

# Why Afghanistan's opium trade may flourish under the Taliban

A field-based commentary from the province of Kandahar showcasing how successive droughts and financial hardship have pushed more farmers to start cultivating opium under the new Taliban regime.

---

## RETHINKING SECURITY IN THE 2020s SERIES – COMMENTARY

*By Wilson Fache – BIC Middle East Consultant*

"It's a small field. If it is well taken care of and the harvest is good, I hope to get two to three kilos of opium," Abdullah Mohammed told the BIC as he surveyed his land in Kandahar's Arghandab district.

Shortly after the Taliban returned to power, the 35-year-old farmer was left with no choice but to cut down his 220 cherry and apricot trees because they were not giving him any fruit due to the lack of water. Instead, he planted pomegranates as well as poppies - a plant used to produce opium which is then transformed into heroin before it floods the European market.

In the countryside, where more than two-thirds of Afghans live, the worst drought in 30 years has left farmers destitute and desperate, pushing more of them to turn to poppy cultivation, which is more water-efficient than most food crops.

With an opium production that has increased 30-fold in the past 20 years, Afghanistan became the world's largest producer of the coveted drug.<sup>1</sup>

"We know it's not right, but we have no choice. We have to provide for our family," said Abdullah Mohammed, a father of two. "This is the first time we have grown

---

<sup>1</sup> The Conversation, «Vingt ans de guerre à l'opium en Afghanistan: retour sur une déroute américaine», September 2021.

opium. Recently, our harvests were bad, so we had to find an alternative. And we are not the only ones. If you look over there, you can see that other farmers have started growing it too," he said, pointing to a field below the hill. In Kandahar, poppy cultivation occupies 5% of all agricultural land.

His father, Mohammed Wali, 60, has spent most of his life growing fruits. Turning to opium, he assured, was not an easy decision to make. "I never thought I would ever start producing drugs. I refused all my life, but now we have no choice if we want to be able to put food on the table," he explained.

For many years, opium brought lower profits per hectare than food crops. However, it offers greater financial security as it can be kept for longer and needs far less irrigation.

"If we had enough water, like before, our fruit trees could have earned us 150,000 Afghani a year (about \$1,500). But without water, it is impossible. It makes me very sad," Mohammed Wali said.

Overall, there was a 21% decrease in hectares of opium cultivation across the country in 2021 compared to 2020. However, because productivity was very high for the fifth year in a row, 6,800 tons of opium were produced from these areas – an 8% increase that could potentially make between 270 and 320 tons of pure heroin.<sup>2</sup>

The case of farmers switching from food crops to illicit substances since the Taliban seized power on August 15 has not yet been quantified and may very well be an epiphenomenon. It is however a worrying development at a time when the country is facing an almost unprecedented humanitarian crisis.

A survey by the United Nations World Food Program shows that an estimated 98% of Afghans are not eating enough, with 7 in 10 families resorting to borrowing food, which pushes them deeper into poverty.<sup>3</sup>

"Poppy cultivation means less land for other types of agriculture, such as food crops like wheat. Poppies are in direct competition with wheat. And that's very

---

<sup>2</sup> BIC interview with Anja Korenblik, the Head of the Illicit Crop Monitoring Program at UNODC, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, December 2021.

<sup>3</sup> Reuters, "Afghans face 'of hunger and destitution' - UN agency", December 2021.

unfortunate because there is now a food crisis in Afghanistan," said Anja Korenblik, the Head of the Illicit Crop Monitoring Program at UNODC, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime.

"On the one hand, you have people in rural areas who depend on opium cultivation, and who will probably continue because they need the money, and on the other hand, the country needs food and more wheat," she told the BIC.

The abrupt withdrawal of foreign aid following the Taliban victory has left Afghanistan's fragile economy on the brink of collapse, with prices for food rising rapidly out of reach for a large segment of the population.

On August 17, two days after their return to power, a Taliban spokesman declared that the opium trade would be banned under their new regime. But even supporters of the Islamist movement concede that the traffic is a matter of survival for many.

"From the point of view of Sharia, the opium trade is strictly forbidden. But we have no choice because we are facing a serious crisis," a pro-Taliban mullah (religious figure) told the BIC while standing at the edge of an opium field near the village of Hajji Makhadem. "So, sometimes it is necessary to cross the red line," he concluded.

In fact, the Taliban themselves seem to have backed down. The movement's spokesman, Zabihullah Mujahid, recently told the New York Times that the new government no longer plans to eradicate poppy cultivation. "Our people are going through an economic crisis and stopping people from their only means of income is not a good idea," he said, adding, however, that farmers were encouraged to "find alternatives."<sup>4</sup>

In fact, opium may represent a vital financial windfall for the insurgents-turned-rulers at a time when the country is going through a serious economic crisis and part of the national reserve has been frozen by the United States.

The Taliban had already profited during the war from the spoils of this traffic to finance their insurgency through a system of taxes. In 2016, half of their income came from this illicit trade.

---

<sup>4</sup> The New York Times, "In Hard Times, Afghan Farmers Are Turning to Opium for Security", November 2021.

Last year, the total value of opiates, including exports and domestic consumption, was between 9 and 14% of Afghanistan's GDP, which exceeded the value of the officially recorded licit export of goods and services, according to UNODC.

Some experts believe that the Taliban are neither able nor willing to rein down on opium production and trafficking, with one specialist telling the BIC that taxation has already increased since their return to power.

## About the BIC

The BIC is an independent, non-profit, think-and-do tank based in the capital of Europe that is committed to developing solutions to address the cyclical drivers of insecurity, economic fragility, and conflict the Middle East and North Africa. Our goal is to bring added value to the highest levels of political discourse by bringing systemic issues to the forefront of the conversation.

## Rethinking Security in the 2020s Series

This project takes critical aim at yesterday's approaches to security and defence, with a view towards developing proactive solutions to the evolving nature of insecurity and hybrid warfare. The series has three overarching themes, namely "New Geopolitical Landscape in the MENA Region", "Peacebuilding and Conflict Prevention" and "Transnational Challenges to Water and Energy"

## Author

Wilson Fache | BIC Middle East Consultant



 @BICBrussels  @bicrhr  BIC

 [www.bic-rhr.com](http://www.bic-rhr.com)  [info@bic-rhr.com](mailto:info@bic-rhr.com)

 Avenue Louise, 89 1050, Brussels, Belgium  Tel:+32 027258466