

ISSUE BRIEF

No. 4290 | OCTOBER 29, 2014

U.S. Counternarcotics Efforts in Afghanistan Fail to Deliver

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The Office of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) has released a scathing report criticizing U.S. counternarcotics efforts in Afghanistan.¹ Referencing an unprecedented spike in opium production in 2013, the report warned that the nearly \$7.6 billion the U.S. government spent on counternarcotics operations in Afghanistan is failing to reduce drug production in the region. The SIGAR report is a wake-up call for the U.S. to reconsider its strategy for fighting the drug scourge in Afghanistan.

Increasing opium production in Afghanistan is startling, but it is not an excuse for the U.S. to give up on its counter-drug initiatives in the country. Rather, it is a reminder that there is no silver bullet or quick solution to Afghanistan's drug trafficking problem.² Addressing the country's counternarcotics challenges will require long-term commitment from the U.S., private-sector willingness to invest in opium alternatives, and political will from the Afghan government to recalibrate its drug policy.

Narcotics Trade Linked to Terrorism

The U.S. troop drawdown from Afghanistan comes amidst the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, al-Qaeda's declaration of a new South

Asia wing, and continued unrest in the Middle East and South Asia. This ripening environment for terrorism is made more problematic by the American public's wariness of committing additional U.S. military resources to counterterrorism operations abroad—much less dedicating time and money to counternarcotics efforts in Afghanistan.

U.S. counternarcotics initiatives should be viewed as part of the broader U.S. counterterrorism strategy. Drug profits in Afghanistan are a source of revenue for the Taliban insurgency and other terrorist groups, and allowing the drug trade to grow unabated will only fuel instability in the region.³

SIGAR's Unsettling Findings

At the heart of the SIGAR report is an acknowledgement that the Afghan drug trade is growing in spite of U.S. efforts. The SIGAR report calls for a reevaluation of current policies and a reallocation of aid resources. Afghanistan is the largest producer of opium in the world. In 2013 alone, Afghanistan produced a record 209,000 hectares of opium poppy.⁴ The SIGAR report notes that profits increased to \$3 billion in 2013, a 50 percent increase from 2012.⁵

The report also found that some U.S.-led initiatives were inadvertently encouraging opium production. SIGAR noted failures in southwest Afghanistan where arable land, cultivated for alternative livelihood assistance programs, was instead used for opium cultivation.

In response to the SIGAR report, the U.S. Embassy in Kabul and the Department of Defense defended their counternarcotics efforts by explaining that they needed the support of the Afghan government, which thus far has been limited. The Embassy criticized the

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/ib4290>

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scope of the report for focusing primarily on the failure of the alternative livelihood assistance program in southwest Afghanistan and Nangarhar, while ignoring other successful programs like the specialized interdiction units and rehabilitation centers for drug addicts.

Alternative Livelihood Assistance, Not Eradication, Is the Solution

Problems in the alternative livelihood assistance programs in Nangarhar and southwestern Afghanistan should be investigated. But, when placed in the broader scope of successful alternative livelihood assistance programs, they are outliers.

Some of the most successful counternarcotics programs in Afghanistan have been private-sector-led or public-private partnerships that fund alternative livelihood programs. For instance, Microfinance Investment Support Facility for Afghanistan (MISFA) has reached more than 82,000 Afghans and invested over \$93 million in alternative livelihood programs.⁶ MISFA's programs provide a means for Afghans to escape poverty without resorting to illicit poppy cultivation. U.S. Agency for International Development's (USAID) alternative livelihood programs have reached an estimated 30 percent of Afghan farming households.⁷

Pursuing eradication before securing alternatives to poppy cultivation has proven disastrous. Historically, eradication without alternatives robbed farmers of their income, led to increased support for the Taliban, and created food shortages in some areas.⁸ Eradication and opium bans without alternatives do not work because drug producers and traffickers have significant stockpiles of poppy that they can sell at increased prices to meet demand. Therefore, eradication benefits the traffickers and not the Afghan people.

Recommendations

Countering the drug problem in Afghanistan should be viewed as a long-term endeavor. Short-term fluctuations in opium production should not result in full-scale revamping of current policy. Drug trafficking in Afghanistan is the result of systemic poverty, ongoing conflict, and rampant corruption.⁹ Each of these problems is significant in and of themselves—they, like drug trafficking, will not be resolved overnight.

Counternarcotics funding over the past two years has already been on a sharp decline—reflective of a broader exit strategy from Afghanistan.¹⁰ But the U.S. must safeguard the progress it has made to date, including work accomplished by the specialized counternarcotics units, ongoing progress

1. Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, Office of Special Projects, "Poppy Cultivation in Afghanistan: After a Decade of Reconstruction and Over \$7 Billion in Counternarcotics Efforts, Poppy Cultivation Levels Are at An All-Time High," October 2014, <http://www.sigar.mil/pdf/Special%20Projects/SIGAR-15-10-SP.pdf> (accessed October 27, 2014).
2. William Byrd, "Afghanistan and the International Drug Control Regime: Can the 'Tail' Wag the 'Dog?'" United States Institute of Peace *PeaceBrief* No. 143, April 16, 2013, <http://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/PB%20143-Afghanistan%20and%20the%20International%20Drug%20Control%20Regime.pdf> (accessed October 27, 2014).
3. Lisa Curtis, "U.S. Counternarcotics Policy: Essential to Fighting Terrorism in Afghanistan," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 2845, September 30, 2013, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2013/09/us-counternarcotics-policy-essential-to-fighting-terrorism-in-afghanistan> (accessed October 27, 2014).
4. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, "Afghanistan Opium Survey 2013," November 2013, http://www.unodc.org/documents/crop-monitoring/Afghanistan/Afghan_report_Summary_Findings_2013.pdf (accessed October 27, 2014).
5. Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, "Poppy Cultivation in Afghanistan."
6. Microfinance Investment Support Facility for Afghanistan, "Outreach Data of MISFA Partners," MISFA, April 2013, http://www.misfa.org.af/site_files/13711061501.pdf (accessed October 28, 2013).
7. United States Agency for International Development, "USAID Engagement in Afghanistan—2014 and Beyond," February 10, 2014, <http://www.usaid.gov/news-information/fact-sheets/usaid-engagement-afghanistan-2014-and-beyond> (accessed October 27, 2014).
8. Curtis, "U.S. Counternarcotics Policy: Essential to Fighting Terrorism in Afghanistan."
9. Christopher D. Kolenda, "Dismantling the World's Top Kleptocracy Is a Key Challenge for Afghanistan," *Foreign Policy*, October 20, 2014, http://southasia.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2014/10/20/dismantling_the_world_s_top_kleptocracy_is_a_key_challenge_for_afghanistan (accessed October 27, 2014).
10. U.S. Department of State, "Congressional Budget Justification: Foreign Operations: Appendix 3: Regional Perspectives, Fiscal Year 2015," 2014, <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/224070.pdf> (accessed October 27, 2014).

toward supplying long-term alternative livelihoods, and rehabilitation support for former drug addicts.

With this in mind, the U.S. should prioritize the following initiatives:

- **Continue funding promising counternarcotics programs** and recognize that these efforts are part of the broader counterterrorism strategy in the region. Individual counternarcotics efforts should be evaluated on their own merits to determine what is working and what is not. Better oversight should be instituted where needed, as in the case of southwest Afghanistan. USAID is currently reviewing their projects.
- **Avoid drastic measures** that could threaten overall stability in the country. Opium bans, massive eradication campaigns, and aerial spraying have historically worsened or created other more threatening problems in Afghanistan.¹¹ Such strategies have propped up the Taliban, created health and crop crises, and increased poverty and dependence on poppy cultivation.
- **Mobilize the private sector** to invest in alternative livelihood programs and provide opportunities for Afghans to escape poverty without participating in illegal poppy cultivation. These programs should be crafted as long-term, sustainable, and lucrative alternatives to opium poppy growth.
- **Improve oversight and evaluation** on all U.S.-led counternarcotics activities, with a special eye toward alternative livelihood assistance programs. These projects must be evaluated on an annual basis to ensure they are not fueling the drug trade, but rather providing alternatives to it.

- **Equip Afghan forces to handle counternarcotics operations** by providing training in intelligence sharing, data collection, and effective law enforcement tactics for handling the vast drug trafficking network in Afghanistan.

- **Eliminate funding for counterproductive programs**, like the Good Performers Initiative, which rewards Afghan governors for eradicating poppy. Policies that rely on eradication have failed in Afghanistan and run contrary to the U.S. government's stated agenda to support alternative livelihood assistance before eradicating poppy.

Conclusion

Most of the solutions to drug trafficking in Afghanistan require long-term commitment. SIGAR's call to reexamine current policy is a timely one, especially as troop levels drop to 10,000 by the end of this year and the U.S. prepares Afghans for a significant transition.

Countering the narcotics industry is an important aspect of fighting terrorism in Afghanistan. Abruptly cutting off U.S. counternarcotics assistance would play into broader Afghan fears about being abandoned by the international community. The drug trade contributes to an environment conducive to criminal and terrorist activity. Allowing it to go unchecked would undermine Afghan stability and the economic and political progress that has been made over the past decade.

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11. Curtis, "U.S. Counternarcotics Policy: Essential to Fighting Terrorism in Afghanistan."