



COMMENTARY

OPIUM LICENSING: JUMPING FROM THE FRYING-PAN INTO THE FIRE

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OPIUM LICENSING² for medicine as proposed by the Senlis Council (SC), an international policy think tank, is not a solution to the problem of narcotics in Afghanistan. The SC has been able to convince the European Parliament to support their idea along with some pharmaceutical companies and other health organizations in the UK. However, the results and recommendations that the SC has produced do not seem either correct or pragmatic. Opium licensing in Afghanistan is an false solution that would increase the demand for drugs worldwide and it would add to the complexity of counter-narcotics efforts. Instead, a few basic changes in the current counter-narcotics efforts in Afghanistan, as part of a comprehensive approach for security and stability in the country, would address the issue of opium production.

Why the SC argues for Opium Licensing?

As claimed by the SC, opium licensing for medicine would have the following advantages:

1. Limiting the reach of heroin to the streets of Europe: currently over 90% of the heroin used in the streets of Europe originates from the opium produced in Afghanistan;
2. Responding to the world's unmet need for pain-relief medicine;
3. Providing sustainable livelihoods to Afghan farmers who rely on poppy as a valuable cash crop;

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² The Senlis Council had proposed providing licenses to Afghan farmers for the production of opium which then could be legally sold to authorities who would then process the opium and would produce morphine and other medicines for export.

4. Establishing security by disrupting the heroin economy, a threat to security, and eventually stabilizing the country;
5. In the long run, the illegal business of growing poppy will be eliminated from Afghanistan.

The SC has reached these conclusions through an analysis of data gathered from their surveys and research. However, the facts analyzed are in many cases isolated from many other related issues. For example, they claim that the US and UK annually spend over USD 800 Million on implementing their counter-narcotics policy, while at the same time all the opium produced in Afghanistan could be bought for USD 600 Million.³ Perhaps they made this remark when they multiplied the amount of opium produced in Afghanistan into a price of opium per kilogram, however it is impractical to buy all the produced opium for a fixed price. The price of opium is influenced and controlled by many factors and it may rise with the creation of a new demand for opium-for-medicine. The drug lords would also have strong role and interest in increasing the prices to maintain their decadent lifestyles. Many such examples can be found in the SC's analytical reports.

A flawed solution

Strong law-enforcement capabilities – currently not present in Afghanistan - are required to control the leakage of licensed opium to illegal channels. The widespread cultivation of poppy in Afghanistan, insecurity across the whole country – especially in the south with strong pressure to grow poppy coming from the drug lords – and the existing level of corruption in Afghanistan would all make it impossible to tightly control the opium produced in the scheme. The plan for opium licensing in Afghanistan would also not succeed for the following reasons:

1. The main reason for the cultivation of poppy is the global demand for narcotics in the drug retail markets around the world. An overview of the world annual opium production – as reported by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) – shows that opium has been produced at a level of approximately 3500 to 4000 metric tons (mt) in the past 10 years, regardless of from the country of origin. This opium is the main source of the world heroin markets. It is likely that a proportion of this amount serves to satisfy the counter-narcotics authorities' need for visible 'busts' worldwide and is expected to be seized. However, it is possible that another amount is being stored

³ Opium in Afghanistan: Eradicate or subsidize?, Donald G. McNeil Jr. , IHtribune, 14 October 2007

to address shortages on other occasions, such as in 2001. In the 1960s and 1970s, Turkey served to supply the required drugs; in the 1980s it shifted to the Golden Triangle (Thailand, Myanmar and Laos); and since then Afghanistan has been addressing this demand.

Redirecting a proportion of the world's opium produce towards medicinal use would not affect the supply of the heroin black market. Instead, it would create an additional demand which would in turn be met from elsewhere. Consequently, as opium licensing is proposed to be implemented in Afghanistan on a large scale, this demand will increase opium production and thus the availability of narcotics—a factor for the promotion of drug abuse.

2. Only 4% of the total cultivable land in Afghanistan has been used for growing poppy by farmers, resulting in 8200 mt of opium yield, which accounts for 93% of global opium production.⁴ If opium production is licensed, each and every farmer will seek to obtain the license. Afghan analysts suspect that opium production will rise by a factor of more than ten.

In that case, the enormous amount of opium produced would firstly be too much to convert into medicine, as one kilogram of Afghan opium gives almost 100 grams of morphine⁵ and it would generate extremely large amounts of morphine (8 million kilograms) which would surpass that needed by medical practitioners around the world. Only 27.8 tons of morphine were consumed for medical and scientific purposes in 2003.⁶ This is not only because of the shortage of narcotic analgesics in the world. Instead, it involves different constraints and considerations in the medical field which do not allow intensive or heavy usage of narcotic analgesics on account of the side-effects of the medicine (addiction etc.) On the other hand, 8200 mt opium may be expected to produce 820 tons of morphine, 30 times that which is consumed annually. If opium production were to rise by such a level, how would the world's medical professionals manage to use that huge amount of narcotics?

⁴ The figure 4% was derived through a simple calculation. According to Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), Afghanistan has 8.8 Million hectare (12% of the total area) of cultivable land, less than half of which is cultivated annually because of inefficient irrigation systems and required agricultural mechanisms and technology.

⁵ Heroin is "Good for Your Health": Occupation Forces support Afghan Narcotics Trade, Prof. Michel Chossudovsky [Globalresearch.ca], 30 April 2007

⁶ International Narcotics Control Board 2005, Narcotic Drugs: Estimated World Requirements for 2005; Statistics for 2003 United Nations, New York.

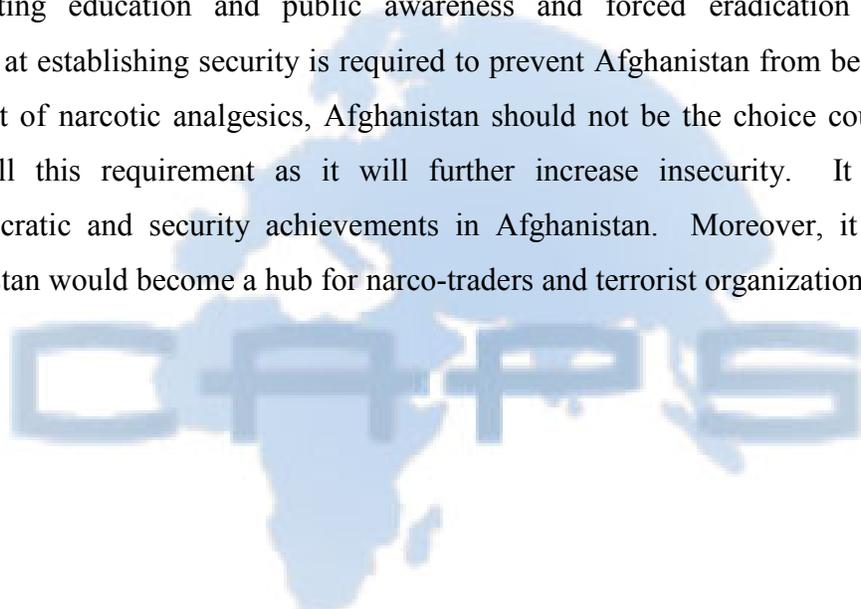
3. Nevertheless, the SC argues the licenses would be provided to farmers through informal local governance and networks. If a farmer were to sell his yield to drug lords, it would result in a cancellation of the license for the entire village.⁷ There are two elements missing from the narrative here: firstly, the informal local governance networks are not strong enough to have control over the farmers. The *shuras* and *jirgas* are not able to implement selective licensing, and thus every farmer will be applying for the license; secondly, the current government security apparatus is not strong enough either to enforce the law or to prohibit those farmers who violate the agreement. It seems inevitable that drug lords would get access to the opium. If Afghan institutions in time become capable of preventing farmers from cultivating poppy, then what would be the argument for poppy cultivation on a large scale, as the primary need is for the elimination of its cultivation in the country.
4. The farmers' main motivating factor to grow poppy in preference to other crops is the high prices they get as an essential means of livelihood. At present, a farmer earns ten times as much if he grows poppy and not wheat. If the farmer grows wheat, it would not be sufficient to provide for his family. Additionally, if many farmers grow poppy, the price of opium will fall. In that case, growing poppy will not help Afghan farmers to earn their livelihood. This way, opium licensing would not provide a sustainable livelihood for farmers—one of the principal goals of the opium licensing project.
5. An overview of the history of poppy cultivation around the world shows that insecurity precedes the cultivation of poppy. It is not the cultivation of poppy that creates insecurity, therefore, but rather insecurity that paves the way for poppy cultivation to shift there. Once the narco-trade is established, it creates a vicious circle with both mutually reinforcing each other. Therefore, adopting other measures to establish and maintain security would help to stop the growing of poppy too.
6. Another significant reason for farmers in Afghanistan to produce opium is the coercion of farmers by drug traffickers to grow poppy. Dealing with these traffickers is a challenge that the SC research does not address.
7. Afghanistan cannot be compared to India and Turkey. This is because India grows licensed poppy only on 11,000 hectares of land with 250 mt annual opium produce, and Turkey produces 75 mt

⁷ Feasibility study on opium licensing in Afghanistan for the production of morphine and other essential medicine.

licensed opium annually.⁸ Firstly, Afghanistan's production has been over 30 times that of India, and 100 times that of Turkey. Secondly, no comparable law enforcement capacity exists in Afghanistan to control leakage of the opium to illegal channels.

Outlook

The opium licensing solution to the problem of narcotics in Afghanistan would be a case of 'worse becoming worst'. Instead, a comprehensive approach – including development works, provision of alternative livelihoods, promoting education and public awareness and forced eradication – besides different interventions aimed at establishing security is required to prevent Afghanistan from becoming a narco-state. If the world is short of narcotic analgesics, Afghanistan should not be the choice country to allow poppy cultivation to fulfill this requirement as it will further increase insecurity. It will undermine the development, democratic and security achievements in Afghanistan. Moreover, it will threaten global security as Afghanistan would become a hub for narco-traders and terrorist organizations.



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⁸ Ibid