

II. International

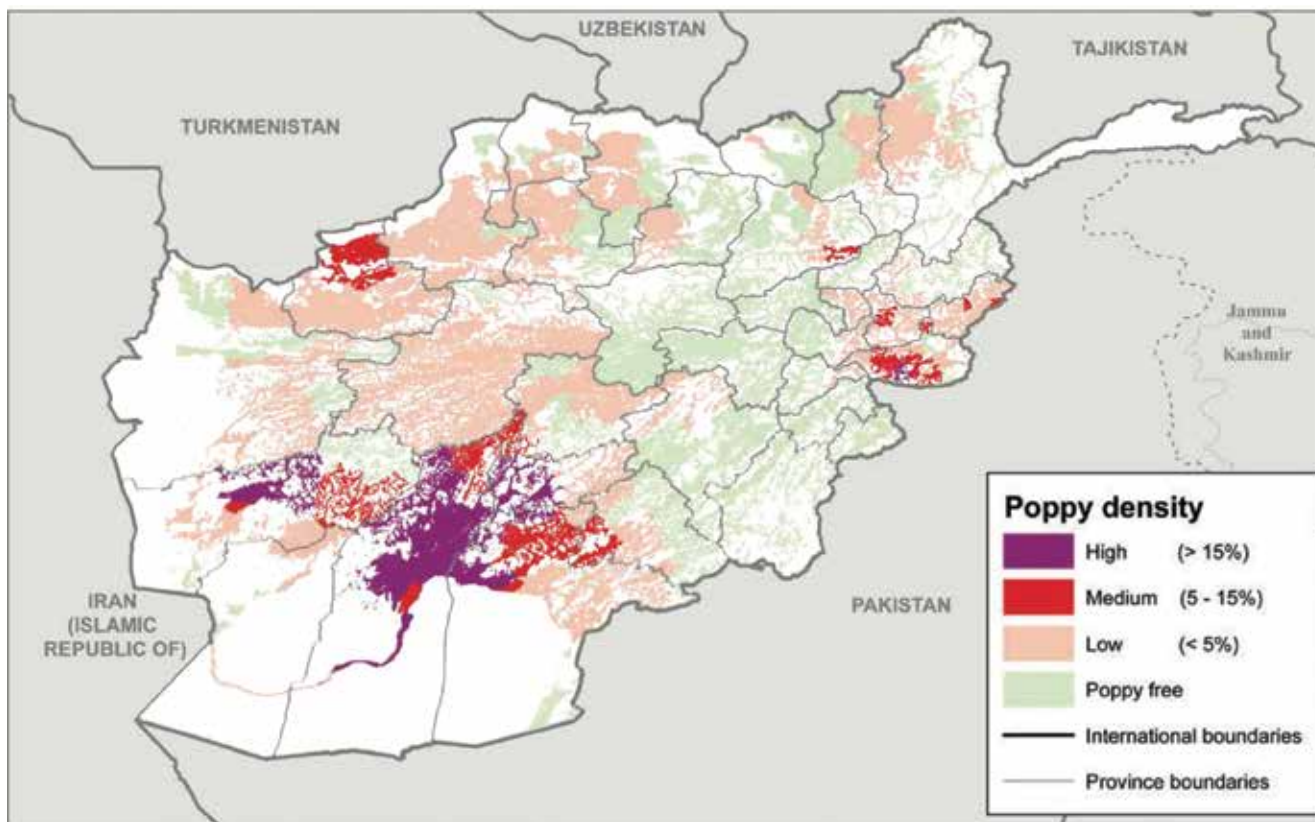
Afghanistan Shuts Down the West's Opium Fix

by Marcia Merry Baker

June 22—Earlier this month, satellite imagery has documented—if proof were needed—the dramatic drop in the area of opium poppy cultivation in the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA). The cultivated area dropped 99% during the last crop year (November 2022 planting, until the present), in the foremost

production state of Helmand Province, falling from 129,000 hectares down to 740. Helmand has accounted for as much as 70% of the annual opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan in recent times. The decrease in other provinces is on the same scale. In Nangarhar, opium poppy fields dropped from 7,000 hectares in

Density of Opium Poppy Cultivation on Agricultural Land, 2022



UNODC

In its [report](#) of June 6, AlcisGeo states that “an effective ban on poppy cultivation has been imposed in Afghanistan in 2023, and opium production will be negligible compared to 2022.” Its high-resolution satellite images (not presented here) show that in Helmand province, poppy cultivation has been reduced from more than 120,000 hectares in 2022 to less than 1,000 hectares in 2023—a reduction in this one province alone that surpasses any prior national poppy ban in Afghanistan, even the Taliban prohibition of 2000/01. Whereas in 2022, poppy cultivation in Helmand comprised 52% of agricultural land area with wheat at 45%, in 2023, poppy cultivation remains on only 1%, and wheat is now being cultivated on 94%.

2022 to only 865 this year.

Nationwide, the opium poppy area fell from over 230,000 hectares in 2022, down to just a few thousand hectares, located in outlying areas in many provinces. Farmers have planted wheat and some other crops in a significant share of the former poppy fields.

In early June, AlcisGeo, a Britain-based GIS firm, released dramatic satellite images and summary data concerning these areas. It posted a [report](#), on its findings: “Truly Unprecedented: The Taliban Drugs Ban v.2.0.”

Implementing the Opium Production Ban

In April 2022, Mullah Haibatullah Akhundzada, the Supreme Leader of Afghanistan, issued a decree banning the cultivation of opium poppy, and the government took steps to follow through. At an April 3 news conference in Kabul, Akhundzada announced:

If anyone violates the decree, the crop will be destroyed immediately and the violator will be treated according to Sharia law.

The ban prohibits trafficking, processing, and using of opiates, as well as proscribing poppy cultivation. It also forbids the production, use, and transit of other narcotics, including alcohol, heroin, Tablet K, and hashish. Along with the production ban, the Taliban government is conducting treatment programs for addiction. As of 2021, the time of the exit of the U.S./NATO forces, the drug addiction rate in Afghanistan had stood at an estimated 10%, meaning almost 4 million people among the total population of 37 million.

The last time a sweeping opium poppy eradication program was successful in Afghanistan was 2000–2001, when the Taliban and the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) collaborated to achieve an almost total eradication of poppy cultivation. Dr. Giuseppe “Pino” Arlacchi, the Executive Director of the UN Drug Control Program at that time (1997–2002), since merged into UNODC, extols the new reports of the current IEA achievement. He spoke of this at a June 10 international Schiller Institute conference, upon receiving the news about Afghanistan’s current poppy eradication program:

This is a major piece of information, because Afghanistan produces more than 90% of the heroin consumed in Europe, and it will have dramatic effects in the coming months on the drug market all



Schiller Institute

Dr. Giuseppe “Pino” Arlacchi, former Executive Director of the UN Drug Control Program (1997-2002), praises the success of the Afghan government in once again banning opium poppy production.

over Europe. It confirms what I said about 2001, that the intervention by American forces had a very negative effect on opium poppy production.

Arlacchi recalled that in 2000–2001, the UNODC successfully implemented a program under which the Taliban government banned opium production in exchange for aid to promote alternative crop production. Arlacchi, who was in Afghanistan and personally involved in the operation, has reported that a mere \$300 million was needed for the poppy substitution transition. This led to an almost complete elimination of the opium fields in the country. But then the U.S., the UK and NATO invaded, and fostered the comeback of dope production, which soon attained very high levels again.

Arlacchi explained what was involved in this de-volution:

[In September 2001,] the U.S. invaded Afghanistan, and the first thing [Defense Secretary] Mr. Rumsfeld and his friends did was to make an agreement with the warlords who were controlling the drug production, in order to fight so-called terrorism in Afghanistan. It meant a green light for the production of narcotics—the Taliban were completely out of the picture at the time—and drug production skyrocketed again.

British occupying forces came to be in charge of Helmand Province, and the UK protection of opium production became notorious.

Now, today, the Taliban have succeeded, and are committed to keeping their nation free of the dope

scourge. In the first few chaotic months of Fall 2021, a sizable area of Helmand and other parts of Afghanistan continued to be planted to poppy. Estimates ranged up to 233,000 hectares nationwide. The Taliban government laid plans to roll this back. Beginning with the April 2022 announcement of the poppy cultivation ban, they took a series of actions over the ensuing months to follow through. To begin with, a grace period of two months was observed, to end the 2021–2022 opium poppy crop year, and make it the last ever. The government made an effort to supply wheat and other seeds, as well as other crop support inputs.

Over the Summer of 2022, measures were also taken against methamphetamine processing and trafficking. Ephedra crops and hundreds of ephedrine labs were destroyed across the country.

The West Objects, Complains

During 2021–2022, before the Kabul anti-opium poppy measures took hold, Western political circles provided no support for the shutdown, through such needed measures as better seeds, funding for crop transition, etc., but instead waged a blame campaign against the Taliban for the 2021–2022 opium crop. Under the headline “How the Taliban’s ‘War on Drugs’ Could Backfire,” the Feb. 1, 2023 issue of *Foreign Policy* magazine [declared](#):

The purported ban on opium and ephedra devastates poor farmers, enriches the Taliban, and has done nothing to curb addiction.

Even the UN’s Office on Drugs and Crime expressed an opium-is-here-to-stay viewpoint in a November 2022 UNODC [Research Brief](#): “Opium Cultivation in Afghanistan; Latest Findings and Emerging Threats.”

OUTLOOK : Most of the 2023 opium crop must be sowed by early November 2022; farmers will take decisions on whether and how much opium poppy to plant amid severe economic disruption

and continued humanitarian crisis, continued high prices for opium and uncertainty about how the de facto authorities will enforce the cultivation ban.

Over the past year, the commitment by Afghanistan’s Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock (MAIL) to shut down opium poppy cultivation was actually downplayed in the UNODC’s Fall 2022 report, which stated outright that it was questionable whether “the drug ban will be effectively enforced.”

This sickening statement was made during the same timeframe when the U.S. Federal Reserve retained more than \$7 billion in Afghan central bank (DAB) foreign exchange reserves that it had illegally seized. Intensified sanctions and other measures undercut the



Functioning as part of the Washington-London “special relationship,” the United States Institute of Peace blames the Taliban government for banning opium poppy cultivation, citing “negative economic and humanitarian consequences” for growing wheat instead!

ability of the Afghan government (which the U.S. does not recognize) and economy to function, including its capacity to export, and to import food, fertilizer, and other necessities.

However, now at the point of the 2023 harvest-time, the success of the Taliban opium ban is irrefutable, despite all the Western lies and obstruction. Even the BBC, earlier this month, carried the news. It reported the evaluation of David Mansfield, an expert on Afghanistan’s illicit drug trade, who cited the AlcisGeo satellite imagery, and confirmed that poppy cultivation had been reduced to levels not seen since 2001. According to Mansfield:

It is likely that cultivation will be less than 20%



USMC/Mark Stroud

Prior to the pullout of the U.S. Marines, Afghans are engaged in cultivating a vast poppy field south of U.S. Marine Corps/Georgian Army Forward Combat Operating Base Shir Ghazi, in Helmand Province, April 14, 2012.

of what it was in 2022. The scale of the reduction will be unprecedented.

On June 7 the BBC reported that its own on-the-ground investigation throughout Afghanistan, especially in the provinces of Nangarhar, Kandahar, and Helmand, also showed the marked decrease in poppy cultivation.

However, there is a new Western narrative, intended to cast blame on the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan government. The new line is that the Kabul ban on cultivating opium poppy prohibits poor farmers from making good money growing dope! It consigns farmers to remain poor by growing wheat and other crops, which brings in less money.

This narrative emanates from London, but a good example of it is the June 8 posting of an [article](#) on the website of the United States Institute of Peace (USIP), headlined, “The Taliban’s Successful Opium Ban Is Bad for Afghans and the World,” by William Byrd, Ph.D. The sub-headline states his thesis:

The ban is not a counter-narcotics victory and will have negative economic and humanitarian consequences, potentially leading to a refugee crisis.

In short, he says the farmers need the money from growing dope, and if you ban opium poppy, you are

causing an economic shock causing hardship and emigration. This viewpoint is all the more venal since the USIP was chartered by the U.S. Congress in 1984 and functions as part of the Washington-London “special relationship.”

West’s Deliberate Food Shock

The current agriculture and food situation in Afghanistan is an emergency—a deliberate shock. This comes about *not* because of positive initiatives from Kabul, such as shutting down opium poppy cultivation, but because baseline food and humanitarian aid has been drastically reduced from the UN’s World Food Program and related multinational agencies, at the very same time that

the economy is kept in permanent crisis because of the deliberate Western policies such as the U.S./NATO sanctions, and the continued U.S. confiscation of the national assets of the Afghan central bank.

Over 95% of the Afghan population of 37 million do not have a reliable, sufficient supply of food. Some 15 million are in a phase of serious need for food aid, as categorized by the UN. Until 2023 they were receiving emergency rations through the World Food Program. However, since April, the rations have been cut off for 8 million of these people, who have now been thrown into desperation, with the threat of starvation. On June 18 the London-based non-government operated Save the Children organization issued an emergency appeal, that aid must be resumed.

But even the budgeted international funding goals have been reduced. In a statement issued June 5, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs said that its 2023 aid plan for Afghanistan would be reduced to \$3.2 billion from the estimated \$4.6 billion it had projected earlier this year. It is likely even the \$3.2 billion will not be fully funded.

To recap: the current food shock is deliberate, and needless. Interim international aid has been needed in Afghanistan, because as of 2021, the U.S./NATO occupying forces had come to account for some 75% of the income for the Afghan central government’s operating budget, all of which was dropped overnight in August



CC/Quarti

Infestation of the Moroccan locust threatens to destroy, potentially, 1.2 million tons of wheat, a quarter of the expected annual harvest.

2021. National reconstruction is the goal, and can be done, but the aversive financial environment of sanctions and asset seizure is taking its toll. The current aid reduction means not only less food assistance for those in need, but less assistance to agriculture to grow more food.

In addition, there is an immediate agriculture crisis, in that there is an outbreak of locusts, affecting 8 of the 34 provinces so far, including Balkh and other northern wheat-basket provinces. International anti-locust assistance has not been delivered on the scale required. The insect is the Moroccan locust, one of the worst. The infestation threatens to destroy, potentially, 1.2 million tons of wheat, which is a quarter of the expected annual harvest.

The Afghanistan representative of the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), Richard Trenchard, said May 10:

The last two big outbreaks, 20 and 40 years ago, cost Afghanistan an estimated 8% and 25% of its total annual wheat production. Harvest forecasts this year are the best we have seen for the last three years—but this outbreak threatens to destroy all these recent gains and dramatically worsen the food insecurity situation later this year and into next year.

Even absent the locust plague, Afghanistan has been producing only in the range of 4–5 million tons of wheat a year, and needs to add imports of wheat and

wheat flour in the range of over 3 million tons annually—through aid, or commercially. Much of this comes from Kazakhstan, since Pakistan, the previous principal import source, has been devastated by floods.

The Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock has taken steps, with little means, to boost any short-term grain and food output possible, including fighting the locusts despite the constraints of lack of resources. Otherwise Kabul has initiated the construction of the Qosh Tapa Canal in the north, to eventually irrigate some 550,000 hectares of cropland. This project will be enough to end the national food gap, but the completion date is sometime later this decade. Afghanistan and Uzbekistan have formed a task force for hydraulic engineers to work on a canal design to minimize water loss, given the limited water resources in the shared Amu Darya Basin.

There are certain other bilateral initiatives for economic benefit, including food from India, China, Russia, and elsewhere. On April 14, the Fourth Meeting of Foreign Ministers of Afghanistan’s Neighboring States issued the “[Samarkand Declaration](#)” of support to Afghanistan.” Among the many points in the declaration is the statement:

The Parties expressed their deep concern about the humanitarian situation and the poor economic situation in the country, declaring their readiness to continue providing humanitarian assistance to the Afghan people and providing support for the economic reconstruction of Afghanistan.

On the key matter of the national financial system, it is notable that on June 16, China’s Ambassador to Afghanistan, Wang Yu, met with the Acting Governor of the Afghanistan Bank, Mullah Hidayatullah Badri, formerly the Acting Finance Minister, to discuss banking relations, business, the economy, and trade.

The cynical rationalization by Western agencies for reducing food, humanitarian, and agriculture aid is that the Taliban disapprove of Afghan women working in aid agencies. Whatever their view, does creating starvation help those women and girls?