

## EU leadership on narcotics strategy in Afghanistan

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An important step in the right direction of Europe's policy vis-a-vis Afghanistan has unfortunately gone unnoticed: with an overwhelming majority, the European Parliament recently adopted a recommendation to the European Council calling for a scientific pilot project to further investigate the possibilities for strictly- controlled morphine production in Afghanistan.

The European Parliament also expressed the Europe-wide consensus that chemical spraying of poppy crops should not be implemented in the war-ravaged country. The endorsement from the European Parliament could not have come at a better time: in the last two years the Afghan opium crisis has completely run out of control, resulting in skyrocketing poppy cultivation and opium production. The massive illegal opium economy is currently hijacking both the development and reconstruction efforts in the country and jeopardising NATO's stabilisation mission.

The parliament has judged the situation correctly and is calling for a change of counternarcotics policies in Afghanistan. Based on extensive on-the-ground research undertaken in the southern provinces of Afghanistan, the Poppy for Medicine project the European Parliament refers to would boost much-needed economic development, bring illegal poppy cultivation under control and build support for NATO's thorny stabilisation mission in Afghanistan. It involves licensing the controlled cultivation of poppy to produce essential medicines such as morphine to be exported and consumed in countries facing an acute shortage.

Unlicensed poppy cultivation would remain a criminal activity. Tailored to the realities of Afghanistan, Poppy for Medicine projects would link the country's two most valuable resources - poppy cultivation and strong local village control systems - to secure the controlled cultivation of poppy for the local production of morphine. The Senlis Council released a Poppy for Medicine technical dossier in June this year, detailing the specifics of the scientific pilot project that could be run next year in several areas of Afghanistan including the troublesome south and southeast.

Currently, over half of the international aid addressing the Afghan opium crisis is poured into aggressive crop eradication, which is wreaking havoc in the poppy growing areas – creating social tension and jeopardising NATO's overarching objective of winning the Afghans' hearts and minds. Crop eradication is not only destructive, but fails to recognise that opium cultivation presently provides livelihoods for more than three million Afghans. Taking opium cultivation away without providing an alternative income for povertystricken farmers is simply not a viable strategy. When it comes to the looming prospect of aerial spraying of chemicals, the British Foreign Office Minister Lord Malloch Brown recently stated that only the United States is favouring this drug control strategy in Afghanistan.

The US is increasingly pushing for chemical spraying of poppy crops as a silver bullet solution to Afghanistan's huge illegal opium economy, modeled on similar strategies tried in vain for decades in Latin America. President Karzai is strongly opposed to chemical spraying and needs all the support he can get from European countries and the EU at large to counter-balance the US and prevent a nightmare scenario in Afghanistan. Chemical eradication would not only spell utter disaster in terms of environmental and public health-related risks, but would give the Taliban the decisive advantage in southern Afghanistan – the area where the future of the country and the entire region is determined in terms of stability and the possible return of extremism.

The European Parliament consensus on the need for a different approach is a crucial first step in the right direction. The Afghan opium crisis is no longer a simple counter-narcotics problem, but has become the main impediment to the success of the international community's mission of stabilising and reconstructing Afghanistan. Failure to seriously address this problem in a sustainable manner will bolster the insurgency by providing the Taliban with a fertile recruitment ground and support base. It would also mean that all European Union funds and efforts invested in Afghanistan would have been in vain.

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