Afghanistan's Cultivation Conundrum: Will Federally Licensing Opium Poppy Cultivation Eradicate Afghanistan's Opium Poppy Crisis?

By Michael Stoll

One of the most daunting geopolitical challenges facing the U.S.-led international community is the opium poppy crisis enveloping Afghanistan. Not only does it supply 93% of the world’s opium and heroin, but it also finances a great deal of the Taliban insurgency endeavoring to overtake Afghanistan. Due to its centuries-long strategic importance to the likes of Britain, the U.S.S.R., and now the United States, theories about how to save Afghanistan and repress this quandary abound. But it is one, that proposed by the International Council on Security and Development (ICOS, formerly the Senlis Council), which has captured the attention of the world. Its 2005 “Feasibility Study on Opium Licensing in Afghanistan” perpetuates the notion that federally licensing the cultivation of Afghan opium poppy for sale to the pharmaceutical industry will lift poor farmers out of abject poverty and provide stringent government oversight of a currently illicit industry. It has since become something of a panacea for the vast majority of journalists and writers commenting on Afghanistan’s narcotics problem. This notion, however, is flawed for several reasons, chief of which is the fact that the cultivation of poppy and the production of opium are at the root of most problems in Afghan society. If the government of Afghanistan (GOA), its neighboring countries, and the international community are truly committed to staving off this ill, it would behoove them to increase the capacity of the institutions capable of strengthening Afghan society. Once capable, these institutions will be in a better position to prevent the cultivation of

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Afghanistan’s opium poppy altogether.

Like other countries plagued by economies dependent upon the cultivation of the main raw ingredients of narcotics (for example coca in Bolivia and Columbia, and opium in Myanmar), Afghanistan suffers from a lack of competent security forces, a corrupt government, an ineffective judiciary, and a lack of infrastructure. These maladies have created a permissive environment for opium poppy cultivation — and they are anything but easy fixes. But until the root causes of these problems are analyzed and corrected, combating opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan will be a futile exercise.

This paper first discusses Afghanistan’s recent history of opium poppy cultivation and then puts forth ICOS’ idea for federally licensing opium poppy cultivation. It then uses Afghanistan’s regional ally, India, as a case study of federally licensed opium poppy cultivation and highlights what conditions must and must not be present in order for a program of this magnitude to be implemented. Next, it refutes ICOS’ main points on who cultivates opium poppy in Afghanistan. Lastly, it suggests pragmatic ways to systematically eradicate opium poppy cultivation.

I. A History of Afghan Opium Poppy Cultivation

Afghanistan’s present narcotics situation owes itself not just to three decades of war, both defensive and civil in nature, but the anarchy left in its wake. Prior to 1978, “Afghanistan was self-sufficient in food production. Agricultural production also accounted for 30 percent of exports, earning the country US$100 million annually in much needed foreign exchange.” 6 This changed, though, when the Soviet Red Army marched across Uzbekistan’s Friendship Bridge on December 27, 1979 and spent the next decade mining the farms and pastures of the countryside, destroying the irrigation channels which nourished the rural farming communities, killing livestock, and destroying the road networks. 7

At about the same time the Soviets were marching back across Uzbekistan’s Bridge of Friendship in disgrace ten years later, Pakistan, Iran, and Turkey
were coming under intense international pressure to decrease their opium poppy cultivation and heroin production. As production in these countries decreased, farmers and traffickers realized that the decrepit state of Afghanistan would more than adequately replace their lost bases of operation.

The anarchic aftermath of the Soviet invasion and the civil war of the 1990s in which the Taliban prevailed stripped the state of its ability to enforce the rule of law. In the absence of a stable environment, a dangerous mix of regional and local power-brokers such as warlords and drug traffickers (some of whom today are Afghan parliamentarians, provincial and district governors, or chiefs of police of the main poppy producing provinces) were left to fill the power-vacuum. It is these men, and not the oft-cited opium poppy farmers, who are profiting massively from the explosion in opium poppy cultivation.

II. ICOS’ Proposals and Recommendations

In response to the above situation thirty years in the making, the ICOS proposes to break the vicious economic, political, and social cycle of Afghanistan’s opium economy by implementing a federal licensing scheme which would legitimize the cultivation of Afghanistan’s opium poppy. ICOS contends that the program would provide stringent government oversight to a currently illicit industry while simultaneously bringing impoverished farmers out of the throes of poverty.

Its proposals are built on the premise that they could alleviate the current social, political, and economic milieu by siphoning off black market opium which not only helps to fund the Taliban insurgency, but enriches a small minority of land owners and the political elite. From a political standpoint, the ICOS posits that its licensing plan would bring much-needed revenue into the coffers of the state (in the form of taxes and sales of their product to the pharmaceutical industry) and aid in its building. It would also decrease the contempt for government officials and the police as their role would switch from that of eradicators to merely monitors. This role reversal would in turn lessen the culture of corruption within the government and security sector as these institutions would no longer

After the Taliban-instigated opium poppy ban in 2001, the farm-gate price per kilogram skyrocketed from approximately US$28 to US$300 per kilogram.
need to solicit bribes in return for not eradicating certain farms. Economically and socially, it would allow farmers to derive a legitimate, immediate, and steady income while shifting their jobs from a currently illegal and illegitimate industry into a legal and ethical one.\textsuperscript{11}

The ICOS states “widespread poverty in the country is the prime motivation for farmers to cultivate opium poppy.”\textsuperscript{12} According to the ICOS’ former Executive Director, Emmanuel Reinert, “For the moment, Afghanistan relies heavily on opium poppy cultivation for survival.”\textsuperscript{13} Its popularity among the landed poor stems from the fact that it is an incredibly resilient crop requiring little to no attention. Therefore, the lack of farming equipment and irrigation throughout the country will not hurt the end product. Secondly, and more obviously, it is the ultimate cash crop. After the Taliban-instituted opium poppy ban in 2001, the farm-gate price per kilogram skyrocketed from approximately US$28 to US$300 per kilogram.\textsuperscript{14} ICOS believes that federally licensing the cultivation of opium poppy for sale to the pharmaceutical industry for use in morphine, codeine, and other essential medicines is a pragmatic proposal because those living in the rural parts of Afghanistan are living an existence which precludes adequate means to provide food and money for their families. The licensing scheme would alleviate this problem while simultaneously providing government oversight. In addition, the program would increase the government’s revenues, in the form of added taxes, allowing it to be able to afford to build up the country and improve the infrastructure countrywide.

III. India’s Licit Opium Poppy Cultivation Experience

Much like the ICOS proposes to have in Afghanistan, India manages its licit opium cultivation program through a local control mechanism, the lambardar. The lambardar is responsible for documenting the details of who is licensed to legally grow opium poppy in that particular district. The lambardar’s data is then scrutinized at the national level by the Central Bureau of Narcotics (CBN).\textsuperscript{15}

India allows the legal cultivation of opium in the states of Madyah Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh. Each state is then subdivided into districts. Each farmer in a district wishing to cultivate opium legally must apply with his district lambardar, which in turn determines how many licenses will be granted based upon existing stocks of opium and domestic and foreign pharmaceutical company orders.\textsuperscript{16} In addition, the lambardar decides the size of the plots of land to be licensed. In the 1999-2000 growing season, 0.2 hectares were granted to each opium poppy farmer.\textsuperscript{17} The ICOS proposes a
similar local control mechanism for its program in Afghanistan, but instead of a lambardar, they believe that a shura or jirga (council) led by local elders would be effective in overseeing the program at the local level.\textsuperscript{18}

Using a mixture of satellite imagery and extensive manpower (the CBN employed 2,000 employees in 2001) the CBN closely monitors the farmers involved in the licit opium cultivation industry.\textsuperscript{19} But even with this amalgam of technology and manpower, the CBN are unable to prevent what, according to the U.S. State Department, is between a twenty and thirty percent diversion of licitly cultivated opium poppy to the black market.\textsuperscript{20} It is for this reason that India has greatly decreased the amount of land set aside for the licit cultivation of opium poppy from 21,141 hectares in 2001 to 6,796 in 2006. Additionally, the amount of licenses granted was slashed from 105,697 in 2003 to 72,478 in 2006.\textsuperscript{21}

But even these reductions in land and licenses devoted to licit opium poppy cultivation have not impeded opium poppy from being cultivated in isolated parts of the country outside the purview of the Indian government. Remote areas in the northeastern part of the country along the Jharkhand, India-West Bengal border, are under the control of Maoist insurgents.\textsuperscript{22} Much like the insurgent-controlled southern Afghan provinces where ninety eight percent of the country’s opium poppy is cultivated,\textsuperscript{23} the Maoist insurgent dominated northeast is beyond the Indian government’s reach. This allows them to cultivate opium (or protect those who cultivate it) at will. And like their counterparts in Afghanistan, a portion of the proceeds from the drug trade help to finance their insurgency.\textsuperscript{24}

The Indian case study paints a bleak picture for what would certainly occur in Afghanistan were it to adopt the ICOS’ licensing scheme. In addition to lacking the capacity India has to monitor the licit cultivation of opium poppy, there is currently a much stronger insurgency raging in Afghanistan which has a vested interest in making sure opium poppy continues to be cultivated; the Taliban derive upwards of 40 percent of their finances from the cultivation of opium.\textsuperscript{25} Coupled together, these two factors will preclude Afghanistan from effectively managing an opium poppy licensing program.
IV. Refutation of the ICOS’ Main Points: Is Poverty the Primary Motivating Factor?

“So the usual myth so much publicized in Afghanistan and outside - we cultivate opium because we are poor - besides being an insult to Africa and the other countries and the other regions which are even poorer and they don’t cultivate opium, is even wrong statistically. The per capita income of the provinces which have abandoned opium is about half of the traditional per capita income of the provinces where opium is intense - the south.”

It is indisputable that Afghanistan is incredibly poor, but the ICOS’ contention that poverty is the primary motivating factor for farmers to cultivate opium poppy is in contrast with the information gleaned from the ground. According to Ambassador Thomas Schweich, former Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary (PDAS) for the Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL) at the U.S. State Department (the agency which oversees the counter narcotics efforts in Afghanistan), poverty is not the reason for opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan. “The Senlis Council’s notion that poverty is the primary motivating factor for opium poppy cultivation is just not true at all,” he said. “Look at a map and you’ll see that it just doesn’t make any sense. Nearly all the cultivation takes place in the insurgent-protected south.”

The misdiagnosis of not only who is primarily cultivating opium poppy, but for what reason they are doing so, will do nothing but obviate policy makers’ ability to implement effective and issue-specific solutions to the raging illegal opium poppy crisis.

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) concurs, reporting that it does not appear that poverty is the primary motivating factor for opium poppy cultivation. Over ninety eight percent of the 157,000 hectares devoted to opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan in 2008 were grown in the restive southern provinces of Helmand (at 103,000 hectares of cultivation, it would be, if it were a country, the largest poppy producing country in the world), Kandahar, Nimruz, Uruzgan, Farah, Daykundi and Zabul. The remaining two percent is spread out in provinces such as Herat, Badghis, Faryab, Baghlan, Kabul, Laghman, and Kunar. Nangarhar,
Afghanistan’s second leading opium poppy cultivating province in 2007, is now poppy free, making eighteen out of Afghanistan’s thirty-four provinces poppy free.31

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>2007 Annual Household Income of Non-Poppy Farmers (US$)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Central</td>
<td>2,674</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eastern</td>
<td>1,753</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northeastern</td>
<td>2,290</td>
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<tr>
<td>Northern</td>
<td>1,862</td>
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<tr>
<td>Southern</td>
<td>3,382</td>
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<tr>
<td>Western</td>
<td>2,273</td>
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The southern provinces are producing almost the entirety of the nation’s opium poppy and are now plagued by an insurgency, and, prior to the explosion in opium poppy cultivation, were better off financially than the rest of the country.32 Due mostly to the Helmand River Valley, the south has always been the most fertile part of the country. Large-scale irrigation networks emanate from the river and nourish the farmlands throughout the southern provinces. Additionally, they have a more developed road network, making it easier to get crops and products to the markets.33 As such, it cannot be argued that the region became wealthier than the rest of the country due to the explosion in opium poppy cultivation there. Non-poppy farmers in the south earn nearly US$700 more per year than their counterparts in the next wealthiest part of the country, the central region. They also earn nearly US$1,600 more per year than their counterparts in the poorest part of the country, the East; see table above (source: 2008 Afghanistan Opium Survey).

Were opium poppy cultivation positively correlated with poverty, it would stand to reason that cultivation would not only be taking place on a large percentage of Afghanistan’s arable land, but also be most prevalent in the poorest parts of the country. However, neither contention is true. According to the 2008 UNODC Opium Survey, opium poppy is cultivated on only four percent of the country’s arable land.34 Additionally, the poorest parts of the country, the eastern and northern provinces, are almost entirely poppy free.

The ICOS’ misdiagnosis of not only who is primarily cultivating opium poppy, but for what reason they are doing so, will do nothing but obviate policy makers’ ability to implement effective and issue-specific solutions to the raging illegal opium poppy crisis. As the vast majority of the opium poppy is not cultivated by impoverished sharecropping farmers, but rather
by larger and better off farms (many of which, according to Schweich, are “industrial-size poppy farms owned by government opportunists and Taliban sympathizers”35) in the more prosperous, fertile, and insurgent-laden southern provinces, a licensing scheme makes no sense at all. These farms would have no incentive to switch from the lucrative illicit industry they chose to join (as opposed to being forced into it by circumstance) to a far less profitable and highly regulated one, especially since the value of licit opium poppy is far less than that of the illicit. Additionally, a program of this magnitude would bring into the industry thousands of farmers from the central, northern, western, and eastern regions of the country who are currently engaged in the cultivation of traditional crops such as wheat, dates, and other fruits, thereby vastly increasing the amount of land devoted to the cultivation of opium poppy and further exacerbating food shortages in Afghanistan and other Southwest Asian states.

V. Policy Recommendations

It is imperative to implement a counter narcotics strategy which addresses the factors directly enabling the cultivation of opium poppy. This includes tackling narcotics corruption at the highest reaches of the Karzai administration, improving the security and justice institutions, increasing the intensity of demand reduction programs, and offering incentives to the rest of the country in order to keep other regions from contemplating cultivating opium poppy. Aerial eradication of one of the Taliban’s primary source of revenue must coincide with the above.

A. Accountability

International relations theory posits that survival is of the utmost importance to political actors. As such, they do not always implement policies that are best for their society in the long run. They may “depend upon policies that appeal to the short-term special interests and narrow constituencies than upon policies meant to address broader and more long-term social interests.”36
Such is the case with Afghan President Hamid Karzai, who has been an ineffective ally in rooting out those in the government who either tacitly or directly support the drugs trade. This inability stems from his weakness and unwillingness to remove people in the government who are either close friends, political allies, or they wield so much power in a certain region of the country (particularly the south/southeast; traditional home of the Pashtuns, of which Karzai counts himself) that vice their support, he would lose his grip on power.

The main reason for President Karzai’s inability to exert a strong sense of leadership on his constituents throughout the country is his incessant fear of reprisal from the people of the Pashtun, poppy producing southern provinces. In the last election, 95 percent of the people in these provinces voted for Karzai. Clamping down on their opium poppy revenues would anger these constituents, imperiling his political survival so close to the upcoming presidential election in late 2009.

Not only does Karzai owe much of his political survival to his Pashtun brethren in the south, but to the U.S.-led international community as well. This support, in the form of training, construction, and money, is vital to Karzai’s survival and is much easier to manipulate than the support of the Pashtun South. As such, money spent on construction projects, training, and other material support should be dependent upon Karzai achieving clear U.S. devised benchmarks, chief of which should be arresting and trying narcotics targets on the top of the totem poll instead of the usual farmer or low level trafficker.

B. The Police

The Afghan National Police (ANP) is still constrained (and will most likely continue to be for the next several years) by a multitude of factors, chief of which are corruption, a lack of training, and a lack of equipment. In order for the police to even approach the level of capability needed to address the opium poppy crisis enveloping Afghanistan, these deficiencies must be addressed.

1. Corruption

The ANP is effectively the face of the government at the local/district level. In small villages where there is little to no government presence, the police are responsible for providing a modicum of security, including arresting those trafficking narcotics through or near their district. But their ability to
perform these functions has been constrained by the corruption that pervades the forces throughout the fractured, ethnically diverse country. “More than 90 per cent of the police are corrupt,” said a Kabul businessman, interviewed while visiting Mazar-e-Sharif on a buying trip. “Last year my shop in Kabul was robbed. After the robbery I found the identity card of one of the local police in my shop. When I brought it to the police station, the commander took it off me, and warned me not to tell anyone or else my life would be at risk.” The fact is the police are perceived as part of the problem and not, as they should be, part of the solution.

The vast majority of the corruption stems from the fact that the police are not compensated fairly, or in most cases at all, for the risk they assume on a daily basis. Seventy dollars per month hardly seems an adequate salary to pay a police officer charged with preventing the production or trafficking of drugs in Sangin District, Helmand Province. Without sufficient salaries, the police are forced to solicit bribes and let drug traffickers pass checkpoints, often times with heroin or opium laden vehicles, in both poppy free and poppy producing provinces. Until the issue of adequate payment to the police is resolved, they will continue to solicit bribes not only from drug traffickers and other problematic individuals, but innocent Afghans traveling the cratered unsafe roads of Afghanistan.

2. Training

Another reason for the ANP’s inability to combat the drug trade is their lack of training. As a nascent force with no history of organized policing, the ANP require the presence of a strong police training contingent. NATO had over 5,000 professional police men and women training a Kosovar police force comprised of approximately 6,500 in the 1990s. That is nearly one trainer for every 1.3 Kosovar police officer. In contrast, Afghanistan, a much larger country with a force of 82,000, has only 700 police trainers, amounting approximately to one trainer for every 114 ANP.

Continuing to fund Afghanistan’s security forces and working to establish more parity between the trainers and trainees will allow the U.S.-led Coalition to help them put an Afghan face on the provision of security. As General Petraeus said recently, “success will require a long term commitment from the U.S.” This long-term commitment entails, among other things, training the police forces to handle their own security requirements, including those related to the drug trade.
3. Equipment

Eliminating the entirety of the corruption and instituting more thorough police training programs will do nothing if, when deployed on their own, the police are unable to procure the proper equipment to combat drug traffickers infiltrating and exfiltrating the porous Afghan border with narcotics or precursor chemicals such as acetic anhydride (vital for the conversion of opium into heroin). Using old Soviet weaponry, which is often times rusted and in many cases not working, the ANP are no match for the superiorly armed adversaries they face on a daily basis. The Taliban-protected drug traffickers and heroin conversion labs have at their disposal a plethora of Hilux vehicles able to traverse the rough and foreboding terrain, a glut of AK 47’s and ammunition, and critically, heavier weaponry such as rocket propelled grenades (RPG’s) and mortars.

To combat this deficiency in equipment, the Afghan government and U.S.-led international community must stand up a supply and distribution system that would provide the government with a more efficient and transparent means of procuring and distributing to its police the weapons, vehicles, and uniforms they need in order to conduct operations against narcotics-traffickers and those that are operating conversion labs. Accountability would place both parties in good stead, as they would know not just how many crates of ammo, uniforms, or night vision goggles are being distributed, but also who is getting them.

C. The Justice System

The Government of Afghanistan and the U.S. Government have established the Counternarcotics Justice Center (CNJC) in Kabul, which comprises holding facilities for before, during, and after trials at the newly established Central Narcotics Tribunal (CNT). The CNT has national jurisdiction and presides over cases involving more than two kilograms of narcotics. Prosecutors, judges, investigators, and other such personnel working at the CNJC are recruited, trained, vetted, and mentored by the United States. While the capacity to try narcotics offenders in Kabul is essential, the capital city should not hold a monopoly on this capability. Currently, all-encompassing justice facilities such as the CNJC are not found at the provincial level and only

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four provinces (Herat, Balkh, Nangarhar, and Konduz) employ trainers who mentor prosecutors and others involved in the justice system. Until judicial facilities and an aptitude for incarcerating, holding, trying, and sentencing high value narcotics offenders is built and fostered at the provincial level, the courtrooms and jails of Afghanistan will continue to be inhabited by the same people; low level farmers and traffickers of little to no consequence.

D. Incentives, Incentives, Incentives

Economist William Easterly aptly stated, “People respond to incentives, all the rest is just commentary.” Nowhere does this statement ring truer than the poppy-free and nearly poppy-free provinces of Afghanistan. As mentioned previously in this paper, ninety eight percent of Afghanistan’s opium poppy cultivation takes place in the restive southern provinces while a negligible two percent is sewn throughout the rest of the country. In order at the very minimum to keep the status quo and prevent the current eighteen poppy-free and nine nearly poppy-free provinces from lapsing into cultivating status, the people of these areas need incentives to stay poppy free. Empirical evidence illustrates numerous crops are potentially more profitable than opium poppy. “In Thailand, the substitution of flowers for opium poppy has led to profits per square metre being increased by over fifty times. In Pakistan, onion has proven to be more profitable crop than opium poppy, whilst in Lebanon, garlic has been the more profitable alternative. Crops such as apricots, apples, black cumin, grapes, pomegranates, and melons can now garner similar prices to opium poppy. And because of the severe food shortage, wheat prices have sharply increased in the 2007-2008 timeframe. However, these crops require sustained investment and mentoring. As such, the approximately US$300 million investment in the agriculture sector out of a total US$15 billion over the last six years is hardly emblematic of an effort to improve this vital sector of Afghan life. Currently, less is spent in Afghanistan in terms of GDP than has been on nearly all of the major international crises of the last century.

Increasing this aid is the key to rebuilding the irrigation networks which were destroyed during the Soviet invasion. Sustained investment in this type of...
infrastructure would mitigate the effects of droughts because crops would have a guaranteed source of water. Investing in roads out to the rural parts of the country so the farmers are able to get their products to market, providing agricultural mentoring in the planting of wheat, saffron, pomegranates, and dates, and giving agricultural subsidies to farmers for seeds, fertilizer, and equipment could help not only to make Afghanistan self sufficient in food, but also an exporter of it. This investment would increase the country’s revenue and prevent Afghans from joining the narcotics industry or the Taliban insurgency for pay. Additionally, the employment opportunities generated by these investments could secure steady paychecks.

E. Demand Reduction

The Afghan opium poppy crisis has spread like wild fire in the south mainly because of a huge demand for the product, and little risk for those who cultivate, produce, and traffic it. However, at the expense of focusing on the source of the problem — the demand — governments expend the most resources on the eradication of the supply network because it yields more tangible results.\textsuperscript{53} This situation is no less different in Afghanistan. The amount being spent on supply-side eradication of the opium poppy industry dwarfs what is being spent on demand reduction. The U.S. government “contributes several million dollars annually to demand reduction programs.”\textsuperscript{54} But “several million” from the US$326 million 2007-2008 fiscal year U.S. counternarcotics budget is but a drop in the bucket.\textsuperscript{55}

In Afghanistan, as in some other majority Muslim societies, it may be possible to leverage religious values against domestic narcotics use.\textsuperscript{56} As such, an increase in the intensity of the information operations, publicizing the fact that over a million Afghan citizens are using this harmful product and ruining their lives and the future prospects of the country, needs to take place.\textsuperscript{57} But outside of Afghanistan, in countries such as Britain, Russia, or France, among many others, politicians need to be less attuned to their own political survival and instead make it more difficult for those who hunger for Afghanistan’s heroin. Until the purchasers of Afghanistan’s opium based derivatives are punished more severely, they will have no incentive to curb their habits, continually providing a steady stream of business for the opium poppy farms in southern Afghanistan.

F. Aerial Eradication

The alternative to aerial eradication, manual eradication, brings with it a host of its own problems, all of which are more serious than those associ-
ated with aerial eradication. The police, who are ill-equipped and trained, are required to go into the insurgent-protected South to destroy one of, if not the main, sources of the Taliban’s revenue. This is naturally met with a great deal of resistance and results in the deaths of many more police than need be. Without the proper training and equipment, as mentioned above, the police are, and will continue to be, no match for the people protecting the opium poppy fields of the South. Additionally, this process furthers the perception that the police are corrupt, as they inevitably will forego manually eradicating certain farms if they can extract an attractive bribe. Finally, manual eradication is inefficient and can only reduce so many hectares of land devoted to opium poppy cultivation at one time.

It is for these reasons that aerial eradication is superior to manual eradication and should thus be instituted. Not only would this be a much safer alternative than manual eradication of massive swaths of opium poppy fields, but it would reduce a perception that the government and security sector are corrupt and not interested in the people’s well being. While the overall counter narcotics effort in Columbia has been characterized as overly militarized, it is worth mentioning that their aerial eradication program has reduced the amount of land devoted to cocoa cultivation from 166,000 hectares to 78,000 hectares in five years time, according to UNODC Executive Director Antonio Maria Costa.58

Of great importance, the economies of scale resultant from aerial eradication would put a large dent in the Taliban’s coffers, depriving the Taliban of tens of millions of dollars to use in its battle against the U.S.-led coalition. With a depleted war chest, the Taliban protected southern areas would have less access to sophisticated weapons and money to pay recruits. This reduction in insurgent and narcotics industry capacity would make it easier for the police and justice systems to move in, and allow the government to gradually exert greater control over the region, allowing for a gradual normalization and the institution of crops other than opium poppy.

VI. Conclusion

The primary aim of this paper was to illustrate that the environment in Afghanistan is not conducive to the ICOS’ opium poppy licensing scheme. All but a negligible amount of Afghanistan’s opium poppy is being cultivated in a traditionally wealthy part of the country. It also happens to be the most lawless, insecure, and poorly governed part of Afghanistan, illustrating clearly that the opium poppy crisis is more a result of instability, poor and corrupt governance, and a lack of security than poverty. This paradigm ren-
ders the ICOS’ proposed licensing scheme ineffective and would actually exacerbate the opium poppy crisis, as the number of people in the industry would increase exponentially. Also, the total amount of arable land devoted to cultivating opium poppy (currently only four percent) would greatly increase at the expense of crops such as wheat, dates, pomegranates, and saffron.

The above policy recommendations are not by themselves a panacea for the opium poppy crisis. They will, however, begin to address the problems in Afghan society that are creating a permissive environment in which to cultivate opium poppy. If Afghanistan is to move beyond its turbulent past, it must turn its back entirely on the cultivation of opium poppy, licit or illicit.

-Shreya Basu served as lead editor for this article.

NOTES

3 Originally written under the auspices of the Senlis Council, they are now known as the International Council on Security and Development. The ICOS bills itself as an international policy think tank which endeavors to implement policy changes in the realm of global security, public security, and public health and drug control. They gained prominence in 2005 with the publication of their Feasibility Study on Opium Poppy Licensing in Afghanistan. Soon thereafter, news papers and writers the world over began to adopt their position that federally licensing opium poppy cultivation would be a viable solution to the opium poppy crisis in Afghanistan http://www.icosgroup.net/.
4 Both morphine and codeine have been included in the World Health Organization’s Model List of Essential Drugs since its creation in 1977. More recently, opiates, specifically morphine, have been widely recognized as essential elements in the treatment of cancer-related pain, especially in hospitals as a post-operative analgesic. See David Mansfield, “An Analysis of Licit Opium Poppy Cultivation: India and Turkey,” April 2001: p. 1.
7 Road to Ruin: p. 2.
8 Road to Ruin: p. 3.
18 Senlis: p. 4
21 See U.S. Opposes Efforts to legalize Opium In Afghanistan: The Rationale Against Legalization.
25 Ambassador Tom Schweich, Personal interview, 4 August 2008.
27 Afghanistan Opium Survey, Foreword.
28 Afghanistan Opium Survey, Foreword.
29 Ambassador Tom Schweich, Email Interview, 30 October 2008.
33 “Is Afghanistan A Narco-State?”
38 See Fumento.
40 Afghanistan Opium Survey, Foreword.
43 See U.S. Counternarcotics Strategy for Afghanistan.
44 See U.S. Counternarcotics Strategy for Afghanistan.
50 See U.S. Counternarcotics Strategy for Afghanistan.
52 Ms. Polly Nayak, Email Interview, 24 November 2008.