Trouble In Afghanistan's Opium Fields: The Taliban War On Drugs

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Principal Findings

What's new? The Taliban have launched a campaign against the country's illegal narcotics industry, rounding up drug users, destroying opium poppy and cannabis fields, and arresting some traders. Driven by religious ideology, their initiative strikes at the backbone of Afghanistan's informal economy and the livelihoods of the rural poor.

Why does it matter? The ban has drastically reduced cultivation, but Afghan-produced drugs are still hitting the global market as dealers continue selling stockpiles and some farmers resist the ban. The Taliban's crackdown has devastated the economic outlook for farmers and rural labourers with few other employment options. Women have been particularly affected.

What should be done? The Taliban should be lenient with the poorest farmers as it implements the ban. The anti-drug initiative is in many foreign actors' interest, creating opportunities for donors to support Afghanistan's economic stabilisation. Licit crops will not offer sufficient employment, so the focus should be on job creation in non-farm industries.

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Executive Summary

Launched soon after they retook power in 2021, the Taliban's campaign against narcotics has drastically reduced opium poppy cultivation and upended Afghanistan's drug economy. Driven by ideology, the Taliban's anti-drug efforts include rounding up drug users, eradicating crops, and shuttering drug bazaars. The Taliban's enforcement impacts the livelihoods of millions of people, particularly poor labourers and rural women. Wealthy traders, meanwhile, are profiting from high prices by selling existing stocks. Many farmers have switched to crops such as wheat, but struggle with the reduced income. The ban's future is uncertain; although the Taliban are adamant about implementing it, it could collapse under the weight of economic hardship. Foreign donors, who have much to gain from reduced drug production in Afghanistan, should harness the Taliban's zeal for counter-narcotics and encourage licit economic growth. In the meantime, the Taliban should consider the welfare of the poorest farmers and implement a phased approach to the ban.

Implemented with growing seriousness, the Taliban's anti-narcotics campaign has profoundly affected a country that ranks among the world's largest suppliers of illegal drugs. The main focus has been opium, a central part of Afghanistan's agricultural sector. Enforcement began slowly, but has grown stricter. Taliban forces started with easy targets, herding drug users into jails and rehabilitation centres. They then warned farmers not to cultivate the opium poppies whose resin they have harvested for centuries. When that failed, the Taliban deployed fighters to face down villagers and destroy their crops. As a result, the UN estimates, cultivation declined by 95 per cent – more than any other counter-narcotics campaign in recent history. The Taliban also started to apply pressure on traffickers, despite the fact that some of them backed their movement for decades. More recently the de facto authorities shut down drug bazaars and arrested hundreds of dealers.

While underworld kingpins and big landowners have thrived under the ban, reaping the benefits of skyrocketing prices by selling stockpiles, many farmers have suffered. By UN estimates, the halt to opium farming has affected the livelihoods of almost seven million people. These individuals are unlikely to find other work in a stagnant economy burdened with sanctions. Farmers have lost an estimated $1.3 billion annually, or 8 per cent of GDP in 2023. Farm work remains the biggest source of employment for Afghan women. The ban has hit them especially hard, given their lack of opportunities under a Taliban regime that severely limits their ability to work. The economic shock has been compounded by the Taliban's limited capacity to offer farmers and rural workers alternatives. Many switched to cultivating wheat or cotton, but struggle to make ends meet. Development of licit agriculture would require more irrigation, cold storage facilities and better roads. The Taliban does not have the budget to develop such infrastructure. Meanwhile, the opium price has soared, tempting farmers to flout the ban.

So far, few dare to defy the Taliban. Farmers respect the ban most faithfully in the south, where the Taliban have many supporters, and where bigger farms produced stocks of opium that could be sold after the ban. Still, pockets of disobedience remain, even in the Taliban's home province of Kandahar. In the smaller fields of the moun-

tainous north and east, resistance is more widespread. While the Taliban's measures have shaken the drug sector to its very foundations, the future of the ban remains in doubt. Some experts predict that its economic impact will force the Taliban to backtrack on a signature policy. Of course, it is also possible that the Taliban leadership will remain stubborn and steadfast.

Foreign governments have a lot to gain from Afghanistan no longer flooding global markets with drugs. After the Taliban's severe restrictions on women's rights made the regime odious to much of the outside world, the narcotics ban offers a rare opportunity to work with the new authorities on a pressing issue to the benefit of all sides. The Taliban's strategy of banning drugs without providing alternative jobs risks large-scale displacement of rural Afghans and rising emigration, along with growing desperation among the poor. Donors should support a transition toward licit and equitable growth in the economy, easing the acute poverty crisis the country currently faces. Some already give aid for food security and rehabilitation of drug users, but the assistance falls far short. Effective support at a national scale would require working with the Taliban regime, which is politically difficult and, for many Western policymakers, unpalatable. It would, however, aid Afghan civilians, especially rural women.

In the first instance, support could focus on rural development, agricultural support, water conservation and investments in agro-processing. But the reality is that a drug-free agricultural sector will not provide enough jobs, so the country needs a development plan focusing more broadly on non-farm employment, including for women. Regional countries should support Afghanistan's integration into transport networks and trade arrangements, for their own interests and to stabilise their neighbourhood.

All of this will require time. Until the country makes the painful transition away from dependence on narcotics as a cash crop, the Taliban should show a bit of leniency. Although it is unlikely it will backtrack on the ban, at a minimum the regime should halt more intrusive eradication practices such as house-to-house searches. Adopting more lenient practices such as turning a blind eye to small garden plots of poppy and cannabis would give the poorest farmers a better chance of survival in the coming years. Farmers selling tiny amounts of opium for prices hundreds of times higher than what is paid for other crops would give them a lifeline without jeopardising the ban's overall objectives.

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I. Introduction

The Taliban's return to power in 2021 raised concerns in foreign capitals for a host of reasons, one of which was that the insurgents' victory would herald a lawless free-for-all of trafficking.[1] These fears were not ungrounded: Afghanistan has long been a major producer of drugs and, for more than a century, efforts to curb its output have foundered.

Afghan delegates participated in opium control talks hosted by the League of Nations in the 1920s, although at the time Afghanistan's cultivation was miniscule compared to producers such as China and India.[2] Afghan authorities tried to stamp out opium production in the 1940s and 1950s, but were largely unsuccessful.[3] From the 1970s onwards, Afghan opium thrived as other countries began to enforce stronger restrictions on drugs.[4] The outbreak of war in 1979 accelerated production of Afghan opium, partly due to the destruction of the country's licit agricultural system and partly because rebels turned to drug smuggling to fund the anti-Soviet resistance.[5] During this period narcotics became a central part of Afghanistan's informal economy and it became the world's largest opium producer.[6] Successive civil wars then propelled more narcotics trafficking, principally in opium. The major exception occurred after the Taliban first seized power in the mid-1990s, when they imposed a short-lived ban on production.

This report covers the Taliban's narcotics policy after they regained control of Afghanistan in 2021, capturing a national economy so entwined with illegal drugs that Afghanistan had been branded a "narco-society".[7] It details the rationale behind the former insurgents' decision to declare a war on drugs, and the unprecedented steps

[1] For regional concerns about the Taliban's return, see Crisis Group Asia Report N°337, *The Taliban's Neighbourhood: Regional Diplomacy with Afghanistan*, 30 January 2024. For the economic fallout, see Crisis Group Asia Report N°317, *Beyond Emergency Relief: Averting Afghanistan's Humanitarian Catastrophe*, 6 December 2021. On the security consequences, see Crisis Group Asia Report N°326, *Afghanistan's Security Challenges under the Taliban*, 12 August 2022.

[2] "Opium Production Throughout the World", *Bulletin on Narcotics*, No. 1, October 1949, United Nations, p. 12.

[3] The United Nations Commission on Narcotic Drugs noted, presciently, that solutions to the economic problems related to the prohibition of opium were of "cardinal importance". See, Summary of report in *Bulletin on Narcotics*, vol. IX, no. 4, October-December 1957, United Nations, p. 61, as reported in "Global Illicit Drug Trends 2001", United Nations Office for Drug Control and Crime Prevention, 2001.

[4] Doris Buddenberg, "On the Cultural History of Opium – and how poppy came to Afghanistan", Afghanistan Analysts Network, 11 Jan 2016.

[5] "Global Illicit Drug Trends 2001", op. cit., p. 32.

[6] For an in-depth account, see "Global Illicit Drug Trends 2001", op. cit., pp. 30-43.

[7] "Afghanistan risks becoming a narco-state, UN drugs chief warns", press release, UN Office on Drugs and Crime, 28 June 2006.

they have taken to curb the production of opium and other narcotics. Research included dozens of conversations conducted over 2023 and 2024 with narcotic experts, government officials, Afghan farmers, drug smugglers and traffickers, and former users. Conversations with women were prioritised but were not possible for all interview cohorts given the restrictions on their ability to engage with non-family members. Research was carried out in Badakhshan, Helmand, Kandahar, Nangarhar, and Uruzgan provinces of Afghanistan. Recommendations are drawn from discussions with people most affected by the counter-narcotics campaign, focusing on reducing harms to vulnerable Afghans, especially the rural poor.

II. Understanding the Taliban War on Drugs

A. *Taliban Narcotics Policy 1994-2021*

The Taliban have a complicated history with narcotics. When the movement was founded in 1994, the country was already growing vast amounts of opium. In the early years of the first Taliban regime in the 1990s, Afghanistan produced 75 per cent of the world supply.[8] Taliban efforts to curb the industry were tentative at first: in 1999, the de facto government issued a decree ordering all farmers to reduce their cultivation by one third, a fiat that was only somewhat successful.[9] Nonetheless, in July 2000, the Taliban's supreme leader at the time, Mullah Omar, issued a decree imposing a total ban on growing poppy. Cultivated areas soon declined tenfold, partly due to the Taliban's efforts but also because of a drought and low opium prices.[10]

The ban proved short-lived: the Taliban rescinded it in September 2001, possibly due to the political costs for the regime at a time when it was anticipating military confrontation with the United States.[11] In the hostile post-11 September atmosphere, the Taliban could not afford to alienate farmers.[12] After the 2001 overthrow of the regime, poppy cultivation thrived under the new U.S.-backed government and hit record levels despite Western-funded programs for countering narcotics.[13] Like many of their rivals, Taliban insurgents were involved in this trade and financially benefitted from it. They adopted a lenient approach to the industry, protecting farmers from interdiction efforts and financing themselves by taxing drugs in areas they controlled or contested.[14]

Some Taliban justified their involvement in the drug industry as a short-term expedient, religiously forbidden but necessary for the insurgency's sake.[15] As talks between the U.S. and the Taliban gathered pace in the final years of the war, however, the group's position on narcotics began to shift. In March 2020, a month after signing

[8] Edwin Snyder, "War, Drugs, and Money: The Opium Trade in Afghanistan", Master's thesis, Harvard University, May 2019.

[9] A UNODC survey indicated that the actual reduction achieved by the decree was about 10 per cent. See "Global Illicit Drug Trends 2001", UN Office for Drugs and Crime Prevention, pp. 30-43.

[10] Taliban sources have written that their de facto government initially adopted a policy of gradual elimination of opium. This experiment started in 1998 and 1999, but the results discouraged the Taliban leadership as poppy cultivation increased in some areas. Many local and Taliban mullahs considered poppy cultivation to be allowed by Islam, and the movement's supporters cultivated, traded in, or otherwise profited from opium. See, Abdul Hai Mutmaeen, *Mullah Omar, the Taliban, and Afghanistan*, 2018, pp. 235-40 [Pashto].

[11] David Mansfield, "The Sun Cannot Be Hidden by Two Fingers: Illicit Drugs and the Discussion on a Political Settlement in Afghanistan", Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, May 2019.

[12] Vanda Felbab-Brown, "Pipe dreams: The Taliban and drugs from the 1990s into its new regime", Brookings Institution, 15 September 2021.

[13] On U.S. programs, see "Counternarcotics: Lessons from the U.S. experience in Afghanistan", Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, June 2018.

[14] Western officials estimated that drug traffickers aligned with the U.S.-backed government controlled about twice as much of the trade as compared with Taliban-affiliated smugglers. Crisis Group interviews, Western officials, 2008-2021.

[15] A survey of 42 Taliban found most of them involved in the opium industry, and many described the business as part of their fight against foreign occupation. Graeme Smith, "Talking to the Taliban", *The Globe and Mail*, 22 March 2008.

a peace agreement with the United States, the Taliban announced a gradual ban on the cultivation of cannabis in areas they controlled.[16] While the Taliban did not aggressively implement the ban, its introduction signalled that the group could be preparing to take steps against the much-bigger opium industry.[17] The question grew more important as the Taliban gained territory and eventually seized power in August 2021.

B. *Dilemmas of Power: The 2021 Takeover*

The Taliban sought to immediately quell speculation about their drug policies after they retook power, declaring ambitious plans to wipe out all narcotics. On 17 August 2021, just two days after the fall of Kabul, Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid announced that "Afghanistan will be a narcotics-free country".[18] He added, however, that the country would need "international assistance" to make it happen. Other officials reiterated this message in the following weeks.[19] Some experts noted that the prospect of Islamic theocrats banning a religiously controversial trade was logical.[20] Others were sceptical about the Taliban's sincerity, partly due to the fact they had benefitted from the drug trade during the war years, but mostly because of the political and economic costs of prohibition. In the final decade of the U.S.-backed government, opium poppy occupied roughly three times more farmland than it did in 2002.[21] The scale of the underground trade is hard to assess, but UN estimates claimed that the opium trade amounted to 9 to 14 per cent of Afghan GDP when the Taliban returned to power.[22]

Whatever the size of the industry, narcotics brought in much-needed currency in the midst of the economic crisis the fall of Kabul triggered in 2021. Foreign troops departed and donors cut aid, depriving Afghanistan of development assistance that had amounted to 17 to 22 per cent of GDP.[23] The country's economic straits worsened in the first months of the Taliban takeover as the unrecognised regime struggled to pay civil servants' salaries and stabilise the local currency.[24] Afghans lost an

[16] In February 2020, the United States and the Taliban signed an agreement in Doha which included a timetable for withdrawal of U.S. troops; counter-terrorism pledges from the Taliban; a release of prisoners on both sides; a review of sanctions; and Taliban promises to enter into peace negotiations with the Afghan government of the time. "Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan", U.S. Department of State, 29 February 2020.

[17] Fazl Rahman Muzhary, "What now for the Taleban and Narcotics? A case study on cannabis", Afghanistan Analysts Network, 27 October 2021. See also, "Taliban leadership declares cannabis cultivation as harmful for society and orders limitations on it", *Nunn Asia*, 28 March 2020 [Pashto].

[18] "Transcript of Taliban's first news conference in Kabul", Al Jazeera English, 17 August 2021.

[19] Rupert Stone, "Afghanistan's vast narcotics trade likely to continue under Taliban", *Nikkei Asia*, 2 September 2021.

[20] Jelena Bjelica and Kate Clark, "The New Taleban's Opium Ban: The same political strategy 20 years on?", Afghanistan Analysts Network, 14 April 2022.

[21] Stefan Keinberger, Raphael Spiekermann, Dirk Tiede, Irmgard Zeiler, and Coen Bussink, "Spatial risk assessment of opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan: integrating environmental and socio-economic drivers", *International Journal of Digital Earth*, vol. 10, no. 7 (2017), p. 720.

[22] "Drug situation in Afghanistan 2021: Latest findings and emerging threats", United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, November 2021.

[23] Ibid. See also: "World Development Indicators", World Bank, 2021.

[24] Crisis Group Asia Report N°317, *Beyond Emergency Relief: Averting Afghanistan's Humanitarian Catastrophe*, 6 December 2021.

estimated 14 to 28 per cent of per capita income in 2021, pushing many, including women and even children, into the informal economy where the unabated trade in opiates and synthetic drugs provided one of the few sources of income for struggling households.[25]

The Taliban, who as insurgents had taxed the drug economy, initially formalised this taxation system as part of government revenue immediately after seizing power. As Afghanistan faced sanctions and widening trade deficits, drugs remained one the country's few exports, propping up the local currency and bringing much-needed revenue into government coffers. Per UN estimates, the opium harvest alone employed half a million part-time workers, or the equivalent of 100,000 full-time jobs per year spread across about a third of Afghan villages, supporting not only farmers but many others.[26] Many involved in the harvests were the poorest of the poor – landless labourers who relied on the work to supplement their incomes. In this context, it was easy to imagine that the Taliban's talk about banning narcotics was bluster.

C. *A Sweeping New Edict: Spring 2022*

On 3 April 2022, Afghanistan's new de facto authorities put such scepticism to rest when they announced a ban on the cultivation, consumption, and trade of all forms of narcotics.[27] The Emir's edict covered the use, transport, sale and purchase, import and export, and manufacturing of not just opium but all intoxicants. These included alcohol, heroin, methamphetamine, "Tablet K", and cannabis.[28] 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.[29]

In fact, the two decisions – on drugs and girls' schools – may have been linked. Taliban sources told Crisis Group that their colleagues took both at the same meeting of top leaders in March 2022, after the Emir, Hibatullah Akhundzada, 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.[30] Outsiders speculated that the Taliban wanted to distract the world from the "bad news" about girls with the "good news" about drugs – though if that was the goal, it clearly failed.[31] Taliban insiders, instead, speculate that the Emir

[25] "Opium cultivation in Afghanistan: Latest findings and emerging threats", United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, November 2022.
[26] This figure does not include jobs generated by other aspects of the drug industry. Mansfield estimates that opium provided the equivalent of 450,000 full-time jobs and, in the south, the landless earned up to a third of their income from weeding and harvesting the crop. Mansfield, "Truly Unprecedented: The Taliban Drugs Ban v2.0", op. cit.
[27] See tweet by Zabihullah Mujahid, Spokesman of the Islamic Emirate, 3 April 2022, 8:45am.
[28] Some of these drugs are recent inventions. "Tablet K" pills, a mix of drugs – often methamphetamines, caffeine, MDMA, chlorpheniramine, and heroin – gained popularity in recent years. See, "Afghanistan's 'tablet K' – a forensic insight into an emerging synthetic drug market", *UNODC Global Smart Update*, vol. 26, January 2022.
[29] Crisis Group Asia Report N°329, *Taliban Restrictions on Women's Rights Deepen Afghanistan's Crisis*, 23 February 2023.
[30] Crisis Group interviews, Taliban officials in Kabul and Kandahar, 2022-2023.
[31] Bjelica & Clark, op. cit.

took the two decisions simultaneously to signal the Taliban's independence and willingness to make hard choices, irrespective of whether they earned international praise or condemnation.[32]

Regardless of whether the two decisions were related, their timing ensured there would be little international support for the regime's new counter-narcotics policy. Prior to the narcotics ban, some foreign experts had postulated that the Taliban would dangle the idea of a crackdown on drugs as leverage in negotiations to extract economic and political concessions from the outside world.[33] No such negotiation ended up happening, as most foreign diplomats in Kabul had no advance knowledge of the drug ban and found themselves "pleasantly" surprised by the Taliban's actions on this front.[34]

The ban on narcotics did not take everyone by surprise, however. Reportedly, the discussions around the soon-to-be-announced ban in Kandahar caused a ripple of quiet activity in drug markets. Senior Taliban officials allegedly informed a select clique of top Taliban members and affiliated businessmen of the impending decision, who in turn rushed to buy up caches of opium before prices soared as a result of the official announcement.[35] Buying accelerated immediately after the announcement, especially in the country's south where many farmers, traders, and speculators purchased large stocks of dried poppy, providing them with a windfall as prices rose. Taliban insiders insist that although individual Taliban officials personally benefitted from such trading, the government itself was not involved.[36] All the same, the regime continued to tax the opium trade – at prices inflated by the ban – until March 2023, as the regime ended the transitional period that followed the edict.[37]

D. *An Informal Grace Period*

While a circle of insiders knew of the impeding edict, it came as a shock to most farmers. In large parts of the country, farmers rely on opium as their biggest cash crop. Afghanistan's main opium harvest is the "winter" crop, planted in October and November and harvested in April and May the following year.[38] This rhythm continued following the collapse of the previous government and the early months of the new regime. Farmers even enjoyed a hike in prices in the 2021-2022 season.[39] Farm-

[32] Crisis Group interviews, Taliban officials in Kabul September-November 2022.
[33] Bjelica & Clark, op. cit.
[34] Crisis Group interviews, Kabul-based diplomats, 2022 and 2023.
[35] Crisis Group interviews, Taliban members and poppy businessmen in Kandahar and Kabul, 2022-2023.
[36] Crisis Group interviews, Taliban officials in Kabul and Kandahar, 2022-2023. The claim of insider trading is backed by an uptick in prices that began after the Kandahar meeting in March.
[37] Taliban taxes increased from about $1 per kilogram of opium to $6.66 in 2023, before halting formal revenue collection from the industry. David Mansfield, "Uncharted Territory: Does the Taliban's new edict signal a crackdown on the drugs trade is looming?", Alcis, 2 November 2023.
[38] The schedule varies across the country. Two smaller harvests also occur in warmer provinces, roughly from April to July for the "spring" harvest and from July to September for the "summer" harvest. "Drug situation in Afghanistan: Latest findings and emerging threats", United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, November 2022.
[39] This hike in price may have been a reaction to the political uncertainties arising from the Taliban takeover. "Drug situation in Afghanistan 2021: Latest findings and emerging threats", United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, op. cit.

ers in Nangarhar province told Crisis Group that some growers who previously had not sown poppy due to the previous government's eradication efforts actually turned to opium in late 2021, believing the Taliban would allow it.[40] The UN estimated that farmers planted 233,000 hectares of opium in that season, up 32 per cent from the previous year.[41] Despite the ban, higher prices incentivised more farmers to turn to opium poppy cultivation in the next planting season as well: given that rural residents heavily depended on drug cultivation for their livelihoods, they seem to have anticipated the country's new rulers would not impede it.[42]

The text of the Emir's decree suggested that it was taking effect immediately, but Taliban officials understood that any move to eradicate the vast poppy fields would have triggered such irreparable losses for farmers that it risked creating turmoil. As a result, the Emir's decision was followed by "clarifications" from Taliban officials, granting farmers a grace period before implementation.[43] In principle, this meant the authorities would not interfere with farmers harvesting crops planted before the Emir's announcement.

In some places, however, the grace period extended not just to the harvest planted in late 2021, but also the smaller crop seeded in spring 2022 – after the ban's introduction.[44] In other locations, the Taliban destroyed recently planted poppies but allowed the harvest from fully grown plants.[45] Farmers in Uruzgan and Kandahar provinces say that they immediately planted their spring crops after learning of the ban and – when Taliban officials arrived to check their fields several weeks later – told them the planting had taken place prior to the announcement. To their relief, the Taliban exempted some of these new crops, which generated significant income due to rising prices.[46] The opium price hikes following the announcement of the ban gave some growers a financial cushion, particularly landed farmers in the Taliban heartlands in the south and south west. But for many agricultural workers it was not enough to compensate for the strict steps that the Taliban were to take in the coming months.

[40] The previous government carried out extensive drug interdiction and crop eradication, but poppy cultivation still increased 2001-2021. Crisis Group interviews, farmers in Chaparhar, Sherzad, Khogyani, and Shinwar districts, Nangarhar province, October 2023.

[41] "Opium cultivation in Afghanistan: Latest findings and emerging threats", United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, November 2022, op. cit.

[42] Crisis Group interviews, narcotics experts, Washington and London, March 2024.

[43] See, for example, "Government gives permission to harvest the cultivated poppy", *Afghan Islamic Press*, 29 April 2022 [Pashto].

[44] It is possible that this liberal interpretation of the grace period was one reason why northern Kandahar later emerged as one of the largest residual poppy cultivators of the 2022/2023 harvest. See Section III.B.2.

[45] David Mansfield, "Truly Unprecedented: The Taliban Drugs Ban v2.0", Alcis, 6 June 2023.

[46] According to the UN, "the income made by farmers from opium sales more than tripled from USD 425 million in 2021 to USD 1.4 billion in 2022 – the new figure equivalent to 29 per cent of the 2021 value of the agricultural sector. In 2021, the farm-gate value of opiates was only worth some 9 per cent of the previous year's agricultural output". "Opium cultivation in Afghanistan: Latest findings and emerging threats", United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, November 2022, op. cit.

III. Implementation Strategies

While the April 2022 edict made clear the Emir's determination to eradicate narcotics, it was silent about how the Taliban would execute it. The authorities decided to combat the industry on three fronts: cracking down on domestic consumption, going after smugglers, and deterring farmers from planting. The Taliban appeared to take a step-by-step approach, testing their own enforcement capabilities while also seeing how far they could push the rural communities whose livelihoods were being destroyed. While learning from their mistakes and adjusting course, the authorities kept pushing to squeeze the industry.

A. *Rounding Up Drug Users*

One of the Taliban authorities' first steps was rounding up drug addicts in major cities and sending them to "treatment" centres.[47] This gave the authorities an immediate way of showcasing the ban's implementation, resulting in publicised scenes of Taliban fighters loading homeless people into pickup trucks. The approach also responded to what had become one of Afghanistan's most visible social ills: by the time the Taliban returned to power, the number of Afghan drug users had swollen to as many as four million people, almost 10 per cent of the population.[48] This included nearly one million women and over 100,000 children.[49] UN officials warned of "hyperbolic growth" in the number of users.[50] The Taliban crackdown, however, focused only on the most squalid aspect of this phenomenon. In cities across the country, they rounded up drug addicts who huddled together to get high under bridges, in parks, on hillsides, in graveyards and in sewage drains.

This urban squalor played a key role in the Taliban's decision to reimpose the drug ban.[51] It also raised a concern that the movement had been too tolerant of narcotics in the past: one of the justifications some leaders gave for poppy cultivation in previous decades was that, since these crops were largely exported to Europe and other Western markets, they would not harm Afghans, or Muslims more generally.[52] Public scenes of destitution belied this argument.

[47] The Taliban already rounded up drug addicts prior to the ban, but these efforts significantly picked up pace after the announcement of the narcotics policy in 2022. Crisis Group interviews, Taliban officials in Kabul and Kandahar, November 2023. See also, tweet by Ministry of Interior Affairs, @moiafghanistan, 8:34am, 20 November 2021.

[48] "A knowledge-based approach to tackling Afghanistan's drug abuse crisis", Law and Crime Prevention, *UN News: Global perspective and human stories*, 25 June 2023. Crisis Group observations, 2013-2021.

[49] Abdul Subor Mohmand and Hendree E. Jones, "Drug Use Among Women and Children in Afghanistan: The Complexities of An Important Public Health Issue", *Addict Discord*, 2020(1), 33.

[50] The UNODC estimated that the country had some 200,000 opium and heroin addicts in 2005, but the numbers grew rapidly. See: "UNODC Reports Major, and Growing, Drug Abuse in Afghanistan", op. cit.

[51] Taliban officials told Crisis Group that one of the reasons why the Taliban supreme leader moved so decisively against drugs was because he was troubled by the sight of addicts in urban centres. Crisis Group interviews, Taliban officials in Kandahar and Kabul, September-November 2023.

[52] Crisis Group interviews, Taliban-affiliated clerics in Kandahar and Helmand, November 2023.

The Taliban tackled the problem with characteristic fervour. Previous governments had also forced users into treatment, but the magnitude of Taliban enforcement dwarfed past campaigns. They raided areas known to be frequented by addicts, fuelling allegations of abuse and arbitrary arrest, and detained them in prison-like centres.[53] By August 2022, the Taliban claimed to have rounded up 47,000 users.[54] Local authorities lacked facilities to hold them, however, as most of the country's 180 rehabilitation centres, with a capacity of nearly 40,000, had fallen into disuse after the Taliban takeover, partly due to withdrawal of international funding.[55] Instead, the Taliban herded users into prisons, many of which had empty cells after jailbreaks that occurred during their military advances in 2021.[56]

The Taliban's detox and recovery program for drug users has gradually evolved. The initial version consisted of rudimentary methods such as locking them up for "cold turkey" treatment of several weeks, and then releasing them. This proved unsuccessful, with high rates of relapse.[57] Later, the authorities inaugurated new rehab facilities, including a 5,000-bed centre in Kabul, and opened a few vocational training centres, sometimes funded by international donors, to help former users reintegrate into society.[58] Over time, the authorities conducted fewer mass arrests and offered more users voluntary treatment, with a small number also receiving vocational training.[59]

By mid-2023, the number of drug users loitering around Kabul and other cities had dwindled. It is unclear whether people are no longer using drugs on the streets because they have kicked the habit, or whether the Taliban's actions have forced users underground.[60] The approach of targeting urban squalor affected those who were seriously addicted and homeless, unable or unwilling to live with their families, involuntarily admitting them to treatment centres. But it ignored the majority of users, who consume drugs in private settings – including many women and children who

[53] Crisis Group interviews, former government and Taliban officials, 2007-2023.
[54] "The Ministry of Interior Affairs' Annual Report", video, YouTube, 28 August 2022 [Pashto].
[55] "Afghanistan has over 2.5 million drug users: official", *TOLO News*, 10 January 2020. Crisis Group interviews, Afghan public health official in Kabul, September 2023.
[56] "Over 1,200 drug addicts being treated at Herat prison", *TOLO News*, 20 April 2022 and "Taliban says Afghan prison offers treatment for drug users", RFE/RL, 4 January 2022.
[57] Methods involving shackles and dousing inmates with water were practiced in both government and Taliban-run "treatment" centres before the Taliban takeover. Crisis Group interviews, analysts in Kabul, Jalalabad and Kandahar, September-November 2023. See also, "Afghans treated for drug addiction relapsing, say they need work", *TOLO News*, 23 May 2023.
[58] The Taliban said they built nine rehabilitation centres, housing 7,000 patients in Kabul, 3,000 in Kandahar, 4,000 in Herat, and 1,000 in Balkh province. Training included sewing, electronic repair, leather stitching, carpentry and other vocational skills. Crisis Group interviews, Ministry of Interior and Public Health officials, November 2023.
[59] In April 2024, Taliban officials told Crisis Group that they had treated 110,450 drug users so far, suggesting a slowing of efforts to round them up, and that financing for the program was drawn from mining profits. The EU also funded a 100-bed treatment centre in Kandahar, among other services. "The EU provides an additional €10 million in funding to WHO and UNODC to advance mental health and drug use disorder services in Afghanistan", UNODC Afghanistan, 25 October 2023.
[60] Crisis Group interviews, drug addicts and families, September-November 2023.

make up a large share of the user population.[61] By late 2023, authorities had begun offering some counselling to women and children in treatment centres, especially for those who came voluntarily or were admitted by family members. Still, by and large, the Taliban's efforts focused on homeless men.[62]

B. *Tightening the Noose around Traffickers*

The Taliban also cracked down on some drug dealers – although the trade continued to operate relatively freely, even if illegally. The authorities initially went after dealers who traded in contraband other than opium, giving opium smugglers an informal ten-month reprieve, presumably to let them sell off their stocks before clamping down.[63] In addition, the Taliban's main goal was to curtail the domestic market for drugs rather than prioritise a reduction in exports.[64] Regional states continued to report high volumes of opium shipped out of Afghanistan, and blamed Taliban-affiliated dealers.[65]

The crackdown began with methamphetamines. In addition to being the world's largest source of illegal opiates, Afghanistan had emerged in recent years as a major producer of methamphetamines derived from wild ephedra, a native plant found in the highlands that can be refined into ephedrine, a key ingredient of locally made methamphetamines.[66] In 2021, even before announcing the narcotics ban, Taliban officials had quietly forbidden the harvest of ephedra in some western provinces and prohibited its sale at major markets including the Abdul Wadood Bazaar in Farah province, characterised as "potentially the largest illicit drug bazaar in the world".[67] This did not end trading, however, as the business shifted to smaller district-level markets.[68]

[61] Studies have noted that women users lack access to services as a result of social stigma. See, for example, Kanika Gupta, "The feminine side of Afghanistan's drug problem", *Asia Democracy Chronicles*, 15 July 2023.

[62] See, for example, "500 Drug-addicted women brought to centres in past 6 months: ministry", *TOLO News*, 29 November 2023.

[63] Crisis Group interviews, UN officials and Western analysts, 2023 and 2024.

[64] The most prominent example was Haji Bashir Noorzai, an early backer of the Taliban in the 1990s, convicted of trafficking but released from U.S. custody in a 2022 prisoner swap. Yaqoob Akbary and Christina Goldbaum, "U.S. hostage exchanged for Afghan drug lord in prisoner swap", *The New York Times*, 19 September 2022.

[65] Regional concerns about Afghan drugs are reported by the UN monitoring teams tasked with collecting information from state security agencies. See, for example: "Letter dated 2 May 2023", UN Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team, 2 May 2023.

[66] Methamphetamine can be produced in several ways including with ephedrine. Prior to its use in narcotics, Afghans had little use for wild ephedra, sometimes burning the dry plant for household fuel or using it to tan leather. Borhan Osman, "U.S. Bombing of Afghan Drug Labs Won't Crush the Taliban", Crisis Group Commentary, 11 December 2017.

[67] Mansfield estimates that the bazaar had stockpiled enough dried ephedra in November 2021 to make 220 metric tonnes of meth; by January 2023, there was almost nothing left. See, "Methamphetamine Production in Afghanistan", Alcis Storymaps, op. cit.

[68] The Taliban went further in late 2022, with raids in the mountains where wild ephedra was harvested. Taliban forces shot at people who collected the plants and inflicted an unknown number of casualties. Crisis Group interviews, drug smugglers in Kandahar, Uruzgan, and Helmand provinces, September 2022 to November 2023.

Still, the enforcement measures signalled the Taliban's intention to go after smuggling of all kinds. Following the announcement of the ban, they publicised alcohol seizures in parts of the country. They also began arresting drug dealers, including small-time heroin smugglers.[69] By August of that year, authorities claimed to have arrested more than 2,000 individuals – mostly men – involved in the trade and seized 43 tonnes of heroin, methamphetamine, opium, cannabis, alcohol and synthetic drugs.[70] By late 2022, public flogging for traffickers was becoming a common punishment.[71]

In March 2023, another of the Emir's edicts instructed authorities to set out punishments for those involved in the production and trade of drugs and alcohol, and ordered the burning of all seized drugs as well as the destruction of property used in the trade.[72] In addition to public floggings, authorities introduced years-long imprisonment for smugglers.[73] The Taliban also stopped taxing the opium trade. That move rendered moot the longstanding argument that the Taliban couldn't punish traffickers because imposing levies implicitly rendered it legal.[74] In March 2023, the Taliban re-established the ban on cultivation of cannabis, which is widespread and often purified into a form of hashish known as *chars*.[75] (Although the initial narcotics ban covered cannabis, the Taliban had until then been lenient about it.[76])

The Taliban only started to get serious about the enormous opium trade in late 2023. At the end of the informal ten-month reprieve period on trading, authorities raided and burned drug labs in Bahramcha, reputedly the largest drug market in southern Afghanistan.[77] In April 2024, they also enforced the existing ban on opium trading in the main bazaars of Helmand and Farah, with rumours suggesting similar measures might be extended to other provinces.[78] Dealers could still visit those loca-

[69] See tweet and tweet by Ministry of Interior Affairs, @moiafghanistan, 12 May 2022 and 6 July 2022.

[70] The Taliban claimed that by August 2022, they had destroyed 29 drug labs, seized 236 kg of heroin, 472 kg meth, 4,720 kg opium, 6,000 kg cannabis resin, more than 118,000 pills containing synthetic drugs, and 5,000 kg of alcohol. See tweet (video report) by Ministry of Interior Affairs, @moiafghanistan, 8:35am, 22 September 2022.

[71] See, for example, "Afghan Taliban announce new round of public floggings", Voice of America, 19 December 2022.

[72] See tweet by the Administrative Office of the Prime Minister, @AOP_IEA, 1:37pm, 19 March 2023.

[73] Crisis Group interviews, locals in Kandahar, April 2024.

[74] Taliban taxes increased from about $1 per kilogram of opium to $6.66 in 2023, before they halted formal revenue collection from the industry. Around this time, reports also emerged that the authorities were giving smugglers ten months to export and deplete their opium stockpiles. See David Mansfield, "Uncharted Territory: Does the Taliban's new edict signal a crackdown on the drugs trade is looming?" Alcis, 2 November 2023, and "Taliban waive opium tax in Nimroz province for 10 months", *Hasht e Subh*, 23 March 2023.

[75] See tweet by the Administrative Office of the Prime Minister, @AOP_IEA, 3:23pm, 18 March 2023.

[76] After this second decree, authorities undertook major eradication in Helmand and Badakhshan as the crops were maturing in late 2023. See tweet by Ministry of Interior Affairs, @moiafghanistan, 7:34pm, 15 October 2022 and tweet by Ministry of Interior Affairs, @moiafghanistan, 11:14am, 28 October 2023.

[77] Crisis Group interviews, drug smugglers in Kandahar and Helmand, February 2024.

[78] Local officials and drug traffickers in Farah told Crisis Group that these bans now apply to Abdul Wodood bazaar in Bakwa, Pesau bazaar in Farah Rud, the Diwal e Surkh bazaar in Khak e Safid and

tions and conduct business while keeping their goods stored in private properties. Nevertheless, these measures marked a shift in Taliban enforcement.

C. *Deterring Cultivation and Eradicating Crops*

Perhaps the most significant manner in which the Taliban enforced the ban was deterring farmers from cultivating narcotics or, when that failed, destroying their crops. This was complicated by the aforementioned grace period allowing the harvest of crops planted before the ban, but soon afterwards the Taliban moved to prevent cultivation.

1. Success in the lowlands

Deterrence and eradication began at home, in the south-western provinces that have been the Taliban's strongholds and which produced the majority of Afghan opium. As the grace period for cultivation ended in mid-2022, Taliban officials began to travel through Kandahar, Helmand, Uruzgan and Nimroz provinces, identifying and destroying poppy that was planted after the ban took effect.[79] The Taliban's initial actions targeted smaller harvests, collected in summer, which are typically marginal compared with the main crop planted in autumn and harvested in spring. Still, the eradication sent a message to farmers in the south and largely persuaded them not to plant opium in the next season. This drastically reduced output in the south, which had accounted for 70 to 80 per cent of the country's production.[80]

Authorities also began appointing new counter-narcotics officials across the country, and providing them with specialised training.[81] In late 2022, the Ministry of Interior accelerated efforts to expand the counter-narcotics police.[82] By early autumn, when farmers plant poppy seeds, the Taliban widened their eradication efforts into western and northern provinces.[83] By the spring of 2023, the absence of mature poppies was, as a leading expert put it, "truly unprecedented".[84] The UN said that

a number of other makeshift bazaars. Crisis Group interviews, locals in Helmand and Farah, April 2024.

[79] Crisis Group interviews, farmers in Kandahar, Helmand, and Uruzgan, November 2023.

[80] Taliban counter-narcotics officials told Crisis Group that in the 24 months after the 2022 ban, authorities destroyed only 15,365 hectares of poppy nationally – a tiny fraction of the area previously farmed. This suggests the Taliban's successes in reducing cultivation resulted more from deterrence than eradication. Crisis Group interviews, counter-narcotics officials, April 2024.

[81] "Counternarcotics chiefs in the South complete their specialised training", *Ministry of Interior Affairs*, 31 May 2022 [Dari]; and tweet by Ministry of Interior Affairs, @moiafghanistan, 24 May 2022.

[82] Established in 2003, the Counter-Narcotics Police of Afghanistan (CNPA) was a special police unit that claimed to have tens of thousands of personnel. Like other branches of the former security forces, the CNPA disbanded in 2021. The Taliban have been training a successor to the CNPA but have not publicised its numbers. See tweet and tweet by Ministry of Interior Affairs, @moiafghanistan on 26 and 28 November 2022.

[83] These included Farah, Herat, Badghis, Sur-e Pul, and Balkh. Crisis Group interviews, Ministry of Interior officials in Kabul, September 2023.

[84] David Mansfield, "Truly Unprecedented: The Taliban Drugs Ban v2.0", Alcis, 6 June 2023.

opium production declined by 95 per cent, a reduction of 222,000 hectares from the previous year.[85]

Considering the vast amounts of farmland affected, UN data suggest that the Taliban's campaign ranks among the most successful efforts to deter drug cultivation in the last few decades globally, exceeding the scale of similar drives in Colombia, Peru, and other countries.[86] Still, the effort is not entirely unprecedented in modern history, as China wiped out a bigger opium crop in the 1950s.[87]

2. Challenges in the highlands

Enforcement was not as successful in some places, especially at higher elevations that were difficult for police to access and where populations proved most resistant to the ban. The highlands in the east, the north east and south emerged as key areas of resistance. Some plantations also lingered in mountains and deserts in the south. Farmers in these areas, including remote parts of northern Badakhshan province and eastern provinces such as Nangarhar, said they ignored the ban because they lacked alternatives to feed their families.[88] Many owned small plots of land that could not support other crops due to limited water.[89] Some farmers also said they were following local traditions, arguing that their communities have grown opium poppy for more than a century.[90] Price hikes following the ban also made the crop more appealing to farmers, setting them on a collision course with Taliban.[91]

[85] "Afghanistan opium survey 2023", United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, November 2023, op. cit. This report uses UN estimates for the sake of comparing them with UN assessments in other countries, but more detailed assessments have found somewhat smaller declines: Mansfield, using high-resolution satellite imagery, estimated an 86 per cent drop in cultivation. See, "Afghanistan opium survey 2023", United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, November 2023; David Mansfield, "Uncharted Territory: Does the Taliban's new edict signal a crackdown on the drug trade is looming?", op. cit.

[86] The comparisons are imperfect, but the Taliban's ban affected more farmland than similar efforts in Colombia (1999-2010) that reduced coca cultivation by 106,000 hectares; in Peru (1995-2005) that diminished coca by 67,100 hectares; in Laos (1998-2007) that cut opium poppy cultivation by 25,337 hectares; and in Myanmar (1996-2006) that reduced opium plantations by 141,500 hectares. See UNODC reports: "Colombia: Coca Cultivation Survey 2010", "Peru: Coca Cultivation Survey for 2005", "Opium Poppy Cultivation in South East Asia 2007", and "Southeast Asia Opium Survey 2020".

[87] China devoted 2.6 million hectares to opium in the 1930s. Edward Slack Jr, *Opium, State, and Society: China's Narco-Economy and the Guomindang, 1924–1937* (Honolulu, 2001), p. 163. See also: Zhou Yongming, "Anti-Drug Campaigns and State Building: China's Experiences in the 1950s", *Cahiers d'Études sur la Méditerranée Orientale et le monde Turco-Iranien*, 2001, pp. 233-256.

[88] Crisis Group interviews, Afghan farmers in Baghlan, Badakhshan, Nangarhar, Laghman, Kandahar, Helmand and Uruzgan provinces, September-December 2023.

[89] Farmers in Badakhshan said that the best alternative crop would be kidney beans, which would earn a small fraction of the income from poppies. Farmers in Nangarhar province said they had more options, but that many were water-intensive and could generate conflicts among local communities. Crisis Group interviews, Afghan farmers, October 2023.

[90] A century ago, at the Second Opium Conference of 1924, Afghanistan reported opium cultivation in Badakhshan and Nangarhar provinces. As noted in "Global Illicit Drug Trends 2001", United Nations Office for Drug Control and Crime Prevention, op. cit.

[91] Crisis Group interviews, Western narcotics experts, April 2024.

At first, the authorities pushed back slowly. In late 2022, faced with their failure to deter planting of the winter crop in the highlands, especially in Badakhshan, local officials launched eradication efforts in these areas but on a modest scale, likely as a warning.[92] Instead of targeting farmers, the Taliban appeared to prefer taking action against small-time drug smugglers (see Section III.B above).[93] By early 2023, however, as poppy fields matured, it became abundantly clear that the ban was not well respected in the highlands. Traffickers claim that some of the country's largest smugglers shifted their bases from the south to northern Badakhshan province and expanded the opium trade along the so-called silk smuggling routes across the border with Tajikistan.[94]

Discontent also spread in the south, where farmers complained that they had been denied permission to grow the crop while others in the north and east flouted the ban.[95] This prompted more stringent enforcement in early 2023, as authorities started poppy clearance operations in Nangarhar.[96] In May 2023, the head of the Taliban's counter-narcotics police visited Badakhshan to meet provincial authorities and discuss eradication, followed by operations to destroy crops in several parts of the province later in the month.[97] Given that they were undertaken late in the harvesting season, many of these clearance operations only targeted a small portion of the crop, a compromise that allowed the Taliban a symbolic victory in showcasing enforcement while avoiding full-on confrontation with local communities.[98]

3. Sporadic resistance

Although the threat of Taliban crackdowns was sufficient to deter most farmers, eradication efforts triggered occasional clashes between farmers and security forces, particularly in Nangarhar and Badakhshan. These outbreaks of violence were short-lived as the Taliban suppressed dissent, sometimes with heavy-handed tactics but often through negotiations with local communities. Some resistance might have moderated the scope of the Taliban's ambitions, allowing farmers to eke out more harvests, but the authorities' willingness to deploy fighters also signalled to communities that future drug cultivation could result in state violence.

[92] Crisis Group interviews, Taliban officials and Afghan farmers in Badakhshan and Nangarhar, September-November 2023.
[93] See, for example, tweet by Ministry of Interior Affairs, @moiafghanistan, 4 December 2022; and tweet by Ministry of Interior Affairs, @moiafghanistan, 14 December 2022.
[94] Much of the trade uses one of two smuggling routes: the "Balkan" route which traverses Iran and Turkey; and the "silk" route which crosses Central Asia, earning its nickname from paths formerly used in the silk trade. Crisis Group interviews, drug smugglers in Takhar and Badakhshan, September 2023 and Taliban officials in Badakhshan, September 2023.
[95] Crisis Group interviews, farmers in Kandahar and Helmand, November 2023.
[96] Crisis Group interviews, farmers in Nangarhar, November 2023. See also tweet by Ministry of Interior Affairs, @moiafghanistan, 14 March 2023.
[97] Districts targeted for eradication included Argo, Darayim, Wurduj, Shuhada, Arghanj Khwa, Khash, and Baharak, with some additional operations in Ishkashim and Kishim districts. Crisis Group interviews, farmers in Badakhshan, October 2023.
[98] In May 2023, authorities claimed to have cleared 50 hectares of poppy in Nangarhar and 80 hectares in Badakhshan. See tweet and tweet by Ministry of Interior Affairs, @moiafghanistan, 9 and 22 May 2023.

Major incidents included a firefight between Taliban and poppy farmers in Nangarhar province in October 2022 as the local authorities destroyed opium fields, in which a farmer was killed. A similar skirmish occurred in the same province in April 2023 when Taliban opened fire on poppy farmers, killing one of them; another such encounter took place in May 2023 when the Taliban killed four farmers in Badakhshan province, after they protested against opium eradication. Most of the discontent focused on crop destruction, but locals also fought back in Ghor province in July 2023 when Taliban set fire to a drug lab.[99] Other acts of resistance went unreported in the local media, but overall, these incidents followed the pattern of flare-ups that subsided in a matter of hours.[100] In several cases, the violence was quelled by face-saving deals that allowed farmers to go ahead with parts of their harvest.[101] The main exception occurred in May 2024, when clashes between Taliban and farmers resulted in days of protests and several deaths in Badakhshan.[102]

These localised rebellions added to the simmering instability in parts of the country already chafing against Taliban rule. Most of the violence was concentrated in Badakhshan and Nangarhar provinces, where the previous government had recruited large numbers of young men to fight against the Taliban insurgency. Many survivors from those defeated forces remained unemployed after the Taliban's victory, returning home to farms that are often smaller and less fertile than the bigger plots in other parts of the country. These underlying factors help to explain why the Taliban struggled to enforce their ban in these areas, and why continued pressure on drug growers may contribute to simmering, if not growing, levels of unrest in the years ahead.

[99] Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), September 2021 to May 2024.
[100] Crisis Group interviews, Western officials and analysts, Kabul, 2023 and 2024.
[101] Crisis Group interview, Western expert, May 2024.
[102] Abubakar Siddique, "Taliban's drug ban, heavy-handed tactics fuel deadly protests in northern Afghanistan", RFE/RL, 15 May 2024.

IV. An Unsustainable Ban?

A. *Emerging Trends*

Farmers in several parts of the country told Crisis Group that they expect large-scale drug cultivation to remain suppressed in the coming year.[103] The World Bank estimates that farmers lost about $1.3 billion in annual income, or 8 per cent of GDP, and predicted that the ban would lead to heightened unemployment.[104] Signs are emerging of small-scale defiance as farmers turn to covert forms of cultivation, growing poppies in walled compounds or hidden gardens, often in small quantities or concealed by other crops.[105] Soaring opium prices, now hundreds of times higher than those of other crops, means that even if farmers can only sell very small quantities, they still make considerable profits.[106]

The Taliban are not likely to tolerate such breaches, and officials say they will continue tightening enforcement against both cultivation and trade.[107] Instead of burning crops, counter-narcotics officials have started using chemical herbicides to destroy poppy fields, raising fears among farmers about potential poisoning of their land and water.[108] Mindful that provincial authorities might not aggressively carry out eradication efforts, central authorities also appear to be bringing Taliban from outside the provinces for operations .[109] In locations where social systems remain tribal, authorities are warning elders that they could personally be arrested if any poppy is grown in their villages.[110] This tactic has been successful in some places, but less effective in areas where tribal leaders have little authority.[111] The Taliban have also increased the number of intrusive drug raids, entering homes to search for poppy.[112]

These raids and other measures probably will not deter farmers from growing small-scale crops. This is partly because, in many places, the risks are worth taking: the Taliban do not punish most farmers beyond destroying their illicit plantations. Nor does enforcement seem poised to stop trafficking. The Taliban say they will shutter more bazaars, clamp down on drug labs, and even destroy stockpiles.[113] While these

[103] Crisis Group interviews, Kabul, Kandahar, Nangarhar, and Badakhshan, 2023 and 2024.
[104] "Navigating Challenges: Confronting Economic Recession and Deflation", Afghanistan Development Update, World Bank, April 2024.
[105] Crisis Group observations, 2023.
[106] Price monitoring by Taliban security forces suggested that the farm-gate price of one kilogram of poppy resin in December 2023 was $818. By contrast, the price for one kilogram of wheat was between 30 cents and 60 cents, depending on location; cotton was between $1.50 and $2.50; and domestically-produced rice was 80 cents to $1.30. Only saffron, which sold for $1,014 per kilogram in Herat, offered comparable prices. "Afghanistan Monthly Drug Price Monitoring December 2023", Ministry of Interior Affairs, December 2023.
[107] See, for example, "Taliban begin using chemicals to destroy opium poppies", Radio Liberty Pashto, 8 April 2024 [Pashto].
[108] Crisis Group interviews, Taliban officials, 2023.
[109] The Taliban have previously used similar tactics to deal with other security issues. See: Crisis Group Report N°326, *Afghanistan's Security Challenges under the Taliban*, 12 August 2022.
[110] Crisis Group interviews, locals in Shirzad district in Nangarhar, October 2023.
[111] Crisis Group interviews, Nangarhar and Badakhshan provinces, 2023.
[112] Crisis Group interviews, residents in Kandahar, April 2024.
[113] Crisis Group interviews, Taliban officials in Kabul and Kandahar, May 2024.

measures disrupt the trade, they are unlikely to eliminate it. Indeed, Afghan drug traffickers have reportedly started importing raw opium from Pakistan's borderlands to meet demand and bolster stocks.[114]

This points to a broader problem the Taliban face: deterrence no longer works as well as it did initially. As a result, authorities increasingly need to turn to physical eradication in key hotspots to reduce cultivation. This could require huge amounts of resources from the cash-strapped security forces in the coming years, as failure to enforce the ban uniformly would risk a resurgence of the crop in areas where it was previously stamped out.

Moreover, the eradication of poppy fields may be boosting the manufacture and export of synthetic drugs, which are starting to replace opiates as Afghanistan's primary drug commodity.[115] In the case of methamphetamines, dried ephedra plants remain available in Afghan markets; should there be shortages, manufacturers can easily switch to synthetic "over-the-counter" alternatives to ephedra.[116] Labs used to make synthetic drugs also appear to be proliferating, with dealers moving them to remote areas as they are forced out of villages.[117]

B. *Doubts about the Future of the Ban*

The ban has dealt a blow to the Afghan economy when it was already badly affected by sanctions, asset freezes, banking restrictions, and aid cuts. The country lost 26 per cent of economic output after the Taliban takeover in 2021, but informal sectors such as the drug trade softened the impact for rural communities. Such illicit industries were estimated at the time to match or exceed the size of the licit economy.[118] Against this backdrop, the Taliban's tough enforcement of the narcotics ban has affected the livelihoods of an estimated 6.9 million people, at a time when many were already severely struggling.[119]

Beyond farmers, labourers are most affected – particularly women. Opium is a labour-intensive crop. Historically, it constituted a primary source of employment for both men and women in a third of Afghan villages.[120] In part because the Taliban has severely limited opportunities for women to earn a livelihood, work in the fields remains the main source of employment for women outside of their homes.[121] When

[114] Smuggling networks cross Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran, and some dealers talk about recalibrating to make Afghanistan an import-export hub rather than depending on its dwindling supplies. Crisis Group interviews, narcotics smugglers in Helmand, November 2023.
[115] UNODC predicted a sharp rise in methamphetamine trafficking, based on increased seizures. "UNODC: Methamphetamine trafficking in and around Afghanistan expanding rapidly as heroin trade slows", Press Release: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 10 September 2023.
[116] Most drug refiners prefer wild ephedra over synthetic alternatives, because of its low price but also because they claim the natural ingredients make better drugs. Crisis Group interviews, 2023.
[117] See tweet by David Mansfield, @mansfieldintinc, Afghanistan drug expert, 3:46pm, 13 June 2023.
[118] Crisis Group Asia Report N°317, *Beyond Emergency Relief: Averting Afghanistan's Humanitarian Catastrophe*, op. cit.
[119] "Prosperity or Penury: The political and economic fallout of the opium ban in Afghanistan", Afghanistan Analysts Network, 15 November 2023.
[120] See, "Afghanistan opium survey 2023", United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, op. cit.
[121] "Afghanistan Gender Monitoring Survey: Baseline Report", The World Bank, February 2023.

the harvests do not deliver enough to feed their families, moreover, the burdens of malnutrition and diseases fall most upon girls and women.[122]

By contrast, big landowners and smugglers are doing well. Some of them support the ban for the sake of inflating prices, as most of them still have large stockpiles of dried opium.[123] Over the long term, however, even this wealthier cohort stands to be affected. Given the dramatic drop in opium production, without a major return to cultivation the entire sector could be operating on borrowed time. Should stocks deplete or prices plummet as synthetic opiates or other countries' producers fill the vacuum, what has been called the "most reliable illegal activity" in Afghanistan might become much less dependable.[124]

Fertile parts of the country could grow high-value substitutes, such as pomegranate, figs, almond, "hing" (asafoetida) and pistachio, but all of these require upfront investment and time before they reach profitability, along with better infrastructure.[125] Many farmers in the south have also turned to cotton, but the water-intensive crop is risky in a country wracked by droughts, and could exacerbate the climate crisis by further depleting water resources. Locals in areas that have switched to cotton already complain of falling water levels in major rivers.[126]

Taliban officials express hope that foreign donors might step into the breach, but the Emir's edicts curtailing women's rights have rendered his regime politically toxic for the Western countries that historically funded counter-narcotics and rural development programs.[127] That said, some donors made gestures of support for the Taliban's crackdown. The European Union, for example, funnelled €26 million through the World Health Organization and United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime to rehabilitate drug users in Afghanistan, in addition to allocating €79 million for food

[122] For cultural reasons, poor families tend to feed boys better than girls. As a result, therapeutic feeding centres for malnourished children report mortality rates among girls 90 per cent higher than among boys. "Persistent barriers to access healthcare in Afghanistan: An MSF report", Médecins Sans Frontières, 6 February 2023.

[123] Estimating the remaining inventory is near-impossible, but farmers and traffickers in the south told Crisis Group that they own large stockpiles, with some claiming it could last them three or four years. Crisis Group interviews, 2023-2024.

[124] It is too early to assess the global impact of the Taliban's drug ban, but some experts wonder if opium shortages could lead to a decrease in consumption, displacement of production to other countries, or acceleration of market trends that already favour replacement of opium with fentanyl and other synthetic opioids. Crisis Group interviews, drug experts, 2023 and 2024.

[125] Crisis Group interviews, farmers in southern Afghanistan in November 2023, and "Afghanistan opium survey 2023", United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, op. cit. Also known as Asafoetida, "hing" is a type of medicinal plant that grows in the wild in northern Afghanistan and is exported to regional countries. It is primarily used in the production of antibiotics.

[126] Cotton cultivation has increased in Helmand, Kandahar, Nangarhar, Balkh and Takhar provinces. The turn to cotton cultivation may have contributed to declining levels in the Helmand River, leading to disputes between Afghanistan and downstream Iran. See Crisis Group Asia Report N°337, *The Taliban's Neighbourhood: Regional Diplomacy with Afghanistan*, op. cit. For the rise in cotton cultivation see "Afghanistan's cotton harvest surges by 40%, Taliban claims", *Kabul Now*, 16 February 2024.

[127] See, for example, "Mawlawi Amir Khan Muttaqi Sahib's speech at the opening of the 5,000-bed drug addiction center (Aghosh)", Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 7 February 2023.

security projects.[128] While welcome, such amounts are a far cry from the investments required to overhaul the agricultural sector, which employs about half of the working population, including 70 per cent of working women.[129] Donors walked away from infrastructure projects worth more than $2.8 billion when the Taliban took over – including energy, transportation, and irrigation works that were in part designed to bolster agriculture.[130] Almost none have restarted.[131]

As a result of both the Taliban's lack of preparation and the dearth of international development support, the economic impact of the Taliban's war on drugs is mounting. Some experts say it is a matter of time before the leadership buckles under the pressure of discontent from farmers, especially as many backed the Taliban as an insurgent force.[132] Other observers point out that Taliban supporters, including rich landowners and dealers, are flourishing under the prohibition and therefore support it, at least for now.[133] It is possible, however, that the reclusive Taliban leader will put ideology before political considerations. After all, declaring a halt to the narcotics trade cut off a revenue stream for his own government, which had been collecting significant taxes on the drug trade at a time when the regime lacked cash.[134] Regardless of motives, unless the economy transitions to sustainable alternatives, the ban will face growing pressures if stockpiles dwindle, increasing the number of voices calling for its overturn.

[128] "Press statement by Tomas Niklasson, EU Special Envoy for Afghanistan", Delegation of the European Union to Afghanistan, 8 February 2024.

[129] Agriculture employed 49 per cent of working Afghans, including a higher share of women (70 per cent) than men (42 per cent). "Country profiles: Afghanistan", International Labour Organization, 2021.

[130] "Afghanistan: Unfinished Legacy Infrastructure Projects", unpublished paper, Asian Development Bank, 3 September 2022.

[131] The World Bank's latest plan, "Approach 3.0", "deliberately limits" infrastructure spending to works on a single project, a regional electricity corridor known as CASA-1000, whose completion was requested by neighbouring countries. "The Next Phase of Support to the People of Afghanistan", discussion paper, World Bank, 5 February 2024.

[132] Crisis Group interviews, western narcotics and economic experts, January-June 2024.

[133] Many of the southern farmers Crisis Group interviewed criticised the ban, but many also felt they did not yet need to sell their stockpiles and wanted to hold onto them in the hopes that prices might climb further. Crisis Group interviews, farmers in Kandahar, Uruzgan, Helmand, January-June 2024.

[134] David Mansfield, "Uncharted Territory: Does the Taliban's new edict signal a crackdown on the drugs trade is looming?", op. cit.

V. Recalibrating the Economy: Sustainably, Equitably, Legally

A. *The Taliban's Struggle to Find Alternative Industries*

The Taliban know that responsibility for the transition toward a licit economy rests on their shoulders. Their de facto government has spent a large share of its meagre budget on dams, irrigation, and road repairs, with a focus on water infrastructure.[135] These measures appear to be part of the Taliban's broader economic vision rather than a reaction to the drug ban, but will help affected farmers to grow and market crops other than narcotics. Taliban officials seem eager to negotiate deals with regional countries to gain market access for agricultural exports, although tensions with Afghanistan's neighbours have at times stunted these efforts.[136]

The possibility of economic collaboration with other countries is even more remote. In June 2024, Western donors complained when the UN organised talks with the Taliban in Doha focused on counter-narcotics and the poverty crisis. Donors wanted to include Afghan women and civil society activists in these meetings, which the Taliban rejected.[137] The talks did go ahead, with interlocutors endorsing further discussions with the Taliban and establishing two working groups focused on the economy and narcotics.[138] These two committees arguably have similar jobs: many of the fixes required to sustainably end the drug industry are the same as those necessary to rebuild the post-war economy, namely building the capacity of the Afghan state to deliver services such as electricity, water, roads and central banking. Such aid, however, remains blocked by donors, who fear it would legitimise the Taliban regime.

B. *The Case for Western Investment*

Yet Western donors have good reason to make investments that support the Taliban's experiment with counter-narcotics policy, if only for their own security interests. Firstly, the drugs produced in Afghanistan often end up in Western markets. Secondly, Western governments, particularly in Europe, want to stem the flow of migration from Afghanistan, and farmers losing their livelihoods may well decide to emigrate in search of a better life.[139] The best way to avoid both would be to support the Afghan economy. This might involve restoring even a small percentage of the

[135] The Taliban's budget is not published but they claim to have collected almost $3 billion in revenue in the fiscal year ending in March 2024, mostly from customs, and largely consumed by the state payroll. Crisis Group interviews, Taliban officials, Kabul, May 2024.

[136] On the Taliban's economic engagement with regional countries, see Crisis Group Asia Report N°337, *The Taliban's Neighbourhood: Regional Diplomacy with Afghanistan*, op. cit.

[137] The donors wrote a letter of complaint to the United Nations Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, calling for the inclusion of Afghan civil society members "… so that they too feel legitimate, and valued", Untitled letter from diplomats representing Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Norway, the Republic of Korea, Switzerland, Türkiye, the United Kingdom, the United States of America, and the European Union, 14 June 2024.

[138] Andrew Watkins, "What's Next for the U.N.'s Doha Process on Afghanistan?", United States Institute of Peace, 16 July 2024.

[139] Afghanistan was second only to Syria in terms of first-time EU asylum applicants in 2023. "Asylum applicants by type, citizenship, age and sex – annual aggregated data", Eurostat, 2024.

development funding that flowed to Afghanistan in the past – including to finish some of the incomplete infrastructure projects abandoned overnight in 2021 – and building on long-standing plans for economic recovery that were shelved after the Taliban takeover. Such steps would help to make the transition toward a sustainable, equitable economy that does not depend on illegal drugs.

In the first instance, international support could focus on rural development including rural infrastructure, income generation support, water projects, and investments in agro-processing and marketing.[140] Farmers could benefit immediately from technical help with water conservation methods such as drip irrigation rain water harvesting.[141] Pilot studies into alternative crops, supported by international organisations, could play a role in helping identify viable off-ramps for farmers. Additionally, any agricultural transformation plan needs to factor in the country's vulnerability to climate change.[142]

Any assistance programs should take into account the most acutely vulnerable Afghans: small farmers and agriculture labourers – with particular attention to women – but also Afghan drug users who, faced with a shortage of opiates, might turn to other narcotics such as methamphetamines or synthetic drugs. Programs could bolster the authorities' efforts to improve drug treatment programs to help reduce relapse rates and provide patients with better reintegration opportunities. More importantly, rehabilitation programs should be recalibrated away from focusing on homeless people toward support for other under-served users, especially women and children.

C. *Taliban Enforcement: Too Heavy-handed?*

In the meantime, Taliban authorities should consider a phased approach to enforcement that initially focuses on large-scale drug cultivation while deferring action against smaller plots in personal gardens or walled compounds. This would not require any changes to the Emir's adamantine edicts but could involve a shift in enforcement strategy, in particular by stepping away from invasive house-to-house searches. Allowing farmers to grow and sell small quantities while poppy prices remain inflated could provide a safety net for farmers who might otherwise struggle to meet their basic needs. The Taliban could keep up the pressure on large-scale production by eradicating major fields, but some degree of leniency for household gardens would allow the poorest farmers a bit of breathing room while Afghanistan makes the transition to a licit economy.

Authorities could also consider exempting some areas, or entire provinces. For example, in places where farmers currently have no realistic alternative to poppy, the Taliban might offer temporary, geographically-limited, grace periods. Countries in the region that lobby the Taliban for tough counter-narcotics enforcement should signal to the regime that a softer approach is acceptable in the years before economic

[140] William Byrd, "The Taliban's Successful Opium Ban is Bad for Afghans and the World", United States Institute of Peace, 8 June 2023.
[141] Crisis Group interview, UN official, Kabul, June 2024.
[142] "Why the Taliban Should be Brought in from the Cold for Climate Talks", Crisis Group Commentary, 24 November 2023.

recovery takes hold. Better regional cooperation on issues such as border screening and customs integration would have the dual effect of improving security and fostering trade, hastening the transition to a licit economy.[143]

D. *The False Promise of Rural Livelihoods Projects*

That said, efforts tailored at softening the blow to farmers' livelihoods are unlikely to be sufficient to address the overall impact. The combined weight of unemployed labourers who used to work the opium fields; returnees forced back from Pakistan and Iran; and a fast-growing population add up to an impossible burden on Afghanistan's limited farmland. As one expert put it, the country is already facing a "surplus" rural population, with arable land insufficient to provide employment for the population living on it, driving migration into cities and beyond borders.[144] To generate enough jobs, over the longer term the country needs a development plan focusing on non-farm employment, and a shift to industrialisation.[145]

The first steps for such a shift were recommended by a UN review and endorsed by the Security Council in December 2023, although most Western donors are still reluctant to heed the review's recommendations that they give some development aid to an unrecognised regime that denies women and girls their basic rights.[146] Instead, they restrict themselves to a grey zone at the edges of humanitarian aid, labelled "basic needs assistance", a rubric that allows projects to help with Afghan livelihoods but only on a small scale. "Everyone is funding their pet projects without looking at the bigger picture", admitted an international official.[147] Given Afghanistan's profound poverty, international financial institutions should logically work with national authorities on a multi-year development plan, but such cooperation remains difficult under the Taliban.[148]

Regional countries will bear many of the consequences of the Taliban's narcotics ban, whether as a result of unemployed labourers streaming across borders, or decreased flows in transboundary rivers as the Taliban struggle to irrigate new fields. These risks should push international actors toward supporting Afghanistan's inte-

[143] Graeme Smith and Ibraheem Bahiss, "The World Has No Choice But to Work With the Taliban", *Foreign Affairs*, 11 August 2023.
[144] Crisis Group interview, rural development and narcotics expert, March 2024.
[145] So-called "alternative development" projects have a poor track record of replacing drug crops with legal agriculture in recent decades. In one review, evaluators noted that the solution in most countries is "driven not by agriculture at all, but by non-farm employment and, most crucially, by commuting or migration to better-paid urban jobs". Steve Goss, "Mid-term Evaluation of the Community-Based Agriculture and Rural Development – East Project", UNDP, February 2020.
[146] The UN Special Coordinator's review of international engagement with Afghanistan concluded that a "priority area" should include "supporting food security and agricultural livelihoods, including the [Taliban's] ongoing counternarcotics campaign". Letter pursuant to resolution 2679 (2023), UN Secretary-General, 8 November 2023.
[147] Crisis Group interview, Kabul, 2024.
[148] International officials are often allowed to talk with the regime at a "technical" level but forbidden from working with senior Taliban. One review said this sabotages aid: "Absent a full strategic dialogue with the [Taliban] administration, the World Bank cannot expect to impact broad economic development outcomes". Tobias Haque, Nigel Roberts, Atiqullah Ahmadzai, "Tackling Fragility and Building Institutions: Lessons From Afghanistan", The World Bank, 2023.

gration into regional economic plans, opening trade and building transport connections, which would help with regional stability and contribute to social change in the long term. The Afghan people would benefit from greater ties to the neighbourhood, and farmers would find markets for their harvests.[149]

[149] See Crisis Group Asia Report, The Taliban's Neighbourhood: Regional Diplomacy with Afghanistan, op. cit.

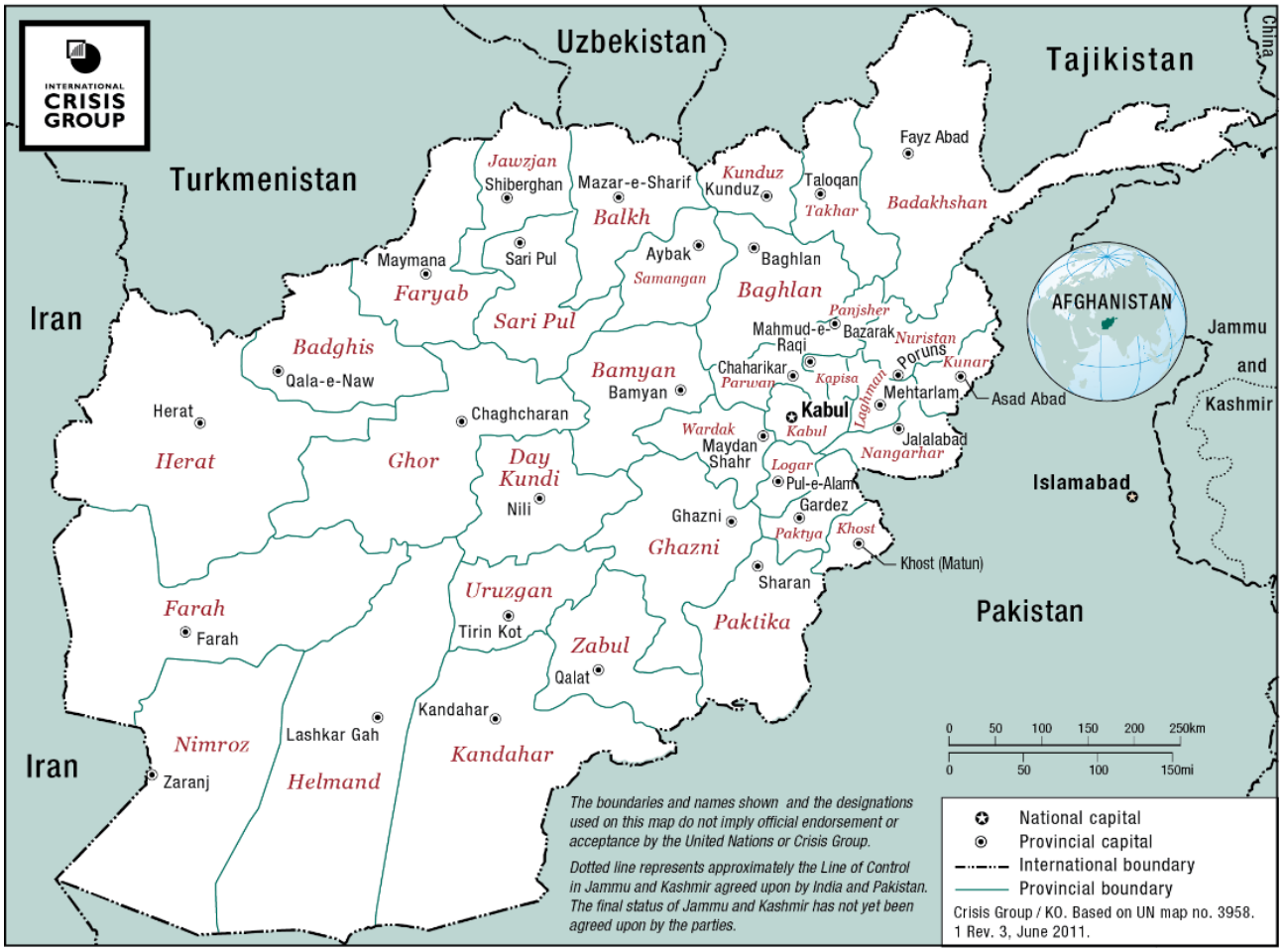
VI. Conclusion

The way the Taliban regime has implemented the narcotics ban is a testament to how the new administration in Kabul wields power. The prohibition on narcotics has been a patchwork of measures, rolled out unevenly, but still amounts to a blanket ban that covers more of the country than any previous attempt. This sets the Taliban apart from many rulers of Afghanistan in the last century, when kings and presidents usually did not presume that their writ extended to the remotest fields.

Nobody can fault the Taliban for lacking ambition in this regard. Yet, the manner in which this policy was enacted suggests that Taliban policymakers continue to have a breathtakingly high tolerance for the painful results of their policies among the country's most vulnerable people. Large sections of the rural population, especially women, could be forced deeper into poverty if the ban on drug cultivation continues to be strictly enforced. The Taliban may not fully appreciate the misery triggered by their policy because their traditional supporters, especially in the country's south, tend to suffer less thanks to their opium stockpiles. The new authorities, however, would do well to grapple with the seriousness of the economic shocks still reverberating from their edicts, and take a more realistic approach toward easing unemployment. For their part, regional and international actors should engage with the Taliban to help make it work. Cooperation with the regime to support a licit Afghan economy would help with fighting the international drug trade and curbing migration in the short term, while also presenting an opportunity to support rural women.

Kabul/Brussels, 12 September 2024

Appendix A: Map of Afghanistan



Appendix B: About the International Crisis Group

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Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 80 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, www.crisisgroup.org. Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board of Trustees – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policymakers around the world. Crisis Group is co-chaired by President & CEO of the Fiore Group and Founder of the Radcliffe Foundation, Frank Giustra, as well as by former Foreign Minister of Argentina and Chef de Cabinet to the United Nations Secretary-General, Susana Malcorra.

Comfort Ero was appointed Crisis Group's President & CEO in December 2021. She first joined Crisis Group as West Africa Project Director in 2001 and later rose to become Africa Program Director in 2011 and then Interim Vice President. In between her two tenures at Crisis Group, she worked for the International Centre for Transitional Justice and the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General in Liberia.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in seven other locations: Bogotá, Dakar, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Addis Ababa, Bahrain, Baku, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Kabul, Kyiv, Manila, Mexico City, Moscow, Seoul, Tbilisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.

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