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Is Afghanistan destined to be run by a drug mafia?

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Pashtunabad—a poor, wind- and flyblown suburb of Quetta—is the type of Pakistani town where commanders in the Afghan Taliban generally lived after being kicked out of their home country in 2001, says a report published in The Newsweek.

Modest cement-block and mud-brick, one- and two-story homes sit cheek by jowl along the narrow, largely unpaved streets and open sewers. Graffiti such as “Long Live Mullah Omar” and “Long Live the Jihad” are scrawled on walls; the black-and-white flag of a pro-Taliban political party flies over many homes.

Living in a town like Pashtunabad carried advantages for the Afghan Taliban’s leadership: it allowed them to fly under the radar and cultivate an image as average Joes, even as they were directing an insurgency against U.S. troops across the border. But in recent years, some Taliban commanders have begun moving out of places like Pashtunabad—and into new neighborhoods that could not be more different. They have transformed rural districts of mud-brick homes in places like Kuchlak—a stretch of poor and arid land populated largely by fruit and vegetable farmers, located on the road from Quetta to the Afghan border—into little boomtowns.

Farther to the south, they have abandoned Karachi’s poor Sohrab Goth neighborhood for wealthier developments like Clifton, where they live in the vicinity of the Pakistani elite, including businessmen, entertainers, artists, and politicians. (The Bhutto family has a sprawling

compound in the area, and Benazir Bhutto's widower, Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari, often stays there.) Many Clifton residents live in such a heavy security bubble, they probably don't even know the Taliban are in town.

In these wealthier neighborhoods, Taliban members are building and buying flashy mansions featuring faux Grecian columns, silver-tinted blastproof windows, and 10-foot-high walls topped with concertina wire. Once, the stereotype of a Taliban leader was that he drove around in an old, secondhand, beaten-up Toyota Corolla; these men, by contrast, drive new Toyota Land Cruisers or other luxury cars.

Taliban leaders, in other words, are a lot richer than they used to be just a few years ago—and the source of their sudden influx of wealth is no secret in Afghanistan and Pakistan. “The Taliban are more involved than ever in systematically promoting, financing, organizing, and protecting the drug trade,” Ahmad Woror, the director of narcotics control in Helmand province, tells Newsweek. “Drugs are ultimately providing the money, food, weapons, and suicide bombers to the insurgency and the good life to Taliban leaders in Quetta, Karachi, and across Afghanistan.”

The drug trade, of course, has been an important part of Afghanistan's economy for a long time—exploited by former Northern Alliance warlords, corrupt government officials, and other major traffickers. Local Taliban leaders have long benefited as well. But now the Taliban's central leadership has decided it wants in. And drug trafficking has become such a pervasive part of the organization's mission that it raises an alarming prospect: should the Taliban's influence grow following the U.S. withdrawal, is Afghanistan in danger of becoming the world's first true narcostate?

HISTORICALLY, THE Taliban has had a complicated relationship with the drug trade. In some respects, the deep involvement of Taliban commanders in drug trafficking is nothing new, says Muhammad Abdali, speaking in his role as head of the Afghan government's anti-drug task force in Helmand province. (Helmand is the country's largest opium producer; according to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, or UNODC, farmers are expected this year to sow more than the 185,000 acres of opium poppies they planted in 2012.) Abdali notes that Akhtar Mohammad Mansoor, who today is arguably the Taliban's most powerful commander, and the late brutal Taliban commander Mullah Dadullah Akhund were already thriving drug dealers back in 1994, just as the Taliban movement was launching. They quickly joined the Taliban soon after it gained traction in the mid-1990s.

Mullah Mohammed Omar—who led the Taliban and ruled Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001 before going into hiding following the U.S. invasion—outlawed opium production and trafficking in the late 1990s as being haram, against Islam. Yet many local Taliban commanders in opium-producing areas, particularly in Helmand and Kandahar, have been using the opium industry to fund their local insurgent operations since the early 2000s, and the Taliban has long collected a 10 percent Islamic usher tax on farmers' opium crops. According to a 2009 UNODC report on opium production, this tax is believed to have netted the insurgency some \$22 million to \$44 million a year—and the Taliban may have earned another \$70 million by providing protection to drug-laden convoys traveling through their territory.

But something changed in the last two years: the Taliban's central leadership now seems to be playing a much more pivotal role in the Afghan narcotics industry. They appear to be increasingly engrossed in both the upstream and downstream sides of the heroin and opium trade—encouraging farmers to plant poppies, lending them seed money, buying the crop of sticky opium paste in the field, refining it into exportable opium and heroin, and finally transporting it to Pakistan and Iran, often in old Toyotas to avoid detection.

“In the past the Taliban were only going after the 10 percent usher tax and protection money, but now they are running the business from top to bottom,” says an insurgent subcommander in the Sangin district of Helmand province who declined to be named. He knows the details: both he and his family are involved in the expanding trade. “Taliban leaders have systematically divided the areas they control into drug zones and assigned them to the most powerful and favored local commanders,” he says. “They are not only encouraging farmers to produce, they are giving local Taliban leaders in each zone a free hand to get actively involved in the business.” Today the insurgency is earning upward of \$200 million or more annually from the drug trade, according to the UNODC.

Why the shift? For years, the Taliban relied partly on donations from sympathetic citizens in the Gulf states to fund their military operations. Recently a lot of that Gulf money has dried up, as rich residents have turned their attention to other Sunni Islamic causes such as Palestine, Egypt, and Syria. This may have spurred the Taliban to look for other sources of funding.

But the biggest factor in the rise of the Taliban's drug involvement may simply be that the group's central leadership decided it wanted a slice of what its local commanders had. Already most of the country's opium was being produced in the largely Taliban-controlled areas of the south and southwest—98 percent, according to a 2008 UNODC report. “The insurgency would be weaker without the drug money that has helped to fund the movement at the local level for years,” says a senior Taliban officer who declined to be quoted by name. “The leadership realized that since it couldn't stop it, then why not get involved and seize control of the trade systematically.”

As in real estate, it's all about location. Consider the case of Akhtar Mohammad Mansoor and Abdul Qayyum Zakir. When Mullah Omar's deputy and brother-in-law were arrested by U.S. and Pakistani forces in Karachi in 2010, his two top deputies, Mansoor and Zakir, began vying for power. Both come from historically competing southern tribes—the Ishaqzai and Alizai, respectively—that are located in the most fertile opium-producing areas of Helmand and Kandahar provinces as well as along the most lucrative drug-smuggling routes. Both live in luxurious new homes. According to Abdali and other sources, both men are heavily involved in the drug trade. “Mansoor is the top Taliban leader because of his and his tribe's drug connections and the resulting money,” Abdali says. “He controls the major drug and transit zones.”

The Taliban's concentration on their drug interests begins each year during the fall planting season. At that time, commanders often provide seeds, fertilizers, and advance payments and are always ready with promises of protection. “In most districts, the Taliban are encouraging villagers to plant as many poppy seeds as possible and are assuring the farmers that the

insurgency will shield their cultivation from government eradication efforts,” Abdali explains. (Despite a big push, government eradication efforts have been largely ineffective, with just 6 percent of the some 380,000 acres of poppies planted last year having been destroyed, according to the UNODC.)

Insurgents have also found business success turning blocks of opium into heroin powder. The UNODC estimates that three years ago there were upward of 500 heroin labs operating in the country, and there are doubtlessly scores more now. Most of the insurgency’s labs are in the remote, no-go, Taliban-controlled areas of Nowzad and Baghran districts in northern Helmand province, Abdali says. “Neither we nor U.S. forces can access those areas,” he explains. “Only U.S. Special Operations Forces could go in. But drug control is not their priority.” Indeed, there has long been a debate as to whether the United States should devote more resources to drug control in Afghanistan. But the already-overstretched U.S. forces have had their hands full simply trying to secure the country and train the Afghan Army. And so they never really focused on eradicating the drug trade.

NEEDLESS TO say, the insurgents do not tolerate competition when it comes to drugs, and Taliban threats have driven out smaller traffickers. “Most small smugglers have quit the business, fearing the Taliban,” says Woror, Helmand’s director of narcotics control. Bigger traffickers are tolerated if they cooperate with the insurgency on the Taliban’s terms. “Sometimes they depend on each other like twin brothers,” says Abdali.

In fact, part of the Taliban’s success in the drug trade has been fueled by a rapprochement of convenience with their longtime mortal enemies: former members of the Northern Alliance. This militia was the big winner in the U.S. invasion of late 2001. With U.S. support on the ground and in the air, the Northern Alliance steamrolled the Taliban and became the core of Hamid Karzai’s new government, especially in its police and security forces. Today, while some of these former Northern Alliance officials are fighting the drug trade, others are abetting and profiting from it. And gradually over the past few years, despite the bad blood between them, the Taliban and former Northern Alliance members have realized that if they put aside their political differences and work together, they can dramatically ramp up their drug profits.

Leading members of the Northern Alliance had long produced opium and refined heroin in northern provinces like Badakhshan—exporting both products north through Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan and then on to Russia and Europe. Now they are also able to ship this harvest through Taliban-controlled areas in the south and into Iran and Pakistan. “The northern warlords, government officials, the police, and the Taliban are in an unwritten economic understanding that they are both part of one cooperative drug chain,” says the Helmand subcommander.

“Before the drugs reach Taliban areas, the shipments have been escorted from the north by the warlords, Karzai government officials, and Afghan police.” Both sides then share the profits when Taliban couriers deliver the top-grade northern shipments to buyers across the border in Iran and Pakistan. “Today there is more of the highest-quality heroin coming from the north and being exported by our forces,” says the subcommander. (Although the north produces only a

fraction of the drugs that come from the south, the opium is of better quality because of the cooler climate and more abundant rains.)

An alliance with their onetime enemies wasn't the only big change for the Taliban in the last few years. Given the newfound drug wealth and seemingly endless possibilities to make even more money, the Quetta Shura—the Taliban's governing body—decided it had to set up a monitoring mechanism to ensure that the windfall of narcotics revenues is shared from top to bottom. As a result, the council established an economic commission last year to scrutinize the surge of wealth. According to several Taliban leaders, 70 percent of the drug profits are now supposed to be given to the commission to spend on food, weapons, explosives, and medical care for the insurgency, while 30 percent is supposed to go directly to commanders and fighters in the field.

To many Taliban in the field, that does not seem like a fair split, as the frontline guerrillas are doing most of the work, taking the biggest risks, and bearing the brunt of casualties and suffering. Not surprisingly, local commanders complain that they are being shortchanged and that the leadership is ripping off most of the money. "Top leaders collect and pocket about 80 percent of the drug revenues from five southern provinces," gripes the Helmand subcommander. "This is holy money for the jihad, so no one should take more than their fair share," adds a Taliban operative who is critical of the inequitable split of the drug profits.

'Fighting the enemy with drug and kidnapping money is the same as fighting with infidel American money.'

Predictably, given that their movement is supposedly based on ultra-orthodox Islam, some Taliban supporters freely express doubts about the insurgency's heavy involvement in narcotics. "It is a great pity the Taliban are dealing with drugs that are expressly prohibited in Islam," pro-Taliban cleric Maulvi Jan Mohammad Haqqani tells Newsweek. "Fighting the enemy with drug and kidnapping money is the same as fighting with infidel American money." Others agree. "The Taliban should not be involved in drugs, as it is hurting the positive image we are building," says the senior officer.

But these are rather lonely voices. The Taliban now seem more focused on the drug trade than on fighting the enemy. "The Taliban's new definition of jihad is making money from the drug trade," says Abdali. The Helmand subcommander puts it this way: "We are using all of our energy protecting poppy fields, our drug interests, and convoys from government forces." Woror says he has never seen the Taliban fight so hard to protect their turf. "This year more than ever the Taliban are constantly fighting our poppy-eradication teams," he says. "And when not fighting us, they are spending most of their time supervising and protecting their drug business."

What all this means for Afghanistan's future is grim. With corrupt government officials, police, former Northern Alliance warlords, and now the Taliban all coordinating their efforts, the country could, after the U.S. withdrawal, end up being effectively ruled by a drug mafia. If that happens, the world will become even more deeply awash in Afghanistan's opium and heroin. And while that will be good news for the nouveaux riches drug lords of Quetta and Karachi, it will be terrible news for just about everyone else.