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## Between Elephant in the Room and Political Hot Potato: The Afghan Opium Problem



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The [record poppy cultivation and opium production levels](#) in Afghanistan come as no real surprise, especially as the [UN's risk assessment](#) earlier this year already warned for a substantial increase. The higher numbers are not even the real problem, although it is unwanted publicity when the international community is in the final stages of completing the security transition in Afghanistan and with presidential elections to be held in April next year.

It is much worse that there is no longer a serious debate on an effective international support strategy to deal with the Afghan opium problem. As the international community backs away from its predominantly military role in Afghanistan over the past twelve years, it also prefers to leave behind the political hot potato of the country's illegal opium industry. This is a complete change of course after the United Kingdom was appointed the G8's lead nation on counter-narcotics in 2002 and the international community committed to supporting [Afghanistan's National Drug Control Strategy](#) since its launch in May 2003.

At the end of October this year, I visited Helmand province with NATO's Transatlantic Opinion Leaders to Afghanistan tour (TOLA). While this Afghan province accounts for 48 percent of illicit poppy cultivation, I was surprised to hear that nobody on the ground from the international community or the military is in charge of finding support strategies that may help to address the opium problem. There is no longer anybody in the Provincial Reconstruction Team in Lashkar Gah or in the broader British and American civilian and military structures responsible for coming up with local development solutions that may help to address illicit poppy cultivation. The 'we are on the way out' discourse clearly includes a hands-off approach to Afghan opium.

It is the result of clear (but unfortunate) strategic choices that political leaders and the foreign military in southern Afghanistan made to focus on the Taliban insurgents and not on one of their principle funding sources. The 'hearts and minds' strategy was central to counter-insurgency tactics in the area but prevented the military from playing a serious role in counter-narcotics operations. The general policy of NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission in Afghanistan has been to stay out of counter-narcotics, despite Defence ministers of NATO member states agreeing in 2008 on a [more robust role](#) of the Alliance to counter the Afghan opium trade.

Although ISAF troops managed to destroy some drug processing laboratories and have helped to confiscate some tonnes of opium, there never was a serious attempt to involve the foreign military. This has resulted in bizarre situations in Helmand province, where at one point 20,000 US Marines and 7,000 British troops were fighting the Taliban insurgency while the province continued to produce up to 70 percent of the total opium production. Next year, when most foreign troops will be gone from the area, the situation could even evolve in a free-for-all [opium turf war](#) following changes to the local power arrangements after the military drawdown.

As we move from security transition towards the transformational decade (2015-2024), we are faced with even less military and civilian support to assist current counter-narcotics efforts in Afghanistan in a meaningful way. Even if the international community prefers not to address the Afghan opium problem in the short term, it should at least worry about its impact on corruption, security and stability. It is not only the estimated 150 million USD that the Taliban insurgency annually derives from this huge illicit industry that should raise eyebrows; it is also the vast amount of local power holders and drug traffickers in southern Afghanistan that prefer to keep the region unstable and keep their exorbitant profits coming in.

While the international community leaves behind the military-security framework that has unfortunately dominated our relationship with Afghanistan since 2001, it should at least try to come up with a serious, robust international support role during the upcoming transformational decade to rein in a severe international problem that is much more than only an 'Afghan affair'.

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