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Poppies for Peace: Reforming Afghanistan's Opium Industry

With the September 2005 parliamentary elections, Afghanistan took another important step toward democracy and stability. Over the past four years, President Hamid Karzai's government has put an end to decades of civil war and offered the Afghan people the possibility of rising from their abject poverty. These successes, however, are merely the silver lining of a massive cloud that still hangs over Afghanistan's future: the all-invasive drug industry that impedes the country's economic growth, fosters instability, and hampers its democratic aspirations. Afghanistan remains economically dependent on the illegal growth of opium poppy and the production and trafficking of drugs. Today, the Afghan drug economy generates $2.8 billion annually, or about 50 percent of Afghanistan's gross domestic product, making almost three million Afghans (12.6 percent of the population) dependent on poppy cultivation for their everyday needs.[1]

The U.S.-led invasion and reconstruction of Afghanistan since October 2001 has failed to destroy this drug-based economy. Of greater concern, Afghanistan has once again become the world's leading producer of opium, the narcotic product of opium poppies. Opium poppy cultivation has now spread to almost every province of the country, and its crops deliver 92 percent of the opium produced worldwide, or roughly 90 percent of all heroin consumed.[2] These facts, as well as falling heroin prices on European streets, clearly indicate that Afghanistan's drug industry is again blossoming and that the international community's counternarcotics strategies are failing. The United States and the United Kingdom are leading a war on drugs in Afghanistan that is quite similar to the one in Colombia, where crops are

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destroyed by force without offering the local population sufficient alternative livelihoods. Despite years of extensive eradication activities, production and supply levels of illegal drugs have remained stable in Latin America, as have their purity levels and prices. This war on drugs, launched in 1971 by the Nixon administration, has cost $150 billion over 35 years and has seen the drug supply rise from 1,000 tons in 1970 to around 6,000 tons in 2006.[3]

The military counternarcotics strategy is clearly not only ineffective but even counterproductive, especially considering recent growing violence and mounting insurgency in Afghanistan's major poppy-growing areas. This strategy should therefore be replaced with a serious alternative that could be called "poppies for peace." Poppy crops can be used to produce medicines such as morphine and codeine, which are high-demand painkillers in a growing global market. The international community should help the Afghan government start a scientific pilot project to investigate further the practical implementation of a licensing system for Afghanistan. Such a system would allocate existing poppy crops for medicinal purposes, offering all stakeholders, from farmers to warlords, an opportunity to profit in a legal economy.

This alternative combines the best of both worlds. It stabilizes a crucial country in the global war on terrorism and alleviates the pain crisis in AIDS-stricken developing countries. It is not a silver bullet for Afghanistan's many troubles, but it does pave the way for the country to escape its current development and security crisis. For strategic and moral reasons, the international community should accept the poppies for peace project as a realistic and attractive alternative to current counternarcotics strategies.

Classic Counternarcotic Strategy Failures

Security and development are two inseparable components of the same reconstruction effort in Afghanistan, with opium located at the core of that nexus. Afghanistan's lawlessness breeds poverty, its poverty sustains instability, and drugs perpetuate this vicious cycle. The dependence of the Afghan economy on illegal opium production hinders economic development and poses a direct threat to the country's stability, reconstruction prospects, and establishment of the rule of law. Opium production serves as the livelihood of millions of Afghans, as well as the main source of income for the remnants of the Taliban forces. Afghan and U.S. officials have openly acknowledged that the illegal drug market "has corrupted the government from bottom to top, including governors and cabinet officials, and is financing warlords, local militias, the Taliban, and possibly Al Qaeda."[4] Although direct links between Al Qaeda and the drug trade are difficult to discern, opium clearly funds Al Qaeda indirectly, which uses drugs profits to support and maintain its terrorism network in Iraq and beyond.[5] The drug links Afghanistan directly to

Iraq, one of the key countries through which opium is trafficked to Western consumer markets.[6] The stakes are high, and Afghanistan could easily slip back into chaos and insecurity if the international community does not make serious headway in tackling the country's lingering drug crisis.

Opium poppy has been officially prohibited since 2002, when Karzai declared a kind of jihad against the drug industry. The Afghan government receives considerable financial and hands-on support from the United States and key European players to eradicate opium poppy crops across the country. British Special Forces have been deployed to track down and dismantle the mobile drug laboratories that are used to convert opium into heroin. The United Kingdom is also involved in the development of alternative livelihoods for farmers, but clearly its main focus is to destroy poppy crops and drug laboratories. Germany has trained significant numbers of Afghan police officers in the use of military tactics to combat drug trafficking, and Italy is the lead country on reforming and rebuilding the Afghan criminal justice system. In 2004 the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency set up a Central Poppy Eradication Force (CPEF) urging local leaders to destroy the poppy fields in the areas under their control.

Reconstruction will be impossible as long as opium dependence remains.

The results of these forced eradication strategies, however, have been minimal, and the costs high. In 2005 the United States earmarked $150 million for eradication over a period of three years, but the CPEF eradicated only 250 hectares, or less than 1 percent of the relevant land, in that first year. That same year, the Afghan government managed to destroy only 5,000 hectares, which accounts for a mere 5 percent of the total poppy cultivation in 2005.[7] For 2006 the figures are even more astonishing. The first real, nationwide, massive eradication campaign has been counteracted by a bumper harvest of 6,100 tons of opium, an increase of 49 percent from 2005 and an all-time high.[8] Despite the eradication of 15,300 hectares in 2006, cultivation increased by 59 percent to 165,000 hectares.[9] The British government will have spent about $960 million from 2002 to 2007 on Afghan counternarcotics efforts, humanitarian assistance, and state building with very little to show for it.[10]

Karzai called on farmers in 2005 to halt poppy cultivation, threatening that the international community would use "all means available," possibly including aerial spraying, to eradicate the opium poppy.[11] He has so far managed to avoid aerial spraying, focusing instead on methods such as manual eradication. Nonetheless, all forms of eradication negatively impact the lives and health of farmers and wage laborers, their families, and their livestock.

Doris Buddenberg, the representative of the United Nation Office on Drugs and Crime in Afghanistan, argued in 2004 that "eradication usually does not bring about sustainable reduction of poppy crop—it is a one-time, short-term effort. Also eradication usually pushes the prices up. As we have seen from the Taliban period, the one-year ban on opium-poppy cultivation increased prices enormously the following year and it became extremely attractive for farmers to cultivate poppy."[12] Kim Howells, the British minister of state dealing with Afghanistan, argued in February 2006 that "aerial spraying could cause famine [in Afghanistan], so we must be careful about it."[13]

The military counternarcotics strategy is ineffective and counterproductive.

Strong-arm eradication measures in Afghanistan would further alienate the local population without making any progress in the fight against drug production. As evidenced by the massive 2006 eradication campaign in the south, forced eradication initiatives complicate even more the already tenuous relationship between farmers and the central government. Farmers become disillusioned with the government and its policies and turn to local warlords or insurgent movements for support and protection.[14] Moreover, field research during early 2006 has revealed a direct link between forced eradication and increased hostility toward the international coalition forces and NATO-led International Security Assistance Forces in southern Afghanistan.[15] Farmers have seen no improvement in their living conditions since the 2001 invasion and are turning their backs on the local government. Meanwhile, the Taliban and other insurgent groups benefit from these misguided policies by offering support and services to farmers.[16] In sum, continuing with force-based counternarcotics policies will only fuel insurgency and terrorism, alienate farming communities, and create similar conditions to those that existed just before the Taliban movement took control of the country in the early 1990s. Forced eradication therefore remains counterproductive as long as the root causes of the opium problem, which are developmental and economic in nature, are ignored or not addressed effectively.

Some donor organizations take a different approach to the opium problem by focusing on the economic nature of the challenge. The European Union recently committed about €376 million to address Afghan opium production during 2006–2010 by stimulating alternative livelihoods.[17] The U.S. Agency for International Development and several European nongovernmental organizations have invested in new agricultural sectors and products, in some cases reintroducing crops that had previously provided many with steady incomes. Through compensation and subsidy arrangements, they are trying to promote products such as rose oil, saffron, nuts, raisins, and various fruits as

alternatives to the lucrative poppy. Another strategy is to revive the Afghan carpet industry, which is trying to turn Afghanistan again into one of the world's leading carpet exporters.[18] These efforts are part of the UN-coordinated Counter Narcotics Trust Fund to finance alternative livelihoods, new government institutions dealing with drug control, a counternarcotics information campaign, local and regional drug law enforcement units, and treatment for drug addiction. The EU has already allocated €15 million to the fund, and individual EU member states are following suit.

This economics-based approach has enormous potential, but it suffers from two main weaknesses. First and foremost, alternative development takes many years to become self-supporting, profitable, and sustainable. In the meantime, Afghanistan risks tumbling back into lawlessness and instability. Second, past experiences have shown that alternative development has very limited impact on drug control. It does not drastically reduce poppy cultivation but instead indirectly benefits the country by reducing economic risk for transitioning farming communities and lending political stability to drug-affected areas. Alternative development for Afghanistan's poppy farmers is necessary but not sufficient in and of itself. Afghanistan's democracy is simply too fragile to rely solely on long-term measures.

An Alternative Path to Stability

Afghanistan should explore other ways to decrease its illicit opium economy. The Senlis Council, an international think tank whose work encompasses foreign policy, security, and development, suggests that, rather than trying to wipe out opium poppy, Afghanistan should capitalize on the expertise of poppy farmers by diverting part of the existing illegal opium industry to the domestic and international medicine markets. A humanitarian brand of Afghan morphine and codeine could be marketed in developing countries that have a serious shortage of those medicines. The council is currently building a coalition to support a scientific pilot project that will further investigate how to implement this proposal.

Although poppy licensing will be far from easy, the basic conditions for such a program exist in Afghanistan. The 2005 Senlis Council study indicates that opium licensing presents an economically viable solution to the status quo of extreme rural poverty.[19] Opium is the base material for morphine and codeine, two World Health Organization–recognized essential medicines. Given that Afghanistan has a long tradition of poppy cultivation and thus has the required knowledge and expertise, it would be possible to set up a medicine-producing industry in the short term on a small to medium scale. This project would also improve the security situation by drawing warlords and Taliban elements into a legal economy. It would decriminalize the

Afghan economy, raise the government's tax base, and erode the financial basis of organized crime and terrorist groups.

If key international and Afghan players can be co-opted in this new strategy, the commercial opportunities for Afghan-made essential medicines are wide open. Globally, the demand for opium-based medicines is significant, and research suggests that the major part of this demand is not being met. Developing countries have almost no access to these medicines, and the growing HIV/AIDS crisis is increasing demand. Currently, only six countries consume 79 percent of opium-based medicines: Australia, Canada, France, Japan, the United Kingdom, and the United States.[20] Developing countries account for only six percent of global pharmaceutical opium consumption.[21] These countries, which suffer the most from the AIDS crisis, lack the financial means to buy painkillers on a commercial basis. Ironically, Afghanistan does not currently produce any opiates for its domestic medicine industry.

A special Afghan brand of morphine and codeine can be developed and promoted in the international development and humanitarian community through preferential trade agreements. Exports of Afghan medicine could become a central element of economic reconstruction and represent a positive and productive economic response to the opium problem, improving security and development. Afghanistan would reap substantial benefits at the global export level. Its medicines would address largely unmet needs for painkillers both in developed and developing countries. Preferential trade agreements between the Afghan government and current donor states would guarantee a substantial and sustainable market for these goods. For that reason, the British medical magazine *The Lancet* argued, "This may be the only chance Afghanistan has to solve its drug problem, while providing a pragmatic and dynamic solution to its future peace, and meeting the vital public health objective of supplying essential medications to the developing world."[22]

The basic idea is attractive, but important questions have to be answered regarding the practical details of such a poppy licensing system. The Senlis Council has therefore recently finalized a series of research programs to examine the details of such a system. A first practical question is whether Afghanistan's current poppy varieties are suited for the production of morphine and codeine. If a new medicinal variety needs to be introduced that is less suitable for the production of heroin, this could seriously hamper the short-term implementation of poppy licensing. Also, Afghan farmers must be provided with an adequate financial incentive for the licit production to compete successfully with the illegal drug trade. Finally, control mechanisms must be developed to ensure that a limited amount of licensed opium is diverted to the illegal drugs economy. Weak government institutions, corruption, and limited experience with such a control mechanism raise doubts about Afghanistan's ability to successfully implement this strategy. Yet, as of

now, 100 percent of the Afghan opium supply "leaks" to the illicit market, so there is plenty of room for improvement. Still, the concern about the level of diversion to illegal channels has important implications. Pharmaceutical companies will be reluctant to participate unless the complete cycle, from poppy crop to medicine, is fully assured and controlled.

This proposal can be modeled on similar projects in Australia, France, India, and Turkey, where opium production is currently used for the international medicinal market. These are rather small-scale projects, but they do offer insights into how a much larger Afghan opium-based industry might operate. In India, where pharmaceutical opium is produced in poor areas such as Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, and Rajasthan, farmers are given a license to grow opium, and the Indian Central Bureau of Narcotics purchases their entire crop at a fixed price. It is estimated that as many as 1 million Indian farmers are employed in the harvesting of around 35,000 hectares of opium poppy each year.[23] Two key questions have bedeviled the Indian licit opium scheme: are farmers paid enough to get them out of their abject poverty, which is as much the consequence as the cause of instability; and is diversion to the illegal market, in which prices are much higher, kept at an acceptable level? Indian farmers seem to profit little from licit opium production. They make just enough to cope with poverty but not enough to defeat it. Although there is no clear data, as much as 20 percent of Indian licit opium production might be diverted to the illegal market. This is too much to call the scheme a complete success but is small enough to encourage Afghanistan to make a serious effort.[24]

Alternative development for Afghanistan's poppy farmers is necessary but not sufficient.

Turkey's successful transition from a culture of widespread, unregulated poppy cultivation to a licensed, controlled system for the production of medicines is even more applicable to the current situation in Afghanistan.[25] In the 1960s, Turkey was one of the world's main opium producers, but after several years of tense negotiations, it switched from unregulated crop growing to licensed poppy cultivation for the production of medicines. The Turkish political dynamic was such that poppy farmers' interests were essential to the political stability of the country, as they are in Afghanistan. When Turkey deemed total eradication both technically and socially impractical, the U.S. and Turkish governments worked together to implement a poppy licensing system supported by the UN and a preferential trade agreement with the United States.

Following these examples, in the short term the real effectiveness of an Afghan poppy licensing system should be tested through pilot projects. Projects

should be set up in different provinces where various poppy varieties could be cultivated, producing medicinal opium to be tested in laboratories. Although Turkey and India show the way, the Afghan situation remains unique because poppy cultivation is the cornerstone of the country's economy, with warlords, the Taliban, and criminal networks deeply involved. Although the scale of such a program would be unprecedented, this should not prevent the introduction of a controlled poppy-licensing system in Afghanistan.

Engaging Afghan Stakeholders

Proponents of this plan must convince key players of the political wisdom and practical feasibility of a poppy licensing scheme for Afghanistan. Using only a fraction of the current spending on counternarcotics, a new medicinal industry could be created to accommodate the economic and political interests of all stakeholders involved in the illegal industry. First, farmers working in a licit opium industry must be offered a competitive income, which is feasible thanks to the high markup in the market price of medicinal morphine. In a new legal economy, farmers would not need to spend money on repayment of opium-denominated loans and the lavish bribes of government officials. Credit offers farmers the opportunity to invest in other produce and technologies and allows for the development of other economic activities, including agro-industry. As such, opium licensing is also the right tool to foster diversification of the Afghan rural economy, important because a single-crop agricultural sector would hamper economic growth.

Former warlords and other regional leaders should be included in this poppy licensing system. Otherwise, they would merely obstruct its introduction. Following the September 2005 parliamentary elections, many warlords and commanders entered the world of politics, for some as a means of securing their economic privileges. Both former warlords and drug traffickers currently benefit directly from the illegal opium trade by reaping the profits of poppy farmers' labor. Only the traffickers, however, will lose out under a licensed system. Given the important role some former warlords play in rural areas and in the new Afghanistan at large, they will be involved with other regional leaders and religious scholars in setting up the licensing scheme.

The poppy licensing proposal would not simply be a tool to create licit income opportunities and boost impoverished rural communities. It would also empower these communities in a way that respects Afghan culture. Poppy licensing depends on control systems that prevent diversion to illicit markets. Field research conducted by Dr. Ali Wardak of Glamorgan University has revealed that existing systems of social control, which are deeply rooted in rural communities in Afghanistan, could be empowered to play a crucial role in organizing and controlling poppy licensing, as well as other rural development

projects.[26] For centuries, traditional rural assemblies such as the *jirga* and the *shura* have functioned as the primary forum of consensus building and order enforcement in rural communities. Moreover, *shari'a* (Islamic law) allows for the cultivation of opium when it does not harm but rather benefits society, as is clearly the case of the opium for medicine project. Rural Afghanistan thus provides an excellent opportunity to integrate these informal social-governance structures with formal control. Such an integrated system could oversee and control the different stages of poppy licensing but could also be applied to other rural development or humanitarian aid projects.

Kabul requires the international community to help set up a licensing system.

These innovative proposals have been received both with interest and skepticism. For several years now, the Afghan government has tried to convince farmers not to grow opium poppy, a policy similar to that employed by the Taliban in July 2000.[27] To implement a scheme that distinguishes between illegal opium production and the licensed production of opium-based medicine, the Afghan government needs to clearly communicate the procedures and rules of licit poppy growing. Currently, they are worried that promoting poppy licensing will send the wrong message to farmers, given five years of trying to convince farmers to abandon poppy cultivation.

The poppies for peace proposal met with an initial welcome by the Afghan authorities. In March 2005, Afghan minister for counter narcotics Habibullah Qaderi welcomed further research on these innovative proposals because they could offer a new economic horizon for his country.[28] That same month, Karzai said at a joint press conference with U.S. secretary of state Condoleezza Rice that the proposal was "an interesting suggestion."[29] More recently, however, the Afghan government has suggested that it is perhaps "not the right time" to implement such a system, as it is still difficult for the government to control many provinces. Qaderi argued that "the poor situation in the country means that there will simply be no guarantee that opium will not be smuggled out of the country for the illicit narcotics trade abroad. Without an effective control mechanism, a lot of opium will still be refined into heroin for illicit markets in the West and elsewhere."[30] With recent research findings on integrated social control systems and the possibility to market Afghan morphine internationally, the Afghan government should reassess this proposal and allow a scientific pilot project to determine if local control mechanisms can limit diversion to the illegal market, paving the way for a poppy licensing system.

Aside from sharing some of the government's concerns, the international community has additional objections to poppy licensing. According to UN

figures, there does not seem to be a global shortage of opium-based painkillers, such as morphine. This would undercut the moral argument for the licit production of pharmaceutical morphine. The UN figures are based, however, on projected demand calculations that are limited to the highly protected market of painkillers. Potential demand from developing countries that lack those essential medicines is not taken into account in these calculations. Most governments did not respond to the UN's questionnaire on their medical needs for painkillers.[31] Even Afghanistan itself has almost no opium-based medicines available, which means that production limited to the domestic market would already be a huge step. If developing countries would get access to affordable analgesics, a new, major market would be opened up for Afghan medical opiates, supported by a preferential trade agreement if necessary.

The only remaining alternative is the poppies for peace proposal.

Afghanistan should be fully responsible for and in control of such a new system of licit opium production. Afghan authorities already have full control of the management of the UN's trust fund to fight drugs. Recent developments in Afghanistan have been favorable to a poppy licensing system. The new Afghan Counter Narcotics Law, which came into force in December 2005, contains explicit provisions for a licensing scheme.[32] Following this law, an Afghan Drug Regulation Committee was established in August 2006. This body is to regulate the licensing, sale, dispensation, import, and export of all drugs in Afghanistan. Qaderi commented that "this is another step forward. Regulation of export, import, sale, dispensation and licensing of drugs by this committee will be solely for scientific, pharmaceutical and licit industrial purposes."[33]

In the short term, however, Kabul clearly requires the political backing, technical support, and investment of the international community to set up a licensing system, find the best way to prevent diversion, and produce high-quality medicinal opium for the domestic and export markets. Afghans can obtain political support for this initiative by casting the Afghan drug crisis as part of the larger war on terrorism. Over the past few years, the Taliban and Al Qaeda have been gaining power and establishing their presence in Afghanistan, especially in the southern and eastern regions of the country. Through their poppy cultivation, ordinary farmers are at the mercy of warlords and insurgents, who grant them protection, agricultural necessities such as seeds and fertilizer, and other services that the weak formal government is not able to provide. This weakness offers terrorist groups a good environment for recruitment and hideouts. Not all Afghan warlords are terrorists, but there certainly is a direct relationship between the two

groups. Opium has funded the activities of warlords for many years, and the consequent anarchy opened a window of opportunity for notorious terrorist groups to operate.

Escaping the Cycle of Violence

Afghanistan must turn the tables on the opium crisis, as reconstruction will be impossible as long as opium dependence remains. It is a structural development and security issue, not just a drug problem per se. Afghanistan should be granted full sovereignty and ownership to solve its predicament but should be able to count on the support of the international community as necessary.

The international community should follow suit and actively help set up a scientific pilot project and subsequent implementation of a poppy licensing scheme. In January, the European Parliament paved the way for a broader European consensus on the need to look into the proposal. It adopted a resolution urging participants of the Afghanistan donor conference earlier this year in London to take into consideration the proposal of licensed opium production.[34] This text earned the support of almost all of the political groups in the European Parliament, demonstrating that European politicians are starting to see the need to investigate innovative approaches that have a serious chance of pulling Afghanistan out of the quagmire of economic misery and political instability.

There is no time to waste, as Afghanistan could well be slipping back to chaos and civil strife. Tackling the drug economy is central to easing Afghanistan's ills, and the only remaining alternative is the poppies for peace proposal, using medicinal poppy cultivation as a bridge to sustainable development and lasting security in Afghanistan.

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