
How the illicit drug industry in Afghanistan strengthens the Taliban, and weakens the West

Introduction

To rightfully grasp the Taliban's hold on Afghanistan, various dimensions that are at play need to be accounted for. This article analyzes how the drugs business, and the thereout resulting network, advantages as well as accumulates financial resources through the illicit industry, benefits the Taliban's hold on Afghanistan. Research suggests that the profit margins are largely inflated, for example the Taliban revenue streams of 2020, in Nimroz province, were \$17.5 million in fuel and \$23.4 million in transit, which are legal goods and services within the framework of the Afghan society, and a comparably low approximate of \$5.1 million was in illicit drugs (Smith & Mansfield 2021, [EFSAS 2021](#)). Yet, these funds are significant for the functioning workings of the UN-designated terrorist organization, and for an underlying internal structure-giving in Afghanistan for the Taliban's ventures. Moreover, the pursuance of the illicit drug trade itself offers the Taliban the possibility of furthering objectives and ideals surpassing Afghanistan. The resulting effects to the dynamics beyond Afghanistan show that the drug industry is of much larger benefit than merely being a stream of revenue for the Taliban. Considering the embeddedness of the drug industry into the workings of the Taliban, the present shift of power could result in an increase of the drive of the global drug markets, and correspondingly add to the stake Taliban holds across a larger sphere.

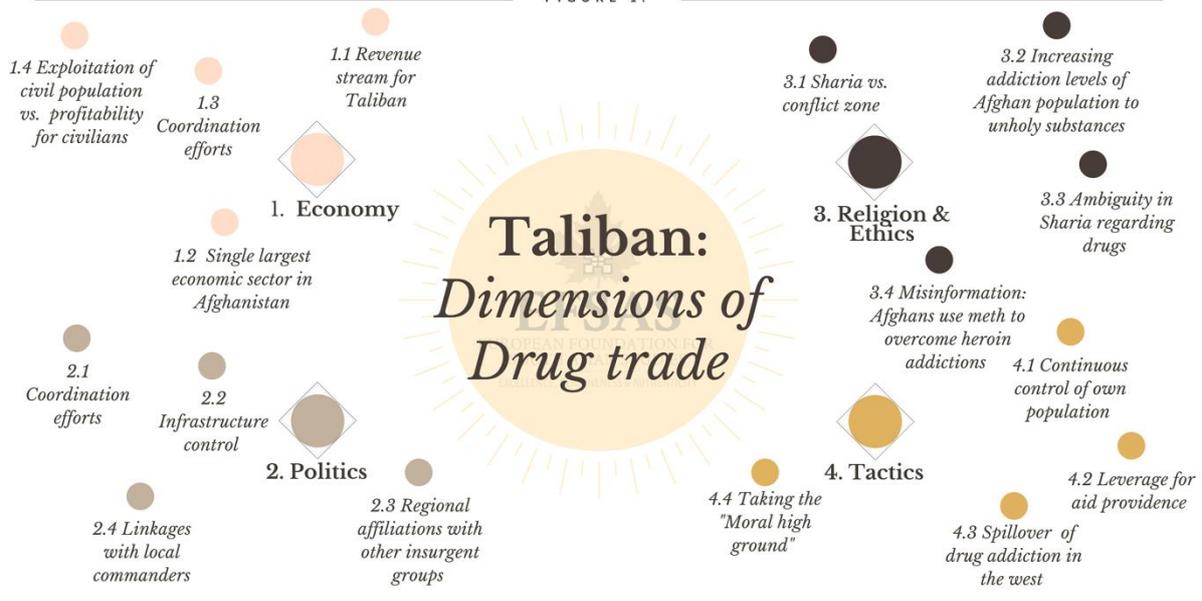
Currently, diverging scenarios, in which the Taliban does or does not receive recognition from a broader range of the international community, indicate diversified outcomes to ever-lasting problematics of the illicit economy in the country. If the Taliban does not receive considerable recognition, the illicit drugs industry could continue to flourish and would likely provide an underlying network for the workings of the Taliban, albeit the fact that seemingly even a non-recognition would result to some extent of cooperation and financial support for Afghanistan, which indirectly would fall into the greedy hands of the Taliban. If the Taliban does receive recognition from various countries, the most probable outcome suggests a veiled reduction, or temporary stop of engagement and encouragement of the drug industry, perhaps only within the Afghan borders (Escobar 2021). Foremost, it would seem convenient for the Taliban to initiate a, by all likelihood temporary, ban or reduction of the illicit economy to showcase the cooperation and engagement with values and ideals of those that provide aid and assistance to the country in order to enhance and mask genuineness of cooperation efforts. Comparably, what the world witnessed in Afghanistan in 2000, which was perhaps one of the most efficient campaigns of curtailing drug production, gives an indication of the underlying tactics of this venture. The opium cultivation bans in 2000 showcase coordinated efforts to, on the one hand, mask a cooperative nature of the Taliban, as well as a ban leading to surging prices of opium which in turn result in large-scale profits for Taliban, as indicated by a Quetta drug smuggler, the Quetta-Shura and the Taliban being closely connected to the Pakistan-based drug trafficking (Peters 2016), because Taliban commanders bought large stock of opiates at a low price, and then were able to sell at a high price (Peters 2009). According to communications with UN officials, Peters argues that members of the Taliban, Al-Qaeda, and other organized drug crime groups, held an

estimated 2,800 metric tons of opium, which, processed to heroin, would amount to 280 tons, and can be translated to \$1billion in profits if sold on the Pakistani market in 2000 (Peters 2009, 15). Although a scenario of downsizing the illicit economy poses advantageous possibilities for the Taliban to veil its unchanged nature, it seems implausible in the context of ambiguous public statements by Zabiullah Mujahid, the Taliban spokesperson. Rather, news outlets and researchers indicate that the request by Mujahid for alternative crops accurately displays the impossibility of removing the illicit industry, given the lack of alternatives and the current profitability (Al Jazeera 2021).

A third scenario, which is largely untouched upon in research, is the Taliban's pursuance of the illicit industry to not only strengthen hold of the country and coordination efforts within Afghanistan, but to further the objectives of professed Islamic ideology and social edict beyond Afghanistan. To explore the groundwork of this possibility, this article will first analyze the Taliban's hold on Afghanistan through the illicit industry in dimensions of economy, politics, religion and ethics, and tactics, then discuss trade routes on a global scale, and explore possible influences and methods that can result in weakening the standing of the west by incentivizing an increased driving of the Afghan drug trade on the global scale, and finally connect the thematic with the Taliban's ideological framework and limitations and objectives through the Sharia. This submission will predominantly analyze opium and methamphetamine trades, in order to, on the one hand, accurately showcase trading routes and historical embeddedness of the opiate industry, along with illustrating the expanding methamphetamine industry and the potential advancements this holds for the Taliban to pursue its ideological endeavors, and the effects this may bear on a global scale. Understanding the methodology of the Taliban engagement in the drugs business not only assists in Countering Terrorism Financing (CTF), which [EFSAS has discussed in its study paper in September 2021](#), but also further allows for a more inclusive perspective on rationale behind engagement, and thereout springing motives and tactical considerations beyond the borders of Afghanistan.

Drugs and Taliban's hold on Afghanistan

Over the past decades, the world has witnessed the influential nature of the once insurgent, then ousted, and currently back in power, UN-designated terrorist group the Taliban. How apparent this influence is, has been visible time and time again. There are various dimensions regarding the strengthening of the Taliban through the illicit drug industry. This article will limit its examination regarding the illicit drug industry and its benefits to the Taliban's control over Afghanistan to the economic, political, tactical, and religious dimensions. Overall, it is important to keep in mind the fact that *"Opium is the most valuable export in Afghanistan, by far. But we pretend it is not there"* (Mansfield 2017). What this illustrates, is the neglect the illicit drugs industry receives internationally and from research. Even more so, when an analysis of the dimensions of the Taliban in the drug industry is crucial to understand the tactical nature of the group.



For clarity and reference, Figure 1 gives an overview of the dimensions and subcategories explored in this paper.

Economic ephedra

The financial benefits the illicit economy opened for the Taliban were, and are today, expansive. The benefits range from 1.1, an influx of revenue for the Taliban, though precise numbers are ambiguous (Latifi 2021), 1.2, being the single largest economic sector in Afghanistan and therefore vital for a functioning economy, albeit killing civilians through drug addiction the industry is keeping others alive through income and jobs in the sector, 1.3, providing an underlying structure and therewith facilitating coordination efforts on a local, regional and State-wide network basis, and 1.4, the exploitation of the civil population. Civil engagement remains high in this illicit and risky business. Rationales underlining this range from a high profitability in comparison to legal crops, weather resistance and easy cultivation on non-nutritious soil for opium poppies, short cultivation times of engagement in the poppy growing business, the natural occurrence and simple processing of Ephedra, easy storage possibilities, and provision of financial bases and security by Taliban (Committee of Foreign Relations 2009, EFSAS 2021).

Thus, also for the civil population it is profitable to engage in the drugs business over involvement in other, legal, sectors. Particularly the methamphetamine industry carries future economic potential for Taliban ventures. The high profitability, as well as low production cost due to the natural occurrence of the ephedra plant easily processable to ephedrine, results in low prices in Afghanistan of \$280 per kg, compared to surpassing \$3000 per kg in Myanmar, marking the competitive advantage for the Afghan methamphetamine industry (EMCDDA 2020). An increased, unregulated methamphetamine industry is visible in data of Taliban revenues to the extent that methamphetamine smuggling made up more than 50% of the revenue of the illicit economy in 2020 (Smith & Mansfield 2021). For the Taliban, this booming industry precisely offers the financial basis and control needed. Mansfield elaborates on the importance of not losing touch with the reality of rural Afghanistan, and that the accounts of institutions, States, and individuals often exaggerate the actuality of profits the Taliban

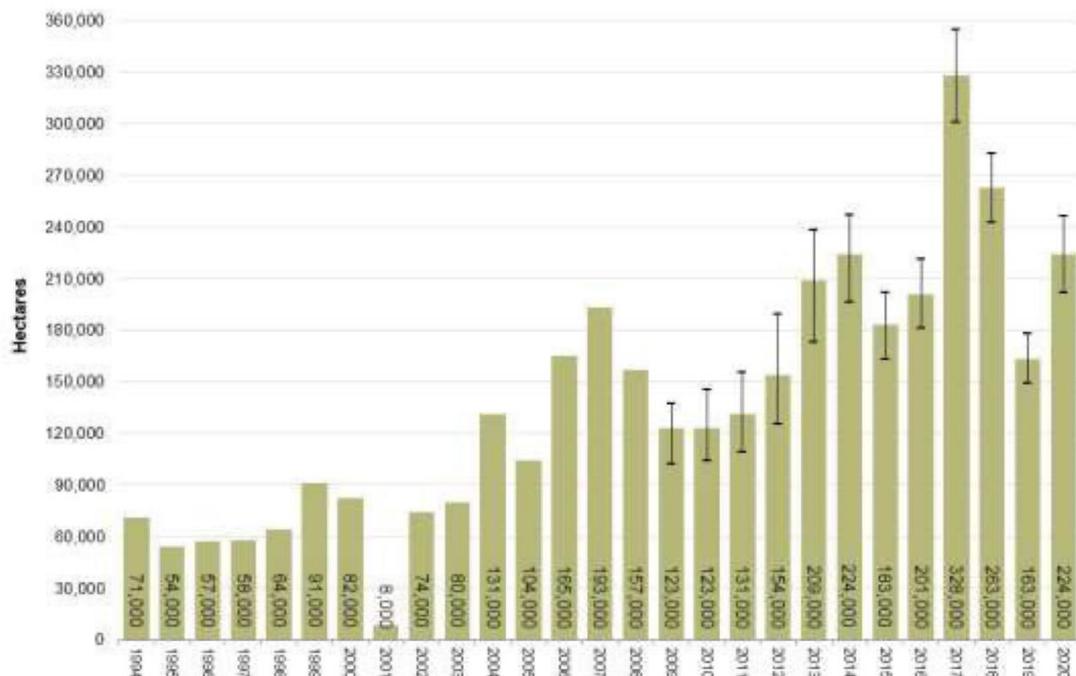
makes from the drugs trade, in particular the specific tax percentages -discussed frequently- may not be representative of the reality, rather negotiations are more in place depending on the circumstances and the nature of value chains and the high cost of engaging in the drugs business in Afghanistan (Mansfield 2021b).

Political poppies

As for economic benefits, the 2.1, coordination efforts were and are also largely advantageous for political ventures of the Taliban. With these coordination efforts comes infrastructure control. Compared to when the Taliban was not in power, it did however hold territorial control of some regions in Afghanistan. This 2.2, infrastructural control allowed for Taliban exertion of power, and for steering towards own objectives through underlying control that made this possible. Moreover, 2.3, regional affiliation with other insurgent groups, for instance the Haqqani network, allows for overarching objectives and for exceeding national borders as well as facilitating trade and communication with organizations in neighbouring States. These power structures as coordination across insurgent groups are referred to as Illicit Power Structures (IPS) (Peters 2016). Over the past decades, the Taliban has built a network through control checkpoints, 2.4, local commanders aligned with Taliban ideals and subordinates to the grander scheme of Taliban, and the payment infrastructure exerting control over, particularly rural, populations (Peters 2009, Mansfield 2019a, Mansfield 2019b, Soderholm & Mansfield 2019, Smith et. al 2021, Sharma, 2021, Labrousse 2005, Zeiler 2021). This also benefitted the rapid takeover of the Taliban.

Over the past decades, the opium industry in Afghanistan has been surging.

Figure 2: Opium poppy cultivation 1994 – 2020



Source 1: UNODC 2021

As visible in Figure 2, opium poppy cultivation has seen significant increases over the past years. UNODC deliberates that the information provided in their survey is vital to counter-narcotic efforts (UNODC 2021). More specifically, this information displays the margins of profit that can be made from the opium industry in Afghanistan, and the increasing amount of hectares leads to the assumption that revenue streams, or at least numbers in trade, were larger over the past years. More so, an increased space, as well as seeing increased percentages of opium poppy cultivation in all regions from 2019 - 2020 excluding Eastern Afghanistan leads to the assumption that not only the cultivation as such saw an increase, but that through aerial control the Taliban profited increasingly from the industry and was able to ensure an infrastructural control (UNODC 2021).

Religion & Ethical dilemmas

As Peters explains, the Taliban's coming to power had little reasoning through the supposed grace of Allah, nor the following of the Sharia, rather it seems the movement, once upon a time well-intentioned, had since the beginning relied heavily on involvement in controversial, illegal sectors (Peters 2009). The nexus between the explicit following and advocating of the Sharia contrasting the nature of Afghanistan having been a conflict zone for decades, displays the controversy of 3.1, Sharia law vs. conflict zone. The limitations to following professed Islamic ideology are visible in various instances. The sudden ban of cultivation in 2000, to display a cooperative nature, while accounts have clearly described Taliban requesting to destroy parts of cultivation to make it seem like action is being taken (Mansfield 2017).

Mansfield describes this as *'taking the moral high ground'*, where Taliban leaders elaborated on their compassion aiming to curtail drug distribution, within Afghanistan, and beyond to neighbouring States and to Europe (Mansfield 2016, 125). Contrastingly, what has become apparent are 3.2, increasing addiction levels of Afghans to drugs. A provoking narrative frequently cited in news articles regarding the illicit drug economy in Afghanistan is the justification of drug sales abroad, because those not aligned with Sharia law and ideals can take drugs so that it harms them. What is then however apparent, is the addiction within Afghanistan, which contradicts fundamentally with the presented objective of protecting the own population by the Taliban, which is growing at an increasing rate. This wide-spread phenomenon of addiction of the civil population to the home-grown drugs shows the paradoxical nature of the objectives and internally contradictory workings of the Taliban. The forming of a narco-State stands in contrast with the image presented through Sharia law. However, the 3.3, ambiguity in Sharia, due to different interpretations, regarding drugs leaves room for grey zones. To avoid for this piece to go on a fully religious discourse, it will only briefly examine multiple accounts of research about these different, and often hypocritical, interpretations.

To keep note, over the past decades research indicates that the Taliban has benefited greatly from the illicit drug industry in Afghanistan. However, it publicly denies its involvement, and attempts to display a resentment of the industry, as well as of addiction. Taliban has long followed a harsh implementation of Sharia law, however, has also indicated relaxation of various brutal interpretations of Sharia law (Times of Israel 2021). In 2000, Mullah Mohammed Omar, the supreme leader of the Taliban at the time, stated that the pursuance of drug cultivation in Afghanistan would not be in line with the perspective of Islam, which then resulted in the strict poppy ban (Fox 2021). According to Handayani and Jainah, Islamic law does not explicitly regulate drug crimes, the way it regulates liquor crimes (Handayani and Jainah 2018). According to the UNODC report on addiction, crime and insurgency in Afghanistan, the Taliban had reduced its strict Sharia law regarding drug trafficking and

cultivation already since 2001, due to the financial profitability and the nature of its position (UNODC 2009, Swartz 2011). What stands in contrast to research indications of an impossibility of curtailing the drug industry and once again imposing strict bans, are the current developments regarding drug addicts and their treatment by the Taliban. Overall, there are accounts of 3.4, misinformation regarding Afghans who are addicted to heroin, who then falsely receive information that methamphetamine assists in the overcoming of heroin addiction. This dimension of drug trade in Afghanistan indicates the health consequences for Afghans themselves due to the increase in methamphetamine trafficking. While young persons in Afghanistan are now also exposed to synthetic drugs on the market, additionally to the vast supply of opiates in the illicit economy, high levels of addiction to both heroin and methamphetamine are visible, and particularly a large group of young people are indicating methamphetamine usage (UNODC report 2021). Regrettably, misinformation largely causes this double addiction of the civil population in Afghanistan. Adding to this, what has become visible in the past days, is a grim and forceful detainment of drug addicts within the country, which could be reasoned by eliminating unholy behaviors from the country, showing cooperation with the west to reduce drug trafficking, or masking their own involvement in the industry.

Summarizing the religious and ethical character of the Taliban involvement in drug trafficking, various indicators become visible. On the one hand, Taliban involvement in the industry is very clearly present, albeit the verbal indications and temporary actions against the illicit industry. On the other hand, based on different interpretations of Sharia law, the Taliban narrates its involvement for one, as a justified means to an end where the revenue derived from the drug involvement is justified by the objective of tacking the unholy perspectives of those in power over the past years (UNODC 2009), as well as *'taking the moral high ground'*, which indicates that cessation of involvement of the drug industry in the past was a tactical move to comply with the west in order to open the possibility for financial and humanitarian assistance (Mansfield 2016). It further deliberates the ignorance of ideology and the prioritization of objectives in times of conflict, and how a conflict zone allows for actions not in line with the ideology to ultimately pursue the goals of the Taliban. Ultimately, the involvement in the drug industry is not only for the civil population a means to survive, but it also allows for tactical ventures of the Taliban.

Tactical high ground

The involvement in the illicit industry in Afghanistan allows for the Taliban to secure a 4.1, continuous control of the Afghan population. As discussed in the political part on the dimensions of drug trade in Afghanistan, for the Taliban control of the Afghan population through infrastructure and through taxation and other payments allows for an overseeing nature. Moreover, the continuous destruction and denial revenue for Taliban during the past two decades by the Afghan government and external forces has not only resulted in further impoverishing Afghanistan's rural population, but it also additionally allowed for the Taliban to gain a position as protecting the rural population from the doings of these actors, and therefore strengthened the bond between the rural population and Taliban commanders, as well as ideologies (Mansfield 2021b, 46). This reiterates the narrative that a ban of drug cultivation and processing seems unlikely, given the fact that the Taliban would then face an outrage of rural farmers, and furthermore the impossibility of controlling local Taliban commanders and the adversity of these wanting to curtail the drugs business, that is profitable for them as well (Mansfield 2021b).

Furthermore, as discussed briefly in the subpart on religion and ethics, the 4.2, leverage for aid providence through laying hand on the drug industry by banning or narrating a reduction of drug production displays in essence one of the most tactical elements of involvement in the industry; As visible in 2000, some UN personnel located in Afghanistan viewed the strict ban on opium poppy cultivation as a gateway for constructive dialogues and aid provision possibilities (Mansfield 2016). According to Mansfield, this was precisely what the Taliban had hoped for, a positive resonance of the ban of drug cultivation in the country, and there with the rewritten perspective on the credibility of the Taliban. Although the tactics failed eventually, it gives good insight into the methodology the Taliban uses to pursue its goals while masking their nature.

An element frequently overlooked in research of the illicit economy in Afghanistan, is its reach of trade beyond Afghanistan and the region. This 4.3, spillover of drug addiction in the west, would indicate why counter-narcotic strikes were so present over a long time span in Afghanistan, although it was clear that the strikes did not reduce much Taliban involvement in the industry. For this spillover, a to this date large unknown factor of the methamphetamine industry, standing in contrast to the well-explored and researched opium industry in Afghanistan, is to establish what quantities of the Afghan-produced methamphetamine crosses borders and enters other markets, given that the production quantities analyzed in field research in Afghanistan exceed the domestic consumption by far (Soderholm et al. 2019). To examine further on this, this article will first explore the possibility of Taliban forces utilizing the illicit drug industry as a tactical weapon, and then attempt to explore Afghan trade routes of opiate trade to examine the long-standing trade routes, and then follow onto methamphetamine trades and where these are directed towards on a global scale. As indicated in the religious and ethical subpart of this paper, the Taliban ventures in the illicit drug economy are reasoned by more than profitability alone. Utilizing the industry as a means to an end, establishing control and oversight, as well as veiling its nature in narrated reductions and bans of drug involvement, displays its nature of 4.4, taking the '*moral high ground*', meaning choosing a favorable narrative of the otherwise non-aligning ideals of the group with those countries who could be able to provide humanitarian or financial assistance.

While the illicit economy benefits the Taliban through financial inflow, the network, infrastructure control of smuggling routes and the affiliations and organizational power of oversight of local Taliban commanders involved in the economy, it holds much more. With the rapid Taliban takeover in Afghanistan in the summer of 2021, the world came to know the long-standing influence the Taliban had over the past two decades, albeit external forces in Afghanistan and a government that, supposedly, was in control of the vast majority of the country. The underlying tactic of a continued drug trade illustrates the symbiosis between Taliban control and influence on the industry itself, and with any affect the industry potentially has within the country on its own population, as well as beyond Afghanistan, there is no doubt of the complicity of the Taliban in the industry. Local Taliban commanders, deeply entrenched in the network of the drug economy, facilitated a rapid takeover through the coordinated structure established over the past decades. Thus, the tactical nature of the involvement should be at the forefront of analysis to understand the place of Taliban in the illicit economy and how it might utilize it.

Afghan drug trade routes

Research clearly shows the inflow of Afghan-produced drugs into other countries, both through increasing seizures at border controls, as well as through rising addiction levels. Combining the dimensions elaborated on in this article, a clear link of tactical objectives is visible. Economic, political, religious, and tactical narrations of the Taliban all link towards potential influences and methods that could be used to weaken the west, not only by the terrorist nature of the group, but by incentivizing and increasing the drivers of Afghan drug trade to a more global realm. Regional affiliations with other terrorist networks benefit the cause, which provides underlying IPS across the region of South Asia (Peters 2016). The intractability of the conflict potential in Afghanistan and the region thrives from the intangible dynamics of the relations of various terrorist networks, as well as the impossibility of fully grasping the nature of the illicit economy. However, the importance of the drug industry to these organizations has not gone unnoticed.

The Taliban involvement in illicit drug trade in Afghanistan has been under scrutiny by Western external forces for years. Various attempts have been made to tackle the illicit industry, many of which were air strikes on laboratories. The counter-narcotic strikes by US and NATO forces were targeted towards the compound of labs, the equipment, and the inputs, i.e., the different chemicals to make the drugs (Mansfield 2019, 41). Those targeted to be affected by the strikes was the Taliban and its diminished revenue from taxation activities, but in actuality it were the owners of the household labs, who lost property. While it caused distress for the Taliban, but not much revenue loss, it caused long-term damage for the civil population and endangerment of the local illicit economy, as well as intensified anger towards the west, and therewith even potential approval of Taliban actions and alignment therewith (Mansfield 2019). The interdiction of NATO and the USA targeting these facilities did not result in the much-hoped for change. Rather, it fuelled chronic damages to civilians and ripped open the bandage of lacking assistance for the already helpless, entrenched in a system of injustice, and resulted in the affiliation of these wounded citizens to consider affiliating themselves with the Taliban as a last resort. Now that the Taliban is in control of Afghanistan, it seems probable that the drug economy will flourish particularly given the retreat of foreign forces. To accurately establish the stakes the US as well as other western NATO-affiliated external forces had in their reasoning for counterstrikes, assessing the trade routes from Afghanistan can be of assistance. Figure 3 shows the global reach of Afghan Opiate trade.

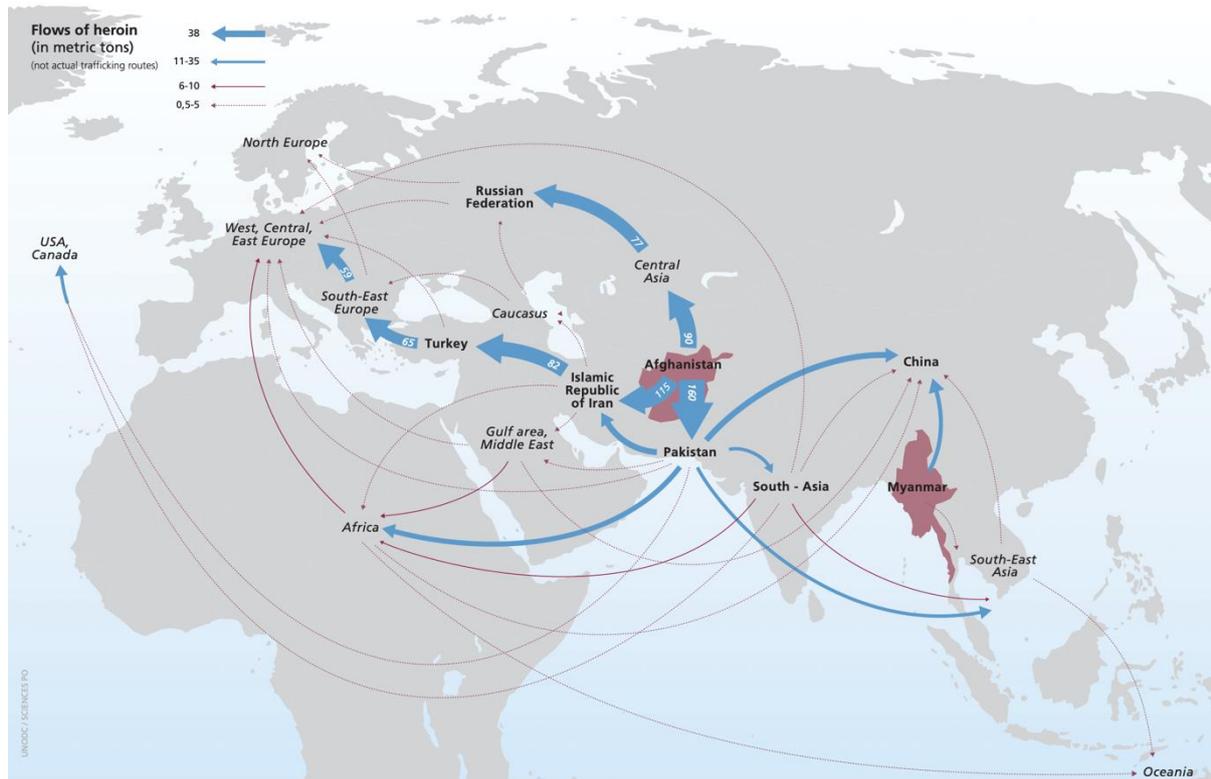


Figure 3: The Global Afghan Opium Trade: A Threat Assessment (Source: UNODC)

According to the UNODC, the trade routes of heroin mainly are conducted through regionally close locations, particularly, and unsurprisingly, through Pakistan. What is visible, is that the flows encompass various regions, and have a vast reach to many countries, including Europe and the United States of America. To give an indication of, for obvious reasons ambiguous, numbers of drugs entering the foreign markets from Afghanistan, approximately 95% of the heroin trade in Europe comes from Afghan grown opium, while merely 1% of the United States’ heroin supply originates in Afghanistan (BBC 2021). However, this is not all. According to UNODC, Afghan drug traffickers’ control 85% of the world’s opium supply (UNODC).

The increasing methamphetamine industry, as deliberated by Mansfield and other scholarly experts, in various research papers, has led to a skewed perspective on just how far the reach of the Afghan drug trafficking is. While the methamphetamine industry coffers the Taliban pockets, it is foremost a niche market not yet in the spotlight of international attention. The increasing productions of the methamphetamine industry in Afghanistan are visible through seizures at the borders of Afghanistan, particularly the increase from 10% Afghan-originated methamphetamine in 2015 at the border to Iran, to a 90% Afghan-origin seizure (UNODC 2021). Furthermore, a 700% increase from 2018 to 2019 of methamphetamine seizures within Afghanistan uncovers the heavy focus put to the industry and its prosperous nature (UNODC 2021).

Only recently has the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Addiction (EMCDDA) released an article titled ‘Methamphetamine from Afghanistan: Signals indicate that Europe should be better prepared’ (EMCDDA 2021). The report explores the expansion of the methamphetamine industry in Afghanistan, and the implications this has for Europe. It focuses special attention to the factor of

naturally occurring ephedra in the landscape of Afghanistan and discusses the broadening consumer markets of Afghan-produced methamphetamine. Vitaly, the report describes the possibility of cheap, and pure, Afghan methamphetamine to enter the European market through established drug trade routes of the Balkans through Turkey and Iran, noting that the Iranian long-standing history of methamphetamine production is shadowed by regulation, contrasting the unregulated and competitively advantageous Afghan-produced substance (EMCDDA 2021). The regional spillovers, not only to Iran but also to Pakistan and lacking cooperation of counter-narcotic efforts led to rising trades also on a global scale (Committee on Foreign Relations 2009). Connecting back to the economic benefits for the Taliban, the cross-border trade at the borders specifically with Iran and Pakistan, and the taxation of goods there, has allowed for revenue, not only of inputs necessary for drug processing, but for other goods as well (Mansfield 2021b).

The illicit drug industry as a weapon

Several reasons why Afghan drugs are so successful underlie the spillover and the increasing production scales. The inherent nature of Afghanistan's narco-State, as explored in an [EFSAS paper in 2017](#), has only been bolstered by the Taliban takeover. Taliban control over the industry, as analyzed, ranges from various dimensions to a deeply entrenched system. Though figures remain not certain due to the illicit nature of the industry, it is apparent that the Taliban benefits largely from the illicit trade, financially, politically, as well as tactically.

Keith Bishop, a high-level external force in Afghanistan during 2009 – 2012, goes a step further underlining the argument of this article, that opiates are regarded not only as a financial basis for the Taliban, but are utilized *“as a weapon to poison their perceived enemies at home and abroad”* (Washington Post 2021). The increase in trade of drugs originating from Afghanistan, as well as the diversification of the portfolio to a larger share of synthetic drugs, has resulted in an expansion of the narco-State and rising levels of addiction in the west. Other accounts describe the intended weaponizing of opium to target the west linked to the increasing cultivation of opium poppies comparably to the beginning of reducing troop sizes in 2017, and the rather increasing cultivation numbers thereafter, comparably in line with Figure 2 (Flanders 2019, UNODC 2020). Flanders further elaborates on the Taliban ideological objectives, in line with the previously discussed religious and ethical dimensions, being the foremost basis of Sharia law, and pursuing a path to fight the Western beliefs (Flanders 2019). Wahdatyar, a high-level political analyst, claims the *“income from drugs goes to fund the Taliban's war engine”* (Wahdatyar 2016). Pepe Escobar explores the options that could now be at hand for the interim Taliban regime. Referring to the possible dimensions of continuance or halting of the illicit industry examined in this paper, Escobar believes, as many other scholars, that the illicit economy is essential for the Taliban revenue influx and control, but also for civilians to receive income (Escobar 2021). He explains that the flourishing illicit economy can benefit Taliban weaponization, countering possible future interferences of NATO or American forces. His narrative presupposes a halting of distribution of drugs inside Afghanistan, which coincides with current developments of forceful detainment of drug addicts in Afghanistan, to eradicate addiction and display the authority of Taliban to further decrease addiction within Afghanistan (Al Jazeera 2021b) but a continuous trade beyond Afghanistan to distribute the poisonous drugs. A Taliban patrol officer explains that these detainments and grim treatments are merely the beginning of curtailing the drug industry, he specifies that farmers are the next in line to be punished according to Sharia law (Al Jazeera 2021b). The truthfulness of these indications is yet to be seen, what however can be certain,

is that security payments as examined in [EFSAS paper 2021](#), for farmers will become higher, and will in turn result in more profit for the Taliban. What was analyzed of the Taliban-initiated opium ban in 2000, was that the destruction of poppy fields was often scenically engineered, and thus such projection could seem plausible in this context as well, to display the veiled workings of the UN-designated terrorist organization.

Conclusion

Foremost, this analysis aims to shed light on the underlying tactical objectives of the Taliban involvement in the illicit drug economy in Afghanistan, and the intended distribution of drugs beyond Afghanistan's borders. The Taliban ideological framework based on the Sharia, though various interpretations exist on illicit substances, is closely connected to the incentive of wanting to distribute lethal substances to the west, while receiving financial benefits and structural control in the country. The ambiguity of when the ideological baseline of Taliban dominates, and when this is ignored in times of conflict, and the workings in a conflict zone that allow for non-alignment with these ideological pointers to still follow onto goals of the Taliban is an important segment to understand in the functioning of the terrorist group and its ultimate goals. The regional spillovers that result from increasing drug trades do not only enhance trafficking and distribution of the good, but they also furthermore allow for deeper regional cooperation between terrorist networks and complicit State entities, not the least visible in the positions of the Taliban interim government.

From a humanitarian perspective, any involvement in the illicit industry seems to be irresponsible. As Hamid Karzai, Afghanistan's President from 2001 – 2014 stated, "*Either Afghanistan destroys opium, or opium will destroy Afghanistan*" (Glaze 2007). However, also any retraction and attempted elimination of the illicit industry is irresponsible given the importance of welfare for the population, and counter-narcotic efforts, as seen in the opium production ban in 2001, or Hamid Karzai's attempt to reduce drug crop cultivation, only highlight this (Mansfield 2021b).

Thus, understanding the methods and reasons for Taliban engagement in the illicit industry, and pursuing pathways to dissect this involvement to protect civilians and their addictions, and creating a broader understanding regarding the specific involvement of Taliban in the illicit economy through trade checkpoints and supply chains, and the tactical advantage this gives the Taliban in and beyond Afghanistan, does not only prevent CTF, but moreover allows for insightful perspectives behind the engagement, and what tactical considerations are pursued by the Taliban. What needs to be at the forefront of analysis, is a tender understanding of the opium ban in 2001, and how this narrative is being followed again, by a group which should not be trusted in their behavior.

Finally, an international response should not make the same mistakes again, and continue to sustain a hawk's eye focus in order to counter promptly and robustly the tacticity and the actuality of the Taliban's objectives.

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DISCLAIMER:

This report was prepared during the unfolding of the impact the Taliban regime has, as well as ambiguities by Taliban statements regarding the Afghan drug industry. It is too early to deliberate what the impact of this shift will be, and how the drug industry will suffer or benefit from it. Therefore, any findings and assessments as well as future projections in this report must be considered as preliminary, and not finite. It is important to continue monitoring the developments, to precisely examine the illicit industry and how it is utilized or condemned by the Taliban forces.