

How the Taliban Crushed the CIA's Heroin Bonanza in Afghanistan

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In the aftermath of the chaotic US and UK withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021, Pakistani journalist Hamid Mir [warned](#) in the Washington Post of the dangers of "ignoring one important consequence of the Taliban takeover: the coming boom in Afghanistan's narcotics trade."

Mir then boldly predicted that, "in the next few years, a flood of drugs from Afghanistan may become a bigger threat than terrorism."

This projection of an international drug trade boom seemed plausible, considering the longstanding accusations that the Taliban funded their two-decade insurgency against the occupying forces by controlling opium production. In fact, it was believed that [95 percent of heroin](#) used in Britain originated from Afghan opium.

It comes as a surprise then, that a June 2023 [report](#) published by Alcis, a British-based geographic information services firm, revealed that the Taliban government had all but eliminated opium cultivation in the country, wiping out the base ingredient needed to produce heroin. This outcome mirrored a [similar move by the Taliban in 2000](#) when they were in power for the first time.

Ironically, instead of praising Kabul's new leaders for quashing the source of illicit drugs, the international community responded to this development with criticism. Even the US Institute for Peace (USIP), which is funded by the US government, [argued](#) that "The Taliban's successful opium ban is bad for Afghans and the world."

Such western displeasure towards the Taliban's efforts to dismantle the global heroin trade may seem perplexing at first glance.

However, a closer examination of events in Afghanistan reveals a different perspective.

Under the guise of the “War on Terror,” the 2001 US and UK invasion was driven in part by the desire to restore the heroin trade, which the Taliban had abruptly terminated just a year earlier.

The western powers sought to [reestablish](#) the lucrative flow of billions of dollars that the heroin trade provided to their financial systems. In fact, “For 20 years, America essentially ran a narco-state in Afghanistan.”

‘Dollar for Dollar’

To understand the origins of the Afghan heroin trade, a review of US involvement in the central Asian nation is necessary, beginning in 1979 when the CIA embarked on a [covert program](#) to undermine the pro-Soviet Afghan government in Kabul.

The US covertly supported an umbrella of Muslim guerrilla fighters known as mujahideen, with the hope that provoking an insurgency would entice the Soviet Army to intervene. This calculated move would force the Soviets into occupying Afghanistan and engaging in a protracted and costly counter-insurgency campaign, thereby weakening the Soviet Union over time.

To accomplish this, the CIA turned to its close allies, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, for help. Saudi Prince Bandar bin Sultan facilitated a meeting between CIA Director William Casey and Saudi King Fahd, in which the Saudis [committed](#) to matching “America dollar for dollar supporting the mujahideen.”

The US and Saudi Arabia, with help from Pakistani’s Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), set up training camps for the mujahideen in Pakistan, and supplied them with advisors, weapons, and cash to fight the Soviets.

Gulbaddin Hekmatyar, the founder of the Hizb-i-Islami militia, was among the most prominent mujahideen leaders, receiving some \$600 million in aid from the CIA and its allies.

Journalist Steve Coll [writes](#) in his Pulitzer Prize-winning book *Ghost Wars* that Hekymatyar recruited from the most radical, anti-western, transnational Islamist networks to fight with him, including Osama bin Laden and other Arab volunteers. CIA officers “embraced Hekmatyar as their most dependable and effective ally,” and “the most efficient at killing Soviets.”

Caravans of Opium

Aid to Hekymatyar and other mujahideen leaders was not limited to cash and weapons. According to renowned [historian](#) Alfred McCoy:

“1979 and 1980, just as the CIA effort was beginning to ramp up, a network of heroin laboratories opened along the Afghan-Pakistan frontier. That region soon became the world’s largest heroin producer.”

The process involved smuggling raw opium gum to Pakistan, where it was processed into heroin in laboratories run by the ISI. The finished product was then discreetly transported via Pakistani airports, ports, or overland routes.

Image: U.S. troops guarding an opium poppy field in Afghanistan.



By 1984, Afghan heroin supplied a staggering 60 percent of the US market and 80 percent of the European market, while devastatingly creating 1.3 million heroin addicts in Pakistan, a country previously untouched by the highly-addictive drug.

McCoy states further that, “caravans carrying CIA arms into that region for the resistance often returned to Pakistan loaded down with opium.” [Reports](#) from 2001 cited by the *New York Times* confirmed that this occurred “with the assent of Pakistani or American intelligence officers who supported the resistance.”

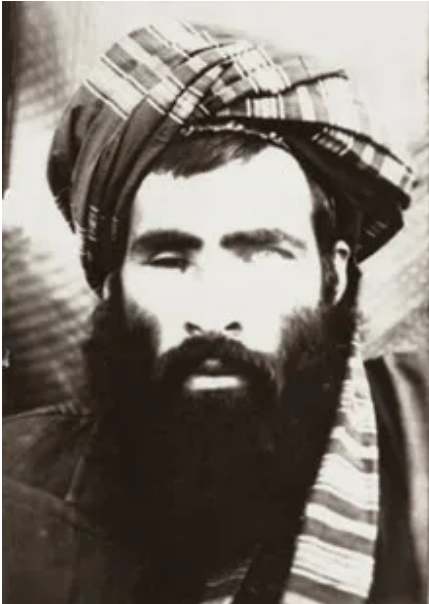
In May 1990, the *Washington Post* [reported](#) that the US government had for several years received, but declined to investigate, reports of heroin trafficking by its allies, including “firsthand accounts of heroin smuggling by commanders under Gulbuddin Hekmatyar.”

Rise of the Taliban

When the Soviets did finally withdraw in 1989, the country fell into civil war as the major CIA-backed factions began fighting among themselves for control of the country. Mujahideen leaders became warlords and committed terrible atrocities against the local population while fighting amongst themselves.

It was during this anarchy that religious students from the madrassas (seminary schools), the Taliban, emerged with the help of Pakistani intelligence to take control of the country in 1996, subsequently inheriting the opium trade, which continued unhindered for several years.

Portrait photograph of Mullah Omar in 1993, just before he founded the Taliban (Licensed under Fair Use)



In July 2000, however, Taliban leader Mullah Omar [ordered](#) a ban on all opium cultivation. Remarkably, the Taliban successfully slashed the opium harvest by 94 percent, reducing yearly production to only 185 metric tons.

Five months later, in December 2000, the US and Russia used the UN Security Council to impose harsh new sanctions on Afghanistan, citing the Taliban's refusal to hand over Al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden following the bombing of the USS Cole in Yemen, in which 17 US sailors were killed. Bin Laden had taken refuge in the Islamic Emirate in 1996 after he was expelled from Sudan.

The *New York Times* [reported](#) that US officials sought to impose the new sanctions, despite warnings from the UN that "a million Afghans could face starvation in coming months because of a drought and continued civil war."

Following the attacks on 11 September, 2001, Bush administration officials demanded the Taliban hand over Bin Laden once again. Mullah Omar insisted the US first provide evidence of Bin Laden's guilt, but President Bush refused this request and ordered the US air force to begin bombing Afghanistan on 7 October.

In the wake of the bombing, Mullah Omar dropped the demand for evidence, and offered to hand over Bin Laden to US ally Pakistan for trial. Bush administration officials once again refused.

Journalist and author Scott Horton highlights in his [book](#) *Fool's Errand* a peculiar aspect of the US campaign: the lack of a clear focus on capturing or eliminating Bin Laden. In fact, President Bush had already stated on 25 September that success or failure should not be defined solely by capturing Bin Laden.

Horton notes further that US planners made no initial effort to hunt down Bin Laden and the foreign Arab fighters supporting him. Instead, head of US Central Command, General Tommy Franks prioritized partnering with Afghan warlord Rashid Dostum to take control of the north of the country, and establish a "land link" to Uzbekistan.

Turning to the Warlords

To also capture the capital, Kabul, and other key cities in the south, Alfred McCoy [notes](#) the CIA:

“Turned to a group of rising Pashtun warlords along the Pakistan border who had been active as drug smugglers in the south-eastern part of the country. As a result, when the Taliban collapsed, the groundwork had already been laid for the resumption of opium cultivation and the drug trade on a major scale.”

Though US forces were too late to prevent Bin Laden’s escape to Pakistan, the US bombing campaign came just in time for the beginning of poppy planting season. Poppies are planted in the autumn so that the juice from the plant, from which opium is extracted, can be harvested in spring.

McCoy [clarified](#) further that, “the Agency (CIA) and its local allies created ideal conditions for reversing the Taliban’s opium ban and reviving the drug traffic. Only weeks after the collapse of the Taliban, officials were reporting an outburst of poppy planting in the heroin-heartlands of Helmand and Nangarhar.”

In December, one of these rising Pashtun warlords, Hamid Karzai, was appointed Chairman of the Afghan Interim Administration and later president.

By the spring of 2002, large amounts of Afghan heroin were once again being transported to Britain via daily flights from Pakistani airports. The *Guardian* [observed](#) the case of a 13-year-old girl who was stopped after she stepped off a Pakistan International Airlines flight from Islamabad to London carrying 13kgs of heroin with a street value of £910,000.

Industrial Scale

Thanks to the “land link” established by General Franks, heroin also immediately began flowing north from Mazar-e-Sharif, under CIA ally Rashid Dostum’s control, to Uzbekistan and then to Russia and Europe.

The flow of heroin was [witnessed](#) by Craig Murray, the British Ambassador to Uzbekistan, who explained that Dostum, an ethnic Uzbek, facilitated the smuggling of heroin from Afghanistan to Uzbekistan, where it was then shipped up the railway line, in bales of cotton, to Moscow and then Riga. As Murray noted:

“Opium is converted into heroin on an industrial scale, not in kitchens but in factories. Millions of gallons of the chemicals needed for this process are shipped into Afghanistan by tanker...The four largest players in the heroin business are all senior members of the Afghan government – the government that our soldiers are fighting and dying to protect.”

‘A Hands Off Approach’

In addition to Dostum, Afghan President Hamid Karzai’s younger brother, Ahmed Wali Karzai, quickly secured a prominent role in the Afghan heroin trade.

Image: Ahmad Wali Karzai (U.S. Navy photo by Petty Officer 1st Class Mark O’Donald/Released)



Credible reports emerged that Wali Karzai was deeply involved in the heroin trade, however, [according](#) to the *New York Times*, the incidents were never investigated, “even though allegations that he has benefited from narcotics trafficking have circulated widely in Afghanistan.”

Senior officials at the US Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) and the office of the Director of National Intelligence (DNI) complained that the Bush “White House favored a hands-off approach toward Ahmed Wali Karzai because of the political delicacy of the matter.”

The *Times* later [reported](#) that according to a top former Afghan Interior Ministry official, a major source of Wali Karzai’s influence was his control over key bridges crossing the Helmand River on the route between the opium-growing regions of Helmand Province and Kandahar. This allowed Karzai to charge huge fees to drug traffickers to allow their drug-laden trucks to cross the bridges.

Like Dostum and Hekmaytar, Wali Karzai built his heroin empire while on the CIA payroll. The agency began paying Karzai in 2001 to recruit an Afghan paramilitary force that operated at the agency’s direction in and around Kandahar and to rent a large compound for use as the base of the Kandahar Strike Force. The CIA also appreciated Karzai’s help in communicating and sometimes meeting with Afghans loyal to the Taliban.

Karzai also served as the head of Kandahar’s elected provincial council. According to a senior US military officer in Kabul quoted by the *Times*, “Hundreds of millions of dollars in drug money are flowing through the southern region, and nothing happens in southern Afghanistan without the regional leadership knowing about it.”

The Blame Game

In late 2004, as reports of Karzai’s involvement in the heroin trade were emerging, Alfred McCoy [writes](#) that “the White House was suddenly confronted with troubling CIA intelligence suggesting that the escalating drug trade was fueling a revival of the Taliban.”

A proposal from Secretary of State Colin Powell to fight the heroin trade was [resisted](#) by US ambassador to Afghanistan, Zalmay Khalilzad, and then-Afghan finance minister Ashraf Ghani. As a compromise, the Bush administration used private contractors for poppy eradication, an effort that *New York Times* journalist Carlotta Gall later [described](#) as

“something of a joke.”

Additionally, [reports](#) of a 2005 cable sent by the US embassy in Kabul to Powell’s successor, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, viewed Britain as being “substantially responsible” for the failure to eradicate poppy cultivation. British personnel chose where the eradication teams worked, but those areas were often not the main growing areas, and “the British had been unwilling to revise targets.”

The cable also faulted President Karzai, who “has been unwilling to assert strong leadership.” The State Department nevertheless defended him, saying, “President Karzai is a strong partner, and we have confidence in him,” despite reports of his brother’s key role in the heroin trade.

But the problem went beyond Wali Karzai. A UN [report](#) for the World Bank published in February 2006 concluded the Afghan heroin trade was operating with the assistance of many top Afghan government officials and under the protection of the Afghan Ministry of Interior.

As evidence of CIA and Afghan government involvement in the heroin trade grew, the focus of the western media shifted towards blaming the Taliban for using drug profits to fund their insurgency against foreign forces.

However, historian Peter Dale Scott [challenged this narrative](#), citing UN estimates that the Taliban’s share of the Afghan opium economy was a fraction compared to that of supporters of the Karzai government. Scott emphasized that the largest share of the drug trade was controlled by those aligned with the Afghan government.

The Surge

In early 2010, the Obama administration [announced](#) a “surge” of 33,000 US troops to help pacify the country, with a particular focus on key districts known for poppy cultivation. One such district was Marja in Helmand province, which McCoy referred to as “the world’s heroin capital.”

Despite the surge’s mission, US commanders seemed unaware of Marja’s significance as a hub for heroin production, fueled by the surrounding opium fields that accounted for 40 percent of the world’s illicit opium supply.

In September 2010, eight months after the start of the surge, “unsubstantiated” [reports](#) emerged that British soldiers were involved in trafficking heroin out of Afghanistan using military aircraft at airports in [Camp Bastion](#) and Kandahar.

Camp Bastion, jointly operated by the UK and the US, was located near Lashkar Gah, another major center of poppy cultivation. In 2012, it was [alleged](#) that [poppy cultivation](#) was taking place just outside the base’s perimeter, with British soldiers providing protection to farmers against Afghan security forces.

By late 2014, British and US forces withdrew from Camp Bastion, handing it over to Afghan forces, who renamed it Camp Shorabak. However, according to a UN [report](#), “the opium-growing area around Britain’s main base in Afghanistan nearly quadrupled between 2011 and 2013.”

Despite the withdrawal, opium exports from Camp Shorabak apparently continued, and a small number of British military personnel [returned](#) in 2015 in what was described by the Ministry of Defense as an advisory role.

In 2016, Obaidullah Barakzai, a member of the National Assembly of Afghanistan, [claimed](#), “It’s impossible for a few local drug smugglers to transfer opium in thousands of kilos. This is the work of the Americans and British. They transport it by air from Camp Shorabak.”

After US forces chaotically withdrew from Afghanistan in August 2021, the Taliban once again succeeded in eliminating poppy cultivation, showing it was far from a “dedicated drug cartel” after all.

Follow the Money

In November 2021, an opium merchant [claimed](#) that “All the profits go to the foreign countries. Afghans are just supplying the labor.”

Peter Dale Scott [noted](#) that according to the UN, some \$352 billion in drug profits had been absorbed into the western financial system, including through the US’ largest banks in 2009. As a result, Scott said the “United States involvement in the international drug traffic links the CIA, major financial interests, and criminal interests in this country and abroad.”

In 2012, the *Daily Mail* [reported](#) that HSBC, Britain’s biggest bank, faced up to £640million in penalties for allowing “rogue states and drugs cartels to launder billions of pounds through its branches,” and for becoming “a conduit for criminal enterprises.”

The billions in profits flowing from the Afghan heroin trade into western banks have now been eliminated by the Taliban *not once, but twice* in the past two decades.

Taliban leader Mullah Omar’s pronouncement in July 2000 that poppy cultivation was “un-Islamic” was, therefore, a more likely cause of the US sanctions imposed in December of the same year, and of the US invasion of Afghanistan a year later, than was any US desire to apprehend Bin Laden and dismantle Al-Qaeda.

In March 2002, just six months after the bombing and invasion of Afghanistan, a journalist [asked](#) President Bush, “Where’s Osama bin Laden?” Bush replied, ‘I don’t know. I don’t really think about him very much. I’m not that concerned.”

The Afghan drug trade serves as a stark reminder of the intricate connections between geopolitics, illicit economies, and global finance, and the need for greater transparency and accountability in addressing these complex issues.

The historical evidence also challenges the simplistic narrative that the Taliban largely controlled the Afghan drug trade, highlighting the dominant role played by the US-backed Afghan government and its allies in the CIA.

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America's "War on Terrorism"

Author: Michel Chossudovsky

ISBN Number: 0-9737147-1-9

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Pages: 365 with complete index

Product Type: PDF File

Price: \$9.50

In this new and expanded edition of Michel Chossudovsky's 2002 best seller, the author blows away the smokescreen put up by the mainstream media, that 9/11 was an attack on America by "Islamic terrorists". Through meticulous research, the author uncovers a military-intelligence ploy behind the September 11 attacks, and the cover-up and complicity of key members of the Bush Administration.

The expanded edition, which includes twelve new chapters focuses on the use of 9/11 as a pretext for the invasion and illegal occupation of Iraq, the militarisation of justice and law enforcement and the repeal of democracy.

According to Chossudovsky, the "war on terrorism" is a complete fabrication based on the illusion that one man, Osama bin Laden, outwitted the \$40 billion-a-year American intelligence apparatus. The "war on terrorism" is a war of conquest. Globalisation is the final march to the "New World Order", dominated by Wall Street and the U.S. military-industrial complex.

September 11, 2001 provides a justification for waging a war without borders. Washington's agenda consists in extending the frontiers of the American Empire to facilitate complete U.S. corporate control, while installing within America the institutions of the Homeland Security State.

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