

# Afghanistan's Opium Production in Perspective

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Afghanistan has been the world's primary opium producing country since 1991, when it surpassed Burma (Myanmar) in total annual production. Both the Taliban regime and the Karzai government inherited an illicit drug economy that has been stimulated by two decades of war and also fuelled the country's war economy. However, just as the Taliban government successfully, but counterproductively, prohibited opium production in 2001, their regime was toppled by U.S. military intervention in response to the September 11 attacks in the United States. Then, in a rather chaotic Afghanistan, opium production resumed and grew back to normal. Now, the illicit drug economy in Afghanistan is said to fuel terrorism. The Afghan government, the U.S.-led coalition and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime consider that "fighting drug trafficking equals fighting terrorism."<sup>1</sup>

However, in Afghanistan as in other parts of the world, in Burma for example, opium has long been at stake in armed conflicts as its trade has allowed these conflicts to be prolonged. As the complex history of opium in Asia demonstrates, opium production and trade have been central to world politics and geopolitics for centuries and the role of the opium economy in Afghanistan does not represent a new trend. In many ways, history reinvents itself.

## A Brief History of Opium

Opium is one of the world's oldest pain-relievers. It is a narcotic drug that is obtained from the unripe seedpods of the opium poppy, *Papaver somniferum* L. It is difficult to pinpoint the geographic area of origin of the opium poppy. Although the oldest opium poppy capsules have been found in Switzerland, the plant itself is thought to have originated

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<sup>1</sup> Antonio Maria Costa, Executive Director of UNODC, Kabul, February 2004.

somewhere between the eastern Mediterranean and Minor Asia. However, the opium poppy has proven its ability to adapt to most ecological environments and, thus, has spread across Europe and Asia, and, even to the Americas, Australia and Africa. Very early on then, the opium poppy grew around human settlements and has most likely thrived in a symbiosis with early human activities along transcontinental migration routes. Indeed, historically, human societies have widely used opium as an analgesic and a sedative. Its cultivation was also a way to finance empires, colonial ventures, and wars.

It was not until the British Empire started organizing and commercializing opium production in the 19th century that the opium poppy became entrenched in the world economy. The opium produced in British India was the first drug to become integrated into the then emerging globalization. Tea, which was then only grown in China, was bought by British merchants with silver extracted from South American mines. This triangular trade went on at least until the British Empire, together with the East India Company it had set up, created a thriving opium market in China, first through illegal smuggling and then through forced imports. The two so-called “opium wars” (1839-1842 and 1856-1860) waged by the British to impose their opium trade onto China resulted in “unfair treaties” that not only made Hong Kong a British colony but also provoked, in China, the biggest addiction ever to happen in world history. Eventually, opium consumption and addiction also spurred tremendous opium production in China. In response to the Chinese national consumption that drained its silver reserves, China became the world’s foremost opium producer.

China did not succeed in suppressing both national opium consumption and production until after World War II. Opium production then moved to the hills and mountains of Southeast Asia, where the so-called Golden Triangle quickly became the primary opium-producing region in the world. As Alfred McCoy revealed in his 1972 seminal book *The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia* (reedited in 1991 as *The Politics of Heroin: CIA Complicity in the Global Drug Trade*),<sup>2</sup> the Cold War clearly helped the illicit opium-heroin economies thrive in Asia. This trend emerged first in Laos and in Burma, then in Afghanistan in what came to be known as the Golden Crescent. In both Southeast and Southwest Asia, the Central Intelligence Agency’s anti-Communist covert operations and secret wars benefited from the participation of some drug-related combat units or individual actors who, to finance their struggles, were directly involved in drug production and trade. To cite just two, the Hmong in Laos and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar in Afghanistan.

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<sup>2</sup> Alfred McCoy, *The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia* (New York, Harper & Row, 1972) and Alfred McCoy, *The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia: CIA Complicity in the Global Drug Trade* (1972; reprint 1991, Brooklyn, NY: Lawrence Hill Books, 1991).

## Opium Production in Afghanistan (and Asia)

Today, Afghanistan's opium production is the direct outcome of Cold War rivalries and conflicts waged by proxies who helped develop a thriving narcotic economy in the country. Afghanistan has been the world's leading opium-producing country for years now, with Burma and Laos ranking second and third respectively.

However, the spread of drug trafficking in Asia and elsewhere is also clearly linked to the international prohibition of *certain* drugs of which the two most significant events occurred in 1961, when the United Nations Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs was adopted, and in 1971, when the administration of U.S. President Richard Nixon declared a global "war on drugs." However, the U.S.-led push for global prohibition had unintended local and regional consequences. In Iran for example, the 1955 prohibition stimulated production in Afghanistan and Pakistan and even in the distant Golden Triangle. Turkish prohibition of opium production in 1972 spurred the Golden Crescent's production and further linked together Asia's two main poppy-growing areas.

After the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the illicit drug trade continued to fuel Asian conflicts, and Afghanistan and Burma became the world's two main opium-producing countries. Their national economies have now been affected for decades by an illicit agriculture that, to some extent and in some areas, grew detrimentally to food crops such as wheat and rice, even though most farmers grow the opium poppy as a cash crop to cope with extreme staple crops shortages. Various political and economic factors have favored or still favor the resort to the illicit drug economy in both countries: internal or transnational conflicts, the disintegration of the state, ethnic contentions, religious strife, oppressive regimes, lack of economic development projects, low international prices of food crops and droughts, just to name a few.

Illicit opium production thrives on war economies and poverty. Impacts and consequences of such economies vary according to time and location. Opium production threatens alimentary self-reliance and subjects growers to repression and even harsher life conditions. Trafficking destabilizes producing and neighboring countries by stimulating the corruption of authorities. Trafficking also spreads consumption of opium and especially of heroin, both creating and increasing drug addiction along trafficking routes, as is the case in Central Asia and China. Production, trafficking and consumption also nurture armed violence across international borders and spread scourges such as the HIV-AIDS epidemic that is transmitted by way of intravenous drug use in most of Asia.

## **Conclusions**

Thus, illicit opium production can be assessed to be a national, regional, and global problem. This problem is deeply rooted in local as well as global histories and may only be addressed in various and specific cultural, political and economic contexts. However, any solution to the problem of illicit drug production in Asia, as in the rest of the world, has to be achieved through a global and coordinated approach. If opium suppression is to be achieved, if it is to be sustainable and not counterproductive, it has to be implemented progressively, through use of a long run strategy, as has happened in Pakistan and Thailand. Afghanistan has suffered two decades of war and economic and political disintegration. Although the role of law enforcement is necessary to rid the country of its drug economy, concrete results will not be achieved without political stability and economic development. It is only when these conditions exist that opium suppression becomes possible in Afghanistan. This is to be achieved through a broad program of alternative livelihood development, mainstreamed into national development strategies.