



Corso di laurea in International Relations

Cattedra

European Islam: Socio-Political Issues

The Global Chessboard of Taliban Afghanistan's Drug Trade

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Anno Accademico 2024/2025

Acknowledgements

My university path seems to have been fairly difficult. It seems strange to see it conclude. Without my family's support, this moment would not have been possible. My most sincere thanks are sent to both my mom and dad, who have been my rock-solid supporters, offering me both the emotional and material help I needed to get through the most trying moments. Had it not been for them, I would not have been able to finish my double bachelor's degree and master's by the time I reached 23 years of age.

I also want to express my sincere gratitude to all of my lecturers, especially Prof. Mohammed Hashas, who has been my thesis advisor and whose advice and mentorship have been crucial to me over my academic career. I would also like to thank my co-supervisor, Prof. Giuseppe Scognamiglio. Their commitment and wisdom have influenced my intellectual development and assisted me in overcoming the challenges presented by my coursework. Furthermore, I owe my university a great deal for establishing a setting that supported my growth on the academic and personal fronts and gave me the opportunity to make a great deal of lifelong friendships.

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Introduction

The idea of *world order* varies depending on the perspective employed. For instance, the Western perspective differs from that of the Global South. Culture, traditions and habits differ so much in different parts of our planet. Therefore, it is fundamental to fully understand these differences in order to respect systems and peoples very far away from us, and that we mostly do not comprehend.

The case of the country of Afghanistan is particularly intriguing. Also known as the graveyard of empires, Afghanistan has often been the junction between rich cultures and clashes of civilisations. From Alexander the Great's conquests to the US-led invasion, the country has often suffered from the plague of war. This prolonged instability has led to its current demise, where poverty, conflicting governance, and continuous conflict have encouraged the growth of the drug industry. Afghanistan, of a population of about 44 million as of 2025, is historically one of the top producers of opium in the world, and its drug trade has a significant economic impact on the country. Warlords, rebels, and militant organisations are financially supported by the drug trade, which feeds the cycle of violence and erodes all prospects for peace or progress. Thus, Afghanistan's ongoing unrest is both a cause and a consequence of drug use, alongside other geopolitical and ethnic factors.

The major research question of the thesis is the following:

How have the complex dynamics of Afghanistan's drug trade influenced the Taliban government's seemingly pragmatic policy choices, and in what ways have these policies impacted international relations and global security?

I was drawn to this issue for a variety of reasons. First, I am captivated by the nexus of drugs, politics, and war, specifically how illicit economies influence the conduct of both state and non-state actors. Furthermore, I have always been fascinated with Central Asia and the larger region around the Silk Road. Its many cultures, spiritual traditions, and historical legacies continue to interest me, and studying in depth Afghanistan provided a significant outlet for that interest.

The major tentative answer of the research would demonstrate that Afghanistan's drug trade is not merely an illicit economic activity, but a complex phenomenon that has developed in the stagnating vicious circle of Afghan misfortune. The Taliban's narcotics policy has carved

yet another notch in the revolving wheel of the nation's instability. The repercussions extend far beyond Afghanistan's borders. Its drug trade, combined with terrorism and organised crime, not only fuels regional instability but also intensifies global security concerns.

It is crucial to stress that in light of the continuous instability and circumstances, this research will be carried out in an area with a strong lack of data. The geographic representation and the sample size of the experts on the issue are not as comprehensive as a study would be for a different topic in a more accessible region. Furthermore, although direct information used in this work is from reliable and trustworthy sources, It is important to note that a significant number of experts, informants cited in consulted works, chose to remain anonymous. Thus, the information from testimonies should be viewed with a certain degree of reservation. Additionally, the opinion of some of the experts, in particular the erstwhile Afghan republic government officials, may be biased in one form or another.

The thesis will be structured into four primary chapters, each building progressively from the previous one in a cohesive, bottom-up approach, creating a clear connection between each part. After a brief historical overview, the first section will follow Afghanistan's decline since the Soviet invasion, examining the ways that protracted fighting have moulded the current political and economic environment of the nation, particularly examining its reliance on the drug trade. In accordance with this chapter, decades of conflict undermined official institutions and solidified illegal affairs, notably the manufacture of opium, as necessary for both survival and the consolidation of power. The drug trade grew ingrained in the political and economic fabric of areas like Helmand due to a lack of well-organised government and a lack of efficient investment in counter-narcotics, which further exacerbated instability.

A political analysis of the Taliban's internal policy will be included in the second chapter, which will also highlight the socio-economic elements that support the drug trade. This will demonstrate how the narcotics economy is impacted by internal problems including poverty and problems with the government. The chapter concludes that the Taliban's involvement in the drug trade is both strategic and pragmatic, with the goal of maintaining control, funding operations, and securing allegiance in neglected rural regions, to keep power within and outside Afghanistan's borders.

After discussing internal policy issues, the analysis will expand in chapter three internationally into more detail about the effects of Afghanistan's drug trade in its surrounding region. There will be a particular emphasis on how Afghan narcotics affect the country's neighbours in Pakistan, Iran and Central Asia; and how parallel trafficking dynamics, as well as international money, laundering hubs coexist and fuel the whole system. This chapter's

findings show how Afghanistan's internal instability has far-reaching consequences. The chapter acts as a link between internal drug concerns and their international consequences, following the channels by which Afghan drugs flow outside of its borders. The study demonstrates that these drug networks are strongly intertwined in transnational criminal organisations and global money laundering systems, which not only fuel the drugs economy but also undermine regional governance and security.

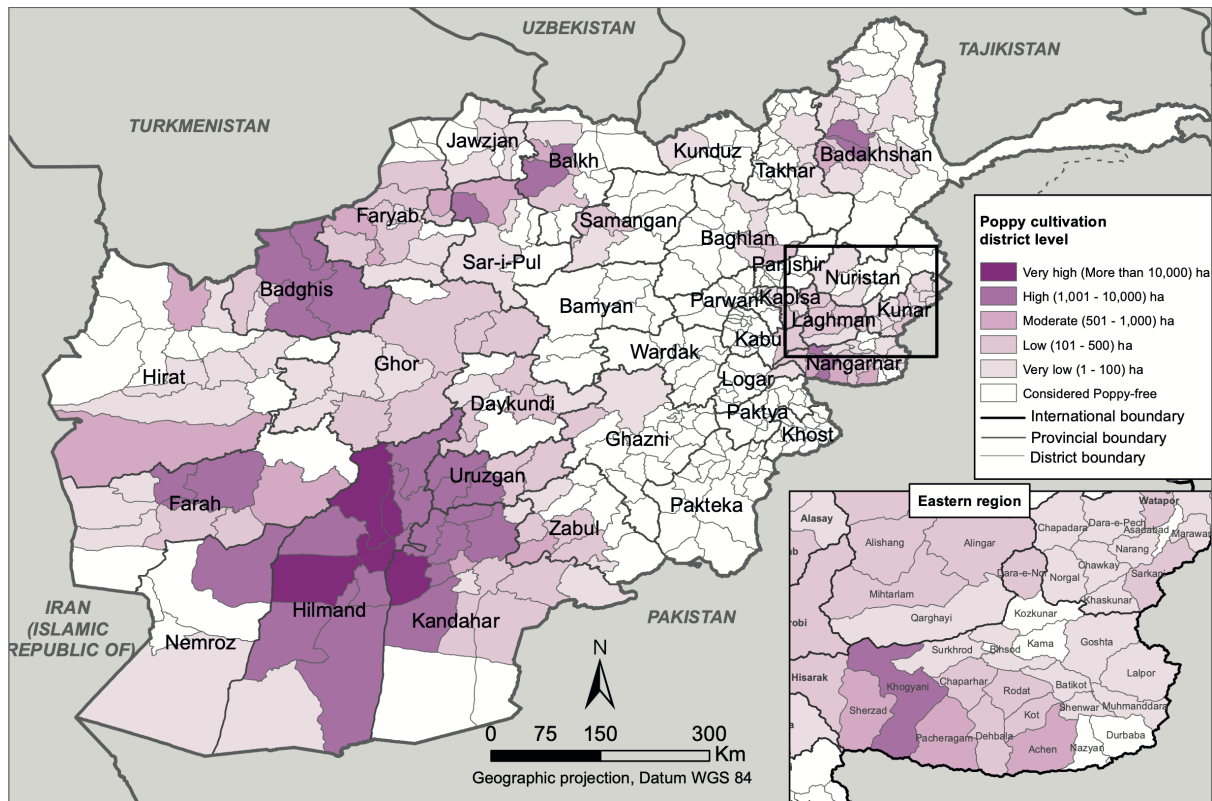
Finally, in the fourth chapter, the analysis will show Afghanistan's drug trade's worldwide ramifications showcasing how it affects global security, organised crime, international drug markets, and terrorism. The impact of the drug trade on local, national, and international political dynamics will be discussed in this chapter.

The findings show that Afghanistan's opiate trade significantly weakens state institutions and exacerbates instability far beyond its borders, severely impacting global security. It enables resilient transnational criminal partnerships, operates through informal financial systems like Hawala, and flows through global routes spanning Africa, Europe, and North America.

Thus, the goal of this thesis is to explore the intricacies of Afghanistan's drug trade through the lens of the evolving Taliban regime, followed by an examination of how narcotics are distributed globally and how these dynamics shape broader issues of international security and social stability.

In its findings, this thesis asserts that Afghanistan's opiate economy is more than just a domestic illegal operation; it is a deep-seated source of global security and societal instability. The Taliban's government, marked by deliberate ambivalence towards opium production and trafficking, has aided the country's integration within transnational criminal and financial networks. However, the complexities of the Afghan situation preclude any straightforward attribution of guilt. Decades of foreign interference, structural poverty, institutional fragility, and discriminatory assistance policies have all helped to consolidate Afghanistan's drug economy. Thus, while the Taliban play an important role, they are only one actor in a larger network of historical, political, and international processes that have together defined Afghanistan's drug scene.

Opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan (by district) 2021-2022



Source: National monitoring system implemented by UNODC¹

¹ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, “[Opium Cultivation in Afghanistan: Latest Findings and Emerging Threats](#),” *UNODC Research Brief*. Vienna: UNODC, 27 November 2022, p. 14.

CHAPTER 1

A HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

1.1 Afghanistan: Graveyard of Empires

Afghanistan is often described as the graveyard of empires.² In the course of history, great powers have invaded Afghanistan without having been able to maintain stable long-term rule. From the British Empire's campaigns during the Anglo-Afghan Wars to the USSR's involvement in the Soviet-Afghan War, and more recently the United States' War in Afghanistan, the country has repeatedly demonstrated its resilience against external powers.³ This section of the thesis will examine in depth why Afghanistan holds this legacy to then explain why it is important for the bigger picture of the study.

1.1.1. Afghanistan's Geographically Strategic Position

The country of Afghanistan holds a very crucial position, serving as a strategic point connecting multiple geopolitical interests. In terms of geopolitics, dominating Afghanistan is not only beneficial but also essential for obtaining entry into Central Asia and influencing the larger South Asian area. Afghanistan has played a major role in major power struggles throughout history, as competing empires fought for supremacy and control over this strategically important territory.⁴

Afghanistan's geographic significance is of great importance, as it is positioned at the intersection of several historical empires, originating from vast territories such as China, India, and the Middle East. Nevertheless, the region's rough terrain and high mountains provide natural barriers that make any military or political attempt to govern the area more difficult. Afghanistan thus rises gloriously over the mountains of Central Asia, like a king atop his throne. Its hilltop location highlights its historical significance as well as the difficulties that accompany it, including accessibility issues and the difficulty of holding onto authority over such a volatile and strategically valuable region.⁵

Furthermore, another key foreign interest in the country has also been about its abundant natural resources, such as priceless minerals and precious stones. Due to its known

² Milton Bearden, "Afghanistan, graveyard of empires," *Foreign Affairs* 80, HeinOnline 2001, p. 17.

³ Nabi Misdaq, "Afghanistan: Political Frailty and External Interference," *Routledge*, 2006, pp. 2-32.

⁴ Ramamoorthy Gopalakrishnan, "The Geography and Politics of Afghanistan," *Concept Publishing Company*, 1982, pp. 1-30.

⁵ *Ibidem*.

unexplored lithium, copper, and rare earth element reserves, not only draws foreign interest, but it also makes rivalry between competing nations for control over these priceless resources fiercer.⁶ Violence and instability have frequently hampered the utilisation of these resources, making it more difficult to convert Afghanistan's natural wealth into real advantages for its people. In the paper '*Do Commodity Price Shocks Cause Armed Conflict?*',⁷ Blair, Christensen and Rudkin illustrate the phenomenon of the so-called *Resource Curse*, where reliance on primary commodities can destabilise governments. Where there is a strong value for local resources, price fluctuations and investment interests can provoke or intensify civil conflict., making a territory of interest more valuable, almost seen as a *prize* to control.

Being as such, Afghanistan has long been an essential component of the complex network of historic trade routes, including the fabled Silk Road. This network served as a medium for ideas and cultural exchange between the East and the West in addition to facilitating the trade of commodities like silk, spices, and precious metals. This region was frequented by traders, tourists, and academics who left a rich cultural legacy that has influenced Afghanistan's identity over the ages.⁸

Owing to this, Afghanistan has developed into a thriving melting pot of various languages, faiths, and cultures. The social dynamics of the nation have been greatly impacted by this rich mosaic, which has created a distinctive fusion of coexisting and frequently overlapping traditions. Interactions between various ethnic groups, such as Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras, and Uzbeks,⁹ have led to a diverse cultural landscape characterised by collaboration as well as conflict. Afghanistan's social fabric has been influenced by diversity throughout its history, giving rise to both lively cultural manifestations and historical tensions as various groups compete for influence and recognition within the larger national narrative.

Thus, in its turbulent past, it seems clear how and why Afghanistan has frequently been used as a front in proxy wars fought by several regional and international forces vying for control of the region. Since outside parties frequently back various factions and groups in the name of advancing their own geopolitical objectives, these conflicts have frequently resulted in protracted instability. Such actions have had disastrous results, starting a violent cycle that

⁶ John F. Shroder, "Natural resources in Afghanistan: Geographic and Geologic Perspectives on Centuries of Conflict," *Elsevier*, 2014, pp. 410-436.

⁷ Blair, Graeme, Darin Christensen, and Aaron Rudkin, "Do Commodity Price Shocks Cause Armed Conflict? A Meta-Analysis of Natural Experiments," *American Political Science Review*, 115, no. 2 (2021), pp. 709-716.

⁸ J. Aruz and E. V. Fino, "Afghanistan: Forging Civilizations along the Silk Road," *Metropolitan Museum of Art* (Symposia, 2012), pp. 4-26.

⁹ M. S. Mazhar, S. O. Khan and N. S. Goraya, "Ethnic factor in Afghanistan, *Journal of Political Studies*," 19, *HeinOnline*, 2012, p. 97.

has not only harmed Afghanistan but also its neighbouring countries. The Afghan population is caught in the crossfire as international forces compete for control,¹⁰ bearing the brunt of the resulting turmoil and suffering.

Afghanistan's political landscape is complicated and usually unstable because of the many intersections of the interests of regional countries such as India, Pakistan,¹¹ and the Islamic Republic of Iran.¹² These countries see Afghanistan as a vital venue for demonstrating their power and thwarting the aspirations of their adversaries. The interaction of these geopolitical rivalries exacerbates already existing tensions and makes regional peace and stability less likely. Afghanistan's internal dynamics are significantly impacted by diplomatic manoeuvres by external parties, therefore resolving these rivalries is crucial to the future of the nation and its place in the larger geopolitical framework.

1.1.2. The Soviet War and the Rise of the Mujahideen

The Soviet-Afghan war was caused by a series of radical actions.¹³ The turbulence started when Mohammed Daud Khan, cousin of king Mohammed Zahir Shah, organised a coup, believing that the social and political reforms of king lacked progress. The king was assassinated in 1973, and tensions rose.

Under the Daud regime, the country became the Republic of Afghanistan, a pro-Soviet state with a vigorous Pashtun spirit. Other ethnic groups did not appreciate Daud's intense Pashtun nationality. His response to restrict several civil liberties only aggravated the situation. The government was clearly falling apart, and Daud managed to hold his office until his assassination during the Saur Revolution of 1978. The coup, led by the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), guaranteed their takeover.

The newly baptised Democratic Republic of Afghanistan, highly associated with communist ideology and affairs, tried to implement a campaign similar to the USSR model. Reforms were despised by the traditionalist community, which based its economy mainly on

¹⁰ Nabi Misdaq, "Afghanistan: Political Frailty and External Interference," op. cit.

¹¹ Zahoor A. Wani "Geopolitical Dynamics in the Afghanistan-India-Pakistan Triangle," *India Quarterly* Volume 78, Issue 4 (Sage Journals), 2022, 617-633.

¹² Ali A. Jalali "Background Briefing: The Geopolitics of Afghan-Iranian Relations," *The Middle East Journal*, Volume 75, Number 2 (Project Muse) 2021, pp. 304-320.

¹³ Williams, B. G., "[Chapter 4. Soviet Rule, the Mujahideen, and the Rise of the Taliban. In Afghanistan Declassified](#)", Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011, pp. 125-183.

agriculture and livestock. The government's reaction was sudden and drastic, suppressing dissenting voices, issuing a long series of arrests and executions. The protests, however, started getting out of hand by 1979. Turbulence also started emerging within the Party itself: between the Parchamites and the Khalqists. While the former were more in line with Moscow, which wanted the regime to end violence and repression towards political opponents, the latter, more relentless, wanted to continue the oppressions to seize power.

In October, the general secretary of PDPA, Mohamed Taraki, was assassinated in Kabul. The order was issued under the second-in-command, Hafizullah Amin, who discovered that Taraki wanted to disempower him. Being the leader of the Kalqs, his leadership agenda soured relations with the USSR.

In December 1979 the USSR decided to launch a military operation to contain the possible future damages Afghanistan could provoke. Soviet troops entered Afghanistan by air and land, quickly seizing urban areas, roads, and communication lines. To replace the fierce Amin, a further operation, Storm 333, was carried out to capture and assassinate him: the moderate and controllable Babrak Karmal was chosen as his successor.

Tribal warlords, with the malcontent of the Soviet regime regrouped and organised themselves under the Mujahideen. The Mujahideen formed under different organised groups of resistance warriors from Afghanistan who were driven mostly by a desire to fight foreign invaders and a common Islamic identity. Their origins were firmly established in the tribal system of Afghanistan, which was made up of a number of different ethnic groups, including Uzbeks, Tajiks, and Pashtuns. Their shared hatred of the Soviet occupation and will to defend Islam brought them together after they had been divided for some time. With strong international backing, especially from the United States through Pakistan, they used their understanding of the challenging Afghan terrain to fight an efficient guerrilla campaign. Their fighters were admired for their courage in battle and were frequently referred to as holy warriors. The Mujahideen evolved into a network of factions, each with its own leadership, objectives, and territory, rather than a single, unified group.¹⁴

It is also in this period there was a steep increase of opium poppy cultivation, as other countries were banning it, the Soviet Union invasion and the formation of the Mujahideen resistance created a particular circumstance in which tolerance for drug cultivation flourished.¹⁵

¹⁴ Suzanne McGee, "[Why the Soviet Union Invaded Afghanistan](#)," *History*, August 15, 2023.

¹⁵ Azizi, Hamid, "[The Nature and Extent of the Taliban's Involvement in the Drug Trade Before and After the Regime Change \(1994–2022\): Insights from Experts](#)," *Taylor and Francis Online*, *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 35, no. 8 (2024), pp. 417-1445.

Having been repulsed to the mountains, they prepared a counterattack against the USSR, the atheist invader, as custodians of Islam, under a Jihad. The US immediately understood the situation, adopting the mindset of the enemy of my enemy is my friend. Weapons and equipment were funnelled by the States through Pakistan to the Mujahideen. On one side the US obtained the possibility of hampering the USSR, on the other Pakistan did not mind some pan-Islamic cooperation.¹⁶

Soviet troops soon found that fighting in Afghanistan was particularly difficult outside of urban zones, and they saw how quickly their initial advance was halted. While they still held the upper hand in the war. Leader Ahmad Shah Massoud managed to obstruct the Soviet advance. He was soon known as “the Tajik mujahideen guerrilla who had humiliated the Soviet Union and become an icon for millions of Afghans and many Cold Warriors in the West” (Williams, 2011)¹⁷.

The red army found itself constantly surrounded and under attack. Ambushes were common, especially in the mountainous regions, where fighters hid through the rocks and ammunition came out of nowhere: the “warriors appeared and disappeared like ghosts” (Shaw, 2007)¹⁸.

Combat became too intense and unfruitful, and by 1985 the war routine had worn on the patience of soviet people and politics. By this year Gorbačëv, who had stepped up in power, saw the war in Afghanistan as something detrimental. Moreover, the war effort only degraded by the following year, after stinger missiles were supplied to the Mujahideen downing Soviet helicopters and crippling the red army’s ability to ascend mountains. With Gorbačëv’s political agenda set in place, the Soviets had to plan an exit strategy from Afghanistan.

In the following years the red army withdrew progressively, placing Mohammad Najibullah in Karmal’s position. The plan was to deviate the conflict from the USSR to the government itself: the Mujahideen now fought against the ruling government. In 1989 the last Soviet troops left Afghan soil officially ending the Soviet-Afghan War.¹⁹

¹⁶ Suzanne McGee, “[Why the Soviet Union Invaded Afghanistan](#),” op. cit.

¹⁷ Williams, B. G., “[Chapter 4. Soviet Rule, the Mujahideen, and the Rise of the Taliban. In Afghanistan Declassified](#)”, op.cit.

¹⁸ Shaw, G., “[Afghanistan’s Ghosts](#). *Journal of Conflict Studies*,” 2007, 27(1).

¹⁹ Suzanne McGee, “[Why the Soviet Union Invaded Afghanistan](#),” op. cit.

1.2 The Aftermath of the Soviet Withdrawal

Following ten years of conflict, in 1989, after driving out the Soviet invaders, the nation faced a number of internal difficulties. The Mujahideen's fierce anti-invasion stance, fostered throughout the conflict, was one of the most complicated concerns. After forming powerful regional coalitions to oppose the Soviet Union, these soldiers were left with an uncertain future. With no external enemy left to fight, there was uncertainty over their role and what direction the country would take moving forward.

1.2.1. Civil War and the Rise of the Taliban

Afghanistan experienced a period of extreme instability and adversity when the Soviet Union withdrew in 1989.²⁰ Years of conflict and destruction combined with the withdrawal of Soviet forces created a weak, unstable state lacking a unified system of national government. As different Mujahideen factions, which had previously been united against a common enemy, turned against one another in a struggle for control of the nation, the power vacuum swiftly degenerated into factionalism. This competition led to a bloody civil war that intensified in the early 1990s, further dividing the country and causing the Afghan people to experience immense pain, relocation, and disappointment.²¹

Amidst the disorder and destruction, the Taliban emerged in 1994, capitalising on the chaos and the people's yearning for stability. The group began as a movement of Islamic students, known as '*Talibs*', who were educated in Pakistani conservative religious institutions and swore to uphold Sharia law strictly in order to establish order in the nation. A wave of wins accompanied the Taliban's swift progress across Afghanistan, as they took control of large areas with little opposition and grabbed key cities. When they took control of Kabul in 1996,²² they essentially established their government and ushered in a new period of tight, authoritarian rule characterised by harsh interpretations of Islamic law that drastically curtailed individual liberties, particularly for women and members of religious minorities.²³ The social, political,

²⁰ Suzanne McGee, "[Why the Soviet Union Invaded Afghanistan](#)," op. cit.

²¹ Encyclopaedia Britannica, "[Mujahideen: Afghani Rebels](#)," *Britannica*, last modified 2023.

²² Richard Kreitner, "[September 27, 1996: The Taliban Conquers Kabul](#)," *The Nation*, September 27, 2015

²³ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), "[Religious Minorities in Afghanistan: Factsheet, October 2021](#)," *USCIRF*, 2021.

and economic landscape of the nation would be shaped by this regime until its overthrow in 2001.²⁴

Thus, the Taliban, a fundamentalist Islamic movement, arose amid the governmental vacuum and widespread instability of Afghanistan's civil war, which broke out when the USSR withdrew in 1989. The group was originally made up of Afghan fighters who had participated in the anti-Soviet jihad²⁵ in the 1980s, many of whom had been trained in guerilla warfare and had received arms and support from various external actors, including, allegedly, covert assistance from the CIA as part of Cold War strategies to counter Soviet influence in the region.²⁶ The Taliban's leadership and early membership were mostly recruited from former Mujahideen groups and *Talibs* of Deobandi Islamic schools in Pakistan, notably in border districts with Afghanistan. Mullah Mohammed Omar, a former Mujahideen commander, declared that he had the divine mandate to lead a moral and religious rebirth.²⁷ The group gained rapid support as well as legitimacy by promising to restore peace and impose a strict interpretation of Sharia law, appealing to Afghans weary of years of corruption, violence, and insecurity.

1.2.2. Afghanistan's History of Instability

The aftermath of Afghanistan's civil war and the factionalisation of the Mujahideen led to the emergence of various radical groups. These factions developed differing interpretations of Islam, with each forming distinct organisations. Some of these groups expanded significantly, with some, like al-Qaeda, growing into international networks. The divergent ideologies and the fragmentation of the Mujahideen created an environment where radical extremism flourished, as these factions vied for power and influence, both within Afghanistan and beyond. Al-Qaeda is a global militant Islamist organisation founded in 1988 by Osama bin Laden, Abdullah Azzam, and other militants.²⁸ Its formation was rooted in the Afghan Jihad against the Soviet invasion, where bin Laden played a crucial role in recruiting, financing, and

²⁴ Maizland, Lindsay, "[The Legacy of the U.S. War in Afghanistan in Nine Graphics](#)," *Council on Foreign Relations*, August 17, 2021.

²⁵ A fight or general struggle against Islam's enemies, often in recent history with arms.

²⁶ U.S. Army., "[Operation Cyclone](#)," *Headquarters Seventh Army*, January 18, 1945. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Reading Room. Accessed February 22, 2025.

²⁷ European Asylum Support Office (EASO), "[Country of Origin Information Report: Afghanistan – Taliban Strategies](#)," *Recruitment*. July 2012, p. 22.

²⁸ Mapping Militant Organizations, "[Al Qaeda](#)," *Stanford University*, August 18, 2015.

training thousands of Muslim fighters from around the world to join the resistance. The group's mission extended beyond Afghanistan, promoting a radical Islamist ideology and global jihad, positioning itself as a defender of Islam and launching attacks worldwide to further its goals.

During the 1980s, Osama bin Laden became increasingly radicalised as the Afghan Jihad's success against the Soviet Union reinforced his belief that Islam could be defended and expanded through force. Following the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, bin Laden returned to Saudi Arabia. However, the presence of US troops in Saudi Arabia during the Gulf War (1990-1991) deeply angered him. He viewed this as a desecration of Islamic holy land, marking the United States as the primary enemy of Islam and solidifying his anti-Western ideology.²⁹

In the early 1990s bin Laden would move to stand where established operations with the support of the government during this period Alki expanded its network establishing connections with various Islam groups and conducting attacks such as the 1992 bombing of a hotel in Yemen which targeted US troops international pressure force leaves 1996 prompting his return returned to Afghanistan where the Taliban had taken power.³⁰

During the reign of the Taliban, al-Qaeda and other extremist organisations were given asylum in their area of control, which permitted them to utilise Afghan land as a base for operations and training.³¹ Given these ties, the Taliban's relations with the United States and the larger international community were strained, especially with al-Qaeda. Under Taliban protection, the terrorist organisation would begin to flourish. In the following years, bin Laden ordered the *Declaration of War against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places* which called for attacks against the US in response to perceived Western oppression of Muslims.³² On September 11, 2001, al-Qaeda the most notorious and devastating attack. Terrorist operatives hijacked commercial planes crashing into the World Trade Centre towers in New York City, into the Pentagon and Washington DC and the fourth intended for another high-profile target in Washington DC crashed in Pennsylvania at the passengers.³³

²⁹ South Asia Terrorism Portal, "[Osama bin Laden - Profile](#)," *South Asia Terrorism Portal*, 2001.

³⁰ Ibidem.

³¹ Council on Foreign Relations, "[The al-Qaeda-Taliban Nexus](#)," *Council on Foreign Relations*, November 24, 2009.

³² Bin Laden, Osama, "[Declaration of War against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places](#)," August 23, 1996. As published in Barry Rubin and Judith Colp Rubin, *Anti-American Terrorism and the Middle East: Defense of Legitimate Rights*. Oxford University Press, 2002.

³³ National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, "[The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States](#)," Official Government Edition. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2004.

1.3 The US Interval

The United States began the War on Terror on September 11, 2001, the first time a terrorist attack occurred on US soil. The goal of this operation was to destroy the terrorist organisation that carried out the assaults, al-Qaeda, and to topple the Taliban government in Afghanistan, which had given al-Qaeda members a safe haven.

1.3.1. Post-9/11

The United States, supported by a global coalition, began Operation Enduring Freedom, which briefly brought the first Taliban government to an end.³⁴ Many Taliban leaders had been killed, taken prisoner, or fled into rural Afghanistan or Pakistan by December 2001. The Taliban's hold on power had crumbled. But, in spite of the loss, the group showed incredible fortitude. They managed to regroup, reorganise, and begin a protracted insurgency against the coalition forces and the new Afghan government, which resulted in years of fighting that severely damaged the infrastructure and lives of Afghan civilians. Even in the face of a strong international military presence, the Taliban were able to establish a foothold in rural regions because to a variety of funding sources, including extortion, opium production, and foreign sponsorship.³⁵

With the help of countries such as China, Pakistan, Russia, and the United States, peace negotiations with the Taliban started in earnest in the late 2010s.³⁶ In a landmark deal made in February 2020, the Taliban promised to cut their ties to terrorist groups and participate in intra-Afghan peace negotiations in exchange for the United States' commitment to withdraw troops.³⁷ However, the Afghan government quickly fell apart after the United States and its allies withdrew their soldiers in August 2021, and the Taliban quickly retook Kabul.³⁸

³⁴ U.S. Department of State, "[U.S. Operations in Afghanistan](#)," *Office of the Spokesman*, 2006.

³⁵ Al Jazeera, "[The History of the Taliban](#)," *Al Jazeera*, August 18, 2021.

³⁶ Gannon, Kathy, "[US Meets China, Russia and Pakistan to Talk Afghan Peace](#)," *AP News*, October 26, 2019.

³⁷ U.S. Department of State, "[Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan](#)," *Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of State*, February 29, 2020.

³⁸ Al Jazeera, "[Afghanistan's Taliban Mark Anniversary of US-Led Forces' Withdrawal](#)," *Al Jazeera*, August 31, 2022.

Thousands of Afghans and foreigners were frantically attempting to leave the country as a result of the Taliban's reappearance.³⁹

Ever since taking back control, the Taliban have restored the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. Their reappearance has caused serious internal and international alarm. Although Taliban leaders have pledged to govern in a more moderate manner than during their previous tenure, claims of limitations and violations of human rights, especially those pertaining to women, have persisted. Similar to previous limitations, women are now prohibited from many places of employment and educational institutions under the Taliban's new regulation.⁴⁰ Global observers are also keeping a close eye on the Taliban's administration style and its wider ramifications for regional and global peace as worries about Afghanistan once again turning into a safe haven for extremist organisations are intensifying.

1.3.2. Crisis and the Opium Boom

In their article, *Aid, Exclusion, and the Local Dynamics of Insurgency in Afghanistan* Daniel Karell and Sebastian Schutte explore whether developmental aid can reduce violence in conflict zones, focusing on US occupied Afghanistan. The authors highlight conflicting perspectives: some suggest that aid increases employment and reduces violence, while others argue that it fuels insurgent activity.⁴¹ The study was based on tracing aid programs in Afghanistan during the US occupation of the country. The results can be seen as an explanation of how exclusion, and the local dynamics of insurgency in Afghanistan have influenced more locals to encourage and even legitimise the rise of the Taliban.

Findings indicate that inclusive aid projects, which benefit entire communities, are associated with reduced violence, while exclusive projects that serve only a select few often fuel insurgent activity. When aid excludes certain groups, it fosters grievances and feelings of injustice, escalating tensions and eventually leading to insurgency. This exclusion works as a *zero-sum* game with clear winners and losers. Data from US military aid programs between 2004 and 2009 show a measurable increase in insurgent activity following the launch of exclusionary projects. The Taliban effectively exploited these grievances by positioning

³⁹ Landinfo. Query Response, "[Afghanistan – Departure and Return After the Taliban's Takeover of Power](#)," LANDINFO, Country of Origin Information Centre, September 29, 2022.

⁴⁰ Al Jazeera, "[Afghanistan's Taliban Mark Anniversary of US-Led Forces' Withdrawal](#)," op. cit.

⁴¹ Daniel Karell and Sebastian Schutte, "Aid, Exclusion, and the Local Dynamics of Insurgency in Afghanistan," *Journal of Peace Research* (Sage, 2018), Vol. 55(6), pp. 711–725.

themselves as protectors of marginalised, rural communities, especially in Pashtun areas, while the post-2001 Afghan government faced widespread accusations of corruption and ethnic favouritism. This very phenomenon demonstrates that exclusionary aid projects led to more insurgent activity in areas where these projects were initiated.

Another important factor to consider is that, as of 2019, US aid to Afghanistan allocated over \$100 billion to primarily serve the military's needs. In contrast, only \$9 billion was allocated for counter-narcotics efforts, and a mere \$4.1 billion was earmarked for humanitarian assistance.⁴²

As a consequence, the Taliban managed to capitalise relatively easily on this. They actively recruited from areas where aid projects had excluded certain communities, and in these same areas they spread wide propaganda campaigns.

Within this reasoning is thus fundamental to show that enforcing the intent of the US to bring democracy has failed. Indeed, democracy is not straightforward solution to conflict. In a paper by Krishnarajan, Møller, Rørbæk and Skaaning, *Democracy, Democratization, and Civil War*,⁴³ the authors demonstrate that established democracies are particularly effective at addressing societal grievances through inclusive practices. Partially democratised regimes struggle to either address grievances or suppress dissent. The case of Afghanistan is quite peculiar as in the country there were two realities, one supported by US aid policies, and one which was shut off by the rest of the world. The instability between the two, so the partiality of democracy, appearing like stains on the territory of Afghanistan increased relative deprivation. This latter concept, elaborated by Gurr,⁴⁴ explains the perceived disparity between what individuals believe they are entitled to (value expectations) and what they perceive as attainable (value capabilities). If these two values do not align, it can lead to feelings of frustration. This frustration begins at the individual level but, when shared among different groups, it may escalate into broader communal conflict. Hence, the process of democratisation itself, if done improperly, can trigger unrest by causing institutional instability and fostering nationalist sentiments. In Afghanistan, these dynamics undermined the US effort to establish a stable democratic system, ultimately facilitating the rise and legitimisation of insurgent groups like the Taliban.

⁴² Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, "[Quarterly Report to the United States Congress](#)," SIGAR, October 30, 2020,

⁴³ Krishnarajan, Suthan, Jørgen Møller, Lasse Lykke Rørbæk, and Svend-Erik Skaaning, "Democracy, Democratization, and Civil War," *V-Dem Institute Working Paper*. Gothenburg: University of Gothenburg, 2016.

⁴⁴ Gurr, Ted R, "Why Men Rebel," *Princeton University Press*, 1970. Reprint, 2016.

Within the chaos of an unstable, or even, absent government it is always the local population that suffers the most. Afghanistan, as abovementioned, is a mountainous and arid country, where growing crops and conducting general business is quite difficult. Nevertheless, the country's territory is ideal for the growth of opium poppies. Accordingly, farmers had resorted to the most cost-production efficient crop: the *papaver somniferum*.

What's more, investment in counternarcotics remained stagnant during the years of US presence.⁴⁵ Given the economic situation the country was in and the relatively low investments in drug-fighting efforts, locals even more incentivised to continue cultivating opium, a longstanding tradition passed down through generations. Despite the severity of this situation, little concrete action was taken, by the local government, the Taliban, or the US military.

Given also the easiness to cultivate the plant, the opium poppy only needs modest water in its early growth phases and does best in warm, temperate settings with little humidity. Sandy loam soils, which provide adequate moisture retention and nutrient availability, are ideal for its growth. The plant's development may be negatively impacted by excessive humidity or severely dry circumstances, which will lower the number of alkaloids it contains.⁴⁶

For clarity in this thesis, it is important to note that the narcotic heroin is synthesised from opium, with the initial step involving the conversion of opium into morphine. This process typically uses readily available chemicals such as calcium oxide and ammonium chloride.⁴⁷ It is also worth noting that, in addition to Afghanistan, the only confirmed large-scale heroin manufacture takes place in Myanmar and Latin America, particularly in Mexico.⁴⁸

Experts on the issue have pointed out how, in some areas of Afghanistan, particularly in the south, the drug trade has always been strongly linked to local tribes, authority and politics. The Taliban in fact origine themselves from the traditional tribal families of Afghanistan and their tie is fundamental. A specialist especially pointed out that since the 1970s, the family of Hamed Karzai,⁴⁹ the president of Afghanistan from 2001 to 2014, has been active in the

⁴⁵ Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, "[Quarterly Report to the United States Congress](#)," op. cit.

⁴⁶ US Drug Enforcement Administration, Office of Intelligence, "[Opium Poppy Cultivation and Heroin Processing in Southeast Asia](#)," Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, September 1992.

⁴⁷ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, "Afghan Opiate Trafficking Through the Southern Route," Vienna: UNODC, June 2015, p. 26.

⁴⁸ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, "[The Global Afghan Opium Trade: A Threat Assessment, 2011](#)," Vienna: UNODC, 2011, p. 144.

⁴⁹ Former Afghan republic government officials were involved in the narcotics trade at all levels. However, the experts were not asked to provide their views on this issue.

narcotics trade. While he was president, Ahmad Wali Karzai, his brother, controlled one of the country's biggest opiate trafficking networks.⁵⁰

In southern Afghanistan, the Helmand Province (Hilmand in the map on page 3), is the ideal place for this crop to grow. In this primarily arid area, agriculture is supported by the vital irrigation provided by the Helmand River. Cultivation has, however, in part moved from the southwest to the northeast, especially to Badakhshan Province, after 2022. This change is partially explained by the Taliban's declaration of opium cultivation prohibition in areas used for traditional poppy growing, which led growers to look for other locations with more hospitable conditions.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Azizi, Hamid, "[The Nature and Extent of the Taliban's Involvement in the Drug Trade Before and After the Regime Change \(1994–2022\): Insights from Experts](#)," op. cit.

⁵¹ Murphy, Francois, "[Afghan Opium Cultivation Bounces and Shifts Two Years After Ban, UN Says](#)," *Reuters*, November 6, 2024.

CHAPTER 2

INTERNAL STRUGGLES

2.1 Socio-Economic Challenges

Afghanistan has always endured hardships in its unfortunate history. The country has seen dramatic trends of poverty, especially in the past century, where most countries have developed and transitioned to a more peaceful state. Afghanistan is a renowned example of a dramatic country, devastated by war and torn by poverty.

2.1.1. Economic Assessment of Afghanistan's Fragile Economy

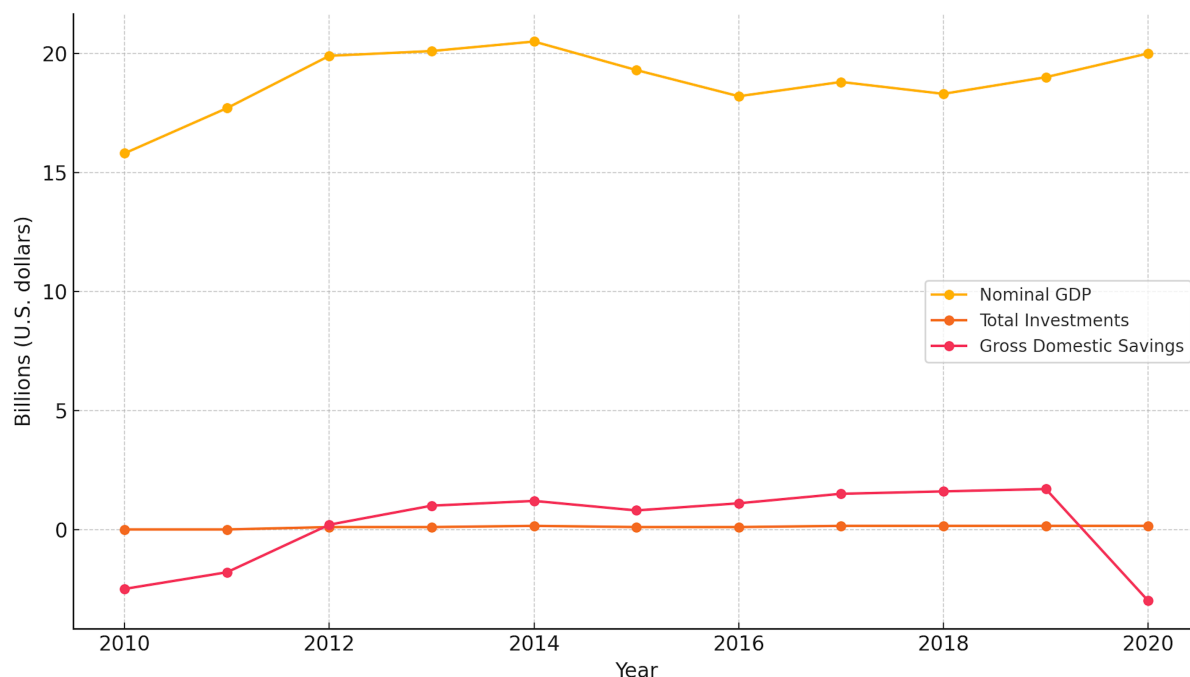
This section of this chapter will explain how the US interval brought even more economic havoc to the country. It will explore how foreign aid mismanagement, shifting military priorities, and abrupt policy changes disrupted local markets, deepened dependency on external assistance, and contributed to long-term economic instability rather than fostering sustainable development.

Firstly, it is impossible to analyse Afghanistan's economy without acknowledging the challenges that the country has been facing with its decades of internal conflicts, political instability, the rushed withdrawal of US troops, the second unplanned rise of the Taliban administration. All these factors have undoubtedly impacted the country's scenario, in terms of society, politics and economy. Afghanistan is a war-affected and developing country, where recovery remains very weak and unsustainable in the long-term. Furthermore, it is important to note that these non-stopping challenges make it harder to gather and access data, that is essential for analysis and policymaking.

By conducting an analysis on Afghanistan's economic performance from 2010 to 2020, data reveals systemic aid mismanagement, an overreliance on foreign contributions, along with an unsustainable economic model that exacerbated inequality rather than fostering long-term stability. While nominal GDP experienced growth in the early 2010s, it remained volatile due to external factors, including foreign aid inflows and political shifts.⁵² Gross Domestic Savings, an essential metric for self-sustained development, showed stagnation and decline, reflecting

⁵² World Bank, "[Afghanistan - GDP \(Current US\\$\)](#)," *World Bank National Accounts Data*, 2025.

an inability to generate internal wealth.⁵³ Despite rising domestic investment, its impact on economic growth was negligible, suggesting inefficiencies and misallocation of resources.^{54 55}



Foreign aid, while crucial for short-term economic survival, created a cycle of dependency rather than fostering self-sufficiency. During the US occupation, Afghanistan became one of the most aid-dependent countries globally, with donor assistance significantly influencing GDP growth. However, this aid largely supported military and reconstruction efforts rather than sustainable economic initiatives, leading to a distorted economy where foreign funds dictated development priorities.

While it is undoubtable that the country did experience some economic growth following 2001, given the worsening aid and a deteriorating security situation, this growth stalled in the years after. A government survey of living conditions for 2017 revealed that over 55% of the population lived below the national poverty line of approximately \$31 per person per month.⁵⁶

In a study conducted by the World Bank, between 2011-2012 and 2016-2017, Afghanistan experienced a significant rise in poverty rates, increasing from 38% to 55%.

⁵³ Trading Economics, "[Afghanistan - Gross Domestic Savings](#)," *Trading Economics*, 2025.

⁵⁴ National Statistics and Information Authority, "[Afghanistan - Investment Year Book Data \(2010-2020\)](#)," *NSIA*, 2025.

⁵⁵ World Bank, "[Afghanistan - GDP \(Current US\\$\)](#)," op. cit.

⁵⁶ Reality Check Team, "[Afghanistan: What Has Happened to Violence, Poverty and Women's Education?](#)" *BBC News*, July 9, 2021.

Employment does not guarantee an escape from poverty, as 59% of the Afghan population lived in households where the head holds were very vulnerable employment. Notably, households reliant on agriculture face even higher levels of economic hardship, with a poverty rate of 63%.⁵⁷

2.1.2. *The Role of Poverty in Drug Production and Consumption*

As mentioned in the previous chapter, a vast majority of Afghanistan's inhabitants were forced to turn in a way or the other to the drug market. Due to the lack of stable work and the lack of any realistic alternative livelihoods, people were forced to grow the infamous *papaver somniferum* as their main or secondary source of income.

Coupling with this, as development programs supported by the government were unable to offer lasting answers, opium emerged as the backbone of Afghanistan's rural economy. US-occupied Afghanistan's lax law enforcement, and the Taliban's expanding power also contributed to making it harder to distinguish between lawlessness and administration. By 2022, Afghanistan accounted for around 80% of the world's opium, becoming the world's largest opium producer.⁵⁸ Opium's high demand and profitability made it a desirable substitute for traditional agriculture, which was beset by persistent problems like as low crop yields, erratic weather patterns.

The combination of flourishing drug production and widespread poverty created a dangerous and highly complex bond. Indeed, it is unsurprising that Afghanistan emerged as the world's leading opium producer. With the steep rise in food prices, an ordinary farmer now must spend 70% of their income on food alone: this harsh reality is echoed in documented testimonies from individuals stating, "*I will do everything because my family is hungry and it is my responsibility to feed them*", or even "*what should we do? Should we die? [...] By this wheat, we can't survive*".⁵⁹

Another major issue stemming from this crisis is widespread addiction. Millions of people in Afghanistan suffer from drug dependency, with many dying from overdoses or failing

⁵⁷ World Bank, "[Poverty in Afghanistan: Results Based on ALCS 2016-17](#)," Washington, DC: World Bank, 2018.

⁵⁸ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, "[Afghanistan Opium Survey 2023: Cultivation and Production After the Ban: Effects and Implications](#)," Vienna: UNODC, November 2023.

⁵⁹ Voice of America, "[Helmand, The Narcotics Curse | Changes in Afghanistan's Largest Opium-Producing Region](#)," YouTube video, April 8, 2024.

to receive proper treatment. Among those who use drugs, suicide is also a tragic consequence. In particular, individuals who take their own lives face additional hardship even in death, as religious customs often prevent them from receiving proper burials. Most addicts either leave or are abandoned by their families and end up forming makeshift communities, often gathering under Kabul's infamous bridges.

This crisis disproportionately affects women, who are left to care for their children without the support of men, as societal and economic barriers make it difficult for them to find work. A major flaw in aid programs has been their exclusive focus on women, often neglecting men. Over the past decade, this imbalance has become a growing issue in Afghanistan, fostering resentment within households. While women may receive employment opportunities, their husbands, left unemployed, struggle with a sense of emasculation and frustration. Traditional gender roles remain largely unchanged; men do not take on domestic responsibilities such as cooking or childcare. As a result, women bear a double burden, working all day only to return home to additional duties and their husbands' resentment.

The year 2017 marked a peak in opium production, with nearly 10 thousand tons yielding \$1.4 billion, summing up to 7% of Afghanistan's GDP.⁶⁰ Despite billions of dollars being spent on counter-narcotics efforts, both drug production and consumption persist. While most of the opium is smuggled abroad, the portion that remains within the country fuels an escalating domestic crisis.

Crystal methamphetamine is also emerging as a major problem in the country. Drug traffickers have discovered that the ephedra plant, commonly known as '*oman*',⁶¹ which grows abundantly in parts of the country, can be used to manufacture meth.⁶² As a result, meth production has surged, alongside other synthetic drugs that are inexpensive to produce. Low cost in fact is what drug addicts in Afghanistan are looking for. Recently, meth's chemical precursor, pseudoephedrine, commonly found in cold medications, has also begun to be produced domestically.⁶³

Another cheap opioid alternative is morphine. Unlike heroin, which is made from strictly regulated chemical precursors, this drug is easier to produce using basic ingredients

⁶⁰ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime and Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, Ministry of Counter Narcotics, "Afghanistan Opium Survey 2017: Cultivation and Production," Vienna: UNODC, November 2017.

⁶¹ Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, "[Is Afghanistan a New Source for Methamphetamine in Eastern and Southern Africa?](#)" *GIATOO*, Risk Bulletin #12, 2020.

⁶² United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, "[Understanding Illegal Methamphetamine Manufacture in Afghanistan](#)," *UNODC Research Brief*. Vienna: UNODC, August 2023.

⁶³ Chellaney, Brahma, "[The Narco-Terrorist Taliban](#)," *The Strategist (ASPI)*, November 15, 2021.

available in Afghanistan, making it a more accessible and cost-effective option for local manufacturers in places with less chemical control.⁶⁴

Drug production and consumption go hand in hand, and both have been steadily rising. However, obtaining accurate user statistics still remains challenging. The most recent available data comes from a 2015 survey conducted by the Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL) in collaboration with the Afghan government. The survey revealed that between 2.5 to 3.5 million Afghans were directly or indirectly addicted to drugs. Alarming, one in three families tested positive for drug use, with rural areas experiencing addiction rates three times higher than those in urban centres. In Bamiyan, drug addiction has deeply affected local communities, with officials estimating that around 50 thousand people are struggling with substance abuse. The crisis is even more severe in rural areas, where drug consumption is rampant. In some provinces, entire villages are reportedly dependent on narcotics, highlighting the devastating scale of the country's drug epidemic. In an interview in one of the affected villages, a reporter asks why drug use was so prevalent, one of the young adults responds: *"I became addicted to drugs because of employment and poverty. I went to Iran far away from home. I was unemployed and the situation was bad, so I got addicted to drugs. When I returned here I thought that the situation would be better. The situation is bad here as well"*.⁶⁵

The crisis extends beyond men, deeply affecting women and children, as they too consume these substances. In addition to heroin and meth, families in these villages are well-acquainted with other drugs such as Tramadol tablets, a cheap and easily accessible alternative to stronger narcotics.⁶⁶

Many villagers are exhausted from this life of addiction and desperately want a change in the system, in their daily lives. They have repeatedly reported drug smugglers to security agencies, yet no real action had been taken till the end of the US occupation. Frustrated and abandoned, they have plead for government intervention, not just to combat trafficking but to establish addiction treatment centres and offer a path toward recovery.⁶⁷

Among the various issues, the Opium Brides phenomena is arguably one of the most tragic. Families are frequently compelled to sell their daughters into marriage in an effort to pay off drug-related debts, using them as money in the illegal opium trade. These young girls,

⁶⁴ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, "Afghan Opiate Trafficking Through the Southern Route," op. cit., p. 26.

⁶⁵ Voice of America, "[The Inside Story | Afghanistan's Addiction Crisis](#)," YouTube video, Oct 21, 2021.

⁶⁶ Ibidem.

⁶⁷ Ibidem.

some of whom as young as children, are sold into the hands of drug lords or traffickers, where they frequently endure a lifetime of mistreatment, exploitation, and hopelessness.

One in seven girls in the developing world marries before fifteen. The fathers who sell their daughters to settle their opium debts are ashamed of what they are doing. It is neither accepted nor considered normal. It has been done in the past, it is not something new, but the level of who many are being done is unprecedented in Afghanistan right now. The worsening economic crisis and rising drug dependency have led to a dramatic increase, as societal structures collapse, and families are torn apart. Traffickers often take these girls away, never to be seen by their families again, leaving behind a devastating cycle of loss and despair.

Self-immolation has become increasingly common in the western regions, evolving into a tragic form of protest. For many, it is not just an act of desperation but a final attempt to reclaim control over their fate. Those who resort to it often believe there is no hope for survival, viewing it as an escape from misery rather than a risk they might endure.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ Pulitzer Center, "[Afghanistan: Opium Economy and the Child Bride Phenomenon](#)," *YouTube video*, February 7, 2012.

2.2 The Taliban's Domestic Policies on the Drug Trade

Since the rise of the Taliban there have been many significant changes in the country. In 2021, the US withdrew, paving the way for a new government modelled after the previous Taliban regime of the 90s. However, the new Taliban leadership faces a stark reality, the world has changed, and simply reinstating their old rule is far more challenging than before. Indeed, governing Afghanistan today requires more of an adaptation rather than a return to the past. Facing severe international pressure, particularly on the economic front, the Taliban must come to terms with the challenges of governance and demonstrate their legitimacy. This not only within Afghanistan but also on the global stage. Their struggle is compounded by the freezing of national assets and the suspension of humanitarian aid, which had previously sustained much of the country's economy before the withdrawal of foreign forces. This section of the chapter will attempt to explain how and why drug policies implemented by the Taliban face the current socio-economic realities in the country.

2.2.1. Prohibition and Exploitation

Ever since taking power, the Taliban have officialised different policies to counteract the cultivation and distribution of drugs.⁶⁹ Prohibition of opium poppy manufacturing, usage, and cultivation was one of their initial measures. This would not be the first time the Taliban have issued this ban, as they had already banned opium in 2000 for a number of reasons, including raising opium prices, strengthening their hold on the drug trade, and establishing their credibility abroad. At the time, the ban resulted in a sharp drop in cultivation, from over 82,172 hectares to less than 8,000 in a single year, which translated into a 75% reduction in whole global heroin supply.⁷⁰ However, the Taliban did not prevent the sale or trafficking of existing opium inventories, allowing them and other traffickers to profit handsomely from the subsequent price increase. Despite the widespread accolades, the action resulted in great economic suffering for rural farmers, with many going into debt or fleeing the country. The political implications of the prohibition, particularly in light of a looming US invasion, prompted the Taliban to reverse their decision by September 2001. The narcotics reversal was

⁶⁹ Gul, Ayaz., "[Taliban Chief Says 'Reforms' End Afghan Poppy Cultivation](#)," *Voice of America*, June 25, 2023.

⁷⁰ Mansfield, David, "Coping Strategies, Accumulated Wealth and Shifting Markets: The Story of Opium Poppy Cultivation in Badakhshan 2000-2003," *Report for the Agha Khan Development Network*, January 2004, p. 4.

not a financially driven decision, as prices had already soared, and inventories were huge. The decision was political, aiming to prevent unrest and maintain rural support before the projected US invasion. Hence, this proved that the Taliban's heavy reliance on the opium trade, which supported rural livelihoods and political influence, eventually outweighed the benefits of prohibition.⁷¹

It is significant to remember that opium production continued and even increased under US occupation despite being illegal and not officially supported.⁷² Post-2001 farmers claimed that Hamid Karzai offered poppy cultivation in exchange for assistance against the Taliban.⁷³ This was due to economic considerations. Since alternative agricultural options were either too expensive to produce or not valuable enough to support livelihoods, opium poppy was the only crop that many Afghan farmers could grow. As previously stated, many Afghans were compelled to cultivate opium because of economic need. During this time, opium cultivation was generally accepted in Afghanistan. Many parts were essentially ungoverned as the government and foreign armies battled to gain complete authority over large swaths of the nation. Opium production flourished unrestrained in certain regions. The cultivation of poppies continued largely unopposed since poppy growing was not seen as a key priority by occupation forces, even in areas where foreign forces maintained a presence.

Thus, the production and trafficking of opium became a commonplace feature of Afghan life, with open marketplaces selling it all across the nation. Drug transactions, like everything in the market, and most this area of Afghanistan, are conducted with Pakistani rupees.⁷⁴ This currency's relevance to drug trade will be elucidated in the next chapter.

Especially *“in Helmand province [the Taliban] collected taxes from the cultivation of opium and trafficking of drugs. There were many opium bazaars where farmers and traders could sell their drugs; the Taliban maintained the security of these bazaars and imposed taxes on farmers and traders. In Kajaki district [Helmand province], several heroin processing labs were either owned by a Taliban member, or some members [of the Taliban] were working in the labs or protected the labs”* (Expert 9)⁷⁵.

⁷¹ Felbab-Brown, Vanda, [“Pipe Dreams: The Taliban and Drugs from the 1990s into Its New Regime,”](#) *Brookings*, September 15, 2021.

⁷² United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, [“Opium Cultivation in Afghanistan: Latest Findings and Emerging Threats,”](#) op. cit.

⁷³ Indira R. A. Lakshmanan, “Afghan Announce Victories in a New War against Opium.” *Boston Globe*, 21 April 2002.

⁷⁴ Voice of America, [“Helmand, The Narcotics Curse | Changes in Afghanistan's Largest Opium-Producing Region,”](#) op. cit.

⁷⁵ Azizi, Hamid, [“The Nature and Extent of the Taliban's Involvement in the Drug Trade Before and After the Regime Change \(1994–2022\): Insights from Experts,”](#) op. cit.

Obviously all this was more common practice in regions with weaker control. Despite ongoing counter-narcotics efforts, drug production remained widespread throughout Afghanistan. Opium was an open secret, widely known and, to a large extent, tolerated. Attention and urgency were directed toward other priorities. For foreign forces and the pre-Taliban government, the focus was on maintaining political control, building infrastructure, and concentrating aid in strategically important regions, particularly the capital, Kabul. Meanwhile, the Taliban, operating in more marginalised regions, prioritised keeping their communities economically satisfied and avoiding unrest. Given these circumstances, it became clear why opium cultivation was tolerated by both sides until 2021.

In September 2021, when the Taliban returned to power, a significant shift in drug policy occurred, at least on a formal level. The new regime reasserted its Qur'anic values, declaring a complete ban on all intoxicating substances, including drugs, narcotics, and alcohol, which are considered haram (forbidden) in Islam. Adhering to a strict interpretation of Islamic law, the Taliban felt compelled to abolish the opium trade and its production. The Taliban, who once funded their fighting by taxing the opium trade in Helmand, have now enforced its ban on cultivation and use of the narcotic.

However, the ban was not enforced immediately.⁷⁶ Aware of Afghanistan's deep economic reliance on the opium industry, the Taliban chose to delay full implementation. The prohibition did not take immediate effect though, as the Taliban, realising the country's economic dependence on the drug, would enforce the full ban from the year after, in 2023.

In its November 2022 report, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) said opium prices spiked after the Taliban's poppy ban. The ban announcement drove a major spike in the price of opium as people feared a future shortage. Poppy farmers especially in Helmand province worried about the Taliban government's ban on poppy cultivation. As a consequence, the price nearly doubled from \$116 to \$203 for one kilo of opium. In total, farmers made an estimated \$1.4 billion in 2022 growing opium. The poppy farmers in Helmand alone made \$733 million.⁷⁷ Prices rose to over US\$300 for the 2023 planting season. By 2024, prices had risen to levels nearly 10 times higher than the pre-ban average, and four times higher than those at the time of the ban's implementation.⁷⁸ The graph below, obtained from the

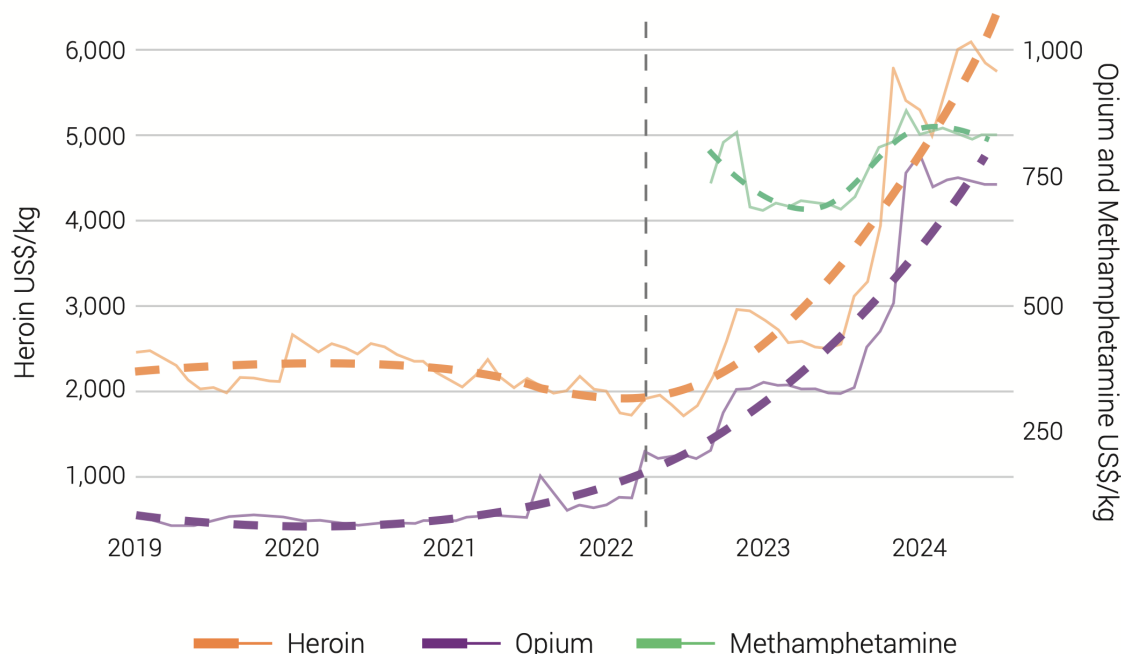
⁷⁶ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, "[Afghanistan Opium Survey 2023](#)," *UNODC Research Brief*. Vienna: UNODC, November 2023.

⁷⁷ Voice of America, "[Helmand, The Narcotics Curse | Changes in Afghanistan's Largest Opium-Producing Region](#)," op. cit.

⁷⁸ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, "[Afghanistan Drug Insights: Volume 4 - Drug Trafficking and Opiate Stocks](#)," *UNODC Information Centre*, January 2025, p. 6.

UNODC,⁷⁹ depicts monthly Afghan medicine prices (US\$/kg) at the trader level from January 2019 to June 2024, demonstrating these fluctuations.

Monthly Afghan drug prices (US\$/kg) at trader level, January 2019 to June 2024



Note: Dashed line plots smoothed trend; data come from UNODC Afghanistan Price Monitoring.

According to an expert on the Taliban, the group would have imposed the ban opium given the prices lowering too much for the internal economy to survive off it. The expert goes on to state that he had “interviewed a military intelligence officer of the Taliban back then who told me the prices were too low and that is why we banned the cultivation, to increase the prices. This is exactly what is happening this year” (Expert 2)⁸⁰, the year after the Taliban takeover.

The Taliban’s Sangin district governor stated: “Sheikh Sahib [Haibatullah] issued a decree that all kinds of drugs, whether it is poppy or cannabis, are banned. [...] Then there is no need for any Mujahid to go and stop a farmer and stop him from poppy cultivation. [...] As

⁷⁹ Ibidem.

⁸⁰ Azizi, Hamid, “[The Nature and Extent of the Taliban’s Involvement in the Drug Trade Before and After the Regime Change \(1994–2022\): Insights from Experts](#),” op. cit.

*we see our surroundings, no one cultivates poppy or cannabis after the decree. If anyone cultivated them then we summon them and make them understand [the decree]”.*⁸¹

The local Taliban government in Helmand already stated that they have eradicated this past autumn’s poppy crop and cleared hundreds of hectares of land. But the problem persists, as international observers, such as the International Crisis Group view the problem, the focus should be on job creation in non-farm industries.⁸²

The treatment of drug abusers presents another important challenge. Indeed, the Taliban have implemented harsh measures against drug users. While eliminating addiction would be the aim, this would need careful implementation of certain medical and psychological procedures. Instead, the Taliban have adopted a draconian strategy to address the problem by making the addicts undergo a difficult drug withdrawal process. Just from the beginning of the process of taking in the addicts the Taliban’s strict approach to drug enforcement is very clear. This is testified directly in an Al Jazeera documentary. In a segment it shows a Taliban-led operation in Kabul that involves the apprehension of drug addicts from the streets. A neighbourhood is raided by Taliban militants and medical personnel, who yell commands and force people in a van. A number of addicts protest and beg, including a man who sobs, “*I have eight children,*” in this tumultuous and dramatic scenario, “*who will provide them with food?*”⁸³

The Taliban utilise very harsh punishments against drug users. This would be part of a larger drive to project moral authority and social control. Imprisoning, beating, and immersing them in cold water for several hours at a time could be among the methods used.⁸⁴ These treatments, which are frequently used without due process, have been strongly condemned by humanitarian organisations and health professionals for breaching fundamental human rights and weakening medical ethical norms.

Regardless, it appears that the prohibition was put into place for international legitimacy since the Taliban had long desired support from the drug trade. To demonstrate that their administration is supporting UN-allied measures, they appear to have returned to it. Though it appears to be primarily an official measure, the drug market is being prevented. The main issue

⁸¹ Voice of America, “[Helmand, The Narcotics Curse | Changes in Afghanistan's Largest Opium-Producing Region](#),” op. cit.

⁸² International Crisis Group, “[Trouble in Afghanistan’s Opium Fields: The Taliban War on Drugs](#),” Asia Report No. 340. Brussels: International Crisis Group, September 12, 2024.

⁸³ Al Jazeera English, “[Inside One of Kabul’s Largest Drug Rehabilitation Centres | Witness Documentary](#),” YouTube video, June 21, 2023.

⁸⁴ Rashid, Ahmed, “Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia,” *Yale University Press*: 2000, p. 119.

is that local farmers and those working at the bottom end of the drug production chain are being compelled to switch from producing poppies to other, more difficult-to-find, and less lucrative crops.

On the other hand, it appears that the Taliban are still receiving financial backing from the narcotics trade. It has come to light that meth laboratories are operating in Kabul, gradually replacing opium, and smuggling their products into adjacent counties. Similar to the Sinaloa cartel's involvement in the international cocaine trade, the Taliban are progressively establishing their position in regard to heroin and methamphetamine.⁸⁵ Indeed, following the crackdown on opium, methamphetamine manufacturing and trafficking in Afghanistan have increased.⁸⁶

2.2.2. Taliban Revenue and International Legitimacy

It is important to mention that the entirety of Taliban funds did not entirely derive from drug trade revenue. In fact, a number of Afghan and American officials have long claimed that Pakistan, Iran, and Russia are among some of the nations that provided financial support to the terrorist group. Even though the latter have denied this behaviour, the biggest individual funders are thought to be private individuals from Pakistan and a number of Gulf nations, such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar. Although it is impossible to measure exactly, it is believed that a sizable amount of the Taliban's income comes from these financial sources. Experts estimate that it may have reached \$500 million annually till 2021.⁸⁷

Foreign aid has also come from the precious minerals, with countries like China showing increasing interest. Due to decades of conflict and instability, a large portion of Afghanistan's mineral and precious stone wealth has been untapped. Afghan government authorities estimate that the country's mining industry is worth \$1 billion a year. Small-scale enterprises dominate the industry, and a large portion of this extraction is done illegally or unofficially.⁸⁸ For this reason, China has fought for mining rights, particularly for rare earth

⁸⁵ O'Donnell, Lynne., "[The Taliban Have a New Drug of Choice](#)," *Foreign Policy*, September 13, 2023.

⁸⁶ United Nations Information Service, "[Afghanistan: Opium Production Remains 93 per Cent Below Pre-Drug Ban Levels, Says UNODC](#)," *UNIS Press Release*, UNIS/NAR/1492, November 27, 2024.

⁸⁷ Azami, Dawood, "[Afghanistan: How Do the Taliban Make Money?](#)" *BBC News*, August 28, 2021.

⁸⁸ *Ibidem*.

elements, copper, and lithium, essential resources for IT hardware to combat its rivalry in the field with Taiwan.

The Taliban had profited for various years from drug trade. They denounced drugs publicly, but it was thanks to these that they managed to finance purchasing weapons, ammunition, and vehicles. Drug trade has funded recruiting campaigns, given fighters salaries, and supported the logistics required to keep its network operating across regions. Additionally, drug money has been used to maintain fundamental governance operations in regions under their control, including courts, religious schools, and even basic health facilities, as well as to fund propaganda and win over local leaders. *“The Taliban had a number of involvements in the drug trade. They encouraged poppy cultivation and protected the cultivation from government eradication. They were involved in the transport of opiates and provided protection to drug convoys. They taxed cultivation [of opium poppy] and the trade and trafficking of drugs. They allowed heroin labs to operate, and some of their members worked in those labs”* (Expert 3)⁸⁹.

Afghanistan, a major player in the worldwide heroin supply chain had positioned itself as the world’s largest producer of opium, with an estimated \$1.5 to \$3 billion made from the opium trade each year. Officials from the Afghan government claim that the Taliban charge opium growers a 10% cultivation fee. They also allegedly collect taxes from traffickers who smuggle the finished product across borders and from processing labs that turn opium into heroin. The Taliban’s revenue from the drug trade ranged from approximately \$20 million to \$500 million, with the group generating between 10% to 50% of its whole income from the drug trade between 2000 and 2020.⁹⁰ Estimates might be inaccurate though given that, according to General John Nicholson, former US commander in Afghanistan, the illicit drug economy accounted for up to 60% of the Taliban’s revenue,⁹¹ as stated in the 2018 Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) report. On the other hand, some experts believe this figure may be overstated, arguing that the Taliban’s revenue streams are diverse and not solely dependent on narcotics.

Although their de facto position on drugs has changed over time, the Taliban deny any connection in the trade and often invoke their temporary prohibition on opium production in 2000 under their first government as proof of their anti-drug stance.⁹² To continue their public

⁸⁹ Azizi, Hamid, [“The Nature and Extent of the Taliban’s Involvement in the Drug Trade Before and After the Regime Change \(1994–2022\): Insights from Experts,”](#) op. cit.

⁹⁰ Azizi and Hughes, “A systematic review,” *Taylor & Francis Online*, 2024, pp. 122–55.

⁹¹ U.S. Department of Defense, [“Department of Defense Press Briefing by General Nicholson via Teleconference from Kabul, Afghanistan,”](#) *U.S. Government*, May 30, 2018.

⁹² Azami, Dawood, [“Afghanistan: How Do the Taliban Make Money?”](#) op. cit.

efforts, as motioned in the previous section, the Emir, Hibatullah Akhundzada's decree on the production, import and export, sale and purchase, transportation, and consumption of all intoxicants, was intentionally declared quite soon by the new government for international legitimacy.

The announcement did not attract much notice internationally, in part because the news was overshadowed by another edict ten days earlier, when the Taliban declared their infamous ban on reopening girls' secondary schools. These two decisions might have been linked as, Taliban sources told Crisis Group that their colleagues took both at the same meeting of top leaders in March 2022, when the Emir summoned his cabinet to Kandahar, and informed them of his view on girls' schools as well as his determination to ban narcotics. Whether the Emir purposely chose to pair the two policies is unclear. Outsiders conjectured that the Taliban's abrupt crackdown on opium cultivation was a calculated attempt of the new government to deflect attention from other countries, by using the 'good news' of their anti-drug efforts to obscure the 'bad news' about their limits on women's rights and girls' education. This has not worked as the majority of the international community assumed that the announcement's timing was a deliberate attempt to deflect growing international criticism of the government and improve its reputation.⁹³

"The Taliban perceives opium as a tool they can leverage, whether for generating revenue or using it as a bargaining chip in negotiations. For instance, during the opium ban in 2001, the Taliban sought foreign aid from the international community. At that time, they had a Taliban official representative in New York, and their aim was to persuade the United Nations and the United States that they should be recognised as legitimate political actors. To demonstrate their good faith, they imposed an opium ban in alignment with global drug control conventions. It appears that history repeats itself" (Expert 8)⁹⁴.

However, it may be seen, navigating the path toward international legitimacy is a complex challenge for a government established by a group identified as a terrorist organisation. Granting recognition to such a regime would not only cast a negative light on the nations choosing to do so but it would also undermine the very policies and principles upheld during the years of occupation, particularly for all the Western nations that aligned themselves with the United States in that effort. Obtaining thus recognition would result in being very difficult for the new government. They have put many efforts in gaining legitimacy just within their

⁹³ International Crisis Group, "[Trouble in Afghanistan's Opium Fields: The Taliban War on Drugs](#)," op. cit.

⁹⁴ Azizi, Hamid, "[The Nature and Extent of the Taliban's Involvement in the Drug Trade Before and After the Regime Change \(1994–2022\): Insights from Experts](#)," op. cit.

borders, backing their operation with local tribal consensus and economic handouts. Furthermore, even the United Nations Security Council has sanctioned a number of Taliban leaders for their ties to the narcotics trade after they were directly involved in it.⁹⁵

More than purely symbolic, international legitimacy is necessary to obtain trade agreements, draw in foreign capital, and obtain financial assistance. Afghanistan is still isolated from international financial systems due to its lack of recognition. The nation's assets have been frozen by the international community, worsening the already severe economic position. In fact, The UN warned of the possible humanitarian and economic repercussions of freezing Afghanistan's financial assets once the Taliban regained power after foreign forces left. UN Special Envoy Deborah Lyons stressed that keeping billions of dollars in Afghan central bank reserves inaccessible may lead to a devastating economic downfall, causing millions of people to live in poverty and hunger and possibly reversing the country's progress for decades. In order to give the Taliban an opportunity to show their dedication to counterterrorism, gender equality, and human rights, she pleaded with the international community to let the economy momentarily '*breathe*'. It would also signify that these frozen assets belong to the Afghan people and should not be used as political pressure, as China's deputy UN Ambassador Geng Shuang stated. Indeed, Afghanistan's central bank holds most of its \$10 billion in assets abroad, mostly utilised as leverage against the Taliban. The International Monetary Fund and the United States have prohibited access to these funds, arguing that any credibility or funding must be obtained by concrete changes. China and Russia, two countries progressively strengthening their ties with the new Taliban government, both demanded their release.⁹⁶

Due to these circumstance, humanitarian issues persisted and even worsened. More than half of the population was already in need of assistance at the beginning of 2021. Concerns about the rights of women and girls are developing in tandem with the drastic economic downturn. The Taliban's demolition of the Department of Women's Affairs and limitations on girls' access to school point to a return to their earlier stricter policies, despite their efforts to show the opposite.⁹⁷ Malala Yousafzai, a Pakistani Nobel prize-winning education activist, stressed the importance of girls' education for peace and security in a speech to the UN Security

⁹⁵ UNSMT, Cooperation between organised crime syndicates 2015.

⁹⁶ Nichols, Michelle, "[UN Warns Afghanistan Needs Money to Prevent Total Breakdown](#)," *Reuters*, September 9, 2021.

⁹⁷ *Ibidem*.

Council. Talking from her direct experience she stressed the necessity to avoid history by stating that her story likely may be one “*that many Afghan girls may share if we do not act*”.⁹⁸

To put it briefly, the Taliban government still strongly lacks international legitimacy. Diplomatic contacts are made possible by obtaining this, and as a chain reaction also trade and funding flow in the country, generating the funds required to maintain a functioning state. Afghanistan is currently unable to utilise those routes, which has left the nation economically stuck and the Taliban in an extremely vulnerable position.

2.2.3. Hypocrisy and Corruption

In this context, the most significant issue is that the Taliban have simultaneously played a double game. They gained consensus internally through the propagation of drug trade and revenue and are now trying to retract their policies to gain international legitimacy. The Taliban’s relation with opium cannot be fully trusted by the international community for this reason, even if the government has now officially issued a ban on drugs.

From this perspective, the evolution of the Taliban drug policymaking follows closely Makarenko’s “Crime-Terror Continuum” hypothesis⁹⁹ that holds that terrorist and criminal organisations can evolve along a continuum from ideologically or religiously inspired to primarily profit-motivated objectives.

Their reputation has indeed been tainted as, for instance, examples of this contradictory policy can be seen when the Taliban issued some fatwas¹⁰⁰ to encourage opium poppy cultivation among farmers. The Taliban used these fatwas to proclaim that the drug trade and poppy farming were acceptable (halal) as forms of Jihad against non-Muslims. The mechanism would be to use religious justification to legitimise narcotics-related revenue generation. Experts cannot quite agree on whether the production and cultivation of illegal drugs is acceptable in Islam. Some believed that making illegal drugs was prohibited by Islam, while

⁹⁸ Yousafzai, Malala, “[Malala Yousafzai: Speech to United Nations Security Council](#),” *Malala Fund*, September 9, 2021.

⁹⁹ Makarenko, Tamara, “The Crime–Terror Continuum: Tracing the Interplay between Transnational Organized Crime and Terrorism,” *Global Crime* 6, no. 1 (2004), pp. 129-145.

¹⁰⁰ In Islam, a *fatwa*, or religious decree, has a lengthy history. In order to handle a particular situation in the current era, Islamic scholars (ulema) analyse and utilise Hadith and verses from the Quran to declare a fatwa. After that, Shariah, or Islamic law, incorporates the new fatwa. A fatwa’s purpose is to allow or forbid specific actions and customs among Muslims.

others believed that it was permitted if a prominent Islamic scholar or clergy member supported the production and cultivation of illegal narcotics.

Nonetheless, one expert in particular pointed out that *“in the 1980s, when the Mujahideen were fighting against the Soviet Union’s invasion of Afghanistan, a fatwa was issued by two prominent Mujahideen leaders, Mawlawai Ajab Gul from the Helmand clergy council and Mawlawai Akhundzada from the Kunduz clergy council. This fatwa permitted the Mujahideen to use drug money to fund their resistance against the Soviet Union. These clergies later held significant influence within the Taliban after the movement was established. The Taliban have referred to this fatwa to justify their involvement in the drug trade later”* (Expert 2)¹⁰¹ only once the group fully consolidated its rule. Many Taliban leaders still to this day are not fully opposed to poppy farming and drug trafficking since they believe that these activities are legal and may be used as a weapon against non-Muslims and the West in general; and it is this very mindset that gave rise to drug harvesting and production during the Soviet-Afghan war.

Additionally, Afghanistan is a nation that, given its situation, flourishes with corruption. Bribery by the drug trade had undermined already the pre-Taliban government and facilitated opium cultivation and trafficking to continue. Money earned from illegal trade also helped the Taliban to pay off some of their opponents. This bribery strategy has always been, in reality, a fundamental component of the group’s strategical military operations.¹⁰²

Paired together, poverty and corruption create a vicious circle which is very hard to abandon. In a study of 2012 by the UNODC, 21% of Afghan National Police personnel were found to have accepted bribes to avoid reporting on drug trafficking and other types of illegal activity. In the same report there are many other instances of corruption within the country, not only within the police force. Similar concerns have been identified with border police. According to the UNODC, 24% of border authorities acknowledged receiving offers to assist in the trafficking of people, drugs and weapons, and 20% of them said they had been given bribes to facilitate the issue of travel permits.¹⁰³

Even now, regardless of the ban, in 2024, opium poppy cultivation in Badakhshan, the northeastern Afghan province, surged by 381%, making it the leading opium-producing region

¹⁰¹ Azizi, Hamid, [“The Nature and Extent of the Taliban’s Involvement in the Drug Trade Before and After the Regime Change \(1994–2022\): Insights from Experts,”](#) op. cit.

¹⁰² Griffin, Michael, “Reaping the Whirlwind,” London: *Pluto Press* (2001), p. 41.

¹⁰³ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, [“Corruption in Afghanistan: Recent Patterns and Trends,”](#) Vienna: UNODC, December 2012, p. 13.

in the country.¹⁰⁴ Indeed, it is an area where enforcement is less stringent or less effective, as already signalled¹⁰⁵ by a graph for prevalence of bribery and average number of bribes paid, by region.¹⁰⁶

There are blurred lines not only on drug cultivation tolerance, but also still on the involvement of the Taliban in the process of trafficking these drugs, as they “*have continued to collect revenue from the drug trade from southern and southwestern Afghanistan after the regime change*” (Nameless former senior Afghan government official)¹⁰⁷. Although the Taliban banned the growing of opium poppies following the regime transition, experts on the issue have stressed that drug production and trafficking still carry on unrestricted in different regions of Afghanistan. This would be deliberately done by Taliban leaders, using their influence and political power, to facilitate the heroin trade outside of Afghanistan, boosting the internal economy. Moreover, following the government transition, there are reports indicating that drug trade has increased in facility also within the opium bazaars, where local farmers and traders openly buy and sell narcotics. These commercial spots seemed to have only proliferated across the country with minimal interference or regulation since 2021. But it is clear that “*the local Taliban commanders not only know about it, but their fighters protect these bazaars and collect taxes*” (Expert 9)¹⁰⁸.

It is still quite uncertain, though, whether the central Taliban leadership in Kabul explicitly ordered local commanders to participate in the drug trade or if the commanders themselves independently used the money they made from the drug trade for their own benefit. According to an expert in the field, “*the local Taliban commanders would not obey their leadership and would collect revenue locally from licit and illicit activities. For instance, after the regime change, when the Taliban leadership announced the national forgiveness or public amnesty and ordered their commanders and fighters not to arrest or kill anybody associated with the previous regime, they [local commanders] were killing the Panjshiris [residents of Panjshir province] and the people from the northern region*” (Expert 5)¹⁰⁹.

Accordingly, nothing much has effectively changed for standard field commanders in the rural regions since September 2021. This goes to show the gap between the leadership and

¹⁰⁴ Felbab-Brown, Vanda, “[Pipe Dreams: The Taliban and Drugs from the 1990s into Its New Regime](#),” op. cit.

¹⁰⁵ Afghan General population survey 2012.

¹⁰⁶ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, “[Corruption in Afghanistan: Recent Patterns and Trends](#),” op. cit., p. 9.

¹⁰⁷ Azizi, Hamid, “[The Nature and Extent of the Taliban’s Involvement in the Drug Trade Before and After the Regime Change \(1994–2022\): Insights from Experts](#),” op. cit.

¹⁰⁸ Ibidem.

¹⁰⁹ Ibidem.

field commanders has only grown as a result of the leadership's lavish lifestyle, wealth, and fame. As a consequence, *"it is very likely that the field commanders of the Taliban don't obey orders from their leadership and don't implement a ban for a long time as they will lose a significant source of revenue"* (Expert 7)¹¹⁰.

However, following the regime change, it is quite certain that several powerful drug traffickers were assigned official posts within the new government, many of which who were even released from prison following the Taliban takeover were given positions such as police chiefs, provincial and district governors, and other important positions within the Taliban government.¹¹¹

The boast of the Taliban to eradicate the drug trade is simply an illusion. Structural poverty in Afghanistan made most people resort to opium as their primary source of income. The Taliban, as former mujahideen leaders and warlords, always were highly reliant on the heroin trade as well as also the drug's consumption for a certain percentage. Religious objections apart, the political and financial expense of drug eradication was astronomical, making the Taliban an abettor and the ultimate sponsor of the drug trade.¹¹²

¹¹⁰ Ibidem.

¹¹¹ Ibidem.

¹¹² Felbab-Brown, Vanda, "[Pipe Dreams: The Taliban and Drugs from the 1990s into Its New Regime](#)," op. cit.

2.3 The Political Economy of Drugs

Having analysed the Taliban's internal policies, it is necessary to discuss internal drug trafficking consequences before passing to the foreign consequences, which will be elucidated in the following chapters. This final section of the chapter explores the effect that production and trafficking have had on the local networks of power, given influence to non-state actors, and solidified shadow networks of governance that have competed with the central government in many instances. The emergence and growth of militias and warlords have been made easier through the funds from drugs that they utilise to fund personal militias and solidify influence. Strategic command over networks of drugs has also been a key aspect of regional dominance through which armed organisations, such as even the Taliban during the years they were in insurgency, have been in a position to finance operations and project influence.

2.3.1. How Opium Complicates Taliban Rank Order

As mentioned in the previous section, there still appears to be a clear divide within Taliban governance between central and local posts. On one side rural peoples in the country still implement previous policies to maintain local support, on the other high positions in Kabul and Kandahar have shifted their agenda concerning drugs, in hope of gaining international legitimacy. The main issue is that opium had always been cultivated in certain regions of the country. It is so embedded in the culture and economy that it is almost impossible to eradicate, and it can definitely not be done by implementing a sudden ban.

The main issue, even at a political level, is that support from the opium-dependent parts of society, such as farmers, traffickers, and local commanders with tribal ties, are partially responsible for the Taliban's survival over the past two decades. This is because of Taliban drug policy encouragement that originated a boom in opium production since the Soviet-Afghan war. Given the situation, it is believed that a relatively immediate long-term prohibition on the production of opium poppies would diminish these groups' revenue streams. It would also lower internal consensus and Taliban legitimacy within more tribal (and more loyal) groups. This cut has incited dissatisfaction among lower-level Taliban militants and local

commanders, endangering the Taliban regime's capacity to maintain control, especially over rural regions.¹¹³

Adding on to this, large landholdings are uncommon in Afghanistan, and most farmers lack the resources to keep opium, even if the 2022 ban on the drug had originally increased prices, this benefited only a small percentage of farmers who possessed stockpiles.¹¹⁴ Despite possible financial losses, powerful tribal chiefs who rely on small-scale farmers to uphold their power are now under pressure from their people to support removing the prohibition. Protests in the Argo and Darayim areas of Badakhshan in May 2024 are said to have been influenced by this tension, which was apparent during research in February 2024.¹¹⁵

The deep-rooted reliance on the opium economy in Afghanistan has not only shaped livelihoods in the rural areas but penetrated deep into the Taliban movement's power structure. The Taliban is sometimes depicted as a monolithic entity, mostly from Western perspectives; nevertheless, it really comprises groups with varying cultural, ideological, political, and economic objectives. Moreover, the term Taliban does not refer to a single and unified entity, but it encompasses multiple conflicting groups and smaller entities within the broader Taliban movement. During the insurgency era¹¹⁶ these groups, both the bigger and smaller factions came together for the same goal: to expel the Afghan republican government and foreign soldiers.¹¹⁷

However, factionalism has intensified since the shift from insurgency to administration, especially in relation to drug policy. This comes into play when analysing the division between tribally and economically driven militias. Distinguishing between these groups can be quite difficult, as certain individuals affiliated with the Taliban for economic and socio-political motivations, such as engaging in drug trafficking or acquiring local tribal authority; others instead aligned with the group for ideological purposes. For this reason, among the Taliban factions and hierarchy internal competition and power struggles emerge. *"The Taliban lacks a proper chain of command. It is essentially an assembly of diverse tribes and individuals, each seeking economic opportunities and power. This decentralized structure leads to chaos, as*

¹¹³ Azizi, Hamid, "[The Nature and Extent of the Taliban's Involvement in the Drug Trade Before and After the Regime Change \(1994–2022\): Insights from Experts](#)," op. cit.

¹¹⁴ Mansfield, Gold Never Gets Old.

¹¹⁵ Khan, Taliban face protests over poppy crackdown.

¹¹⁶ The period of foreign occupation from 2002 to 2021.

¹¹⁷ Azizi, Hamid, "[The Nature and Extent of the Taliban's Involvement in the Drug Trade Before and After the Regime Change \(1994–2022\): Insights from Experts](#)," op. cit.

many local Taliban commanders in different districts and provinces often disregard the orders of their superiors” (Expert 11)¹¹⁸.

This fragmentation is further complicated by the presence of major Taliban subgroups, including the Haqqani network, the Quetta Shura, and the Peshawar Shura, each having distinct strategic objectives and levels of power, notably in the realm of narcotics. The Haqqanis, for instance, play major roles within the Ministry of Interior and have been involved in trafficking networks and border security management. The Quetta Shura, closely tied to the traditional Taliban leadership in the south, has historically benefited most from the opium wealth of southern Helmand. The Peshawar Shura, in contrast, is less prominent than the other two, but more ethnically diverse.

These differences give rise to clashes within the group. An example of such can be seen with factions being ‘loyal’ to wholly separate drugs economies. *“Taliban factions in eastern Afghanistan support cannabis cultivation, whereas those in the south favor opium cultivation”* (Expert 4)¹¹⁹. Factional competition can be detrimental to a stable and centralised rule, especially in disputed trafficking centres like Baramcha, where Baluch and Pashtun Taliban groups have fought for control. The stakes are high: trafficking routes provide cash, power, and clout within the Taliban hierarchy.¹²⁰

2.3.2. Warlords, Borders, and Control of Drug Routes

Such a strong factionalisation of the Taliban mean that they are not the sole group operating within Afghanistan. Narcotics and power are inextricably linked in Afghanistan, and the Taliban are only one example of this. The dispersion of power and decentralised administration has allowed a range of actors, such as local warlords, tribal militias, and political entrepreneurs, to coexist alongside, and sometimes even compete with, the Taliban. These players have frequently monopolised critical drug trafficking routes, charging tolls, controlling border crossings, and funding their own private armies with drugs and weapons earnings.

Many of these warlords rose to prominence during the war in the 1980s, under the anti-Soviet led jihad and went on to play important roles in the post-2001 political environment. The initial objective of the United States intervention in 2001 would have aimed at dismantling

¹¹⁸ Ibidem.

¹¹⁹ Ibidem.

¹²⁰ Ibidem.

terrorist networks, such as al Qaeda. However it ended up revitalising the power of many warlords, who were integrated into the new order for their military utility and assets. Dealing with the illicit economy was not considered to be integral with the military objectives. Thus until 2003, United States counternarcotics policy in Afghanistan was essentially laissez-faire. The US military understood that it would not be able to obtain intelligence on the Taliban and al Qaeda if it tried to eradicate poppy. Meanwhile, it relied on key warlords who were often deeply involved in the drug economy since the Afghan-Soviet war, not simply to provide intelligence on the Taliban, but also to carry out direct military operations against the Taliban and al Qaeda.¹²¹

As the Taliban insurgency resurfaced in the mid-2000s, control of narcotics networks became a strategic necessity. These channels not only enabled the movement of drugs to worldwide markets, but also acted as arteries of influence, allowing whatever party controlled them to collect taxes and black-market duties on merchandise, be it drugs or weapons, moved within the designated territory. Leveraging social allegiances in remote, particularly border regions, became a strategic need for parties wanting territorial control, not only for influence, but also to dominate and benefit from the drug traffic. In southern border zones like, Helmand, Nimroz and Kandahar, power struggles over these routes have been frequent. These provinces are all critical to Afghan administration because they include the region of Helmand, where the majority of opium is harvested, as well as the two regions bordering it to the west and east, which lead into Iran and Pakistan.

In Helmand, the Taliban established their own checkpoints in rural regions leading up to Sangin and Kajaki, two essential opium cultivation towns. In this region, along the Helmand river, they persistently targeted trucks transporting supplies to British and Afghan forces during the foreign occupation. By 2006, the Taliban held de facto control over numerous routes in the southern province of Helmand, notably the route between Musa Qala and Sangin.¹²²

To the east of Helmand lies the province of Nimroz. It's importance is due to the Zaranj border crossing with Iran, which is one of Afghanistan's three main official commerce routes. It is essential for both legitimate business and informal smuggling activities. The province supports the transit of both legal and illegal items, including as narcotics, guns, and even people trafficking. In Nimroz, economic power is based on mobility and access rather than output. As

¹²¹ Anne Barnard and Farah Stockman, "U.S. Weighs Role in Heroin War in Afghanistan," *Boston Globe*, 30 October 2004,

¹²² Meyerle, Jerry, and Carter Malkasian, "[Insurgent Tactics in Southern Afghanistan: 2005–2008](#)," CfRM D0020729.A2/Final. Alexandria, VA: CNA, sponsored by the Marine Corps Intelligence Activity, August 2009, p. 7.

a result, the Taliban have adopted a military strategy aimed at capturing choke points, such as customs zones and vital trade routes that function as economic arteries. By obtaining these, the group manage to shut off potential competitor warlord revenue streams, consolidate influence, and achieve political leverage through economic pressure. These pathways are more than simply drug corridors; they are essential weapons for governance and coercion.¹²³

Kandahar instead has always been at the intersection of governmental authority and the narcotics business. As the Taliban's traditional power base, it has played an important role in their administrative control and drugs strategy. But Kandahar's relevance goes beyond the Taliban. Following the US invasion, the province became the focus of intricate political negotiations. Warlords and strongmen, who had accumulated wealth and military support through decades of smuggling and poppy trafficking, were incorporated into the new foreign-backed governmental system. Figures such as Ahmed Wali Karzai, former President Hamid Karzai's half-brother,¹²⁴ were widely accused of having direct or indirect links to narcotics networks while also functioning as crucial US allies and regional power brokers. This a concrete example which demonstrates that the US interval in Afghanistan did not come without any flaws at the leadership level: as warlords and powerbrokers with close ties to the drug trade were legitimised and absorbed into official governmental structures in order to achieve short-term stability and counterinsurgent success. Furthermore, Kandahar's strategic location, which connects Helmand to cross-border trafficking routes, such as Spin Boldak into Pakistan, has made it a fundamental artery in the country's drug trade. Controlling roads, border posts, and rural smuggling routes in and around Kandahar has generated enormous cash for both Taliban and non-Taliban groups. Toll collection on both legal and illegal commodities has enabled local militias, criminal networks, and tribal groupings to sustain private armed organisations and gain power in Kabul. These networks function alongside legitimate authorities, frequently forming unspoken alliances or rivalries with provincial police and security personnel. In rural regions, the Taliban developed their own checkpoints and taxing systems, while in cities and border areas, fragmented power-sharing relationships with other players fuelled the drug trade.

During the insurgency era,¹²⁵ the Taliban methodically taxed every level of the opium supply chain, from farmers to lab operators to cross-border traffickers. Zakat (Islamic tax) and

¹²³ Mansfield, David, and Graeme Smith, "[War Gains: How the Economic Benefits of the Conflict Are Distributed in Afghanistan and the Implications for Peace. A Case Study on Nimroz Province](#)," London: *Overseas Development Institute* (ODI), August 2021.

¹²⁴ Barker, Kim, "[An AWKward Relationship: The U.S. and Its Ties to Hamid Karzai's Half-Brother](#)," *ProPublica*, July 13, 2011.

¹²⁵ The period of foreign occupation from 2002 to 2021.

protection fees were used to generate revenue. This framework enabled the Taliban to not only fund its operations, but also to integrate into local businesses, establishing networks of reliance and support throughout rural areas. Insurgents from around the country benefitted from the drug trade's low-risk, high-reward structure, which proved far more sustainable than foreign aid or arms smuggling. In a society with little licit economic activity, opium became both an instrument of coercion and a source of legitimacy, particularly when rebels positioned themselves as farmers' guardians against state-led eradication campaigns.

The same rationale applies to other non-state players, such as ethnic militias, former mujahideen leaders, and regional warlords, who have exploited drug earnings to support armed resistance, gain territorial control, or threaten central authority. The Haqqani network, for example, has reportedly used narcotics routes in eastern Afghanistan and over the Pakistan border to fund its activities and cement its semi-autonomous status within the Taliban organisation.¹²⁶

The Haqqani network has historically utilised established drug trafficking routes in eastern Afghanistan and across the Pakistan border to finance its operations. These routes primarily traverse the Loya Paktia region, southwest of Kabul, encompassing the Afghan provinces of Paktia, Paktika, Khost, and parts of Ghazni.¹²⁷ This area is strategically significant due to its proximity to the Pakistan border, facilitating the movement of illicit goods. The network's strongholds in North Waziristan and Kurram Agencies in Pakistan serve as pivotal points for projecting personnel and materials into southeastern Afghanistan.¹²⁸

Furthermore, the financial independence achieved through drugs has allowed rebels to operate with a degree of autonomy, complicating negotiations and effective reintegration attempts. Groups that traditionally relied on ideological passion are now prioritising economic gain. Thus, the drug trade in Afghanistan does more than just fuel insurgencies; it maintains them, modifies their internal structures, and makes them more resistant to conventional military defeat.

The Taliban are currently facing a crucial era in which growing discontent among middle-level Taliban commanders, many of whom are economically embedded in the drug trade, poses a substantial danger to the regime's internal coherence. Unlike during the insurgency, when the Taliban shown unexpected unity despite NATO's continuous efforts to

¹²⁶ Lurie, Devin, "[The Haqqani Network: The Shadow Group Supporting the Taliban's Operations](#)," Perspective. Washington, DC: *American Security Project*, September 2020.

¹²⁷ Ishfaq, Sarmad. "[South Asia's Most Notorious Militant Groups](#)," *The Diplomat*, 31 Dec. 2019.

¹²⁸ BBC News, "[Haqqanis: Growth of a Militant Network](#)," *BBC News*, 14 Sept. 2011.

cause internal disintegration, administering a factionalised movement is significantly more difficult. These groups now operating differ not just in philosophy, but also in their attitudes on government, foreign relations, economic management, and the role of religion. Many younger military commanders, influenced by global jihadi ideology and free of the memory of the 1990s dictatorship, are more rigid than senior leadership.

Aside from impoverishing already desperately poor people affected by COVID-19, drought, and large economic contractions in a country where 90% of people live in poverty and at least 12 million are malnourished, such a ban would also eliminate income and employment for its middle-layer commanders and rank-and-file fighters. Growing discontent among the Taliban's influential middle-layer commanders and their networks would represent a significant danger to the regime's existence. Growing discontent among the Taliban's influential middle-layer commanders and their networks would represent a significant danger to the regime's existence. To survive as a regime, the Taliban will not only need to bridge and manage their different views on ruling, but they will also have to assure that key commanders and their rank-and-file soldiers retain enough income not to be tempted to defect.¹²⁹

¹²⁹ Felbab-Brown, Vanda, "[Pipe Dreams: The Taliban and Drugs from the 1990s into Its New Regime](#)," op. cit.

CHAPTER 3

BEYOND THE BORDERS

3.1 Roots of International Taliban Trade

In these next two chapters, the thesis will expand on the previously discussed internal dynamics, moving the focus to the larger domestic and international ramifications of Taliban Afghanistan's involvement in drug trade. This chapter, in particular, will look at the most immediate processes of the illicit drug trade, still within proximity of the region of production, and how the Taliban has deliberately taken advantage of the system to profit off a global market. The first section will provide a theoretical foundation for how smuggling networks and informal commerce systems have historically benefited the Taliban, also during the insurgency era. The discourse will then move on to a more empirical approach, offering real case examples to demonstrate the practical use and influence of these processes in recent years.

3.1.1 *Smuggling as Strategy*

Smuggling is a common occurrence in conflict-afflicted zones, and in Afghanistan, it has played an important part in sustaining the Taliban's insurgency. Drawing on the research paper '*Rebel Natural Resource Exploitation and Conflict Duration*',¹³⁰ conducted by Conrad and others, which distinguishes between smuggling and extortion as rebel techniques, the Taliban's strategy can be viewed as consistent with the '*power to resist*' concept.

According to Conrad's view, rebel organisations frequently use natural resources, such as drugs, to fuel and prolong battling. Within this paradigm, there is a clear separation between two main techniques of resource exploitation: smuggling and extortion. Both are important strategies, but they differ greatly in structure, danger, and influence on the durability of insurgent groups. However, between the two, smuggling, in particular, gives rebels more flexibility and mobility, enabling them to resist governmental repression effectively and prolong their goals during a period of instability. This is also because rebels who extort resource production from fixed locations are more vulnerable to government attacks.

While the Taliban so still use extortion to collect traditional Islamic taxes like as *ushr* and *zakat* from opium producers and traffickers, this tactic is more prone to disruption, particularly in fixed growing regions like Helmand, which are more readily targeted by raids.

¹³⁰ Conrad, Justin M., Kevin T. Greene, James Igoe Walsh, and Beth Elise Whitaker, "Rebel Natural Resource Exploitation and Conflict Duration," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 63, no. 3 (2019), pp. 591-616.

In contrast, smuggling has provided the Taliban with more strategic mobility, making the group's finances more diverse and tougher to destroy.

This strategy follows the lines of what Conrad characterises as '*power to resist*' rather than '*power to target*'. Smuggling may have not necessarily allowed the Taliban to gain important military successes during foreign occupation, but it did greatly extend the battle by making the group more tenacious and harder to destroy. This phenomenon eventually led to the demise of the US presence within the country and made possible the Doha Accord, the 2020 peace deal between the United States and the Taliban.¹³¹

The Taliban's reliance on the drug economy as a primary commodity also aligns with Blair and others' theory on the role of commodity price shocks in shaping civil conflict.¹³² The work these scholars produced discusses the concept of '*Resource Curse*': the phenomenon that having an abundance of natural resources, relatively simple to extract and trade with, triggers instability in a country, since diverse parties may rise to obtain hold of these assets. In their study '*Do Commodity Price Shocks Cause Armed Conflict? A Meta-Analysis of Natural Experiments*', one of the hypotheses, Rapacity Hypothesis, proposes that rising prices in valuable commodities, such as opium and heroin, which are capital-intensive and globally traded, increase the incentive to capture and control resource-rich areas. The Taliban's desire to dominate important drug-producing regions like as Helmand and smuggling routes such as Nimroz is compatible with this rationale, since growing drug prices make these areas more lucrative '*prizes*' worth fighting for.

Furthermore, according to another hypothesis within the same study, Lootability Hypothesis, narcotics, are highly lootable commodities since they need little capital, are cheap to transport, and are in great demand worldwide. This lootability made drug smuggling especially appealing to the Taliban, allowing for fast liquidity without a significant infrastructure.

These dynamics explain how the Taliban came to power through drug smuggling and why they will probably still continue, at least in part, to rely on it. Smuggling provided flexibility, mobility, and a consistent money source, allowing the organisation to weather military attacks and maintain influence in more remote places. Even after reclaiming power in

¹³¹ U.S. Department of State and the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (Taliban), "[Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan](#)," Doha, Qatar, February 29, 2020.

¹³² Blair, Graeme, Darin Christensen, and Aaron Rudkin, "Do Commodity Price Shocks Cause Armed Conflict? A Meta-Analysis of Natural Experiments," op. cit.

2021, the incentives persist: narcotics continue to offer off-budget revenue, allowing the Taliban to maintain control without needing to depend on outside help.

3.1.2 *Expansion of Transnational Drug Routes*

As clearly stated the Taliban have profited over drug trade. But how exactly does this process technically take place? To be clear, the Taliban's initial military financing did not rely entirely on drug trade. Early sources came from other assets. Back in the 1990s, while the Taliban were still emerging, the group sought financial help from abroad. Accordingly, they engaged in diplomacy and obtained the support of Saudi Arabia and Pakistan.¹³³ In 1996 in particular, Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) provided the Taliban with a fleet of military vehicles and personnel.¹³⁴

Nevertheless, external donations proved insufficient, and the group was forced to diversify its income sources, as well as to develop self-sustaining revenue streams to maintain and expand its operations independently. This is when the Taliban began their black-market and off-the-books activities. One of the most profitable was the illegal trafficking of legal commodities through the Afghan Transit Trafficking Agreement (ATTA). Originally intended to help landlocked Afghanistan's economy by permitting duty-free passage of products from the port of Karachi through Pakistan into Afghan territory, the arrangement unintentionally created a vast illicit market. Goods imported under ATTA were frequently smuggled back into Pakistan illegally, avoiding duties and making substantial profits for individuals who controlled the channels.¹³⁵

The Taliban swiftly took advantage of this opportunity. They made transportation more predictable and profitable for traders by replacing the chaotic and exploitative system of warlord-imposed tolls with a streamlined, one-toll model, as well as protecting trade convoys. Their effectiveness earned them the backing of the Afghan transport mafia, which was actively involved in cross-border logistics.¹³⁶ In exchange, the Taliban took significant earnings,

¹³³ Felbab-Brown, Vanda, "[Pipe Dreams: The Taliban and Drugs from the 1990s into Its New Regime](#)," op. cit.

¹³⁴ Goodarzi, Jobin, "Washington and the Taliban, Strange Bedfellows," *Middle East International*, 25 October 1996.

¹³⁵ Balfour, Frederik, "Dark Days for a Black Market: Afghanistan and Pakistan Rely Heavily on Smuggling," *Business Week*, 15 October 2001.

¹³⁶ Rashid, Ahmed, "Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia," op. cit.

reputedly collecting \$150,000 in a single day from transporters in Chaman,¹³⁷ and by 1997, they were believed to be generating \$75 million per year from this smuggling economy.¹³⁸

As might be anticipated, the Taliban's engagement in drug trafficking has persisted. Experts on the issue have observed that specific factions within the group have maintained close connections with prominent narcotics smuggling and trading networks, despite the group's shift from insurgency to governance. This observation was made in September 2022 when as Haji Bashir Noorzai, a major drug lord financier of the Taliban,¹³⁹ arrived in Kabul, he was greeted warmly by key Taliban commanders, including the minister of foreign affairs and the deputy prime minister, Mullah Brader.¹⁴⁰ Noorzai, a prominent tribal leader from Kandahar and former mujahideen commander, played a very relevant role as an early supporter and financier of the Taliban. He was one of the most prominent characters during the Soviet occupation. A former commander within Hezb-i-Islami Khalis, he had joined the Mujahideen because his land was confiscated by the PDPA administration. The similar background, as well as traditional familial and tribal ties, had prompted Noorzai to support the Taliban when they gained control in the mid-1990s. He joined the Taliban for economic and political reasons, as well as because he agreed with their ideology. When the Taliban gained power in the 1990s, Noorzai was able to reclaim his property, which had been taken away from him by the PDPA government, and subsequently those fields were used to cultivate opium poppy to support the Taliban insurgency.¹⁴¹ He supplied the group with weapons, explosives, and manpower, and was entrusted with overseeing Kandahar following Mullah Omar's disappearance from public view after the 2001 US takeover.¹⁴²

Eight experts interviewed for a study on the Taliban's involvement in the narcotics trade¹⁴³ stated that the group's 2021 takeover led to a general increase in drug trade revenue. This can be evidently demonstrated by concrete examples ongoing across the country. According to three of these specialists, drug trafficking had, as already touched upon, risen in Badakhshan province, and every month, numerous drug traffickers from eastern and southern regions visit the region to sell and buy narcotics. Another of the experts pointed that the

¹³⁷ Rashid, Ahmed, "Nothing to Declare." *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 11 May 1995.

¹³⁸ Balfour, Frederik, "Dark Days for a Black Market: Afghanistan and Pakistan Rely Heavily on Smuggling," op. cit.

¹³⁹ Afghan Biographies, "[Noorzai, Bashir Haji](#)," *Afghan Biographies*, 13 August 2020.

¹⁴⁰ Faiez, US swaps Taliban prisoner; and Fraser and Debusmann, Mark Frerichs: US hostage swapped.

¹⁴¹ Azizi, Hamid, "[The Nature and Extent of the Taliban's Involvement in the Drug Trade Before and After the Regime Change \(1994–2022\): Insights from Experts](#)," op. cit.

¹⁴² Afghan Biographies, "[Noorzai, Bashir Haji](#)," op. cit.

¹⁴³ Azizi, Hamid, "[The Nature and Extent of the Taliban's Involvement in the Drug Trade Before and After the Regime Change \(1994–2022\): Insights from Experts](#)," op. cit.

‘Nangarhar province saw an increase in drug trafficking due to the release of imprisoned traffickers’ (Expert 9)¹⁴⁴. Another stated that ‘Nimroz province [known historically as a major drug trafficking route] witnessed an increase in drug smuggling to Iran’ (Expert 11)¹⁴⁵.

In this context, opium and processed heroin produced in Afghanistan are transported via a complicated network of cross-border trafficking channels. The main smuggling routes lead east into Pakistan, west into Iran, and north via Central Asia, eventually connecting Afghanistan’s drug industry to global markets. This network’s vital nodes comprise of the aforementioned strategic border regions: Nimroz entering Iran; Kandahar, Helmand and Nangarhar entering Pakistan; and northern passageways through Badakhshan and Takhar to enter Central Asia.¹⁴⁶

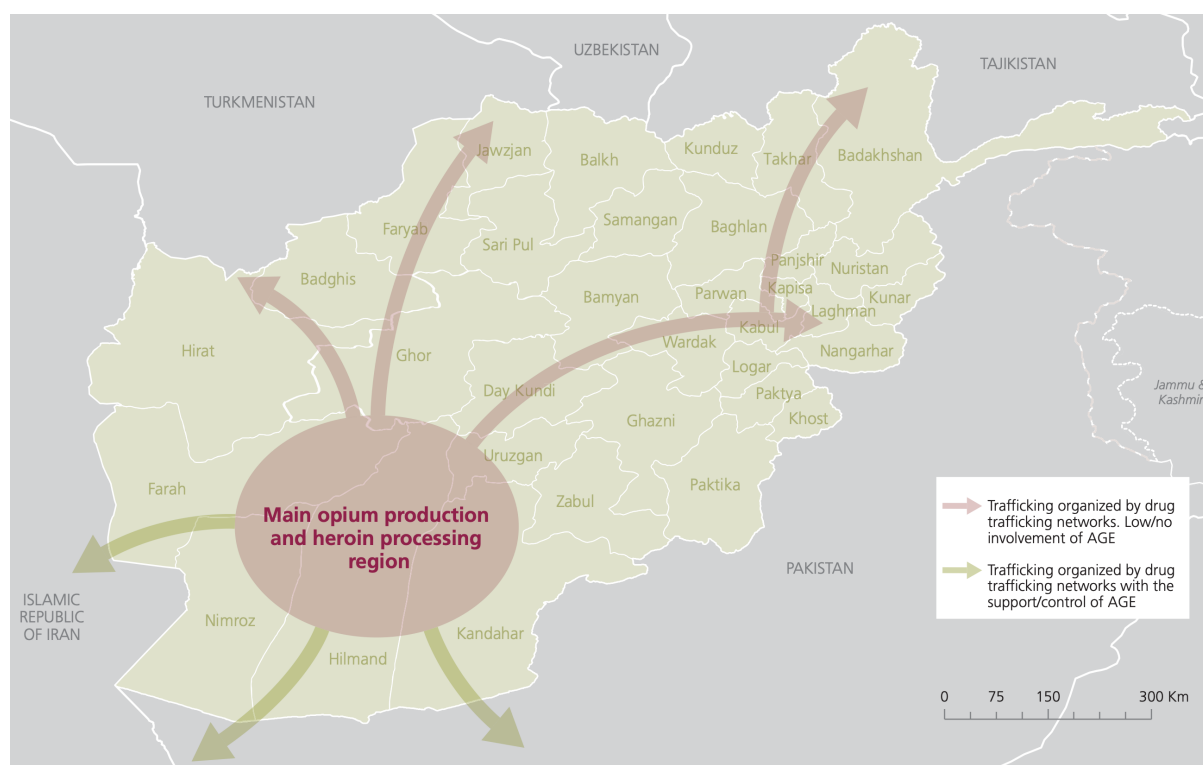
¹⁴⁴ Ibidem.

¹⁴⁵ Ibidem.

¹⁴⁶ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, [“The Global Afghan Opium Trade: A Threat Assessment, 2011,”](#) op. cit., pp. 28-30.

3.2 Neighbouring Countries

As briefly introduced in the previous section, this part will expand the analysis of drug trafficking routes, moving beyond their operation from just within Afghanistan, to explore the role of all bordering countries and their respective involvement in facilitating, enabling, or responding to Afghanistan's drug trade. This trade has impacted all Afghanistan's neighbouring countries, which are all tied, directly or indirectly, to the illicit trade originating from Afghanistan's poppy fields. Indeed, it has created the so called '*Golden Crescent*' area, a region spanning from Pakistan to Iran.¹⁴⁷ Some serve as transit hubs, while others specialise in refining or distribution via marine shipments, air routes, or overland trafficking. Despite disparities in governance and law enforcement capabilities, the countries Afghanistan borders with are unfortunately all involved in the drug trade. While nations such as Iran have implemented some enforcement measures and strengthened border monitoring, lengthy porous borders and regional instability continue to promote smuggling. The image below, sourced from the UNODC,¹⁴⁸ illustrates the main heroin trafficking routes within Afghanistan, with the involvement of Anti-Government Elements (AGEs) in the opiate trade as of 2009.



¹⁴⁷ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, "[Indian Ocean East](#)," UNODC, 2025.

¹⁴⁸ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, "[The Global Afghan Opium Trade: A Threat Assessment, 2011](#)," op. cit., p. 26.

3.2.1 *Pakistan: The Taliban's Backdoor to the Global Market*

Pakistan has traditionally been a key departure point for Afghan opiates and a logistical base for Taliban activities. Out of all the Afghan opiates, heroin and opium, trafficked abroad of the producing country, Pakistan is the one that receives the most. In 2009 alone, 365 tons of heroin were exported from Afghanistan: with 115 tons entering Iran; 90 tons entering Central Asia, though Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan; and 160 tonnes entering only Pakistan. Of Pakistan's total amount, 20 tonnes were consumed domestically, with 2 tonnes were captured by police. The remaining 138 tonnes were trafficked into overseas markets. In addition to heroin, around 350 to 400 tonnes of raw opium were transported from Afghanistan into Pakistan. Of this, roughly 200 tonnes were transported westward into Iran, 132 tonnes were consumed within Pakistan, and 25 tonnes were confiscated by authorities. This influx of narcotics has created severe social problems within Pakistan, just as Afghanistan. An estimated 727,500 people used Afghan derived opiates, with 571,600 identifying as heroin users. Furthermore, 132 tonnes of opium were consumed nationwide. This widespread misuse has had serious health effects, especially concerning injectable drug users, 23% of whom tested HIV-positive, owing to the widespread prevalence of needle sharing.¹⁴⁹

Heroin, opium, and, increasingly, methamphetamine, flow via the Durand Line, which separates Afghanistan and Pakistan. As previously briefly mentioned, smuggling networks reach from regions such as Kandahar and Nangarhar, to border regions within Pakistan, and finally to Karachi, where drugs are exported internationally via sea channels. The main entry points into Pakistan are from the southern provinces in Afghanistan, but there are numerous unofficial border crossings utilised to smuggle drugs into Pakistan.

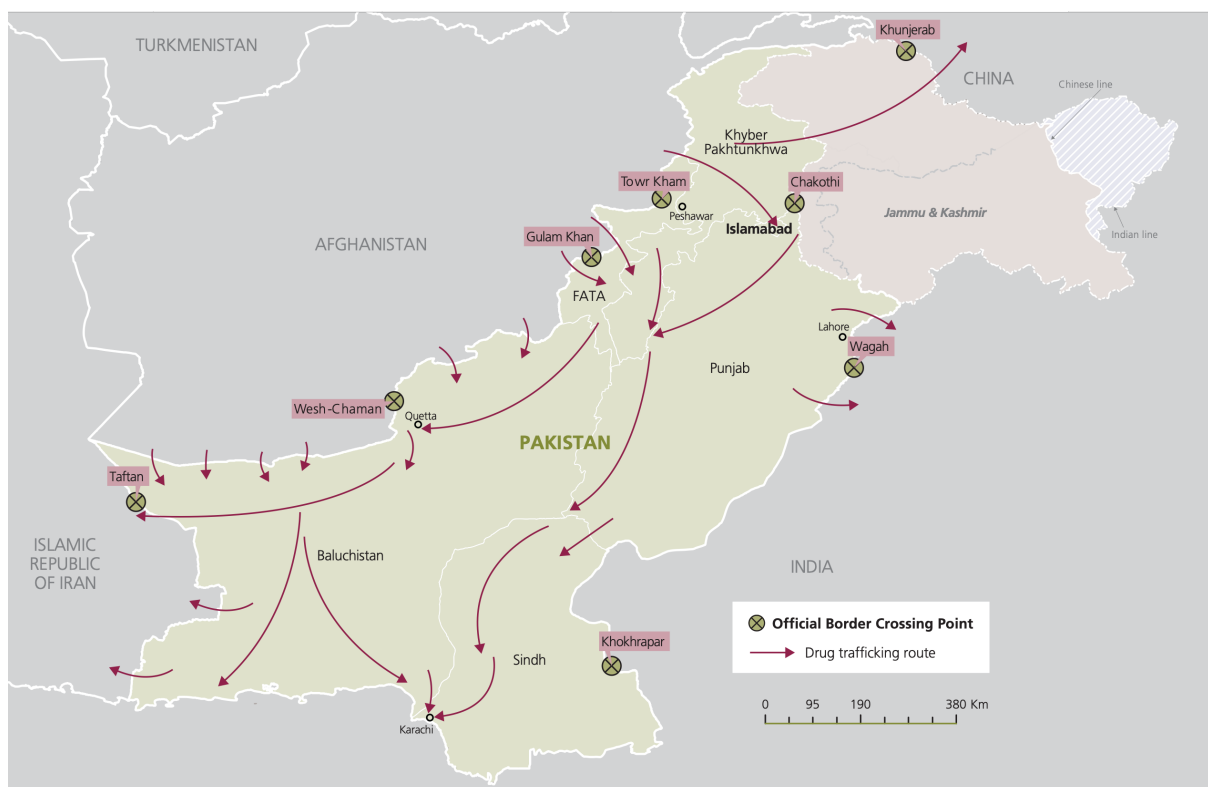
Afghanistan's southern provinces, notably Helmand and Kandahar, are the main entry points for drug trafficking into Pakistan, with subsidiary routes found also through Nangarhar and Kunar to the FATA area,¹⁵⁰ now part of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. These routes are widely used because of the region's permeable borders, lax law enforcement, and strong tribal networks. These latter powerful tribal, and ethnic ties, that bind populations on both

¹⁴⁹ Ibidem, pp. 28-34.

¹⁵⁰ FATA (Federally Administered Tribal Areas) was a semi-autonomous tribal region in northwest Pakistan, bordering Afghanistan, known for limited state control and high insurgent and smuggling activity. In 2018, it merged with the neighbouring province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa through the Twenty-fifth amendment to the constitution of Pakistan.

sides, make it easier to transport drugs across these borders. Tribal tribes like as the Shinwaris, Khogiani, and Mohmand, who live across the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa region, play an important role in regulating and safeguarding these smuggling routes.

Furthermore, Taliban troops and other anti-government organisations are known to offer security and logistical control, particularly along the Balochistan Pakistan province border with provinces like as Nimroz, Helmand, and Zabul, ensuring that both official and unofficial crossings stay open for trafficking. One of the most important transit locations is Bahramcha, a border town that sits between Afghanistan and Pakistan and has become a significant hub for drug storage, trading, and bazaars. Presented below is a map, sourced from the UNODC,¹⁵¹ detailing Pakistan's reported opiate trafficking routes as of 2009, providing a visual reference to help contextualise the complicated geographic designations and critical corridors.



Significant opium hoarding occurs in Pakistan, mainly in Baluchistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, with Khyber Agency serving as a key storage facility. These stocks are carefully maintained to facilitate the movement of drugs across the area, guaranteeing a steady

¹⁵¹ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, “[The Global Afghan Opium Trade: A Threat Assessment, 2011](#),” op. cit., pp. 28-36.

supply chain. While heroin processing facilities are thought to exist throughout these border areas, the specific locations of the laboratories are unknown.¹⁵²

In many instances, Afghan traffickers deliver heroin straight to Pakistani criminal organisations near the border, establishing a continuous chain of custody that supports the resilience and development of the regional drug economy.¹⁵³

In this transnational operation, Pakistani networks paid Afghan suppliers an estimated \$400 million before reselling the heroin on worldwide markets for over \$700 million, resulting in a \$300 million profit margin. When domestic consumption is considered, primarily the 20 tonnes of heroin and 132 tonnes of opium consumed locally, the entire value of Pakistan's opiate market in 2009 reached an estimated \$1.2 billion, with net earnings of \$650 million going to Pakistani traffickers. Notably, extremist groups such as the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), as well as the Haqqani network, and Lashkar-e-Islam profited from the trade through taxing, forced levies, and protection programs, notably in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, bolstering their financial independence and operational capability.¹⁵⁴

Afghanistan's drugs trade goes well beyond its boundaries, with Pakistan serving as a vital hub for the global export of Afghan heroin. This stage of the trade represents the shift from a regional to a worldwide problem, with Pakistan serving as the key connection between Afghanistan's opium industry and foreign markets. In 2009, an estimated 138 tonnes of heroin were smuggled via Pakistan, with 30 tonnes going to Iran and the rest 108 tonnes being moved through significant hubs including Karachi, Lahore, and Gwadar to Europe, Asia, and Africa. Pakistan's under-monitored seaports play an important role in supporting these activities, notably marine routes to the United Arab Emirates and China, which are still popular because to minimal scrutiny and the logistical simplicity of blending illegal cargo with legitimate trade. The low capability of Pakistan's law enforcement authorities contributes to the enforcement gap. In 2009, officials seized just 2 tonnes of heroin, 2 tonnes of morphine, and 25 tonnes of opium, with the bulk of these seizures taking place near land borders and inland dry ports. However, major shortages of skilled personnel and technical equipment, particularly at seaports and dry ports, severely limit the country's capacity to successfully combat drug trafficking.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵² Ibidem.

¹⁵³ Ibidem.

¹⁵⁴ Ibidem, p. 34.

¹⁵⁵ Ibidem, pp. 36-39.

3.2.2 *Iran: The Balkan Route's Eastern Gate*

Iran is both a consumer and a transit nation in Afghanistan's drug trade. A considerable fraction of narcotics, mainly from Afghanistan's southern provinces such as Helmand and especially Nimroz, enter Iran, either for local use or for further trafficking via the Balkan Route, one of Europe's most established heroin routes.

In 2009, an estimated 145 tonnes of heroin entered Iran, with 16 tonnes consumed, 23 tonnes recovered, and the remaining smuggled to Europe, mostly via the Balkan Route. Approximately 80% of this heroin came from Afghanistan, with the remainder transported through Pakistan. In addition, around 1,000-1,100 tonnes of opium were transported into Iran via similar channels.¹⁵⁶

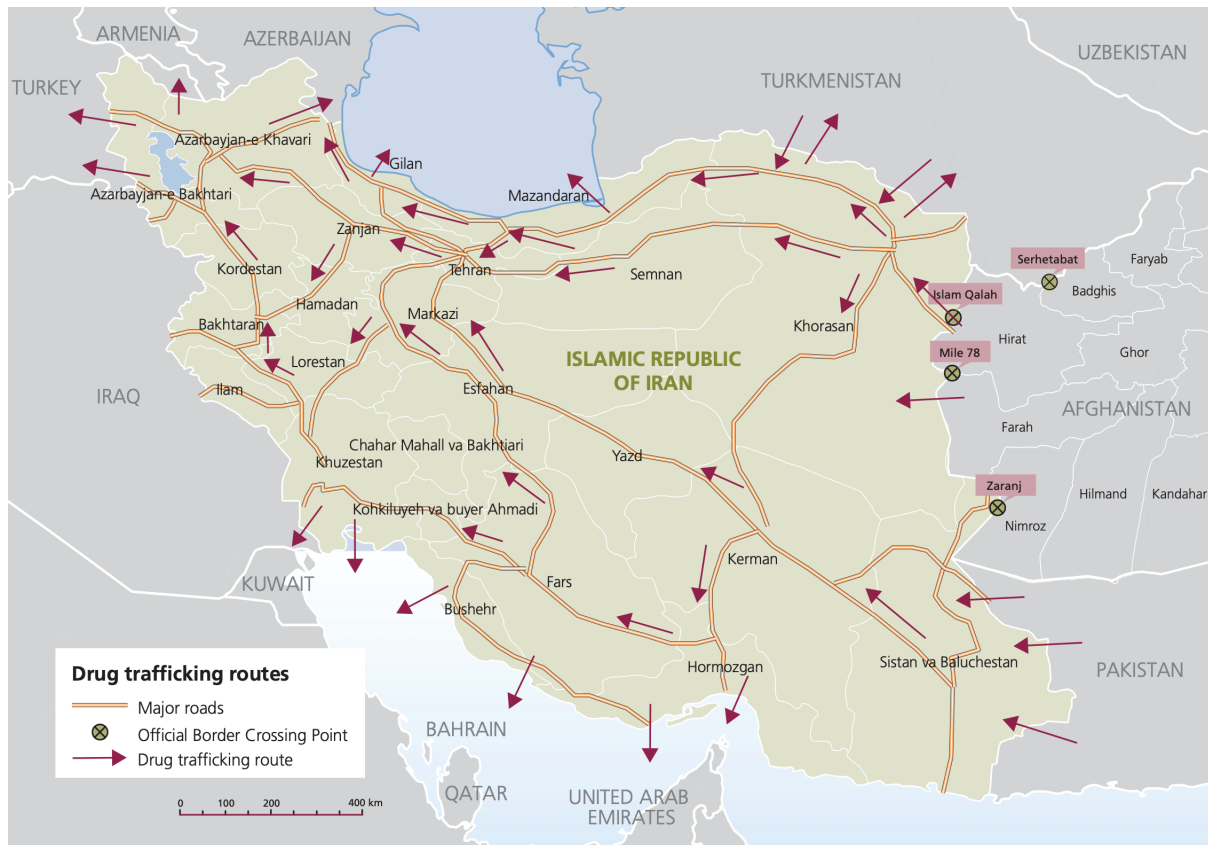
Drug routes through Nimroz, Farah, and Herat Provinces lead to Iran. On these routes, traffickers smuggle heroin overland to border areas, where it is briefly held before being transported into Iran by couriers, who are typically local villagers hired for the job. These couriers normally deliver around 20 kg of heroin apiece and travel at night to avoid discovery.¹⁵⁷ In 2009, Iranian drug traffickers paid an estimated \$725 million to Afghan and Pakistani suppliers. Domestically, Iran's heroin market was estimated at \$1.2 billion, while opium sales were around \$1.5 billion, bringing the entire value of the Iranian opiate industry to over \$2.7 billion. A large amount of these proceeds went to Iranian crime syndicates, but upstream actors in Afghanistan and Pakistan also benefitted. Furthermore, 82 tonnes of heroin were supplied to Turkish and Kurdish trafficking networks for \$750 million, and due to pricing differences throughout the supply chain, Iranian traffickers profited an extra \$330 million by acting as essential intermediates. Once within Iran, heroin travels in a variety of directions: to Turkey via overland pathways; to Gulf nations, such as the UAE via speedboats; to Iraq, where non-state actors as the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) enable further transit; and to the Caucasus and Russia via Azerbaijan.¹⁵⁸ Presented below for clarity is a map, sourced from the UNODC,¹⁵⁹ detailing Iran's documented opiate trafficking routes as of 2009.

¹⁵⁶ Ibidem, pp. 39-40.

¹⁵⁷ Ibidem, pp. 28-30.

¹⁵⁸ Ibidem, pp. 40-42.

¹⁵⁹ Ibidem.



Despite strong counter-narcotics operations and a large border security infrastructure that includes regular interdictions and armed confrontations, Iran's vast and frequently under-monitored borders and coastline remain susceptible. The sheer volume of trafficking activities continues to overwhelm enforcement capabilities, allowing smuggling networks to exploit loopholes and operate with relative freedom.

Narcotics have brought along many humanitarian issues as well. As of 2009, the country had the world's highest per capita rate of opiate misuse, with 2.26% of adults affected. An estimated 430,000 people use heroin, using around 16 tonnes per year, while roughly 560,000 people use opium, accounting for 476 tons - nearly half of worldwide use. This rampant drug abuse has raised, as in the other eastern-neighbouring countries, major public health concerns, especially concerning drug injections. This phenomenon has tragically accounted for more than two-thirds of recorded HIV infections. Another imminent concern regards the quality of the drug, as low-purity heroin, about 7%, dominates the street market.¹⁶⁰

For these reasons, Iran has made great progress in counter-narcotics enforcement. IN 2009 it siezed 580 tonnes of opium (more than the anticipated domestic use), as well as 23

¹⁶⁰ Ibidem.

tonnes of heroin and 16 tonnes of morphine. The majority of interceptions happened in the eastern and southern provinces bordering Afghanistan and Pakistan. In contrast, Iran's northern borders with Turkey saw comparatively few seizures, despite Turkish officials reporting significant confiscations on their side. This may signal a change in trafficking routes beyond Iran's direct enforcement reach.¹⁶¹

Iran in these past decades has made considerable investments in fortifying its eastern frontier to combat the influx of Afghan opiates. These measures include the building of a 688 kilometre canal, 477 km of embankments, an 85 km concrete wall, and 120 km of barbed wire along Afghanistan's border. While these measures have helped to reduce trafficking on some routes, less monitored locations, such as the border with Nimroz province, continue to enable a heavy flow of drugs. Iranian law enforcement officials have emphasised the importance of improved scanning technology, better-trained staff, and more regional coordination, particularly at key entrance points like the Dogharoon border crossing and the vital Bandar Abbas port. Nonetheless, smugglers have responded by relying on '*ant trafficking*', a method that uses small-scale couriers to carry narcotics quietly and regularly, eluding even more strengthened border control systems.¹⁶²

3.2.3 *Central Asia: Corridors to Russia*

Routes in North-Eastern Afghanistan lead to Central Asia. Despite having low opium cultivation, these areas function as important transportation and processing centres. Heroin from the south is transported here for refining or further smuggling. Bribery and collaboration among government and security personnel assist the key transport routes, sometimes known as the '*corruption corridor*'.¹⁶³ Despite being frequently forgotten, the five Central Asian countries, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, remain critical passageways for Afghan narcotics heading north to Russia and Eastern Europe. This passageway is the so-called opium '*North Route*'. In 2009, an estimated 90 tonnes of Afghan heroin reached Central Asia, with 75 to 80 tonnes making it to the Russian Federation, 11 tonnes used domestically, and just 3.4 tonnes confiscated.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶¹ Ibidem, pp. 42-42.

¹⁶² Ibidem.

¹⁶³ Ibidem, pp. 28-30.

¹⁶⁴ Ibidem, pp. 44-50.

Narcotics from Afghanistan flow into this region through the three bordering countries: Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan.

The primary gateway for Afghan heroin into Central Asia is the porous border between Tajikistan and Afghanistan, along the mountain-surrounded Panj River. It is in fact south to this river that Badakhshan province lies. Culturally linked to Tajikistan and rich in poppy cultivation, it remains a major smuggling route, with recurrent drugs seizures reaffirming its strategic relevance. This area is known for its arduous terrain and limited policing infrastructure, which allow traffickers to take advantage of family and linguistic relationships between populations on both sides.¹⁶⁵ Even while the border to the north has always been problematic due to the presence of Russia, in recent years, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, borders have been more flexible, or at least conflict-free. Despite sharing a deep cultural tie with its southern neighbour, since the Taliban takeover, Tajikistan's borders remains mostly closed and heavily restricted. Unlike other Central Asian countries wanting to potentially engage the Taliban diplomatically or economically, Tajikistan has taken a hard stance.¹⁶⁶

Uzbekistan, historically a hub for trafficking networks, has recently embraced more restrictive, pro-Western and European-friendly policies, strengthened border controls and gradually is isolating itself from regional smuggling routes. Its restricted physical access to Afghanistan, which consists mostly of a single crossing at Hairatan and a carefully controlled river border, makes trafficking more difficult. Nevertheless, historically it has often played a role in Afghanistan's opium trafficking. Even now vulnerabilities remain, notably through train links.¹⁶⁷

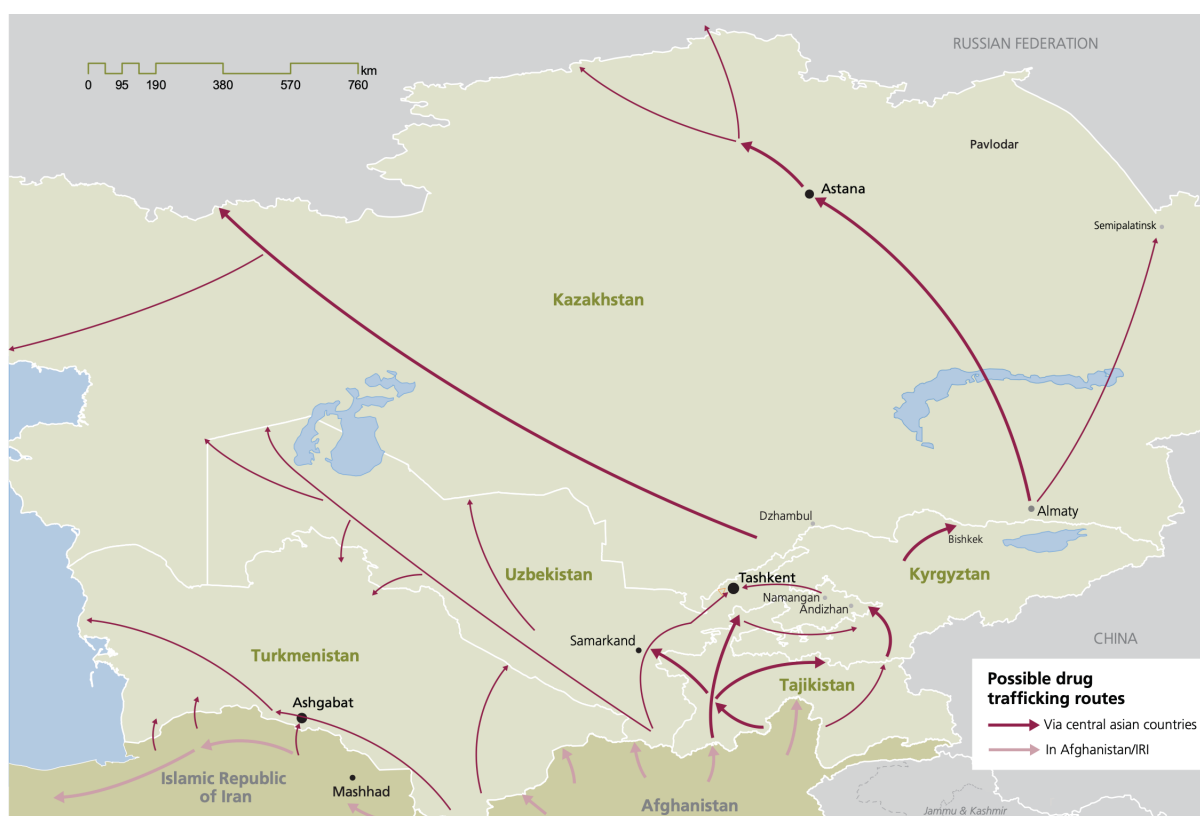
In comparison, Turkmenistan paints a more ambiguous image. Although its flat terrain and heavy monitoring make it less appealing as a transit route, its geographical proximity to both northern Afghanistan and Iran implies it might still function as a quiet corridor. However, the Turkmen government's isolationist attitudes and purposeful suppression of knowledge about criminal operations mean that data on drug movements through the nation are sparse. Nonetheless, regional patterns and limited data indicate that traffickers may use Turkmenistan's quiet posture and less scrutinised routes to carry drugs westward, as shown in map below, sourced by the UNODC.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁵ Ibidem.

¹⁶⁶ D'Souza, Shanthie Mariet, "[Tajikistan and the Taliban: A Lone Voice in Central Asia](#)," *The Diplomat*, December 11, 2023.

¹⁶⁷ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, "[The Global Afghan Opium Trade: A Threat Assessment, 2011](#)," op. cit., pp. 44-50.

¹⁶⁸ Ibidem, p. 45.



Once in Central Asia, Afghan drugs travel northward through Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan before entering Kazakhstan and Russia. Despite not bordering Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan serves an important role as a transit state due to inadequate law enforcement and internal instability. Traffickers frequently employ automobiles, trains, and even commercial aircraft from capitals like as Dushanbe. Ethnic networks and expatriate populations play critical roles in ensuring operational control across the area.¹⁶⁹

Trafficking is controlled by organised criminal gangs, led by Tajik, Russian, Kyrgyz, and Uzbek groups controlling routes along the Afghan border to Russian cities. Operating under family and hierarchical structured, these groups are frequently dominated by former warlords or politically linked figures. In 2009, trafficking heroin to Russia using Central Asian routes yielded a net profit of about \$1.4 billion, or a sum equivalent to Tajikistan's GDP of 31% and Kyrgyzstan's GDP of 33%. Street sales and consumption in Central Asia contributed a further \$1.4 billion, destabilising Central Asian countries' relatively weak economies and fostering extensive corruption.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁹ Ibidem.

¹⁷⁰ Ibidem.

Trafficking in this region has very much obscured the distinctions between criminal and political power. Traffickers have in some instances gained parliamentary immunity or co-opted law enforcement officials using bribery or kin relations. In Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, political volatility and ethnic tensions have also undermined anti-narcotics capabilities. Traffickers also have logistical benefits, including modified cars, remote border crossing points, and even civilian volunteer informants. Central Asian forces in 2009 confiscated just 3.4 tons of heroin, while 90 tons entered the region in the same year. Harsh geography, poor road conditions, and seasonal weather conditions compromise border surveillance. Kyrgyzstan's mountain passes are particularly vulnerable, and there are more than 100 paths of known use during the summer months. Disputed border demarcation, especially along the intricate Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan border, continues to impede efficient monitoring and control. The Sughd region, one of Tajikistan's most developed areas, located in the north of the country, facilitates drug trafficking into Kyrgyzstan by providing superior road and rail infrastructure for opiate transit and export.¹⁷¹

Central Asia is experiencing a growing public health epidemic associated with opiate use. In 2009, there were estimated at 290,000 heroin and 62,500 opium users in the region. Injecting drug use is responsible for high rates of infection, and it is estimated that approximately 55% of HIV positives are injecting drug users. Trends in abuse and deaths related to drugs in the republics of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are especially on the rise.¹⁷²

Most of the heroin trafficked north usually finds its way through Kazakhstan into Russia eventually. Nonetheless, tougher enforcement has been implemented since 2010, when Russia, Kazakhstan, and Belarus established the Customs Union, therefore removing internal customs boundaries.¹⁷³ This union became part of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) in 2015, together with Armenia and Kyrgyzstan.¹⁷⁴ This has demonstrated a broad pattern of weakness in the drug trafficking from Central Asia to Russia and Europe, as also Kyrgyzstan became a member.

¹⁷¹ Ibidem.

¹⁷² Ibidem.

¹⁷³ Ibidem.

¹⁷⁴ Eurasian Economic Union. "[About the Union](#)," EAEU.

3.3 Towards Global Distribution

In this concluding part of the third chapter, the final phases of the Asian regional trafficking chain will be investigated, before turning to the broader international repercussions in the following chapter. This section focuses on two critical nodes. The first is Myanmar, a key rival to Afghan opium and a well-known drug manufacturing centre for international distribution. The second is Dubai, which has emerged as a key financial hub for laundering drug earnings and enabling cross-border illegal cash transfers.

3.3.1 *Myanmar: A Parallel Rival Economy*

The case of Myanmar will serve as a parallel case study due to its similar role in regional production and trafficking networks. While primarily an origin country, it occasionally overlaps with Afghan drug flows, particularly in Asia-bound trafficking routes. Myanmar's significance stems mostly from its location within the '*Golden Triangle*', one of the world's most infamous drug-producing regions,¹⁷⁵ while Afghanistan plays a similar role within the Golden Crescent. These two locations are Asia's twin epicentres for opium cultivation and heroin manufacture, with each supporting enormous illegal economies, rebel networks, and worldwide trafficking routes.

Myanmar, particularly its Shan and Kachin states, has long been a central player in the global opium trade. As part of the notorious Golden Triangle, Myanmar was the world's second-largest opium producer after Afghanistan up to 2022, contributing approximately 25% of global opium supply. In the following year, Myanmar surpassed Afghanistan as the world's top producer of opium, according to a UN report. In 2023, its opium output is expected to increase by 36% to 1,080 tonnes, considerably above Afghanistan's predicted 330 tonnes.¹⁷⁶

The country's political instability, particularly following the 2021 military coup, has compounded grave economic hardship, forcing many destitute farmers to turn to opium

¹⁷⁵ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, "[Opium Economy in Golden Triangle Sees Steady Growth in 2023](#)," *UNODC*, December 12, 2023.

¹⁷⁶ Yong, Nicholas, "[Myanmar Overtakes Afghanistan as Top Opium Producer](#)," *BBC News*, December 12, 2023.

growing for survival. In 2022, opium poppy cultivation grew by 33%, reaching 40,100 hectares, with an 88% increase in production potential to 790 metric tonnes.¹⁷⁷

Myanmar's heroin manufacturing is mostly for markets in East and Southeast Asia, as well as Oceania. The drug was previously carried through Thailand and Hong Kong, but more recently through southern China, including through provinces such as Yunnan and Guangdong.¹⁷⁸

According to the UNODC, the 95% reduction in opium production in Afghanistan following the Taliban's drug ban in 2022 has resulted in a transfer of world supply to Myanmar, where political, social, and economic turmoil caused by a 2021 coup led many to poppy planting.¹⁷⁹ According to the UNODC,¹⁸⁰ Myanmar farmers are now earning over 75% more from opium poppy production, with average flower prices reaching around \$355 per kilogramme.

This rise establishes Myanmar as a direct rival to Afghanistan in the global opioid industry. Given the Taliban's historical reliance on drug revenues, both for internal stability and geopolitical leverage, it is probable that the group are keenly monitoring Myanmar's expanding involvement, as this threatens Afghanistan's supremacy in the illegal trade, especially in the Eastern Asian region.

What further amplifies this threat is Myanmar's ability to adapt. Various ethno-nationalist armed groups in this country have been able to offset losses from poppy eradication by increasing methamphetamine manufacture.¹⁸¹ In contrast, the Taliban lack the necessary experience and regional infrastructure to switch so promptly, making them more exposed to market fluctuations and Myanmar's growing prominence in the global drug trade. The present meth manufacturing in Afghanistan is not as established as that in Myanmar, which dominates East Asian and Australian markets. In Europe instead methamphetamine are supplied by the

¹⁷⁷ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, "[Opium Poppy Cultivation Estimates Increase in Myanmar in 2022 against Backdrop of More Sophisticated Production: UNODC Report](#)," *UNODC*, January 26, 2023.

¹⁷⁸ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, "[Chapter 5: Trafficking of opiates from Myanmar and Afghanistan into East Asia and the Pacific - Transnational Organized Crime in Southeast Asia: Evolution, Growth and Impact](#)," *UNODC*.

¹⁷⁹ Al Jazeera, "[Myanmar Overtakes Afghanistan as World's Top Opium Producer: UN](#)," *Al Jazeera*, December 12, 2023.

¹⁸⁰ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, "[Southeast Asia Opium Survey 2023: Cultivation, Production, and Implications](#)," Bangkok: *UNODC Regional Office for Southeast Asia and the Pacific*, 2023.

¹⁸¹ Felbab-Brown, Vanda, "[Myanmar Maneuvers: How to Break Political-Criminal Alliances in Contexts of Transition](#)," *United Nations University Centre for Policy Research. Crime-Conflict Nexus Series*: No 9, April 2017.

United States from substantial production in Mexico.¹⁸² The Taliban would struggle to compete with manufacturers from East Asia and Mexico. The only regions where a market for Afghan meth may grow dramatically are Africa and the Middle East, where meth usage remains relatively low. However, other medicines, such as Tramadol and Captagon, are widely used in such areas. Furthermore, if methamphetamine usage begins to increase, Chinese and Myanmar-based drug producers may seek to extend their operations in Afghanistan, competing with either meth or heroin manufactured there locally.¹⁸³

The 21st drug century is fundamentally different from the 1990s: it abounds with cheap and powerful synthetic opioids.¹⁸⁴ As a consequence, if the Taliban decide to continue their prohibition in Afghanistan for a year or two, they may discover that their lucrative European drug markets have been stolen away by Chinese and Indian fentanyl makers. Thus, even after rescinding the prohibition, it may not be able to recover its financial losses or restore employment to repressed and poor Afghans, restive militias and powerbrokers, and its own disillusioned groups.¹⁸⁵

3.3.2 *Dubai as a Financial Hub*

Dubai, the second critical node in the global narcotics chain, has come under growing attention as a financial refuge for laundering drug revenues and aiding unlawful cross-border cash flows. The city, known for its fast expansion and investor-friendly climate, has a real estate market characterised by opacity and inadequate regulatory enforcement, conditions that have attracted not just legal money but also the proceeds of global organised crime. Recent investigations have revealed that high-level drug traffickers have purchased luxury houses in Dubai's most exclusive neighbourhoods, utilising them as both financial assets and safe havens.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸² European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction, "[Emerging evidence of Afghanistan's role as a producer and supplier of ephedrine and methamphetamine](#)," *EMCDDA EU4MD Special Report*, November 2020.

¹⁸³ Felbab-Brown, Vanda, "[Pipe Dreams: The Taliban and Drugs from the 1990s into Its New Regime](#)," op. cit.

¹⁸⁴ Felbab-Brown, Vanda, Caulkins Jonathan P., & Humphreys, Keith, "[How Synthetic Opioids Can Radically Change Global Illegal Drug Markets and Foreign Policy](#)," *The Brookings Institution*, 30 April 2018.

¹⁸⁵ Felbab-Brown, Vanda, "[Pipe Dreams: The Taliban and Drugs from the 1990s into Its New Regime](#)," op. cit.

¹⁸⁶ Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project and E24, "[How Dirty Money Finds a Home in Dubai Real Estate](#)," *OCCRP & E24*, May 14, 2024.

One of the reasons for which it is taken into consideration in this thesis is that despite the city's reputation for heavy surveillance, a number of alleged drug traffickers and other criminals have sought refuge there over the past decade, including multiple Afghan warlords and drug lords such as Rashid Popal.¹⁸⁷

Despite international pressure, according to Radha Stirling, an attorney and human rights campaigner who heads the legal aid organisation Detained in Dubai, UAE authorities utilise high-profile fugitives as *bargaining chips*. She goes on to state that: “*The presence of extradition agreements between nations are not necessarily key to whether or not people are extradited. [...] What matters is what Dubai wants in return and whether that nation has something they want enough to barter*” (Radha Stirling, 2024)¹⁸⁸.

In addition to its enormous portfolio of high-end real estate, Dubai has a reputation for its lax financial surveillance, which greatly appeals to those wanting to conceal their illicit earnings. In an undercover encounter held in March 2024, SVT undercover reporters spoke with a representative of Damac, one of Dubai's largest property development companies. During the meeting, the salesman freely indicated that purchasers could pay with “*bags of cash*” or cryptocurrencies and promised them that there would be “*zero question(s)*” about the source of the funds, emphasising the ease with which illegal money may be funnelled into the city's real estate market, allowing drug money to be transformed into physical assets with little oversight. The realtor was describing this real estate opportunity in similar terms to a prominent channel for money laundering, stating that investing significant quantities of cash in property could provide a handy opportunity to avoid the scrutiny that banks generally apply on the sources of funds: “*In properties you are not going to be questioned from any department...especially the developer himself. Anyone who wants to buy can buy [...] There are people, they have cash... and they don't know where to put it. They cannot put like 100 million dirhams (\$27.2 million) in the bank. There will be hundreds of questions [but] if you sell the property and then you transfer all the amount in the bank account, then there is no problem, you will not be questioned from where you bring the cash to buy the property and then to put it in the bank [...] You still have this option in Dubai. So why not use it?*” (Damac Realtor, 2024)¹⁸⁹.

¹⁸⁷ Hasrat, Ahmad Sohaib, “[Ex-Afghan Officials Own \\$42m Assets in Dubai: Report](#),” *Pajhwok Afghan News*, May 17, 2024.

¹⁸⁸ Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project and E24, “[How Dirty Money Finds a Home in Dubai Real Estate](#),” op. cit.

¹⁸⁹ Ibidem.

The United Arab Emirates Financial Intelligence Unit (UAEFIU) discovered that illicit revenues from drugs manufactured in Afghanistan, mainly opium and heroin, frequently enter the UAE financial system via structured cash deposits, the employment of money mules, and minor cross-border transfers. These transactions usually originate in or are directed towards high-risk jurisdictions such as Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran. Afghan-linked traffickers have thus taken advantage of Dubai's traditionally lax enforcement, notably in the previously described real estate and free trade zones, where shell firms and cash-intensive enterprises serve as a cover for money laundering. Afghan traffickers also employ trade-based money laundering tactics, such as over-invoicing and under-invoicing, to conceal the source of narcotics proceeds. While authorities have been already alerted by the current situation and have already promptly strengthened regulatory measures, Dubai especially remains a crucial financial centre in the larger trafficking ecosystem of Afghanistan's opiate economy.¹⁹⁰

¹⁹⁰ UAE Financial Intelligence Unit, "[Patterns of Abusing Financial Institutions in Drug Trafficking and Laundering Its Proceeds: A Strategic Analysis Report](#)," Abu Dhabi: *UAEFIU*, August 2023.

CHAPTER 4

GLOBAL IMPLICATIONS

4.1 Drug Economies Without Borders

This section overviews how Afghanistan's drugs economy operates not solely as a level of production, but also as part of a global, decentralised financial network that is primarily reliant on informal channels such as hawala to transfer large quantities of money across borders overseas. These transfers support local policymaking, militant fundraising, and global finance, all while avoiding official banking restrictions. This section will next look at the Taliban's significant international criminal ties, namely how its drug trade connects with global trafficking networks and transnational crime syndicates. This section of the chapter outlines the final analytical step of drug trafficking before moving on to the overseas destinations. It will link what was stated in chapter 3 to what will be discussed in the last chapter of this thesis.

4.1.1 *Afghanistan's Hawala System*

The *hawala* system in Afghanistan is a centuries-old, trust-based financial network that became the country's de facto financial backbone, especially since the Taliban's takeover in August 2021. With the collapse of the formal banking sector, bank closures, frozen assets and foreign reserves, international sanctions, and the departure of Western financial institutions, *hawaladars* (money brokers) have stepped in to provide essential services such as domestic and international money transfers, savings, foreign currency exchange, and even informal loans. Since the Taliban's takeover, hawaladars have become the primary financial service providers for NGOs, including UNICEF, migrants, and regular Afghan civilians. They manage everything from humanitarian relief distribution to import finance using trade procedures such as *ograyee*.¹⁹¹

The system operates through transfers initiated by a consumer who sends cash and recipient information to a local hawaladar. A reference code is generated and given to a counterpart hawaladar near the beneficiary, who subsequently allocates the cash after

¹⁹¹ *Ograyee* is a traditional form of credit-based commerce in Afghanistan, where commodities are sold on installment and payback terms, allowing buyers, often importers, to pay gradually over time. It is commonly used by hawaladars to facilitate commerce in the absence of official banks.

verification. Settlements between hawaladars take place independently, typically through additional transactions or informal accounting.¹⁹²

Accordingly, based on trust, community ties, and personal networks, hawala is chosen for its accessibility, dependability, and reach into remote regions. Despite its efficacy, the system is criticised internationally for its lack of transparency and the concerns of money laundering and terrorism financing. Indeed, hawala runs mostly off-the-books, with handwritten ledgers (kata) or basic practices. Transactions are executed through trusted intermediates and settled using reverse flows, actual currency, or trade-based settlements. Because of the absence of transparency and regulatory monitoring, hawala is especially appealing for transporting illegal cash, such as drug revenues, across borders without discovery.¹⁹³ In 2004, this “*informal economy, which includes a range of activities in terms of legality and market orientation and accounts for some 80-90% of the total economy (including drugs), has been a coping mechanism for Afghans’ survival during conflict*” (The World Bank, 2004)¹⁹⁴.

This unofficial form of economy perpetuates itself through a cycle of institutional weakness and low productivity. At its foundation is a system characterised by informal, untaxed enterprises that, while providing short-term survival mechanisms, especially during conflict, threaten long-term economic growth. These actions result in low government income, restricting the state’s ability to deliver fundamental public services and uphold the rule of law. The absence of robust legal and administrative frameworks leads to poor governance, discouraging formal investment and reinforcing residents’ choice for informal livelihoods. This, in turn, perpetuates low productivity and a lack of incentives to enter the formal sector. Non-state actors, such as warlords and commanders, such as the Taliban, surround this cycle and exploit the state’s vacuum, so compounding macroeconomic instability and regulatory inadequacies.¹⁹⁵

The Taliban have indeed capitalised on this system in the past as well as in the present. They have officially formalised monitoring through the Da Afghanistan Bank (DAB), which has tightened licensing and recordkeeping requirements, but real effective enforcement still remains patchy. Meanwhile, hawaladars handle liquidity for imports, wages, and government-

¹⁹² Cook, William, Dylan Lennox, and Hasib Hakimzay, “[Trust in Transition: Afghanistan’s Hawala System in Crisis and Recovery](#),” Washington, DC: *CGAP*, November 2024.

¹⁹³ Ibidem.

¹⁹⁴ World Bank, “[Afghanistan: State Building, Sustaining Growth, and Reducing Poverty - A Country Economic Report](#),” Report No. 29551-AF. Washington, DC: *World Bank*, September 9, 2004, p. xi.

¹⁹⁵ Ibidem.

like tasks, allowing for successful administration and service delivery in the absence of established institutions.¹⁹⁶

Hawala connects Afghanistan's informal economy to global markets, mainly the UAE, Iran, and Pakistan, via a complex network of family, ethnic, and diaspora relationships. Trust is the system's currency, the majority of cross-border collaborations are built on long-standing, often intergenerational ties. Based on these connections in these countries, Hawaladars today keep more cash in physical currency, notably USD. Funds from Gulf nations pass through Dubai or Iran before being deposited through business activity or actual cash delivery. This means that hawala serves as both a financial tool and a conduit for Afghanistan's worldwide drug traffic.¹⁹⁷

Despite new, post 2021, Taliban-era legislation mandating hawaladars to register as legal businesses, pay higher licensing fees, and maintain official records, compliance is patchy and unequal. Many hawaladars oppose invasive inspections and argue that laws do not reflect practical reality, particularly when it comes to procedures like as safekeeping and lending.¹⁹⁸

4.1.2 *The Taliban's International Criminal Partnerships*

Afghanistan's drug trade has traditionally functioned as a basis for projecting and maintaining power. The commercial web of drug manufacture and trafficking has allowed domestic and multinational networks to generate income and support militant activities. These links encompass local tribal alliances, regional rebel groupings, and worldwide criminal syndicates.

Many extremist organisations in Afghan-Pakistan tribal areas have gained financially, directly or indirectly, from Afghanistan's opiate trade. The TTP, Al-Qaida, and the Haqqani network are among the most prominent, operating within the ex-FATA region, a major drug trafficking route. Between 2000 and 2009, there were essentially no heroin seizures in this area due to Pakistan's Anti Narcotics Force's (ANF) low presence, creating a climate conducive to trafficking. These gangs have largely exploited the drug trade by taxing, extorting, and protecting traffickers. The Haqqani network, in particular, has built strong cross-border

¹⁹⁶ Cook, William, Dylan Lennox, and Hasib Hakimzay, "[Trust in Transition: Afghanistan's Hawala System in Crisis and Recovery](#)," op. cit.

¹⁹⁷ Ibidem.

¹⁹⁸ Ibidem.

contacts and is heavily reliant on heroin smuggling for revenue, frequently wielding its power through tribal alliances, most notably with the Tanai tribe, a Pashtun community in Khost, the Haqqani's hometown, and portions of Pakistan. While not often actively participating in drug transportation, they generate income by extortion and control of trafficking routes. Al-Qaeda, instead, which is active in ex-FATA regions and linked to both the Haqqani network and the TTP, appears to avoid direct involvement in trafficking. Instead, it provides logistical and operational assistance to local terrorist organisations, including suicide bombers. Its impact is ideological and strategic, rather than economic. Another organisation, *Lashkar-e-Islam*, a major Deobandi jihadist militant party, wields authority in the Khyber Agency by paying traffickers for transit and operational freedom,¹⁹⁹ so strengthening control over drug routes, particularly when instability develops in places such as Waziristan. In Baluchistan, however, the situation is different. Although the province is a major drugs transit route, local Baluch nationalist forces such as the Baluch Republic Army and the Baluch Liberation Army are not systematically tied to drug trafficking. In certain situations, these organisations actively fight the trade, sending threats to traffickers and targeting their businesses.²⁰⁰

In Iran, the hardline organisation *Jund Ullah*, meaning *Soldiers of God*, located in the country's volatile Sistan-Baluchistan province, has long operated in border areas that intersect with significant drugs smuggling routes. This Sunni terrorist group, primarily consisting of ethnic Baluchis, has carried out multiple assaults against Iranian security forces and claims to fight for the rights of the Baluch minority. However, there is no solid evidence linking the group to narcotics trafficking, despite its geographic proximity to smuggling routes.²⁰¹

Among these organisations, the Taliban has formed agreements with major drug traffickers like as Haji Fatah Ishaqzay, Haji Juma Khan, and Haji Bashir Noorzai. *“Major drug traffickers, like Haji Juma Khan and Haji Bashir Noorzai, were actually important Taliban commanders when the movement was established in the mid-1990s. Their role changed later, and while they continued to provide financial and ideological support to the Taliban, their focus shifted toward engaging more extensively in the drug trade. Their networks regulated the illicit opiate market and prices; and they had close links with regional and international drug trafficking networks. They also had extensive hawala networks that were involved in money*

¹⁹⁹ Interviews in Peshawar, August 2010.

²⁰⁰ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, [“The Global Afghan Opium Trade: A Threat Assessment, 2011,”](#) op. cit., pp. 35-36.

²⁰¹ Ibidem.

laundering. Basically, the profit they made from the drug trade was mostly used to fund the Taliban movement” (former senior Afghan government official)²⁰².

On a more global scale, Afghanistan’s narcotics are transported through intricate networks including some of the most powerful international criminal groups. For instance, between the Golden Crescent and Africa, there is a vast organised criminal network, with several representatives in Pakistan’s Khyber Pakhtunkhwa region. From there, heroin is transported to the Balochistan coast and loaded onto ships bound for the East African coastline. Afghan heroin enters East Africa through the maritime channels along the Swahili coast. These routes are occasionally facilitated by members of Nigerian criminal networks, which are noted for their versatility in international drug logistics. Once arrived, activities are closely integrated into the transit nations’ larger political and economic institutions. In Kenya and South Africa, for example, Nigerian networks have worked with local and international organised criminal organisations to facilitate heroin transshipment and secondary trade. In Cape Town, Nigerian, Russian, and Chinese criminal networks have reportedly formed alliances with local gangs to maintain control over distribution channels and infrastructure. These syndicates then assist redirect items to Europe, Australia, or North America.²⁰³ Despite the lack of a direct operational relationship between the Taliban and African terrorist organisations, relations appear to be improving. This tendency raises worries about a possible future link, particularly because other Islamist organisations in the region, including as Boko Haram, al-Shabaab, and al-Qaeda, are already involved in drug trafficking networks.²⁰⁴

On the financial front, Dubai has been already mentioned as an important laundering and reinvestment hub. Criminal syndicates, like Ireland’s Kinahan gang, which operates out of the city, are accused of laundering narcotics money through the emirate’s real estate and luxury goods sectors. These entities maintain arms-length relationships with Taliban-linked traffickers, allowing the clean-up and reinvestment of heroin revenues through shell firms and hawala networks.²⁰⁵

The Southern Route not only channels Afghan heroin through Africa and Asia but also serves as a primary corridor into Europe, where trafficking is largely controlled by powerful

²⁰² Azizi, Hamid, [“The Nature and Extent of the Taliban’s Involvement in the Drug Trade Before and After the Regime Change \(1994–2022\): Insights from Experts,”](#) op. cit.

²⁰³ Haysom, Simone, Peter Gastrow, and Mark Shaw, [“The Heroin Coast: A Political Economy along the Eastern African Seaboard,”](#) Issue 04, June 2018. *ENACT*, Enhancing Africa’s Response to Transnational Organised Crime.

²⁰⁴ Chellaney, Brahma, [“The Narco-Terrorist Taliban,”](#) op. cit.

²⁰⁵ Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project and E24, [“How Dirty Money Finds a Home in Dubai Real Estate,”](#) op. cit.

criminal groups such as Balkan cartels, the Turkish mafia, and Albanian organised crime networks. Afghan heroin frequently flows along the so-called Balkan Route, passing Iran and Turkey before reaching Europe via its south-western countries.²⁰⁶ Turkish and Kurdish syndicates, such as the abovementioned PKK, are known to buy heroin in large quantities, purify it if necessary, and distribute it throughout Western Europe.²⁰⁷ In many cases, these organisations retain steady financial and logistical ties with Afghan producers or intermediaries, including Taliban-affiliated trafficking.

Further west, the Italian ‘Ndrangheta, one of Europe’s most powerful mafia groups, has been implicated in smuggling heroin from Central and South Asia, notably Afghanistan, via routes travelling through East Africa or Southern Europe.²⁰⁸ Dutch and other European trafficking networks, frequently operating out of the major ports of Antwerp and Rotterdam, also act as entry sites for Afghan heroin into Europe following marine shipments from the Middle East or North Africa.²⁰⁹

Finally, some connections extend as far as Latin America, where there are limited but growing interactions between Mexican cartels and Middle Eastern or Central Asian heroin brokers. These ties are mainly established most notably with the Sinaloa Cartel and the Jalisco New Generation Cartel (CJNG). This connection has been primarily established for the exchange of trafficking expertise or precursor chemicals, particularly for methamphetamine production. It is also crucial to note that such connections are not directly tied to the Taliban, but rather to third-party actors, the majority of whom are tied to the Chinese mafia.²¹⁰ A further example of trade links between Taliban Afghanistan and Latin America is the case of Chekri Mahmoud Harb, a Lebanese-Colombian national who operated under aliases such as *Taliban*. He was involved in large-scale drug trafficking operations, with proceeds reportedly funnelled to Hezbollah.²¹¹

²⁰⁶ Chellaney, Brahma, “[The Narco-Terrorist Taliban](#),” op. cit.

²⁰⁷ Townsend, Mark, Antonio Baquero, Iurie Sanduta, and Kelly Bloss, “[Was the Shooting of a Nine-Year-Old Girl in Hackney Linked to a Europe-Wide Battle between Rival Drug Gangs?](#)” *The Guardian*, August 11, 2024.

²⁰⁸ Europol, “[EU Organised Crime Threat Assessment: OCTA 2011](#),” The Hague: *Europol*, April 28, 2011.

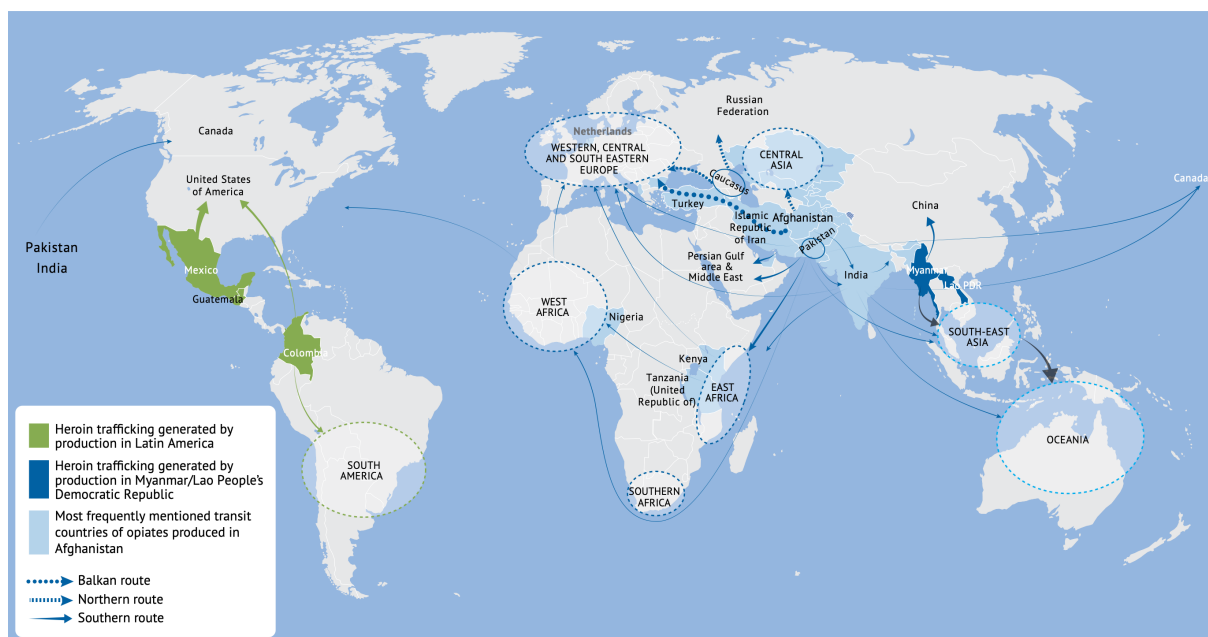
²⁰⁹ European Commission, “[Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council on the EU Roadmap to Fight Drug Trafficking and Organised Crime](#),” *EU Commission*, COM(2023) 641 final, Brussels, October 18, 2023.

²¹⁰ Carrasco, Jorge, “[Mexico, the DEA, and the Case of Zhenli Ye Gon](#),” *Washington Post*, October 29, 2008.

²¹¹ OpenSanctions, “[Chekri Mahmoud Harb](#),” Accessed April 23, 2025.

4.2 Global Destinations

This section investigates how Afghan heroin enters global markets via two primary routes: the Southern Route, which travels through Pakistan, Iran, and the Gulf, typically towards Africa, Asia, and Oceania; and the Northern Route, which travels through Central Asia to reach Russia and Europe. The map below, sourced from the UNODC,²¹² shows a visual representation of these opiate trafficking flows, coupled along with Myanmar's and Latin America's. In addition to these movements, it is crucial to emphasise the importance of the Taliban's religious basis for opium growing. According to some Taliban interpretations of Sharia law selling drugs to non-Muslims in the West is not only permissible, but also a form of jihad. This would be permissible unless the drug is utilised by Muslims. *"Mullah Imam who was a member of the Taliban, [...] believed it is not haram if opium is exported to Western countries"* (Expert 10, 2024)²¹³. Additionally, a trafficker stated: *"Good [...] May God turn all the infidels into dead corpses. Whether it is by opium or by shooting, this is our common goal"* (Taliban Drug Trafficker, 2021)²¹⁴.



²¹² United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *"Afghan Opiate Trafficking Along the Northern Route,"* Vienna: UNODC, June 2018.

²¹³ Azizi, Hamid, *"The Nature and Extent of the Taliban's Involvement in the Drug Trade Before and After the Regime Change (1994–2022): Insights from Experts,"* op. cit.

²¹⁴ Chellaney, Brahma, *"The Narco-Terrorist Taliban,"* op. cit.

4.2.1 *Africa: Emerging Hub and Human Cost in Opioid Transit*

Afghan heroin has been trafficked into and via Africa since the 1980s, with a significant increase observed around 2009. East African nations around the Swahili Coast, such as Kenya, Tanzania, and Mozambique, have emerged as significant transit sites for heroin originating in South-West Asia and bound for Europe. Heroin is frequently transported by traditional *dhow* boats²¹⁵ over seaborne routes, resulting in both international trafficking and rising domestic use and drug dependence tendencies inside countries. However, heroin seizures in East and Central Africa have climbed significantly, indicating a greater penetration into the worldwide heroin market. These regions are vulnerable to trafficking due to porous international boundaries and inadequate governmental systems. Overall, the Southern Route has spread to land, air, and ocean-based routes through Eastern, Southern, Western, and Central African regions, contributing to an increase in drug consumption, particularly among young people, while also putting enormous strain on already underdeveloped public health infrastructure.²¹⁶

Heroin seizures in Africa climbed significantly between 2010 and 2013, with 684 kg confiscated in 2010, 716 kg in 2011, and 674 kg seized in 2012. Trafficking patterns varied by region: heroin was mostly delivered by water and air from East and West Africa, regions more accessible to the Asian origin land. In contrast, most heroin trafficking in North and South Africa took place overland. Significantly, North Africa was maintained relatively independent from intra-African patterns of heroin trade, operating as a conduit for shipments heading directly for Europe rather than completely integrated into internal African trafficking networks.²¹⁷

Heroin usage is a ever-growing public health issue in Africa. The drug is believed to be used by between 190,000 and 300,000 persons, 0.2 to 0.4% of the adult population, in Southern Africa; and by 420,000 to 1,120,000 people, 0.2 to 0.5% of the adult population, in West and Central Africa. Countries with the greatest incidence rates are Kenya, Nigeria, Mauritius, and South Africa. Coastal nations have a particularly high rate of heroin usage because they serve as entry locations for drug trafficking. There are overall approximately 1.78 million drug users in Sub-Saharan Africa, with between 535,000 and 3,022,500 injecting.²¹⁸

²¹⁵ Arab sailing vessels, commonly seen in the Red Sea and Indian Ocean, are notable for their lateen sails and unusual structure.

²¹⁶ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, "Afghan Opiate Trafficking Through the Southern Route," op. cit., pp. 86-103.

²¹⁷ Ibidem.

²¹⁸ Ibidem.

Additionally, Tramadol, the aforementioned non-internationally regulated synthetic opioid, has seen a significant surge in trafficking into West Africa and Egypt from India. The arrest of high-dose Tramadol shipments in 2012 signalled the beginning of a fast increase in trafficking. Shipments climbed from 157 in 2012 to 882 in 2013, with 232 reported in the first quarter of 2014. The primary destination nations are Benin, Nigeria, Ghana, Togo, Niger, Sierra Leone, Cameroon, and Côte d'Ivoire. More than 900 Tramadol shipments were seized between 2012 and 2014, with 153 tonnes detained in 2012 alone. The extensive abuse of Tramadol within the region has created mounting dependency, and there are concerns of compelling users eventually substituting the drug with heroin.²¹⁹

Moreover, according to the UNODC,²²⁰ in recent years, Nigerian crime syndicates have emerged as significant intermediates in the worldwide heroin trade, in particular in the trafficking of Afghan heroin from Pakistan to East and Southern Africa to Asian and Oceanian markets. It is important to stress their importance over other crime syndicates given their use of weak border controls and established diaspora networks to assist smuggling across continents. Their operations are particularly visible in transit hubs like as Kenya, Tanzania, and South Africa, and they also reach consumer markets in Malaysia, Australia, New Zealand and other regions of East and Southeast Asia.

4.2.2 *The Pacific Route*

Oceania, notably Australia and New Zealand, is a significant destination in the worldwide heroin trade, given its geographical proximity to the Asian drug motherland. Shipments are part of the larger Southern Route. In 2009 approximately 4 tonnes of heroin were transported to the continent. Australia, being the major recipient, consumed 3.2 tonnes, with New Zealand accounting for 0.6 tonnes.²²¹

The majority of heroin trafficking into Oceania comes from South-East Asia, including Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Malaysia, originating mainly from Myanmar and from Pakistan and Iran, directly from Afghanistan.²²² Trafficking methods are diverse and

²¹⁹ Ibidem.

²²⁰ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, "[Transnational Organized Crime in Eastern Africa: A Threat Assessment](#)," UNODC, September 2013.

²²¹ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, "[The Global Afghan Opium Trade: A Threat Assessment, 2011](#)," op. cit., pp. 70-71.

²²² Ibidem.

increasingly sophisticated, including direct maritime shipments, such as from Pakistan, with involvement of Nigerian cartels, to Malaysia; trans-shipment through Middle Eastern ports; direct and circuitous air courier routes, as Pakistan to Bangkok or via Gulf states; widespread use of postal services; and rerouting through Europe, chiefly the Netherlands, and South-East Asia before final delivery to Australia.²²³

Furthermore, recent Chinese investments in port infrastructure throughout the Indian Ocean and Southeast Asia, including as the ports of Gwadar in Pakistan and Hambantota in Sri Lanka, may unwittingly provide new nodes for drugs transshipment and concealment.

According to a report by Modern Diplomacy,²²⁴ the Arabian Sea has considerable hurdles in maritime security management, with widespread reports of drug and weapon smuggling. Alongside these illicit maritime departure destinations, a significant concern lies in the limited surveillance capacities of many Pacific Island Countries and Territories, whose small size and geographic isolation hinder effective monitoring. This results in unregulated entry points that traffickers can exploit as strategic gateways for smuggling drugs into the larger mainland markets of Australia and New Zealand.

4.2.3 *Europe: Terminal Market and Global Hub*

Europe has long been one of the most profitable destinations for Afghan heroin, fuelling a thriving economy for more than two decades. According to the most recent UNODC estimates, the Western and important European heroin markets alone generate over US\$13 billion yearly, indicating the region's important position in the global drug economy. Of this bigger market, heroin use is heavily concentrated among the top four nations, which account for two-thirds of all heroin users: the United Kingdom, Italy, France, and Germany. The United Kingdom has the most opiate consumers, around 280,607; followed by Italy at 190,351; Germany at 172,313; and France at 131,539.²²⁵

²²³ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, "Afghan Opiate Trafficking Through the Southern Route," op. cit., p. 17.

²²⁴ Adnan, Saba, "[Significance of Marine Safety Control in Gwadar Port and China's Marine Silk Road](#)," *Modern Diplomacy*, March 20, 2021.

²²⁵ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, "Afghan Opiate Trafficking Through the Southern Route," op. cit., pp. 104-115.

Becoming increasingly prominent, also cannabis from Afghanistan, Pakistan and India is already entering the EU via the Balkan Routes.²²⁶

The smuggling of Afghan heroin into the European market traditionally was dependent on the time-tested Balkan Route, which smuggles narcotics through Iran and Turkey *en route* to European markets. However, in recent years, the Southern Route has incorporated more diverse path routes. The new routes comprise of shipments that begin in Afghanistan and pass Pakistan and the Middle East. In the latter case, this takes place through transshipment centres such as the UAE, through Dubai, Bahrain and Qatar, before continuing into East or West Africa and finally Europe. However, this has evolved into growing tendency of channelling Southern Route cargo straight into Europe, bypassing traditional middlemen. More modern principal transit zones include East African states such as Kenya and Tanzania, as well as West African republics such as Nigeria, Ghana, Benin, and Côte d'Ivoire.²²⁷ The diversity of smuggling routes throughout time demonstrates how traffickers seek to capitalise on specific regions' less effective law enforcement capacities. Over the past decade, the Black Sea Route, running through Iran and the Caucasus,²²⁸ has gained increasing significance in the global heroin trade. According to the Central Asian Regional Information and Coordination Centre (CARICC), Azerbaijan has emerged as an important transit point along this route, with authorities reporting large seizures of heroin and opium.²²⁹ These shipments are then processed and directed through Ukraine,²³⁰ to finally reach Romania and the Baltic and Nordic countries. Other notable developments include an increasing prevalence of maritime shipments from Iranian and Pakistani ports to the Mediterranean,²³¹ and the use of commercial and freight air links between Pakistan, Iran, India and EU airports, by means of direct flights or stopovers in West and East Africa.²³²

Between 2010 and 2013, over 60% of heroin entering Europe came from Pakistan. During the same time period, East Africa accounted for around 16% of Europe's heroin supply,

²²⁶ Europol, "[EU Organised Crime Threat Assessment: OCTA 2011](#)," op. cit.

²²⁷ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, "Afghan Opiate Trafficking Through the Southern Route," op. cit., pp. 104-115.

²²⁸ World Customs Organization, "[Georgia Customs Seizes Record Amount of Narcotics](#)," *WCOOMD*, August 28, 2014.

²²⁹ Central Asian Regional Information and Coordination Centre, "[Presentation World Drug Report 2023](#)," *CARICC*, July 6, 2023.

²³⁰ World Customs Organization, "[Large Heroin Seizure in Ukraine](#)," *WCOOMD*, June 22, 2015.

²³¹ World Customs Organization, "[Massive Heroin Seizure by Pakistani Authorities](#)," *WCOOMD*, July 29, 2010.

²³² Europol, "[EU Organised Crime Threat Assessment: OCTA 2011](#)," op. cit.

South Asia, particularly India, Nepal, and Bangladesh, for about 10%, and Southern Africa for about 7%. Smaller amounts were detected to Iran and other Gulf nations.²³³

Delving further into the trafficking techniques employed, heroin trafficking from Afghanistan into Europe relies on sophisticated procedures aimed at circumventing strict EU border security and law enforcement. Maritime shipments continue to be the most important, with massive amounts of heroin disguised in cargo containers carrying ostensibly genuine commodities like furniture or canned foods. Major European ports, chiefly Rotterdam in the Netherlands and Antwerp in Belgium, have become critical transit points for illicit maritime heroin imports. Traffickers also make considerable use of air transportation, using couriers to conceal heroin in luggage or through body packing. International postal services are another method used, with shipments disguised as commercial products such as jewellery boxes or food.²³⁴

At the national level, an investigation of important European nations indicates recent trends in Afghan heroin trafficking and distribution. In the United Kingdom, there has been a clear movement away from reliance on the Balkan Route through Turkey and towards direct supplies from Pakistan. By 2012, 84% of big heroin seizures in the UK comprised drugs transported directly from Pakistan, with Belgium and the Netherlands emerging as important intermediary hubs; sporadic transits through African nations have also been observed. Similarly, Spain's heroin supply witnessed a substantial adjustment in 2012, shifting away from Balkan-supplied networks and towards trafficking more linked to Pakistan and Uganda, with an apparent increase in heroin seizures transiting through Africa, especially in the latter nation. On a further note, although the heroin market in Italy has historically been dominated by Balkan-route supplies, trafficking through East Africa, notably Tanzania and Kenya, has increased significantly since 2012. While by 2013, the Balkan Route had reclaimed dominance in Italy, East African routes have still continued to play an important role. France and Belgium have also seen an increase in heroin shipments coming directly from Pakistan, with many passing through East African and Middle Eastern ports. Meanwhile, the Netherlands has solidified its position as a significant European transit nation, acquiring heroin both directly from Pakistan and indirectly through African networks.²³⁵

²³³ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, "Afghan Opiate Trafficking Through the Southern Route," *op. cit.*, pp. 104-115.

²³⁴ *Ibidem.*

²³⁵ *Ibidem.*

Data on trafficking and seizures show that the Southern Route is becoming increasingly important in providing heroin to Europe. Between 2010 and 2013, 6,348 kilogrammes of heroin related with Southern Route trafficking were recovered across Europe, the majority of which came from Pakistan. Major entrance ports were Belgium, Spain, and the Netherlands, all of which reported large-scale container shipments; in 2013, a record 863-kilogram heroin seizure was recorded in the port of Antwerp, with a cargo transiting through Mozambique. Between 2010 and 2012, the majority of heroin seizures at Paris Charles de Gaulle Airport were related to East African departure locations, with 43% coming from Kenya, 38% from Tanzania, and 9% from Nigeria. Similarly, seizure statistics in the UK revealed that in 2011, 61% of heroin shipments originated in Pakistan, rising to 84% in 2012.²³⁶

The economic motivations underlying heroin trafficking to Europe are significant, fuelled mostly by massive pricing discrepancies along the supply chain. A gram of heroin has generally always sold for under US\$5 in Pakistan,²³⁷ yet by 2022, street-level prices in Europe had soared dramatically, with average costs reaching as high as €79 per gram in countries such as Sweden.²³⁸ These astounding margins make Europe a more appealing destination and encourage traffickers to seek more direct routes, eliminating their need on middlemen. Smugglers boost their earnings by avoiding intermediary costs by shortening and streamlining trafficking routes. They also lower the possibility of detection, which adds to the attraction of direct shipments from source or transit nations into Europe.²³⁹

Recent trafficking patterns have shown substantial alterations in the flow of Afghan heroin into Europe. Direct exports from Pakistan to important European destinations such as the United Kingdom, Belgium, and Spain have increased significantly. Concurrently, East African nations such as Kenya and Tanzania have emerged as key transit hubs, demonstrating traffickers' resilience to shifting enforcement practices. Middle Eastern destinations, notably the UAE, have increased in popularity as logistical staging stations along the Southern Route. Seizure patterns are increasingly reflecting the usage of marine trafficking tactics and air courier networks. There is an increasing sophistication in these networks, evident in complex,

²³⁶ Ibidem.

²³⁷ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, "[Price and Purity](#)," *UNODC, World Drug Report 2021*, Section 8.1.

²³⁸ European Union Drugs Agency, "[Average Retail Price per Gram of Heroin, 2013-2022](#)," *EU Drug Markets Data Hub*, 2024.

²³⁹ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, "Afghan Opiate Trafficking Through the Southern Route," *op. cit.*, pp. 104-115.

multi-stop trafficking routes such as those moving from Afghanistan to Pakistan, through the UAE and Kenya, and onward to Europe.²⁴⁰

4.2.4 *The flow of Afghan Opiates to the Americas*

In North America, heroin trafficking has become more complicated and diverse, with Canada emerging as a main destination for shipments that originate in Afghanistan and travel through numerous locations. Recent interdictions have revealed that heroin arrived in Canada via air from Africa and Europe, sea shipments from Pakistan, and international mail routed through many transit sites.²⁴¹ Although direct trafficking linkages between Afghanistan and North America are minimal, Canada's well-developed logistical infrastructure and established drug routes make it a particularly appealing target for future exploitation by traffickers. The North American heroin market has around 1.67 million users. Of this total 1.2 million reside within the United States and 114,000 in Canada. Of the two, Canada is more vulnerable to Afghan heroin penetration, whilst the US market is much more tightly linked to supply lines from Western Africa and especially Latin America.²⁴²

Trafficking routes into North America demonstrate the southern route's breadth and diversity, as well as its ability to adapt across large regions. Heroin originating in Afghanistan is usually transported through Pakistan before going through intermediate centres such as the UAE, India, or Iran. Shipments are then sent to Canada and the USA, typically passing through Qatar, Kenya, Tanzania, Nigeria, Ghana, Benin, and portions of Europe. Between 2010 and 2013, trafficking statistics in Canada showed that nearly 70% of heroin seizures utilised air transit, with 30% tied to postal delivery. Pakistan, India, the UAE, and Germany were the most popular transit destinations for these cargoes. In the US, heroin interdictions indicate a greater reliance on South Asia, African countries, and Gulf states as key departure sites.²⁴³

Between 2010 and 2013, seizure data demonstrates significant discrepancies in heroin trafficking trends between Canada and the United States, reflecting their relative placement on global smuggling pathways. In Canada, officials investigated 119 heroin trafficking cases,

²⁴⁰ Ibidem.

²⁴¹ Ibidem, p. 18.

²⁴² United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, "[The Global Afghan Opium Trade: A Threat Assessment, 2011](#)," op. cit., pp. 73-74.

²⁴³ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, "Afghan Opiate Trafficking Through the Southern Route," op. cit., pp. 116-120.

seizing around 1,453 kilogrammes of the narcotic. A major 60% of these seizures passed through Europe, with 29% coming from Pakistan. Importantly, an estimated 90% of heroin collected in Canada between 2009 and 2012 was highly likely to be linked back to Afghanistan, highlighting the country's direct reliance on Afghan-sourced opioids. In comparison, the United States recorded 236 instances, and 360 kilogrammes of heroin confiscated over the same time period. South Asia (49% of exports into the US) was the largest departure region, followed by Africa (30%), Europe (11%), and Pakistan (9%).²⁴⁴

The means of transporting and concealing heroin into North America have proven adaptable and sophisticated. Air couriers and foreign postal services have been the most popular forms of delivery for traffickers, as they provide speed and lesser amounts that are simpler to conceal. Maritime transportation continues to be an essential avenue for bigger consignments, especially bulk deliveries. A significant example can be seen when, in 2014, the Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA) intercepted about 12 kilogrammes of suspected heroin at Toronto Pearson International Airport. A detection dog alerted authorities to the presence of narcotics in a luggage on its way from Pakistan.²⁴⁵ To evade discovery, traffickers have used a variety of concealment strategies, similar to those used for smuggling to other continents, such as putting heroin in checked luggage, shipping containers, or imbedded in ordinary commercial commodities like juice boxes, tea, coffee, and rice.²⁴⁶

Regional dynamics in North America show diverse trends in heroin trafficking routes and source locations. In Canada, the key areas for seizures have been Toronto and Montreal, both of which have significant airports that connect the country to faraway regions such as the Middle East. For what regards the USA, Afghan heroin is more commonly found in big cities and areas distant from the US-Mexico border, which is the principal entry point for Latin American heroin originating mainly from Colombia. In the domestic market, heroin from both sources is often combined to be transported and sold more easily. Geographically, the weight and number of seizures of Afghan heroin favours the eastern United States, notably the northeastern cities of New York, Boston, and Washington DC.²⁴⁷

The significant economic incentives associated with heroin trafficking continue to fuel direct smuggling routes from source to destination. For example, heroin from Pakistan may be

²⁴⁴ Ibidem.

²⁴⁵ Canada Border Services Agency, "[CBSA Officers Seize Approximately 12 kg of Suspected Heroin at Pearson](#)," *Government of Canada*, April 16, 2014.

²⁴⁶ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, "Afghan Opiate Trafficking Through the Southern Route," op. cit., pp. 116-120.

²⁴⁷ Ibidem.

obtained for around US\$4,000 per kilogramme. The resale price in the United States typically ranges from approximately US\$50,000 to US\$70,000 per kilogram;²⁴⁸ In Canada, the resale price of heroin ranges from approximately US\$108 to US\$464 per gram, depending on purity and region.²⁴⁹ This huge price difference makes the sale extremely profitable, driving traffickers to seek more efficient methods that avoid traditional intermediaries. The ability to maximise profit while decreasing vulnerability to interception further encourages direct shipments, which are frequently facilitated through air and ocean channels.²⁵⁰

Supporting evidence demonstrates the extent of North America's involvement in the worldwide heroin trade, notably Canada's reliance on Afghan-sourced opioids. Afghan heroin is believed to account for up to 78% of total heroin use in Canada. Traffickers are now using intricate, multi-stop routes through Africa and the Middle East to reach North American markets. Authorities in Canada and the US have verified heroin shipments that arrived directly from Pakistan or indirectly through significant transit centres like as Belgium, the Netherlands, and Uganda. Arrest data also reflects these trends as West African and Pakistani nationalities form the majority of persons detained for heroin trafficking into North America.²⁵¹

As previously stated, while direct Taliban connections to Latin American cartels lack enough evidence to verify, there is mounting evidence that the economic and logistical frameworks that enable heroin smuggling have been exploited by actors from both regions, resulting in occasional intersections between South Asian insurgent financing networks and Latin American criminal infrastructure. It is still important to note that the UNODC in 2015 stated that "*Afghan heroin is trafficked to every region of the world except Latin America*" (UNODC, 2015)²⁵². Thus, to this date, there is no direct evidence of Afghan heroin directly entering Latin American markets; rather, it is routed through other regions and trafficked directly to the United States and Canada, bypassing Latin America altogether. This is due to Latin America's heroin production. Although Latin America is more commonly associated with cocaine, and as well as marijuana, it is less widely known that the majority of heroin trafficked into the United States now originates from Latin America, particularly Mexico and Colombia.²⁵³ Nevertheless, despite this potential competition, Afghan heroin still finds its way

²⁴⁸ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, "[Heroin and Cocaine Prices in Europe and USA](#)," UNODC.

²⁴⁹ UN Office on Drugs and Crime, "[World Drug Report 2024: Statistical Annex. Table 8.1: Prices and Purities of Drugs](#)," UNODC, Accessed April 22, 2025.

²⁵⁰ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, "Afghan Opiate Trafficking Through the Southern Route," op. cit., pp. 116-120.

²⁵¹ Ibidem, p. 10.

²⁵² Ibidem, pp. 116-120.

²⁵³ U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, "[2020 National Drug Threat Assessment](#)," Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, March 2021.

into the Northern American market, albeit in smaller quantities, often routed through multi-leg trafficking paths that involve Africa, the Middle East, and Europe.²⁵⁴

²⁵⁴ Isaacson, Adam, “[Four Common Misconceptions about U.S.-Bound Drug Flows through Mexico and Central America](#),” *Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA)*, June 20, 2017.

4.3 The Drug Trade's impact on Global Security

This final portion of the thesis concludes the analysis by turning from the structural mechanisms of the Taliban's drug economy and trafficking routes to the larger global ramifications of their continuous engagement in the drugs trade. Having concluded documenting how, despite their theocratic creed, the Taliban tolerated, or at times justified, the cultivation and export of opiates, this last section examines the worldwide repercussions of such paradoxes. It specifically investigates the transnational implications of Afghanistan's opiate industry for global security and sociopolitical cohesiveness. This includes an investigation of how drug-funded insurgencies affect law enforcement globally, the limitations of current anti-narcotics operations, and the societal effects of heroin use, and stigma created in Western nations. Crucially, the section discusses the relationship between drug trafficking and perceptions of Islam, looking in particular into Europe, where increasing Islamophobia is frequently fuelled by narratives associating Muslim-majority nations to crime and terrorism. This last chapter tries to analyse the efficacy of international solutions while providing a critical assessment on the larger human, political, and socio-cultural context.

4.3.1 *International Efforts to Combat the Drug Trade*

If this thesis has demonstrated one core point, it is the deep correlation between Afghanistan and the global drug trade. This section will examine the various policy approaches that have been attempted to address and mitigate the negative consequences of this connection.

Before the rise of the new Taliban government, the UNODC led one of the most significant international responses to Afghanistan's entrenched position in the global drug traffic. Among its primary goals there have been alternative development projects aimed at persuading Afghan farmers to switch from opium poppy farming to lawful crops like as wheat or saffron.²⁵⁵ In parallel, the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB), also an integral part of the UN framework, launched in 2024 two tools to assist governments in combating the diversion of drug precursors used in unlawful manufacture. The first is a compilation of national legislation designed to improve domestic regulations and international collaboration.

²⁵⁵ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, "[Alternative Development Programme Afghanistan 2016–2020: Achievements at a Glance](#)," Kabul: UNODC, 2020.

The second is a list of 500 chemical cousins of known precursors intended to assist police in identifying chemicals that traffickers may employ as replacements.²⁵⁶ These operations UNODC and INCB led are two examples of foreign attempts to undermine the root issues of Afghanistan's opiate economy. Given that the core challenge in curbing opium production lies in the lack of economically viable alternatives for farmers, these interventions address both the agricultural supply side, by promoting alternative crops with competitive market value, and the industrial inputs required for drug processing, such as precursor chemicals.

However, alternative explanations and criticisms of counternarcotics activities highlight fundamental flaws in implementation and durability. Crop substitution plans, while well-intentioned, can fail because of limited market access, insufficient infrastructure, or a lack of security for steady farming, particularly in rural Afghanistan. Furthermore, harsh eradication measures have alienated local agricultural groups who rely on poppy cultivation in many cases. This resentment has occasionally been utilised by the Taliban, who portray themselves as champions of rural interests, therefore increasing their local support and recruitment capabilities.

Historically, NATO and US military operations in Afghanistan have always encompassed counternarcotics activities as part of larger security and stabilisation initiatives. One prominent example is targeted missions to demolish heroin production infrastructure, notably in opium-rich districts like as Helmand. These operations frequently featured the detection and demolition of clandestine laboratories used to transform opium into heroin in order to undermine the Taliban's funding streams.²⁵⁷ However, as noted in previous chapters, the success of militarised counter-narcotics operations is hotly debated. A 2019 investigation indicated that after more than 200 bombings against heroin laboratories, the Taliban's opium income were mostly unchanged, raising severe questions about the long-term impact and strategic usefulness of such operations.²⁵⁸

An additional phenomenon that has developed in limiting the transnational flow of narcotics originating in Afghanistan have been border enforcement measures, notably within the framework of regional task groups. An example of such can be seen with the CARICC. This organisation is in fact an important multilateral mechanism for information exchange and coordinated action between Central Asian republics, Russia, and other regional allies, utilised

²⁵⁶ International Narcotics Control Board, "[INCB Launches Two New Tools to Support Authorities in Preventing Diversion of Controlled Precursors and Related Chemicals](#)," *INCB*, May 17, 2024.

²⁵⁷ Al Jazeera, "[Six Heroin Labs Destroyed in Afghan Crackdown](#)," *Al Jazeera*, January 30, 2017.

²⁵⁸ Hennigan, W. J., "[The U.S. Sent Its Most Advanced Fighter Jets to Blow Up Cheap Opium Labs. Now It's Canceling the Program](#)," *Time*, February 21, 2019.

to combat narcotics smuggling through the region. Meanwhile, state agencies such as Pakistan's ANF and Iran's specialised drug enforcement units carry out ground-level interdiction and surveillance operations, particularly in porous and high-traffic border areas. But while these operations have resulted in large drug seizures, their overall impact of these missions is sometimes hampered by the corruption present in the countries surrounding Afghanistan, limited resources, and the flexibility of trafficking networks.

International legal frameworks have also had a significant impact on how the world responds to drug trafficking. The United Nations Convention Against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances, adopted in 1988, provided the framework for international cooperation in criminalising drug-related offences, improving extradition systems, and targeting drug-related money flows.²⁵⁹ The Financial Action Task Force (FATF) supplements this legal instrument by monitoring nations' compliance with anti-money laundering guidelines. Countries judged to be ineffective in combating drug-related money laundering, particularly those that fail to control the financial components of the heroin trade, risk being *grey-listed* by the FATF.²⁶⁰ Such lists may restrict access to global financial systems, putting pressure on governments to make changes. As an example, the United Arab Emirates was placed on the grey list in March 2022 because of financial oversight concerns, but it was later removed from the list in February 2024 after enacting significant reforms to address these issues.²⁶¹ The FATF also has urged nations including Nepal, Pakistan, and Afghanistan to strengthen their hawala oversight and compliance procedures. The FATF has regularly grey-listed Pakistan for insufficient control over unregulated money routes, urging the country to improve monitoring of hawaladars, increase reporting requirements, and enforce official registration.²⁶²

Despite the international community's countless efforts, substantial flaws and policy gaps continue to undercut the global response to Afghanistan's drug trade. One important problem is the fragmented character of international collaboration, which is sometimes hampered by geopolitical conflicts such as the long-standing rivalry between the United States and Iran, hence impeding integrated regional plans and obscuring information from both sides. Furthermore, most of the worldwide attention remains skewed towards supply-side initiatives,

²⁵⁹ United Nations, "[United Nations Convention Against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances, 1988](#)," Vienna: UN, 1988.

²⁶⁰ Financial Action Task Force, "[Black and Grey Lists](#)," FATF, 2024.

²⁶¹ Cornish, Chloe, "[UAE Removed from Money Laundering 'Grey List'](#)," *Financial Times*, February 23, 2024.

²⁶² Financial Action Task Force, "[The Role of Hawala and Other Similar Service Providers in Money Laundering and Terrorist Financing](#)," Paris: FATF, October 2013, p. 18.

with inadequate emphasis on demand reduction or thorough investigations into the origins and funding networks of drug supply chains after seizures. Monitoring systems for new risks, notably synthetic narcotics, are still inadequate, despite Afghanistan's increasing methamphetamine manufacturing in primitive 'poor man's meth' laboratories utilising locally obtained ephedra. This expanding market continues to be a key blind hole in present drug control systems.

4.3.2 *Western Consequences: The Case of European Islam*

This section concludes the final chapter of the thesis by bringing the study full circle: from Afghanistan's local opium production to its far-reaching global impacts in a Western city. It reinforces the central argument that Afghanistan's drug trade is a transnational force that reshapes international relations and security paradigms, demonstrating that even distant and stable states cannot avoid the consequences of the country's entrenched narco-politics.

One of the more neglected repercussions is how these dynamics influence perceptions of Islam in Afghanistan and internationally. Domestically, some Taliban religious officials have rationalised heroin shipments to the West as a legal conduct, citing selective readings of Sharia as a kind of economic warfare or jihad against non-Muslim civilisations. When this personal story is presented on a global scale, it becomes extremely troublesome. In Europe, the intersection of narcotics, migration, and terrorism contributes to a public discourse that increasingly associates Islam with crime and extremism.

In certain situations, Islamist extremist narratives in Afghanistan have presented drug trafficking as a valid form of jihad, when the drugs are marketed to non-Muslims in the west. By portraying heroin exports to the West as a weapon against 'infidel' cultures, these organisations defend illegal trade as both strategic and religiously sanctioned. This ideological justification not only provides financial support for insurgent and terrorist actions, but it also perpetuates harmful perceptions that associate Islam with criminality and extremism.²⁶³

The combination between drugs and extremism has a vital but frequently overlooked consequence: radicalisation within Western jail systems. In nations such as France, Belgium, and the United Kingdom, a considerable proportion of people convicted of minor narcotics

²⁶³ European Foundation for South Asian Studies, "[Narco-Jihad - Haram Money for a Halal Cause?](#)," Publications - Study Papers, *EFSAS*, 2023.

offenses, many of whom are from marginalised Muslim communities, are subjected to Islamist extremist beliefs while in prison. Prisons have become breeding grounds for radical ideas, with charismatic recruiters using grievances, identity crises, and perceived social marginalisation to sway susceptible convicts towards more militant worldviews.²⁶⁴

As a result of these dynamics, such tales fuel Islamophobic emotions in Western cultures, perpetuating cycles of mistrust, monitoring, and marginalisation of Muslim populations. Drug-related arrests involving persons of Afghan or Pakistani descent in Europe frequently exacerbate negative perceptions about Islam and people of Middle Eastern or South Asian ancestry. These episodes are regularly used by far-right movements to reinforce xenophobic narratives, presenting Muslim populations as fundamentally related to crime or radicalism. Such framing creates a pretext for increasing monitoring, securitisation, and discriminatory laws, further marginalising these people and widening societal differences.²⁶⁵

On the other hand, it is true that profits from the Taliban's drug trade indirectly benefit groups that pose dangers within the European Union's borders, raising security and counterterrorism concerns. Trafficking networks linked to jihadist groups not only fund extremist activities, but they also impede intelligence and law enforcement efforts. These networks employ the same logistical and financial infrastructures as insurgency and terror funding, undermining EU counterterrorism initiatives and contributing to a greater sense of insecurity on the continent.

In response to the growing issues posed by heroin trafficking and usage, some European nations, most notably France, have enacted harsh legislation targeted at destroying drug networks and reducing drug-related crime. While these initiatives aim to improve public safety and combat organised crime, they have also generated serious concerns about their societal impact. These measures, in particular, have the potential to disproportionately target and monitor minority populations, particularly those of Muslim descent, reinforcing existing stigmas and adding to social estrangement.²⁶⁶

Parallel to this but separate in function is the confluence of heroin smuggling routes with irregular migration paths, notably into Southern Europe, which has resulted in tighter

²⁶⁴ The Times, "[Islamist Gangs Exploit Vacuum of Authority in Britain's Prisons](#)," *The Times View*, April 14, 2025.

²⁶⁵ Ramadhan, Jelang, Karomah Widianingsih, Eva Achjani Zulfa, and Imam Khomaeini Hayatullah, "Media and Islamophobia in Europe: A Literature-Based Analysis of Reports 2015-2023," *Religions* 16, no. 5 (2025): 584. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16050584>.

²⁶⁶ Pineau, Elizabeth, and Gabriel Stargardt, "[France Passes Sweeping New Drug Law as Cocaine Surge Drives Crime Wave](#)," *Reuters*, April 29, 2025.

border restrictions and increased securitisation of migration.²⁶⁷ While both processes are based in international trafficking, combining them risks unfairly stigmatising migrant communities, many of whom are escaping the very instability that trafficking contributes to.

The rising incidence of heroin use in major European cities such as Paris and Berlin has placed an additional strain on public health services. Rehabilitation and harm-reduction programs are under significant demand, especially in metropolitan areas where drug use is prevalent. This tendency disproportionately affects marginalised populations, which are frequently already disadvantaged in terms of financial status and healthcare access.

²⁶⁷ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, “[Smuggling of Migrants: A Global Review and Annotated Bibliography of Recent Publications](#),” Vienna: *UNODC*, 2011.

Conclusions

Afghanistan has seen decades of suffering, violence, and external interference. This thesis has attempted to demonstrate, through the case study of its narcotics business, how these conditions shaped and were altered by a series of drastically diverse administrations, many of which were influenced or pressured by foreign powers. It has also demonstrated how Afghanistan is commonly misinterpreted in international discourse, with inadequate difference between its ruling officials and civilian populace. By focussing on the political economy of drugs, the thesis provides a complex view of how governance, resistance, and survival tactics are intertwined in a state where formal institutions frequently fail and the border between legitimacy and crime remains unclear.

As this thesis concludes, it turns to reflect on the broader ramifications of the analysis offered throughout its chapters. What began as the investigation into the Taliban's ties to Afghanistan's drug trade has evolved into a more in-depth examination of how illegal business is intertwined with government, ideology, and global security. Though generally dismissed as peripheral characters, Afghanistan's rural communities, warlords, and insurgency networks provide the foundation of one of the world's most profitable global drug trade markets. It now results clearer how Afghanistan's narcotics industry has progressed from a rural coping mechanism to a sophisticated geopolitical phenomenon.

The primary research question - how Afghanistan's drug trade has moulded Taliban administration and affected foreign relations - has been addressed by tracking the evolution of the Taliban's pragmatic policies and their connection to global security dynamics. The answer: the Taliban have reinvented rebel rule through drug trafficking, using a complex combination of survival strategy, religiously motivated pragmatism, and global criminal affiliation and trust.

What emerges is an evident picture: the Taliban's drug policy is not accidental nor disingenuous. Rather, it is an attempt to adjust to chronic instability, geopolitical isolation, and economic marginalisation. Far from being an outlier, the Taliban's incorporation into global trafficking networks has rendered them both a result and a benefactor of globalization's dark underside. The rotating vicious cycle of Afghanistan's instability, fear, poverty, ideological rigidity, and foreign neglect has produced conditions under which drug manufacture is not only permitted but institutionalised. The Taliban's drugs policies are both a means of survival and a

strategy of resistance, disguised as selective religious justification and carried out through deeply established international networks.

Furthermore, this thesis has shown that the effects of Afghanistan's drug trafficking go well beyond the country's boundaries. It permits the financing of extremist actors, weakens regional stability, exacerbates corruption, and moulds global perceptions of Islam through the lens of crime and violence.

The insufficiency of divided international efforts, as well as the unintended effects of foreign occupation, have exacerbated the problem by reinforcing the networks they aimed to break. Counter-narcotics programs that overlook the political economics of drugs, the robustness of informal channels such as hawala, and the shaky character of official authority in borderlands will continue to fail, since the system continues to function after decades of fighting it.

In conclusion, this thesis suggests that Afghanistan's drug trade is more than just a simple illegal activity; it provides the foundation for an alternative political and economic system. War creates wealth, profit consolidates power, and power is legitimised by opposition myths. Confronting this system involves more than crop eradication or border crossing restrictions; it necessitates a reconsideration of global security paradigms, an honest confrontation with the systemic imbalances that feed such economies, and an acknowledgement of the resilience built in informal forms of government. Furthermore, it demands altering mentalities in the West, where the very demand for this market originates and where simple, punitive solutions have all too frequently overlooked the fundamental causes of the problem. Only by addressing both ends of the supply chain and comprehending the difficulties of adaptation in the aftermath of unsuccessful interventions can significant progress be made.

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