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FROM KABUL TO KHYBER

TRACING THE SHIFT IN POPPY CULTIVATION FROM
AFGHAN FIELDS TO PAKISTAN'S BORDERLANDS



DR ANGANA KOTOKEY

VIF Brief

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**Tracing the Shift in Poppy Cultivation from
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Dr Angana Kotokey

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3, San Martin Marg | Chanakyapuri | New Delhi - 110021

Tel: 011-24121764 | Fax: 011-66173415

E-mail: info@vifindia.org

Website: www.vifindia.org

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Introduction

After the Taliban came back to power in Kabul in August 2021, the new regime imposed a ban on the cultivation of poppy farming in 2022, under new laws passed by the Supreme Leader. While the 2022 harvest was largely exempted from the ban, the Taliban is seen making efforts to strictly put an end to its cultivation—in their attempts to aggressively eradicate poppy plantations, while leaving a large section of farmers in Afghanistan with limited economic opportunities.¹ Meanwhile, since the Taliban imposed this ban, poppy cultivation has been on the rise in Pakistan's Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) provinces after significant migration of Afghan opium farmers was observed inside Pakistan.

This article, therefore, aims to explore, in sections, the geopolitical dynamics surrounding the rise of poppy cultivation in Afghanistan and Pakistan and the factors driving the shift of poppy cultivation to Balochistan and KPK, along with the various push and pull factors shaping the emergence of poppy markets in Pakistan.

A geopolitical overview of the history of Poppy Cultivation in Afghanistan and Pakistan

Opium poppy, which is a medicinal plant, has been known to the human race since ancient civilizations, and continues to be cultivated around the globe for the production of pharmaceutical opiates and heroin.² While the poppy straw harvested from cultivation is generally employed by

pharmaceutical entities, the liquid or dried sap (known as opium latex or gum) is the starting material for the clandestine production of heroin.³ In Afghanistan and Pakistan, the opium cultivation has been a long-standing issue, covering thousands of years. The growing of opium and its use has been part of the regular lifestyle for people living in these regions, where the local men have traditionally smoked opium in a tiny sphere, often the size of a ball bearing, and mixed with tobacco in a cigarette.⁴ Meanwhile, the womenfolk would eat it in different forms, which becomes part of household consumption and is grown in small patches, close to the house, and interspersed by other crops.⁵ Historically, opium cultivation spread along the Silk Road, from the Mediterranean through Asia, and finally reached China, where it became a catalyst for the Opium Wars in the mid-1800s.⁶ Afghanistan was not a classical producer of opium and processed heroin. However, it was only in the high mountains of the Badakhshan province where opium was produced for local consumption as early as the 18th century.⁷ It was not until the beginning of the 20th century that small amounts of opium were also grown in the Herat province in western Afghanistan, as well as in eastern Nangarhar.⁸ The opium cultivation increased in Afghanistan after demand for Asian-derived drugs across Europe and the United States doubled, which became one of the primary impetuses to trade in illicit drugs.⁹ Afghanistan's involvement in the modern international drug trade began even before the 1970s, when thousands of bohemian, cultured people—around 5,000 to 6,000—were living in Kabul and helped expand the local hashish trade. Over time, this local trade grew into a major part of the global drug network, especially connecting Afghanistan with Europe.¹⁰

Significantly, it was only during the Cold War period when several external factors shifted the opium production market to Afghanistan, and the country became the new hub of the 'Asian Drug Trade'. For example, in 1974, the Turkish government brought the production of opium under its control and licensed it for medicinal purposes, which led to shifts in

production levels.¹¹ Meanwhile, Iran under Shah Reza Pahlawi imposed a total ban on opium cultivation, outlawed the possession and sale of opium, considering the high production levels and an increase in drug addictions among the population.¹² Soon, fearing massive losses of gold and hard currency paid to international drug traffickers due to the ban on opium cultivation, the Shah of Iran lifted the ban in 1969.¹³ However, after the Iranian Revolution in 1979, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini declared the use of drugs as an un-Islamic practice,¹⁴ in his attempt to reduce addiction by minimizing the total production volume, and consuming the remaining stockpiles for complete domestic use.¹⁵ Consequently, as there was no surplus drug left for exporting to the US and Europe, gaps in supply were soon filled by drug producers from Afghanistan and Pakistan.¹⁶ Although opium has long been grown in parts of Afghanistan and Pakistan for local use, international demand—especially for refining it into heroin—started as early as 1970. This shift was shaped by the substantial differences in how land is managed and owned in Pakistan and Afghanistan.¹⁷

Apart from the above external factors, during the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan in 1979, opium was processed into rough morphine and exported to the world market.¹⁸ In addition to fighting with the Soviet Army, the mujahedeen resistance unveiled deep-rooted discontents between ethnic and religious groups. Regional players like Iran and Saudi Arabia, who were involved in the Afghan war, capitalized on animosities between different ethnic and sectarian groups to their benefit to play their ideological geopolitical wars in Afghanistan, which only contributed to deconstructing the resistance movement.¹⁹ The rivalry between different mujahedeen factions saw groups resorting to activities like mining underground irrigation canals—often known as the *Karez/Qanat* system—creating difficulties in cleaning out the sediment that accumulated annually in the irrigation of the canals, thereby causing water scarcity in regions dominated by opposing parties.²⁰ Similarly, the Soviet army burned down orchards, fields, and destroyed water canals in villages

where the mujahedeen held control, causing severe water shortages amid harsh weather conditions, resulting in internal and external migration²¹ Therefore, with limited land to continue cultivation of crops, and with scarce water facilities, Afghan farmers either migrated to Pakistan, Iran, or began growing in large-scale quantities, the high-valued cash crop, 'opium', which required less water.²²

As the Afghan war intensified, more regional and global players were drawn into the conflict, which led to the commercial manufacture and selling of drugs, and the geopolitics during that time soon transformed business into a 'drug economy'. Since then, the drug expansion inside Afghanistan stood in direct connection with war-related events, and the trajectory from a drug economy to a 'war economy' began after profits earned from the production and selling of drugs brought additional money to different mujahedeen factions who used it to finance their resistance. Moreover, Afghan warlords from southern Afghanistan began planting opium in large quantities, which were later processed into heroin before sending it out to international markets via Pakistan, which generated millions of revenue, much of which was used for administering local governance and other military activities.²³ The opium production, which was estimated at 100 tons in 1971, suddenly increased during the Afghan war, and by 1991, an estimated 2000 tons were produced, which doubled to 4600 tons by the end of the decade.²⁴ Throughout the Afghan war, the mujahedeen were involved in the production and sale of opium, necessary to buy weapons through an increasingly structured and formalized economic system that grew from the nascent 'drug trade'.²⁵

Meanwhile, the West's demand for heroin, which greatly expanded during that period, replaced the flow of drugs from Southeast Asia's *golden triangle* to the *golden crescent* after Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran began to supply large quantities of illicit opiates to the global market.²⁶ Prior to this change, Pakistan was the transit route for drugs like heroin that

flowed to Western Europe and North America, the majority of which was supplied by countries from Southeast Asia. However, in the mid-1970s, when governments in Vietnam and Laos fell, the drug trade link between the countries in the Golden Triangle (Myanmar, Thailand, and Laos) got disrupted with the United States.²⁷ All this was combined with the prolonged drought in the region that reduced the capacity of the Golden Triangle nations to meet the demands of illicit drugs. Accordingly, this unprecedented situation placed a greater demand on the golden crescent countries, especially Afghanistan and Pakistan, to fill the gap and continue trading in drugs. With shifts in geopolitical dynamics that began with the Soviet intervention in 1979, Pakistan not only became a partner in this drug trade, but also the Pakistani Drug Syndicate ran a parallel economy of convenience in the country that contributed to the largest 'narco-terrorism' in the region.²⁸

The role of Pakistan in Afghanistan's Opium Cultivation (1979-1996)

Pakistan's participation in Afghanistan's opium cultivation and its subsequent contribution to the illicit drug trading began with the former's involvement in the Afghan War in 1979. Islamabad participated in the Afghan Mujahedeen resistance as an ally of the United States in their fight against the Soviet forces in Afghanistan. As the opium cultivation expanded during the war period, Pakistan transformed itself into a notable processor and exporter of heroin.²⁹ The opium, which was produced in Afghanistan's poppy fields, was later processed into heroin in Pakistani laboratories in the Bannu and Dir districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa before being sent out to Europe and the United States.³⁰ Afghan Mujahedeen fighters, who controlled large swaths of land in Afghanistan that produced opium, brought the drug with them to Pakistan during 1982-1983 and sold it to heroin refineries, which were then operating under the protection of General Fazle Haq, the governor of the erstwhile North West Frontier

Province (NWFP).³¹ Furthermore, the former President of Pakistan, General Zia-ul Haq, and the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) together played a prominent role in encouraging opium farming in Afghanistan-Pakistan border areas that helped expand the drug trade.³² Zia's close associate, Fazle Haq, along with Lieutenant Khalil-ur-Rehman, were some of the Pakistani Army officials involved in this illicit drug trade, and who dominated the drug syndicates.³³ The involvement of these personnel clearly showed signs of a strong connection that exists between Pakistan's Army and drug trafficking in the country.

Additionally, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) was responsible for expanding these drug trading networks and also significantly benefited from collaborating with Pakistan's ISI in opening the 'weapons-drugs pipeline'.³⁴ Notably, at the international level, the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate passed the Anti-Drug Abuse Act in 1986 to strengthen Federal efforts to promote international drug law enforcement cooperation, to improve enforcement of U.S. drug laws, and to enhance interdiction efforts.³⁵ The law was important because it increased the ability of federal authorities to stop the flow of drugs into the United States by imposing more tariffs on countries that do not adhere to the U.S.'s efforts to stop the flow of drugs.³⁶ Meanwhile, in Afghanistan and Pakistan, the US covertly supported the drug trade. Some sources maintain that the CIA used ISI as the intermediary to support Mujahedeen leaders of the *Peshawar Seven* parties by providing them with weapons and logistics in exchange for a share of profit from the drug business.³⁷ This strategy served two key purposes for the CIA: it enabled them to covertly arm and support the militant groups and secure their allegiance, and also get involved in the drug trafficking that served as a lucrative source of additional income.³⁸

Several reasons concerning Pakistan's socio-economic as well as strategic interests encouraged the growing of poppies, particularly in the tribal areas, in addition to processing the opium coming from Afghanistan. Due

to Pakistan's regional geopolitical rivalry with India, Zia tacitly supported illicit opium cultivation to generate funds necessary for sustaining several covert operations.³⁹ The revenue earned through the sale of drugs and weapons was diverted to militant groups, including those involved in cross-border offensives against India; however, the majority of the money went to different mujahideen factions fighting the Soviet forces in Afghanistan.⁴⁰ Pakistan's opium production soared to an estimated 800 tons annually, and by the mid-1980s, approximately 70 percent of the heroin processed in Pakistan was being sold on international markets, fuelling regional instability and proliferating the global drug trade.⁴¹ To support this shadow economy that was growing in Pakistan during 1970–1980, Zia established the National Logistics Cell (NLC)—an ostensibly state-run transport agency that used to ferry arms to the Afghan border while trafficking opiates back to the port city of Karachi for export business.⁴² This dual-use infrastructure became a critical part of the covert supply chain that linked narcotics, warfare, and foreign policy during Zia's military rule.⁴³ Meanwhile, in Afghanistan, the ongoing conflict significantly disrupted key agricultural inputs, including labour availability, access to fertilizers and irrigation water, seed quality, agricultural machinery, and the maintenance of arable land. Moreover, the government's lack of attention to the revival of the agrarian economy resulted in large-scale migration of Afghanistan's farmers to nearby regions, including Pakistan.⁴⁴ In addition, the deteriorating security scenario in Afghanistan due to war led to a massive exodus of the Afghans to Pakistan, who settled in NWFP, married locals, and started their own business after shifting their illicit crop cultivation from Afghanistan to Pakistan.⁴⁵ Some of these Afghan migrants were involved in two important areas of the economy in NWFP—the arms business and the smuggling of goods and drugs.⁴⁶

Nonetheless, the withdrawal of the Soviet forces from Afghanistan in 1989, which saw the country transitioning into a phase of civil war, further accelerated the drug economy. The drying up of external aid

from the US and the Soviet Union, including several regional countries, became the decisive external factor contributing to the war economy after some Mujahedeen leaders, local commanders, and foot soldiers began searching for alternative sources of income and employment opportunities. Meanwhile, the rural population responded to this change by switching completely to harvesting poppy, with some people travelling to Pakistan's KPK and Balochistan due to Afghanistan's fragile economic situation.

Governance and Insurgency through Opium: The Taliban and the Drug Trade (1996-2021)

With the Taliban coming to power in 1996, the group acquired control of all the transit roads and border crossings, thereby gaining access to revenues earned from the drug trade.⁴⁷ Initially, the Taliban imposed a ban on the cultivation of opium that did not last long, after which the regime adopted a laissez-faire approach to drug cultivation, which progressively evolved into taxing the farmers and traffickers as well as providing them security.⁴⁸ Moreover, the Taliban, as a means to curb resistance from opponents and secure its political legitimacy, allowed Mujahedeen leaders and warlords (especially from the northern province of Badakhshan) to continue their opium cultivation, after they obtained a 10 percent agricultural tax (ushr) and a 20 percent alms tax (zakat) on the opium production.⁴⁹ This taxation from the drug industry yielded immense economic benefits, after US\$ 15 million from Ushr and US\$ 30 million from Zakat were collected in 1999.⁵⁰ Therefore, the Taliban regime encouraged local opium cultivation by offering government protection to the export trade and through collecting much-needed taxes on both the opium harvested and the heroin manufactured.⁵¹ The regime also sought to expand and regulate the narco-economy by providing official government licenses for opium cultivation, through setting up model farms, and teaching farmers the methods to grow poppy more efficiently, and also distributing fertilizers for the cultivation of poppy.⁵² A UNODC report mentioned that during the Taliban's first

three years in power, Afghanistan's opium crop accounted for 75% of the world's production.⁵³ As per the UNODC 2003 report, poppy cultivation increased from 200 metric tons in 1980 to 1,600 metric tons in 1990, which grew to 3,400 metric tons in 1994, and 4,600 in 1999.⁵⁴

After the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, which led to the ousting of the Taliban regime, the nature of the drug trade changed once again with the involvement of foreign powers in the region. The Northern Alliance (coalition of anti-Taliban militias), which joined the US and NATO forces in removing the Taliban from power, soon took control of those provinces that were actively cultivating opium.⁵⁵ They began using the revenue from the drug trade to maintain their powerful position.⁵⁶ Since 2001, drug production in Afghanistan has offered the 'warlord politicians' a source of economic and political power.⁵⁷ In fact, under the former Republican government in Afghanistan, the drug trade became the largest economic sector, providing full-time employment to over half a million people.⁵⁸ Unlike during the Afghan war, the drug economy since 2001 has flourished and sustained as a powerful shadow economy funded by internal and external actors, and supported by a weak state.⁵⁹ Efforts made by the former government and the CIA to eradicate opium cultivation and heroin production were futile because much of it was situational and was on paper, and depended on the interest of the parties involved. The CIA's close relations with the Northern Alliance gave them the advantage of having access to the drug markets active in the northeast of Afghanistan.⁶⁰ Additionally, to retrieve connections with drug smugglers based in southeast Afghanistan, the CIA turned to groups of warlords active along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border.⁶¹ To a great extent, from 2001 onwards, more revenue was generated from opium cultivation, which eventually went to the Taliban as well, and contributed to its revival in 2005-2006. UNODC reported that by 2007, Afghanistan's opium harvest of around 8,200 tonnes supplied 93% of the world's illicit heroin.⁶² The same report also mentioned that the Taliban was using drug profits to fund

weapons, logistics, and wages in 2008, and collected \$425 million in opium tax, enough to recruit new fighters for their insurgency who were paid US\$ 300 monthly—much higher than farm wages.⁶³ The Taliban's income from the drug trade ranged from US\$19 million to US\$500 million, with the group generating between 10% to 50% of its income from the drug trade between 2000 and 2020.⁶⁴ Excluding a short period between 2000–2001, when the Taliban imposed a ban on opium cultivation, the group's involvement in the drug trade in the initial years of its resurgence involved the group taxing farming of the crop, along with trafficking.⁶⁵ However, after 2014–2015, when the Taliban began to control more territories inside Afghanistan, they were directly involved in the cultivation process and production of opium, and smuggling, generating large-scale profits that helped them in their fight against the U.S. and the NATO forces who left Afghanistan in August 2021.⁶⁶

Since the Taliban's return to power, global concerns over Afghanistan's expanding illegal drug trade have grown once again. Despite the Taliban's current ban on opium cultivation, large stockpiles of opium remain from the previous year's cultivation, including methamphetamine production.⁶⁷ Some reports write that Taliban leaders continue to be directly involved in drug production and trafficking.⁶⁸ Apparently, this ban will exert pressure on Balochistan and KPK to continue cultivating opium necessary to persevere in the international drug market, and will witness a similar migration of farmers with their crops to Pakistan, resembling the first Taliban ban in 2000–2001.

Drug Trade in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK)

Pakistan's Balochistan province, which borders both Iran and Afghanistan, plays a critical role in the transnational trafficking of Afghan opium, serving as a primary conduit for six of the nine major smuggling routes leading to

Iran, Europe, Asia, Africa, and North America.⁶⁹ Over the years, due to prolonged insurgency, growing lawlessness, and insufficient labour market opportunities in the province, the farmers have shifted to cultivating opium instead of traditional crops like wheat, barley, and vegetables that yield them more benefits in a short time than from engaging in conventional agriculture.⁷⁰ In addition, the continued instability in the region due to war has driven drug trafficking groups and smuggling networks to relocate their activities from Afghanistan to Balochistan.⁷¹ Furthermore, the province remains thinly populated, and its remoteness and inaccessibility have prompted the trafficking of drugs to flow from Helmand and Nimroz in Afghanistan to Chaghi and Nushki districts in Balochistan.⁷² Moreover, the Chaman-Spin Boldak crossing (the official border between Balochistan and Afghanistan), which remains poorly patrolled and can be easily traversed, further complicates the situation. Helmand, the main epicentre of opium cultivation in Afghanistan, followed by Kandahar, borders Balochistan to its southeast, and much of the illicit drug is smuggled through this route to Africa and Europe. Once the drug reaches Pakistan, it is normally stocked in houses along the borders for some time before being sold at home or sent to international markets, after providing compensation to household members for their services.⁷³

Similarly, in the case of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the province has historically been characterized by widespread poverty, internal conflicts, poor infrastructure, unemployment, and weak institutional governance.⁷⁴ For decades, the economy was sustained by illicit activities, including the cultivation of poppy, which played a multi-functional role in rural livelihoods; provided credit, gave people more access to land, and therefore, remains an important source of income for the local people.⁷⁵ In KPK, the poppy crop has been cultivated mostly in the Malakand division, and also in cities like Mardan and Swabi.⁷⁶ Besides economic reasons, strong family and trade ties between tribes on both sides of the Durand Line help facilitate drug smuggling into Pakistan, as people cross the border through

Torkham and other unofficial routes. Additionally, the local trafficking networks exploit the fragile economic situation and the vulnerabilities of marginalized groups, especially those of the Afghan refugees, and use them to carry drugs to Pakistan.⁷⁷

These trafficking networks operate through multiple channels/mediums, including drug couriers or mules who cross the border on foot or using pack animals; truck drivers—who conceal illegal substances in their vehicles across official border crossings, like Torkham (near the Khyber Pass), with or without the drivers' knowledge; drug dealers who use women in the garments business on both sides of the border by concealing drugs in their fabrics or saturating those fabrics with methamphetamine; and street-level peddlers who exploit out-of-school children, often refugees, disguising them in school uniforms and loading their bags with drugs for distribution in cities like Peshawar.⁷⁸

The change in the region's geopolitics since the late 1970s has made Pakistan the manufacturer and the transit for the international drug trade business. However, efforts to counter the growth of narcotics in Afghanistan and Pakistan led regimes to impose a less effective ban on the cultivation of opium. The Taliban regime during its first Emirate imposed a ban on illicit crop agriculture, which resulted in more opium stockpiles and increased prices, benefiting both farmers and drug dealers, including authorities in the region. Significantly, restrictions on opium production in Afghanistan leave a direct impact on Pakistan and its economy, with a huge migration of Afghan farmers to the country, leading to escalating poppy fields, and reviving links between drug dealers, state authorities, and some non-state actors in the international drug trade. A similar situation can be apprehended with the Taliban 2.0's ban on opium cultivation in Afghanistan.

Shifting Fields: The Rise of Poppy Cultivation in Pakistan Post-2021

With the Taliban 2.0 coming back to power in Afghanistan, the regime

has once again imposed a ban on the production of opium cultivation in 2022. On 3 April, Hibatullah Akhundzada, the Supreme Leader, issued a decree banning the production, sale, processing, and consumption of all drugs across Afghanistan.⁷⁹ However, this time, the interim administration gave a grace period after announcing the ban that allowed the farmers to harvest the crop already in the ground, and to store significant amounts of inventory, evoking doubts on the long-term sustainability of this ban.⁸⁰ In a report published by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), Afghanistan's economy, after more than two years of virtually eliminating cultivation of the drug, still remains dependent on the revenue earned from opium, along with a thriving opium market since the ban, and an increase in drug prices.⁸¹ In the initial months of the ban, according to UNODC Opium Survey 2023, the national harvest fell from 6,200 tons of fresh opium in 2022 to just 33 tons in 2023, after Helmand and Kandahar provinces, recorded drops of 99.99 per cent and 88.84 per cent respectively in the area of land under poppy cultivation in 2023.⁸²

Despite cultivation largely being brought down across Afghanistan, the problems are related to the existing stockpiles stored by the landed farmers and traders, which have increased their value with a significant price rise. Opium prices have nearly doubled since the ban, with a 300% increase observed between April 2022 and October 2022; and a rise from \$417 per kilogram in August 2023 to \$802 per kilogram in December 2023, according to a UN survey.⁸³ Meanwhile, the high opium prices are likely to activate the re-emergence of poppy cultivation in Balochistan and KPK, due to the availability of vast lands with little or no government control and the willingness of landowners to rent land for opium cultivation.⁸⁴ Some recent reports claim the rise of significant poppy farming operations in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's Dera Ismail Khan district.⁸⁵ UNODC, in November 2024, recorded that "opium poppy cultivation in Pakistan had risen from 27 hectares in 2020 to 380 in 2023."⁸⁶

At the local level, the ban on opium cultivation in Afghanistan in 2022 led to two immediate responses—amid economic pressures, certain parts of Afghanistan have resisted the ban by continuing to grow poppy after coming to a deal with some Taliban officials to share profits.⁸⁷ Secondly, with no alternative cash crop readily available, some Afghan farmers have moved from southern Afghanistan to Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, similar to the migration that happened during the Taliban's first Islamic Emirate.⁸⁸ Apart from fears of a lost economy, the migration of poppy cultivation to Pakistan is driven by several other push and pull factors.

In a recent survey by the *Afghanistan Analyst Network*, Jelena Bjelica and Nur Khan Himmat highlighted the process of migrating the poppy cultivation to Pakistan post the Taliban takeover in 2021.⁸⁹ The trajectory from moving out of Afghanistan and relocating in Pakistan to continue growing poppies happens through a clandestine network that involves several players, like drug dealers/smugglers, the border police, and the middleman. One of the most frequently used routes for migration runs between the Baramcha district in Afghanistan's Helmand province and the Nushki district in Pakistan's Balochistan province, which is controlled by smugglers, who are reportedly charging between 30,000 and 35,000 Pakistani rupees (approximately 110 to 125 USD) from each person crossing the border.⁹⁰ Moreover, during the journey, the Afghan farmers are allowed to cross a series of border police check posts and internal checkpoints, only after giving bribes to the Pakistani police.⁹¹ The presence of a covert system of bribery⁹² involving landowners, leaseholders, farmers, police, and higher authorities, all together, help in establishing the clandestine network that complicates efforts to eradicate poppy cultivation in the region. In Balochistan, before the harvest, government officials start negotiating money with landowners in return for making water available to them for irrigation, which is crucial for ensuring a successful reaping of the crop. Some reports mention that government authorities take

between 2- 5 lakh Pakistani rupees for each tube well made accessible to farmers, depending on the size of the area of land on which the poppy is cultivated.⁹³ Notably, the role of drug smugglers in this covert network, therefore, involves coordinating not just in successful border crossing, but also establishing links with local officials or intermediaries who facilitate such illegal migration.

Meanwhile, the Afghan opium farmers arrive in Pakistan either as 'sharecroppers'—who get a share of the harvest or a portion of the land to farm in return for their labour or migrate there as 'opium growing experts'.⁹⁴ The cultivation is made possible by tenant farmers who rent the land and manage the project by bringing in more financial backers, and also make arrangements for the transfer of poppy farmers from Afghanistan to work in the fields of Pakistan as sharecroppers.⁹⁵ These sharecroppers are then required to pay a part of the share of their harvest to the tenant landowner. Moreover, some of the migrant farmers are given money by rich drug dealers from Kandahar, Helmand, and the south of Afghanistan⁹⁶, who made their fortunes through illicit poppy cultivation, to go and rent land in Pakistan, and continue this lucrative business, by relocating it to Balochistan and KPK.⁹⁷ Hajji Juma Khan, a tribal leader from Baramcha in Helmand, was accused of heading an international trafficking network, and involved in the sale of opium, heroin, including morphine.⁹⁸

Besides Pakistan providing lands to yield poppies and laboratories to manufacture heroin, there is a large market in the country that openly sells opium, especially in the Qilla Abdullah district in the northwest of Balochistan.⁹⁹ Gulistan, which is a town in Qilla Abdullah and lies close to Spin Boldak, hosts poppy markets, where opium is openly bought and sold for public consumption and regional and international trading.¹⁰⁰ With minimal regular police checking, these markets have expanded in Balochistan and have sustained through the *hawala system* that helps in the circulation and transfer of the money earned after selling the harvest.¹⁰¹

The Hawala System is an alternate remittance system that channels hidden banking structures, and has been operational since the eighth century, is traditionally associated with a money transfer mechanism that operated extensively in South Asia.¹⁰² The Hawala is based on trust, which subsists and channelizes its activities outside of or parallel to conventional banking or financial institutions, and is a value transfer instrument for opiate trafficking from Afghanistan and Pakistan.¹⁰³ Apart from the risk-free remittance of money from expatriates, the ancient system of hawala is being used both by terrorists and money launderers to move their money to avoid detection and reporting.¹⁰⁴ It is a reliable and easy-to-use system for drug traffickers because it is not supervised and controlled, and the smugglers cannot be identified and traced by police, and provides limited details about the sender or receiver.¹⁰⁵ The presence of hawaladar (individuals or entities that facilitate the transfer of funds and provide guidance to migrants) in a hawala system is connected through a network of relationships, and they use various methods to transfer funds, such as courier services and in-hand transactions.¹⁰⁶ Because the cultivation of poppy and the selling of opium and heroin are illegal in Afghanistan, the hawala system is a good substitute against formal banking for migrants and refugees working in Pakistan who use the traditional mode to send remittances back to their families, due to its convenience, availability, and accessibility.¹⁰⁷ Hence, the presence and constant use of hawala transactions in these regions not only add impetus and facilitate the migration of both poppies and farmers to Pakistan but also secure the drug trade, despite superficial bans on poppy cultivation.

Additionally, shared ethnicity, culture, tribal, and familial ties influence the movement of Afghan farmers from the south of Afghanistan to Pakistan. Similarities in language and traditions help in the process of integration into the local communities. Pakistan has experienced a significant influx of Afghan refugees since the Soviet intervention, with the majority being Pashtuns who share a common ethnic background with people living across

the Durand Line. The Pashtuns form the majority ethnic group in KPK and northern Balochistan. Considering that there is a significant number of Pashtun population residing in the east and south of Afghanistan, it is apparent that Afghan farmers, especially from Kandahar and Helmand, will migrate to Pakistan in situations like deteriorating economic conditions and rising insecurity in their country. Afghan refugees displaced by conflict in the past forty years have faced financial hardships, making them vulnerable to exploitation by drug traffickers, who lure or coerce them into smuggling or selling drugs, often under threat and manipulation.¹⁰⁸ Over the years, this clandestine network of drug dealers and higher authorities has used the Pashtun population across the Durand Line to create ethnic trading networks, largely illegal (involving smuggling of goods, arms, and drugs), between Afghanistan and Pakistan.¹⁰⁹

Finally, after constant periods of prolonged war in Afghanistan's history, the country is highly vulnerable to the effects of climate change, with rising temperatures, changing precipitation patterns, and increasingly frequent extreme weather conditions, which have severely impacted resource-based livelihoods in Afghanistan.¹¹⁰ Inform Climate Risk Index 2023, ranked Afghanistan fourth among countries most affected by the impacts of climate change.¹¹¹ According to several other reports, Afghanistan has experienced a temperature rise considerably higher than the mean worldwide, amounting to 1.8 °C between 1951 and 2010.¹¹² The temperature rise is anticipated to last from 2006 until 2050 and rise by 1.7–2.3 °C, and afterwards by 2.7–6.4 °C until 2099, throughout the country.¹¹³ Due to the war in Afghanistan, places like Helmand and Kandahar have seen a significant rise in temperatures.¹¹⁴ Since 2001, open-air burn pits, often used for military waste management, have been producing toxic smoke, affecting not just human beings but also causing damage to the whole ecosystem.¹¹⁵ Moreover, the war has damaged the irrigation and farming systems, especially the traditional Qanat/Karez system, making agriculture more vulnerable to an unpredictable climate.

These underground water systems, due to frequent bombardments and movement of heavy military equipment, are being left with contaminated waters, making irrigation difficult.¹¹⁶ Additionally, the presence of landmines since 1980 has contaminated the soil, which can have negative implications on the irrigation/agricultural sector by disrupting the food chain, also contributing to a loss of biodiversity due to leakage of chemical substances into soil and water.¹¹⁷ Moreover, due to the presence of explosive remnants of war (ERW), almost 4 million people are exposed to the constant risk of being harmed, with an estimated 1.2 million square meters of land contaminated by mines and improvised explosive devices.¹¹⁸ Combined with a rapid population growth, environmental vulnerabilities have intensified resource competition, supported by a fragile economy, and unemployment. The impact of conflict on farming communities, along with a deteriorating irrigation infrastructure, has contributed to increased opium poppy farming, which requires less water and is roughly three times more profitable per hectare than primary crops like wheat.¹¹⁹ Therefore, with rapid climatic change and environmental hazards impacting agricultural options, the Taliban's ban on opium cultivation in 2022 has left the Afghan farmers with options like relocating poppy cultivation and moving to Pakistan.

The Path Ahead

Poppy cultivation in Afghanistan and Pakistan is not a new phenomenon and has been in practice for decades, supporting the livelihood of many people across the region. It expanded due to the State's failure to develop infrastructure facilities necessary to create more legal jobs for the common man. The movement of the poppy plantations to Pakistan since the Taliban imposed a ban on its cultivation in Afghanistan, resembles earlier bans, and is expected to have similar consequences on the former's social life and economy. Pakistan's participation in manufacturing heroin and methamphetamine and exporting them has caused serious damage

to the health of the younger population, with several reports focusing on the impacts of overuse of drugs.¹²⁰ The highest prevalence of drug use is recorded from KPK, where almost 11 percent of the population use the illicit substance (although the real figures are expected to be much higher), and also in Balochistan, Lahore, and Karachi.¹²¹ In a 2023 report on drug overdose in Pakistan, it was mentioned that about 700 people die every day due to drug overdose-related complications, which translates to 250,000 deaths every year.¹²² According to a UN report, the total number of drug addicts in Pakistan is 7.6 million, out of which 78 percent are male and 22 percent are female.¹²³ Pakistan is one of the youngest countries in the world, where 64 percent of the population is below the age of 30, and 29 percent of Pakistanis are between the ages of 15 and 29¹²⁴. The illicit use of drugs and the rise in criminal activities are often observed as closely interrelated behaviours and are a major social cost to society.¹²⁵ With constant peer pressure, the country's youth are more vulnerable to drug abuse and crime. Significantly, an obsession with drugs was observed among students of academic institutions, after several reports claimed that 53 percent of students at elite private schools were addicted to drugs.¹²⁶ Schools and universities in Peshawar, the capital city of KPK, have also reported on the availability and large-scale use of drugs by students.¹²⁷ Such addictions are driving them to resort to criminal activities like regular theft and robbery, causing distress among residents.¹²⁸

Pakistan, accompanied by loose state control over drug production, followed by a fragile economy and growing unemployment, and with an increase in crime rates, can add to the advantage of non-state actors present in the region. Rising unemployment, especially among the youth, can fuel frustration and desperation in them, pushing some towards illicit activities, including participation in the drug trade, and getting involved in criminal activities. In such an environment, non-state actors like militant groups and other organized criminal networks are well-positioned to exploit these weaknesses. They may provide economic incentives and protection in return

for more recruits from the younger population. Moreover, in addition to internal crisis, constant change in the geopolitical interests of major powers vis-à-vis Afghanistan and Pakistan since the Taliban came back to power in 2021, there lies a probability that old clandestine networks will be activated again to swiftly smuggle arms/ weapons and drugs across the region and beyond, including in countries like India, leading to widespread instability and turmoil.



Dr Angana Kotokey is a Research Associate at the Vivekananda International Foundation, New Delhi. She holds a PhD from the School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) India. She completed her M.Phil. as a recipient of M.Phil. Research Fellowship issued by the Ministry of External Affairs, India from the Institute of Foreign Policy Studies, Calcutta University (Kolkata). Angana has completed her Master's from Pondicherry University in South Asian Studies. She graduated in Political Science from

Indraprastha College for Women, University of Delhi. She has attended several national and international conferences and workshops on her area of research and presented papers at SOAS University of London, George Mason University, Russian-Armenian University, University of Copenhagen, Roma Tre University etc. She has written book chapters and also published research papers including in peer reviewed international journals like the Asian Affairs: The Journal of the Royal Society of Asian Affairs (published by Routledge), Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies (Routledge), The Round Table: the Common Wealth Journal of International Affairs (Routledge) etc. Her core areas of research are Geopolitics, Afghanistan, Political Islam, Arab World and Pakistan.

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The Vivekananda International Foundation is an independent non-partisan institution that conducts research and analysis on domestic and international issues, and offers a platform for dialogue and conflict resolution. Some of India's leading practitioners from the fields of security, military, diplomacy, government, academia and media have come together to generate ideas and stimulate action on national security issues.

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VIVEKANANDA INTERNATIONAL FOUNDATION

3, San Martin Marg, Chanakyapuri, New Delhi – 110021

Phone: +91-11-24121764, 24106698

Email: info@vifindia.org,

Website: <https://www.vifindia.org>

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