



Myths & Facts about Fighting the Opium Trade in Afghanistan

Myth No. 1: Afghanistan's abundant poppy crop can be refined into biodiesel to serve as the country's principal agricultural product.

Fact: Refining biodiesel from poppies sanctions an illicit activity, increases demand for poppy cultivation, and benefits narco-traffickers and insurgents.

- Cultivating, processing or possessing opium is a violation of Afghan law.
- Dividing poppy cultivation into licit and illicit segments would complicate significantly the task of identifying illicit cultivation.
- Alternative uses of opium poppy will raise its price and will encourage more illicit cultivation. The increased production will ultimately reduce the price, but increase the supply, making the country more dependent on poppy cultivation.
- Alternative uses of poppy will reduce the narco-traffickers subsidy burden and allow them to save more money while ensuring a long term supply.
- Countries that produce opium for licit purposes have strict controls, sophisticated law enforcement and licensing systems (all of which Afghanistan lacks)—and still admit to significant illegal diversion.

Myth No. 2: Farmers plant poppy because they have been doing so for generations; it is part of their culture and they have no alternatives available.

Fact:

According to the UNODC, only 6.4% of the Afghan population currently participates in opium poppy cultivation and opium is grown on less than 2% of Afghanistan's farmable land. Although some small fraction of the Afghan population has traditionally cultivated opium poppy, Afghanistan's opium boom began in the 1980s as drug traffickers capitalized on the chaos created by perpetual conflict.

- According to the UNODC, 70% of the cultivation in Helmand, the nation's largest poppy-growing province, began in just the last four years, coincident with the Taliban's resurgence in the south.

Myth No. 3: Legalizing poppy for licit medical use (morphine) would solve the drug problem in Afghanistan.

Fact:

There is no legitimate world demand for legal Afghan opium, as the current supply of licit opiate raw materials already exceeds world demand. Using Afghan poppy for legal opiates is neither a feasible nor desirable solution.

- Countries that produce licit opium have strict controls, sophisticated law enforcement and licensing systems (all of which Afghanistan lacks)—and still admit to significant illegal diversion.
- Historical experience from Bolivia and other countries show the often disastrous effects of legalizing drug production without the requisite market demand or law enforcement and control mechanisms. Afghanistan has far less regulation capacity than all of these countries, virtually guaranteeing that an unacceptable amount of government-subsidized opium would be diverted to the illegal drug market.
- Legalization is ultimately counterproductive and dangerous, and would expand and entrench the drug trade, undermining ongoing efforts to bring security and sustainable economic development.

Myth No. 4: Buying-out the poppy harvest would solve the drug problem in Afghanistan.

Fact:

Afghanistan’s National Drug Control Strategy and the US Strategy for Counternarcotics in Afghanistan reject “silver bullet” approaches like buying-out crops from farmers. The governments of Afghanistan and the United States are opposed to the legalization of opium in Afghanistan and to buying the crop, as are the relevant technical agencies of the United Nations.

- There are no shortcuts to fighting opium production in Afghanistan. A buy-out scheme would not be a one-time effort, would cost at least hundreds of millions of dollars annually, and would be more expensive than the international community could realistically undertake. The Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan does not have the physical or financial capabilities to buy up the annual harvest, either. Poppy cultivation also violates Afghan law.

- Moreover, the real effect of such a buy-out could be a significant upsurge in cultivation, absent very robust law enforcement capabilities to ensure that growers sell only to the government. At present, only a fraction of Afghanistan's population is engaged in the drug trade and opium is grown on less than 2% of Afghanistan's farmable land. A buyout policy would likely create a perverse incentive, leading more Afghan farmers to cultivate, and increase the cost of a buy-out dramatically. It would also disincline farmers to switch to sustainable licit alternatives.

Myth No. 5: The U.S. thinks the best way to solve Afghanistan's drug problem is to simply eradicate the poppy fields.

Fact:

The Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan has developed a comprehensive counternarcotics strategy widely supported by the international community, and the U.S. Government has a similarly balanced supporting strategy.

- The GIRoA is implementing a comprehensive National Drug Control Strategy that includes institutional capacity-building, law enforcement and interdiction, demand reduction and treatment, criminal justice reform, public education, regional cooperation, agricultural development, and governor-led poppy eradication.
- The United States has eliminated support for the Ministry of Interior's Poppy Eradication Force (PEF). The USG continues to support governor-led eradication on a case-by-case basis where licit alternatives exist.

Myth No. 6: The U.S. is planning to execute an aerial spray eradication program in Afghanistan despite opposition from the sovereign Afghan government.

Fact:

The U.S. has never implemented aerial spraying in Afghanistan and does not plan to execute such a policy in the future.

Myth No. 7: The narcotics trade and the Taliban-led insurgency are unrelated or only tangentially related. The counternarcotics effort wastes precious resources that would be better spent fighting the insurgency.

Fact:

The opium trade and the insurgency are closely related. Poppy cultivation and insurgent violence are correlated geographically, and

opium now provides the Taliban with a significant portion of its revenues.

- The UNODC and other major international stakeholders all acknowledge that the Taliban-led insurgency and the Afghan drugs trade are increasingly linked.
- In 2009, after NATO defense ministers agreed that ISAF could play a role in counternarcotics in Afghanistan, NATO issued an order for ISAF to target drug traffickers and drug-producing labs where there is evidence that they provide “material support” for the Taliban-led insurgency.
- The links between the insurgency and the drug trade are especially strong in contested areas of the south, where drug proceeds provide a substantial amount of insurgent revenue. As found elsewhere in the world, the illegal drug trade is strongest in areas where security and rule of law are weak. It sustains and promotes lawless activity, corrodes good governance, and threatens to undermine the legitimate Afghan government and our efforts to assist it in waging a counterinsurgency.

Myth No. 8: The Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan lacks the will or the capacity to take serious action against the drug trade.

Fact:

Where the security situation allows, the Government of Islamic Republic of Afghanistan can and does take action on the drug trade; as the recent successes in dramatically reducing poppy cultivation in Balkh, Badakhshan, Nangarhar and Helmand demonstrate.

- Afghan government leadership in major poppy-producing provinces has shown that Afghanistan can and will reduce poppy cultivation, improve access to alternative livelihood programs, and extend the rule of law, given adequate security.
- Even in secure areas, corrupt practices and other improper influences can and have had an effect on the ability to target and prosecute the most significant traffickers. It is important that GIRoA act decisively to reduce such activities that are unhelpful to countering the drug trade and advancing the rule of law.

Myth No. 9: The U.S. government can combat the opium trade by using mycoherbicides to eradicate opium poppy.

Fact:

The USG does not and has no plans to use mycoherbicides in Afghanistan.

- Mycoherbicides are naturally occurring biological organisms that could theoretically attack illicit drug crops. Over the past decade and at congressional direction, INL has investigated the use of mycoherbicides for both coca and opium eradication. The USG continues to research mycoherbicides.
- It is unknown whether mycoherbicides would jump species and thus destroy food crops.
- The effect on humans is as of yet undetermined. Some reputable researchers have claimed evidence of carcinogenic effects.

Myth No. 10: There is a single miracle crop that can easily replace poppy.

Fact:

It is incredibly difficult to match the value of opium poppy with a single legal crop, although it is critical that we provide sustainable agricultural alternatives to opium poppy in Afghanistan.

- USAID has reviewed several alternative crop suggestions including soy, cotton, sunflower, jathropa and others. There are isolated cases where, under certain conditions, the price of licit crops can equal that of poppy. However, the farm gate price of opium poppy can be manipulated to regulate supply by the small cartel of brokers, traders and narco-criminal networks that control opium processing and trafficking in Afghanistan.
- Crops with the greatest potential are the high value horticultural crops in which Afghanistan has traditionally enjoyed competitive advantage. These crops include, but are not limited to, grapes, almonds, pistachios, pomegranates, apricots, and melons.

Myth No. 11: Interdiction alone can solve the counternarcotics problem.

Fact:

While interdiction is a critical piece of the U.S. government's counternarcotics strategy in Afghanistan, it will not alone solve the drug problem. The U.S. government strategy provides a balanced, whole-of-government approach to targeting narcotics traffickers and drug lords, while enhancing our focus on agriculture, demand reduction, public information, interdiction and rule of law.