

Nov 04, 2016 by *M. Ashraf Haidari*

Agricultural Diplomacy Can Help Wean Afghans From Poppy Crop ^[1]

After decades of violence, the opium poppy crop remains one of the few stable income sources for poor Afghan farmers, who cannot be effectively persuaded to end poppy cultivation without being granted alternative ways of making a living. In 2005, most farmers complied with the poppy ban set out by the Afghan government with the understanding that legal alternative means of survival would be provided. But when the promised aid failed to materialize, drug production quickly rose again.

Forced eradication of poppy crops merely targets the effects of poppy production, not its underlying causes. International experience has taught us that eradication in isolation is ineffective. Decreases in cultivation in one area can simply lead to increases in another, and news of impending eradication efforts can provoke growers to disperse cultivation over a larger area, much like investors diversifying portfolios to hedge risk. Counter-narcotics efforts must be enacted contemporaneously across the country in a strategic manner.

Above all else, farmers must be given the opportunity and necessary resources to grow alternative crops. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that most Afghan farmers are sharecroppers, whose landlords dictate what they can grow. Consequently, the high-value opium poppy is the crop of choice.

Liberating farmers from this cycle of dependence requires that they have access to both land and alternative financing, such as widely available micro-lending. Further, to make alternative crops more lucrative to farmers, investments in infrastructure are needed. In addition to supplies of water, seed and fertilizer, farmers must have access to reliable farm-to-market roads or to cold-storage facilities to preserve products for later export. Today, besides the recently completed Kabul-to-Kandahar ring road, Afghanistan lacks a road system, and only about 9 percent of the population has access to electricity.

Once effective alternatives are available, farmers could begin to transition away from poppy cultivation without paying a financial penalty. An initial grace period could be extended, beyond which noncompliant farmers would face crop eradication and criminal prosecution.

To be effective, counter-narcotics efforts must target all players in the long chain of the opium trade, including traffickers, distributors and dealers, who pull in about 80 percent of the export value of Afghan narcotics. Essential to the prosecution of these kingpins is a functional justice sector, with coordinated law enforcement and judicial activities. Inadequate compensation, training and equipment currently limit the ability of the approximately 74,000 Afghan policemen and 1,500 judges from effectively combating this threat.

The international community recognized these shortcomings in the justice sector and their deleterious effects on the counter-narcotics mission at the Conference on the Rule of Law in

Afghanistan last month in Rome. With \$360 million pledged and a timetable established for instituting a National Justice Program, the conference outlined much-needed reforms. This conference underscored how staggered, long-term reforms to the justice sector are vital, especially at the provincial level.

But even with international support, transnational drug traffickers will continue to permeate Afghanistan's borders and undermine the rule of law in the absence of coordinated prosecution and enforcement efforts among Afghanistan, its neighbors and consumer countries. All of Afghanistan's neighbors have a vested interest in reducing opium poppy cultivation and trade. In addition to facing the continued destabilizing effect of the Taliban insurgency, Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan's Central Asian neighbors now face the problems associated with having millions of drug abusers and rising HIV/AIDS infection rates from needle-sharing.

The tenets of Islam, Afghan culture and the Afghan legal system all prohibit the production, consumption and trafficking of drugs. Poor Afghan farmers would honor these tenets right away if they were given a legal choice to enable their survival. The international community must double its law-enforcement cooperation with Afghanistan and recommit to providing the country with long-term development aid to meet the farmers' demand for legal livelihoods.

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