



# STIRRING UP THE HORNET'S NEST:

How the Population of Rural Helmand view the current Counterinsurgency Campaign

David Mansfield  
October 2018



Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit

Issues Paper

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International - Social

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This report would not be possible without the hard work of colleagues at the Organisation for Sustainable Research and Development who continue to conduct fieldwork under increasingly difficult circumstances. The dedication of the team in Kabul and colleagues in the field is commendable.

The value of the geospatial support of the team at Alcis Ltd—in particular Richard Brittan, Matt Angell and Madeline Alston—cannot be overestimated. The mapping and geospatial products that they provide are not only visual displays of the research findings; they are a fundamental part of the diagnostic work used to identify appropriate research sites and further explore the results of data collection on the ground. While data collected through both remote sensing and ground surveys offer valuable insights on current developments in rural Afghanistan, integrating the two methods throughout the entire research cycle has yielded far more information about why particular events occur.

Further thanks go to a group of esteemed colleagues for their comments on earlier drafts of this report. They are (in alphabetical order) Sultan Mohammed Ahmadi, Matt Bentrutt, Richard Brittan, Bill Byrd, Anthony Fitzherbert, Paul Fishstein and Ghulam Rasool. The time they put into this task and their insights are very much appreciated; the work would not be the same without their valuable input. Thanks also go to the publishing team at AREU for their patience and skills in editing and making this an easier read than when they first received it. Needless to say, any mistakes made in the final report are those of the authors.

Finally, thanks go to the European Union for their continued support for longitudinal analytical work on the role of opium poppy in rural livelihood strategies in Afghanistan. Without the funding and moral support they provide for this work, our understanding of the different socioeconomic, political and environmental factors that shape the multiple realities in rural Afghanistan, and the impact of these factors on levels of opium poppy cultivation, would be severely constrained. We would then be left with the kind of simplistic quantitative data and metrics that all too often shape the drugs policy debate in Afghanistan and other source countries.

## FOREWORD

AREU is grateful to our researchers and partners for their tireless work and dedication—in a challenging environment—to studying a phenomenon that is considered a hindering factor threatening the lives of Afghan people as well as providing them with short-term livelihoods.

We are thankful to the European Union for their continuous support of our research on Natural Resources Management (NRM).

With the change of administration in the United States, a new counter-insurgency strategy has emerged for Afghanistan. A “population-centered” approach focusing on “winning hearts and minds” has been replaced by a more aggressive military approach against insurgent forces and their financiers. This strategy is highly ostensible in Central Helmand, where the Afghan government and the US military heavily rely on aerial raids to decimate the heroin labs they hold responsible for funding the insurgency.

Dr. Mansfield’s paper provides invaluable insight into how the joint counterinsurgency campaign of the Afghan government and US military is perceived by the population of Central Helmand. It illustrates how the strategy has proven to be counterproductive and has garnered animosity from the majority of the population in the area and also led to an upsurge in violence. Dr. Mansfield includes recommendations that would help alleviate the negative sentiments towards the government and the US military as well address opium poppy eradication in a sustainable manner.

Stirring Up the Hornet’s Nest, like other works from Dr. Mansfield, is critical to our understanding of the impact of opium poppy production in Afghanistan. The findings shared in this paper can bring much needed insight to development workers, civil society, and the Afghan government on this subject matter and help shape future efforts. We hope this study will serve as an in-depth analysis of the situation in Central Helmand province, providing a timely contribution while the annual poppy cultivation report by UNODC will be on its way in the upcoming weeks.



Dr. Orzala Nemat  
Director, AREU.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Mansfield is a Senior Fellow at the London School of Economics. He has been conducting research on rural livelihoods and poppy cultivation in Afghanistan for twenty one consecutive growing seasons. He has a PhD in development studies from the School of Oriental and African Studies, London and is the author of *A State Built on Sand: How opium undermined Afghanistan*. David has worked for AREU since 2005.

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

A central tenet of US counter-insurgency during the Bush and Obama administrations was “winning the hearts and minds” of the population. This was termed a “population-centred” approach and was informed by a strategy of “clear, hold and build,” in which coalition and Afghan forces would clear insurgents from a given territory, then hold it while their influence was mitigated, and invest in the development and governance of the area. The assumption was that such a strategy would gain the support of the population.

Between 2008 and 2012, Helmand province was a focal point for just such a population-centred counter-insurgency effort. It was estimated that between 2009 and 2011, more than US\$648 million<sup>1</sup> was spent in the province in tandem with an inflow of over 20,000 US marines, as well as UK, Danish, and Afghan military forces.<sup>2</sup> As early as late 2009, the district of Nawa Barakzai, just south of the provincial capital of Lashkar Gah, became an emblem of counter-insurgency efforts and cited as an exemplar of the merits of “putting the population first.”<sup>3</sup> The approach was then replicated in the neighbouring districts of Nad e Ali and Marjah when over 3,000 US marines, 1,200 soldiers from the UK and 4,400 Afghan forces deployed under Operation Moshtarak in February 2010,<sup>4</sup> while millions of dollars were spent on physical and social infrastructure.

Levels of violence declined,<sup>5</sup> but any gains were short-lived following the departure of international military forces in the summer of 2014, which diminished the mobility of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF). Development investments in central Helmand also dwindled along with the associated donor funds. By the fall of 2016, the insurgency had once again made major inroads, ANDSF had abandoned security checkpoints in Nad e Ali, Marjah and Nawa Barakzai and there were few rural development projects.

In the wake of the Trump administration’s debates over the future of US assistance to Afghanistan, a new counter-insurgency strategy—the South Asia Policy—came into play. Armed with a change in presidential authorities that supported a more aggressive military position against insurgent forces and those believed to be financing them,<sup>6</sup> the United States Forces Afghanistan (USFOR-A), in the words of its commander General Nicholson, would take “the fight to the enemy in all its dimensions.”<sup>7</sup>

This paper documents how this new strategy is perceived by the rural population of central Helmand, both in the canal-irrigated areas of Marjah, Nawa Barakzai, Nahre Seraj and Nad Ali and in the former desert areas north of the Boghra canal. It is based on the results of fieldwork in rural Helmand in May 2018 and high-resolution imagery. The paper emphasises how, by the turn of 2018, central Helmand was once again a battleground in which the population was not the prize—to coin the phrase used by proponents of population-centric counterinsurgency—but the perceived victims of a campaign of protracted violence that many farmers believe is at the behest of US and Afghan military forces. The paper also suggests that antagonism toward the government and the uptick in violence were exacerbated by a campaign of air

1 Upper Quartile, “Counternarcotics and Alternative Livelihoods Assessment” (unpublished report by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 2011, page 13).

2 Special Inspector General Afghanistan Research, “Stabilization: Lessons from the Afghanistan Experience,” 2018 [May 2018], 177. <https://www.sigar.mil/interactive-reports/stabilization/index.html>. Accessed 11 September 2018.

3 Special Inspector General Afghanistan Research, “Stabilization: Lessons from the Afghanistan Experience,” 29-30.

4 Theo Farrell, *Unwinnable: Britain’s War in Afghanistan, 2011-2014* (London: Penguin Random House), 310.

5 Special Inspector General Afghanistan Research, “Stabilization: Lessons from the Afghanistan Experience,” 176; Farrell, *Unwinnable*, 325.

6 C. Thomas, “Afghanistan Background and US Policy in Brief” (Congressional Research Report R45122, June 2018, Congressional Research Service) 10.

7 Department of Defense Press Briefing by General Nicholson via teleconference from Kabul, Afghanistan, Press Operations, General John W. Nicholson Jr., commander, Resolute Support and U.S. Forces Afghanistan, 20 November 2017. <https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript-View/Article/1377753/departement-of-defense-press-briefing-by-general-nicholson-via-teleconference-fr/>

strikes targeting heroin labs, a dramatic downturn in opium prices and a worsening economic situation. The allegations of corruption frequently levelled at Afghan officials and security forces without any notable investments in physical or social infrastructure only serve to further alienate the rural population from a government that is thought to only “fill its own pockets.” The paper concludes that, in this environment, the US and Afghan government forces may be able to clear parts of central Helmand of insurgent forces, and even hold the area for a time, but there is little to suggest this strategy will win the support of the population. Finally, recommendations are offered.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

The paper is based on in-depth fieldwork and high-resolution imagery undertaken in April and May 2018 in 20 research sites in central Helmand. In total, 362 interviews were conducted with rural households: 180 interviews in 12 research sites within the canal-irrigated area of central Helmand, 120 interviews in seven research sites to the north of the Boghra canal and a further 52 interviews with women who resided in former desert areas (see Figure 1). Supplementary data were also collected from those selling goods and services to these communities, including traders in herbicides, solar panels and diesel. This paper also draws on a body of fieldwork in these same research sites dating back to 2008.<sup>8</sup>

High-resolution, remote sensing imagery was integral to the research. Geospatial data identified research sites based on their histories of poppy cultivation, crop destruction and development assistance, including wheat seed and fertiliser provided under the Helmand Food Zone initiative, a counter-narcotics intervention in the canal-irrigated area of central Helmand province that combined eradication, public information and agricultural inputs. To capture how responses to the Food Zone vary by location, socioeconomic group and resource endowments, geospatial data on vegetative index, proximity to markets and cropping seasons were also used in the selection of research sites.

Remote sensing imagery was then used to verify that fieldworkers had been to the identified sites and to examine the primary data. The high-resolution imagery allowed further exploration of primary research findings: identification of crops under cultivation and of new or damaged physical infrastructure, and measurement of changes in the area. Finally, geospatial analysis supported the extrapolation of research findings over a wider geographic range beyond the research sites themselves.

A local team that has a deep knowledge of the area and has worked closely with the lead researcher and author for more than a decade conducted the fieldwork. To circumvent the inherent problems associated with researching an illegal or underground activity, the research focused on household livelihood strategies. Pressure on the Afghan government to act against opium cultivation and trade has made illicit drugs a more sensitive discussion topic with farmers and other stakeholders than was the case in the 1990s and early 2000s. However, the rural household remains the most accessible unit of analysis when looking at the national opium economy as it offers a basis for cross-referencing findings both with other work on rural livelihoods, and with other research on the specific role of opium production in Afghanistan and elsewhere.

Discussions in the field focused on the direct experience of respondents and their households rather than on events or phenomena over a wider geographic area, where answers become increasingly speculative.<sup>9</sup> Individual interviews with farming households were conducted in the field as farmers tended their crops, since holding interviews in the household compound can become subject to interruptions and biases. Group discussions with farmers were avoided, as they tend to be dominated by community elites, are inappropriate for sensitive issues and increasingly represent a security threat in rural Afghanistan, particularly in the south.

8 This body of historical data consists of a total of 3,760 individual interviews that were conducted every 6 months over 7 consecutive years and which, by May 2011, came to cover 28 distinct research sites, including eight in the desert area to the north of the Boghra canal. The first round of fieldwork was conducted in November/December 2007 (N 42), but covered only seven sites; the second round in November/December 2008 (N99) covered ten sites; the third round in November/December 2009 (N112) covered 11 sites; the fourth round in April/May 2010 (N 87) covered 11 sites; and the fifth round in November/December 2010 (N 360) covered 23 sites. From the sixth round in April/May 2011 (N 447) until November 2013, 28 sites were covered. The seventh round was in November/December 2011 (N 373); the eighth round was in April/May 2012 (N 462); the ninth round was in November/December 2012 (N 404); the tenth round was in April/May 2013 (N 462); the eleventh round was in November 2013 (N 472); the twelfth round of fieldwork consisted of 140 in-depth interviews conducted in ten sites in May 2015. The final round of fieldwork was conducted in April/May 2017 and consisted of 300 interviews, 180 of which were undertaken in 12 research sites within the Helmand Food Zone, and 120 of which were undertaken in 8 research sites to the north of the Boghra canal.

9 "Farming Systems of Nad Ali District, Helmand Province," in *Agricultural Survey of Afghanistan, Report 15* (Peshawar: Swedish Committee for Afghanistan, 1992), 1.

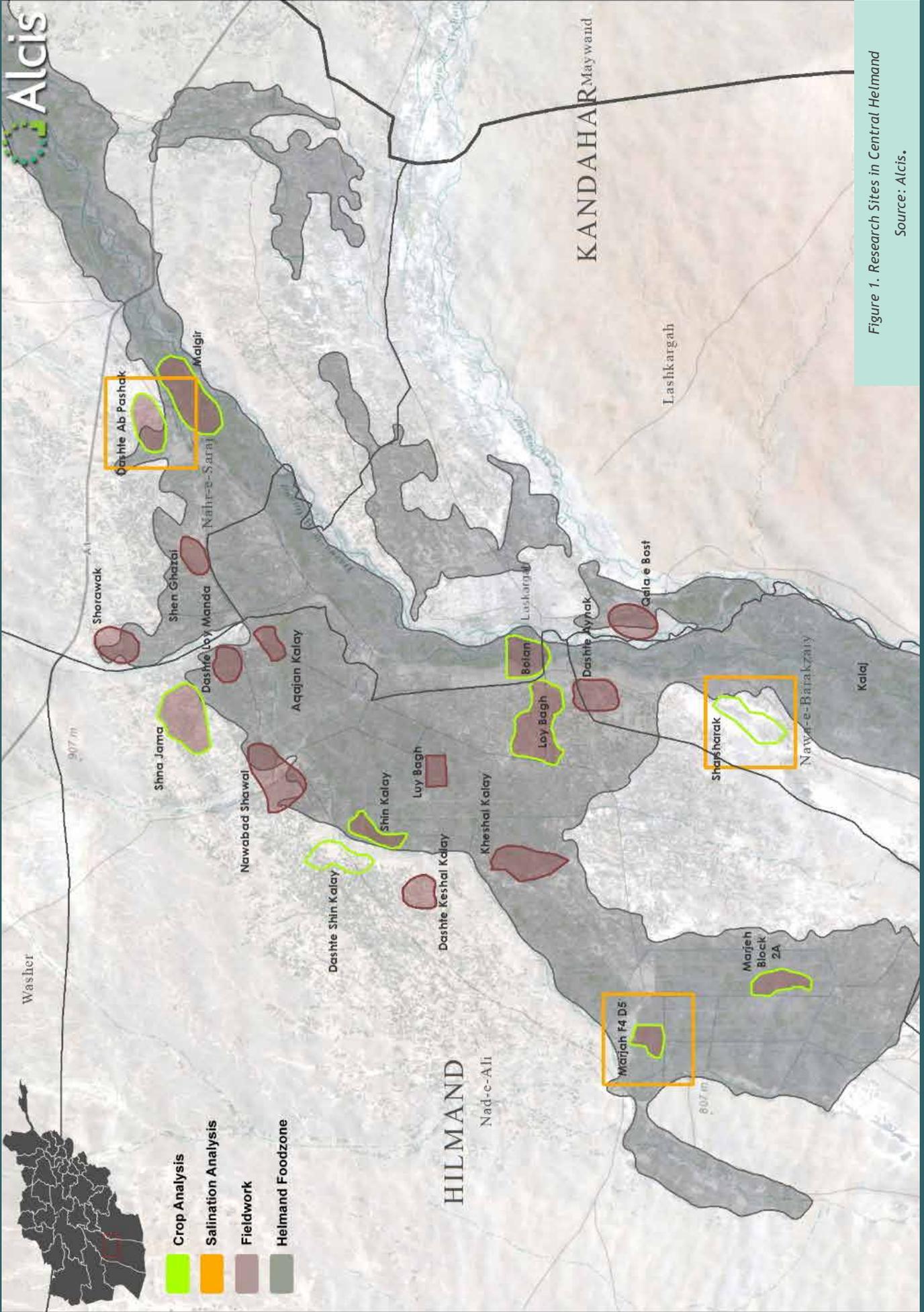


Figure 1. Research Sites in Central Helmand  
Source: Alcis.

### 3. REPORTS OF RISING LEVELS OF VIOLENCE

The most telling evidence of the battlefield in Helmand and its impact on civilian life is the amount of agricultural land that lays untouched. In the past, there was evidence of land left uncultivated due to fighting around the district centre of Marjah in 2016 and 2017. That winter cropping season, more land was abandoned following government incursions into Nad e Ali in April 2017 and an attempt to wrest back control of the area around the district centre. The fighting was such that farmers around the military base in Shawqat near Luy Bagh left over 400 hectares of poppy crop unharvested rather than risk going to the field (see Figure 2). Some farmers reported that family members were shot and injured while tending their crop.

But this was just a prelude. In the fall of 2017, with Afghan government forces holding the road and the district centre in Nad e Ali, and the Taliban entrenched in the countryside, the land around key infrastructure in the district became a battleground. Caught in the crossfire between opposing fighting forces, farmers had little choice but to abandon their land over the winter and seek sanctuary elsewhere. This trend was particularly pronounced around Luy Bagh, where more than 1,000 hectares were left with no crop over the winter season (see Figure 2). Those with resources fled to the provincial centre, Lashkar Gah, while others sought refuge with relatives in the area and in neighbouring villages, hoping the conflict would not spread. Some went to the former desert land north of the Boghra, conscious of the Taliban's dominance over the area. Once there, farmers believed the "government of the Taliban" offered protection for both the population and their opium crop.

Although the former desert area did not prove quite the sanctuary farmers had hoped for, it remained far more peaceful than the contested area. In parts of the canal-irrigated area—areas such as Luy Bagh, Shin Kalay and Koshal Kalay, where the government had mounted operations in the early part of 2018—the reports of injuries and deaths were particularly high. For example, one farmer in Nad e Ali reported that his daughter was shot and killed after the police opened fire as he drove past a checkpoint while travelling between Luy Bagh and Chanjir. The police insisted the girl was still alive and ordered the man to drive her to the hospital in Lashkar Gah; they would not let the man return to his village under any circumstances. Knowing his daughter was already dead, the man drove to Lashkar Gah and slept in his car next to her body, only returning to his village the next day to bury her.

Others also reported the death of a family member due to the fighting and the hardship that followed.<sup>10</sup> The death of a brother, a son, a wife—all caught in the crossfire caused by the dramatic uptick in violence in central Helmand. The economic impact on the household was immediate—the cost of a burial, the loss of a working family member and the associated wage—and, in the cases where a brother was killed, a dramatic increase in the number of dependent women and children. The emotional effects are far harder to quantify and more long-term. The most common reaction was frustration and anger, generally levelled at both sides in the conflict, but with the greatest opprobrium for government forces.

In this environment, allegiances were fluid and pragmatic: "There is no difference to me between the Taliban and the government. But if we have just one of them in the area it is better; if we have both, there is fighting."<sup>11</sup> Most people just wanted security and were indifferent as to who provided it; as a farmer in Koshal Kalay exclaimed, "If the government is not able to bring security to an area they should leave the government to the Taliban; then the fighting will finish and the corruption will finish."<sup>12</sup> There certainly appeared to be little to engender government support since services were limited, allegations of corruption were rife and levels of insecurity were such that parents feared sending their children to school or going to the local clinic, even in places like Marjah 2A, an area that surrounds the district centre. On the perimeter of the canal command area in the district of Nad e Ali, the ANDSF's efforts to wrest control of Nawabad Shawal bazaar from

10 In total, 12 respondents reported deaths in their family due to fighting over the last 12 months. Most were in the former desert areas, either north of the Boghra canal or in Dashte Aynak or Dashte Shersherak.

11 Interview, Koshal Kalay #6

12 Interview, Luy Bagh #5



# Abandoned Agriculture

Luy Bagh, Nad-e Ali

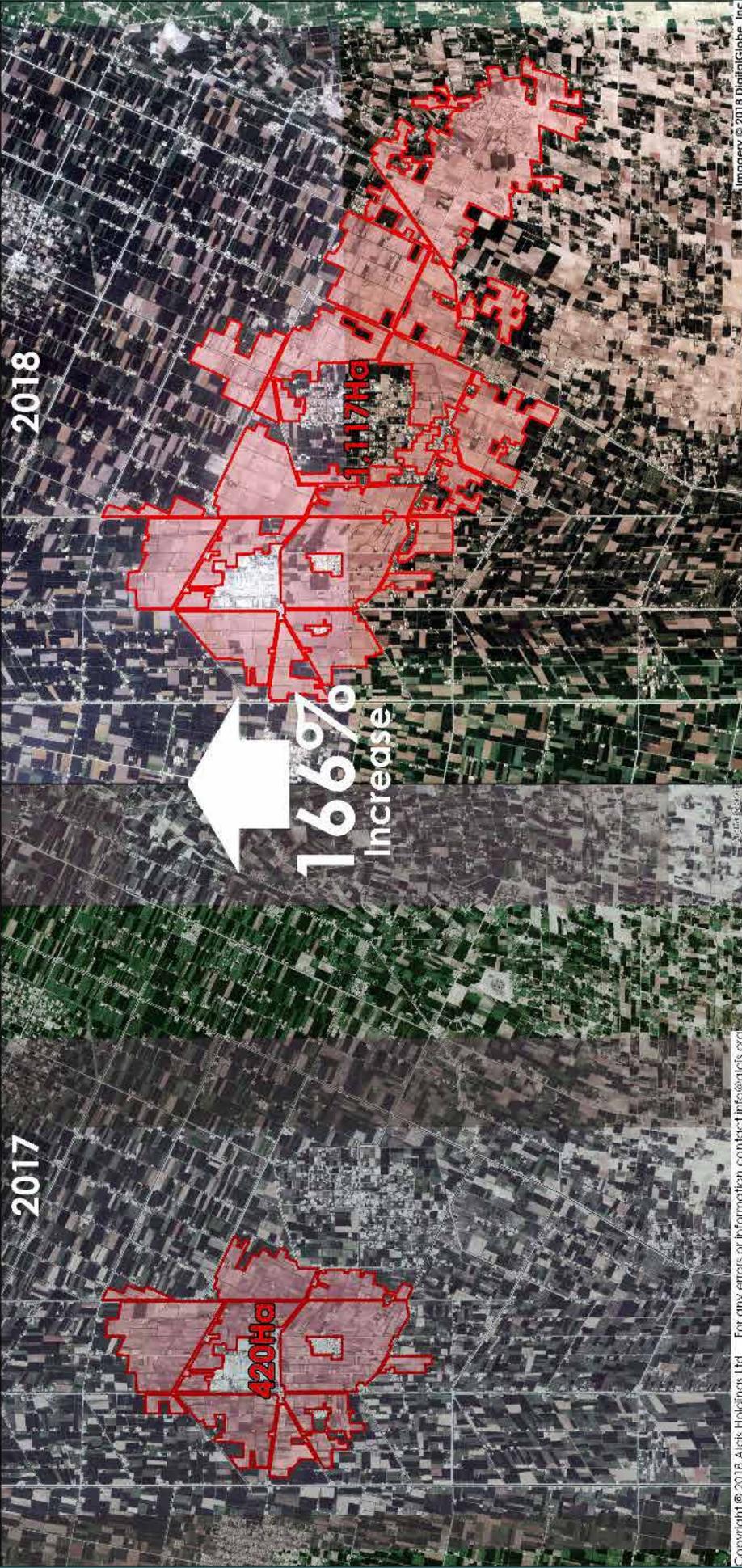


Figure 2. The Amount of Abandoned Land in Luy Bagh, Nad e Ali, 2017 and 2018.

Source: Alcis.

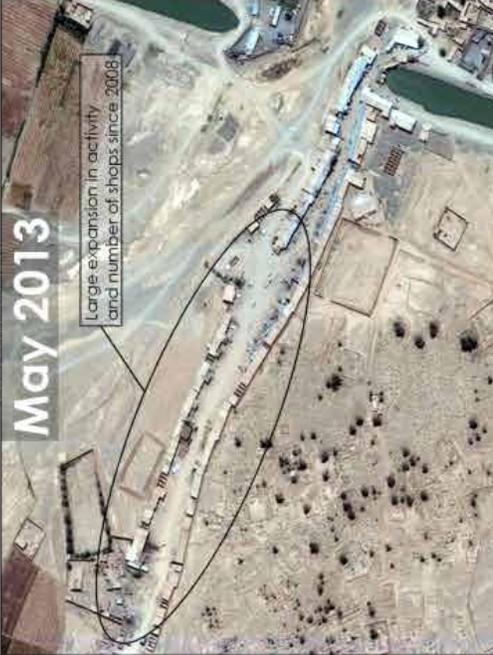


# NAWABAD SHAWAL BAZAAR

Nad-e-Ali  
Helmand



April 2008



May 2013

Large expansion in activity and number of shops since 2008



February 2018

Steady amount of trade since 2013

Small number of new shops



March 2018

Reduced bazaar activity from normal seasonal levels



April 2018

Further decreases in activity



July 2018

Bazaar abandoned

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Figure 3. The Expansion and Closure of Nawabad Shawal Bazaar, Nad e Ali, 2008-2018

Source: Alcis.

# Abandoned Agriculture

Marjah Block 2A, Nad-e Ali

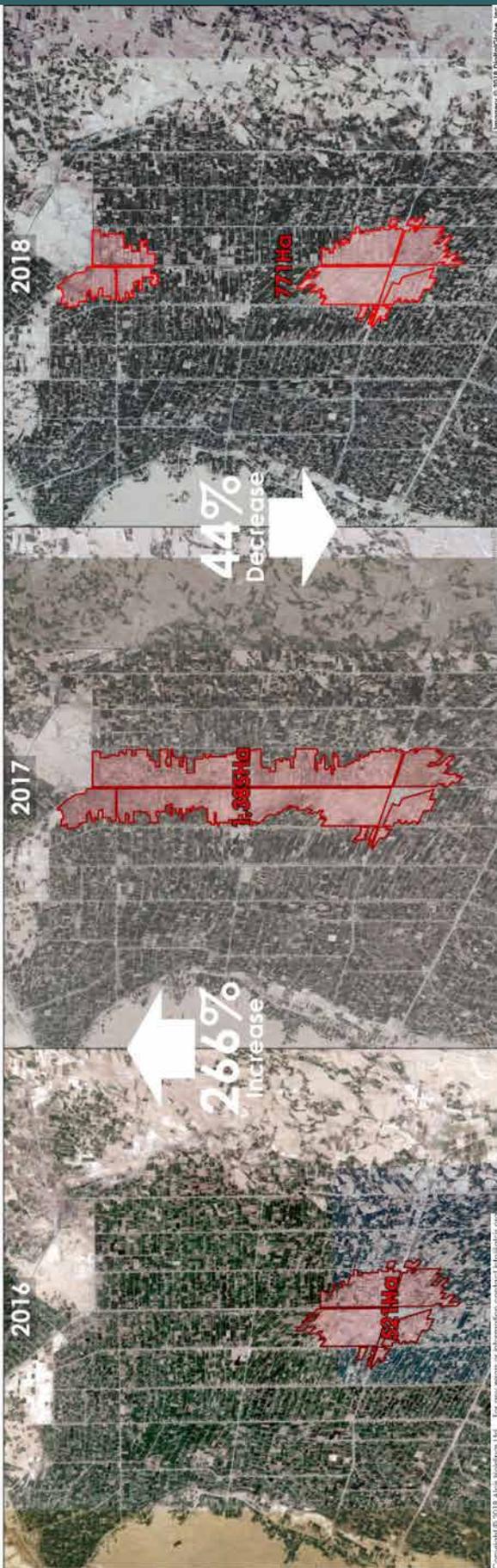


Figure 4. The Amount of Abandoned Land in Marjah, 2016-2018.

Source: Alcis.

the Taliban in March 2018 was reported to have led to the death of 27 soldiers and the closure of what had been a major economic hub in the area (see Figure 3).

Much of the anger expressed toward the government was due to what was perceived as its inability to hold an area and maintain security. Many of those bordering the Boghra in western Nad e Ali, in areas such as Koshal Kalay and Shin Kalay, were particularly incensed, accusing the government forces of abandoning them in late 2016. There were even allegations that the police received payments from the Taliban to do so and were cooperating with them. As a respondent in Shin Kalay claimed: “The government and Taliban are the same—they support each other. Sometimes the government leaves the checkpoint to the Taliban; sometimes the Taliban leaves the checkpoint to the government. Both kill the local people.”<sup>13</sup> This sense of betrayal at the hand of government forces, and the possibilities that it might happen again due to their perceived weakness and the behaviour of the local police, prevailed in most of the canal-irrigated area, with the exception of Qala Bost and Bolan—both areas in close proximity to Lashkar Gah.<sup>14</sup>

In the district of Marjah, in sites 2A and F4-D5, there was even relief that government forces had been contained by the Taliban and found themselves confined to the district centre over the winter of 2018. There was also clear evidence of the impact that this had on livelihoods, with a dramatic reduction in the amount of abandoned land, falling from 1,385 hectares over the winter season in 2017 to 771 hectares in 2018 (see Figure 4). As a farmer in Marjah 2A argued, “When the government was not here, there was no fighting; when they arrived here, the fighting started.”<sup>15</sup> In the wake of the reported number of deaths due to fighting, including one that a respondent farmer claimed was due to “bombing by the US,”<sup>16</sup> it is perhaps not a surprise that there is a widespread view among those interviewed in Marjah that “the [the Taliban]<sup>17</sup> have power here and have improved security.”<sup>18</sup>

13 Interview, Shin Kalay #9

14 “The murgadag government doesn’t work for the people. They escape to Lashkar Gah and leave the people. Then the Taliban come and kill the people. Now the Arbaki is here. They are worse than the Taliban.” Interview, Koshal Kalay #3

15 Interview, Marjah 2A #5.

16 Interview, Marjah F4D5 #4

17 At the time, the interviewee referred to the *mujahiddin*, a common term used for the Taliban in the southwest.

18 Interview, Marjah F4D5 #15

## 4. WHERE ARE THE GOOD GUYS?

The aerial strikes against heroin labs further stirred the pot in Helmand. Launched on 19 November with much fanfare from General Nicholson, Commander of USFOR-A and NATO's Resolute Support Mission, these strikes had allegedly destroyed 200 laboratories by 8 August 2018.<sup>19</sup> US military officials claimed that by April 2018 air strikes had led to losses of "tens of millions of dollars for the Taliban."<sup>20</sup> By August 2018, these estimates were updated and it was reported that the "air campaign had wiped out about \$46 million in Taliban revenue."<sup>21</sup>

However, farmers in Helmand view this campaign quite differently and see it as further evidence of a campaign of violence waged against them. They do not recognise the claims of "a narco-insurgency," or the suggestion that the drugs business is somehow the insurgency's primary objective, as suggested by a US special operations commander in Afghanistan.<sup>22</sup>

Farmers recognize the relationships between the insurgency and opium in much the same way they see the government's involvement with the drugs trade. The rural population of Helmand has direct experience with the taxes that they are expected to pay on the opium crop to the local Taliban commanders, but it is nothing like the figures cited by officials or in the media. They are also aware of taxes on the transit of opium through the area and on heroin production, but the rates are broadly in line with those that are also imposed on wheat production and diesel fuel, at around 1 percent of value. Farmers are also accustomed to the Afghan local police taxing opium when they hold sway over an area. For example, after Koshal Kalay and Shin Kalay fell to the government following its operation in the first few months of 2018, farmers paid around a tax of Pakistani Rs 2,000 per *jerib* (the equivalent of US\$16) of opium to the police, a rate commensurate with what the Taliban charged.

The rural population is also far too familiar with the more predatory and punitive rent seeking of government forces. In April 2018, for instance, farmers north of the Boghra stretching the 22 kilometres from Dasht e Ab Pashak to Dasht e Loy Manda reported that they were subject to a campaign of looting by police from Gereshk (see Figure 1 for locations). Halfway through the opium harvest as farmers' coffers were being filled, the police are alleged to have gone door to door seizing opium. One farmer claimed he lost nearly 50 kilograms of opium during this campaign. He could not hide his disdain for the government forces and the local strongman, a member of the national assembly named Moallem Mir Wali, who many believed was behind the campaign. As one respondent stated: "the *chawarki* (authorities) came and took 11 *man*<sup>23</sup> of opium from my house; the son of the kafir just arrived here to steal. This is no government, they are thieves; they only come here for looting."<sup>24</sup> Another farmer in the same village complained "the operation arrived and took opium from the people. People say Moallem Mir Wali said [to the Police] 'please go to the dasht and loot the people.'"<sup>25</sup>

Some farmers alleged that were it not for the presence of the Afghan National Army, they too would have been robbed. While the Taliban disrupted the raids after a few days, it was not until the elders of Dasht e Ab Pashak arranged to make payments of Rs 4,000 (the equivalent of US\$ 32) for each tubewell that the campaign finally came to a close.

19 Don Nissenbaum, "Months of US strikes have failed to curtail Taliban opium trade: The effort to put pressure on the insurgency in Afghanistan hasn't crippled a major source of the groups revenue" *Wall Street Journal*, 8 August 2018.

20 Resolute Support, "379 air expeditionary force wing bombers strike Taliban drug facilities", 28 May 2018.

21 Nissenbaum, "Months of US strikes..."

22 Michael Philips, "US attacks Taliban's source of funds in Afghanistan", *Wall Street Journal*, 30 May 2018.

23 A *man* is an Afghan unit of weight. In Helmand, one *man* is the equivalent of 4.5 kilograms.

24 Interview, Dasht e Loy Manda #9

25 Interview, Dasht e Loy Manda #8

## 5. BOMBING LABS OR WHACKING MOLES?

While to western observers the word laboratory may conjure up images of a clinical environment, in Helmand, labs, or “factories” as they are referred to locally, consist of little more than a compound wall, a small living quarters and a “lean-to,” or *bandara*. Even the equipment is basic: a supply of old 200-litre metal barrels previously used for diesel, a collection of metal and plastic bowls, a press and, in the more technologically advanced set up, several gas burners for heating the barrels.

There are many of these factories; perhaps a building that previously housed a sharecropper or tenant farmer, a compound abandoned after the owner moved up the property ladder and built a better house next door, or sometimes a building constructed for the sole purpose of heroin production. While there is local antipathy to labs being located in urban areas—something the Taliban is reported to have moved against<sup>26</sup>—farmers report that they litter the countryside in Helmand in such numbers that the strikes have little effect on the amount of heroin produced. As one farmer north of the Boghra in Dashte Loy Manda exclaimed: “There are many factories everywhere. When one factory is bombed, there are another 1,000 present. This campaign will not have any benefit for the government.”<sup>27</sup> Most question the efficacy of the campaign given the loss of capital to the lab owners being minimal.

The labs are also largely seen as independently owned, low-technology “mom and pop”-type establishments that can be found in a relative or neighbour’s household compound. Locally, nearly everyone knows in which compound heroin is produced, but there is deep suspicion over the actual purpose of the lab strikes, particularly given the doubts many farmers have over the government and USFOR-A’s claims of a narco-insurgency. For many of those interviewed, the aerial strikes were further evidence of a government whose priorities are not aligned with their own, but are influenced by the interests of an international community more concerned about drug use in their own countries.

Farmers north of the Boghra were vitriolic,<sup>28</sup> claiming that they were subject to frequent air attacks by US and Afghan forces. The lab strikes were not seen as undermining the funding of the Taliban, but rather leading to a worsening security situation and posing a direct threat to the local population. There were reports of civilian casualties from the lab strikes, most notably in Musa Qala district centre during the initial days of the campaign (see Figure 5).<sup>29</sup> Within an environment in which there is both a rise in the number of injuries and deaths among civilians due to the uptick in fighting, and where opium production is elemental to the local economy, the air strikes on heroin labs are perceived as part of a wider campaign of violence against the rural population.

26 M. Barker, and S. Yousafzai, “Taliban commander orders closure of opium labs in towns and cities” *The Guardian*, 28 May 2018.

27 Interview, Dasht e Loya Manda #4

28 “This is the government of the Kafir. By the name of factory, they destroy the houses of the people” (Interview, Dasht e Shurawak #2); “I f\*\*k the wife of the factory. Each day a lot of people in Helmand are killed and the government never asks who they are, they just look for the factory.” (Interview, Dasht e Shin Kalay #8); “The foreigners bomb the factory in Musa Qala and Nawzad. It has no effect on me. I f\*\*k their mother! If they are strong they will capture the district and bring security to the people, but all the districts are in the control of the Taliban.” (Interview, Dasht e Shin Kalay #3); “F\*\*\* the mother of the government! They start the bombing (of the factories) with no benefit. Allah will move the foreigners from the country. All these problems are created by them.” (Interview, Shna Jama #7); “The US destroyed only two factories in Musa Qala; it has no effect on poppy. There is more poppy this year than last year and next year I will cultivate again. With this operation we are most opposite with the government as they destroy the houses of the people.” (Interview, Shna Jama #1)

29 Interview, Dasht e Shin Kalay #1 “The foreigners by the name of the factory destroy the houses of local people. They killed one entire family. We are most upset with this operation.”



## 52\_Strike\_2

Figure 5. A Still from USFOR-A Video Showing an Air Strike against what is alleged to be a Heroin Lab in Musa Qala.

Source: Department of Defence News.<sup>1</sup>

1. Screengrab from Department of Defence News, "Resolute Support Commander Updates Reporters on Afghanistan Operations", 20 November 2017,

## 6. AND TO MAKE MATTERS WORSE

While farmers dismissed the idea that the lab strikes had an impact on heroin production and insurgent funding, they did talk of the campaign's effect on the wider economy. One issue was that the labs provide local employment, but of greatest importance to farmers was the recognition that these “factories”, as they are referred to locally, were the primary purchaser of the opium that so many farmers in central Helmand depend upon for their livelihood.

In early to mid-May 2018, opium prices all but collapsed. Whereas farmers had sold their opium for Rs 45,000 to 72,000 per *man* (the equivalent of \$84 to \$135 per kilogram) during the preceding 12 months, prices in the canal-irrigated area had fallen to as low as Rs 16,000 per *man* (the equivalent of only \$30 per kilogram) following the 2018 harvest. Even in the former desert areas of Helmand where there is a premium stemming from the lower moisture content of the opium, the price in May 2018 was only selling at up to Rs 25,000 per *man* (the equivalent of \$47 per kilogram), significantly lower than in 2017, where prices of up to Rs 90,000 per *man* (the equivalent of \$169 per kilogram) had been paid to farmers.

A fall in opium prices is common during the immediate harvest period, and is largely a function of the market trying to find an equilibrium at a time when the scale of production remains unknown due to variances in the amount of land cultivated, and the yield and the quality of the opium produced, all of which may vary significantly over a small area and over time due to the staggered nature of the harvest season. Price data collected on only a monthly basis rarely reflect these fluctuations, particularly when they do not differentiate for the quality of opium and its source (see Figure 6). Itinerant harvesters add to the confusion. Paid a share of the yield in the southwest—in 2018, only 1/5 or 1/6 of the crop due to low prices—they tend to sell their crop locally at a low price for fear that, were they to travel with their opium, they would be robbed, arrested and possibly required to pay a bribe. As such, these are seen as distress sales and tend to artificially deflate the opium price until the harvest period is over.

Figure 6. A Comparison of UNODC Monthly Opium Price Data from Fieldwork, Differentiated by Date, Quality and Source.



UNODC = United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime.

Source: Monthly prices from UNODC Afghanistan Drug Price Monitoring Report, June 2018, page 8; desert and canal prices from fieldwork.

Despite this knowledge and a confluence of events, in particular the depreciation of the Iranian *rial*, farmers largely credited the dramatic fall in the price of opium to the lab strikes. Here, again, it was the Afghan government and the US military that were blamed. Just one example of many accusations was a farmer in Loy Bagh who referred to the lab strikes as “not a good operation. The Americans want to destroy the economy of the farmer.”<sup>30</sup> A few farmers blamed the devaluation of the Iranian *rial*, known locally as the *toman*, suggesting that traders feared being left holding Iranian currency following the sale of their opium with the risk that it would lose further value against the dollar and the Afghani. Some of those interviewed even called for the Afghan government to intervene to prop up the *rial*.

30 Interview, Loy Bagh #2.

It was far less common to hear farmers blame the fall in opium prices and their deteriorating economy as a function of overproduction, even if there were signs of rising levels of cultivation in Helmand, particularly in the former deserts north of the Boghra. There was little evidence of any effort by the government to limit cultivation outside the confines of Qala Bost and Bolan; even in Bost, poppy persisted. In Bolan, the decision not to grow was due to an agreement with local Barakzai strongman Hafizullah Khan, rather than at the government's command. Elsewhere, the government was seen to have enough on its plate; as a farmer in Loy Bagh commented, "The government is too busy fighting, they don't have time for statements against poppy."<sup>31</sup>

Alongside the rise in cultivation was what appeared to be a full recovery of opium yields across Helmand after the poor crop that plagued the area from 2012 to 2015 (see Figure 7). In 2018, yields ranged from 2 to 3 *man* of fresh opium per *jerib* (the equivalent of 45 to 67.5 kilograms per hectare) in the canal command area of Helmand and up to 3.5 *man* per *jerib* (the equivalent of 78.75 kilograms per hectare) in the former desert areas north of the Boghra. On the surface this was advantageous, particularly after the experience of crops that produced little more than 1 *man* of opium per *jerib* in 2014, and as little as 0.5 *man* per *jerib* in 2015. However, in the face of a more than three-fold fall in opium prices, and multiple farmers selling their crop for between Rs 16,000 to 20,000 per *man* (the equivalent of US\$29 to US\$36 per kilogram) at harvest time there was little to celebrate.

While opium prices rallied quickly, rising to as much as Rs 60,000 per *man* (the equivalent of \$108 per kilogram) in June 2018, at the time of fieldwork the fall in opium prices had hit hard.<sup>32</sup> There were repeated complaints by farmers across central Helmand—but most notably among the land poor—of an inability to afford medical treatment for serious ailments such as failing kidneys, cancer and the injuries they sustained during the fighting. Some farmers reported that they had sold assets such as their motorbike, a car or livestock to pay for medical treatment. Loans were hard to come by and there were signs of retrenchment as farmers sought to deal with the growing economic uncertainty. A common strategy for managing economic woes at home, i.e. sending family members to work in Iran, had also been disrupted by the growing economic crisis across the border and the devaluation of the *rial*. Finally, there were very few signs of development assistance. A smattering of farmers claimed that they had received a bag of wheat or some fertiliser in the past 12 months, primarily because they knew someone in the agricultural department in Lashkar Gah, but more generally there were few reports of any active development projects bringing benefits to the rural population either north or south of the Boghra.

It was only in Bolan and Qala Bost that there was any reprieve from the litany of anger and resentment that emanated from the rural population of central Helmand. In these two locations—both providers of high-value horticulture and labour to Lashkar Gah—there was overwhelming support for the Afghan government and its efforts. With non-farm income opportunities in the city, even government salaries, and with a multitude of spring and summer vegetables, perennials such as vineyards and pomegranates - and, most importantly, a stable, secure environment, there was little to complain about. One farmer in Bolan noted, "Because of this government our area is secure; we can easily work in our land and our farm. We support this government."<sup>33</sup>

31 Interview, Loy Bagh #7.

32 In early June, opium prices in Helmand rose again up to Rs 60,000 per *man* in the former desert areas and Rs 50,000 in the canal command area, only to fall to Rs 35,000 to 40,000 per *man* and Rs 48,000 to 52,000 per *man* respectively by 7 June.

33 Interview, Bolan #7.

Here the opinions on opium poppy cultivation and the lab strikes stood in stark contrast to the rest of central Helmand. On the whole, the farmers in these two areas supported the government efforts, even citing the rise in the number of drug users seen by the Helmand River as evidence of the negative effects of opium production.<sup>34</sup> In Bolan, there was relief that farmers had not grown opium this year, mindful as they were that the fall in opium prices meant they would not have met their input costs.



*Figure 7: Healthy Opium Crop in Canal Command Area of Helmand, April 2018.*

34 “This is a good operation, we will be free from the risk of heroin,” Interview, Bost #13; “We support [this operation] as people in Lashkar Gah are addicted to heroin,” Interview, Bolan #8.

## 7. CONCLUSION

This research suggests that, beyond the environs of Lashkar Gah, there is little love for the Afghan government, and, whether rightly or wrongly, the rural Helmandis put the responsibility for their woes firmly at the government's door. From rising levels of violence, corruption and a downturn in the economy due to falling opium prices, it is the Afghan government and its American backers that the rural population typically hold responsible. While small glimmers of support can be seen in places like Qala Bost and Bolan, a journey a few kilometres along the road into Nad e Ali and Marjah, Nahre Seraj or even parts of Nawa Barakzai, reveals a population at loggerheads with the government in Kabul.

The source of this anger is the growing levels of violence that the rural population endure. The evidence is stark: increasing amounts of land abandoned as farmers look to flee the conflict; empty bazaars; rising numbers of injuries and deaths among the rural population; and reports of an ever-increasing number of aerial sorties and attacks that have led to heightened levels of fear and anxiety across much of central Helmand.

It is apparent from this research that in such a volatile environment the air campaign against heroin laboratories launched in November 2017 is not perceived as the Afghan government or USFOR-A would like, i.e. as part of a counter-insurgency effort to deny the Taliban revenue. Farmers' experiences with paying taxes on the opium crop, as well as the market structure, locations and functioning of the "factories" leads them to believe that the relationship between the Taliban and the drugs trade is not much different from that of government officials. Nor is the aerial campaign against labs seen as a productive counternarcotics effort, as many farmers in central Helmand would argue there are many more labs than can be destroyed. Further, the kind of "mom and pop" establishments that are in operation suffer few economic losses when they are hit, and are easily replaced.<sup>35</sup>

Instead, the rural population sees the strikes as part of a wider campaign of violence in which they and their livelihoods are the target. Perhaps it should be of no surprise that, in an area where the opium economy is so prevalent, the population will see little moral equivalence between a counter-insurgency campaign and a military campaign against drug labs. In fact, as much as it might chafe western and Afghan government officials, in places where heroin factories are a local employer, a major purchaser of the primary local agricultural crop and are owned by fellow villagers and neighbours, there is every chance that a protracted air campaign against labs will be seen as the equivalent of bombing the local market or bazaar. None of this bodes well for those looking for solutions to the insurgency and the growing drugs problem in Afghanistan, but surely it is incumbent on all those working there to ensure their interventions do not do more harm than good.

35 This is a finding supported by United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) research in northern Afghanistan, which reports that "laboratories tend to be rebuilt quickly after a single raid and return to processing after a short break in production." "Afghan opiate trafficking along the northern route", UNODC, Vienna, June 2018, page 13.

## 8. RECOMMENDATIONS

**The airstrikes against labs should cease.** The campaign has had little impact on the drugs trade and Taliban revenues. It is also proving counterproductive, increasing hostility among the rural population to both the Afghan government and international military forces. A more effective strategy would be to dismantle major trafficking networks and the cross-border trade where more significant profits are made by criminal organizations with links to both insurgent and corrupt government officials.

**Attempts to disrupt the revenue of conflict actors should be grounded in robust analysis.** Empirical analysis indicates that the revenue generated by the insurgency from drugs labs is not as significant as current policy narratives suggest. To develop an effective strategy for denying revenue to the insurgency, there is a need to develop a more granular understanding of the different types and locations of the revenue streams that conflict actors draw upon.

**Efforts to retake territory should not be conducted during critical periods in the agricultural season.** In Afghanistan, it is typically the winter cropping season that is the most important to farmers' livelihoods. Mounting major military campaigns in the fall and spring has a significant impact on the livelihoods of the rural population. Locally, launching a military campaign during the planting or harvest of the winter crop is seen as evidence of a government and international forces that have little care for the population's welfare. Compensation for those who have incurred losses is essential.

**Map a clear and long-term strategy for supporting farmers' transition out of illicit opium poppy cultivation.** There is a danger that rural communities associate the Afghan government and Afghan military action with a subsequent ban on opium production, even where farmers have no economic alternatives. This can lead farmers to resent and even resist the government's efforts to recapture land and compel them to side with the opposition. The government would do well to take an explicit position that opium poppy will not be banned or eradicated in the absence of viable alternatives.

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