



UPNM NATIONAL DEFENCE UNIVERSITY OF MALAYSIA
CENTRE FOR DEFENCE AND INTERNATIONAL SECURITY STUDIES (CDISS)

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COMMENTARIES

cdisscommentary.upnm.edu.my

No. 11 – 25 August 2022

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Drug Smuggling in the Golden Crescent Region: Will There Be Any Ending?

By

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Since 1100 A.D., opium has been grown in Afghanistan. Growing drug plants as a cash crop has converted the illegal drug trade into a major source of wealth, notably for drug lords, paramilitaries, and guerrilla groups in many regions of the world. In the Golden Crescent region, traditional, modern, and migrant or refugee are three common types of opium users. Drug smuggling and drug trafficking are common problems emanating from the Golden Crescent region, particularly in Afghanistan. As Afghanistan produces more than 90 percent of the world's heroin and opium, this country embraces the title of the epicentre of global drug trafficking. The Muslim dimension of the opium-producing area, which includes Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran, is known as the Golden Crescent. Due to Afghanistan's extensive poppy and narcotics farming, drug sales have grown to be a substantial source of money for both organized crime and international terrorism organizations like Al-Qaeda.

According to the Afghanistan Opium Survey Report in 2020, conducted by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, the opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan has sharply increased from 183,000 hectares in 2015 to 328,000 hectares in 2017. From 2018 to 2020, the reports show the fluctuation in the number of opium poppy cultivation where in 2019, the number declined to 163,000 hectares from 263,000 hectares in 2018 due to COVID-19 and a slight increase to as many as 61,000 hectares to 224,000 hectares in 2020. Although the United States has spent approximately USD \$7.28 billion on counter-narcotics programmes since 2001, the narcotics business is still booming as there is a lack of unity among significant players in anti-narcotics efforts. Afghanistan's opium cultivation across provinces and its drug smuggling is not a new problem. The reason for the occurrence is that since 1991, Afghanistan has been the world's leading opium producer, accounting for 90 percent of global production.

As a global producer, this country is facing numerous issues as manufactured drugs are used throughout the country, resulting in 10,000 deaths each year. Drugs in Afghanistan not only cause death, but they also fuel insurgency, fostering addiction among Afghans, promoting insurgency abroad, and fostering addiction abroad through smuggling and trafficking. Growing

opium poppy is not just a regional issue. Opium poppy, which is modified into heroin, is not only consumed in Afghanistan and neighbouring countries, but is also smuggled into Europe and sold there as well. Equally important, family relations and common social bonds, which reside on both sides of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, also known as the Durand Line, help the drug smuggling activity become much smoother without any interference from local authorities. The backbone of world society depends upon farmers. The role of farmers in Afghanistan is paramount in the Afghan economic spectrum as their contribution helps this country generate eight percent to eleven percent of the gross domestic product (GDP).

Yet, it is different in the Afghanistan scenario as the farmers, who came from many rural areas, were involving themselves in partially or exclusively planting and cultivating illegal crops as a means of survival. Farmers in Afghanistan are quite special as they are the decision makers in determining what type of crop to grow. Most of them believe that if they grow other crops or wheat, they will not get enough money to survive as this poppy production will generate more than USD \$3000 in income. As these crops are the main pillar of the Afghan economy, this illicit good was easily transported as the drug smuggler or the middleman could easily purchase directly from the farmer. Insurgents have also become another best smuggler network. To sustain the growth of the illicit business sphere, the protection provided by groups such as the Taliban and Al-Qaeda are vital.

The clear phenomenon which is often highlighted for a better understanding of why Afghans engage in growing opium is poverty. Afghan farmers tend to grow poppy production as this activity is profitable and this plant also requires less water consumption compared to other crops such as wheat. Poverty among the masses has also led to a lack of education and modern knowledge among Afghans in order to lift themselves out of poverty. The easiest way to gain money in poor countries is by doing drug smuggling activities. The geographical proximity of Afghanistan, which shares a common border lane with Pakistan for over 2,640 kilometres, also known as the Durand Line, has enabled Afghanistan to smuggle out its illegal narcotic products to Pakistan. In this area, the movement of people across the border is uncontrollable as the characteristics of the border itself are located in mountainous and hilly areas. The use of vehicles to transport goods and people have also been used to smuggle drugs, as these vehicles are typically excellent hiding places for illegal drugs and substances before they are safely landed in Pakistan.

Drug smuggling activities in the Golden Crescent region, particularly in Afghanistan, are still skyrocketing. The high demand and supply of Afghan narcotics has resulted in a significant impact of various security threats to this region. Afghanistan has created the ideal environment for the development and maintenance of a strong and long-lasting criminal economy based on opium growing and drug smuggling. The second is corruption. local authorities failed to curb this issue due to corruption and individual interest. For example, farmers often pay bribes to police and anti-drug agents, for them to turn a blind eye to their illegal activities.

In the eyes of Afghan society, opium cultivation provides the ideal environment for the formation and maintenance of a powerful and long-lasting illegal economy. Until this day, the ongoing issue regarding drug smuggling activities in the Golden Crescent region, notably in Afghanistan, is difficult to curb. Even with the appearances of international assistance, they seem to inflame the situation, as aiding billions of cash to fight narcotics has yielded no beneficial results, but undoubtedly led to greater harm such as violence, corruption, as well as empowering cartel groups. To be sure, patience and expectation are required to adhere to all policy implementation to eliminate this issue in this 'Narco-Jihad' region, as without initiation,

progress does not occur. Will there be an end to the narcotics situation in Afghanistan? It's a difficult question to answer for now.

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