



# Plant kingdom

The latest military offensive in Helmand is being accompanied by a new strategy in the battle to win the hearts and minds of Afghans: a step away from wholesale poppy eradication. **Vanda Felbab-Brown** reports on why this controversial experiment is the most likely route away from war and oppression in Afghanistan.

Now that intense fighting under Operation Moshtarak to wrestle the poppy-rich Helmand district of Marja from Taliban control has ended, the most difficult part – to build good governance there – has begun. Many problems complicate building good governance in Afghanistan, from corruption and tribal loyalties to a lack of technical capacity. And chief among the challenges is poppy.

The problem is not simply that the illicit opium economy contributes to the Taliban's coffers and intensifies widespread corruption in Afghanistan. It's more pernicious than that. It is an economy that fills the coffers of the majority of key players on the Afghan stage, including senior government officials. The poppy has massive political implications in Afghanistan.

For large segments of the rural population, such as the inhabitants of Marja, poppy frequently represents their predominant and sometimes sole

livelihood. And indirectly, it underpins much of Afghanistan's other economic activity, such as construction and sale of durables as well as consumer goods. Not surprisingly, poppy cultivation – though technically illegal – is seen as legitimate by many Afghans, especially those who would otherwise suffer a great economic hardship.

The Nato-led International Security Assistance Force (Isaf) is finding that although Marja's inhabitants for the most part do not like the Taliban, the fact that the Taliban allowed them to grow poppy in peace was crucial. It is predicted that if police are now to be brought in to enforce eradication of the poppy crop, the inhabitants will rebel.

A high level Isaf military officer recently told me: "We understand that eradication drives the population into the hands of the Taliban, and we don't want that. But the problem is that without somehow suppressing the poppy, it looks like a bunch of US marine

guys are guarding the poppy fields, with the narcotics industry functioning right under their noses."

Tolerating the farmers' cultivation of poppy may look bad to the international community, but not to many Afghans. Rather, if poppy is suppressed without legal livelihoods already in place, the Afghans will view the forthcoming military campaign in Kandahar with a jaundiced eye. The result will be ineffectiveness on two fronts: counter-narcotics and counter-insurgency.

The reactions Isaf is encountering in Marja are indicative of the reactions throughout rural southern and eastern Afghanistan. One of the principal sources of the popular tolerance for and sometimes outright embrace of the Taliban has been its protection of the poppy fields against eradication. Since forced eradication was rolled out in 2004 in Kandahar, the Taliban used protection against poppy eradication to mobilise the population – from areas

**(Left) Treading carefully: US Marines walking through a poppy field in Marja**

with traditionally strong Taliban support, such as the districts of Arghandab and Maywand in Kandahar, to areas that traditionally were not friendly to the movement, such as Shinwar and Khogiani districts in Nangarhar.

A deep-seated resentment against the police – widely perceived as thieves in state-issued uniforms – comes not only from a fear that they will supervise the eradication of poppy, but even more so from the fear that they will steal the opium and themselves sell it for profit, as they indeed have done many times. The best way to be a drug trafficker is to be in charge of eradication or interdiction.

In a courageous break with 30 years of counter-narcotics policies that focused on ineffective, forced eradication of illicit crops as a way to reduce supply of drugs and bankrupt belligerents, the Obama administration wisely decided last year to scale back eradication in Afghanistan.

The administration understood that fighting a population-centric counter-insurgency would be deeply at odds with eradicating the crops on which the population depends for human security and economic survival. Suspending eradication has been a critical mechanism in winning the population away from the Taliban. Instead, the administration determined to focus on interdiction and rural development.

That overall strategy is appropriate. Not simply because of the political aspects of winning the hearts and minds of the population through their stomachs, but also because the evidence from the ground so far shows eradication will not bankrupt the Taliban. The Taliban rebuilt itself in Pakistan between 2002-2004 largely without access to the drug trade. In fact, eradication policies have failed to bankrupt a belligerent group anywhere in the world: Colombia being one example. In short, the siren song of eradication is false: it does not bankrupt belligerents; instead, it alienates the population, thus curtailing intelligence provision and other co-operation with the counter-insurgents.

As the poppy plants continue to grow in Marja, however, the new strategy may be difficult to sustain. Already voices to eradicate are increasing. In addition to being a hard sell, the desired effects of the new policy will take time and be very uneven.

Take rural development, which the Obama administration has embraced. That indeed is the sustainable way

to reduce the illicit economy and violence and build a functioning state in Afghanistan. But it takes a lot of time and resources. It needs to be well-designed and address the economic drivers of illicit crop cultivation: physical insecurity, lack of infrastructure, microcredit and value-added chains, and not simply chase a replacement crop. Addressing these complex drivers takes a lot of trial and error and patience: it will not get rid of poppy in Marja in a year or so. So come the late spring, Marja's inhabitants are bound to be lancing the poppy capsules and scraping the resin right under the marines' noses, even with rural development under way.

## SUSPENDING ERADICATION HAS BEEN A CRITICAL MECHANISM IN WINNING THE POPULATION AWAY FROM THE TALIBAN

Why not compensate the farmers for eradicating their fields? Providing compensation for eradication, including the assurance of food security, is certainly better than simply conducting forced eradication without alternatives in place. But at best, compensation for eradication, including 'self-eradication', is a stop-gap measure. At worst, it can lead to a host of perverse effects.

When compensated eradication was tried in Afghanistan between 2002-2003, much of the money was stolen, either by corrupt Afghan officials who did not pass it on to those farmers who eradicated or by farmers who pretended to eradicate in order to pocket the money.

But the crucial failure of the compensation scheme is that in some cases it created an incentive for farmers to grow more poppies. Farmers realized that the more poppy they grew, the more they could destroy and the more compensation they would get. Moreover, farmers that had been restricted in the amount of poppies they could grow because of the labour-intensive nature of collecting the resin from plant heads, were able to increase their cultivations because they were paid for simply destroying plants, not gathering resin. Nor does compensation do anything to address the fact that the 'on the ground' banking system and economy

in Afghanistan is largely linked to the opium trade. The harsh reality is that a farmer who severs all links with the opium trade lowers his chances of getting credit.

If you can't stop the poppies being cultivated, the next best thing is to seize the opium. Interdiction, when carried out properly, is a component of the right policy, but not because it will either bankrupt the Taliban or by itself reduce poppy cultivation. If interdiction was extensive enough to shut down local demand for opium by traffickers, such as by preventing traffickers from getting into the Marja district or confiscating poppy seeds on a large scale, its local effects would be indistinguishable from eradication. And the population would be back in the hands of the Taliban. Instead, interdiction should focus on reducing the corruption and coercive power of crime groups – be they Taliban-linked or government-linked.

Instead of oscillating between forced eradication and choosing not to enforce regulation, the international community and the Afghan government should explicitly embrace the model that works in the context of illicit crops: development with sequenced eradication.

The policy should be announced as follows: the drug trade is illegal and harmful for the country, Afghan society, and the international community. But we understand that the Afghan people need to feed their families. So we will work with the Afghan people to address the structural drivers of poppy cultivation. Once the opportunity to sustain a legal livelihood is available – a determination to be made jointly by the Afghan government, a team of international experts, and with input from the local community – those who have not abandoned poppy cultivation, will have their poppies eradicated.

In some areas of Afghanistan, this policy would enable eradication to be carried out now; in others, it would take years of development. Such a policy would be effective, sustainable, consistent, politically feasible and synergistic with both counter-insurgency efforts and state-building.

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