

# MP-IDSA

## *Issue Brief*

# Afghanistan's Changing Drug Dynamics

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## **S***ummary*

The recent clashes between the Taliban and local communities over the destruction of opium fields in the Badakhshan province and other areas underscore the complex dynamics surrounding opium cultivation in Afghanistan. The Taliban will have to regain the trust of the international community by fulfilling its commitments contained in the Doha agreement, to enable it to access resources to bring about the desired changes in Afghan economy and society.

On 6 May 2024, in a confrontation between the Taliban and local inhabitants in the Argo district of Badakhshan Province concerning the eradication of poppy fields, a resident was killed and several others were severely injured.<sup>1</sup> This uprising of local residents against the Taliban started from the incident that unfolded in the Daraim district two days back, resulting in the fatality of another local resident.<sup>2</sup> These repeated events underscore the entrenched reliance of local farmers on opium cultivation in the absence of viable alternatives and governmental assistance.

In August 2021, during the inaugural press briefing, Taliban spokesperson Zabiullah Mujahid declared a firm stance against narcotics production and pledged to make Afghanistan “a narcotics-free country”.<sup>3</sup> Since then, the Taliban has intensified efforts to eradicate poppy cultivation, and the results have been promising. As per the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), Afghanistan has seen a notable 95 per cent reduction in opium cultivation, dropping from 6,200 tons in 2022 to a mere 333 tons in 2023.<sup>4</sup>

The impact of the ban is particularly evident in provinces like Helmand, previously responsible for over 50 per cent of national poppy cultivation, now reduced to a mere 1 per cent in 2023.<sup>5</sup> To aid the transition, the Taliban have exempted traders from taxes, permitting them to export remaining opium stocks. While there is noticeable progress, numerous challenges persist, especially with the world witnessing a significant increase in synthetic drug production and trafficking.

## Recurring Theme

Since the late 1990s, the Taliban has struck a delicate balance between the perceived un-Islamic nature of drug use and the economic benefits. They banned the consumption of opiates but allowed opium production and trade. The move, however, was merely a tactic to get international recognition for the regime. During the establishment of their first Emirate from 1996 till 2001, they applied 2.5 per cent *zakat* (almsgiving) and 10–20 per cent *ushr* (an Islamic agriculture tax) on

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<sup>1</sup> **“Taliban Face Rare Public Uprising Against Their Rule in Northeastern Afghanistan”**, *Voice of America*, 5 May 2024.

<sup>2</sup> **“Taliban and the Flames of Ethnic Conflict”**, *Hash e Subh Daily*, 8 May 2024.

<sup>3</sup> **“Transcript of Taliban’s First News Conference in Kabul”**, *Al Jazeera*, 17 August 2021.

<sup>4</sup> **“Afghanistan Opium Survey 2023”**, United Nations Office on Drug and Crimes, 5 November 2023.

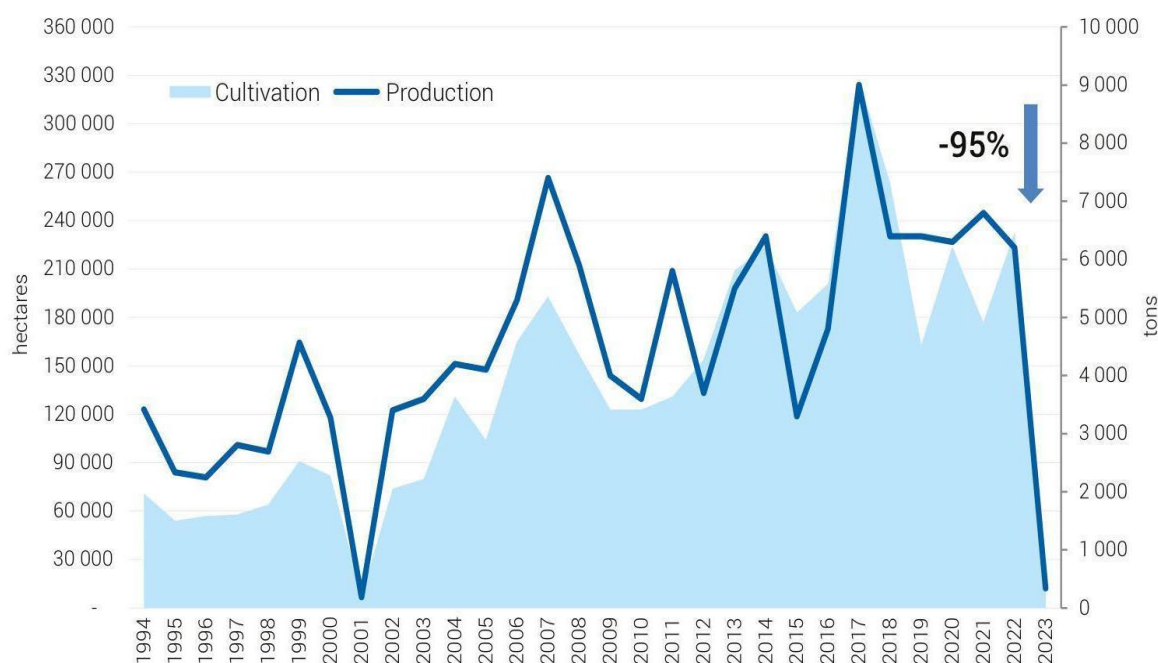
<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

poppy cultivation. This move not only brought millions of dollars annually to their treasury, but they also had a religious rationale for it.<sup>6</sup>

Subsequently, after earning money for almost three consecutive years, they imposed a strict ban on opium consumption as well as on its cultivation, transportation and trading to convey their purported constructive objectives for Afghanistan’s development. Graph 1 shows opium cultivation in Afghanistan during 1994–2023.

**Graph 1**

**Opium cultivation and production in Afghanistan, 1994-2023**



**Source:** “[Afghanistan Opium Survey 2023](#)”, UNODC Research Brief, August 2023, p. 27.<sup>7</sup>

After the ban, the cultivation fell from an estimated 82,172 hectares in 2000 to less than 8,000 in 2001.<sup>8</sup> Although globally, this reduction contributed to a significant 75 per cent fall in the supply of heroin for the corresponding year, the Taliban could only achieve official recognition from Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab

<sup>6</sup> Ahmed Rashid, “[Descent Into Chaos: How the War Against Islamic Extremism is Being Lost in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia](#)”, Allen Lane, 2008, p. 400.

<sup>7</sup> “[Afghanistan Opium Survey 2023](#)”, no. 4.

<sup>8</sup> “[Afghanistan - Annual Opium Poppy Survey 2001](#)”, United Nations Office on Drug and Crimes, 16 October 2001.

Emirates.<sup>9</sup> The ban was shortlived as the Taliban was ousted by the US forces after the attack of 9/11, leading to the establishment of an interim republic government led by Hamid Karzai.<sup>10</sup>

In 2021, after their resurgence, the Taliban reiterated their stance on narcotics in Afghanistan. This time, they implemented it at the very beginning of the establishment of the Islamic Emirate. Notably, Helmand reported a near-total reduction and provinces like Farah and Nimroz witnessed almost 90 per cent decline in opium cultivation.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, the Taliban has established anti-narcotic units tasked with overseeing the effective implementation of the ban at the grassroots level.<sup>12</sup>

## The Rise of Synthetic Drugs in Afghanistan

While the reduction in poppy cultivation is beneficial for countries suffering severely from drug trafficking, challenges loom large given the Taliban’s financial constraints to successfully run the country. The economy is in dire straits, with frozen central bank reserves in the United States and the looming risk of losing funds from international entities such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank, and external aid, which previously comprised over 75 per cent of Afghanistan's economy.<sup>13</sup> Also, the impact of such measures on poverty can be very significant in a country in which 61 per cent of all households are dependent on agriculture for their livelihood.<sup>14</sup>

As a result, unfortunately, the vacuum created by this ban has led to a surge in the synthetic drugs market, particularly dominated by methamphetamine produced in Afghanistan. This provides another avenue for the Taliban to amass substantial profits to further their agendas. The rise in synthetic drug production has been a serious concern for the international community as it is largely supplied to the European Union, the Middle East, the South-Asian and Eastern African countries.<sup>15</sup> The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) seizure data

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<sup>9</sup> **“Investigation -- a Volatile Region”**, *Washington Post*, 14 September 2001.

<sup>10</sup> **“The Global War on Terrorism: The First 100 Days, 2001-2009”**, Archive, U.S. Department of State.

<sup>11</sup> **“Massive Reduction of Opium Production in Afghanistan”**, *Alcis*, 2023.

<sup>12</sup> Yogita Limaye, **“Inside the Taliban’s War on Drugs - Opium Poppy Crops Slashed”**, *BBC News*, 6 June 2023.

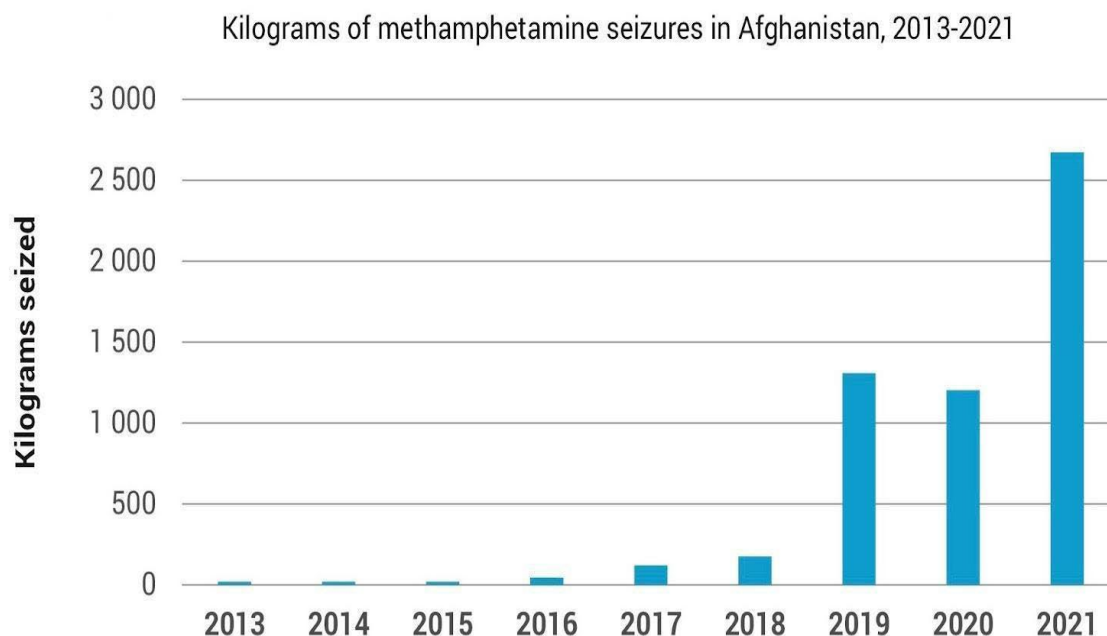
<sup>13</sup> **“Taliban’s Access to Cash Limited as Biden Administration Freezes Afghan Reserves”**, *The Washington Post*, 17 August 2021.

<sup>14</sup> **“Unlocking the Potential of Agriculture for Afghanistan’s Growth”**, World Bank, 2 May 2018.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

below (Table 1) shows a sharp rise in synthetic drug supply in Afghanistan and neighbouring countries from 2,500 kg in 2017 to 2,970 kg in 2021.

**Table 1**



Source: UNODC, responses to the annual report questionnaires

**Source:** [“Understanding Illegal Methamphetamine Manufacture in Afghanistan”](#), UNODC Research Brief, August 2023, p. 15.<sup>16</sup>

The chemical which is used as the primary precursor in the synthesis of methamphetamine is called ephedrine.<sup>17</sup> It is naturally present in a plant called Ephedra that thrives abundantly in Afghanistan's mountainous regions at altitudes exceeding 2,500 metres. The findings of the UNODC report also indicate the use of ephedra plants as a raw material for extracting ephedrine.<sup>18</sup> The ephedrine produced is then sold to make methamphetamine, locally known as *shisha*. Notably, the conversion of ephedrine into methamphetamine is a relatively simple process, requiring minimal expertise compared to the utilisation of other precursor chemicals.<sup>19</sup> The UNODC reports insufficient presence of ephedra in Afghanistan to meet the demand for methamphetamine in the market. Additionally, the report notes

<sup>16</sup> [“Understanding Illegal Methamphetamine Manufacture In Afghanistan”](#), United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, August 2023.

<sup>17</sup> David Mansfield, [“This is Not the Ephedra You Are Looking for”](#), *Alcis*, 15 September 2023.

<sup>18</sup> [“Understanding Illegal Methamphetamine Manufacture In Afghanistan”](#), no. 16.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

that the industry-grade ephedrine can offer greater efficiency and reliability, potentially providing virtually limitless support for illegal manufacturing endeavours.<sup>20</sup>

**Table 3: Raw Materials** Input Costs

	Ephedra	Cold medication	Bulk ephedrines
Input costs for a pure kilogram of methamphetamine	US\$590	US\$1,069	US\$500
Financial return for 1 kilogram of methamphetamine (50% purity) <sup>a</sup>	US\$405	US\$162	US\$450
Weight needed to reflect regional seizures of 29.7 tons (50-90% purity)	6,500-11,700 tons of fresh plant matter	414-745 tons of cold medication in tablet preparations	26-47 tons of industrial-grade material

<sup>a</sup> Only accounts for cost of primary inputs, excludes other fixed costs and other necessary chemicals or material which may vary considerably by input.

Source: Responses to the UNODC Annual Report Questionnaires.

**Source:** “[Understanding Illegal Methamphetamine Manufacture in Afghanistan](#)”, UNODC Research Brief, August 2023, p. 9.<sup>21</sup>

However, David Mansfield, a researcher on rural livelihoods and cross-border economies and the author of the book, *A State Built on Sand: How Opium Undermined Afghanistan*, counters that there are no supporting seizures, price data, or interviews of those involved in processing and manufacturing of methamphetamine to conclude the above findings by UNODC.<sup>22</sup> A physical map of Afghanistan shows that there are more than 15 provinces in central, east and north-eastern regions in which ephedra grows.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, the quantity of ephedra discovered in Abdul Wadood Bazaar, colloquially referred to as the open-air drug market in the southwest of the Bakwa district of Farah province, within a single day surpasses the quantity of dried ephedra

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> David Mansfield, “[This is Not the Ephedra You Are Looking For](#)”, no. 17.

<sup>23</sup> David Mansfield, “[An Industry and a Population Under Stress: Methamphetamine Production Under Taliban Rule](#)”, *Alcis*, 11 December 2023.

that the UNODC notes is necessary to produce the seized methamphetamine in Afghanistan and neighbouring countries.<sup>24</sup>

In 2022, Afghanistan and neighbouring regions reported annual legitimate requirements for over 100 metric tons of bulk industrial-grade ephedrine.<sup>25</sup> The surge in legal imports of industry-grade precursors reduces reliance on manual labour and the infrastructure-intensive process of extracting ephedrine from plants. However, this is less of a possibility in a country that has a crippling economy and an abundant supply of naturally growing plants containing ephedrine.

## Taliban Policies to Curb Methamphetamine Production

Recognising the importance of suppressing meth production by calling it un-Islamic as a pivotal measure to secure international recognition, the Taliban initiated a ban on ephedra crop harvesting across the central provinces of Ghor, Farah, Nimroz and Bamyán in December 2021, even before they imposed a ban on opium cultivation. The Taliban stationed checkpoints near mountainous regions to prevent the harvesting, consequently resulting in an abrupt escalation of the ephedra, ephedrine and methamphetamine prices. In October 2023, stricter penalties were imposed under a new drug law by Mullah Haibatullah.<sup>26</sup>

Contrary to the measures taken by the interim government and its implementations on the ground, neighbouring countries like Iran, Tajikistan and Pakistan have continuously reported about the free flow of drugs in their countries through Afghanistan. Iran has rejected the decline in opium production in Afghanistan, stating that traditional drug trafficking is still occurring.<sup>27</sup> Pakistan’s Balochistan province continues to be the hub for drug trade and smuggling and functions openly.

Tajikistan also has not registered any decline in drug trafficking of opiates and other drugs originating in neighbouring Afghanistan despite the ban.<sup>28</sup> Speculations about the rise in the drug market are high at a time when drug lords like Haji Bashir,<sup>29</sup> who in the 1980s provided weapons and financially supported the Taliban in their war against the Soviets, had been recently released by the US in prisoners’ exchange in September 2023. He received a grand welcome from the senior Taliban leaders.

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<sup>24</sup> David Mansfield, [“Truly Unprecedented: The Taliban Drugs Ban”](#), *Alcis*, 7 June 2023.

<sup>25</sup> [“Understanding Illegal Methamphetamine Manufacture In Afghanistan”](#), no. 16.

<sup>26</sup> [“Drug Law”](#), *Alcis*, 28 August 2023.

<sup>27</sup> [“Iran Rejects UN Claims That Afghanistan Poppy Cultivation is Declining”](#), *Iran International*, 11 November 2023.

<sup>28</sup> [“Tajikistan Sees No Signs of Drug Smuggling from Afghanistan Abating”](#), *TASS*, 5 February 2024.

<sup>29</sup> Zameer Safi, [“Bashir Noorzai Released by Us in Exchange for Mark Frerichs: Muttaqi”](#), *TOLOnews*, 19 September 2022.

## India’s Concerns

In the Indian Ocean Region, drug trafficking originates from two prominent areas—the ‘Golden Crescent’ in the West comprising Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan, whereas the ‘Golden Triangle’ in the East, comprising Myanmar, Thailand and Laos.<sup>30</sup> The United Nations Narcotics watchdog reported that the dark net and maritime routes have emerged as preferred modes of trafficking, and South Asia remains an important transit area for traffickers smuggling opiates produced in Afghanistan to Europe and North America.<sup>31</sup>

India has noted a sharp rise in drug seizures of large quantities, with the second biggest drug seizure of 3,000 kg on Mundra port in Gujarat days after the Taliban came to power in August 2021.<sup>32</sup> In February 2024, the Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB) made their highest-ever narcotics bust of 3,300 kg from the sea, including 158 kg of methamphetamine powder.<sup>33</sup> The consignment was sailed from an Iranian port and was off to Gujarat port.

Being positioned between Afghanistan and Myanmar, two significant drug-producing regions, renders India more susceptible to illicit drug trafficking. In the latest drug seizure on 29 April 2024, the Indian Coast Guard (ICG), along with the Anti-Terrorist Squad (ATS), seized 86 kg of heroin worth Rs 602 crore from a Pakistani boat that was on its way to Sri Lanka via Tamil Nadu, off the Porbandar coast in Gujarat.<sup>34</sup> Rise in drug trafficking through South Asian routes can be instances of pharma drugs being illegally diverted for narcotics purposes in the country.

India should enhance collaboration with Afghan authorities to comprehensively grasp evolving circumstances and proactively counter the threat posed by drugs originating from that area. Additionally, Indian Coast Guard must intensify surveillance on vulnerable ports to thwart drug traffickers' attempts to engage in illicit activities and prevent the expansion of the drug trade within Indian borders.

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<sup>30</sup> Shivanshi Bhadouria, “**Emerging Synthetic Drug Market in the Bay of Bengal**”, Vivekananda International Foundation, 5 September 2022.

<sup>31</sup> “**Significant Increase in Seizures of Drugs in India Over Past Five Years: UN Narcotics Watchdog**”, *The Economic Times*, 10 March 2023.

<sup>32</sup> “**Mundra Port Drug Seizure, Big Haul, Small Fish and a Dead End**”, *The Hindu*, 20 November 2021.

<sup>33</sup> “**India’s Highest-Ever Drug Bust: 3,300 Kg Narcotics Seized off Gujarat Coast**”, *Business Standard*, 28 February 2024.

<sup>34</sup> “**Drugs Worth Rs 600 Crore Seized from Pakistani Boat on Way to Sri Lanka; 14 Crew Members Held**”, *The Indian Express*, 29 April 2024.



## Conclusion

The clashes between the Taliban and local communities over the destruction of opium fields in the Badakhshan province and several other areas in the region underscore the complex dynamics surrounding opium cultivation in Afghanistan and its implications on the local population. The persistence of this illicit activity reflects the enduring challenges faced by farmers in transitioning from the lucrative business of poppy production, particularly in the absence of support from the Taliban regime. Without external financial support, local farmers cannot find alternative livelihoods for survival.

The significant reduction in opium cultivation within Afghanistan under the Taliban’s watch, however, offers an opportunity to guide the nation towards legitimate crop production, potentially taking the country on the path of real development. It requires a comprehensive approach that addresses the underlying drivers of opium cultivation while fostering sustainable economic development and social cohesion in affected communities.

Afghanistan remains overly dependent on humanitarian aid to recover from the decades-long conflict, necessitating continued support. Greater regional coordination and cooperation appear essential to counter the synthetic drug production reported post-2021. Overall, Afghanistan's long-term growth hinges on shifting from reliance on international aid to a private sector-led economy leveraging the country's strengths, particularly in agriculture.

Transitioning from poppy production to profitable alternative crops will require support from the state that the current Taliban regime may not be able to provide. In order to make this transition permanent and irreversible, the regime will have to address larger issues of regaining the trust of the international community by fulfilling its commitments contained in the Doha agreement, which will enable it to access resources to bring about the desired changes in Afghan economy and society.

## About the Author

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