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Opium meets Development: Exploring the Opium Question in Contemporary Afghanistan

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Abstract

In light of the forthcoming April 2016 United Nations General Assembly Special Session (UNGASS), it has been repeatedly emphasized that a change of the global order on drug policy should be made. Any outcome of UNGASS, whether reform or business as usual, will have essential developmental impacts on Afghanistan's economy and especially on those involved in the agricultural production side of the opium economy that is farmers and farm-workers. Therefore, this examination of the nature and the political economy of counternarcotics in Afghanistan from a development perspective aims to inform the debate on drug policy reform at national and international scales.

The paper analyzes the counternarcotics efforts and policies in Afghanistan and examines the interplay of political actors since the military intervention in 2001. It discusses the initially dominant counter-narcotics approach, categorized here as that of 'War on Opium' articulated through an opium farming eradication strategy. Outcomes of this strategy are briefly discussed as those shaping the move to what is considered here as the currently dominant counternarcotics approach of 'Development for Opium' ranging from around 2009 until today and articulated through an alternative livelihoods strategy. It argues that this can be considered a 'positive' kind of strategy, which seeks consent by opium farmers by means of (economic) developmental discourse as the preferred mechanism of implementation. The repertoire of actions is now allegedly broader and centered on opium crop-substitution. Discussions of the autonomy and capacity have been used to shine light on certain groups steering the current Afghan state to implement a counternarcotics strategy beyond a 'sectorial policy' of opium combat and contributing to their state-building project. A project which, arguably, relies on (rural) livelihood improvement to strive for the pacification of Afghanistan's majority of agrarian (an allegedly unruly) population.

Introduction

The military intervention in Afghanistan in November 2001 set a milestone for what would become one of the US longest wars. The US-led intervention in Afghanistan was also the onset for a long-term engagement in a state-building project aimed at establishing a new liberal political and economic order in Afghanistan. Over the course of 2001 to 2015, the international community also engaged increasingly in humanitarian aid, reconstruction and ultimately development efforts. The turning point of such engagement in Afghan development financing came about in 2006 when the ‘Comprehensive Approach’ was adopted by the international alliance of donor countries calling for an integration of governance, security and development. Since then, development aid in-flows tied the Afghan state fate to the will (and interests) of foreign aid donors.

However these particular state-building efforts have been, and so remain today, vigorously contested by other social forces pushing for competing state-building projects, of which the dominant one is embodied by the Taliban. In the context of a war which was strongly framed from its outset as a fight against both terrorism and drugs, and in a country which is today the world largest producer of opium (UNODC, 2014c), what I term the ‘opium question’ becomes one of utmost relevance for development trajectories in Afghanistan. By this ‘opium question’ I mean the forms in which the opium economy, its social relations and politics, shape and are in turn shaped by broader political dynamics of state-building.

In this research, I engage with this question through a simplified version to inquire about the ways in which counter-narcotics schemes, state-building and development shape each other in contemporary Afghanistan. This research question is considered of relevance because I came to see counter-narcotics as proxy indicators of the status of the state-building project under examination.

The US and its international allies have been long struggling to take control over the opium economy to tackle down rebellious forces but with limited success. According to national and international legislation opium cultivation is an illicit crop in Afghanistan. The generally growing trend of opium production, though, seems to be more responsive to the vagaries of climate, than to counter-narcotics schemes of different nature. This is so because opium in Afghanistan is a fundamental means of livelihood, rent extraction and profit making for a range of actors stretching from farmers, share-croppers and farm-workers (at the less benefited side of the opium chain) to traders, smugglers and (inter)national government officials. Moreover different rural and urban elites, including anti-government forces such as the Taliban but also formal government officials gain significant political power from engaging in the opium economy. As the story often goes, counternarcotics measures have hit harder on the most needy and vulnerable. Indeed they have pushed large numbers of rural working people(s), usually less politically powerful and connected, into cycles of indebtedness, leaving them often with no other choice than to recur to poppy farming for survival in increasingly less-advantageous conditions.

This research is informed by a particular political economy approach, in which I attempt to discuss distributional and relational questions around wealth and (politico-ideological) power, while analysing ‘answers’ to these questions in an interpretive fashion. To illustrate the politico-economic dynamics shaping the emergence of the opium economy from the 1970’s onwards and until the US-led military intervention of Afghanistan in 2001, a brief historical analysis is also provided vis-a-vis the process of modern state-formation. In inquiring on the changing trajectories of state-led counter-narcotics schemes I first discuss the initially dominant counter-narcotics approach- ranging from about 2001 until 2008-and categorized here as that of ‘war on opium’, which was articulated through an opium farming eradication strategy. This strategy was arguably a ‘negative’ one which relied on coercion and force as mechanisms of implementation, and included a limited repertoire of actions in which destroying opium fields was the privileged one starting from around 2004.

Outcomes of this strategy are briefly discussed as those shaping the move to what I consider here as the currently dominant counter-narcotics approach of ‘Development for Opium’, ranging from around 2009 until today (2015), and articulated through an alternative livelihoods strategy. This can be

considered a ‘positive’ kind of strategy, which seeks consent by opium farmers by means of (economic) developmental discourse as the preferred mechanism of implementation. The repertoire of actions is now allegedly broader and centred on opium crop-substitution and agricultural and rural development.

This analytical categorization of counter-narcotics schemes is considered to be meaningful to discuss the autonomy and capacity (in Fox (1993) terms) of the groups steering the current Afghan state to implement a counter-narcotics strategy beyond a ‘sectorial policy’ of opium combat and as a means of contributing to their particular state-building project; one which, arguably, relies on (rural) livelihood improvement to strive for the pacification of Afghanistan’s majority of agrarian (an allegedly unruly) population.

I conclude that eradication as the dominant strategy gained momentum from 2004 onwards legitimized through the coupling of ‘war on drugs’ and ‘war on terror’ discourses. Military operations of the US and the UK supported eradication measures while the UK also focused on developing the capacity of the Afghan Ministry of Counternarcotics. The new Afghan government lacked the autonomy to articulate its own objectives under the prerogative of the dominant ‘international community’ which was dominant in the early stages of the international state-building project in 2001.

‘Development for Opium’ is the current dominant counternarcotics approach and is argued to have emerged as a reaction to both expected and unexpected outcomes of the ‘War on Opium’, such as forcing opium farmers away from the new central government and towards the Taliban. In order to get the modernizing state-building project back on track, and amidst increased funding from international donors to fight the Taliban-opium binomium from 2006 onwards through a more consent-seeking than violent perspective, the approach to counter-narcotics also shifted from 2009 onwards into one of an improvement scheme. The representation of farmers in policy documents, people’s rhetoric and media is since then re-centred around poverty and destitution. Accordingly, an alternative livelihoods strategy gains priority over eradication as the preferred way to achieve the goal of eliminating opium production and trade.

As it will be further argued in this paper, coercion is still present in nowadays improvement-inspired approach to counter-narcotics but more intrusively as a threat rather than as a direct force. Indeed, when enticing forms are insufficient to make subjects behaving as they should, coercion becomes resourceful. In Li’s terms, “more authoritarian forms of government are often reserved for sections of a population deemed especially deficient and unable to exercise the *responsibility of freedom*” (2005:387, stressed added).

Even though, it is still too soon to assess (un-)expected outcomes of the latter approach to counter-narcotics vis-à-vis the modernizing state building project and its reliance on improvement, it could be argued that current trajectories still tend to reward those who self-govern themselves as they should, and punish those who do not; or in other words, to exchange ‘Development for Opium’.

1 Livelihoods, rents and profits: Sketching the opium economy in Afghanistan

The global war on terror meets the war on drugs in contemporary Afghanistan. The homeland of the rebellious Taliban¹ is also the world’s main producer and supplier of illicit opium² nowadays, with a suggested share of more than 90 percent of global production (UNODC 2014c) and has been the world’s leading producer for almost two decades (except in 2001) (Figure 1).

¹ Taliban, meaning “students” in Pashtun language (Talib in plural) is a term used for the Afghan anti-government resistance forces that ruled in Afghanistan from 1994-2001.

² ‘Opium is a highly addictive narcotic drug acquired in the dried latex form from the opium poppy (*Papaver somniferum*) seed pod. Traditionally the unripened pod is slit open and the sap seeps out and dries on the outer surface of the pod. The resulting yellow-brown latex, which is scraped off of the pod, is bitter in taste and contains varying amounts of alkaloids such as morphine, codeine, thebaine and papaverine [...] Heroin (diacetylmorphine) is derived from the morphine alkaloid found in opium and is roughly 2-3 times more potent’ (<http://www.drugs.com/illicit/opium.html> accessed on October 27 2015).

Figure 1. Global opium production 1998-2013

Source UNODC 2014

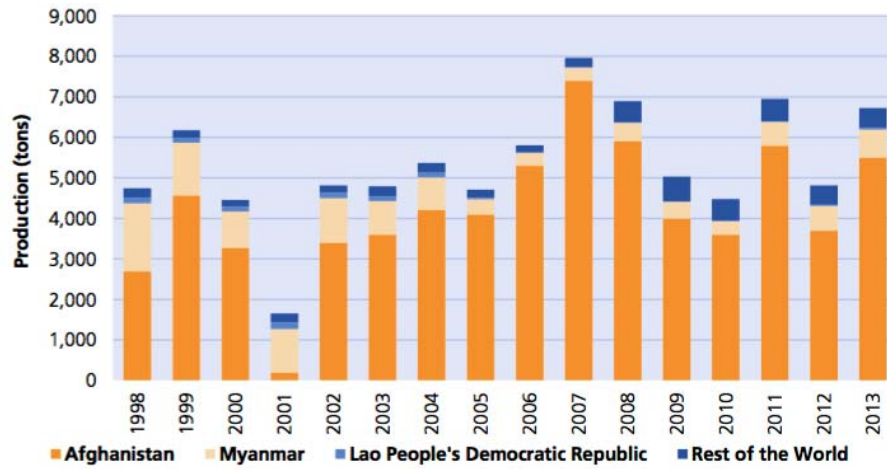
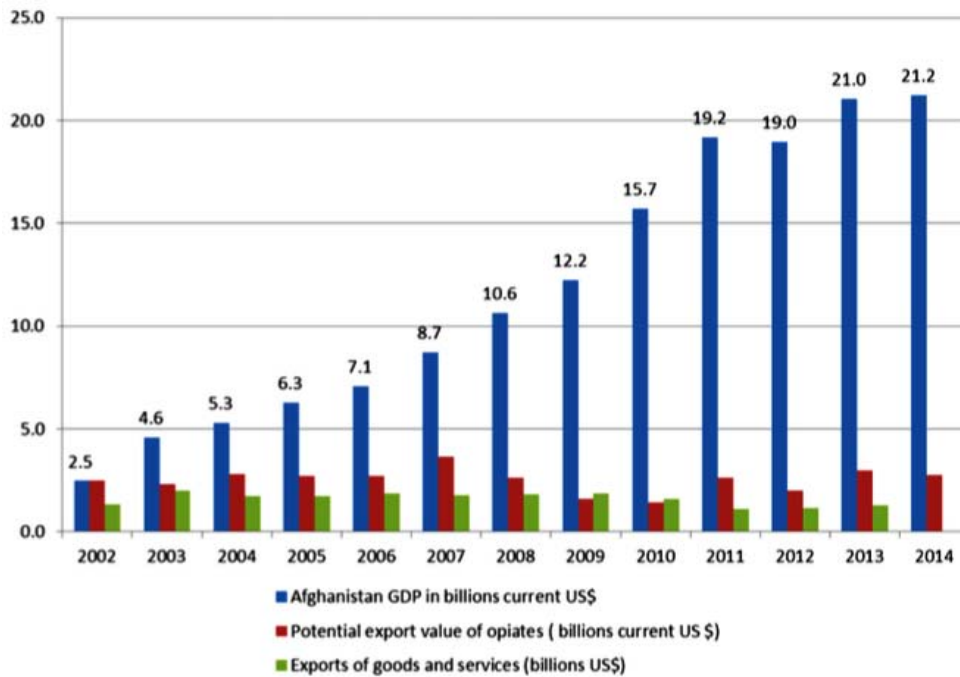


Figure 2. Afghanistan GDP, potential export value of opiates and value of Afghan exports of goods and services (in billion US dollars).

Source UNODC 2014



Opium production, transformation (mainly into heroin) and circulation (trafficking) is estimated to account for as much as 13 percent of the Afghan Gross Domestic Product (UNODC 2014b). It should be noted however that from 2003-2007 the "potential gross value" of the opium economy was almost half of Afghanistan's GDP. It constantly dropped from 2008 to 2014 from 41 percent to 13 percent (UNODC 2014b:15). Distinctly, the reduction is not a result of a shrinking Opium economy but of a growing licit economy of which foreign revenue constitutes a major share. Domestic revenue by 2005 was about only five percent of the (legal) GDP (Suhrke 2010). The share of export value of Opiates compared to licit production of goods is considerable and it remains stable along a steeply rising GDP (Figure 2). Afghanistan took on the features of a rentier state, characterized through high dependence on foreign aid (World Bank, 2004), (Ghani et al. (2007), Goodhand and Sedra (2010), Rubin (2002, 2006), Suhrke (2013).

Opium involves, an uncertain but surely huge amount of economic and belatedly political power. It provides with an unmatched opportunity to profit- and rent-seekers alike, as well as with survival livelihoods to a great majority of impoverished tenants, share-croppers and agricultural workers. As a result of the opium banning in national and international legislation, then, a very large part of Afghanistan's economy has effectively become illicit..

Multiple and different actors participate in the opium economy ranging from (inter)national government officials, local power-brokers and merchant middlemen to land-owners, farmers and farm-workers (Interview Advisor, UNODC). Not all of them benefit from the opium economy in the same way, though. Analyzing this mosaic of state and non-state actors involved in the Afghan opium economy, with varying degrees of economic, ideological and political power, Goodhand suggests that the opium economy lies at an intersection of "namely the 'shadow' and 'coping' economies" (2005:191).

The form of Opium cultivation in Afghanistan varies based on the province. While in the North Opium is cultivated on smaller land plots around the more mountainous regions such as in Badakhshan province. Helmand in the South, where most Opium is cultivated (RAND 2015) has much larger farm-holdings. In the South almost half of the farmers are share-croppers (RAND 2015). While land-owning farmers usually also cultivate wheat and animal feed, share-croppers depend on the landlords decision on what to crop. The majority of share-croppers grow Opium mainly because it provides them with access to land and credit. They can gain access to land and can cultivate food as well while only paying with their labour (Goodhand 2005). The UNODC projected that around 376,000 full-time jobs have been generated by the Opium economy in 2013 (UNODC 2014b). These include farmers, laborers, harvesters, traders and traffickers.

As part of opium's "shadow economy" middlemen and government officials strive to make profit and to derive rent (Goodhand 2005). Local Opium traders are buying Opium at farmers farmgates and sell it at designated Opium markets (Interview Senlis). Patronage systems and nepotism, pervasive in the Afghan political and economic landscape, only strengthen opium's "shadow economy". In some instances, such as in Helmand's province frontier with Pakistan, the opium economy has helped to make millionaires out of government officials working along the border (Interview high ranking government official, MCN; Interview government official, Ministry of Transport; see also Aikins (2009)). This explains largely why it has been hard for mainly international policy makers and the central Afghan government institutions (financed mainly through USAID funding (Suhrke 2010)) to push through counter-narcotics measures. Those who are expected to push for change are the ones profiting from it. Even the International Security Assistant Force (ISAF) has been cooperating with drug smugglers for the sake of maintaining strategic partnerships (Aikins 2009).

2 Contribution to the contemporary 'opium question' in Afghanistan

My inquiry about the opium economy in Afghanistan made me look at opium beyond a cash-crop or a drug, and as a contentious source of economic and political power. By 'opium question' I mean the forms in which the opium economy, its social relations and politics, shape and are in turn shaped by broader political dynamics of state-building.

My approach to the concept of state-building is inspired by Jonathan Goodhand's research on 'the linkages between the drugs economy, borderlands and 'post conflict' state-building' (2009:26) in the Afghan-Tajik border in the north-east. For this purpose, Goodhand defines state-building as 'a conscious, planned and often externally driven attempt to establish an apparatus of control' (ibid.). In contrast, Goodhand understands state formation 'to be an historical or immanent process, the largely unconscious outcome of conflicts, negotiations, compromises and trade-offs' (ibid.)

Making a complex, messy and long story short for explanatory purposes here, I argue that the United States (US)-led military intervention in 2001 became a milestone in the contentious process of (modern) state-formation in Afghanistan. It provided powerful but shadowed factions of modernizing and usually urban elites with a unique opportunity to push for their particular state-building project.

This is a project mirroring Western liberal capitalist democracies and, therefore, clashing in economic, ideological and political ways with what was the dominant state-building project at the time of the US-led military intervention of 2001. Arguably, this was a state-building project representing the interests of traditional, usually rural (and often Pashtun ethnic) elites, institutionalized during the Taliban regime from 1994 to 2001.

Since 2006 the military project broadened while it has been recognized that the modernizing sort of state-building project cannot be solely achieved by repressive military actions that relied mainly on air-strikes. While troop levels gradually increased (with the official end of the war in Iraq) a surge in mainly US troop numbers in 2009 has been accompanied by the parallel increase of international development aid in-flows (Suhrke 2010).

Counter-narcotics have been the modernizing state-building companion ever since drugs and terrorism were coupled around the year 2004. Since the Taliban insurgency has profited from the opium economy (UNODC, 2014), the latter has been increasingly framed as an enabling mechanism for anti-government armed groups (Interview Official, UNODC; Interview Head of Provincial and Regional Directorate, MCN). Indeed, Figures 3 and 4 above show a major overlap of opium producing regions and those which are either under Taliban control or in active dispute nowadays. These regions are not limited to but are mainly situated in Helmand and Kandahar provinces in the south of Afghanistan, and in Nangarhar province in the South-East. While in 2006 62 per cent of opium cultivation was compromised in the south, this increased to 90 per cent in 2012 (Mansfield 2014).

This is considered in my research to be among the main motivations of actors pushing for the liberal state-building project to invest significant amounts of human and financial resources to curb opium cultivation. Around 7 billion US dollars have been spent only by the US between 2001 and 2014 in programs directly related to counter-narcotics measures such as security sector reform in Afghanistan, and another 3 billion on agricultural development projects not stating counter-narcotics as the goal (Sopko 2014).

Forceful eradication was pushed through as the main strategy of tackling cultivation during the first years of the military intervention (2001-2009). During this period the main tool of reducing cultivation was carried out through manual or machine-led destruction of Opium fields. This strategy has arguably lost ground after 2009-2010 mainly because cultivation remained on the rise and anti-government positions strengthened. Indeed, aggressive eradication campaigns were not only often counter-productive (Felbab-Brown 2009, Mansfield 2013, Mansfield 2014) but also triggered violent resistance by farmers, resulting in many deaths on both sides (Interview High Ranking Government Official, MCN).

More recently an alternative livelihoods strategy has taken center-stage in the approach to counter-narcotics, mainly through a crop substitution strategy. This strategy involves also forceful eradication measures but it privileges an improvement strategy through economic assistance for farmers to grow alternative crops (such as wheat), the construction of infrastructure for transport and agricultural production, and the opening and/or strengthening of markets for alternative crops.

Notwithstanding the laudable intentions of this latter counternarcotics strategy it is still to be seen how effective it is to deal with the historically constituted, multi-faceted and entrenched problematique that the opium question represents for current Afghan state's capacity to implement an autonomous governmental programme along the lines of the modernizing state-building project.

Rather than trying to assess initial outcomes of these counter-narcotics strategies, let alone forecast future ones, my aim is to engage with the opium question through a preliminary mapping of the ways in which counternarcotics schemes, state-building and development efforts shape each other in contemporary Afghanistan.

Therefore, my main research question is *how do counter-narcotics schemes, state-building and development shape each other in contemporary Afghanistan?*

In engaging with my main research question a series of sub-questions are considered to be helpful:

1. What are the recent historical foundations of today's opium economy vis-à-vis state building projects in Afghanistan?
2. What are the main trajectories of counter-narcotics schemes from the 2001 US-led military intervention onwards? How are they different in terms of their approach, privileged strategy and repertoire of counter-narcotics actions?
3. Why do specific actions and discourses become more or less dominant in each of the counter-narcotics schemes from 2001 onwards, and where are the turning points?
4. Through which discourses are certain tactics of the counter-narcotics schemes (de)legitimized?

3 The Opium Economy and the Afghan Modern State: A brief and recent genealogy

This sketchy historicization of the opium economy vis-à-vis the contentious material and ideational conditions in which the Afghan modern state was forged is an important background for my next discussion on the character of counter-narcotics efforts from 2001 onwards.

Here I discuss about 'rentier elites' and their role in state formation and government amidst foreign intervention using Fox's concepts of autonomy and capacity to emphasize the role of rural and urban elites and state actors. Particular focus is set on the politico-economic dynamics shaping the emergence of the opium economy from the 1970's onwards and until the US-led military intervention in Afghanistan in 2001. I organize the chapter in three sections, each referring to a particular period of interest, ranging from the late 19th century Kahn regime to that of the Taliban until 2001. This periodization leans on Goodhand's elaboration on how the opium economy has evolved in Afghanistan.

The rise of the modern state in Afghanistan Citizenship and Privilege

From 1880 to 1901, the Afghan ruler Abdur Rahman Khan tried to build modern-state autonomous from nearby colonial and traditional empires (mainly Zarist Russia and British-India). His violent means of government earned him the name of the 'Iron Emir' (Baker 2011). One of this forcefully modernizing measures was the transferring of population to and from different regions. This, as Scott (1998) notes, was a common approach by modernizing rulers who aimed at making 'their' societies more legible in order to enhance its capacity to govern over people and territory. Indeed, together with the need to tame unruly tribes, domestic revenue mobilization was already a problem during Abdur Rahmans' reign. He noted how "one quarter of the money which is rightly mine, I get without trouble; one quarter I get by fighting for it; one quarter I do not get at all, and those who ought to pay the fourth quarter do not know in whose hands to place it" (in Suhrke, 2011:129)

Population transfers and control have been an important tool of government not only by Afghan rulers but also by foreign state actors. The US also financed a major resettlement project during the 1950's to bring nomadic tribes into Helmand province (one of current opium hotspots, recall figure 3 above). The idea was to introduce more ethnic diversity to break the powers of indigenous clans (Mansfield 2013). They were seen as border -crossing, rule evading peoples. In a country where tribal customs were the main institutions of governance (and arguably remain so in many areas), interventions such as this one could be seen as a major effort to strengthen state capacity to govern 'unruly' population. New nomadic tribes in Helmand were settled into former desert land and the US built irrigation canals to allow for sedentary agricultural livelihoods.³

But it was not only the US. Also from the 1950s onwards the Soviet Union was actively competing in providing 'modernization assistance' as part of the ensuing ideological Cold War of the time. Both potencies tried to establish political and ideological control over Afghanistan and, indeed, engaged in a proxy-war (see Rubin 2000). Through these measures, the population of the second half of the 20th century was becoming increasingly used to foreign capital infusions and reconstruction.

³ The project was part of what came to be seen as US developmental efforts to accommodate modernization to agrarian societies in developing countries. See Ekbladh 2002,

Civil War (1979-1994)

During the 1970's the leftist Afghan government was also carrying out modernization reforms to strengthen and centralize governance. At this time, the Afghan state's autonomy was subject to USSR influence, and inspired by Bolshevik ideologies that social and political transformation could only come through military action (Kakar 2006). Thus, the Afghan government of the time was described by the historian Hassan Kakar as a "puppet regime" (ibid). Accordingly, in carrying out its modernization schemes the capacity of the state was dependent on the Soviet Union to provide military and economic assistance.⁴

In order to bring the rural population under the rule of Kabul, customary governance structures were replaced by formal ones. The government employed local officials to extend its rule. The reforms also targeted land redistribution in Helmand but encountered various resistance struggles in the countryside by the Mujahideen⁵. Modernization had to resort to other means of government, then. In order to push for reforms the government resorted to coercion and violence, entering into a full-fledge civil war. Many of the resistance fighters were executed and imprisoned during that time (Kakar 1995). Amidst the war, Helmand province saw the rise of rural elites⁶ who consolidated power through their coercive abilities (Mansfield 2013). State's capacities to govern relied, then, on emerging or strengthening rural elites who had the capacity to rule through coercion.

The repeated calls for more military assistance by the Afghan government peaked when the Soviets occupied Afghanistan to suffocate the rural resistance of the Mujahedeen in 1979. Because of the political tensions in Helmand the Soviets limited their activities in the countryside to providing the provincial centers with military protection and supply of goods. The Soviets were indeed punishing the local resistance by destroying the irrigation systems the US had built and on which the (now deemed agriculturalist) population depended to farm. The Soviets didn't have the capacity to reach out to the local and mainly rural population (Mansfield 2013). During this time the rural-urban gap, as a proxy of class and ideological divisions within Afghan society, widened substantially.

Meanwhile US assistance to the rural resistance groups came through an "arms pipeline" (Goodhand 2005:198). The resistance fighters were "mainly Pashtun-based groups with considerable funding from the US" (Ahady 1995). Indeed, the Mujahedeen commanders of the rebel groups funded by the US started accumulating wealth and investing into illicit activities such as opium cultivation and drug production (Goodhand 2015). As a result, the foundations for the opium economy in Afghanistan resulted from, but also reinforced, the (civil/ cold) war economy. During the 1970's period and under the Soviet influence there was already a global shift of opium cultivation into Afghanistan, while supply from the Golden Triangle in South East Asia decreased (see Figure 1). By 1985, 31 percent of the global share of opium production was coming from Afghanistan (Goodhand 2005).

Meanwhile the growth of the opium economy was further stimulated because Afghanistan lost a major means of extracting revenue through foreign aid after the withdrawal of the Soviet forces. Those power holders constituted by the enriching Mujahedeen commanders had to look for internal revenue sources and turned to opium cultivation once more (Goodhand 2005). Farmers in the meantime could continue growing opium and specializing in the crop. The result could be seen in the growing commodification and expansion of the opium economy. Already by the early 1990s, Afghanistan was

⁴ The then president Amin noted that "we are convinced that if there were no vast economic and military aid from the Soviet Union, we could not resist the aggression and conspiracies of imperialism, its leftist-looking allies [China and others] and international reaction, and could not move our country toward the construction of a socialist society." Recorded in A. Mozorov, the then KGB deputy chief in Afghanistan from 1975 to 1979.

⁵ The Mujahedeen were resistance fighters opposing the Soviet-back government in Afghanistan. They were later financed by the US to fight in the proxy war against the Soviet Union when this invaded Afghanistan. Some more radical parts of the Mujahedeen fractioned into the Taliban later.

⁶ Such as Nasim Akhundzada, whose nephew later became the governor of Helmand under the new Afghan government in 2002.

contesting Myanmar's position as the main producer of raw opium in the world, with a production between 2200 MT and 2400 MT of opium per year during 1992-1995 (Goodhand 2005).

The Taliban regime (1994-2001)

The Taliban developed as a powerful group with the Soviet military intervention and the proxy-war financed by the US. The Taliban who originated in a group of scholars in Pakistan were involved in the Civil War that erupted after the Soviet Union withdrew from Afghanistan and different mighty factions came to compete for power in the country. The initial years of the Taliban came along with a sense of stability for the people in Afghanistan. They were able to establish a "pliant regime" (Goodhand 2005:99).

With the rise in perceived security, agricultural production was on the rise, too. As Byrd and Ward pointed out, the Talibs looked for local support to increase their capacity to govern (2004:6, in Goodhand 2005)., Local warlords would agree to work together with the Taliban under the condition that they could continue opium cultivation. Not surprisingly, during 1997 and 1998 opium production increased by 43 percent, and in 1999 production rose to a peak of 45,000 MT, representing 75 percent of the world supply (Goodhand 2015). Thus, rural opium growing elites were once more gaining political control on one side and economic power on the other. The Taliban regime was, indeed, either consciously or unconsciously supporting the state-building project of the more traditional rural elites.

This said, an important milestone in the history of Afghan opium economy was the ban on cultivation issued by the Taliban in the year 2000 which brought production down to the lowest level since the 1980's. The ban's motivation is disputed. Some say it was a move by the Taliban leaders aimed at gaining more international recognition and become accepted as a legitimate government (Interview former, British military official). Notwithstanding, it is still unclear which specific factors catalysed this outcome, as there was also a severe drought during the time of the ban, or whether the Taliban had in fact enough capacity to pursue their ban even amidst their political compromises with cultivating elites.

In a nutshell, in this brief genealogy of the opium question in Afghanistan until the US-led intervention of 2001, I have tried to argue how traditional rural elites which consolidated power through war (against the Soviet and the subsequent civil war) and its related flows of military assistance were major catalysers of the Afghan opium economy. This at the same time they gained political power to push for their particular state-building project not only through force and coercion, but also through their strategic alliances with national and foreign powers.

The next chapter introduces the first formal counter-narcotics scheme, brought about by actors pushing for the modernizing state-building project. A scheme which I term as 'War on Opium'.

4 War on Opium

Approach of the War on Opium

The US-led military intervention by the end of 2001 had great impact in the state formation process and development trajectories in Afghanistan. It is well-known that the war in Afghanistan came about as a 'desperate' response to the attacks on New York and Washington in September 2001⁷. In ousting the Taliban from power in Afghanistan under accusations of hosting the Saudi Osama bin Laden who claimed responsibility for the 9/11 attacks, the US became the most concerned foreign power with the political order in Afghanistan.

⁷ As Suhrke notes: "Responding to the 9/11 attacks by going to war in Afghanistan was perfectly in line with the Administration's national security doctrine that celebrated *Realpolitik* and the importance of military power in the conduct of US foreign policy" (2011:5).

The US government repeatedly emphasized that it wanted to transform Afghanistan into a democracy. For the then George W. Bush government it was in the national interest to launch what was framed as a ‘War on Terror’⁸ to protect the US own security. Afghanistan was then seen as a safe haven for the Al-Qaeda organization and thus for international terrorism. With this reasoning, at the end of 2001 ‘the international community’ came together with Afghan personalities (mainly from urban, educated upper-classes) in the Bonn Conference to nominate an interim government and set its main objectives. In these early stages of the liberal state-building project, the paramount objective of the US was of course to fight Al-Qaeda (Rubin 2006, Felbab-Brown 2009). Thus combating the drug production and trade was initially not the primary goal even if it was rendered useful to convene other countries’ support for this state-building project in Afghanistan. However, and even though the new Afghan government appeared to have been enforced as a result of collective efforts under the UN umbrella, there is the strong belief that representation at the Bonn Conference was strongly biased towards representation of US interests (Rubin 2006). The objectives set by the UN in the Bonn Conference expected the new formal government to be dedicated to “cooperate with the international community in the fight against *terrorism, drugs* and organized crime” (Bonn Agreement 2001:4). The “drug-terrorism” frame was of course not a new one. The US’ global war on drugs had previously gained momentum in Latin-American and Caribbean countries through its repressive approach on counter-narcotics⁹, and the coupling of drug and terrorism was a key frame for instance in the “Plan Colombia”¹⁰. Thus, this overwhelming framing was taken on board by the new Afghan interim government as a national priority. Because opium was first, known to be massively produced in Afghanistan for some time already, as discussed earlier, and second, seemed to be actually feeding the Taliban resistance (see figures 3 and 4) it was easy to problematize it in relation to terrorism and thus enrich the ‘War on Terror’ frame with that on drugs to achieve a dramatizing effect that would attract attention, and even better. Furthermore, since drugs have a negative connotation in the eyes of most of the Western world it was not difficult to bring the ‘two evils’, drugs and terrorism, together and in this way set the grounds for how the public (the American population –electoral constituency-, Afghan government officials, the ‘informed world’ more generally) perceived the drug question in Afghanistan and the nature of the Taliban insurgency. This is in line with Duffield’s argument that practices that serve to intensify the depiction of ‘ineffective states’ in the post-cold war era by traditional north-Atlantic powers are increasingly gaining momentum (2010).

⁸ The War on Terror, was a global campaign which has been repeatedly referred to by global media outlets. It started as a military, legal, political fight against organizations deemed ‘terrorist’ and countries seen as supporting them. The term has first been referred to by G. W. Bush (see also Eric Schmitt; Thom Shanker (26 July 2005). "U.S. Officials Retool Slogan for Terror War". *New York Times*. Retrieved 8 January 2015.)

⁹ See <http://www.state.gov/j/inl/regions/westernhemisphere/index.htm> (accessed on October 6, 2015).

¹⁰ In which the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC by its acronym in Spanish) were labelled as a terrorist organization financing through cocaine production and trade (see <http://bogota.usembassy.gov/plancolombia.html> accessed on October 6, 2015).

Figure 3: Map of Opium Cultivation in Afghanistan (at district level)

Source: UNODC, 2014

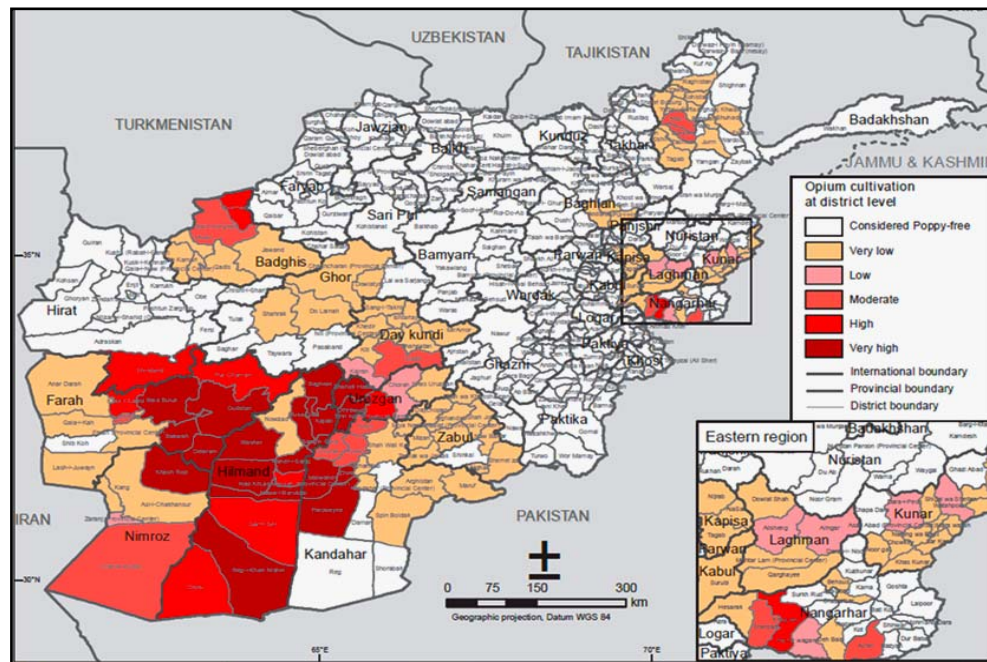
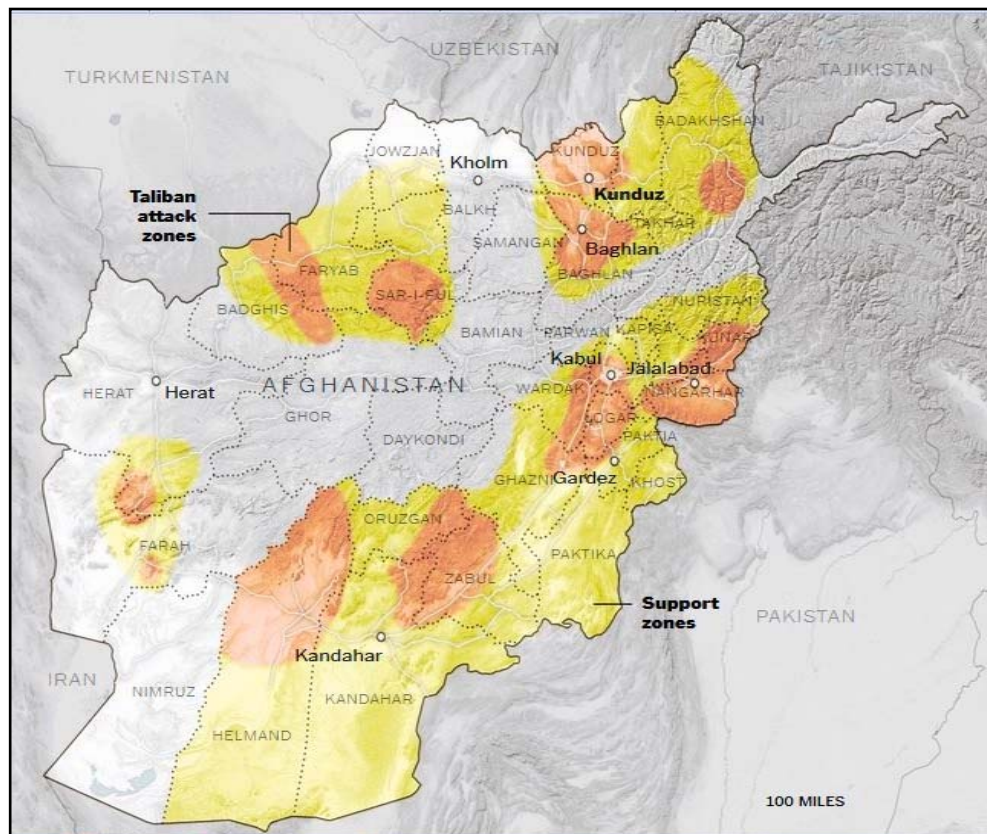


Figure 4: Map of Taliban presence in Afghanistan as of September 29, 2015

Source: The Institute for the Study of War 2015, in Almkhatar and Yourish October 16 2015 (http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/09/29/world/asia/afghanistan-taliban-maps.html?_r=0 accessed on October 19 2015)



Indeed, most of the informants I interviewed, as well as the perceptions from the general public I

gathered during my periods in Afghanistan, portray opium as a huge problem. Former President of Afghanistan, Hamid Karzai (in power after the Bonn Conference and until 2014) used often the term “evil” in de-scribing the “opium problem” in Afghanistan (The Kabul Times 2014¹¹). It can be argued, then, that as well as the US and the Afghan interim government were at war with the terrorist insurgency, they were also at war with the opium economy feeding-in the terrorist insurgents. This is why I name this approach to the opium question and counter-narcotics in Afghanistan as that War on Opium.

Consequently, the embryonic government of Afghanistan stated in the 2004 National Constitution that “the state prevents all types of terrorist activities, cultivation and smuggling of narcotic drugs and production and consumption of intoxicants” (The Constitution of Afghanistan 2004, stress added). The fram-ing of the initial Bonn Agreement was thus retained and institutionalized. Furthermore in 2006 the Afghan MCN devised the first official national counter-narcotics strategy document and cited this very article of the constitution (MCN 2006). Afterwards, the “terrorism-drug” frame was in fact disseminated over several policy documents, informing and bringing together a variety of state actors within the official counter-narcotics strategy such as the military, government officials, “experts” and development aid workers, all drawing from this narrative in their realms of activity.

I argue , therefore that the autonomy of the Afghan state leaders to articulate their own counter-narcotics goals was kept at bay as a result of the influences brought by the US-led military project. The coupling of also ‘opium and Tal-ibs’ informs the way Afghan urban elites perceive the opium question.

Strategy of the War on Opium

From 2002 to 2006 the UK was the foreign actor responsible for counter-narcotic efforts in Afghanistan. This mandate was established at a G-8 meeting in Tokyo in 2002. Discursive frames apart, the US held an “essentially laissez-faire” (Felbab-Brown 2009) position towards the opium economy *prior to 2004*. The US forces didn’t want to compromise their military interests by being associated with counter-narcotics. They wanted to stay away from intervening in the opium economy as their main focus was to gain support in the warlord-controlled countryside of Afghanistan. The US military was in a paradoxical situation: On one side it had to ‘fight the enemy’, also framed at the Bonn Conference as opium. On the other hand, to fight the Taliban it was convenient to ‘ally with the local population’ to build trust and support. The result was that the US military actually allied with many warlords involved in the drug trade in search of intelligence and military services (Felbab-Brown 2009). As discussed in the previous chapter, this ‘pragmatic position’ of the US military had a precedent in the collaboration the US held with local warlords during the times of resistance to Soviet interventionism. Thus, even though the Bonn Conference coupled terrorism with drugs in Afghanistan in 2001, counter-narcotics was until 2004 a secondary, even if relevant aspect in the fight against the Taliban.

This dynamic changed considerably from 2004 onwards when the approach to counter-narcotics developed effectively into what I called before ‘War on Opium’. By 2004 the Taliban had officially been defeated (Harvey 2003, Felbab-Brown 2009). But since, first, the frame of terrorism had been openly coupled with that of drugs at the Bonn conference; second, the increasing drugs trade became a hot issue in the US media during 2004¹²; and third, the Bush administration was under even more pressure to act ‘in the interest of the American people’ in face of the forthcoming November 2004 elections, the US were under ‘real’ pressure to act and show that they had some sort of control over the terrorists, and thus over the opium economy on which they source. In other words, to prove they were doing what they allegedly went to Afghanistan for: Establishing a democratic state.

¹¹ See <https://thekabultimes.wordpress.com/2014/03/29/afghanistan-iran-relations-unparalleled-over-past-decade-president-karzai/>

¹² See for example headlines such as “Terrorism’s harvest” (McGirk 2004); “Poppies Flood Afghanistan, Opium Tide May Yet Turn” (Rohde 2004)

As a result, opium *eradication* gained momentum as the dominant and effective strategy within the War on Opium approach to counter-narcotics in Afghanistan. The official eradication strategy was articulated in various ways.

Different national and international state actors came together under this eradication strategy with varying agendas and capacities to realize their goals. The MCN, established only in 2005 with the support of the UK and the UNODC, stood in an awkward position vis-à-vis the counter-narcotics strategy of the Afghan MoI-US INL & military partnership. While the MCN strategy was, at least discursively, more focused on less coercive strategies to tackle production and on fighting traffickers, the MoI laid its focus on forceful eradication. So in spite of these two competing streams, from 2004 onwards the more repressive counter-narcotics strategy of the MoI-US binomium became the dominant one for the following five to six years.

Repertoire of actions of the War on Opium

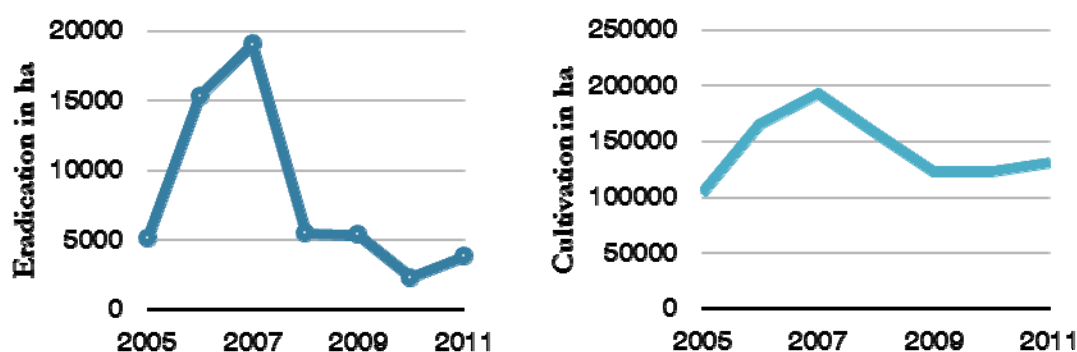
Prior to the discussed coercive turn in the dominant counter-narcotics strategy from 2004 onwards, and in fulfilment with its role as the leading foreign state in official counter-narcotic efforts in Afghanistan, the UK deployed a compensated eradication programme during 2002 and 2003. In this program farmers were promised 350 US dollars for each one-fifth of a hectare cultivated with opium they eradicated by themselves. Half of the 70 million US dollars assigned for the program (Felbab-Brown 2009) were funded by the UK and the other half by other donor countries.

In 2004, however, Plan Afghanistan was put into practice by the US INL and the Afghan MoI to advance a more forceful eradication strategy. Plan Afghanistan included air fumigation and manual and machine-led poppy eradication by the Opium Eradication Force. This task-force was established and trained by US contractor DynCorp (an American Private Security firm) to carry out direct on-field destruction of opium poppies. These interventions relied on coercion and force as main mechanisms of governing unruly opium growers, and were met by the latter in the same way. For instance in Nangarhar province in 2008 the Governor threatened the population that in cases of non-compliance with the government would bomb their houses (Felbab-Brown 2009).

In the main growing province of Helmand, the Opium Eradication Force encountered fierce resistance and many people were injured and killed in violent clashes. However, and even though Afghans were doing the ‘dirty work’, the UK military still provided medical assistance and other support to the Afghan National Security Forces pursuing Governor-led eradication (Interview former, British military official). Ultimately the Opium Eradication force was dissolved in 2010.

Figure 5: Evolution of opium eradication vs. cultivation in Afghanistan

Source: Authors own elaboration with data from the UNODC (2005-2011)



Since the embryonic Karzai government lacked the coercive means its capacity to implement eradication measures depended on foreign forces to commit to the goal of eradication. Something that might contribute to the (un-) intended consequences I outline below.

(Un-)intended consequences of the War on Opium: A back-firing cat-and-mouse game

Far from eradicating farmers' will (or what for some became a 'vital need') to grow opium, the coercive eradication strategy discussed above seems to have incentivized it. Opium production grew steadily from 2004 to 2010 (see Figure 5) with a peak in 2007

Coercive measures have in some instances been successful in decreasing cultivation during the intervention year, but failed in the medium and long-term.

This cat-and-mouse game has had long-standing implications for the modernizing state-building project. During the *War on Opium* counter-narcotics scheme, rural population in the poppy haven of Helmand province increased their dependency on opium and sought protection from eradication with the Taliban. Opium share-croppers and farm labourers depended on this profitable and labour intensive crop for survival. So eradication alone only made them move further away from state's reach in order to keep growing opium (Mansfield 2013). Indeed, many displaced farmers in Helmand province moved into desert areas, formerly unpopulated and now irrigated by tube-wells and started opium cultivation there. In those areas the government has none or very limited outreach, and opium production grew exponentially (Mansfield, 2013) together with anti-government feelings. Especially in opium growing havens of Helmand and Nangarhar provinces, rural population's perceptions of the state worsened considerably (Interview former, British military official). Many of the displaced farmers interviewed by Mansfield in Helmand associated their anti-government feelings to the latter's destruction of opium fields. Some of their testimonies argue: "I can't grow opium. The pimps and the kafir have destroyed the crop. I want to join the Taliban and fight against the government [because] this and last year my crop was destroyed (Mansfield 2013:73).

Whether these views were shaped by local opium economy elites or truly felt by actually displaced farmers does not change the governance challenge in the area, especially for the Afghan state. Indeed, while the Afghan government is perceived as the bad fellow, foreigners are viewed in better terms. Maybe the fact that Helmand province has been "showered with aid" (Felbab-Brown 2009) and a variety of development aid organizations provides economic assistance to the population, can help in explaining such radically different perceptions.

In sum, it can be argued that the War on Opium approach, with its forceful eradication strategy was a "big failure" (Interview former, British military official). A US journalist recently stated that "U.S. efforts at eradication have been tainted by locals who offer intelligence against enemies or rivals rather than the most prolific producers, further corrupting that effort" (Shinkman 2015). While this might have been also the case, it is worth stressing that this forced eradication strategy hit harder on the poorest and most vulnerable of all within the opium economy, that is, small-scale farmers, share-croppers and farm-laborers. These (un-)intended outcomes of the War on Opium might have well contributed to the need to revise the approach to counter-narcotics schemes with a sense of urgency, especially to get back on track with the modernizing state-building project.

5 Development for Opium

The expected and unexpected but generally counter-productive outcomes of the War on Opium are argued here to be among the underlying reasons for the changing emphasis in the current counter-narcotics approach. The above argued 'big failure' might well explain why all multi-lateral actors agree that counter-narcotics as a priority has stepped down (Sopko, 2014). Mansfield (2014) claimed in 2014 that opium is the "elephant in the room" nobody wants to talk about. Given that there are still new policies generated and programs devised, the question is whether it is counter-narcotics as such, or the War on Opium approach, that has lost momentum. I argue in this chapter for the latter option, that counter-narcotics still matter (and matter a lot) and that a new and more policy *intrusive* counter-narcotics approach is around; an approach which I term as that of 'Development for Opium'.

Ever since the military intervention project in Afghanistan was discussed there have been tensions between the developmental and warfare perspectives. While the US were concerned with the military strategy other countries emphasized on institutional capacity building, and the US-led military project expanded, a ‘peace-building approach’ has been advocated by the United Nations. However, recent trajectories in the military approach to the Afghan problem have also moved to consider the potential of a more developmental approach. As Suhrke noted “the emerging doctrine in NATO held that defeating the Taliban required *more effective delivery of public goods*” (2011:10 stress added). Thus, in 2006 the international alliance adopted the so-called ‘Comprehensive Approach’, which called for a closer integration between the developmental, governance and military strategies. Nonetheless, the broadening in scope of the peace-building agenda of the ‘international community’ came along with a surge in military troops in 2009.

Approach of Development for Opium

One of the most prominent outcomes of my interviews in Afghanistan in August 2015 has been that the focus of many of the major actors influencing the approach to counter-narcotics is nowadays set more and more on development-oriented interventions. The logic behind this shift is that farmers engaged in opium cultivation because of underlying structural dynamics that span from indebtedness and poverty to the lack of licit livelihoods alternatives. Accordingly, without abandoning completely more disciplining interventions, the new approach to counter-narcotics relies more in preventive measures in order to keep opium cultivation at bay. While still important, the dramatic framing of the drugs-terrorism nexus, which specially since 2004 informed the War on Opium approach and its concomitant criminalization of all those involved in the opium economy regardless of their more or less subaltern position, has slowly broadened and fine-tuned its more narrow initial scope. Indeed, a major shift in the approach to counter-narcotics resides in how the new 2015-2019 National Drugs Control Strategy (NDCS) differentiates among the multiple actors involved in the opium economy;

“Although *alternative livelihood options alone* may be enough to influence the decisions of a subset of farmers, *eradication* and the application of the rule of law are also *necessary* to break the cycle of cultivation by *opportunistic farmers, affluent landowners, and narco-entrepreneurs*, many of whom operate with impunity” (MCN 2015:4, stress added).

Whereas it was formerly enshrined in the constitution of 2004 and taken into the first Afghan Strategy on Drug of 2006, the drug-terrorism frame has been increasingly reshaped by the notion that the opium economy in Afghanistan is a pervasive issue that permeates through all levels of the modernizing state-building project in the form of corruption, stalling its performance and weakening its outreach. Accordingly, in the 2015 National Drug Control Strategy counter-narcotics has been reformulated as part of the state-building and developmental agenda of the modernizing bloc. In order to build institutions which effectively deliver those public goods considered strategic to defeat the Taliban by the NATO, counter-narcotics has to be tackled. And thus, it could be argued that the way to go about it is with a will to reward those who self-govern themselves as they should, and punish those who do not; in other words, with a will to exchange ‘Development for Opium’.

The majority of my interviewees had the same conception about farmers as poor dwellers who have no choice rather than cultivating opium (Interview Senlis, Interview Aga Khan Foundation, Interview high ranking government official, MCN). Farmers are sympathized with. They are poor, they have no choice. Government, development experts, and the military alike seem to share this conception about them, at least discursively. Opium farmers’ agency is bounded by Taliban rule where there “is no government control” (Interview UNODC). The main frame is not described anymore as one of evil criminal farmers but as one of poverty and destitution¹³. Poverty and destitution can’t be fought by

¹³ This is taken from my analysis of Afghan opium farmers’ representation in the media (particularly in The New York Times) that I developed in my essay for ISS course “Violent Conflict, Media and the Politics of Representation”. I concluded that farmers are mostly depicted as passive objects deserving aid from 2012 on,

military means. And since the calculations in terms framing the problem have changed, so have the fixes that are proposed and the actors that are called-in to deal with it.

Strategy of Development for Opium

Whereas the strategic focus of counter-narcotics has previously been set on the elimination of opium cultivation, since 2012 it formally incorporates a broader range of structural dynamics. The 2012 Alternative Livelihoods Policy stands as a comprehensive improvement strategy in areas such as “poverty, food insecurity, massive unemployment, inequities in access to natural resources (land and water) [and] indebtedness to narco-entrepreneurs” (MCN 2012:9). The Ministries involved in tackling the opium question have also increased. The ALP was endorsed by the MCN, the MAIL, the MRRD the Ministry of Water and Power, the National Environmental Protection Agency and the MoFA (MCN 2013).

The reduced emphasis on eradication in the new counter-narcotics strategy can be seen in that an average 4278 ha/ year were eradicated between 2009 and 2015 while the average eradication rate was of 11230 ha/ year from 2004 to 2008 (UNODC 2005 to 2015). In general, the Afghan government’s main way of curtailing the steadily rising opium cultivation is currently based on promoting a market-led development. The rationale is that the improvement of the market economy inexorably leads to the best outcomes for all.

The strategy quite frankly envisages a transformation of farmers’ production systems through “needed support allowing them to reorganize production systems along market-driven lines and to develop the required physical and institutional infrastructure to support the shift from subsistence agriculture to market oriented agribusinesses” (MCN 2013:12). The logic behind this is that the infallibility of markets will improve the living conditions (“poverty, unemployment, indebtedness, inequity in access to land and water” (ibid). In this regard it is worth recalling Duffield’s statement that generally development is viewed better than violence and despotism as it conforms better to the liberal values of freedom (2010).

Even though the main markets for illicit opium are abroad (mainly in the UK and US) the problem has been reframed as an Afghan problem. A new objective has become recently more relevant in the counter-narcotics arena: Articulated as “GOAL 3”, the new 2015 NDCS states that reducing internal demand for drugs is one of the priorities. This has been harshly criticized by especially Afghan scholars (Personal Communication with professor at the American University; Interview Advisor, UNODC). Media campaigns now talk about drug addicts on the streets of Afghanistan (Personal Communication with UNODC communications official). However, although it is now one of the main objectives of the government it doesn’t translate into practice: One of my interviewees who has initiated a project aimed at treating and supervising opium addicts in Kabul complained about how in spite of repeated attempts to gain government support there has been no interest in supporting or funding her project (Interview Founder ‘Life is beautiful’)¹⁴.

The lack of interest of the government in actually pursuing what it aims to do make me questioning the autonomy under which government actors created the goals of the counter-narcotics strategy in the first place. Talking about his organization’s attempts to challenge the counter-narcotics strategy and push for legalization, one of my interviewees mentioned that it was essential to gather international support in proposing alternative policies because “it is always the US deciding”. Indeed doubts have been cast over the degree of autonomy under which the government acts and sets its goals, since the majority of the Afghan ministries are actually financed by foreign donors. Indeed, Afghanistan has been termed a “rentier-state” due to its high dependence on foreign aid, which brought about tensions of “ownership” versus “control” by foreign donors over Afghan policies (Suhrke 2013). Suhrke in particular notes that:

whereas in earlier reports from 2001 and 2002 they were depicted as violent resisters of government policies and eradication.

¹⁴ ‘Life is Beautiful’ is a non-for-profit organization, working with Opium addicts in Kabul. The organization is providing shelter, work and treatment; receives no assistance from the government but from ‘Narcotics Anonymous’.

“International actors wanted a measure of control over their programs and the reform agenda (...) the tensions worked like sand in the machinery of state-building. It drove the continuous tug of war over the modalities of aid, civil service appointments, and elections - as well as how to deal with corruption and how to fight with (or negotiate with) the insurgents” (2013:271).

Rentier rulers are unlikely to be autonomous (North 1990) and thus to articulate their interest and needs without the influence of their sponsors which might have conflicting views or interests. In Afghanistan where the government is financed mainly by the USAID, government officials are afraid to openly criticize ‘Afghan’ policies. In one case the salary of a bureaucrat working in the MCN for more than ten years was 200 US dollar a month, barely enough to feed his family and provide education to the children¹⁵. “The minister is just symbolic and other people do not criticize the leadership. They rather follow the rules”. The extent to which critique, and therefore accountability, is possible is very limited. For example, one of the loudest critiques of the eradication strategy came through an NGO (called the Senlis council at the time) of which I interviewed the former country director. The program in Afghanistan initially advocated for a licensing system that would enable farmers to legalize opium cultivation. Unintended consequences such as the detrimental effects of forced eradication on farmers and farm workers have been a reason for the Senlis Council to challenge general assumptions¹⁶ about counter-narcotics approaches during the time it was active (around 2005-2007) (Interview Senlis). It challenged available policy solutions by suggesting the licensing of the opium economy, it published media articles about the resurgence of the Taliban, and it openly criticized air fumigation¹⁷ (Interview, Senlis). As Tania Li noted, the practice of critical politics allow to pose new questions and challenge ways of thinking which might have changed existing themes in improvement assemblages (Li, 2007).

The way such critical politics is practiced under the influence of certain dominant state actors such as the US INL seem to be connected to the barriers that the actors in the state apparatus perceive and that keeps them from criticizing official state policies.

Arguably, the move towards more autonomous and capable government by Afghan state actors starts with creating Afghan problems. Interventions, in different realms can be better justified and legitimized if they are targeted at the improvement of widely-felt problems rather than at the ‘fault of foreign command’. Victimization has worked two-ways. On one hand Afghan farmers in particular, and on the other hand, the Afghan population more generally. The opium economy has kept its ‘evil’ face but victims are now visible. Farmers’ distress is talked about in TV shows, in government offices and development seminars, while drug addicts are shown on TV, conveying the message to the broader Afghan audience that it is now Afghans who are suffering from the opium economy. These programs are streamed and financed by the UNODC, the INL (through the US embassy) and the Afghan ministries still under heavy influence of foreign experts, consultants and implementing agencies under public awareness campaigns. Such communication campaigns have increasingly moved to the foreground in development practice and can be seen as efforts to gain more legitimacy over the Afghan citizenship.

Repertoire of actions of the Development for Opium scheme

From 2002 till 2015 a minimum of 70 rural development programs were carried out in Afghanistan (see Annex 1)¹⁸. The Afghan government, lacking the capacity to finance and implement those funds relied on foreign donors. Most of them (35) were sponsored by the USAID, the World Bank (9), the

¹⁵ Personal communication during my stay at the MCN in August 2015.

¹⁶ For instance, in its proposal “Poppy for Medicine” the Senlis Council “by over-emphasizing failed counter-narcotics strategies such as forced opium eradication, the US-led international community has aggravated the security situation, precluding the very reconstruction and development necessary to remove Afghan farmers need to cultivate opium” (Greenfield et al., 2009)

¹⁷ This interviewee claimed that air fumigation eventually stopped after claims have been made by the Senlis Council

¹⁸ According to RAND (2015) which accumulated a figure based on different discussions with development practitioners and government officials as well as World Bank documents (see ANNEX B)

Asian Development Bank (8) and DFID (6) (RAND 2015). Only the US, as the largest donor, has since 2002 spent over 18 billion US dollars (basically Afghanistan's total GDP in 2010 excluding opiates). Whereas food security was the primary goal of most programs until 2009, the goals of reducing opium cultivation and increasing economic growth moved into the foreground afterwards.

As a showcase AVIPA was one of the programs that have been instituted and financed by the US at a cost of 60 million dollars. The program was implemented during 2008-2009 in the North of the country. The designated goal was to provide food security to farmers by providing them with subsidized seeds, feed and fertilizer. The initial goal was not to decrease opium production but to support selected farmers to increase their income, especially after many were hit by a drought in 2008. In 2009 USAID authorized an extension of AVIPA and created AVIPA-plus with a budget increase from 60 to 300 million dollars (RAND 2015). Most of the bulk of the funding was to be used in the south of Afghanistan. The USAID reframed the program to reduce Opium cultivation, to assist with state-building, and to deter sympathy of the population towards the Taliban (RAND 2015). AVIPA-plus in the south covered 45 percent of farming households, and specifically 45,000 farmers in Helmand and 45,000 in Kandahar province (RAND 2015).

Other similar programs with specific reference to decreasing opium cultivation followed from 2009 onwards such as HARD-P and CARD-F (MCN 2012). These programs had both similar goals and similar means, providing economic packages to farmers and strengthening markets for licit agricultural production while simultaneously reducing incentives to grow opium.

Preliminary outcomes and discussion

The pre-eminence of implementing alternative livelihoods for opium emerged from roughly 2009 onwards even though it became enshrined in the 2012-2017 National Drug Control Strategy and even more in the 2015-2019 one. It is worth stressing that this move in counter-narcotics was accompanied by a major surge in the number of foreign troops in 2009 (to decline again from 2014 onwards), especially in the south of the country. It was there too where the efforts of peace-building (or warfare) were coupled to those in the realm of development. Suhrke stated that this turning point in aid flows was initiated already in 2006 and “triggered a massive international effort to create a new social order. Development assistance increased from five to eight billion dollars a year and around sixty governmental donors were actively involved in Afghanistan” (2011:1)

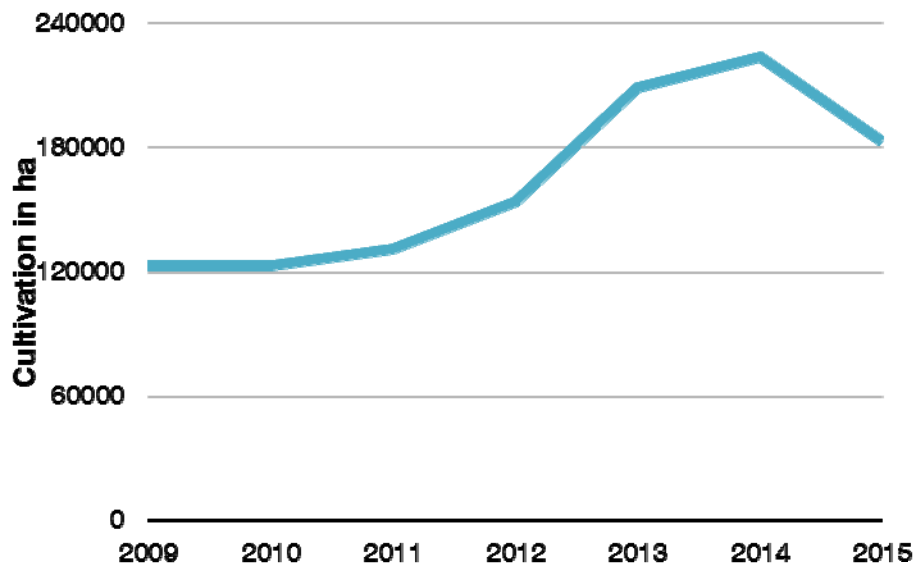
The counter-narcotics approach thus transformed together with the military strategy and as a response to the (un-)intended consequences of the War on Opium, all in order to put the modernizing state-building project back on track, now on the basis of improvement. Since the Opium for Development approach to counter-narcotics in Afghanistan relies on heavy funding from external donors, the state actors' autonomy seems rather compromised, even though the social groups steering the Afghan state might not feel so. Big funding points in the direction of increased state capacity to implement the alternative livelihoods counter-narcotics strategy. But implementation constraints seem to be hampering such implementation efforts. In any case, it is still too soon to assess (un-)expected outcomes of the Opium for Development approach.

In inquiring its immediate effects on opium cultivation, it is worth recalling my initial discussion on how farmers' drivers to grow opium are mainly access to land and credit. Because other alternative crops didn't bring the same criteria available to land-less sharecroppers who would use land and also cultivate food, poor farmers had to migrate all together and move into former desert areas where opium cultivation increased substantially (Mansfield and Fishstein, 2014). Notably the move towards alternative livelihoods did not bring the expected reduction in cultivation. As in Figure 6 Cultivation is still on the rise¹⁹.

¹⁹ The 15 % fall in 2015 has been attributed to agronomic factors (see <http://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2015/10/27/state-department-still-without-new-plan-to-fight-drugs-in-afghanistan>) (see also UNODC, 2015)

Figure 6: Opium cultivation in Afghanistan (in ha)

Source: Authors own elaboration with data from the UNODC (2009-2015)



Finally, it should be noted that the market rationale underpinning the alternative livelihoods strategy entails a “residual” approach to poverty instead of a “relational” one (Bernstein et al. 1992:24-25). The former understands that poor people is poor because they are left out from, or cannot access to, market opportunities. The latter arguing that poor people is often poor precisely because of the very market relations into which they engage. Arguably, this developmental path informing the Opium for Development counter-narcotics scheme seems to be taking (at least in this initial stage) the form of a project of state-capitalism. As Bernstein relevantly argues:

“the state acts to promote the extension and intensification of commodity relations in conditions where it might not be immediately profitable for productive and finance capitals to do so. The lack of capital for investment on the necessary scale as well as the lack of technical and managerial expertise to help explain the *major role of aid* [...] in the promotion of *rural development schemes* which provide infrastructure for the further development of commodity relations [...] or the planning and financing of production schemes (agricultural machinery, irrigation equipment, improved seeds, fertilizers, etc.). These [*state-managed forms of capital*] represent an *alliance between* the apparatuses of the *state* which organize the political, ideological and administrative conditions of the further penetration of capital into peasant agriculture, and the provision of the financial and technical means of this penetration by either *private capitals* or the particular form of *finance capital* represented by the World Bank and other aid agencies” (1982:174-175, stress added).

Conclusion

This paper argues that the initial counternarcotics approach- namely the ‘War on Opium’- ranging from around 2001 till 2008 has been superseded by ‘De-velopment for Opium’ -ranging from around 2009 till today.

The former approach was activated through a coupling of the ‘war on drugs’ with the ‘war on terror’ discourses in Afghanistan which has been argued to serve the need of certain actors to intensify the

depiction of Afghanistan as a ‘global threat’. These actors can be broadly identified by the US and the ‘international community’ which triggered the 2001 Bonn Agreement where the future trajectories of Afghanistan’s state-building project were discussed, but also includes the national Afghan elites who were present at this conference. These narratives were strategically selected to initially advance the US and international alliance’s aim for modernizing state-building in Afghanistan. While Afghan elites were involved in this process as a legitimizing mechanism to mark the efforts as a nationally owned project they have actually been nominated by the ‘international community’. Therefore the autonomy and capacity of the Afghan nationals was just emerging. While the new 2001 government built on a ‘clean slate’ in the embryonic stages of state-formation their autonomy was non-existent, relying on international financial and military support to build their capacity.

Additionally as I have tried to make clear in the historic discussion, certain rural elites started to derive rents and/ or profits from opium in the course of the cold and civil wars and could thus also build political power which was later used in strategic alliances with the military occupation forces in Afghanistan from 2001 onwards. During the ‘War on Opium’, then, while cultivation increased, the military forces changed their tactics and employed repressive eradication which was a measure to curb cultivation which had inadvertent consequences. These unexpected outcomes of the War on Opium might have well contributed to the need to revise the approach to counter-narcotics schemes with a sense of urgency, especially to get back on track with the modernizing state-building project.

Roughly around 2007-2009 the counternarcotics approach shifted to Development for Opium where the focus is now on crop substitution. A new developmental discourse emerged, and with it a new representation of opium farmers. This change arguably happened to reflect the new developmental project in order to ‘make friends’ among the (unruly) rural population which has experiences increasing anti-government perceptions as a direct result of counternarcotics actions.

It is important to stress that the move from the ‘War on Opium’ to the ‘Development for Opium’ approach did not come from day to night. It is a process of change. Even if the latter is argued to be dominant nowadays, both approaches overlap in terms of their preferred strategies and repertoire of actions.

The nature of the interactions between state and non-state actors has changed thereafter, alongside the approach to counter-narcotics. Most distinctively, there has been a shift from the military Generals to development experts, or from ‘red and blue fist to red-tape’. The tactics have broadened in scope. Whereas the means before were quite narrow and only focused on eradication they have become widened in engaging more tactics such as changing the narrative and representations of opium farmers from criminals to vulnerable people in need of development, framing the drug problem as an Afghan problem, using developmental discourse as the enabling mechanisms for the alleged objective of reducing opium cultivation. The tactics can be better understood as ones which seek the consent of farmers to willingly change their behaviour for their own will rather than forcing them by coercive means.

Even though, it is still too soon to assess (un-)expected outcomes of the latter approach to counter-narcotics vis-à-vis the modernizing state building project and its reliance on improvement, it could be argued that current trajectories still tend to reward those who self-govern themselves as they should, and punish those who do not; or in other words, to exchange ‘Development for Opium’, with the more or less direct support of the Western potencies.

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Mariam Morid holds an MA in Economics of Development with a specialization in Global Economy from the International Institute of Social Studies in the Hague. Her research focus centers around the political economy of global drug policy and particularly the opium economy in Afghanistan. Her research interest was born out of her work in an Afghan research NGO (APPRO) based in Kabul, and carrying out fieldwork in different regions of the country during 2013/2014 in the area of Security Sector Reform, Development and Gender.