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Afghan Opium Production Hits All-Time High

It's No Accident

by MIKE WHITNEY

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2014 was a banner year for Afghanistan's booming opium industry. According to a United Nations annual survey released on Wednesday, opium cultivation set a record in 2014, increasing by an impressive 7 percent year-over-year and up nearly 50 percent from 2012. Afghanistan presently produces 80 percent of the world's heroin which provides billions of dollars in illicit profits for the powerful drug Mafia. Heroin trafficking and production have flourished under US military occupation and transformed Afghanistan into a dysfunctional narco-colony.

Readers who follow events in Afghanistan will recall that the Taliban had virtually eradicated poppy production before Bush and Cheney launched their war in 2001. The Pentagon reversed that achievement by installing the same bloodthirsty warlords who had been in power before the Taliban. Naturally, this collection of psychopaths—who the western media lauded as the “Northern Alliance”—picked up where they left off and resumed their drug operations boosting their own wealth and power by many orders of magnitude while meeting the near-insatiable demand for heroin in capitals across Europe and America.

In a Thursday article in the New York Times, Rod Nordland suggests that the recent uptick in production can be pinned on the Afghan presidential elections. Here's what he says:

“The eight-month presidential and provincial elections...affected opium production not only in the increased demand by politicians for campaign cash, but also in diverting police and military resources to the elections and away from opium eradication.

Opium crop eradication decreased by 63 percent from 2013 to 2014, the report said. Such changes were seen in nearly all provinces where there were eradication efforts underway...

Andrey Avetisyan, a former Russian ambassador to Afghanistan and now the head of the United Nations drug agency here, said United Nations officials had met with (newly-elected President) Ashraf Ghani recently and were encouraged by his concern. He understood well that drug trafficking suffocates the normal economic development,” Mr. Avetisyan said. “We are quite optimistic.” (Afghan Opium Cultivation Rises to Record Levels, New York Times)

Think about how that for a minute. Nordland admits that production rose because of the “the increased demand by politicians for campaign cash”, but then he does an about-face and says that those same politicians (like new president Ashraf Ghani) support opium eradication. Does that make sense to you, dear reader? Is Nordland trying to say that Afghan politicians only support eradication when they don't need money, but do a quick 180 when they do?

It's worth noting that Washington's new man in Kabul, President Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai, received a Master's degree from Columbia University, taught at Johns Hopkins University from 1983 to 1991, and joined the World Bank in 1991. In other words, he has the perfect pedigree for an aspiring sock puppet who will do whatever Washington tells him to do.

It's also worth mentioning that Ghani signed a controversial security deal to allow US combat troops to stay in Afghanistan after the occupation formally ends. (US troops will also enjoy total immunity from prosecution.) Karzai refused to cave in on the issue, which made him persona non grata at the White House, but eager-to-please Ashraf signed the document the day after he was sworn into office. Here's the scoop from the Washington Post:

“The United States and Afghanistan on Tuesday signed a vital, long-delayed security deal that will allow nearly 10,000 American troops to remain in Afghanistan beyond the final withdrawal of U.S. and international combat forces this year.

The Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA), and a separate pact signed with NATO, permit the continued training and advising of Afghan security forces, as well as counterterrorism operations against remnants of al-Qaeda. The signing of the documents comes as Taliban insurgents are increasing their attacks in an effort to regain control in anticipation of the combat troops' departure.

The accord was signed a day after Ashraf Ghani was sworn in as Afghanistan's new president in a power-sharing government, marking the first democratic handover of power in the nation's history. Ghani's predecessor, Hamid Karzai, who had presided over the country since shortly after the Taliban was driven from power in 2001, had refused to sign the agreement, souring relations with Washington.” (U.S. and Afghanistan sign vital, long-delayed security pact, Washington Post)

You can see why they love Ghani in Washington. The man is clearly prepared to bend over backwards to please his handlers at 1600 Pennsylvania Ave.

There's no reason to think that Ghani is going to be any tougher on poppy growers or drug traffickers than Karzai. The whole thing is a joke. Besides, Ghani doesn't have the resources to wage that kind of war. He can't deploy combat units to burn the fields, or hunt down and bust the kingpins, or freeze the assets in suspect bank accounts. Only the US has that kind of power, and they're not interested. According to the report by the Office of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction:

"The recent record-high level of poppy cultivation calls into question the long-term effectiveness and sustainability of those prior efforts....Given the severity of the opium problem and its potential to undermine U.S. objectives in Afghanistan, I strongly suggest that your departments consider the trends in opium cultivation and the effectiveness of past counternarcotics efforts when planning future initiatives." (CNN)

"Counternarcotics efforts"? What counternarcotics efforts? The US hasn't lifted a finger to fight the ballooning drug trade in 14 years.

Show me one headline in the last decade where US agents rolled up even one big-name drug trafficker in Afghanistan? The Washington PR guys don't even bother faking it with photos of captured kilos of heroin stacked a mile high or shady looking gangstas blindfolded and handcuffed doing the perp walk for the media. They don't fake it, because they don't care what the public thinks. In fact, they even shrugged off the UN report. The State Department issued a bland statement saying they were "disappointed", while a spokesman for the Pentagon, Michael Lumpkin, opined, "In our opinion, the failure to reduce poppy cultivation and increase eradication is due to the lack of Afghan government support for the effort."

Got that? In other words, blame Karzai. How's that for accountability?

So what's going on here? Is the US is really allowing an illicit multi-billion dollar industry to flourish right under its nose (without involvement of any kind) or is there a part of this story that's missing from the headlines? Of course, that leads us to an area of speculation that the media considers taboo, the prospect that US intel agencies are somehow implicated. As journalist and author Alexander Cockburn pointed out some years ago:

"There are certain things you aren't meant to say in public in America. ... A prime no-no is to say ...that the CIA's complicity with drug dealing criminal gangs stretches from the Afghanistan of today back to the year the Agency was founded in 1947." (Why They Hated Gary Webb, Alexander Cockburn, CounterPunch)

Is that it? Is that why Afghanistan has emerged as the world's biggest producer of heroin, because the CIA is somehow involved?

It seems quite likely, although I suspect it has less to do with greed than it does with policy. After all, the production and trafficking of narcotics helps the US achieve its strategic goals in

Afghanistan, that is, to pacify the public, to maintain the loyalty of the warlords, and to open the country to resource extraction and military bases. As long as the warlords get their payola, the US is able to maintain some control over the hinterland beyond Kabul, which is a big part of the gameplan. Now check out this blurb from an article by Alexander Mercouris titled “The Empire of Chaos and the War on Drugs” which gives a brief history of the CIA’s involvement in the drug trade:

...during the French war in Indochina, the SDECE (French secret service) ... turned to the French Connection to organise the heroin traffic, partly in order to fund its own operations against the Vietnamese Communists. After the French left, this operation was taken over by the CIA, with opium poppies grown and processed in the area now known as the Golden Triangle by CIA-backed Chinese drug lords associated with the anti-Communist Kuomintang movement, which had ruled China before the 1949 Communist takeover. The extent of collaboration between the US and the drug traffickers was so great that in the 1960s, the CIA was actually arranging flights to ship heroin from southeast Asia to the US.

The extent of CIA and SDECE collusion with the French Connection and with the Chinese drugs lords of southeast Asia was exposed in 1972 by the US historian Alfred W. McCoy in a seminal book *The Politics of Heroin: CIA involvement in the Global Drug Trade* (first edition 1973 and third edition 2003)...

The center of opium cultivation then switched to Afghanistan, where the same pattern reproduced itself. The major cultivators and traffickers of opium and heroin were assorted criminals and gangsters who made up a large proportion of the so-called Mujahidin, the Islamic jihadi insurgency which the CIA was supporting in the 1980s because they were fighting the Soviets. These criminals, of whom the most notorious is the Afghan warlord and drug trafficker Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, used the Soviet war in Afghanistan as a cover and protection for their criminal activities. Later many of these same people formed the core of the so-called Northern Alliance, which, together with the US, overthrew the Taliban in 2001 and formed the government that has ruled Afghanistan ever since. The Taliban had tried to eradicate opium cultivation and heroin trafficking. Following their overthrow, both resumed with a vengeance...

Many people are vaguely aware that cocaine production and trafficking took off in Columbia in the 1970s and 1980s at a time when the right-wing pro-US Colombian government was fighting a counterinsurgency war against a left-wing guerrilla movement known as the FARC and that this war continues to this day...

What even fewer people know is that, repeating the pattern of what happened in southeast Asia in the 1960s and in Afghanistan in the 1980s, what caused the Latin American cocaine trade to explode was the CIA’s involvement in it. In the 1980s the CIA formed an alliance with the Colombian drugs lords to support the Contras, the right-wing insurgency the CIA supported to overthrow the left wing Sandinista government in Nicaragua. With CIA encouragement, the Contras themselves became heavily involved in the cocaine trade, as did the various right-wing paramilitary groups the CIA was simultaneously supporting in El Salvador during the civil war there. The key transit corridor of these Colombian drugs was Mexico, where the individual who controlled the cocaine trade was Miguel Gallardo, a gangster who is now acknowledged to have

been a CIA asset. Gallardo is the acknowledged godfather of all the various vicious Mexican drug cartels that have proliferated in Mexico ever since, which have reduced parts of the country to a state of virtual war...

The CIA's admission of its role in creating the modern cocaine trade is little known and barely acknowledged in the US. A look at the present state of the heroin trade makes it grimly obvious that nothing has changed and that no lesson has been learned." (The Empire of Chaos and the War on Drugs, Alexander Mercouris, Sputnik)

Do you see the pattern here? This isn't about profits. It's about crushing workers movements, leftist organizations, and any emerging grassroots group that threatens the plutocratic system of wealth distribution. To achieve that end, Washington would just as soon climb into bed with jihadis and Neo Nazis as they would with druglords and narco kingpins. In fact, they have!

The point is, Afghanistan's bumper crop is not an accident. It's a form of social control that fits with Washington's broader strategic objectives of maintaining a permanent military presence in Central Asia and of opening up the country to resource extraction. The proliferation of drugs helps to keep the "little people" in line so the adults can get on with the business of looting.