

# Afghanistan: Is Failure an Option?

## By Martin Ewans

**Afghanistan has defied numerous efforts by outsiders to subdue and control it. As a nexus of narcotics and terrorism, however, the world cannot afford to walk away from assisting the country's return to stability. Sir Martin Ewans looks at the roots of the problems there and how more can be done to turn the situation around.**

AFGHANISTAN LIES AT THE EPICENTER of two of the world's most critical issues — drugs and terrorism. Each year, Afghans cultivate, process and market an opium crop which ends up as heroin on the streets of Europe, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), China and elsewhere causing intense social problems, with over a hundred thousand people dying from drug-related deaths and hundreds of thousands more seeing their lives ruined.<sup>1</sup> In 2001, the United States engineered the fall of the Taliban and its expulsion from Afghanistan with the aim of depriving al-Qaeda of safe havens in that country. Seven years later, the Taliban are still very much in evidence and the tribal areas lying on both sides of the Afghan-Pakistan border continue to provide al-Qaeda with a base from which to conduct their global *jihād*.

The problems in Afghanistan have their roots in the Soviet invasion of 1979, when the Afghan *mujahadeen* were financed and armed by the Americans and the Saudis, with support mainly from the Egyptians and Chinese. This assistance was channeled through Pakistan. Hardly any American or any one else ventured into Afghanistan in those years or trained an Afghan. Arms and equipment were delivered to the Pakistanis for onward transmission, and Pakistani instructors were trained by the Americans and, in turn, trained the Afghans. The Americans and other outside participants had little influence on who received the arms and training. Under former Pakistan President Zia-ul-Haq, the greater part went to fundamentalists and extremists, of whom the most prominent

1 *Afghanistan Opium Survey, 2007*. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime.

2 R. Prescott Allen, *The Wellbeing of Nations*. International Development Research Centre, 2001.

was Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, now closely associated with al-Qaeda.

Worse than this, an appreciable number of men from around the world, principally, but by no means exclusively, Arabs, joined the resistance against the Russians. They also received arms and training from the Americans via the Pakistanis, and they went on to form the nucleus of al-Qaeda. The Americans and their allies were so focused on bringing about a Soviet defeat that they failed to see the Frankenstein's monster they were creating. The so-called "Arab Afghans" then moved on to pursue their *jihād* in Bosnia, Chechnya, Kashmir, Southeast Asia and elsewhere; they are also now fighting in Afghanistan with the Taliban.

A further error, with severe consequences, occurred after 1992 when the Russians finally abandoned the country: the Americans and their allies also left, leaving the Afghans almost completely to their own devices. A vicious civil war ensued, which the Pakistanis finally tried to halt by forming, training, arming and supplying the Taliban, who went on to occupy most of the country and in turn nurtured and protected al-Qaeda. It was not until after the attacks of September 11, 2001 that the Americans took decisive action and brought about the fall of the Taliban regime. They did not, however, deal finally with either the Taliban or al-Qaeda. Because they had left it to the Pakistanis to deal with the situation on the ground in Afghanistan, they had very few contacts within Afghanistan and practically none among the leaders of the key Pushtun tribes on the Afghan-Pakistan border. As a result, they

were unable to mobilize these tribes to help prevent the Taliban and al-Qaeda from retreating to safe havens in Pakistan. Having employed what was known as the "northern option," working through the Northern Alliance with its strength in Badakhshan, by the time the NATO forces led by the Americans deployed troops in the tribal areas between Jalalabad and Kandahar, it was too late.

When Afghanistan was liberated from the Taliban in November 2001, its problems were immense. It had experienced war for a quarter of a century. A million or more of its people had been killed, while some eight million had been displaced internally or externally. The country was littered with landmines that continued to kill and maim. Its agricultural sector and infrastructure had been devastated. Rates of infant mortality were appalling: as many as one in three children died before their fifth birthday and about half were severely malnourished. Life expectancy averaged around 40-45 years. Practically a whole generation had missed school and illiteracy rates were appalling. There was no accepted national government nor any coherent military or police forces. Insofar as power structures existed, these were in the hands of a variety of warlords. A global table of "national wellbeing" showed Afghanistan near the bottom, along with such countries as Burundi and Sierra Leone.<sup>2</sup>

It is right to emphasize this dire situation since it is only fair that we should measure progress against it. Regrettably, many of the indicators are little changed, and Afghanistan remains near the bottom of the scale by many measures of national

3 *Afghanistan: Economic Activity and Policy Challenges*. Library of Parliament, Canada, 21 November, 2007.

wellbeing. But an important aspect of assessing the situation is that whatever one may think of the international community's commitment and effectiveness, at least this time the world has not walked away. A certain amount of financial and economic discipline has been imposed, and the economy has achieved an average growth rate of 11-12 percent per year since 2002.<sup>3</sup> Healthcare has expanded and six million Afghan children are now in school (although two million are not). Refugees have returned and there has been a degree of political reconstruction. The "Bonn process" — named after UN-sponsored talks in the German capital of Afghan leaders aimed at reconstituting Afghanistan's government in December 2001 — has been completed. The country now has a constitution, and the Afghans have elected a president and a parliament. There is a government, even if it is very weak, and there is a democracy, even if it functions imperfectly. Against a background of decades of foreign occupation and civil war, this is an achievement.

There is, however, a considerable downside. On the military front, the American and other NATO forces assigned to Afghanistan, which are considerably under-resourced, have not succeeded in making significant inroads into the Taliban-al-Qaeda heartland on the Afghan-Pakistan border. Substantial areas of southeastern Afghanistan remain under Taliban control, while the Pakistan government has failed to take effective action against the tribes who shelter the two movements on its side of the frontier. With Pakistan in political turmoil and the regime of President Pervez Musharraf weakened, this situation is unlikely to improve. Since 2004, the Taliban have made a notable comeback. The US and other NATO forces have routinely defeated them in battle and they have suffered considerable casualties, but they are still able to maintain some 8,000 or more fighters in the field. Virtually unhindered, the Pakistani *madrassas*, the religious schools that have formed the backbone of the movement, continue to turn out recruits. Funding comes mostly from the proceeds of opium production, which the Taliban both promotes and exploits in the areas

they control. Since 2005, suicide bombings have developed on the pattern seen in Iraq, with over 140 attacks in 2007. While progress has been made in forming an Afghan army, it is under-equipped and under-trained, and has suffered high attrition rates. It is still a long way from becoming an effective force and it relies heavily on US and NATO support. The Afghan police force is in an even worse state: it lacks sufficient training and discipline, is mired in corruption and is a particular target of Taliban attacks.

Afghanistan has long grown opium, but before the Soviet invasion it was of little international consequence, when other crops were far more important. It started to become a problem during the civil war, as competing warlords looked for ways to finance their operations. The Taliban suppressed opium production temporarily, mainly to increase the value of the stocks they held. After their departure, production started to soar. The British government volunteered to take the lead in devising means to deal with the problem, and, at a cost of £70 million over a three-year period, tried to put in place a program to provide Afghan farmers with incentives to grow alternative crops. Not to put too fine a point on it, the program comprehensively failed. Afghan opium production in 2007 amounted to an all-time high of 8,200 tons, double the amount produced two years previously. This year's planting is said to be even bigger. Afghanistan now produces 92 percent of the world's opium, according to the United Nations, a crop with an export value of around US\$3 billion, or about a third of its gross domestic product. Money from the drug trade seeps into the licit economy and contributes to government revenues. For the peasant farmer, poppies are a hardy and profitable crop. After several years of drought, a crop that does not need much water is particularly attractive. Also, to cite figures provided by one Afghan farmer, a kilo of opium earns him \$150, while seven kilos of wheat earn him just \$1. Polls suggest that most Afghans would prefer not to grow the crop, but see no viable alternative. It is obviously highly unsatisfactory that an illegal product is

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economically so important, but at present this is a fact of life.

Various solutions have been suggested. One, favored by many American policymakers, is crop eradication. Assuming that were feasible, it would have drastic consequences both for Afghan farmers and the economy. The Afghan government is strongly against it and it would intensify popular support for the Taliban insurgency. It would also likely amount to no more than a temporary solution, since prices would rise and the incentives for renewed production would be that much greater.

Two other solutions have been floated. One is to encourage livestock production and another is to purchase opium for legitimate medicinal products, such as morphine or codeine. The problem with livestock production is environmental. In the past, livestock producers were mainly nomads or *kuchis*, and they had to move between summer and winter grazing areas. Otherwise it is a precarious business in Afghan climatic conditions. After all the warfare and drought, the country's livestock has been drastically reduced, and it will be a long time before it can be rebuilt.

The economics of purchasing opium for medicinal purposes, meanwhile, are unfavorable. The supply of opium for such purposes already exceeds demand. Moreover, prices would probably not compete with those for illegal production. Effective regulation would also be required, and the Afghan government seems unable to provide this.

The scale of poppy growing varies greatly across Afghanistan. More than half the crop comes from Helmand Province, where British forces are deployed. Another 30 percent comes from five provinces bordering Pakistan. In contrast, six of the 13 northern provinces are largely opium-free. Poverty does not seem to be the main factor involved, since the southern provinces are much richer: rather, the cultivation of opium is greater in areas controlled by the Taliban or where insurgency prevents the Afghan government and international agencies from operating effectively. This suggests that where local governance is relatively good and the insurgency not a problem, the conditions for making inroads into opium growing may exist. There should be scope for a cocktail of measures, including improvement of the law enforcement and judicial systems, building public awareness, dismantling trafficking networks and, above all, comprehensive rural development, which has been sadly neglected.

The issue of good governance is critical, both in discouraging the opium economy and, positively, in giving Afghanistan the stability and development it needs. The trouble is that corruption and inefficiency pervade the state apparatus, not only in key ministries and local governments, but also in the judiciary and the police. International assistance aimed at the reconstruction of the judiciary was put into the hands of the Italian government, with results that were less than satisfactory. The Americans, meanwhile,

have recruited warlords to help them in their operations along the Pakistan border, while the Electoral Complaints Commission failed to prevent some 80 warlords from entering parliament. As a result, a culture of impunity has emerged, and no effective action has been taken to bring to account either those who were responsible for war crimes during the civil war or those who profit from the drugs trade. The Afghans know what they want: surveys have shown that a majority wants accountability and an end to drug trafficking. But this has not happened.

A conference was held in London in late January 2006 to mark the end of the Bonn process and to look to the future. It approved three documents. One was the so-called “Afghanistan Compact,” the second a “National Development Strategy,” and the third a “National Drugs Control Strategy.” The Afghanistan Compact set out a series of targets and aspirations which Afghanistan and its international partners hoped to achieve over the next four or five years. They covered pretty well every aspect of national life: security, governance, the rule of law and human rights and economic and social development. By the end of 2010 the army was to be fully established, primary education would cover 75 percent of boys and 60 percent of girls, basic health services would cover 90 percent of the population and 90 percent of villages would have safe drinking water.

It is far from certain that these and other targets will be achieved. The Afghan government’s domestic revenue is sufficient only for about half its expenditures, and the fiscal deficit is almost entirely financed by external aid. It is difficult to see how this dependency can be reduced: there is virtually no income tax, and while the customs system may work to some extent at the periphery, it does not produce much in the way of funds. The government will struggle to generate tax revenue at a faster rate than expenditures.

Pledges of aid at the London conference were on the order of \$10.5 billion over the following five years, although it was not clear how much of this was new money, rather than a repeat of old pledges. The Afghan government said it needed

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about double this amount — or about \$4 billion a year. To put the issue in context, Afghanistan has been receiving some \$67 in aid per capita per year: the comparable figure for Bosnia was \$249 and for Palestine \$217 — an amount even East Timor received in aid. One problem is that Iraq, where the US government has been spending some \$16 billion a year in reconstruction, is sucking the oxygen out of American programs elsewhere, while other governments have shown themselves less than enthusiastic to come to the aid of Afghanistan. The Afghan government has little control over what goes on: some three quarters of foreign aid is in the hands of outside organizations that operate as they please and in an uncoordinated way, with much of their money going to security, overhead and the cost of expatriates. Many bring in outside workers, rather than employing Afghans. There has been a good deal of consultation about this, and promises have been made to give the government more of a say in how the aid is spent. But non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are concerned that closer government supervision may hinder their efforts to reach the poorest and most deprived.

In sum, Afghans are not seeing the results — in terms of peace, reconstruction and development — that they were given to expect following liberation from the Taliban. Nevertheless, they

4 "Opinion poll suggests most Afghans relatively hopeful about the future." BBC Press Release, 3 December, 2007.

remain remarkably optimistic. A recent opinion poll suggested that some two-thirds of those surveyed believe that conditions in their districts are good or very good, and a similar proportion supports the government of President Hamid Karzai.<sup>4</sup> Three-quarters approve the military intervention of 2001 and more than eight out of ten wish to have the present government in power rather than the Taliban, for whom there is minimal support. More than two-thirds support the presence of US/NATO troops. Levels of approval are, however, eroding by comparison with previous years, and disillusionment will undoubtedly set in if the insurgency is not defeated and the present pace of reconstruction and development is not accelerated.

The issues boil down to two: governance and staying power. There is no escaping the need for thoroughgoing anti-corruption measures and a clampdown, initially, on the two dozen or so drugs barons who control the Afghan opium trade. There also has to be continuing external involvement, both militarily and in reconstruction and development. While America and Britain are strengthening their forces in anticipation of a further Taliban offensive in the spring, other participants, notably the Netherlands, Germany, Italy and Canada, face domestic opposition to their continued deployment. Canada is even threatening to withdraw its troops if other NATO countries do not step up their contributions. Britain and America could find pressures on their forces easing if their commitments to Iraq wind down, but there are signs that domestic support for their continued involvement beyond another year or two could also erode.

Afghanistan is so lacking in resources that from the mid-19th century onwards, very few Afghan governments could manage the country without foreign assistance. The main reason for the destruction of the British Army on its retreat from Kabul in the First Anglo-Afghan War was that the British government scaled down the subsidies being paid to the power brokers in the country. Having learned the lesson, during the rest of the 19th century Britain provided arms and money to successive emirs, to enable them

to maintain an army and stay in control. In the early 20th century, Emir Amanullah dispensed with British aid and was unable to withstand the tribal opposition to his rule. In the 1930s and 1940s, the government survived by dint of doing very little and leaving most of the country to its own devices. Then, after the Second World War, international aid flowed in, most of it from the Soviet Union, and that again tipped the scales in favor of the government. Subsequently, immense quantities of Soviet aid propped up successive Communist regimes until 1992, when the Soviets finally threw in the towel. It is unrealistic to expect Afghanistan to survive in a coherent form without external assistance, and this must continue for the foreseeable future. For one thing, security needs an army, an army needs to be paid and the Americans are bankrolling the army. The historical parallel to the British experience would appear to be very close.

In Afghanistan, success will only come as a result of a long-haul effort. The past several years have been mostly lost, with too little emphasis placed on reconstruction. Far more resources and coordination from the international community are needed than are at present being applied. The stakes are high. Defeat would mean a triumph for al-Qaeda, another civil war, an uncontrolled opium economy and the renewed subjection of the Afghan people to intense privations and the medieval brutalities of the Taliban. What the Afghans fear most is that the international community will again lose interest. This could happen. Failure is an option.

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