

2 THE TALIBAN DRUG BAN



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Opium traders paying cash for opium. (Photo by David Mansfield)

THE TALIBAN DRUG BAN: AN UNPRECEDENTED SUCCESS OR AN INEVITABLE FAILURE?

On April 3, 2022, the Taliban's so-called emir, Haibatullah Akhundzada, issued a decree banning the production, sale, processing, and consumption of all drugs in Afghanistan.¹ This ban has, so far, dramatically reduced poppy cultivation in Afghanistan and raises the question of how the Taliban have seemingly succeeded in countering narcotics where the United States and its coalition partners failed despite spending nearly \$9 billion over 20 years.² However, a closer look at the current ban and those that preceded it evokes doubt about the long-term sustainability of this ostensible achievement.

After two and a half years of enforcement and a steep reduction in opium cultivation, Afghanistan remains economically dependent on opium. The juxtaposition of a steep reduction in cultivation and a continuing and thriving opium market with even higher prices complicates what the ban means for Afghanistan and the world. The opium trade continues unabated largely because landed farmers were allowed to store significant amounts of inventory before the ban went into effect. Additionally, certain parts of the country have resisted the ban, and economic and political pressures are mounting as those who depend on opium cultivation have been left without alternative means to support themselves.³

THE TALIBAN'S COMPLICATED HISTORY WITH OPIUM

Afghanistan's economic dependence on opium production predates the Taliban's 1996–2001 rule. Although opium production in Afghanistan was first reported in the 18th century, its rapid growth started in the late 1970s, partly spurred by the country's ongoing state of war. The Taliban have consistently opposed opium production on religious grounds. Even before taking control of Afghanistan in 1996, they issued a statement prohibiting the cultivation, processing, and trade of opium in late 1994. From 1994 to 2000, the Taliban made five attempts to ban opium cultivation, but none led to as steep a fall in production as their 2000 ban, which reduced opium cultivation from 82,000 to 8,000 hectares (ha) by 2001, as seen in Table E.1.⁴

TABLE E.1

TALIBAN ATTEMPTS TO BAN NARCOTICS AND THEIR EFFECTS, 1994 TO 2001				
Date	Taliban Statement	Change in Cultivation (UNODC)	Other Factors Influencing Results	Overall Impact
1994	Ban on opium cultivation	Cultivation fell from 69,927 ha to 53,732 ha	Unreliable survey in 1994; reduction localized largely in Nangarhar where Taliban had no presence	No effect
November 1996	Statement of opposition to production, processing, trafficking and abuse of opium and pledge to take all necessary measures	Cultivation rose from 56,819 ha to 58,417 ha		No effect
September 1997	Stated that use of heroin and hashish will not be permitted under Islam and Afghans should strictly refrain from growing, using, and trading hashish and heroin	Cultivation rose from 58,417 ha to 63,664 ha		No effect
October 1997	Clarification issued specifically banning cultivation and trafficking of opium	Cultivation rose from 58,417 ha to 63,664 ha		No effect
1999	A call for 1/3 reduction in opium poppy cultivation	Cultivation fell from 90,000 ha to 81,983 ha	Severe drought particularly in southwest and north; price differentials between wheat (high) and poppy (low)	Negligible results
July 2000	Outright ban on opium poppy cultivation	Cultivation fell from 81,983 ha to 7,598 ha	Severe drought particularly in southwest and north; price differentials between wheat and poppy	Significant results

Source: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, "The Sun Cannot be Hidden by Two Fingers: Illicit drugs and the discussions on a political settlement in Afghanistan," 9/2019, p. 11.

The Taliban's 2000 Opium Ban

In July 2000, five years after taking over Kabul, and seven years since they came to dominate the south, the Taliban announced an edict banning opium poppy cultivation.⁵ At that time, opium prices were at their lowest in decades, wheat prices were peaking, and much of Afghanistan's south and southwest were four years into a severe drought. The Taliban announced the ban in July, just after the 2000 opium poppy crop had been harvested and three months before the new planting season, which typically runs from October through November. The timing of the announcement, as well as opium prices as low as \$30 per kilogram, left farmers with little opportunity to stockpile opium or plant a new crop in the fall. Ultimately, the ban led to a 90% decrease of areas under cultivation, from 81,983 ha in 2000 to 7,598 ha in 2001, but impoverished the population. The loss of political support from those most affected by the 2000 ban left the Taliban politically vulnerable at the time of the September 11, 2001, attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon.⁶

2001–2021: Billions of Dollars Could Not Curb Opium

Just prior to the poppy planting season in November–December 2001, and what might have been the second consecutive year of a Taliban ban, the United States invaded Afghanistan. The United States' initial plans for Afghanistan did not include addressing the country's opium problem.

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Instead, to degrade al Qaeda's capabilities in Afghanistan, the United States turned to key warlords who were entrenched in the drug economy for intelligence and, at times, to carry out military operations.⁷ Despite the United States spending nearly \$9 billion between 2002 and July 2021 to eliminate Afghanistan's rising opium cultivation and trade, Afghanistan remained the world's leading producer of opium.⁸

SIGAR has long tracked and reported on the United States' efforts to curb the production of illicit drugs, particularly opium, in Afghanistan. In 2018, SIGAR analyzed the United States' efforts, decisions, and failures involving counternarcotics efforts in Afghanistan in a lessons-learned report. SIGAR found that the lack of functioning Afghan law enforcement and judicial institutions upon which counternarcotics work normally relies limited the options available to address the drug trade.⁹

When the United Kingdom initiated crop eradication efforts in 2002, it further strained relations between Afghans and the international community. SIGAR reported that this approach was "misguided and ineffective, as it was inconsistently applied and undercut by corruption."¹⁰ Amidst these efforts, a more complex web of drug benefactors emerged. The Taliban, the Afghan police, Afghan politicians, various militias, tribal elites, and many ex-warlords-turned-politicians all benefited from the drug economy, regardless of their political allegiances.¹¹

In analyzing U.S.-led counternarcotics efforts in Afghanistan, a 2021 study by David Mansfield, a leading expert on Afghanistan's illicit economies, pointed to a widespread, but incorrect, belief that opium was the Taliban's main source of income. According to the study, these oft-repeated claims, with some arguing that opium comprised as much as 60% of all the Taliban's revenue, were based on little evidence. These narratives led to ineffective counternarcotics policies that alienated large segments of the population and drove Afghans closer to the Taliban.¹² In fact, the belief that the Taliban significantly profited from opium led the United States to tie its counterinsurgency efforts with counternarcotics to deprive the Taliban of funding.¹³ Mansfield wrote, "Flawed narratives drove policies that alienated the rural population, such as forced eradication of opium and the bombing of heroin labs, which led to farmers giving help to the Taliban, believing that the insurgents could defend against counternarcotics policies of the Afghan government and its foreign backers."¹⁴

“Flawed narratives drove policies that alienated the rural population, such as forced eradication of opium and the bombing of heroin labs, which led to farmers giving help to the Taliban...”¹⁶

Even before the fall of the former republic, SIGAR identified 13 findings in its lessons-learned report, which remain relevant in answering why and how the two decades-long U.S.-led efforts to eradicate opium and Afghanistan’s illicit drug economy failed:¹⁵

1. No counterdrug program undertaken by the United States, its coalition partners, or the Afghan government resulted in lasting reductions in poppy cultivation or opium production.
2. Without a stable security environment, there was little possibility of effectively curtailing poppy cultivation and drug production in Afghanistan.
3. The U.S. government failed to develop and implement counternarcotics strategies that outlined or effectively directed U.S. agencies toward shared goals.
4. Eradication and development assistance efforts were not sufficiently coordinated or consistently implemented in the same geographic locations.
5. Counternarcotics goals were often not incorporated into larger security and development strategies, which hindered the achievement of those goals and the wider reconstruction effort.
6. Counternarcotics efforts were not a consistent priority at the most senior levels of the U.S. or Afghan governments.
7. Eradication efforts, including compensated eradication, had no lasting impact on poppy cultivation or national-level drug production.
8. The failed U.S. push for aerial spraying damaged the U.S.-Afghan relationship and unity of effort in the coalition’s counterdrug mission.
9. Alternative development programs were too short-term and often relied on the simple substitution of other crops for poppy. These programs did not bring about lasting reductions in opium poppy cultivation and sometimes even contributed to increased poppy production.
10. In limited areas with improved security and greater economic opportunities, some Afghans were able to diversify their livelihoods away from opium poppy. However, local reductions in poppy cultivation were almost always short-lived or offset by increases elsewhere.
11. U.S. support helped Afghan counterdrug units develop promising capacity and become trusted partners. However, these units did not have a strategic impact on the drug trade due to insecurity, corruption and poor capacity within the criminal justice system, and lack of high-level support from the Afghan government.

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12. Poor-quality estimates of poppy cultivation levels, eradication numbers, and drug money going to the insurgency made it more difficult for policymakers to accurately assess the problem and determine effective policy responses.
13. The counternarcotics performance metrics used in Afghanistan, particularly the overemphasis on annual estimates of poppy cultivation and eradication, contributed to ineffective policy decisions.

THE TALIBAN'S CURRENT OPIUM BAN

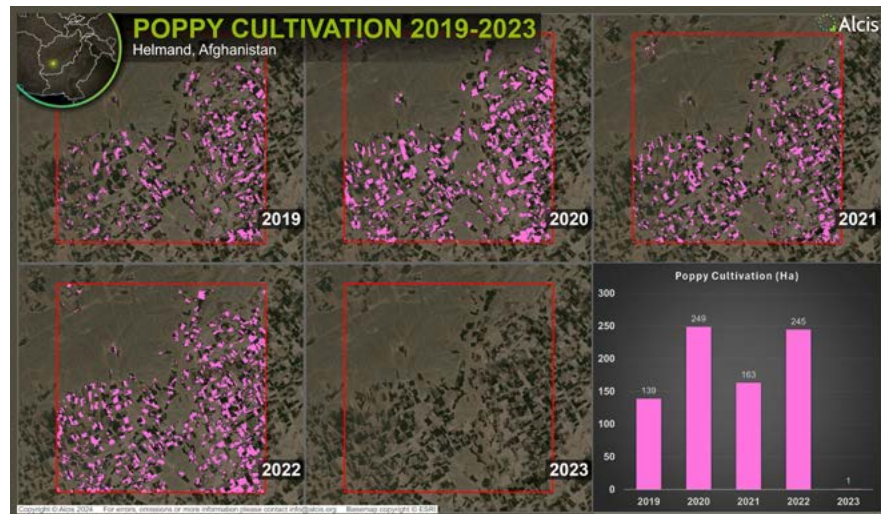
In April 2022, seven months after seizing power, the Taliban's leader issued a nationwide drug ban that included opium, saying, "from now on, cultivation of poppy has been strictly prohibited across the country." The Taliban ministry of interior warned, "If anyone violates the decree, the crop will be destroyed immediately, and the violator will be treated according to Sharia law." As with their 2000 ban, the Taliban justified the prohibition on religious grounds, while they also sought to gain international legitimacy.¹⁷

After the April 2022 ban was announced, the United Nations confirmed that the Taliban ministry of interior had permitted a two-month grace period to enable farmers to complete the spring harvest and sell their opium gum. In October 2022, SIGAR reported that the Taliban had not interfered with the fall poppy crop planted in 2021, allowing the crop to be harvested after the so-called emir's edict.¹⁸ According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), from 2021 to 2022, poppy cultivation increased by 32% despite the opium ban. More crucially, the price of opium increased by 300% between April 2022 and October 2022 and landed farmers were able to stockpile opium to sell at higher market-driven prices.¹⁹

Ban Dramatically Reduced Opium Cultivation

The following year, Afghanistan saw a steep nationwide drop in poppy cultivation, which decreased by more than 85% in 2023, according to the British geographic information service Alcis.²⁰ UNODC reported that opium cultivation decreased 95% in 2023.²¹ Yet, trade continued thanks to the stockpiles farmers had amassed before and during the Taliban's two-month grace period.²² The Taliban were able to enforce the ban on cultivation more effectively in some provinces than others, so results have been uneven across the country. In southern and southwestern Afghanistan, most of the farmers were buoyed by substantial opium stores that had risen in value, and poppy cultivation was practically nonexistent from April 2022 to April 2023. In Nangarhar, a major poppy-producing province, there was an 84% reduction in poppy cultivation in the same period, although cultivation persisted in the more remote areas and efforts to destroy the crop led to outbreaks of violence. Despite this, the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan reported that opium continued to be traded across the country, providing further evidence of significant inventories.²³

In May 2023, opium prices in Kandahar were \$263 per kilogram, compared to around \$160 in May 2022 and in Nangarhar, opium prices were \$362 per kilogram, compared to around \$220 in May 2022.²⁴ As shown in the satellite imagery, Helmand Province saw a 99% decrease in poppy cultivation following the 2022 ban.



Poppy cultivation from 2019 to 2023 in Helmand Province. (Imagery by Alcis)

However, as with the Taliban’s 2000 ban, the current ban on opium cultivation fails to offer farmers—except those with larger land holdings and inventory—any alternative livelihood options, leaving a significant economic void among the portion of the Afghan population that relies on the illicit drug economy. According to UNODC, poppy farmers have lost half their income since the ban. In the first full year of the ban’s enforcement in 2023, the total income farmers made by selling their harvest declined by more than 92% compared to 2022, from \$1 billion to just over \$100 million.²⁵ Although State has told SIGAR that UNODC figures may be “imprecise estimates” since the ban’s full impact has yet to be analyzed nationwide, there have been growing signs of economic distress in those parts of Afghanistan where poppy farmers have small landholdings, high population densities, and few non-farm income opportunities. This includes a reduction in the quantity and quality of food consumed, decisions to delay important healthcare, and the sale of long-term productive assets, such as land, and increased rates of outmigration.²⁶

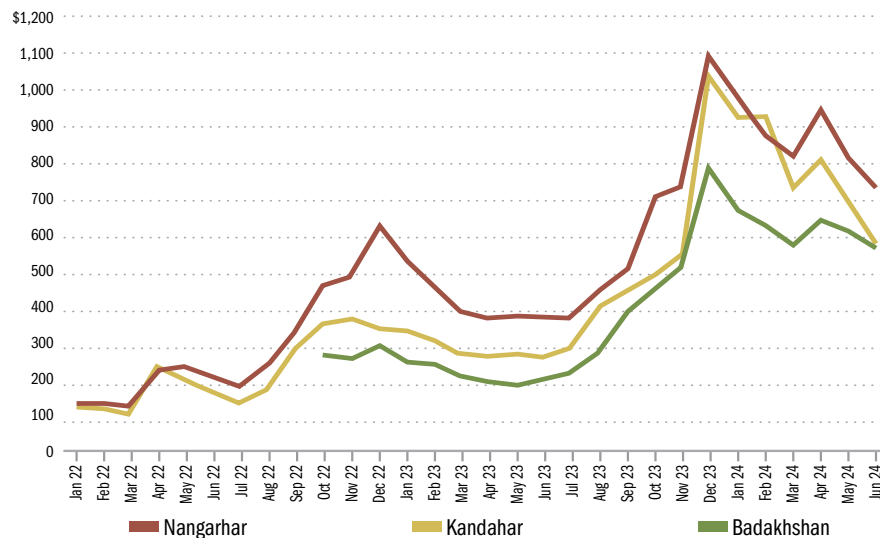
The Opium Ban’s Fragility

Although opium cultivation has fallen dramatically as the ban enters its third year, recent analyses from experts suggest several factors that point

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FIGURE E.1

DRY OPIUM PRICES PER KG, JANUARY 2022 TO JUNE 2024



Source: Alcis, email to SIGAR, 7/13/2024.

to the ban’s ultimate fragility. Taken together, these factors lead experts to predict that the ban will in time fail, just like those preceding it.²⁷

Opium Inventory Problem

Although the current ban has significantly impacted opium cultivation, no action has been taken against the existing stockpiles stored by landed farmers and traders. As a result, a bull market has developed as farmers and traders anticipate further price increases, causing speculation and hoarding. This has raised the value of stockpiled opium, undercutting small farmers, and greatly increasing the capital and purchasing power of landed farmers with significant opium reserves.²⁸ According to a July UN sanctions monitoring team report, “Senior Taliban continue to profit” from the ban, as farmers are “struggling to make up the shortfall with alternative crops.”²⁹

Opium prices have nearly doubled since the ban, from \$417 per kilogram in August 2023 to \$802 per kilogram in December, according to a UN survey.³⁰ As shown in Figure E.1, at its peak so far, a kilo of opium cost over \$1,100 in late December 2023, though that price has since decreased to about \$600. Alcis imagery and livelihood analyses show that the amount of opium stored in Afghanistan remains substantial, as much as 16,567 metric tons.³¹ Landed farmers in the south and southwest have thus gained considerable economic advantage from the ban. This has, in turn, greatly reduced the need for the Taliban to coerce compliance and to target crop eradication against one of its core constituencies.³²



Bags of opium and stacks of Pakistani rupees. (Photo by David Mansfield)

Lack of Alternatives and Concerns with Wheat

High resolution satellite imagery analysis of Helmand Province, which saw a 99% decrease in poppy cultivation in 2023, shows farmers have largely replaced poppy with wheat or fallow land. But wheat is not a sustainable alternative to opium because as an annual crop, wheat can be replaced with opium at any time.³³ Promoting wheat as an alternative to opium can be misleading because, for the vast majority of farmers, wheat is a staple household crop, not a cash crop. According to the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, Afghanistan’s commercial wheat market is saturated by cheap imports from Pakistan. Further, “This shift to wheat is not driven by the pursuit of profit and commercial production but rather by the need to hold down financial outlays and secure a supply of a staple food.”³⁴ The UNODC 2023 Opium Survey confirmed that while farmers cultivated wheat and other licit crops in 2023, “the loss of cash income from opium is a formidable challenge.”³⁵

A 2019 study by David Mansfield looking at food insecurity in Helmand Province noted that although farmers would grow some wheat in response to concerns over food insecurity, “the uptick in wheat cultivation neither denoted economic growth nor enduring transition out of opium poppy.” In fact, the study identified wheat as one of the crops used often by farmers as a way to wait out periods of uncertainty and insecurity before returning to opium.³⁶ In addition to assessing farming alternatives to opium, Mansfield also highlighted the importance of non-farm income such as opium to families. These non-farm alternatives could help families “cope with shocks such as serious illness or death, as well as have sufficient funds for investment in potentially productive enterprises, such as purchasing land, small businesses, livestock or sending children to higher education.”³⁷

Comparing the Current Opium Ban with the 2000 Ban

Given Afghanistan's history and its dependence on opium, the Taliban's current ban on opium may fail as did the one they imposed in 2000. But Mansfield cautions against taking these comparisons too far, given the different contexts, timings, scopes, and prices of opium when the two bans went into effect. The timing of the ban in 2000 effectively prohibited farmers from stockpiling opium. It was announced three months after the previous crop had been harvested, and three months before the 2001 crop went in the ground. Furthermore, prices at harvest time in May 2000, were as low as \$30 per kilogram, giving farmers few chances to retain any crop that year as they had to sell the opium on-hand to meet their household expenses. Estimates showed that in the years before 2001, poppy cultivation was typically around 70,000 hectares per year.³⁸

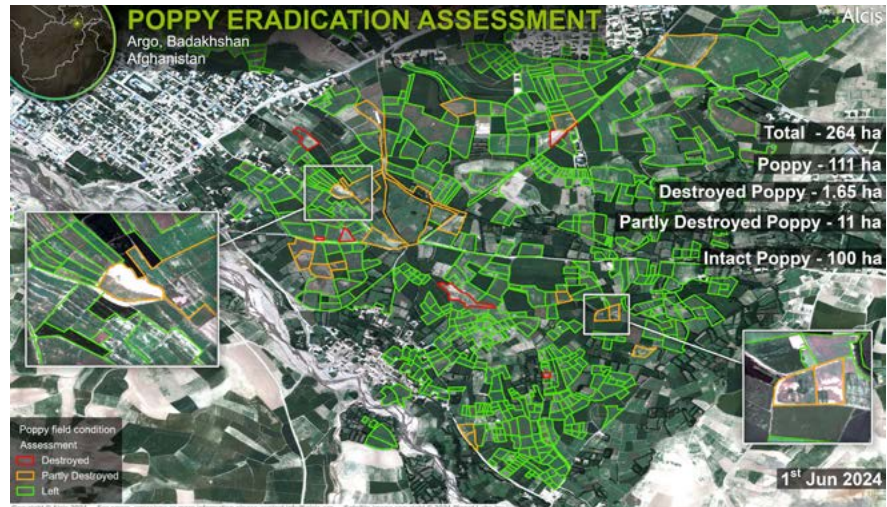
The 2022 ban, however, has allowed farmers to harvest opium and build stockpiles before it was implemented, playing a major role in quieting dissent from powerful landowners, who instead of losing a valuable harvest season, benefited from increased opium prices. Another difference is the sheer scope of today's opium farms. By 2022, Afghanistan had 200,000 hectares of opium poppies, or 130,000 more hectares than it had in 2001.³⁹

Despite these differences, the two bans share some characteristics. The Taliban have used religion as a justification for imposing both bans and they have both been part of Taliban efforts to gain international recognition. In neither case have the Taliban disrupted the opium trade.

Divisions and Dissent

Another factor that raises questions about the ban's sustainability is the resistance to the ban, which the Taliban have not fully curbed. Voice of America reported that, "Not everyone is peacefully accepting the opium ban and eradication," with Badakhshan Province posing the greatest challenge. In Badakhshan, Helmand, Herat, and Nangarhar, the article reported, poppy is being grown "in the open and hidden behind property walls." This has led Taliban eradication operations, fomenting farmer resistance and unrest.⁴⁰

State has long identified farmers' resistance in certain parts of Afghanistan as one of the main challenges to the ban. This resistance took a violent turn in April and May 2024, when large-scale protests erupted in the Argo and Darayim districts of Badakhshan Province. The Taliban opened fire on the protesters, killing two. Following these events, the Taliban sent a high-level delegation to Faizabad, the capital of Badakhshan, to try to quell the unrest.⁴¹ Farmers have also resisted the ban by continuing to grow opium. In a June 2024 satellite image analyzed by Alcis, Argo, Badakhshan, seems almost completely untouched as farmers continue to grow opium.



A poppy eradication assessment of Argo, Badakhshan Province in June 2024. (Imagery by Alcis)

Opium Ban Increases Poverty

Unlike landed farmers who have largely benefited from the ban and support it as long as their inventories last, large segments of Afghanistan’s rural population have suffered and oppose it. According to a recent United States Institute of Peace report, “the poppy cultivation ban is akin to an additional humanitarian shock from approximately \$1 billion loss of income annually,” for a large part of the Afghan population. Afghan families who depended on the opium economy are coping with the economic loss in counterproductive ways, such as selling their assets, eating less and lower-quality foods, and pulling out their children from secondary schools to work instead. The report also warned that “outmigration by family members to work abroad (ultimately Europe) to send back remittances becomes an increasingly attractive option for those who can afford the cost, despite the associated risks.”⁴²

BAN ON OTHER DRUGS FACES VARYING DEGREES OF SUCCESS AND FAILURE

In addition to banning opium, the Taliban have also attempted to ban cannabis and methamphetamine. Although the April 3, 2022, decree mainly focused on opium, it also included blanket prohibitions against the “use, transport, selling, trading, importing and exporting of all types of drugs.” On March 9, 2023, the Taliban issued a more specific ban against cannabis, just before cannabis crops would be sowed. According to the Afghanistan Analysts Network, cannabis is a summer crop, “with planting done in most of the country between late March and late May, harvesting in October and

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November, and resin extraction in December and January.” The ban’s timing to prohibit the next planting season differed from the opium ban and its two-month grace period. The Afghanistan Analysts Network also reported cannabis cultivation persists in the northern provinces that have continued to resist the Taliban’s ban.⁴³

The ban on the methamphetamine industry also rolled out in stages. As early as December 2021, the Taliban issued a ban on ephedra, resulting in its continuous price increase. Ephedra is a green shrub that grows wild in high altitudes and is used in the manufacturing of methamphetamine. (A UNODC report claimed that ephedra is not the main source of methamphetamine in Afghanistan and that the drug is made from over-the-counter medicines and bulk pharmaceuticals. However, Mansfield disputes this with evidence showing that ephedra is indeed the primary input in methamphetamine production in Afghanistan. He also has shown that there is a dearth of data pointing to over-the-counter medicines or bulk pharmaceuticals as the primary source of methamphetamine production.)⁴⁴

Following the ban on ephedra, the Taliban closed the Abdul Wadood Bazaar, located near the Bakwa district in southwestern Farah Province. The Abdul Wadood Bazaar had served as the main market for ephedrine and methamphetamine production since 2017. High resolution satellite imagery analysis by Alcis showed the number of labs within 400 km² of the Bazaar went from 125 in March 2021, to zero by September 2022 when the Taliban moved to close down the bazaar and the labs in the surrounding area.⁴⁵

Mansfield posits that “disruption rather than elimination is the more likely outcome of these efforts.”⁴⁶ In October 2023, a new set of laws specifically laid out strict penalties for those caught harvesting and trading ephedra, and those who are involved in the production or trade of ephedrine and methamphetamine. As a result, the industry has further dispersed, with meth producers or “cooks” moving to the mountains where ephedra is found aplenty.⁴⁷

Perhaps it is too early to assess how the ban against drugs other than opium have played out in curbing or ending the production and trade of illicit drugs such as cannabis and methamphetamine. Ongoing analysis points to a mixed picture, wherein those whose lives depend on the production and trade of illicit drugs oppose the ban and look for opportunities to undermine its implementation.



Satellite imagery of the Abdul Wadood Bazaar in Farah Province. (Imagery by Alcis)

CONCLUSION

The Taliban's recent narcotics ban succeeded in massively reducing opium cultivation for the harvest seasons that immediately followed its enforcement. Whether it is sustainable remains to be seen. Despite the so-called emir's decree, the opium trade in reality has not been prohibited. In fact, data from rising opium prices show that the ban has helped those who stored stockpiles of opium before and during the two-month-long grace period following the ban, especially those farmers with significant plots of land, to benefit from harvesting opium for future trade. This inventory, along with lack of economic alternatives for farmers, has led to the fragility of the ban as a whole. The Taliban's bans on other drugs have also seen mixed results, and recent resistance and unrest due to the opium ban show that the Taliban faces mounting challenges to this latest ban. Indeed, the questions of how long the Taliban's opium ban will last, and whether the Taliban will succeed in their stated goal of ridding Afghanistan of its opium dependence, are yet to be answered.

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سر مفتش ویژه برای بازسازی افغانستان



اداره

ستر مفتش

افغانستان د پيار غاونو لپاره د خانگري

“The Taliban have not met any of the commitments they said they were going to meet when they took over and not just the way they’re treating women and girls, the way they’re managing their own economy, the way they’re taking care of their own people. We are in no position, nor will we be, to recognize the Taliban as the official governance of Afghanistan.”

—*National Security Council Strategic Communications Advisor John Kirby*