

Whistling in the Wind: The Inevitable Return of Poppy Cultivation to Afghanistan

By David Mansfield

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Abstract

This chapter examines the Taliban's efforts against drug production and trade in Afghanistan following the Taliban's new drug edict in October 2023. Utilizing data from satellite imagery analysis, the authors' extensive field work in Afghanistan, and reports by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, the chapter explores the political and economic impacts of the Taliban's drug ban, as well as its implementation. The main argument presented is that while the ban may lead to significant political and economic ramifications, including undermining the livelihoods of millions involved in poppy cultivation, it could also provoke rural unrest and weaken Taliban rule. The chapter concludes that international engagement needs a more realistic approach to counternarcotics, that recognizes (i) the uneven nature of the Taliban's current efforts with a focus on banning poppy cultivation, not prohibiting the trade in opium and its derivatives, and (ii) that transitioning away from illicit drug production requires a growing economy and the creation of large numbers of jobs to support the land-poor - not simply a focus on alternative crops targeted at the landed. As such, any future counternarcotics efforts should not be pursued as "stand alone" interventions as was the case in the past, but integrated across the entire development effort in Afghanistan.

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Introduction

There was considerable scepticism when the Taliban's leader Mullah Haibatullah Akhundzada first announced a drug ban on 3 April, 2022. Barely seven months after the Taliban took power, drug prohibition was not an obvious priority for the newly-established government in Kabul, given how the Republic's efforts to ban poppy had been used to mobilize rural support during the insurgency and the growing humanitarian crisis following the collapse of the Afghan Republic in August 2021; this collapse led to a curtailment of international development funding and the seizure of the Afghan Central Bank's foreign exchange assets – two things critical to the functioning of the Afghan economy (editor's note: see also Rigsby's and Byrd's chapters in this anthology).

However, in September 2023, some 18 months after the drug ban was announced, imagery analysis from the specialist geographic information services company Alcis revealed that opium poppy cultivation had fallen from 211,083 hectares in 2022 to 22,642 hectares in 2023, an 86% reduction (Mansfield, 2023d). A week later, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) reported an even more pronounced 95% fall in cultivation between 2022 and 2023, estimating cultivation had fallen to as little as 11,000 hectares compared to 233,000 a year earlier. While there were some questions over the efficacy of UNODC methods and ultimately the accuracy of the results, there was little doubt that the Taliban had delivered an effective ban on poppy cultivation; by December 2023, there were growing signs that an unprecedented second consecutive year of a poppy ban would be imposed (UNODC, 2023; Byrd, 2023). Recent projections, with 21 of 34 provinces complete, shows 7,306 hectares of poppy for 2024 (the remaining 13 provinces accounted for only 52 hectares in 2023).

Moreover, there was also evidence that, alongside these efforts to curtail the poppy crop, the Taliban had been engaged in an even more robust effort against the methamphetamine industry. In fact, ephedra, the plant used in the production of methamphetamine and ephedrine production, was the target of the Taliban's initial drug control efforts in December 2021, several months prior to their leader Mullah Haibatullah's call for a nationwide drugs ban (Mansfield, 2023b). By November 2023, analysis showed more than 700 ephedrine labs had been closed, the price of ephedra had risen almost five-fold, the cost of trade and production of ephedrine and methamphetamine had more than doubled over 2020 levels, and batch volumes had reduced – all dramatically reducing the incomes of those involved in its production and trade (Mansfield, 2023e).

Despite these obvious achievements, the drugs trade continues within Afghanistan and on its borders. As of January 2024, poppy farmers remained free to sell their crop in local bazaars – although discretely – and while the Taliban’s announcement of a new drugs law in October 2023 had, in principle, led to further restrictions on the cross-border drugs trade, seizures by Afghanistan’s neighbours continued largely unabated. Moreover, while the methamphetamine industry in Afghanistan had been significantly disrupted by the Taliban’s efforts, it remained operational and the authorities in both Iran and Pakistan continued to make significant seizures.

The persistence of production and trade was in part a result of just how pervasive drugs have become in Afghanistan over the last few decades and the difficulties of tackling any illegal economy in the midst of a protracted conflict. This is particularly the case in a country where the state has historically had such limited reach into its hinterlands, and where drug production and drug control are often instrumentalized by both governments and insurgent groups and become central to the conflict. However, it was also a function of the nature of Taliban rule and the politics of Afghanistan. For all the statements about the overwhelming coercive power of the Taliban regime and the centralization of decision making in the hands of Mullah Haibatullah – as well as the how many interpret the dramatic reductions in aggregate levels of poppy cultivation – the central authorities power over the rural population continues to be negotiated in many parts of Afghanistan, especially in remote rural areas where drug crops are concentrated. As this article will show, the Taliban’s approach to counter-narcotics reflects this political reality, where concessions are often offered to more powerful groups, such as the landed in the Taliban’s heartlands of the south and southwest, who have clearly gained considerable economic advantage from a drugs ban that has dramatically inflated the value of the inventory they have accumulated over many years of production.

Ultimately, a comprehensive and enduring ban on poppy alone would impact an estimated 10 million people across Afghanistan, a country with a population of only 40 million (Mansfield, 2023d). Tackling what continues to be a persistent drugs trade would widen the impact even further, undermining the livelihoods of a much wider range of both actors and sectors supporting the drugs economy; indeed, it would have a multiplier effect across the legal economy, deflating incomes and driving down demand for goods and services in rural areas. In the current strained eco-

conomic climate this kind of ban would likely lead to increasing rates of outmigration and possibly growing dissent in the countryside. In the last two decades, imposing this kind of collective shock on rural communities in Afghanistan has proven politically destabilising. Therefore, it is only sensible to question whether the Taliban will continue its efforts, despite the religious credentials afforded to the ban and what can be achieved from international engagement on counter-narcotics in the current environment – an area explored in the conclusion of this article.

This chapter examines how this most recent Taliban drugs ban has been imposed, and what both the methods deployed and the uneven nature of enforcement tell us about Taliban rule and the feasibility of sustaining the ban alike. Rather than simply assessing whether the ban has been effective in reducing levels of drugs production in Afghanistan, it explores the way that efforts to restrict drugs production have been imposed, which areas and populations have been targeted, the groups that have been either advantaged or disadvantaged by these efforts, and subsequently how the ban could impact Taliban rule. Building on this reading of the effects of the current ban on political economy, the chapter offers both a prognosis of its trajectory and proposed international efforts to support its continuation, including support for so called “alternative development” – rural development projects aimed at reducing poppy cultivation which are often targeted at landed farmers in areas where drug crops are most concentrated. It is important to note that whilst this chapter builds on a rich body of historical work on drugs production in Afghanistan, it focuses specifically on the period since the Taliban takeover in August 2021. Given the paucity of primary research on drugs production during this period, the chapter draws largely on the recent work of the author and his research partners at Alcis, both of whom have worked in Afghanistan for almost three decades.

The chapter is divided into three further sections. The next section examines the iterative way in which the drugs ban has been imposed, and documents what can be seen as a cautious approach to enforcement, in stark contrast to expectations that prohibition would be either immediate and robust (in line with a narrative of the Taliban’s draconian rule) or not imposed at all, on the basis that Haibatullah’s announcement was merely a case of politicking on the international stage, possibly in pursuit of diplomatic recognition. The third section looks at means and effects of the ban’s imposition, focusing on the provinces of Helmand in the south-west, Nangarhar in the east, and Badakhshan in the north-east. It shows the di-

vergence in the level of compliance (with Badakhshan a notable anomaly) and the impact on the rural population, and what this means for consent.

The fourth, concluding, section points to the inevitable return of widespread poppy cultivation to Afghanistan – inevitable, in part, because the level of assistance required to fill the economic gap that the drugs ban has inflicted on rural communities would take more than a decade of significant funding for the major reconstruction effort required; and given the current political impasse between the Taliban authorities and the international community, in particular Western donors, this reconstruction appears to be out of the question. The return of widespread poppy cultivation can further be considered inevitable because of the uneven way the ban has been imposed, both between and across provinces. In particular, the Taliban will look to rescind the ban once its primary rural constituency – the landed and influential farmers of the south and south-west – are no longer advantaged by it and their inventories have run low. At this point, maintaining the ban will impose a significant political cost on the leadership and any benefits gained on the international stage will soon be outweighed.

The Taliban Drug Ban: Draconian Statement; Iterative Process

It was not until 14 months after Haibatullah's initial announcement of the drugs ban, with Alcis's release of poppy figures for Helmand province, that the international community recognized a drug ban to actually be in place (Alcis, 2023). Until then, then the ban had been met with considerable cynicism. With restrictions on both the freedom of the press and on the movement of United Nations staff within Afghanistan following the Taliban takeover, donors had been denied the opportunity of reporting from remote rural parts of Afghanistan where drug crops like opium poppy, cannabis and ephedra are found. Like many governments, including the Afghan Republic, the Taliban also proved rather reluctant to support journalists and others in their efforts to examine the drugs issue more closely, conscious that a failure to deliver on the ban would reflect poorly on their rule and the religious credentials of Haibatullah as the Amir al-Mu'minin (leader of the faithful).

In 2022 and for the early months of 2023, media accounts of the Taliban ban only served to muddy the waters, reporting on performance measures for counter-narcotics efforts that were often out of date or inap-

propriate for the changing circumstances and Taliban rule. For instance, it was not unusual for journalists and commentators as late as April 2023 to cite UNODC reports of rising poppy cultivation between 2021 and 2022 as evidence of the failure of the Taliban drugs ban, failing to recognize that the 2022 crop was planted in the fall of 2021, five months prior to Haibatullah's ban, and that as early as January 2023 there was already a growing body of evidence indicating there would be a dramatic fall in the level of poppy cultivation in 2023. At the time, media criticisms of the Taliban's failure to deliver widespread eradication – the physical destruction of the crop, another counter-narcotics measure often used during the Republic – also seemed misplaced given such low levels of planting.

What was often missed in these critiques was the iterative process by which the ban was imposed: a reflection of the political realities of Afghanistan, where those in power – even the Taliban – are often required to negotiate with communities to gain access to rural areas where the Afghan state has limited or no presence and where livelihood options are limited. A less cautious approach risks dissent that may soon spread and undermine the government's authority with other important constituencies in the countryside.

While the prohibition announced by Haibatullah was framed as absolute and immediate, it was in fact often implemented iteratively at the provincial and district level: launched through a series of intermediate acts that served both as warnings to those involved in the production and trade of drugs of the potential for more severe sanctions to come, whilst simultaneously giving the Taliban leadership the ability to gauge reactions amongst its constituents, both the local population, and its own rank and file, thereby better managing the risk of widespread dissent.

While many in the international community might have expected a more draconian stance to drugs prohibition from the Taliban following Haibatullah's pronouncement and an immediate outright ban, viewing anything else with cynicism, what materialized was a more gradualist approach shaped by the political realities of rural Afghanistan. In fact, the Taliban's efforts to ban poppy began with just such an example when they targeted the minor spring-planted poppy crop in Helmand and Kandahar in the spring of 2022, only a few weeks after Haibatullah first announced the drugs ban. This campaign prompted ridicule as it left the major crop planted in the fall of 2021 (before the ban was announced) intact, and led many to question the integrity of the Taliban's counter-narcotics efforts.

Videos even showed tractors destroying the much smaller spring planted crop while leaving larger more mature plants fields untouched in neighbouring fields.

However, recognising that destroying the standing fall planted crop only a week or two before harvest would have proven deeply unpopular with Taliban commanders and would have provoked rural unrest, the Deputy Ministry of Interior, issued a two-month grace period for any crop grown prior to the ban – contradicting Haibatullah’s call for an immediate and comprehensive prohibition. This iterative strategy proved critical to the success of the ban on the subsequent 2023 crop, as it allowed farmers to harvest what they had already planted in the fall of 2021 and retain as much as possible – even selling off other assets such as cars and motorbikes – to minimize crop sales (Mansfield, 2023c). With the price of opium increasing by more than 300% between the announcement of the ban and the planting season in late 2022, and by 900% at the time of the planting of the 2024 crop, it has provided more landed farmers in the south and south west where inventory is more widespread, with assets to not only better manage the impact of the poppy ban but, in some cases, to prosper from it (see Figure 1).

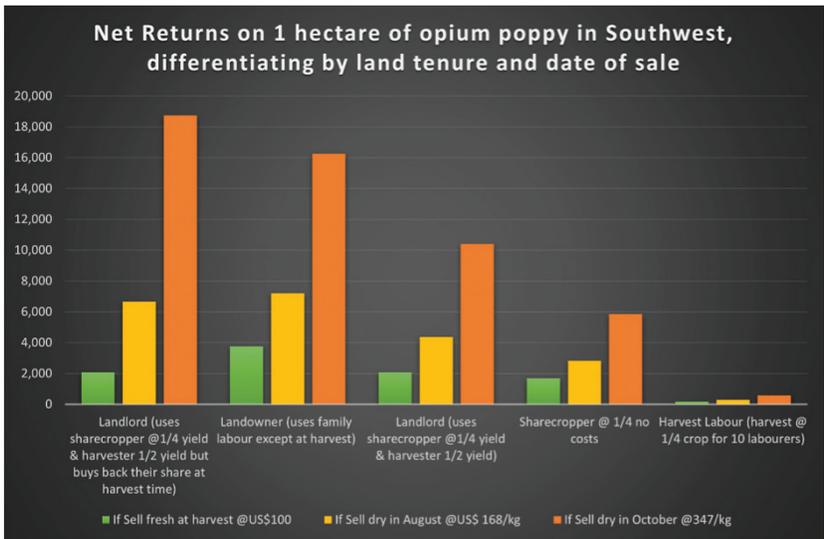


Figure 1. Net returns earned on one hectare of opium poppy and how they vary by land tenure and time of sale. Landowners employing both sharecroppers and harvesters to tend their crop can earn significantly more from their poppy crop than the land-poor, particularly if they sold their opium some months after harvest, when prices had increased more than threefold.

A similar iterative process of enforcement can be seen with the Taliban’s efforts to ban the methamphetamine industry in the south-western provinces of Farah, where the trade in ephedra, as well as the production of ephedrine and methamphetamine, was concentrated during the former Republic. In December 2021, the Taliban gave traders in the village of Abdul Wadood – the largest entrepôt for ephedra in Afghanistan – one month to sell off the large volumes of ephedra they stored in the bazaar. Once this was achieved, the district governor of Bakwa targeted the ephedrine labs that dominated the district, issuing multiple warnings to owners and chemists, known locally as “cooks”, before eventually raiding and closing Abdul Wadood bazaar on 17 September 2022 – an act serving as a signal for any remaining ephedrine labs to cease operation. While many lab-owners and cooks established labs nearer to the source of the wild ephedra crop in the central highlands, imagery shows there continues to be very little ephedrine production in Bakwa (see Figure 2).

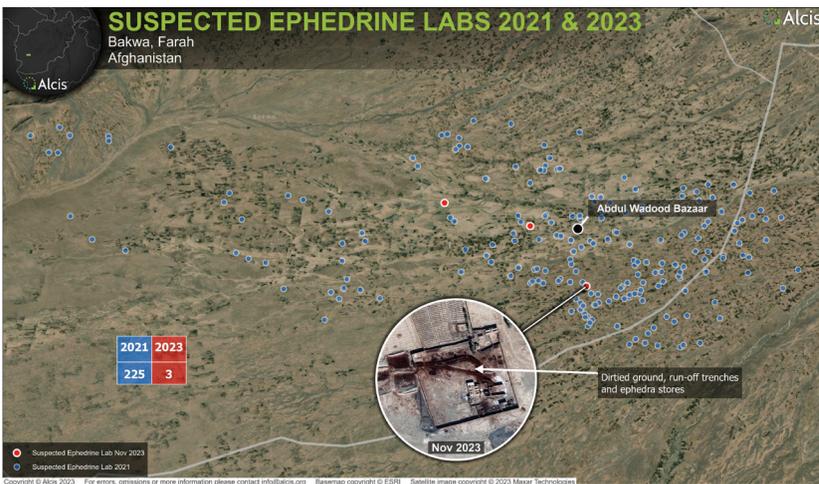


Figure 2. Image analysis showing the dramatic reduction in the number of ephedrine labs in the district of Bakwa in Farah following the Taliban clampdown in September 2021.

There were also considerable negotiations over the enforcement of the poppy ban on the 2023 crop in many more remote parts of the country, a further reflection of the limits of Taliban rule. Some populations, most notably Badakhshan, but also in key southern districts of Nangarhar, as well as Shah Wali Kot, Khakrez, and Nesh in Kandahar, simply ignored Haibatullah’s edict, including the local commanders responsible for its im-

plementation (see Figure 3). In areas like Achin in southern Nangarhar and Jurm in Badakhshan, while the local authorities made some effort to destroy the crop, they withdrew when communities resisted. These were all areas where the local population were unwilling to comply – but perhaps more importantly, local Taliban commanders, fearful of a backlash, were reluctant to press rural communities and eradicate their crops.

In the latter half of 2023, we have seen the same judicious approach to the cross-border drugs trade in both Kang on the Afghan-Iran border, and in Durbaba on the Afghan-Pakistan border with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Since July 2023, cross-border smugglers and traders have faced growing pressure from the Taliban authorities to abandon their trade. In Kang, cross-border smugglers were informed that the catapults that they had been using for almost five years to propel drugs across the Iranian border – and that had proliferated following Haibatullah’s ban – were banned. Those subsequently caught breaking this rule, along with those carrying drugs across the border by bag in the region of Durbaba, Nangarhar Province, were then arrested and held for a day before being released along with their contraband. A week or more later, those apprehended on the border with drugs were arrested and held for three days, only to be released without their loads, resulting in financial loss and a warning to those in the wider community that the cross-border drugs trade was now a riskier venture.

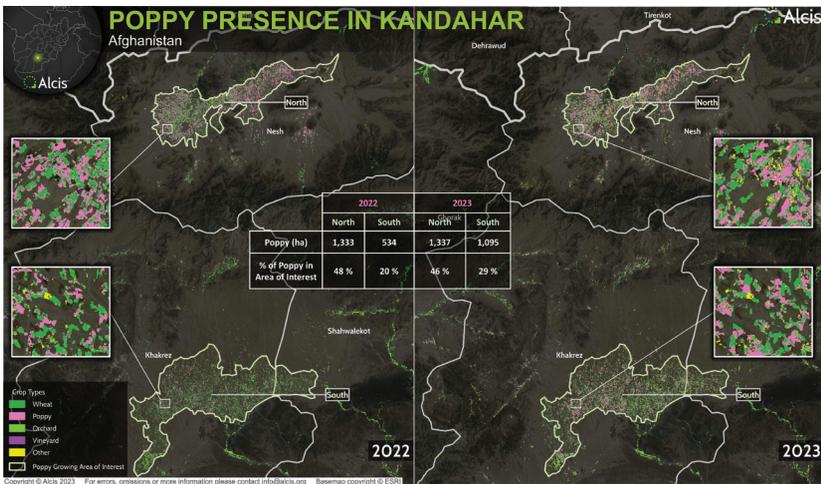


Figure 3. Image analysis showing persistent poppy cultivation in Kandahar in the districts of Khakrez, Nesh, and Shah Wali Kot, despite the imposition of the Taliban ban, in 2023

In the process of imposing the drugs ban there are countless other examples of the Taliban authorities adopting this more cautious approach where those involved in the production and trade are issued multiple warnings before serious action is taken. This has allowed some groups to negotiate and adapt, even to adopt strategies where the value of assets can be increased to compensate for future loss of income – the storing of opium to sell later when prices have risen, for example. However, this slow ramping up of the pressure on drugs production and trade has also brought restrictions and uncertainty, creating an environment in which many of those cultivating, producing and smuggling drugs are exposed to increased risk and costs. As the drugs ban enters its second year, and its impact potentially deepens and widens to cover a larger population, it risks destabilising the political situation, as the next section will discuss.

The Political Risks of a Continued Ban

At the time of writing (June 2024), Afghanistan had entered uncharted waters with the Taliban acting to impose an unprecedented second consecutive year of a nationwide poppy ban. While some might celebrate this as an achievement for counter-narcotics, when the Taliban were last in power their efforts to curtail poppy in 2000/01 led to rural unrest after only a single season (Mansfield, 2016, pp. 121–138).

While it could be argued that there is much greater potential for a more enduring ban this time round, given that when the Taliban seized Kabul in August 2021 they inherited a very different country with established government institutions and a much larger economy. However, there is also an economic reality that undermines any ban on opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan, and we should be careful not to exaggerate the ability of Taliban rule to overcome it. As the scholar and author Tom Barfield notes:

Those Afghan leaders who would best succeed during the [20th century] employed a “Wizard of Oz” strategy. They declared their governments all-powerful but rarely risked testing their claim by implementing controversial policies. The leaders most prone to failure and state collapse were those who assumed that they possessed the power to do as they pleased, and then provoked opposition that their regimes proved incapable of suppressing. (Barfield, 2010, p. 164)

There is already considerable evidence that the current ban has not been uniformly accepted by the rural population or by those within the Taliban's own ranks responsible for implementing it (Mansfield, 2023c). This uneven enforcement exposes some of the fault lines in Taliban rule, particularly in the more mountainous and Tajik dominated area of Badakhshan where cultivation increased between 2022 and 2023 and local commanders resisted calls from Kabul and Kandahar to impose the ban.

History also shows that it is not simply a matter of the coercive power of the state; rural communities have agency and influence over the politics of Afghanistan far beyond their immediate areas. When the economic impact of a ban on poppy cultivation is felt collectively across a large number of households, local resistance can quickly escalate, prompting those in the districts responsible for enforcement to retreat, unwilling to impose further losses on their own families, neighbours, and communities, and to risk exposing the limits of their power. Experience has shown that in Afghanistan resistance to a continued ban at the district and provincial level can take time to mobilize and will differ between areas as a function of socio-economic conditions, political and environmental conditions. However, once the economic effects are severe and felt collectively across a wider area, dissent, unrest, and even violent resistance, has proven inevitable, as highlighted by the unravelling of both the poppy ban and the political situation in Nangarhar between 2010 and 2013 (Mansfield, 2016, pp. 169–208).

Helmand: The More Resilient South, but Only while Stocks Last...

Currently, those with inventory from cultivating opium over the past decade continue to prosper from the ban and are largely immunized from its economic effects. This is particularly true in the south and south-west where a larger proportion of the rural population have the advantage of larger farm sizes. These are also what might be considered the Taliban's "heartlands" where many of the Taliban's leadership are from, and where the movement drew both support and fighters during the insurgency.

Even here, however, there is both a political and economic reality that the leadership and its commanders must contend with. Ultimately, the opium stored by farmers in these more advantaged areas will eventually run out, and although the better-off are currently less concerned about their own immediate economic situation, a second consecutive year of a ban will result in growing disquiet and concern that continued prohibi-

tion will impact on more marginal members of their communities: the sharecroppers, tenants and small landowners. This will result in further impoverishment and, in turn, the risk of increased crime and instability. While opium prices have risen and inventories increase in value, even the wealthy consider the larger impact of the ban and how it harms the wider community whose interests they are often called on to represent, and who have a history of turning against the rural elite.

With a ban now in place for a second year, and the Taliban pursuing efforts to destroy any residual planting that they find, there is a growing threat of increased outmigration from the southern region, even in provinces like Helmand where irregular migration has typically been at a minimum, largely due to high levels of poppy cultivation. Historical evidence shows that in the absence of economic alternatives, and with societal discordance, farmers will feel increasingly aggrieved by a government seen as imposing restrictions on livelihoods while offering little in return. It is a phenomenon that the Taliban took full advantage of as insurgents in the wake of the Republic's efforts to eliminate opium poppy over the last two decades. While improved physical security has often been a brand that the Taliban has traded on, it can quickly sound hollow when a growing number of community and family members are compelled to commit crimes or migrate to meet their basic needs.

Nangarhar: A Growing Crisis

We can see a contrast between the relatively better-off farmers in the south and south-west and those in the east where landholdings are much smaller, population densities higher, and there are few signs of the opium stores. In fact, after only one year of being forced to abandon poppy in the eastern province of Nangarhar, there was growing evidence of households pursuing coping strategies that are indicative of heightened levels of economic distress. This includes the sale of long-term productive assets, including farm equipment, jewellery, and land to meet basic expenses, and the sending of male family members abroad. A second consecutive year of a ban will hit these communities particularly hard; over time there are fewer assets to sell.

Despite the economic impact of the ban, the Taliban seems determined to curtail opium production across the province of Nangarhar in 2024, even in the more remote mountainous areas bordering Pakistan

where cultivation persisted in 2023. In late December 2023, the local authorities pressed into the upper reaches of some of the most hard-to-reach valleys, arresting farmers and destroying their crop, in part to serve as an example to those in lower areas not to plant.

While the current campaign may serve to further reduce poppy cultivation in Nangarhar, and to remove the persisting cultivation in the higher valleys of Achin that proved so embarrassing to the district authorities in 2023, it will inevitably fuel rural resentment. In the absence of viable economic alternatives (e.g., jobs, export markets for crops), it will also leave farmers with the same options as they faced during the Republic: either to leave the area or to resist those imposing the economic hardship, drawing on external support where they could. While some might think this resistance can be contained in these more remote upper areas in the southern districts of Nangarhar, where poppy is at its most concentrated, evidence shows that once it takes hold it can quickly spread to the lower areas of the province straddling the Kabul River (Mansfield, 2014).

Badakhshan: A Thorn in the Emirate's Side

The situation in Badakhshan may offer the best example of just how difficult it is for the Taliban to maintain the ban without experiencing significant economic and political fallout. In 2023, the provincial authorities, most of them hailing from within the province, were unwilling to enforce a ban on the area or even to press for reductions, resulting in the increased levels of cultivation we have seen in the province in 2023 (see Figure 4). This will not have gone unnoticed in other parts of the country, particularly in the south and the east where the ban was largely complied with.

Early indications were that the same happened again with widespread planting in the fall of 2023, which brought criticism in January 2024 from the Chief of Army Staff, Fasihuddin Fitrat, and the most senior Badakshi commander in the Taliban government, and the threat of eradication (Tolo News, 2024). If communities and the elites in the east and the south are not to use a second year of continued cultivation in Badakhshan as leverage and an excuse to return to poppy in 2025, the Taliban leadership knew it needed to adopt a more aggressive position in the first few months of 2024 before a further spring crop of poppy was planted and the likelihood of resistance grew. In fact, the new Governor of Badakhshan, a Kandahari from Maiwand District, may have been appointed in June 2023 for

just such a task. However, as of January 2024 he had done little to either deter planting or engage in an early eradication campaign against the fall planted crop; he had, rather, spent some time replacing senior posts in the provincial administrations previously held by Tajik's with Pashtuns from other provinces (Hasht e Sabh, 2024)

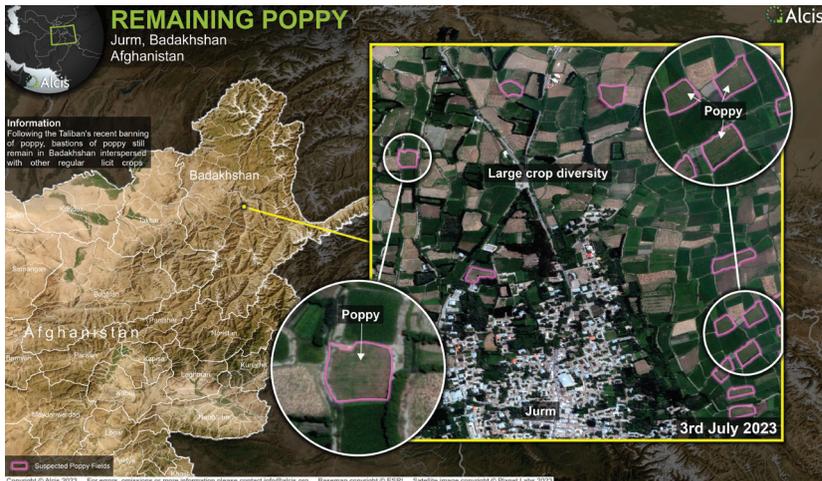


Figure 4: Image analysis showing poppy cultivation in the district of Jurm, Badakhshan Province, in July 2023 despite the imposition of the Taliban ban and an eradication campaign.

It was not until April 2024 that an eradication campaign began in earnest, any only a few weeks later violent unrest ensued as farmers in the districts of Argo and Darayem pushed back against both crop destruction and the influx of Pashtuns from Baghlan and Kunduz who were given the task (Mansfield 2024b). The subsequent standoff between local communities and the provincial authorities in Badakhshan led to a senior delegation being sent from Kabul to quell the growing unrest. While much was made of it both locally and in the media that there was no room for compromises and that all the poppy crop would be destroyed, the resultant campaign resulted in major concessions to farming communities across Badakhshan. As of 1 June 2024, high-resolution imagery over the central parts of Faizabad and Argo showed a patchwork quilt consisting of some poppy fields that had been destroyed, others where only some of the crop was damaged, and many more where the poppy remained completely unscathed (Mansfield 2024b). There was clear evidence that substantial amounts of poppy remained in central Argo in areas where the authorities

claim that all the poppy crops had been destroyed, and large numbers of fields that were left untouched in the villages around the provincial centre of Faizabad (see Figure 5).



Figure 5. Images from 1 June 2024 showing low levels of eradication (less than 3%) around the district centre of Argo where crop destruction by the Taliban had been centred

Whichever way you look at it, a drive to press for dramatic reductions in poppy cultivation in Badakhshan in 2024 was likely to be destabilising. The economic impact of an outright ban would be severe enough to result in an increase in outmigration to Iran, Turkey and potentially Europe, adding to those leaving from other land-poor provinces where the ban has already been effectively enforced. Unseating local Taliban commanders in positions of power in Badakhshan who had failed to act against the crop, or undermining their authority with an influx of outsiders, particularly Pashtuns, was always going to provoke unrest in a province where the local Taliban are riven and there have already been several high-profile attacks on the leadership (Al Jazeera, 2023).

Ultimately, the poppy ban is proving divisive and has the potential to increase political and economic disparities as it continues. The dramatic increase in opium prices we have seen in Afghanistan over the latter half of 2023, with prices rising to more than 1,000 U.S. dollars per kilogram, an unprecedented high, only complicates matters further. Pushing a ban into a second year without tackling the trade further increases the divisions in the country, inflating the value of the assets of traders and the landed

with their inventories, while denying future income to the small landholders who are heavily dependent on poppy for their livelihoods (Mansfield, 2024a). The fact that the losses and benefits of this policy will be unevenly distributed and have a geographic, tribal, and potentially ethnic dimension, increases the potential for unrest in the rural areas most affected, and could exacerbate tensions within the Taliban. Given all of this, it seems inevitable that while widespread poppy cultivation will not return in 2024, it is only a matter of time before it does.

The Futility of Engagement in the Current Environment

While persistent cultivation in other provinces matters, it is how the ban unfolds in Badakhshan that will be pivotal, not just for levels of cultivation in the country but for Afghanistan's wider politics. On one side, the high levels of cultivation in Badakhshan present a challenge for the Taliban leadership, particularly now that the ban is in its second year, and the negative economic effects are felt by growing numbers of people across Afghanistan. There will be farmers in many other provinces particularly hard-pressed come the spring of 2024, following another winter season primarily cultivating wheat: a food crop that most Afghan farmers cannot produce enough of to meet their family's needs, even when monocropping it, due to their small landholdings. It is likely that a growing number of communities will begin to look to local leaders, and their relatives in the Taliban, to press for the ban to be rescinded in the years ahead, possibly using continued and increasing poppy cultivation in Badakhshan as a reason. This could present a problem for the leadership given the religious nature of the decree and how closely it is associated with Haibatullah.

Yet to maintain the ban would require a more aggressive effort in Badakhshan: the kind of campaign that began in Nangarhar in late 2022 with an effort to deter planting, followed by more widespread eradication in the spring, and culminating in early arrests in some of the most remote (and hostile) parts of the province in the final months of 2023. With high levels of planting in Badakhshan in the fall of 2023, however, and further cultivation in the spring of 2024, it was already too late to deter cultivation, and the potential for a violent reaction to eradication of the standing crop became more likely. While the new Kandahari Governor of Badakhshan may have brought new energy to the job and stronger links to Haibatullah, he needed to garner the support of the local Taliban commanders, whose

reluctance to enforce the ban in 2023 played such a deciding factor in farmers' decisions to plant last fall. Instead he looked to remove them. The result has been a significant climbdown by the Taliban authorities where they have looked to project the appearance of power claiming widespread destruction, but where they have had to capitulate to local interests and allow poppy cultivation to continue (Mansfield, 2024b). If this becomes more widely known, it could lead to farmers in other provinces trying the same and attempt to return to widespread poppy cultivation as soon as next year.

Support from the south and south-west will be key. Here, the landed and most powerful, with large inventories, continue to gain significant economic advantage from the current poppy ban (Mansfield, 2024a). As such, the issue of inventory – who holds it and how long it might last – is critical to the question of how long the poppy ban will continue. As long as it is the land-poor in the south and south-west most impacted by the ban, the push back is likely to be limited. However, at the point where a growing number of landed farmers of influence (perhaps with sons in the Taliban) begin to feel the pinch, maintaining the ban will become considerably more difficult. It seems inevitable that while widespread poppy cultivation has not returned to Afghanistan in 2024 it is only a matter of time before it does.

Moreover, given the economic impact of the ban on the rural population and the potential political ramifications, there is a need to question whether the dramatic reduction in poppy cultivation is an unambiguously positive outcome. While the automatic response is to automatically consider any drugs ban a “good thing” that should be welcomed, as suggested by the United Nations Independent Assessment in November 2023 which called for “further steps to maintain the current trajectory of the eradication of illegal narcotics” (United Nations Security Council, 2023, p. 14); it is not as clear-cut as many might think. If the likely outcomes of enduring reductions in cultivation are a growing economic crisis, political instability, and an outflow of migrants from rural Afghanistan to Europe, one must question whether those arguing that the ban unequivocally produces benefits have given the matter sufficient thought.

It is certainly worth noting that during the former Afghan Republic, while parts of the U.S. government did press for widespread poppy eradication and an outright ban, this was not the position of the United Kingdom as the G8 lead nation on counternarcotics, nor that of European nations, concerned as they were that such a move would lead to an economic and humanitarian crisis and undermine support for the Afghan

government (GIRoA, 2006; Holland 2006; European Commission, 2006). In short, the United Kingdom, and others, only pressed for an outright ban in an area only when the political and economic conditions allowed.

Aside from the fact that the importance of such a dramatic reduction was not the consensus of the international community during the former Afghan Republic, or indeed that of the current de facto authorities, there remains the question of what an effective response to the Taliban ban might look like. History has shown the limited, and often counter-productive, effects on poppy cultivation when policy makers reach for the formulaic menu of counter narcotics responses (alternative development, for example). Decades of failed alternative livelihoods and development projects in Afghanistan, often simple crop-substitution programmes, show that small-scale bounded development efforts would achieve little in the current economic crisis (Mansfield, 2023a; SIGAR, 2018, pp.106–129; Mansfield 2015).

For example, between 2002 and 2017, the U.S. government spent \$1.46 billion on alternative livelihoods, but this achieved little to prevent record levels of poppy cultivation (SIGAR, 2018). Alternative livelihood interventions taking a one-size-fits-all approach are ineffective and, in the current circumstances, would primarily benefit the landed farmers who have already gained the most from the current ban. Whilst alternative livelihoods may seem like the most logical response to offset the negative economic effects of the ban, they would not scratch the surface of a multifaceted and complex dilemma.

Decades of evidence from other drug producing countries demonstrate sustainable reductions in cultivation require a growing economy and the creation of large numbers of jobs to support the land-poor and absorb those forced to leave poppy cultivation. To achieve the kind of development effort needed to support an enduring reduction in poppy cultivation in Afghanistan would require a dramatic change in the current relationship between the Taliban and the international community. For one, it would require Western donors and others to commit to work closely with the Taliban over the next decade or longer to transform the rural economy. This would not only require a change in political direction but more than a decade of significant funding for a wide range of interventions, including infrastructure and rural development, as well as donors and implementing agencies learning lessons from experience of more than 20 years – which does not look likely (SIGAR, 2018; Mansfield, 2020).

Without this fundamental shift in approach, the international community, left tinkering around the edges, will be able to do little to prevent cultivation returning in the coming years. Funding small scale alternative livelihoods programmes, as the United Nations is pressing for, will be like whistling in the wind, which, given past experience, could prove to be throwing good money after bad; moreover, when the Taliban relent to the economic realities of the rural population and the political reaction it provokes, even within its own ranks, it will only prompt them to blame the international community for what they will claim, not incorrectly, to be a wholly inadequate response (Kabul Now, 2023). As the late European diplomat and long term Afghan watcher Francesc Vendrell noted in response to the last Taliban drugs ban in 2001 when head of the then United Nations Special Mission for Afghanistan: “The Taliban will not put religious purism ahead of their military ambitions” – a suggestion that the leadership would either rescind the ban or simply fail to enforce it if it led to widespread unrest in the countryside and resistance to their rule (Mansfield, 2016, p. 138).

Rather than follow the well-trodden path of funding counter-narcotics interventions in Afghanistan, including poorly-focused alternative livelihoods programs that have repeatedly failed to deliver, it might be better for international donors, and in particular Western donors, to recast the conversation and ask the Taliban leadership as to what their plans are for continuing the policy they chose to enact and what they will do to address the consequences. This might include a discussion about the national development plans they need to mitigate the far-reaching impact of the ban and the kind of compromises they would be willing to make on gender, human rights, and inclusive government to obtain financial support. In the short term, there could be greater financial aid for humanitarian assistance in those areas where the ban has hit the land-poor the hardest. In particular, it would also be useful to hear more from the Taliban leadership about what they propose to do about the trade in opiates. This an area where there continue to be few signs of action as of yet – which raises significant questions over the Taliban’s actual commitment to the drugs ban.

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