

Record Afghan Opium Crop Signals Violent Year for U.S. Forces

As poppy cultivation in Afghanistan increases, more funds are likely supporting the Taliban's insurgency, portending a tough year ahead for U.S. occupiers, write Will Porter and Kyle Anzalone.

By Will Porter and Kyle Anzalone

In Afghanistan, the world's most powerful military is threatened by a small, pink flower.

Despite an escalation of the Afghan conflict under the Trump administration, a record opium crop, coupled with steady Taliban gains, foretell bitter fighting in the coming months for American forces and the Afghans stationed alongside them.

"Record-high opium production is but one indication of how badly U.S. efforts have failed and are continuing to fail," said Andrew Bacevich, professor of history and international relations at Boston University and author of *America's War for the Greater Middle East*. "It is both a major source of Taliban funding and an indication of how little control the Afghan government is able to exert."

The Taliban and the Opium Trade

In November, the UN Office of Drugs and Crime released its annual Afghanistan Opium Survey. According to the report, 2017's opium crop, estimated at 9,000 tons, marks an 87 percent increase from the previous year.

The record crop has left the Taliban flush with cash it will use to finance military operations, the wages of fighters, as well as arms purchases.

As the area under cultivation in Taliban territory grows, "we can conclude that more funds flow to the Taliban," said Gretchen Peters, former ABC News foreign correspondent and an expert on the Afghan opium trade.

While many have enjoyed the plant's small dark seeds on their bagels, at maturity poppies produce seed pods which contain opium, a sticky sap that is drained from the pods and dried. Opium's alkaloids can be extracted and altered to produce a wide range of opioid narcotics, including morphine and heroin.

Over the last decade Afghanistan has been the world's top producer and exporter of raw opium and heroin, in some years supplying much of the entire global heroin market.

The opium trade has long played a vital role in the Afghan economy and political landscape. The plant not only supplies farmers with a highly profitable cash crop and creates employment opportunities in rural areas, but proceeds from the opium trade also bolster local warlords and militant groups such as the Taliban.

“The Taliban is a major player in setting farm quotas for poppy farmers, storing and transporting opium out of Afghanistan, running and protecting drug labs that refine opium into heroin and laundering drug proceeds,” Peters said.

The narcotics trade is now the Taliban’s single greatest source of revenue, “taxing” opium traffic to the tune of hundreds of millions of dollars annually. In the last year the group has also expanded its activities to refining and selling the substance itself, a development sure to put more funds in the hands of the militants.

The factors driving poppy cultivation in Afghanistan are myriad.

“Scarce employment opportunities, lack of quality education and limited access to markets and financial services continue to contribute to the vulnerability of farmers towards opium poppy cultivation,” the 2017 Opium Survey found.

The lion’s share of last year’s record opium crop was cultivated in the Helmand and Kandahar provinces in southern Afghanistan, near the Afghan-Pakistan border. This virtually ungoverned tribal territory has furnished the Taliban with a place of refuge since the American invasion in 2001, and serves as a base of operations for the Taliban’s activities.

“[The Taliban] receive much of their funding from the narcotics trafficking that occurs out of Helmand,” U.S. Army Gen. John Nicholson, commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan, said in a press briefing last year. “Helmand produces a significant amount of the opium globally that turns into heroin and ... this provides about 60 percent of the Taliban funding.”

From its southern stronghold near the Af-Pak border, the Taliban has managed to launch attacks and capture or contest nearly 45 percent of Afghanistan, painting a dismal picture for American military objectives in the country.

This year’s unprecedented poppy harvest only serves to darken that image, particularly for the upcoming Spring Offensive.

A Bloody Spring

The Taliban surges in activity during Afghanistan’s warm spring months, lying more or less dormant in the autumn and winter. This annual spike in operations has been dubbed the “Spring Offensive.” In last year’s Offensive, vowing to

target American soldiers, the Taliban made gains all over the country, generating momentum that the group is now poised to capitalize on.

With the Trump administration's Afghan strategy in place, American troops will now be closer than ever to the war's front lines.

Defense Secretary James Mattis announced in September that over 3,000 soldiers would be deployed as part of the strategy, putting the total U.S. troop level in Afghanistan at approximately 14,000. Over 1,000 additional American advisers could also be deployed to support Afghan security forces as they push into the Taliban-controlled south this spring, putting more Americans in harm's way.

U.S. military officials have acknowledged the increased danger American soldiers will face.

"Yes, there will be greater risk, absolutely," Gen. Nicholson said last year. To limit the danger, the military was "going to great lengths to ensure force protection," Nicholson said, adding that the soldiers would have a "whole array of support behind them."

Marine Lt. Gen. Kenneth McKenzie, director of the Pentagon's Joint Staff, concurred with Nicholson's assessment in a press briefing earlier this month, telling reporters "Americans are at risk and unfortunately there are probably going to be continued American casualties in this campaign."

While many American soldiers fill an "advise and assist" role in Afghanistan, the lines between advisory and combat missions can easily blur when Americans are so closely embedded with foreign troops, as has happened in similar operations elsewhere in the world. The proximity to active combat zones only increases that risk to American personnel.

Tough Year Ahead

Signs that 2018 will be a tough year for U.S. forces have already begun to manifest.

January saw a wave of deadly Taliban attacks launched in Afghan's capital of Kabul, one killing some 100 people, including four American citizens. With some exceptions, Kabul was thought to be a nominally safe city, but the recent attacks prove the Taliban's ability to project force far beyond its southern sanctuary.

Also in January, the Pentagon blocked a federal watchdog from publishing a report on Taliban territorial holdings, another troubling indication that the war is not going the administration's way.

The watchdog, the office of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), said the decision was problematic because “the number of districts controlled or influenced by the Afghan government had been one of the last remaining publicly available indicators for members of Congress—many of whose staff do not have access to the classified annexes to SIGAR reports—and for the American public of how the 16-year-long U.S. effort to secure Afghanistan is faring.”

Past experience does not bode well for the Trump strategy. The Obama administration presided over a large Afghan “surge” in 2009 which swelled total troop numbers in the country to over 100,000. Given the surge’s lack of success in reversing Taliban gains—in spite of the drastically ramped-up American presence—some analysts are skeptical that the Trump approach will work.

“The Trump strategy is really not much of a strategy,” Bacevich said. “It’s a strategy of persistence, albeit with a small number of additional U.S. troops and a generous additional dose of bombing. The expectation is that the Taliban will tire and become willing to settle on a negotiated end to the war. I know of no evidence to support such an expectation.”

Trump’s National Security Strategy—a document that lays out a general framework for U.S. policy goals around the world—called for increased military pressure on the Taliban in order to force them to the negotiation table. The administration, however, appears to have abandoned this plank of the strategy, announcing late last month that the U.S. would no longer seek talks with the group.

The announcement raises questions for the Trump administration with respect to the American mission, and the role of American soldiers, in Afghanistan.

A War Within a War

In addition to stepping up regular combat and advisory operations in Afghanistan, the United States is also increasing its involvement in drug interdiction—what amounts to a war on drugs within a war on terror.

In a recent article for the Guardian, professor of history at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and author of “The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia,” Alfred McCoy, recounts a conversation he had with an American Embassy official stationed in Afghanistan.

Speaking over satellite phone from an Afghan poppy field, the official gave McCoy a stark ultimatum: “You can’t win this war without taking on drug production in Helmand province.”

To date, despite spending a cool \$7.6 billion on such efforts over the last

decade, they have largely met failure.

“By every conceivable metric, we’ve failed,” Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, John Sopko, said in a 2014 speech at Georgetown University. “[Opium] production and cultivation are up, interdiction and eradication are down, financial support to the insurgency is up, and addiction and abuse are at unprecedented levels in Afghanistan.”

(He could have added that addiction and abuse are at unprecedented levels in the United States as well, with the opioid epidemic contributing to decreasing national life expectancy rates, according to recent research.)

Gen. Nicholson announced in late November that the U.S. would begin directly bombing Taliban-linked drug production facilities, targets which had previously been off limits to U.S. and allied forces. The Pentagon claims the strikes, which have continued since November, have already crippled the Taliban’s finances and denied the group \$16 million in revenue, but the progress might not be what is alleged.

“The Pentagon has made various claims about the size of the impact on Taliban finances, but that is all highly speculative,” Vanda Felbab-Brown, Brookings Institution senior fellow in the Center for 21st Century Security and expert on Afghanistan, told Altnet.

“The logic is that a certain amount of heroin is destroyed per target and that heroin is assigned that same value per unit price, but we can’t assume that,” Felbab-Brown said. “It could be there was no processed heroin there at all, only opium. The only value might be that it eliminated one Taliban financier who happened to be present, or maybe disrupted one link in the trade, but we can’t even assume that.”

Aside from the questionable effectiveness of the operations, their consequences can be measured in other ways as well.

In one particular strike intended for a drug lab in the Helmand city of Musa Qala, American bombers instead hit the home of a small-time opium trader, killing his wife, his six children—most of whom were no older than 8—and his one-year-old granddaughter.

Such casualties are often written off as “collateral damage,” but, as a growing body of research indicates, civilian deaths have driven radicalism and violence in countries where the U.S. military operates, pushing local populations into the arms of militant groups like the Taliban.

One 2010 study found that eight insurgent attacks per year could be prevented in

every average-sized Afghan district if American operations killed fewer civilians, concluding that “in order to reduce violence to ISAF [International Security Assistance Force] soldiers, units should seek to minimize civilian casualties.”

While administration officials are apparently seeing the importance of the drug trade to the strength of militant groups in Afghanistan, the situation may now be impossible to remedy by military means. Diverting military funds into developing Afghanistan’s agricultural sector, some analysts believe, could be the key to solving the problem.

“If the international community continues to nudge the country’s dependence on illicit opium downward through sustained rural development, then maybe Afghanistan will cease to be the planet’s leading narco-state—and just maybe the annual cycle of violence could at long last be broken,” writes McCoy.

The U.S. has worsened the drug problem in Afghanistan through decades of bad policy, Peters said, but it “could turn the table by focusing energy on stabilizing non-drug producing parts of the country.”

Given the administration’s stated strategy of escalation, albeit ambiguous, an abrupt change of course does not appear likely.

Regardless of what long-term solutions (or lack of them) the United States imposes on Afghanistan, as the Taliban consolidates its territorial gains and bolsters its power with proceeds from the narcotics trade, the spring of 2018 is slated to be one of the bloodiest sagas of America’s longest war.

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