**Cartels and Afghanistan**

[**Shazia Anwer Cheema**](https://nation.com.pk/Columnist/shazia-anwer-cheema)

July 09, 2021

The Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) report for 2021 confirms that the US and NATO forces’ withdrawal from Afghanistan is leaving a country behind that is producing poppy harvest, enough for 80 percent of global heroin production and supplies.

A record available with the United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC) indicates that the Taliban banned opium cultivation in 2000 and left Afghanistan with zero percent production of poppy. The UN report “The Opium Economy In Afghanistan—An International Problem” published in 2003 questioned at page 5:

Why is the international presence in Afghanistan not able to bring under control a phenomenon connected to international terrorism and organised crime? Why is the central Government in Kabul not able to enforce the ban on opium cultivation as effectively as the Taliban regime did in 2000-01?

According to a report prepared by Sarah Almukhtar and Rod Nordland and published in the Washington Post on December 9, 2019, the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction described counter-narcotics efforts as a “failure.” Despite billions of dollars to fight opium poppy cultivation, Afghanistan is the source of 80 percent of global illicit opium production.

[PIA announces to operate special flights for Najaf](https://nation.com.pk/10-Jul-2021/pia-announces-to-operate-two-special-flights-for-doha)

“Before the war, Afghanistan had almost completely eradicated opium, according to the United Nations data from 1996 to 2001, when the Taliban were in power,” the report claimed.

According to available data with UNODC, the southwestern region (Helmand, Kandahar, Nimroz, Uruzgan, and Zabul Provinces) continues to dominate opium-poppy cultivation and accounted for 73 percent (118,444 ha) of the national total in 2019. Nearly three-quarters of the national reduction from 2018 to 2019 was driven by declining cultivation in the southwestern region. In contrast, southern Afghanistan (Ghazni, Khost, Paktika, and Paktika Provinces) continued to have the least amount of opium-poppy cultivation, with 0.1 percent (123 ha) of the national total.

Today, opium cultivation is a major source of income and jobs. Other than war expenditures and international donations, drug sale is the biggest economic activity of Afghanistan. Since 2002, USAID has disbursed approximately $2.3 billion to improve licit agricultural production, increase access to both domestic and international markets, and develop income alternatives to growing poppy for opium production. USAID’s active agriculture programmes have a total estimated cost of $315.7 million but all is without result and Afghans have been producing poppy and drugs under the rule of the United States and its installed civil governments.

[Qureshi, Blinken discuss bilateral relations over phone call](https://nation.com.pk/10-Jul-2021/us-to-continue-cooperation-with-pakistan-on-afghan-peace-process-blinken)

Another report connected with money laundering from Afghanistan released by SIGAR on January 14, 2021, indicates 65 percent of all cash leaving Afghanistan was “illegally earned, transferred” or used, with a significant portion connected to the opium trade. It is estimated that as much as $4.5 billion in cash is smuggled out of the country annually.

The recent activity of power shift indicates that the Taliban has established civil governments in areas under their control and Kabul is not far for them now.

Will only the Afghan National Army against Taliban rule or drug lords living on both sides of the Afghan border? This is an important question because the history of Taliban rule denied poppy cultivation and drug business. Yes, there is an allegation that during US-sponsored rule, the Taliban had been taking their share from drug business to fund their war against foreign troops and there is possibility the Taliban would not ban poppy cultivation.

There are several questions linked with the possible success of any government in Afghanistan that; like the previous government of the Taliban, is against poppy cultivation. All those who are part of the multimillion drug empires are hesitant to accept the change. Drug cartels with their massive power in terms of resources have the ability to challenge militaries as we have examples from Latin American where law enforcement agencies are helplessly fighting against drug lords because they need heavy war machinery to fight back.