

Hamid Gul, who is close to both the CIA and British intelligence, travelled extensively within Afghanistan to bring field commanders under the Taliban banner. Gen. Nasirullah Babar was a minister in Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto-Zardari's Cabinet when she switched her support to the Taliban. In May 1997, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's Foreign Minister, Gohar Ayub Khan, son of Pakistan's military dictator in the 1960s, flew to the northern Afghan city of Mazar-e-Sharif immediately after the Taliban captured that city, recognized the Taliban government, and announced that all other nations should follow suit, as "the civil war is now over."

Also interested in Afghan affairs, is Iran. It was Iran's efforts which combined most of the Shia parties in Herat, Afghanistan to form the "Hizb-e-Wahadat" in 1988, and pressed for Wahadat's participation in international negotiations heretofore dominated by the Sunni parties supported by Pakistan, the United States, and Saudi Arabia. Today, Iran supports the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance. There are reports of arms supplied by Tehran to Ahmed Shah Massoud's Alliance in northern Afghanistan.

Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf countries appear to have continued to fund much of Pakistan's policy in Afghanistan through official and unofficial channels. Until mid-1998, Saudi Arabia supplied heavily subsidized fuel to the Taliban through Pakistan, in addition to providing general funding. It is likely that support for the Taliban also fits into the Saudis' "religious rivalry" with Iran and long-term strategic cooperation with Pakistan. Some Saudi companies and individuals have interests in the various pipeline proposals under consideration.

The Osama bin Laden Factor

Saudi support to the Taliban has waned since 1998, perhaps because of Riyadh's concern about Osama bin Laden. Osama bin Laden, the man U.S. intelligence considers the most dangerous terrorist in the world, is one of the sons of a wealthy Saudi construction magnate. Saudi sources remember him as an ordinary young man whose intense religiosity emerged when he grew fascinated with the ancient holy mosques of Mecca and Medina.

With the blessing of the CIA and Saudi intelligence, and the active hand of the Ikhwan-al-Muslimeen, an international support network was set up. The hub of this informal network was established in Peshawar, Pakistan in the early 1980s through the "makhtab al-khadamaat" (Office of the Services), headed by a Jordanian, Abdullah Aezaam, who was a close associate of bin Laden.

Bin Laden, in turn, founded the Bayt ul-Ansaar (House of Volunteers)—a foundation that recruited and financed Arab volunteers willing to fight the Soviets in Afghanistan. Though the number of these Arabs (known as "Afghan Arabs") were very few compared to the other nationalities fighting in Afghanistan, these militants not only brought with them their brand of Islam, but also took back home their combat experience in the name of *jihad*. These militants who went back

home to Saudi Arabia are dreaded by Riyadh.

Bin Laden himself bankrolled Afghan mujahideen guerrillas fighting the Soviets through the 1980s. With the help of an Iraqi engineer, Mohammad Saad, bin Laden blasted massive tunnels into the Zazi mountains of Paktia province to establish the resistance's hospitals and arms dumps, and cut a mujahideen trail across the country to within 15 miles of Kabul. It is this Paktia "bunker" that the United States tried to hit on Aug. 20, 1998, when it launched a missile attack from the Arabian Sea. Throughout the 1980s and the 1990s, bin Laden forged a special relationship with the Pakistani ISI. A U.S.-based newspaper, *Pakistan Today*, reported in its July 23, 1999 issue that bin Laden had contributed 1 billion Pakistani rupees in support of Nawaz Sharif in the 1997 elections.

Bin Laden's organization, Al-Qaeda, is reportedly a loosely bound group, which includes his Arab followers and former "freedom fighters" who fought in Afghanistan. Al-Qaeda operatives have been accused of attacking American soldiers in Somalia, Yemen, and Saudi Arabia.

Afghan Drugs: Gold to the Taliban

by Ramtanu Maitra

In 1986, when the Soviet Red Army was struggling to gain control of Afghanistan, about 400 tons of opium were produced, accounting for almost 25% of the world's legal and illegal opium output. In 1999, a decade after the Red Army withdrew and seven years after the Soviet Union ceased to exist, Afghanistan, 70% under Taliban control, produced 4,600 tons of opium, accounting for 75% of the world's combined opium production. Furthermore, fully 97% of those 4,600 tons were produced in the areas under control of the Taliban "seekers of knowledge" (see **Table 1**).

There have been poppy fields in Afghanistan as far back as history can recall. Crimson poppies in the eastern part of Afghanistan, overflowing across the Durand Line into what

TABLE 1
Opium Production in Afghanistan
(Metric Tons)

Year	1986	1992	1996	1999
Afghanistan	400	640	1,230	4,600
World	159	3,389	4,100	7,300

Source: United Nations Drug Control Program.
1992 is the year that the Soviet Union ceased to exist.
1996 is the year that the Taliban got control of 70% of Afghanistan.
1999 is the year that opium production by the Taliban more than doubled.

were the Federally Administered Tribal Agencies (FATAs) of Pakistan, were there for all the travellers to the distant land to see. In Landi Kotal, the famed bazaar of drugs and arms on the Pakistan-Afghanistan border, mounds of opium could be seen. The drug was there when the British came in the 19th Century, and it is still there today.

But the opium explosion, which has crippled that part of Asia, and is steadily creeping upward into Central Asia to cripple it as well, occurred in the 1980s. Then, crimson poppies, producing dirty white opium, which gets converted and sold as powdery white heroin, provided the “cash” to fight the invading Soviets. Anyone, at least almost anyone, who was involved in that anti-Soviet crusade, has dipped into this precious cash to fight the Russians as well as to line his own pockets. Some, such as Sir George Bush, Oliver North, and other players in the Iran-Contra affair, were exposed, but most of them remain unknown.

Now, the Taliban is in control of virtually the entire poppy-growing area of Afghanistan. The drug is grown almost anywhere and everywhere. In 1997, for the first time, opium production was reported from northern provinces of Kunduz and Jawjan. The most prolific opium production is in the southeastern provinces of Helmand, Kandahar, and Ningarhar.

Ethnic Pushtoons, who dominate the Taliban rank and file, never used opium or heroin much, and they still do not use drugs. But, a lot of opium and heroin is making its way out eastward through Pakistan and northward through Central Asia. On Jan. 24, 1999, Commander of the Russian border troops in Tajikistan Lieutenant General Reznichenko told newsmen that along the Moskovsky and Pyandzh sections of the Tajik-Afghan border, several dozen tons of opium and two tons of pure heroin were stored, waiting to be taken into Tajikistan and then farther north on its way to Europe and beyond. Things have not gotten any better since General Reznichenko enlightened us. In fact, it has grown a lot worse. Narcotics has not only helped to fund old extremists groups, such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and the United Tajik Opposition, but also helped to launch new ones, such as the Islamic Movement of Tajikistan.

The drug’s reach does not confine itself to the so-called “bad guys,” but also involves those who are entrusted with the nation’s interest. It is not a secret, and it was spelled out recently in the Aug. 21 Bishkek summit where the Presidents of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan had assembled to formulate policies to deal with growing terrorism and extremism in the area, that officials at a very high level in Tajikistan are benefitting from drug trafficking. An eyewitness in Dushanbe, the Tajik capital, told the author that he found the Russian soldiers wining and dining in the most expensive restaurants in the city and flaunting U.S. dollar bills.

Taliban money is also showing up elsewhere. There were reports of Taliban bank accounts full with money in Bangladesh, a Muslim-majority state, where the Taliban-type orthodox Islam is being spread. The money, which originated from

FIGURE 2
Poppy-Growing Areas in Central Asia



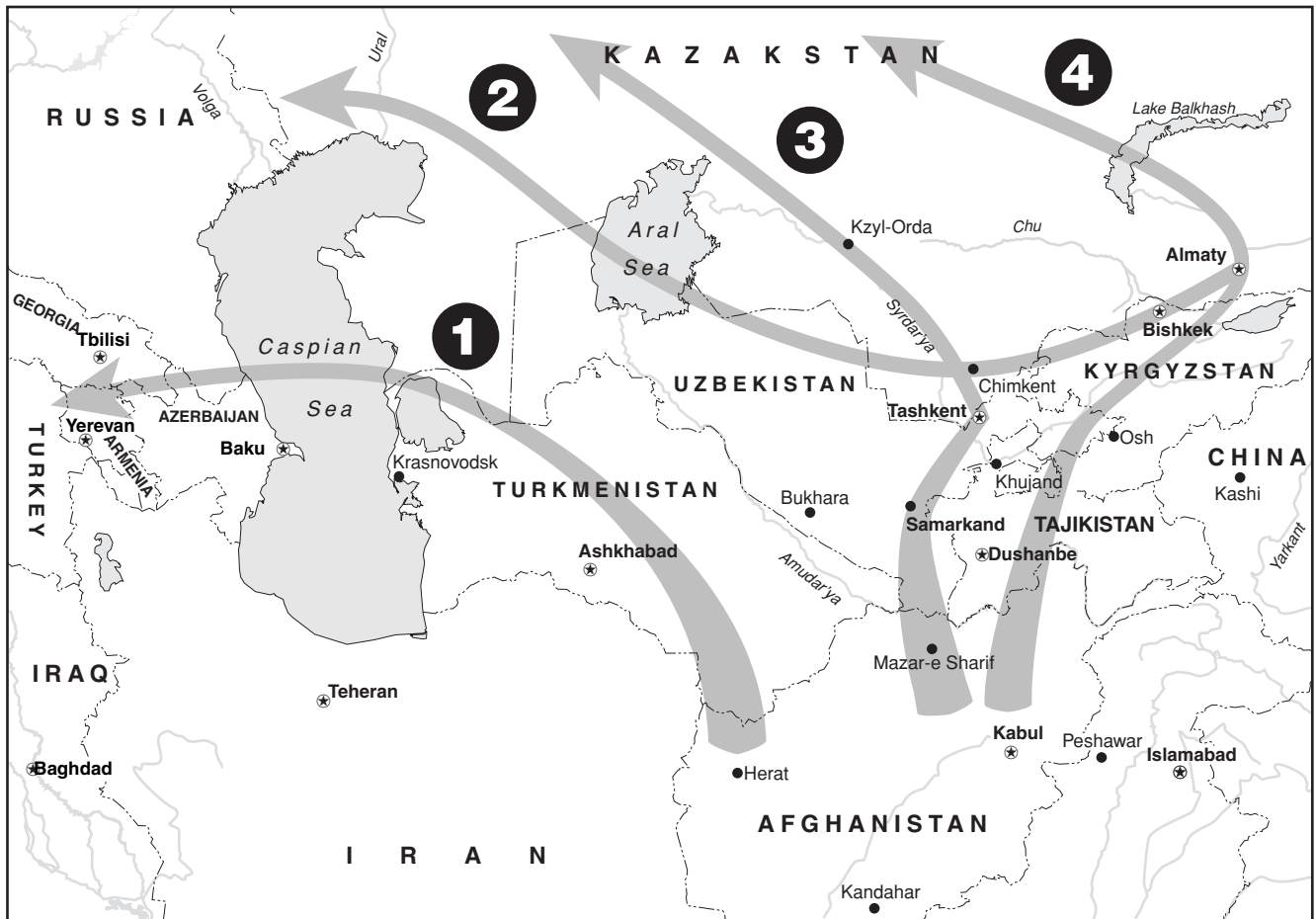
poppy fields, will be invested to train footsoldiers.

But, the Taliban drug operation has done worse. In Afghanistan, the Yemen-born Saudi terrorist Osama bin Laden is using the vast drug money to strengthen his *Al-Qaeda* (which means “military base”), and to train terrorists to fight against Russia in Chechnya and to even train Uighurs in Xinjiang province, China. Harkatul Mujahideen, based in Pakistan, hires mercenaries to carry out *jihad* in the Indian part of Kashmir. They, too, use the drug money generated in the Taliban-held part of Afghanistan. The Taliban trained and armed two other killer groups in Pakistan: the Sipah-e-Sahaba and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi. Both are Sunni groups, and like the Taliban, are involved in killing Shia Muslims. These outfits killed five Iranian officers in training by the Pakistan Air Force.

However, narcotics is like the genie out of the bottle. One never knows what harm it will cause next. In Pakistan, when the Soviet Army invaded Afghanistan in 1979, there were a handful of chronic users of heroin. Things changed quickly, though. As Pakistan leaped into the Afghan scene with arms and military expertise, and regional ambitions, the border

FIGURE 3

Opium and Heroin are Flowing out of Afghanistan/Central Asia into Europe and China



Route 1: Opium, mostly from Herat, Afghanistan to Turkey, for processing into heroin. **Route 2:** Heroin from northern Afghanistan and Tajikistan to western Europe through Estonia and Latvia. **Route 3:** Heroin from northern Afghanistan transported through Tashkent, Uzbekistan to western Europe, via Moscow and Tallinn, Estonia. This route feeds Chechnya as well. **Route 4:** Heroin from northern Afghanistan, Tajikistan, and Kazakhstan to western Europe via St. Petersburg.

between Afghanistan and Pakistan vanished. Along with million of Afghan refugees, drugs began to flow into the major Pakistani cities of Karachi, a port, and Lahore. In 1993, the last time a formal survey of drug addicts was carried out by the Pakistani authorities, it showed that 3.1 million Pakistanis were chronic users of drugs. The situation here, too, has gotten worse, and Pakistan has now perhaps the highest number of chronic heroin users on a per-capita basis of any country in the world.

Afghanistan is a dry country, where agriculture will always remain an extremely difficult proposition. The dry land, illiterate population, and an abysmal infrastructure do not spell hope. Monetarily, opium producers are way ahead of wheat producers (see **Table 2**). The Taliban have little interest in lifting this curse simply because it is the curse that got them

where they are now—in possession of 70% of a devastated country.

TABLE 2
Comparison between Wheat and Opium Revenues in Afghanistan

Year	Wheat Revenues from 5,000 m ² Land	Opium Revenues from 5,000 m ² Land
1986	\$52.75	\$1,050
1992	\$50.72	\$758.3
1996	\$85.0	\$955
1999	\$97.4	\$1,400

Source: United Nations Drug Control Program.