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U.S. Bombing of Afghan Drug Labs Won't Crush the Taliban

U.S. aerial bombing of drug laboratories in Afghanistan will solve neither the country's Taliban insurgency nor its drugs problem.

On 21 November, the U.S. military began major airstrikes against what it described as Taliban drug labs in the north of Helmand province of Afghanistan. Yet a coercive counter-narcotics campaign will solve neither the country's poppy boom nor the Taliban's profiting from it, which has long depended to an extraordinary extent on very local dynamics.

It is no secret that the Taliban bankrolls its operations in part by drug money, with estimates of its annual share of the multi-billion-dollar illicit drug economy ranging from tens to a few hundreds of millions of U.S. dollars. The staggering 87 per cent increase in Afghanistan's opium production in 2017, as reported by the United Nations Office for Drugs and Crime's (UNODC) this month, also means more profits for the Taliban.

But it would be naïve to say the Taliban is fighting because conflict helps it gain control over the profits of the drug trade, or that Afghanistan's drug production boom is because of the Taliban. The criminal economy thrives on weak state institutions, systemic corruption and poverty, while the insurgency represents, fundamentally, a political challenge. These are separate phenomena with distinct histories and different solutions.

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complete proscription of narcotics as un-Islamic in the past. Ironically, its willingness now to earn from the opium trade is part of its broader evolution that includes increasing pragmatism and the relaxing of some of its religious puritanism and cultural conservatism.

In summer 2000, when the Taliban ruled most of Afghanistan, the movement's late leader Mullah Omar issued a decree banning opium production and trade before the poppy cultivation season began. Even though this was not a formal *fatwa*, or religious ruling, stunned U.S. and UN officials reported from Afghanistan in the spring of 2001 that the Taliban had almost totally eliminated the cultivation of opium in the areas under its control. That year, Afghanistan's opium production hit rock bottom, in stark contrast to the preceding two decades, when the country had been one of the world's largest suppliers of illicit drugs. The UN described the ban as "one of the most remarkable successes ever" in the fight against narcotics.

The key to the ban's successful implementation was its religious justification, I have heard repeatedly during field work among Afghan farmers and Taliban officials who followed the eradication campaign in the east and south of

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the country, where opium cultivation was most widespread. For years, clerics had debated the religious status of drug production and trading, and half-heartedly attempted a gradual prohibition. Sceptics within the Taliban deemed the absence of a conclusive ruling on the issue as insufficient to deprive impoverished people of their major source of livelihood. But in the end, the Taliban built consensus among local community leaders that since the use of any addictive drug was *haram*, or forbidden in Islamic law, so were activities that brought drugs into use, including the cultivation, production and trafficking of narcotics.

Mullah Omar’s effective prohibition in 2000 came amid growing pressure on the Taliban regime from the international community. Yet, those who worked closely with him are adamant that he was not driven by external pressure or the desire to earn international recognition, like some other Taliban leaders. His intense personal conviction tilted the balance on the drugs issue, as it did on other controversial decisions that followed, including the destruction of the Buddha statues of Bamiyan and the Taliban’s refusal to deport Osama Bin Laden. In any event, the Taliban felt its successful ban on drugs was unappreciated by the international community.

Opium cultivation resumed as soon as the Taliban regime fell. When the movement returned in the form of insurgency in 2003 in the opium heartland, it was limited in scale and could raise funds to sustain itself by capitalising on the anxiety about a long-term U.S. presence among Afghanistan’s neighbours and anti-Americanism in the Persian Gulf countries. As the insurgency grew larger, it needed more funds. The Taliban had to mobilize revenues domestically, including from poppy production, especially after the drawdown of international

troops and the strengthening of the Islamic State (ISIS) in 2014 diverted the attention of its Gulf-based backers. Local commanders who took control of territories where opium production and trade were booming could not resist the lucrative business.

The decision to use poppy money to advance jihad is endorsed by some prominent Taliban clerics. Some argue that circumstances, specifically the “American occupation”, make it permissible, since defeating the greater evil requires embracing the lesser evil of drug money. Another rationalisation is that since the Taliban does not officially rule the country, it has neither the responsibility nor the ability to stop drug production or trading, which cuts across government and insurgency-controlled areas. If it cannot be stopped totally, the argument goes, why should the Taliban deny people under its control a profitable livelihood and risk losing support for its jihad. Also at work is a tacit logic that these drugs mainly harm infidels, and as long as infidels occupy Afghanistan or support the occupation, the Taliban need not care about their lives.

Despite these justifications, the Taliban’s embrace of the drug trade is limited both horizontally, with a small minority secretly involved in it, and vertically, since the involvement is mainly taxing, rather than running or controlling the trade. A small number of commanders in major opium hubs are involved in all stages of the drug trade. But there is no systemic involvement. The group is not the only player in this business, narcotics are not the Taliban’s institutionalized business, and without drug money, the movement would not fall apart.

The bulk of the Taliban – fighters, and commanders in non-poppy growing areas as well as leaders who do not deal with finances – are in the dark about the movement’s relationship to

drugs. No one asks how the fighting is funded, and the finance chiefs and those who collect drug-related incomes try to keep the opium returns secret, since involvement with drugs is still ideologically unacceptable for many members. The rank and file dismiss as lies reports about Taliban participation in the drug trade that appear in Afghan and international media and in propaganda by the Islamic State group.

Nevertheless, the Taliban profits from the drug trade and in doing so opens itself to the charge of being profit-driven, rather than motivated by a political vision. Some Taliban leaders understand the negative impression this creates in the international arena. In November last year, the Taliban's political emissaries in Qatar sent a message to the international community through independent Afghan political activists: if the government imposes a ban on drugs in its own areas, they said, the Taliban would return to a complete prohibition.

Aerial bombing is a deadly new turn in coercive counter-narcotics operations. U.S. officials have hailed it as an effective element of the new U.S. strategy in Afghanistan and South Asia, part of a multi-pronged approach in fighting the insurgency. They claim the airstrikes have already had an impact on the Taliban, something that is difficult to measure on ground independently. It is also unlikely to weaken the Taliban financially, not least because its sources of funding are so diverse. The bombing campaign is much more likely to benefit the movement in other ways. This is because most drug

labs being targeted are the primary livelihood of ordinary people, and are usually located in populated areas. Destroying them with no provision for alternative sources of income, and the probable killing of civilians in the process, will increase popular support for the Taliban. Accounts from areas affected by the bombing already indicate the airstrikes have mainly hurt civilians and their livelihoods rather than the Taliban.

The aerial bombing is also not going to help neutralise Afghanistan's opium boom. Soaring opium production is largely a symptom of rampant corruption on the state side, and the failure of the Afghan government and its international backers to give farmers viable new ways of earning a living. Corrupt government officials and pro-state elite have long participated in the opium economy on a greater scale than any non-state actor.

The transformative reforms needed to tackle these challenges can only come through resolving the insurgency, which in turn can only be resolved through a political settlement. Dismissing the Taliban as a drug-running, criminal enterprise is not the answer. The group stands for a cause that has a popular resonance in non-marginal segments of society, and it is these genuine constituencies and popular roots that account for its continued survival, not the opium boom.