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## **The Drug War and Terrorism**

**by Scott McPherson**

On the first anniversary of the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks, President Bush assured the public that in fighting a cause “even larger than our country” the American government would “continue to pursue the terrorists in cities, and camps, and caves across the earth” to rid the world of the threat of terror. Unfortunately, in continuing to hold the “war on drugs” in the same high esteem as his “war on terrorism,” the president has been helping to feed and arm the very terrorists he has vowed to crush.

The connection between Middle East terrorists and the drug trade dates back more than two decades, when the United States and pro-Western governments opposed the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. At that time the focus was on training and equipping fierce mujahideen fighters to resist communist occupation forces, but the means to that end were often the same: drug money.

Interestingly, the headlines would suggest that the relationship between drug dealers and terrorists is a fairly recent development. The October 7, 2003, issue of the *Washington Times* reported,

Taliban insurgents in Afghanistan are increasingly turning to drug money to buy weapons ... financing a 4-month-old Taliban offensive, one of the largest since the allies ousted the Taliban from power 22 months ago.

Noting the drugs-terrorist connection,

The Bush administration has talked publicly of ridding Afghanistan of its lucrative poppy crop that *provides 70 percent* of the world’s heroin. [Emphasis added]

Just four days later, the same newspaper was reporting that drug czar John Walters was acknowledging that “the struggle between narco-trafficking has to be linked with the fight against

terrorism” because “drug-trafficking groups contribute to the financing of corruption and terrorism.”

And those involved in the drug trade in the Middle East are as serious about their investment as their violent counterparts in countries such as Colombia and Brazil. Attacks on foreign-aid workers in Afghanistan have skyrocketed — from one a month to one every two days — particularly in areas where opium-producing flowers are being harvested. “It’s absolutely true that security is worse in places where people are growing poppies,” said Diane Johnson, the Afghanistan program director for the Mercy Corps, a charity based in Portland, Oregon.

“The revenue from the poppy trade in Afghanistan is more than all the humanitarian aid combined,” said Paul Barker, Afghanistan director of CARE. He’s right, of course; poppy cultivation in that country earned \$1.2 billion in 2002, compared with \$500 million in foreign aid, providing an incredible incentive to those who profited from poppy growing to adopt an “any means necessary” approach to protecting their largest cash cow.

Naturally, the White House has reason to be concerned about increased worldwide demand for heroin, and the resulting profitability of poppy growing in the regions of the world where terrorist organizations most flourish. U.S. and other forces have been in Afghanistan for two years — despite having ousted the ruling Taliban government, which supported al-Qaeda terrorists, early in the campaign — fighting an ongoing guerrilla war against supporters of Osama bin Laden and Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar in hopes of creating a stable government in Kabul and the country in general.

However, with poppy sales on the rise in Afghanistan — up from 12 percent of the world market in 2001 to a portion as great as 76 percent today — local warlords whose allegiance rests comfortably with anti-U.S. factions and those whose loyalty is up for sale can be counted on to continue cultivating this highly coveted crop to raise money for local armies fighting to expel American and allied troops from Afghanistan.

This could spell serious trouble for George W. Bush. Domestically, more heroin production will mean that more drugs will be sold on American streets by the kinds of characters who would do business with terrorists. Street crime and corruption will certainly be a booming industry in the next few years. On the foreign-policy front, rising demand for illegal drugs from the United States and other countries means more money for terrorists to finance violent operations against coalition soldiers in Afghanistan and Iraq. More body bags coming home from the “frontlines” of the war on terrorism might not bode well for a president who is running for reelection later this year.

The most ironic factor to be considered in the drugs-terrorism discussion is that American conservatives have been beating the drug-war drum for almost 30 years now, but since 9/11 the so-called war on terrorism has certainly trumped the anti-drug crusade as the Republicans’ new favorite government program. But now that the administration is seeing a connection between

drug manufacturing and support for terrorism, it will be increasing operations against poppy growing in the belief that this will slow the flow of heroin to American shores and simultaneously dry up funds going to terrorists.

### **Unintended consequences**

Despite the best-laid plans, the law of unintended consequences will very likely thwart the president's designs. Should he choose to expand the war on drugs to yet another foreign country and engage in the kind of "crop eradication" program popular in South America, the president will be forced to face certain realities that might prove impossible to circumvent.

For example, if initial anti-drug operations in the Afghan countryside prove successful in limiting the supply of heroin, economic factors will simply override any perceived success; when the price rises, even more suppliers will be encouraged to begin manufacturing the drug to meet the newly intensified demand. At the same time, those producers who manage to remain in business will reap the short-term benefits of a price spike, channeling their huge profits into guns, equipment, and other tools of the terrorist trade. This puts things essentially back where they began.

Naturally, this scenario assumes that there will be any real success at all. The ferocity of resistance to such efforts, coupled with Afghanistan's "Wild West" atmosphere, could well lure American soldiers into an even more brutal and protracted military campaign in the badlands of south central Asia. The president and his advisors may be looking for ways to wrap up operations in Afghanistan, but expanding the war on drugs as a sort of sub-department within the larger war on terrorism would mean the kind of extended military commitment that makes the public shudder and politicians run for cover.

A counterargument to these possibilities may be that with enough intelligence and manpower, combined with increasing amounts of economic aid, the American government could mount an anti-poppy offensive sufficient to convince poppy growers to find another line of work and destroy those who resist. Such proposals may look good on paper, but the reality of such programs is that dirt-poor peasants and narco-terrorists are not easily put off an occupation as lucrative as the drug trade. And the measures needed to even attempt such an offensive mean pushing more and more locals towards the warm embrace of the terrorists and warlords the U.S. government desperately hopes to undermine.

The ultimate irony, then, is that the U.S. government's love affair with fighting the drug war is or will be the single largest contributor to increasing support for terrorists, no matter what actions the government takes to combat drugs.

This leads to another consideration. The American government's role in the Middle East drug trade has a long and tainted history, which makes the present anti-poppy campaign reek with hypocrisy.

Specifically, the CIA played a major role in channeling weapons to anti-Soviet fighters in Afghanistan throughout the 1980s, funded in large part by the illegal sale of opium. This started with the CIA's turning a blind eye to drug trafficking by the rebels, but eventually escalated to the point where the CIA was actively encouraging the production of heroin through its Pakistani counterpart, the ISI. In time, drug sales would be used to boost CIA-ISI coffers in their covert war against the Russians. Some critics have even speculated that this development closely mirrored the rise of heroin use among Pakistani youths, making the U.S. government a surrogate heroin pusher at the very time that President Reagan was calling for a renewed jihad against illegal drugs.

Sad to say, in the battle against worldwide terrorist networks President Bush seems poised to repeat the mistakes of the past, but on an even broader scale. In hoping to stem the manufacture of heroin in Afghanistan, his administration will begin stepping up operations against poppy growing and the warlord-terrorists who are collecting the profits. This will very likely prove as disastrous as the failed attempts to fight domestic drug dealers witnessed over the last 30 years.

Still, old habits die hard, and when Republicans hear about drugs, they instantly reach for the hammer of government to stamp out the perceived evil, but because of their drug war, the drugs will simply become more profitable and abundant.

If the president were truly serious about hitting terrorist organizations in their pocketbooks, he would fight for the legalization of drugs, which would result in a radical drop in price as legitimate suppliers flooded the market to meet present demand. In fact, an end to the drug war would also mean an immediate end to illicit drug lords because they couldn't hope to compete in the marketplace against reputable companies, including America's massive pharmaceutical industry. The only reason that such drug lords are able to survive and prosper is that they're operating within a black-market climate — a climate that often rewards such practices as violence, fraud, corruption, and double-dealing.

By making the war on drugs an extension of the war on terror, the U.S. government is only compounding the problem it claims to be trying to solve. Ending the war on drugs, on the other hand, would eliminate one of the important funding sources for terrorists.

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