTICS POLICIES

Since early 2002, when the Afghan Interim Authority first assumed power, the Afghan government and the international community have continuously refined their counternarcotics efforts. The Afghan government has combated poppy cultivation by creating national strategies; forming government-sponsored teams to implement those strategies; and assigning provincial governors with the task of eliminating poppy cultivation.

As noted earlier, U.S. involvement in Afghanistan was initially focused on military operations targeting al Qaeda and Taliban forces. As operations evolved, the U.S. military and other U.S. agencies (e.g., the Department of State and the Department of Justice) have become more engaged in counternarcotics activities.

While American counternarcotics initiatives have included a variety of activities, including judicial reform and drug interdiction, the focus here is on the policies that directly affect poppy farmers: eradication, alternative livelihood development, and public information. Eradication involves physically halting cultivation: crops may be dug up by tractors or by hand, or destroyed by herbicides. Alternative livelihood development, which may involve skills training and support for alternative crop production, focuses on providing farmers with economically viable income sources. Public information campaigns are designed to educate farmers about the government's ban on poppy cultivation, to ensure that they are aware of alternatives, and to persuade them to switch from cultivating poppy to other sources of livelihood.

Afghan counternarcotics initiatives

The counternarcotics efforts of the Afghan Interim Authority initially focused on bans and eradication. Although the Afghan government subsequently expanded its approach, eradication and alternative livelihood development are central to its strategy.

The Ministry of Interior (MOI), the lead ministry in charge of counternarcotics, released the country's first cohesive national strategy in October 2002 (Blanchard 2008). This strategy was replaced in 2003 by the Afghan National Drug Control Strategy (NDCS), which established two goals: reducing poppy cultivation by 70 percent by 2008 and eliminating it entirely by 2013. Also in

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[10] In some instances, dependence on opium traders has led to a decline in poppy production. In 2007, for example, in Ghor Province, which is far from the main trafficking routes, a decrease in both production and prices led to a drop in the number of opium traders operating in the province. As a result, farmers who could generate income from alternative sources did so (Mansfield and Pain 2007).

2003, Hamid Karzai (who had become interim president in 2002) assigned provincial governors responsibility for eradicating poppy from their provinces. This approach, known as governor-led eradication (GLE), produced some positive results in certain areas, particularly where local populations respected the governors and viewed them as legitimate representatives of the central government. In 2004, a large majority of the eradication that occurred was undertaken through GLE programs (UNODC and GOA 2005).

In December 2004, two days after having been elected president, Karzai launched a major effort against poppy cultivation, opium production, and drug trafficking (Mikhos 2006). As part of this initiative, he redistributed responsibility for drug interdiction by elevating the Counternarcotics Division of the MOI to the cabinet level; giving it a new name, the Ministry of Counternarcotics (MCN); and assigning it responsibility for developing overall policy and ensuring that counternarcotics efforts were aligned with the goals of the NDCS. Meanwhile, the MOI and its special deputy for counternarcotics retained responsibility for the implementation of counternarcotics strategy; thus, most of the domestic units responsible for eradication fell under the MOI. In 2006, the Afghan government updated the NDCS; the most notable change was the elimination of the deadlines for meeting the poppy eradication goals (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan 2006).

The MOI and the MCN have separate chains of command and have created implementing entities that are responsible for specific types of missions. The Poppy Elimination Program (PEP), for example, which is under the MCN, supports eradication at the provincial level. PEP teams—which generally have six to eight members, including Afghan officials and international experts—are responsible for assessing cultivation levels and monitoring eradication efforts; PEP teams also conduct public information campaigns to discourage poppy cultivation and support alternative livelihoods. Because PEP operates at the provincial level, the teams often work with governors, who are charged with leading local eradication efforts (Blanchard 2008).

The MOI administers several entities that are focused at least partially on eradication:

- The Counternarcotics Police of Afghanistan, the lead drug enforcement agency in the country, has intelligence, investigation, and interdiction capabilities and receives training from the United States and the UK (Mikhos 2006).
- The Central Eradication Planning Cell, a UK–led organization, relies on information gleaned from surveys and sophisticated technology to target poppy fields and monitor eradication efforts (Blanchard 2008).
- The U.S.-backed Afghan Eradication Force, formerly known as the Central Poppy Eradication Force, enforces the poppy ban in areas where local initiatives have been unsuccessful (Blanchard 2008). The eight-hundred-member force, which is broken into several smaller teams, has mobile units and air support.

U.S. and international counternarcotics initiatives

Like those of the Afghan government, the counternarcotics initiatives of the U.S. government and the international community have expanded since 2002. At an April 2002 meeting in Geneva, donor countries—including Germany, Italy, Japan, the UK, and the United States—developed a plan to support reconstruction and the establishment of security in Afghanistan; one result was the assignment of various missions to particular nations and organizations (Holt 2002). Counternarcotics operations were assigned to the UK, where 90 percent of the heroin is Afghan in origin (Orszag-Land 2004), and the United States agreed to train a 70,000-member Afghan National Army (Rohde 2006).

In January 2003, to support reconstruction, the United States and ISAF introduced provincial reconstruction teams (PRTs), joint civilian-military teams that are usually commanded by a military officer and consist of a military member (e.g., a civil affairs officer), a civilian police officer, and experts from civilian U.S. government agencies (e.g., the U.S. Agency for International Development, the Department of State, the Department of Agriculture, and the Department of Justice); for security, each PRT is accompanied by a platoon of military personnel. The PRTs' reconstruction and development efforts focus on agriculture, including alternative livelihood development; the teams are also involved in governance programs and in promoting the rule of law. Because PRTs were initially located in hot spots, they did not interact with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) or international agencies. They have since spread throughout the country and have been taken over by countries other than the United States. As of late 2009, nearly thirty PRTs were operating in Afghanistan (Malkasian and Meyerle 2009b).

As noted earlier, U.S. military forces initially focused on military activities, not on reconstruction or counternarcotics. In fact, the United States relied on the UK and the Afghan government to handle counternarcotics, because the U.S. military depended on opium traffickers, including warlords, for information on the Taliban and al Qaeda. But as the country continued to destabilize—and as it became increasingly clear that poppy cultivation was contributing to the destabilization—the United States changed strategy. Between 2003 and 2004, U.S. aid increased from US$982 million to US$2.4 billion; the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) doubled its staff in Afghanistan; the U.S. military increased its deployment of PRTs in the south and east, where poppy was strong and security was weak (Rohde 2006); and Zalmay Khalilzad, the U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan, shifted policy and requested NATO assistance with counternarcotics efforts (Tarnoff 2009; Brownfield 2004). Of the US$2.4 billion, US$532 million was for USAID and U.S. Department of State counternarcotics efforts, including US$258 million for eradication, US$180 million for alternative livelihood development, and US$5 million for public information; the balance was for drug interdiction and law enforcement (GAO 2006). The U.S. counternarcotics plan closely matches that of the Afghan government, in that it focuses primarily on eradication and alternative livelihood development.

Responsibility for supporting U.S. counternarcotics efforts is distributed among several U.S. agencies:

- The Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL), which is under the authority of the U.S. State Department, is responsible for helping the Afghan government with both eradication and public information (Inspectors General 2007). The INL collaborates with the GLE programs; provides guidance to the PEP teams; and cooperates closely with the UK counternarcotics efforts (through the Joint Narcotics Analysis Center, in London, and the International Operations Coordinating Center, in Kabul).
- The Office of National Drug Control Policy coordinates with INL in providing guidance for counternarcotics policy (Kerlikowske 2009).
- USAID has assumed most of the responsibility for reconstruction efforts, which includes administering the U.S.'s alternative livelihood programs. In Afghanistan, these programs include crop substitution, diversification (e.g., crop rotation and animal husbandry), distribution of cash in exchange for labor, and training courses to allow Afghans to obtain new jobs in a different sector.[11]
- The U.S. Department of Defense, through the PRTs, provides intelligence, logistics, and protection for eradication operations.

FACTORS THAT UNDERMINE POPPY ELIMINATION EFFORTS

Both the government of Afghanistan and the international community have set goals for reducing poppy cultivation, but the statistics show that these goals are far from being attained: since 1994, when UNODC began measuring cultivation, production was highest from 2004 through 2009; and of the ten years that production was highest, eight were from 2002 through 2009 (UNDCP 2000; UNODC and GOA 2009).

It would be misleading, however, to hold counternarcotics programs fully responsible for changing patterns of poppy cultivation: as field researchers David Mansfield and Adam Pain have argued, the larger context must be taken into account (Mansfield and Pain 2008). The price of poppy ebbs and flows, as do those of other crops. Agricultural conditions change from year to year. Provincial and regional leaders shift, and with them the level of corruption and the focus on counternarcotics efforts. Finally, the influence of insurgents and criminal elements varies with the level of security. When a farmer makes a decision about planting poppy, all of these factors are considered—not simply the government's counternarcotics actions.

Nevertheless, counternarcotics programs can be evaluated according to their impact on farmers and their ability to address farmers' reasons for choosing to cultivate poppy. Counternarcotics efforts that address farmers' motivations may

[11] A number of other organizations, including NGOs, international agencies, and the PRTs, are also engaged in alternative livelihood programs.

prove helpful, assuming that other factors beyond the immediate control of counternarcotics programs—such as weather, or the global opium market—are aligned. On the other hand, counternarcotics efforts that are designed and implemented improperly can undermine their intended objectives.

The authors' observations of the impacts of counternarcotics efforts on Afghan farmers reveal three themes:

- Eradication, alternative livelihood development, and public information campaigns are extremely difficult to implement in areas where insecurity is high or where public officials are complicit with or directly involved in the narco-trade.
- Eradication efforts undermine the financial well-being of farmers and may cause the population to turn against the government.
- Alternative livelihood programs can help move farmers away from poppy in the short term but are difficult to sustain under long-term pressure from other factors.

These themes will be explored in more detail in the three subsections that follow.

Insecurity and complicity

From the perspective of their impact on farmers, eradication, alternative livelihood development, and public information programs have had mixed results. In some cases, the programs have been undermined by lack of security or by the complicity or direct participation of public officials in the narco-trade. Where both of these characteristics are present, such as in the southern, Taliban-controlled provinces, counternarcotics efforts have been severely curtailed.

Corruption—which runs from the highest levels of government down through provinces and districts—has undermined efforts to combat the Taliban and the drug trade. Early in the post-Taliban era, many former leaders of the United Front who had been heavily involved in the narco-trade were installed at the Ministry of Interior, the agency that leads counternarcotics operations, and many opium-trading warlords were elevated to parliament or to key positions in provincial and district governments and various police forces (*Jane's Islamic Affairs Analyst* 2007); in fact, it has been estimated that 25 percent of the Afghan parliament is involved in the narco-trade. In one of the more notorious examples, the then-governor of Helmand Province was discovered to have nine tons of opium in his basement; he went onto become a senator (Inspectors General 2007). Of Afghanistan's thirty-four provinces, the former governors of fourteen (including Helmand) have been implicated in the drug trade; one of the most prominent Afghans in the trade is Ahmed Wali Karzai, the brother of President Hamid Karzai and a high-level political figure in Kandahar Province (*New York Times* 2010).

In the least secure regions, farmers and insurgent groups have opposed eradication by force or other measures. In many cases, insurgent groups have

fired on eradication teams; farmers have also flooded fields to prevent tractors from destroying the crops. Even in relatively secure areas, the complicity of local officials in the narco-trade can significantly undermine counternarcotics efforts. In some cases, for example, when fields are being selected for eradication, GLE teams or local police commanders have targeted only the fields of their competitors or of small and powerless farmers, while protecting their own and those of their allies (Byrd and Buddenberg 2006); in other cases, farmers have been targeted on the basis of tribal affiliations, exacerbating tensions among rival ethnic groups (*Jane's Islamic Affairs Analyst* 2008).

In some of the early efforts at eradication, farmers were paid to eradicate their fields—which some did—but the money was never distributed by the governors or the local police commanders. In other cases, numbers were manipulated so that provincial officials could profit both from the sale of the opium and from its supposed eradication. In still other instances, farmers have succeeded in bribing eradication teams to leave the crops—and the farmer's livelihoods—unmolested (Peters 2009a; Morarjee 2006).

Eradication, economics, and the central government

The principal problem with eradication programs is that they target farmers, instead of alleviating the pressures that drive farmers to growing poppy. In fact, field research indicates that farmers, more than any other actors in the opium trade, have been victimized by eradication programs—and that as a consequence, the programs have helped turn the rural population against the government (Mansfield and Pain 2008; Pain 2008). The primary effect of eradication is economic: by destroying a farmer's income source, eradication can lead to poverty and drive farmers deeper into debt to landholders and lenders. The timing of eradication can exacerbate the problem: if poppy crops are eradicated after planting season, farmers may be left with no other income source (Davis and Chouvy 2002). Moreover, if farmers' financial security is undermined during one season, they may be forced to grow more poppies during the following harvest to make up for lost revenue, assuming that poppy prices are high enough.

In the international community, aerial eradication—that is, spraying pesticides from aircraft in order to destroy the crops—has been one of the most contentious areas of debate. The United States has advocated aerial eradication on the basis of speed, efficacy, and safety for eradication personnel, but the Afghan and other governments have objected because the pesticides damage all crops that are sprayed, not just poppy; there is also concern is that aerial eradication will further encourage farmers to turn toward insurgent groups for protection (*PakTribune* 2005).

Alternative livelihood programs

Unlike eradication programs, which can harm poppy farmers, alternative livelihood programs are designed to move farmers away from poppy by providing them

with other sources of sustainable income. In much of the country, except in the least secure areas, USAID, among other agencies, has undertaken programs that are specifically intended to alleviate some of the pressures that push farmers toward poppy cultivation; the forms of support include providing irrigation for crops, providing seeds for alternative crops at no cost, providing loans, and building roads to create easier access to markets (USAID n.d.).

Alternative livelihood programs have shown promise in some areas but have succumbed, in the long term, to the other pressures that spur poppy cultivation. Development projects, for example, have been cited as a key reason (along with the cooperation of the provincial governor) for the 96 percent reduction in poppy cultivation in Nangarhar Province between 2004 and 2005 (Mansfield 2008b). Unfortunately, such projects have proven unsustainable: eventually, local goodwill and short-term support from donor nations and agencies are overcome by agricultural, economic, and security pressures.

It is important to note, however, that farmers do not necessarily require alternative livelihood programs to decide to try crops other than poppy. Farmers have demonstrated a willingness to switch to other crops when, on account of economic, agricultural, or security considerations, those crops offer higher returns. In 2007 and 2008, for example, when a notable shift to wheat production occurred in a number of provinces, researchers attributed the change to four factors: high wheat prices, falling opium prices, pressure from authorities, and farmers' concerns about low levels of food crop cultivation (Mansfield 2008a). But such shifts may be short-lived, depending on how conditions evolve. If alternative crops cannot sustain higher levels of profit, poppies are often the best choice from an economic perspective.

COUNTERNARCOTICS EFFORTS IN URUZGAN PROVINCE

Uruzgan Province encapsulates many of the issues associated with counternarcotics efforts in Afghanistan as a whole.[12] A Taliban stronghold, Uruzgan is in southern Afghanistan—and, like many provinces in that region, is home to a variety of players in the poppy trade, including criminal elements and Taliban insurgents and their allies. The province is the fourth-largest producer of poppy in the country and borders Helmand and Kandahar, the two largest producers. As shown in figure 2, after peaking in 2004 and dropping dramatically in 2005, poppy cultivation in Uruzgan remained fairly constant from 2006 through 2009.

In May 2004, when the U.S. military established a base of operations in Tirin Kot, the provincial capital, Uruzgan was one of the last Taliban strongholds. As of this writing, ISAF controls the southern region of Afghanistan; a PRT deployed by the Netherlands in February 2006 is under the direction of ISAF; and USAID and a PEP team (based in Tirin Kot) are also active in the province,

[12] This section is based on interviews with USAID officials and members of PRTs who were operating in Uruzgan Province between 2006 and 2008.

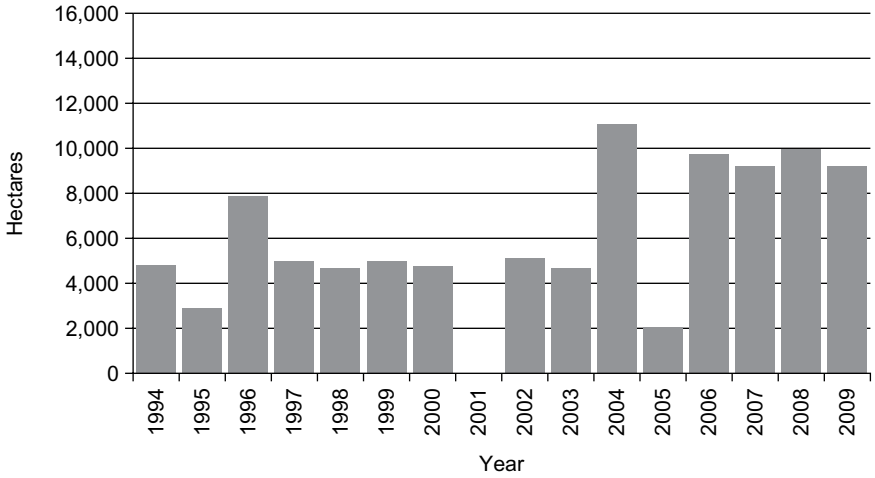

Figure 2. Poppy cultivation in Uruzgan Province, 1994–2009

Source: Data from UNODC and GOA (2005, 2009).

as are ISAF-directed Australian forces. Both on their own and in collaboration with other entities, all these organizations have undertaken counternarcotics efforts in the region, including eradication, alternative livelihood development, and public information programs.

Alternative livelihood and public information programs

Conditions in Uruzgan Province made it difficult to implement alternative livelihood and public information programs. Although the province used to have productive orchards (which yielded nuts and pomegranates, and were also used to produce dried fruits), the trees have vanished, most having been cut down for firewood. The violence of the past several decades has contributed to loss of agricultural production and led to a decline in the experience base of the local population. The alternative livelihood campaigns undertaken by USAID and the PRT were delayed by lack of transportation and lack of local capacity. According to the agricultural expert on the PRT, there is "nothing like a working agricultural extension service; there are no functioning demonstration farms or agricultural colleges."

In 2006, to support development in Uruzgan, USAID focused on labor-intensive projects that would provide non-poppy-related work for the local population. Among the successful projects were the installation of irrigation systems and the construction of small roads and bridges. USAID also funded the distribution of seeds and agricultural products and undertook "train-the-trainers" programs.[13]

[13] In a "train-the-trainers" program, agencies train local individuals, who then conduct subsequent training; such programs can be a cost-effective means of building capacity.

Although these operations were somewhat successful, it takes time to get agricultural operations up and running and to rebuild the marketplace. As a consequence, turning the population away from poppy was a difficult undertaking.

Both the PEP teams and the PRT found it difficult to conduct public information campaigns and to win the trust of the local population. With small groups of farmers spread out across a wide area of land and no central communication network, communication was difficult and time-consuming. And because the Taliban had eliminated many local leaders, what would otherwise have been a conduit to the local population was lost. In addition, local Afghans who worked on PEP teams became targets for those in the poppy trade;[14] the work was so dangerous that the team collecting information about poppy cultivation levels had to pretend that it was performing other, unrelated activities.

Yet another problem was that the PEP teams' public information campaigns were not necessarily well received by the farmers. Even though the campaigns emphasized the fact that poppy growing was counter to Islamic principles, they were unable to discourage farmers from growing poppy. Nor was it effective to warn that the government would eradicate the poppy fields: because of the weakness of the central government, the farmers did not regard the threats as credible.

Insecurity and complicity

Alternative livelihood programs faced a number of challenges, but the most serious were lack of security and the complicity of local officials in the narco-trade. Because security was available mainly through association with the PRT, most development actions were undertaken by or in coordination with the PRT. For example, USAID first undertook alternative livelihood development programs in the province in 2004, after the arrival of military forces that could provide the necessary security.[15]

Although the Taliban and affiliated groups had a large presence in Uruzgan between 2006 and 2008, there were not many combat operations in the area. The Taliban and their allies focused their military operations in Helmand and would retreat to Uruzgan between operations. Despite the relatively low level of violence, overall insecurity limited counternarcotics efforts. For example, lack of security prevented the Afghan MCN from operating freely in Uruzgan. In order to compensate governors who were undertaking eradication as part of the GLE program, the MCN and UNODC were in the practice of sending verification teams throughout the country; but in Uruzgan (as well as other areas), pervasive insecurity made

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[14] According to a former PEP team member, PEP teams were threatened on many occasions.

[15] Because being associated with the military or the government may jeopardize their security or undermine their effectiveness as independent organizations, NGOs often eschew cooperation with military forces. Hence, most NGOs chose not to operate in Uruzgan Province.

it too dangerous for the teams to verify eradication reports. As a consequence, according to an interviewee, provincial officials were able to make unverified, and likely inflated, claims about how much poppy had actually been eradicated.

Another consequence of insecurity was the difficulty of bringing legal crops to market. The one road leading from Tirin Kot to Kandahar was commonly obstructed by roadblocks that the Taliban and other forces (including the Afghan National Police) had set up for the purpose of extracting taxes or bribes; these high "transportation" expenses could exceed what farmers could earn from their sale (Mansfield 2008a).

Public officials' support of the narco-trade further undermined counternarcotics efforts: the director of transport was suspected of growing poppy, as was then-governor Abdul Hakim Munib (Anderson 2007). As one expert interviewed by the authors noted, "in Uruzgan, the poppy trade was connected to everything." Another interviewee also reported that the governor of Uruzgan was corrupt and supported the poppy trade. According to this source, the governor allowed the PEP team to operate from within his compound but did not support eradication; in fact, poppy was reportedly being grown on his compound. The governor also held talks with community leaders, but instead of instructing them to not grow poppy, he would tell the leaders that the PEP team had come to take away their livelihoods. Finally, the source noted that although the governor received funds to participate in GLE programs, his eradication efforts targeted only small, poor farms owned by people who had no political influence, not the larger and more productive holdings that belonged to powerful individuals.

LESSONS LEARNED

Stemming the cultivation of poppies in Afghanistan is a critical step in stabilizing the country, but it must be done with care, so as to retain the support of the population. Afghan, U.S., and international efforts to stem the poppy trade reveal several lessons:

- Counternarcotics efforts should not punish the poppy farmers, who represent the most vulnerable and victimized link in the opium trade.
- Large-scale eradication should not be undertaken until viable livelihood alternatives to poppy have been established.
- Because of the complexity of the various factors that influence poppy cultivation, the success of particular policies and programs should be judged only over the long term.

Provide support for poppy farmers

Evidence from the field has made it clear that, by and large, the farmers who cultivate poppy do so not because they support criminal or antigovernment elements but because of a complex mix of agricultural, economic, and security

considerations. In fact, in numerous instances, farmers in various regions of the country have been willing to move away from poppy, at least in the short term, when a sufficient level of support has been provided—or even promised—to mitigate these other factors. When it comes to the poppy trade, the farmers are not the enemy and should not be punished; counternarcotics efforts should focus instead on supporting farmers and undermining the traffickers and others who profit the most from the trade.

Establish viable alternatives to poppy

In many regions of the country, particularly in Taliban-controlled areas where infrastructure is limited and insecurity is widespread, poppy remains the only crop that can enable farming families to meet their basic needs. Thus, before eradication begins, it is essential to establish alternative means for Afghan farmers to earn an income. Specifically, counternarcotics efforts should provide farmers with economic security to protect them against the failure of alternative crops, subsidize the income from less profitable crops, provide access to loans, provide the necessary farming equipment, and establish safe access to markets. Building a lawful rural economy and establishing security in Afghanistan are necessary preconditions to achieving a sustainable reduction in poppy cultivation; eradication efforts, which have undermined both these goals, should be pursued only sparingly. The Afghan government, the U.S. government, and the international community must develop goals and priorities that reflect this perspective.

Judge success over the long term

Many observers have declared that several localized decreases in poppy cultivation are successes: the example that is perhaps cited most often is the 96 percent decrease in poppy cultivation between 2004 and 2005 in Nangarhar Province.[16] During that period, Nangarhar's governor focused on reducing poppy cultivation and, through USAID, obtained large investments in alternative livelihood programs. Although the governor's commitment and USAID support may indeed have contributed to the decrease, they were not enough to overcome the other forces that eventually pushed the province back into poppy cultivation. To achieve long-term success, counternarcotics strategies must be resilient enough to withstand pressures that are beyond the control of local officials and international actors, including price fluctuations, weather, and insecurity.

Evaluations of farm-level counternarcotics efforts must focus on the long term and must take into account the larger context, including economic, agricultural, security, and location-specific influences (Mansfield and Pain 2008). Counternarcotics efforts must not only recognize the influence of factors such as price changes,

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[16] See, for example, Martin and Symansky (2006).

droughts or floods, insurgent attacks, the commitment of local leaders, and the availability of development assistance, but must also ensure that operations designed to improve the lives of Afghan farmers address these factors over the long term, as they continue to evolve. Attributing success—or failure—to specific and narrow counternarcotics policies may lead to misguided strategies.

CONCLUSION: THE WAY AHEAD

At the time of writing, Afghanistan was the world's largest producer of opium. The country is in the throes of an evolving conflict, and its future is highly uncertain. In the fall of 2009, in a national election that was marred by corruption, President Karzai was reelected for a second five-year term. Meanwhile, U.S. policy toward Afghanistan has shifted under the administration of President Barack Obama.

On the military side, President Obama announced in December 2009 that 30,000 additional American troops would be deployed to Afghanistan; if conditions permit, they will begin returning to the United States in mid-2011 (Obama 2009). U.S. counternarcotics policy in Afghanistan has also undergone a major shift: holding that eradication is counterproductive and harmful to poor farmers, the United States will discontinue poppy eradication efforts and will focus instead on agricultural development and reform, and drug interdiction (Kaufman 2009; Bruno 2009). This is a sharp departure from the policies of the Bush administration, which had advocated the use of herbicides to stem poppy cultivation (Barry 2009).[17]

In December 2009, as part of its regional strategy to improve stability in Afghanistan and Pakistan, the Obama administration noted that its "top reconstruction priority is implementing a civilian-military agriculture redevelopment strategy to restore Afghanistan's once vibrant agriculture sector" (USDA 2010, 1). The Afghan government has indicated—through the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation, and Livestock—that it regards agricultural reform as critical (Bruno 2009).

From 2002 to 2007, roughly 14 percent of the US$6 billion spent by USAID in Afghanistan was allocated to agriculture and alternative livelihood development (USAID n.d.); it is unclear how much this allocation will change under the new strategy. USAID's counternarcotics efforts have focused on substituting other high-value crops for poppy; those programs are expected to continue (Bruno 2009). The U.S. Army has also begun to shift its agricultural development efforts. In eastern Afghanistan, instead of having PRTs run agricultural programs, the army has turned those programs over to agribusiness development teams led by National Guard members (Bruno 2009). The U.S. Department of Agriculture has also provided a great deal of assistance—US$256 million from 2003 through 2009—mainly in the form of food and economic development (USDA 2010).

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[17] The Afghan government, the UK, and the European Union opposed the eradication policies of the Bush administration. Nevertheless, other nations, including Russia, continue to pressure the United States to pursue eradication.

All of these shifts in counternarcotics policies that affect Afghan farmers are promising developments. But regardless of the strategies adopted for ongoing operations, it is clear that poppy cultivation in the fields of Afghanistan is a problem that will not be resolved in the short term.

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