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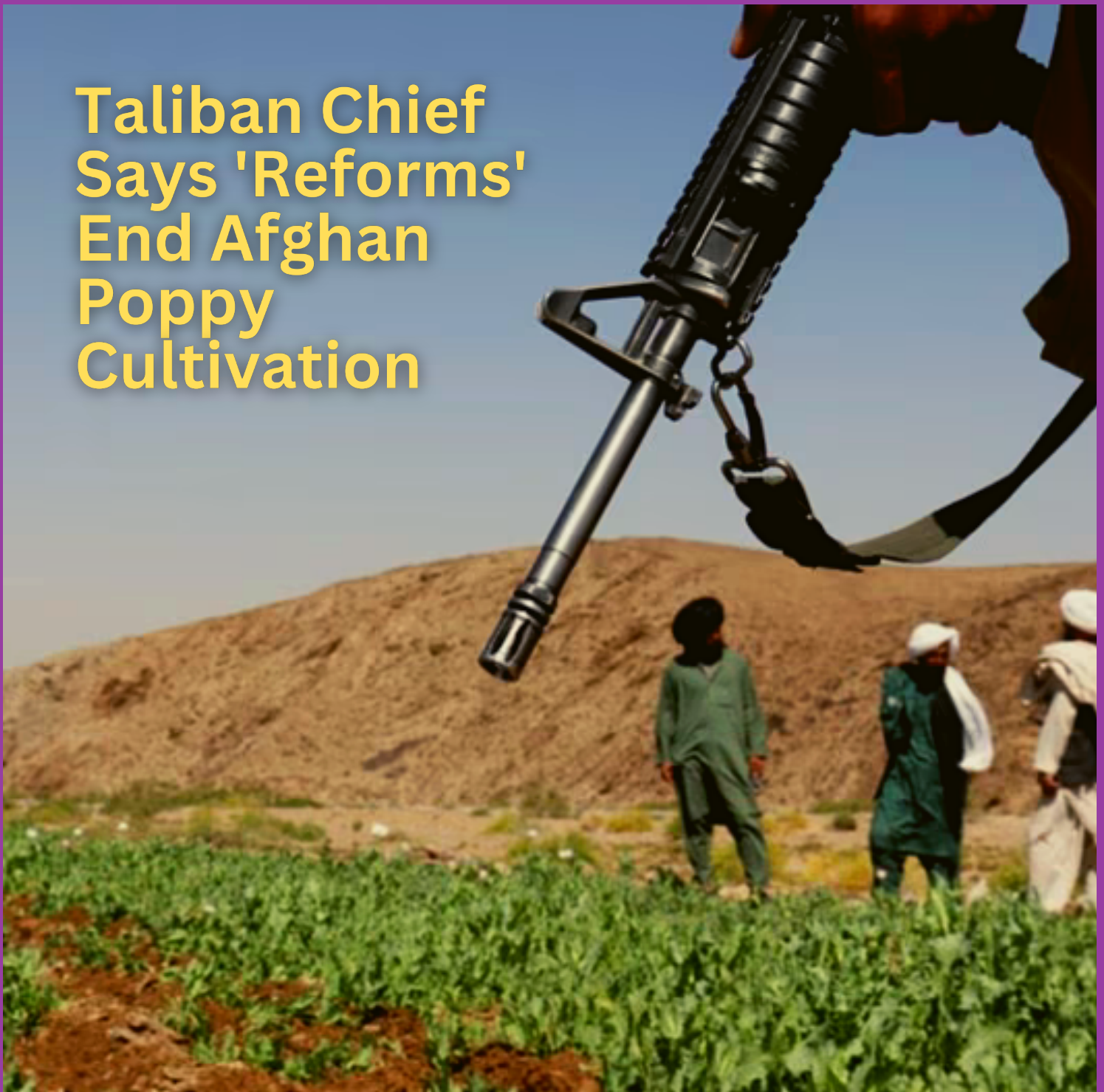
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Taliban Chief Says 'Reforms' End Afghan Poppy Cultivation



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The supreme leader of Afghanistan's Taliban declared Sunday that their campaign against illicit drug production in the country had eradicated the cultivation of opium poppies, which are used to make morphine or heroin. Hibatullah Akhundzada's declaration follows recent media reports and satellite images backed by the United Nations and the United States, concluding that annual poppy cultivation has "significantly" decreased in the world's biggest opium producer.

The reduction is credited to a decree issued by the reclusive Taliban chief in April 2022, which strictly prohibited the cultivation, production, usage, transportation, trade, export, and import of all illicit drugs in Afghanistan. The ban allowed anti-narcotics Taliban units to eradicate poppy farming across the impoverished war-ravaged country, which accounted for 85% of global opium production until last year, according to United Nations estimates.

Comments

Background

Understanding Afghanistan's Drug Trade: Poppy Cultivation

There is no other nation in the world with an active & stable (growing) illicit drug ecosystem deep rooted to support a nation's economy, as that exists in Afghanistan. [1] The United Nations Office of Drugs & Crimes (UNODC) credits Afghanistan as the leading economy, cultivating poppy for roughly 1/3rd of the globe.[2] Cultivation of poppy (the most valuable cash crop) is a labour-intensive process that requires large scale employment of masses at every step (in a complex yet systematic procedure) requiring increased wages after every cycle and elevating the standard of living for warlords and drug traffickers (higher echelons) and those engaging indirectly.[3] The process involves war lords and traffickers lending money to small and medium scale poppy farmers, who then collect the opium paste after certain processes (involving mechanised instruments to human stomping) before transporting the semi-prepared crop to the market.[4]The minimal levels of investment (with high returns) motivate small time farmers to avail credit and easy sale in warlords-controlled markets, minimising their exposure in transporting to new and unknown areas.[5]

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The warlords (also drug traffickers) offered lucrative financial schemes to buy/lease lands, and provided daily wage workers with numerous opportunities during the seasons of harvest.[6] The scheme profited poppy farmers enormously, motivating them to invest in wells (with deep water levels), pumps and other instruments including solar panels.[7] Their profits enabled greater access into secondary markets (directly linked with poppy cultivation) including semi-scale industries focussed on fertilisers, and other agricultural produce involving use of tractors, or transportation (such as in construction businesses), resulting in temporary rest houses (across major highways) and food stations (owned/controlled by warlords). [8]

Today, for a common Afghan folk, access to food and conduct of day today affairs are unthinkable without poppy. [9] Cultivation of poppy is more than just occupation, it is a lifeline that is driving households albeit Afghanistan's economy under the Taliban, drawing a thin line between global isolation and complete capitulation.[10] Before the Taliban took over Kabul, frequent droughts and Covid-19 pandemic had systematically weakened the Afghan economy, affecting both rural and urban households.[11] With minimal need for water, the ability of poppy (as a crop) to withstand adverse climates makes it a lucrative investment with high returns.[12] In the words of Dr Habibullah, cultivating poppy is much harder than cultivating wheat or corn which has two harvesting seasons.[13] Though draughts seriously impact cultivation of other crops, according to him, poppy cultivation has witnessed a rise even after subsequent ban (farman) issued by the Taliban, resulting in a higher quality of heroin exports (in hundreds of thousands in tons), with an opiate economy rising from \$1.9 to \$2.8 billion in 2022. [14] Does the recent declaration by Hibatullah Akhundzada emanate from the serious impact of poppy cultivation on human health, state building and internal security or Taliban's relations with external states? It is too early to tell.

A Novice In Market: Methamphetamines

The entry of Methamphetamines, popular among drug law enforcement as crystal meth or simply meth, is a new entry in Afghanistan's illegal drug trade, creating an international colour to the traditional supply chain, encompassing the routes through Pakistan and reaching overseas markets of Africa, Europe and Middle East through maritime routes.[15]

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Source: *Undark Magazine*

This is credited in part to the presence of surplus Ephedrasinica [16], a shrub found largely in parts of central, eastern and northern regions of Afghanistan, containing the natural ingredients of ephedrine.[17] Ephedrine, a chemical prerequisite, was earlier imported from Iran and Pakistan at ten times its international cost.[18] The shrub, Ephedra sinica is the next best alternative to ephedrine, which is found locally in abundant quantities with syrup extraction being cheap and cost effective.[19]

Today, according to one expert (under the Taliban rule), Meth is in high demand in rural & semi-urban cities – with Afghans increasingly addicted to the cheap drug, especially in rural parts where demand and supply is the highest.[20] There is little doubt that the precursor to the drug is synthetic based (production coping up with increased demand and supply), since its discovery, ephedrine has reduced cultivation cost by half, cultivated and distributed even in the mountainous regions of Afghanistan, where weather conditions are too harsh for poppy or cannabis to grow.[21]

Interestingly, the farman (declaration) issued by the Taliban in 2022 (03 April), including the recent one issued by Hibatullah Akhundzada, does not explicitly mention Meth, but greatly emphasises poppy or heroine and on many accounts to simply drugs.[22] The existing routes of trafficking, functions as an added advantage for meth distribution which (if the farman on poppy or heroin executes) can employ existing supply chains (of poppy or heroin) crossing via Pakistan or Iran.[23] Distribution of syrup extracted from ephedra can easily be cloaked for medicinal properties and transported under the shadows of Pakistan's coast guards (largely with their participation) crossing over border markets on Balochistan's Makran coast, with a destination in Iran.[24] Fulfilling the demands of Iranian markets, the shipment may enter into the market of the Middle East fulfilling greater demands in Turkey, and in Europe.[25] That said, it still remains unclear as to how much of meth production succeeded in reaching ports of Europe, under the Taliban regime—the author spoke to various European security experts, who presented varied data based on hypothesis, inconclusive for the author to comment.

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Connecting The Dots: The Taliban, Hibatullah Akhundzada's Farman & The Drugs Trade

The Taliban's participation in the civil war emanated after the capture of Kabul, making it difficult to analyse its posture on drug trade in the early 1990s.[26] Their interest in the drug trade can be traced to its First Emirate. The Taliban 2.0 is an outcome of a long standing (20 years insurgency) which resulted (with time) in greater partnerships/relations with farmers on the hinterlands, creation of makeshift labs, network of couriers/smugglers and other critical individuals responsible in keeping the supply chain alive, which funded and fueled its insurgency against the West.[27] Taking the note of the recent farman issued by Hibatullah Akhundzada, the author aims to focus on deciphering implications on Taliban 2.0, if the former does enforce a law under the Sharia.

Taliban 2.0

One year before the US withdrawal, the Taliban issued a ban on growing cannabis, after consulting with numerous religious scholars and various factions within the shura (rahbari council), with an intent to invoke reaction.[28] According to one expert, the ban was limited to cannabis growth and did not cover poppy.[29] After taking over Kabul, the interim government of the Taliban released a farman citing actions to limit Afghanistan's drug economy, reflecting key decisions from the same policy implemented by the First Emirate in its 15-month rule.[30] Without a policy, the traders were left to interpret Taliban's uncertainty resulting in large scale stockpile or raw opium, sky rocketing the prices in illicit bazaars. In its initial months, local Afghans witnessed an iron fist approach against drugs which was largely limited to inhumane treatment of addicts and users confined under stricter imprisonment.[31]

It is important to note that, in the southern region of Afghanistan, the opium is planted between October and November and is harvested between April and May.[32] Hence, farmers in the poppy growing regions have to make a decision by early autumn on what to sow, which may bring further clarity on Akhundzada's declaration and its impact, especially if the farmers within the hinterlands obey his farman. That said, the crop cycle in the northern regions of the country runs later than the south.[33] There is no recent estimate that points towards an increase in the poppy production on the borders of Turkmenistan and Tajikistan, but experts argue a rise in the poppy cultivation due to some ethnic Tajiks in alliance with the Taliban.[34]

Considering the larger Uzbek and Tajik populations in the north, Taliban have, before it's takeover, experienced some serious battles which did not result in their favour.[35]

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Source: VOA

It is too early to predict the implications on Akhundzada's farman, but mapping a trajectory from its previous ban experience, the Taliban may initiate a limited ban on poppy cultivation during summers, to monitor response, which will be logical than losing trust/support from hinterlands in its strongholds of Helmand and Kandahar.

Two major factors challenge Taliban's ban on poppy/drug cultivation:

The first is demography, which today stands as over 39 million and growing.[36] In addition to this, the poppy cultivation, according to a United Nations Office of Drugs & Crime (UNDOC) report points to an estimated 233,000 ha in 2022, increasing by 32% than the previous year.[37] This requires the Taliban to enforce a ban on much larger territories, sustaining the livelihood of 39 million, if not directly.

The second point towards Taliban's ability to enforce, without creating instability/cohesion within its ranks. As witnessed by the author first hand, ISAF's bid to counter the insurgency had negative impacts, as Taliban painstakingly made alliances with roughly every faction which would hate to see the US led alliance stay.[38] In years building up to the insurgency, ISAF spent considerable time and resources to break rogue factions within the Taliban leadership.[39] This resulted in rahbari shura to grant more autonomy to affiliate groups/factions, provided that the leadership will not abandon or defy strategic objectives and expectations by the leaders and contribute actively to achieve organizational goals. [40]

It is still unclear as to how Akhundzada's declaration will play out beyond theory or reflect the same sentiment from its factions/affiliate groups involved heavily in poppy cultivation, which also includes newcomers and members of the erstwhile ANDSF.

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Haqqani's continue to view Mullah Baradar's appointment (that of the new deputy prime minister) as a demotion and Siraj's appointment as the interim interior minister, along with other members of the network holding prominent portfolios as a sign of trust by the leadership council.[41] Considering the distribution of portfolio's objectively, the decision also reflects the leadership council favouring battle hardened militant corps rather than political actors. This changes the dynamics on drug trafficking. The Haqqani network, integrated to roughly all Pakistani establishments in the north Waziristan province, is also administering the TTP, also exercising control, in the region.[42] This gives them the opportunity to integrate/navigate drug trade into legitimate state owned (and private entities run) import and export businesses, cloaking their illegitimate business.[43] Creating a dedicated stream would raise suspicions. Hence, giving flexibility to certain foot soldiers (to undertake separate tasks) not only prevents them from joining rival factions such as the Islamic State, but also ensures their growth into smaller factions, by indulging in actions not limited to illegal mining but trafficking drugs.[44]

Taking note of dynamics, it still remains unclear as to how Taliban will enforce a ban on poppy cultivation albeit drug trafficking as a whole without providing alternate incentives to battle hardened troops at the lower echelons, taking note of revenues obtained by poppy cultivation and proceeds used by their families to sustain. Devoid of any poppy-eradication efforts and considering the delapidated state of de-addiction centres, any future ban could result in greater unrest, driving a wedge between factions at the provincial levels.

The Pakistan Route

Taking the note of Afghanistan opiates, the income rests majorly in its manufacture and distribution to international markets than consumed domestically.[45] Afghanistan opiates have greater access to European markets, including the route to the Balkan region, passing from Iran and Turkey, and a longer route that passes from Pakistan to Iran, and onward to Asia, Africa, reaching central and western Europe.[46] Afghanistan's shares the longest border with Pakistan (2,640 kilometres (km)), and is a hub of the country's exports.[47] Pakistan is the principal benefactor of all channels going in and out of Afghanistan. With devaluation of Afghanis and sinking Pakistani currency, US dollars have become a prime currency for hawala providers to traffic through the borders.[48]

After Kabul fell, US dollars have become the leading currency to smuggle for Pakistan-based hawala operators and couriers.[49] This is majorly carried out through the two border areas—Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP)—which are controlled by TTP in principle with proceeds leading to certain Pakistani intelligence and military officials as a courtesy from the Haqqani's, some landing in government bodies, NGOs and ISI-owned civil establishments.[50]

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The porous nature of the border reinforced by difficult terrain poses no such challenge for Taliban fighters to cross the region illegally, carrying large cargo, some reserved for border officials and other power brokers directly benefiting from these transactions.[51]

Onward Journey: The Nature of The Border Provinces

Baluchistan

The most preferred route for trafficking in Afghanistan passes through the region of Balochistan[52] The topography of Balochistan makes it lucrative with numerous entry and exit points (covering land and maritime boundaries) suitable for trafficking goods.[53] Goods exit Afghanistan from Helmand, entering into Balochistan's Chagai district, which are then transported to the fishing towns on the Makran coast, where they get loaded into small boats, destined for the Gulf and East Africa, with a probable final destination being Europe. [54] According to one expert, TTP installed a heroin processing factory with a supply chain connected to the region of Chagai, geographically the largest border city, with accessible crossing points to Kandahar, Helmand & Nimroz.[55] A smaller route going through Iran's Sistan Balochistan province, this inter-section, also known as the Golden Crescent, is one of Asia's main opium-production/distribution hubs.[56]

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) border stretches with Afghanistan through eight districts, with Chitral in the north to South Waziristan in the south.[57] KPK continues to be a haven islamists factions, Pakistani-backed militants, drug and hawala networks.[58] Following the US-led NATO coalition presence in Afghanistan, Tehreek Taliban Pakistan (TTP), exercised control (through influence in KPK shura) along the tribal belt, eliminating much of the rival tribes and retaining control over their leadership, amalgamating them into smaller affiliates. [59] This resulted in TTP taking over smuggling routes, networks, making a focus on drug trade for greater revenue, moving beyond taxation for transport of goods, men and material.[60]

Pakistan's one-handed scorched policy against the islamists factions resulted in immense destruction of arable land and necessary livestock, whereas loosely controlled cross-border movements, along the border fences, permitted movement of illicit trade and other goods. [61] This bolstered TTPs ability to strengthen their offenses: inspired from the Taliban victory at Kabul, the group began exercising explicit control over the KPK (through leadership council), targeting Pakistani military from within and across the border.[62]

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Now a hotbed of smuggling and production, TTP regularised tax collection at key points primarily at Torkham, one of the busiest trading points between the two countries.[63] At Torkham, the group taxes per vehicle 38\$ to 50\$, and as high as 80\$ on cargos containing crystal meth, heroin, arms, destined for Jamrud town.[64] For border towns along Ghulam Khan, Angur Adda & Kharlachi, those who control them gain the access to southern routes along with key choke points, without fearing a competition from the traffickers of the north, extracting rents much higher than the north.[65]

Conclusion

Although too early to assess, determining impact on Hibatullah Akhundzada's farman on a campaign to eradicate poppy and opium production remains speculative. Does Akhundzada's concern reflect an inclination to seek international support? His decision does not reflect any concern to current poppy's market demand and supply or involvement of Taliban fighters, factors which cannot be ruled out. How will his farman result in a poppy cultivation ban, that too as a policy, with poppy literally keeping Afghanistan's economy and thousands of households afloat?

The rahbari shura also hosts members who are actively contributing to opium trade; predominantly of those having families in Kandahar and Helmand, with, rank-and-file of commanders from roughly all provinces, and affiliates who milk profits from the illicit trade; which brings to the context of severe instability (regional and organizational) in the event of such a decision, causing enormous distrust and discontent at all levels.

Even if, hypothetically, rahbari shura put its weight behind Akhundzada, it still remains unclear whether it will impose its farman on provincial leadership. In the light of internal cohesion, which stands intact today, it will prove costly for Taliban to retain loyalty within factions, post-imposition of Akhundzada's farman. If the Taliban does impose such a policy on Akhundzada's farman, it will have far reaching socio-economic repercussions.

Analysed By
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