

Catapults, Pickups and Tankers:

Cross-Border Production and Trade and How It Shapes the Political Economy of the Borderland of Nimroz

David Mansfield

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Author: David Mansfield

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About Drugs & (dis)order

‘Drugs & (dis)order: building sustainable peacetime economies in the aftermath of war’ is a four-year Global Challenges Research Fund project generating new evidence on how to transform illicit drug economies into peace economies in Afghanistan, Colombia and Myanmar.

It is an international consortium of internationally recognised organisations with unrivalled expertise in drugs, conflict, health and development. Led by SOAS, University of London, project partners are: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU), Alcis, Christian Aid, Kachinland Research Centre (KRC), London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (LSHTM), Organization for Sustainable Development and Research (OSDR), Oxford School of Global and Area Studies (OSGA), PositiveNegatives, Shan Herald Agency for News (SHAN), Universidad de los Andes, and Universidad Nacional de Colombia.

Project aims

1. To generate a new evidence base on drugs and illicit economies and their effects on armed conflict, public health and livelihoods. This will be done through comparative empirical research on borderland regions in Afghanistan, Colombia and Myanmar, which together produce the vast majority of global illicit heroin and cocaine.
2. To develop new programmatic approaches and policy reforms, that can contribute to the reduction of violence and more inclusive development and sustainable livelihoods in drugs affected contexts.
3. To build a global network of researchers and research institutions from Afghanistan, Colombia, Myanmar and the UK. This project focuses on drugs, but will widen the field of study to incorporate other illicit economies. This agenda will be driven forward through the establishment of a Research Consortium for the Transformation of Illicit Economies.

To find out more about Drugs & (dis)order visit the website: www.drugs-and-disorder.org and follow us on Twitter [@drugs_disorder](https://twitter.com/drugs_disorder).

About the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit

The Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) is an independent research institute based in Kabul that was established in 2002 by the assistance of the international community in Afghanistan. AREU's mission is to inform and influence policy and practice by conducting high-quality, policy relevant, evidence-based research and actively disseminating the results and promote a culture of research and learning. Since 2020, AREU organization is registered with Ministry of Economy (MoEc) as a non-profit NGO. As the top think-tank in Afghanistan and number three in Central Asia according to the Global Go To Think Tank Index Report at the University of Pennsylvania, AREU achieves its mission by engaging with policy makers, civil society, researchers and academics to promote their use of AREU's research-based publications and its library, strengthening their research capacity and creating opportunities for analysis, reflection and debate. AREU is governed by a Board of Directors comprised of representatives of donor organizations, embassies, the United Nations and other multilateral agencies, Afghan civil society and independent experts.

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AREU holds memberships in multiple international development consortiums including the RESOLVE Network, Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF), The School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium (SLRC), A Conflict Sensitive Unpacking of The EU Comprehensive Approach to Conflict and Crisis Mechanism (EUNPACK), ADB- Asian Think Tanks Network (ATTN) and The Regional Environmental Centre for Central Asia (CAREC). For more information visit www.areu.org.af

In 2018, AREU was awarded Best International Social Think Tank by Prospect Magazine.



Contents

About the Author	IV
Acknowledgements	V
Executive Summary	VI
1. Introduction.....	2
2. Methodology.....	5
2.1. Research objectives and approach	5
2.2. Research design and implementation	6
3. Background: Nimroz.....	13
4. Emerging Answers to the Research Questions.....	24
4.1. Physical Geography	25
4.2. Physical Infrastructure	31
4.3. Geopolitical	35
4.4. Violence	41
4.5. Regulatory regimes	44
4.6. Networks and Patronage	48
5. Key themes or lines of analysis that require further research	49
6. Conclusions and wider implications	53
BIBLIOGRAPHY	55

About the Author

David Mansfield is an independent consultant working with AREU since 2005. He has been conducting research on rural livelihoods and poppy cultivation in Afghanistan for 24 consecutive growing seasons. This research has involved over 16,000 in-depth household interviews in rural Afghanistan. David has a PhD in development studies from the School of Oriental and African Studies, London, is the author of *A State Built on Sand: How Opium Undermined Afghanistan*, and has produced more than 75 research-based products on the drugs economy and rural livelihoods in Afghanistan.

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Executive Summary

Nimroz is sometimes dismissed as a backwater, a barren desert area with limited agricultural land and a relatively small population. However, over the last 2 decades the province has transformed into one of Afghanistan's primary hubs for international trade, trailing only Nangarhar, Herat, and Balkh in terms of the value of customs duties the government collects. The economic and strategic significance of the province is further increased by the scale of the illicit trade in the tri-border area and the population of Nimroz's links with those in Pakistan and Iran. Ziranj, the provincial capital more than doubled in size between 2008 and 2019, attracting businesses and traders from Farah and Helmand, reflecting Nimroz's role as a regional economic hub for the southwest, and a relatively secure environment, even for those with wealth.

Moreover, the growing cross-border trade through Nimroz reflects shifting geopolitical priorities, as successive Afghan governments have looked to move away from dependence on Pakistan as their primary trading partner. In fact, the importance of Nimroz is directly associated with the interests of the governments of Iran and India, as the Government of India looks to strengthen its economic and political relations with Afghanistan, and establish an alternative to Afghanistan's trade with Pakistan and the Chinese Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) initiative. India has invested heavily in the Chabahar port on the Iranian coast, and in infrastructure projects in both Nimroz and Iran to encourage a trade corridor with Afghanistan that bypasses the ports of Gwadar and Karachi. Iran, keen to earn hard currency in the wake of US sanctions, and work with the Afghan government to resolve historical water disputes, and temper its restive Baloch

population, is an enthusiastic partner in these efforts. Iran, too, has financed a variety of infrastructure projects and offered preferential tariffs and regulations to encourage trade between Afghanistan and India. Its investment in a border fence with Afghanistan and in transport infrastructure between Chabahar and Nimroz has helped canalise trade through Milak, and increase revenues to the governments in both Tehran and Kabul, alike.

All of this has turned Nimroz into a major conduit for diesel, cement, and transit goods, alongside its role as a focal point in cross-border smuggling of people and illicit drugs such as opiates, hashish and methamphetamine. These economies link this once remote desert province to other provinces in Afghanistan and major international markets. Moreover, the value of these economies is significant and provides hundreds of millions of dollars in revenue and rent to traders, the Afghan government, insurgents and critical jobs and income to the population in this key border area.

This working paper charts the development of Nimroz as a major cross-border trading hub, the reasons for its emergence, and how different factors, including physical terrain, geopolitical interests, infrastructural investments, violence and formal and informal regulatory regimes have impacted both on the trading routes of particular commodities, and who has extracted rent from them. The paper is based on more than three hundred interviews with those directly involved in the trade of a variety of commodities and who are located at different strategic points in their value chains. It also uses high resolution satellite imagery to identify and examine the geography of the different cross border value chains under study

as well as verify the results of fieldwork and where possible extrapolate these findings over a larger geographical area.

In many parts of Afghanistan, particularly the eastern region, it is the mountains, and the narrow passes between them, that shape transport routes in and out of the country. However, this research shows that in the Southwest, in provinces like Nimroz, it is the Helmand river and the arid desert terrain that acts as natural barriers to the movement of goods and people. The depth and width of the Helmand river is such that in some places it is only passable at specific locations where the current is slow or where a bridge or boat is available. While the desert is so hot, vast, and hard to navigate that it requires an intimate knowledge of the area, along with proper preparation and contacts en route. As such, both river and desert create natural chokepoints through which cross border trade can be channelled. This research shows, as with the earlier work in Nangarhar, that significant income and rents can be generated for those that control these chokepoints and have the capacity to tax the goods that pass through them.

As with other border provinces, and earlier research in the east, evidence points to the redistributive aspects of these illicit economies. Consisting of multiple segmented journeys, with different local actors responsible for trade and transportation of commodities across specific areas, the cross-border trade in goods provides significant income, employment and rent to those in Nimroz and across the borders in Iran and Pakistan, even binding ideologically and politically opposing forces together in multiple economic transactions.

The paper also points to the cooperation and collusion between state actors and those in the insurgency, highlighting the common

interests that underpin patterns of trade and rent extraction, and the importance of the agency of the local traders and population involved. Examples documented include a demand by traders that the insurgency abandon its more disparate and punitive rent seeking against trucks on the roadside at Ghorghory, and for the government to allow a Taliban representative to be appointed to the Customs office in Ziranj. While it lasted, this intervention delivered a system that allowed traders to better manage their risks and reduce their business costs, and compelled the Taliban to develop an informal regulatory regime that did not deter business and alienate the local traders and population from whom it needed support. Other examples cited, point to the need for traders and transporters to adapt and innovate in order to reduce rents, increase volumes and generate better profit, in what is the high-cost industry of cross-border smuggling.

The paper offers some indicative estimates of the value of the cross-border economy to Nimroz and thereby its growing importance within Afghanistan and the region. For example, it estimates that people-smuggling earned an estimated US\$356 million per year in Nimroz in 2019, down from its peak of US\$643 million in 2015, when as many as 200 pickups were leaving Ziranj each day to head to the southern border with Pakistan. The official cross-border trade in diesel from Iran through Milak alone was worth around US\$155 million in 2019, earning US\$18 million for the government in taxes, and approximately US\$6 million for the Taliban in rent. An estimate of the value of the smuggled fuel in false tanks, and in other containers passing through Milak, as well as across the multiplicity of unofficial crossings in the province, could surpass the value of the formal trade. The province's strategic position in the burgeoning drugs trade—which now includes a growing cottage

industry in methamphetamine production using the ephedra plant grown wild in the central highlands—provides further income, rent and jobs to the province's population, its key politico-military actors, and those involved in the drugs industry in other parts of Afghanistan and across its borders.

These cross-border trading interests are such that there is a strong constituency for the continuation of these economies and the potential for protest, negotiation and even violent resistance if the state, or other actors, make efforts to restrict production and trade along particular routes or at specific locations. Continued government tolerance of the smuggling of fuel, drugs and other goods across the Afghan, Iranian and Pakistani borders highlights the redistributive nature of these illicit economies and their role in subsidising borderland communities. Moreover, the agency of those involved, their links to provincial, national and regional powerbrokers constrains the capacity of the formal authorities and the insurgency to act were a peace to be brokered.

Finally, this paper shows how important the interests of those across the border in Iran and Pakistan are to the political and economic stability of a border province like Nimroz. There is little doubt that those in Tehran remember the Taliban government of the 1990s and will fear any political settlement that delivers a government in Kabul that is dominated by them. Moreover, in 2017, official trade with Afghanistan was worth US\$2 billion, twice that of Afghanistan's trade with Pakistan, and judging by some of the infrastructure and activities at a variety of official and unofficial crossings seen along the Afghan-Iranian border informal trade could easily be of a similar magnitude. This is revenue that the Iranian economy cannot afford to lose, particularly in light of US sanctions and COVID-19, and could lead to a hostile reaction

from Tehran were a new government in Kabul to realign its trade policy towards Pakistan. A potential response might be a break in the uneasy peace with Kabul over Iranian water rights, possibly including in the form of renewed attacks on major irrigation schemes in places like Nimroz, Helmand and Farah.

Pakistan's economic and political interests, including the need to reduce the agitation amongst its own Baloch population that has stepped up attacks against CPEC infrastructure, also impact on Nimroz. With border infrastructure not dissimilar to that built by Iran, Pakistan has greater control over the movement of people and goods across its borders with Afghanistan. However, it too contains powerful groups with vested interests in the continuation of these illicit flows, as is evident by the strategic gaps in this infrastructure, highlighted by this research. As such, it seems unlikely that Pakistan, like Iran, will prohibit cross-border smuggling, but will instead, also like Iran, use this newly built infrastructure as a way of increasing revenues and offering favour to their strategic allies both inside its own borders, and within Afghanistan.

1. Introduction

This is the second of two working papers documenting the initial exploratory phase of research for the Drugs and (Dis)order project in Afghanistan. This research was led by the author and conducted in partnership with the Organization for Sustainable Development and Research (OSDR) and Alcis and first undertaken in the provinces of Nangarhar, in eastern Afghanistan, bordering Pakistan, and then in the southwestern province of Nimroz, located in the tri-border area neighbouring both Iran and Pakistan.

The first paper, “Mules, Pickups and Container Traffic: Cross Border Production and Trade and How It Shapes the Political Economy of the Borderland of Nangarhar” was released by the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) in July 2020.¹ This second paper documents the research in Nimroz conducted in mid-2019. Given that this initial phase of the research was exploratory and informed by common approaches, methods and goals, there is a degree of replication in the introduction and methods sections of these two reports. As such, this second paper can be read in conjunction with the first on Nangarhar for those interested in the functioning of cross-border illicit economies, or as a standalone for those with a particular interest in Nimroz, southwestern Afghanistan and the scale of illicit trade operating in the tri-border area.

It is important to note that in the context of Afghanistan, the goal of the research was to develop a robust and dynamic understanding of the actors, commodities and events that shape the borderlands of Nangarhar and Nimroz. While the overall Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) project focuses on the

role illicit drugs play in the transition from war to peace in the borderlands of Afghanistan, Colombia and Myanmar, the research team in Afghanistan decided to widen the scope of this exploratory phase of the research to include the production, trade and movement of several key commodities specific to the area.

This decision served several purposes. Most importantly, it improved access and security for the researchers, but it also served as a strategy for better understanding the relative value and significance of the drugs trade compared to other major sources of profit and rent in each borderland, and identify whether illicit drugs were more closely associated with violence and instability than the other commodities studied, a presumption that has often beleaguered the design of past research and dominates much of the official and scholarly literature. Given this decision this first exploratory phase of the research sought to answer four main questions:

- i. How does the production and transportation of key commodities, such as minerals, drugs and fuel, impact on the political and economic stability of borderlands?
- ii. Do these impacts differ depending on whether commodities are (a) illegal or (bi) legal commodities moved illegally?
- iii. What is the reason for the shifting relative importance of different commodities and transportation routes and how do these relate to changes in economic and political networks and/or violence?

¹ David Mansfield, “Mules, Pickups and Container Traffic: Cross Border Production and Trade and How It Shapes the Political Economy of the Borderland of Nangarhar” (Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, July 2020).

- iv. Which interventions supported/undermined the production and transportation of these commodities; what decisions guided their design and implementation; and ultimately how did these interventions effect the political and economic stability of borderlands?

Maintaining core research values and avoiding fetishising and rarefying drugs was critical to the methodological underpinnings of this work and the security of all those involved. Combining in-depth fieldwork with high-resolution satellite imagery also proved essential to the veracity of the research findings, and moving beyond a reliance on key informant interviews that tends to dominate much of the literature in illicit economies.

It is important to note that the production, processing and consumption of illicit drugs is just one of a set of activities and means of livelihood in these borderland areas; and often only one of many that are deemed illegal. Therefore, the research adopted an approach that “talked around drugs not about drugs”, thereby positioning the illicit drugs economy within broader questions about the livelihoods and the political economy of those living in these border areas and avoiding the kind of direct questions that often lead to the kind of aggrandisement, denial and the levelling of accusations of drugs trafficking at political opponents that has been seen in much of the official and scholarly literature.

Experience has shown that direct and focused questions on the production of illicit drugs, and particularly the processing and smuggling of opiates, is unlikely to yield meaningful data and can expose researchers to considerable danger. It can also lead to a distorted understanding of the importance of illicit drugs within the political economy of the region. To avoid this scenario, establish and

strengthen contacts in situ, and develop a clear understanding of the research possibilities for subsequent rounds of fieldwork, this initial phase focused on charting the economic and political networks that underpin the production, transport and cross-border movement of a number of commodities, including drugs, minerals, “transit goods”, fuel, fertiliser and people. With its focus on these particular commodities, the research travelled the length of their supply chains, from the official and unofficial crossings along the Afghanistan/Iran border deep into the hinterlands where some of these commodities are produced, as well as the locations en route where these, and other transit goods, are stored and traded on both sides of the border. As such, the research is rich in spatial data that can be further developed and strengthened during subsequent phases of the research.

This paper is divided into five further sections. The second section offers a detailed account of the methodology. This was a challenging phase of the research, not least because of the difficult security environment in which it was conducted. Levels of violence have increased considerably in Afghanistan in recent years, and access to the border areas with Iran where smuggling is endemic can often lead to researchers being confronted by officials who may be complicit in illicit cross-border economies. The strategy for mitigating these factors are described in some detail here. The third section of the paper provides a brief overview of the province of Nimroz—its historical importance as a borderland and its strategic importance in contemporary history both regarding the state building project in Afghanistan but also in terms of drugs production and control.

The fourth section provides emerging findings from this initial phase of the research. It documents the ebb and flow across different border points, routes, checkpoints and areas of commodity production, and outlines what these shifts in trade say about how different political and economic alliances in borderlands are formed, cooperate and compete in order to gain greater control and influence over strategic chokepoints where profit and rent can be extracted. In doing so, this initial phase of the research raises the possibility that illicit drugs are possibly less important in both value and rent to government and insurgents than the cross-border transit trade, and particularly the trading of diesel. This phase of the research also suggests that levels of violence

in Nimroz are not directly related to the production and trade of drugs in the province, or efforts to control it—which there have been few—but linked to the geopolitical interests of neighbours like Iran and Pakistan and their attempts to mitigate the political ambitions of Balochi dissidents within their own territories, as well as influence and the flow of both goods and resources from Afghanistan, including in the case of Iran, water from the Helmand river. The final section of the report offers some initial conclusions as well as identifies areas for further research.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research objectives and approach

This paper documents an initial, exploratory, phase of the research in Afghanistan. It drew on the experience of over twenty consecutive years of fieldwork in rural Afghanistan, including in Nangarhar, by the lead researcher, and more than a decade of close partnership with OSDR, Alcis and AREU. This experience of researching the role of opium poppy in rural livelihoods in Afghanistan, and the different factors that influence it, highlighted the challenges in examining the relationship between the drugs economy, violence and political settlement in the borders of Afghanistan, in particular:

- i. (i) the difficulties of gaining access to remote and conflict affected border areas, and individuals more deeply involved in the processing and smuggling of illicit goods;
- ii. the importance of avoiding “drugs fetishism” and the need to study the political economy of drugs in context, positioning it as one of many commodities around which actors and institutions align, compete, and extract rent and favour; and
- iii. the imperative of a robust methodology that does not rely on the “narratives of the powerful”, i.e., the smugglers and

political actors who have often been the focus of past research on drugs, violence and political economy, but also provides physical evidence of the changes in the production, processing, and movement of illicit commodities, and the interventions that affect them.

The importance of a robust methodology and the ensuring the veracity of research findings was identified as a priority. Avoiding the problems of “drugs fetishism”, where the world is seen largely through the prism of drug production and drug control measures, and little consideration is given to the wider socio-economic and political context in which they occur, was also viewed as critical for developing a robust methodological approach.² In Afghanistan, rumour, anecdote and misinformation on illicit drugs production and efforts to control it have also been widely circulated, and gained legitimacy in official narratives and the works of many scholars.³ Moreover, as an illegal or underground activity, there are a number of aspects of the drugs economy that are particularly difficult to research; unseen, unaccounted for, and often subject to personal aggrandisement and bias by officials and key actors, such as smugglers and politicians. This is particularly the case with the relationship between the insurgency and drugs where bias and poor methodology have often led

² David Mansfield, *A State Built on Sand: How Opium Undermined Afghanistan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

³ For example, there are claims that the Taliban imposed a ban in 1994 that led to reduced cultivation in 1995, and that they subsequently rescinded prohibition in 1996. This is despite all the empirical evidence to the contrary. Other unfounded rumours include “opium melons”, genetically modified seeds, and the planting of opium varieties from countries such as Burma, Italy, the US and China. On occasion, scholars and policy analysts are beguiled by such claims and engage in what Furstenberg describes as “an uncritical acceptance of local mythology,” which has implications for both policy and research. See David Mansfield, “Understanding Control and Influence: What Opium Poppy and Tax Reveal about the Writ of the Afghan State” (Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, August 2017); and David Mansfield, “The Sun Cannot Be Hidden by Two Fingers: Illicit Drugs and the Discussion on a Political Settlement in Afghanistan” (Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, May 2019), 7-10.

to narratives that are discordant with historical realities and to inflated estimates of the revenue generated.

To better manage these challenges and develop a more robust and dynamic understanding of the actors, commodities and events that shaped the borderlands of Nangarhar and Nimroz the decision was made to focus this phase of research not just on illicit drugs, but on the production, trade and movement of a number of key commodities in specific borderlands. This decision served several different purposes. First, broadening the scope of the research to include legal commodities—many of which are smuggled illegally—guaranteed better access to officials, elites and individuals involved. Illicit drugs, particularly processing and cross-border movement, remains a deeply sensitive issue for those involved; a function of illegality and the fear of arrest from the authorities, or retribution from corrupt officials or armed actors for sharing information. Discussing the production and movement of a wider range of commodities mitigated the potential of researchers being accused of working for law enforcement and of respondents being reluctant to engage.

Second, broadening the scope of the research to include other commodities allowed detailed empirical data to be collected on the different trading networks and routes, the economic and political actors that underpin them, and the degree to which both routes and actors along the value chain specialise in specific commodities or simply “move space” that could contain a wide variety of goods—legal and illegal. Focusing the enquiry around specific commodities, routes and the circumstances and events that shaped patterns of trade and rent extraction offered respondents a set of tangible facts that they could relate to and describe.

Third, it was anticipated that by including the production, trade, processing and movement of a range of other commodities in the borderlands, the research would be able to develop a better understanding of the relative value and significance of the drugs trade compared to other major sources of profit and rent in each borderland, and identify whether illicit drugs were more closely associated with violence and instability than the others commodities studied.

2.2. Research design and implementation

Recognising the security challenges, as well as fundamental resource and time constraints, this research focused on a limited number of commodities namely, (i) illicit drugs, differentiating between cannabis, hashish, opium, morphine, heroin and methamphetamine; (ii) minerals, in Nimroz, largely marble from Helmand; (iii) diesel; (iv) fertiliser; (v) cigarettes; and (vi) people.⁴

Minerals and illicit drugs were identified on

the basis that they were both high-value commodities produced in Afghanistan in more remote mountainous areas beyond the central government’s control and often cited as a significant source of revenue for the insurgency. Talc as opposed to marble is less capital-intensive—often being hand-dug—and is a “lootable commodity” that is still heavily reliant on roads and infrastructure for its transportation and export. This contrasts with illicit drugs that can travel within Afghanistan and across

⁴ David Mansfield, “Partner Consultation for Afghanistan Case Study” (Workshop report for GCRF Drugs and [Dis]order, November 2016); Nangarhar Planning Matrix, February 2017; Nimroz Planning Matrix, February 2017. The inclusion of “people” was specific to Nimroz given the scale of people smuggling across the western border, and will be covered in the second working paper.

the border by foot or by donkey, making them much more portable, less reliant on major road networks and therefore potentially less vulnerable to control and regulation.

Diesel and fertiliser are legal commodities and were selected because they are transported into Afghanistan through the major official crossing points like Torkham in Nangarhar and Milak in Nimroz, as well as smuggled illegally in large amounts through multiple unofficial crossing points across the country. These were prioritised since both commodities have been a mainstay on the list of Afghan imports and have been a regular feature of the cross-border trade from both Pakistan and Iran. For example, in 2018, 373,000 metric tonnes of diesel were imported into Afghanistan with a value of US\$166 million,⁵ a significant reduction in comparison to 2010 at the height of the military surge in Afghanistan when the North Atlantic Treaty Organization was importing most of its fuel through Pakistan under the Afghan Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement.

With particular relevance to the province of Nimroz, the rise in the price of fuel in Pakistan and the dramatic devaluation of the Iranian rial following US sanctions led to a flourishing cross-border trade in diesel between Iran and Afghanistan. Current estimates indicate that the trade in fuel at the official border crossing alone at Milak, near Ziranj, could be worth US\$155 million per annum.⁶ However, this figure does not take into account the diesel smuggled across the border at Milak concealed in tankers and containers or through the numerous unofficial crossings, or guder, along the border in the districts of Ziranj,

Charburjurak and Kang. The scale of this unofficial trade in Nimroz is significant and alongside smuggled fuel along other parts of the Iranian border, including in Farah, may far outweigh official imports of diesel at Milak. The smuggling of fuel also remains an important source of income for many of those living on both sides of the Afghan/Iranian border.

Cigarettes are another legal commodity smuggled both in and out of Afghanistan through various unofficial border crossings. Building cigarettes into the study, or so it was believed, would illuminate a commodity that is imported into Afghanistan through one borderland, transported across the country and then exported via another, and as such, document the interactions of both the international and intra-national political and economic networks that traded and extracted rent from them. Ultimately, the inclusion of cigarettes, as well as a research design built on multiple research sites, proved critical to charting the transit trade between Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan—a multibillion-dollar economy built on goods imported legally from neighbouring countries only to be smuggled across the same borders, or those with other neighbours, to exploit the differential tax rates. In 2014, the value of the transit trade with Pakistan alone (excluding imports by North Atlantic Treaty Organization states) was US\$2.5 billion.⁷ In 2018, trade between Iran and Afghanistan—much of it now channelled through Nimroz—reached US\$2 billion, surpassing the value of trade with Pakistan (US\$1.2 billion) and China (US\$1 billion).⁸

5 National Statistics and Information Authority, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. "Afghan Statistical Year Book 2018-2019", Issue No. 40: 230-36. July 2019.

6 This is based on an estimate of up to 35 tankers per day, each with an official weight of 23 MT of fuel and a price of US\$615 per MT in Nimroz. It does not include the fuel these tankers conceal either in false tanks or in separate containers in the cabin.

7 Pakistan Business Council, "Afghanistan's Transit Trade Patterns Pre and Post APTTA," June 2015, page 7. <https://www.pbc.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/AfghanistansTransitTradePatternsPrePostAPTTA.pdf>

8 Financial Tribune. "Iran Biggest Trade Partner of Afghanistan in 2017-18", 8 April 2018. <https://financialtribune.com/articles/economy-domestic-economy/84309/iran-biggest-trade-partner-of-afghanistan-in-2017-18> (accessed 27 August 2020).

The smuggling of people was viewed as critical to better understanding the political economy of Nimroz. Ziranj in particular is a central hub for Afghan travelling to Iran, Turkey and on to Europe. With as many as 200 “Datsun” pickups per day (except Friday), each containing around 20 people, and each individual charged the equivalent of US\$515, this was an industry worth up to US\$643 million per annum during the peak years of 2014 and 2015;⁹ even in mid-2019, with much lower levels of migration, it was still worth an estimated US\$356 million per annum.¹⁰ Furthermore, people smuggling is an economy that links this remote provincial centre to each province in Afghanistan, with hoteliers in Ziranj serving as a collection point for those from the country’s 34 provinces wishing to be transported into Iran and beyond.¹¹ It is also an industry that has had to adapt and evolve in the face of growing investments in border controls by Iran, including physical infrastructure and greater regulation, as well as changing patterns of violence both in Nimroz and elsewhere. As such, the inclusion of human smuggling as a commodity in this first phase of research proved invaluable for mapping the political and economic networks that shape the politics of cross-border trade in the province.

Once the key commodities were chosen, potential research sites were identified and prioritised for the first phase of the fieldwork and high-resolution satellite imagery analysis and collection. This was done iteratively with OSDR and Alcis. An initial selection of potential research sites involved the identification of:

- i. the major official and unofficial border crossings in Nimroz;

- ii. the primary points of production for each of the commodities being studied that originated in Afghanistan; and
- iii. the location of any wholesale markets, with the objective of mapping the supply chains for each commodity.

Once an initial list of locations had been established, imagery analysis was conducted to assess the current activity in each site, and, where possible, to trace supply chains back to further locations that might be of interest. This imagery analysis and then a review of some of the historical data identified several locations where commodities were or had been stored and cross-decked from one form of transport to another. It also provided visual evidence of the changes in infrastructure, the amounts of goods stored and transported over time, and a useful point of reference to follow up during data collection in the field. A map of the primary research locations can be found in Figure 1.

The final stage in the research design for this first phase was the development of tools for data collection and the prioritisation of respondents. Again, it was experience of research on illicit drugs in Afghanistan that shaped the focus of the initial phase of the research: Who would be the respondents? How they would be approached and at what stage in the research? What kind of questions could be posed?

Experience suggested that access to those involved in the different commodity chains for illicit drugs—the traders, processors, transporters, lab owners and workers, and money changers (hawaladars)—would be limited during this first phase of the research. This was particularly the case for those involved

9 Sune Engel Rasmussen, “On the Edge of Afghanistan.” *Foreign Policy*, 12 September 2017. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/09/12/on-the-edge-of-afghanistan-taliban-iran-war-united-states/> (accessed 27 August 2020).

10 This is based on reports of up to 80 pickups per day leaving Ziranj for Dak on the Pakistani border and a charge of the equivalent of up to US\$715 for each passenger for the onward trip to Iran.

11 Rasmussen, “On the Edge of Afghanistan.”

in the production and transport of morphine, heroin, methamphetamine, as well as money changers and officials. These were the most sensitive aspects of the research and those involved would be more reluctant to speak both openly and accurately. More importantly, there could be serious consequences for local researchers were there to be unrelated law enforcement efforts in the area at a later date. It was judged that, during this exploratory phase, it would be possible to make initial contact, generate some findings—albeit ones that would need to be handled with caution—and build on the relationships established for the latter phases of the research when more robust data collection might be possible.

Rather, it was decided that the focus of data collection during this initial exploratory phase was on those involved in the day-to-day activities of extraction, transport and trade of each of the commodities being studied and in each of the sites identified. To circumvent the inherent problems associated with researching an illegal or underground activity, the data collection focused on household livelihood strategies: how these individuals earned a living and how the circumstances that shaped it had changed over time and why. Most importantly, discussions with respondents focused on their direct experience rather than on events or phenomena over a wider geographic area, where answers become increasingly speculative.¹²

A further focus of this first phase of the research was “key informants”, i.e., individuals who had lived in a particular research site for an extended period of time and had intimate knowledge of the history, political economy and events that shaped that location. Due to problems of access and the composition of the research team at this stage of

the research, these respondents were male. To gain as full a history as possible, preference was given to those 60 to 70 years of age, as most recall the time of King Mohammed Zahir Shah in the 1950s and 1960s. The research in Nimroz presented some particular challenges in contrast to Nangarhar in that an increasing number of the villages on the border with Iran and the unofficial guder border crossings had experienced a significant outflow of the population, a function of drought and the impact of Iranian border controls on the informal economy.¹³ This meant that many of the original inhabitants of these areas had left, settling in Ziranj, Iran and other areas, making it more difficult to develop a detailed history of these locations prior the late 1970s.

In prioritising the type of information to be collected during fieldwork it was recognised that different actors had quite different knowledge and experiences that they could recount. For example, a “transporter” of opium knows little about the price per kilogram at different points along the journey to Iran or Pakistan, knowing instead only what they are paid and the costs incurred for transport, storage, bribes and “taxes” to the insurgency. Similarly an opium trader—has detailed knowledge of the price differentials from one location to another and the amount that would need to be paid to transport a kilogram between them, but would have little and often outdated information of the number of checkpoints en route or who controlled them, and know little of the different payments required at each stage for the costs of hiring a vehicle. Although data collection did focus on drawing out these specific areas of knowledge for each category of respondent, the enquiry was also structured around a set of common themes and questions so as to allow as much data as possible to be cross-checked and verified by

12 Swedish Committee for Afghanistan. “Farming Systems of Nad e Ali District, Helmand Province.” In: Agricultural Survey of Afghanistan, Report 15. (Peshawar: Swedish Committee for Afghanistan, 1992), 1.

13 Karlos Zurutuza, “Afghans Living Under the Shadow of Iranian Guns”, Al Jazeera, 15 October 2014. <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2014/10/afghanistan-shooting-nimroz-iran-taliban-201410147102888751.html> (accessed 27 August 2020).

category of respondent, commodity, and conduit—a full list of which can be found in Table 1.

In terms of the interviews themselves, it was decided that the sensitive nature of the data lent itself to individual interviews. Therefore, to mitigate bias, interviews with all respondents were conducted while individuals were at work, since

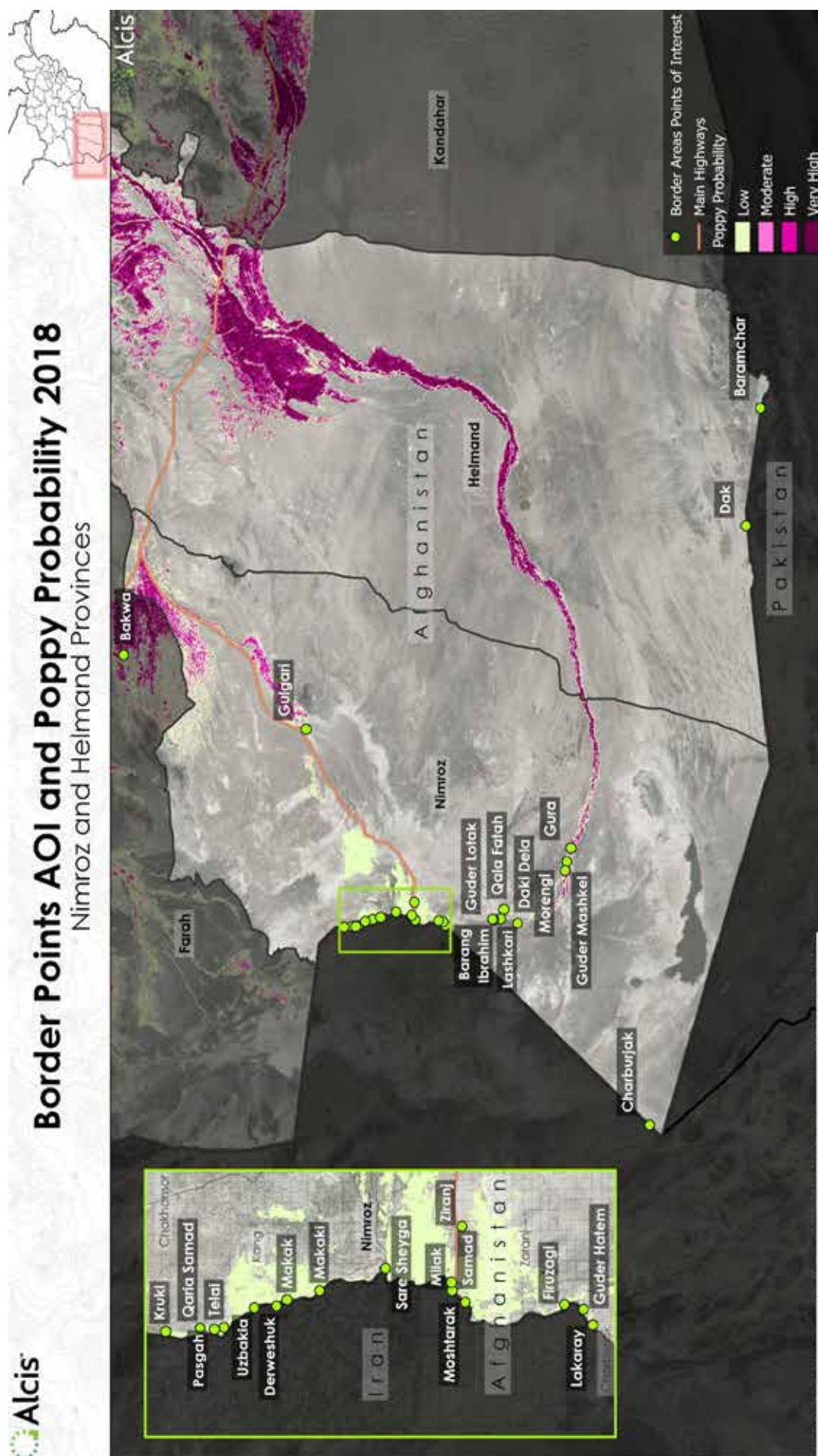
holding interviews in the household compound can become subject to interruptions. Group discussions were avoided, as they tend to be dominated by community elites, are inappropriate for sensitive issues and increasingly represent a security threat to both respondents and researchers in rural Afghanistan.

Table 1: Number of Respondents by Category, Commodity and Conduit

Routes/ Conduit	Key Informants	Trader					Transporter				
		Opium	Fuel	Transit	People	Fertiliser	Opium	Fuel	Transit	People	Fertiliser
Dak/Mashkal	5									26	
Lotak/Mile 46	9										
Milak/Ziranj	17		62	22		5		37			
Khwabgah	8	3									
Lakaray	3	1					4				
Firuzagi	5										
Kang Din Mohammad	3										
Moshtarak	2						2				
Mohammad	2										
Khwaja	8						1				
Abdul Rahman	3										
Deh Raees	4						4				
Hatam	6						2				
Makaki	6						3				
Derwishuk	4	2					5				
Telai	3						4				
Gulshah	6	4					11				
Noor Mohammad Khan	5	1					4				
Kruki	1										
Totals	100	11	62	22	0	5	40	37	0	26	0

Source: Fieldwork

Figure 1: Nimroz and Research Sites during 1st phase of research (AOI Area of Interest)



Flexibility was also built into the first phase of the research through regular consultation between those on the ground, the team leaders at OSDR and the lead researcher. This not only meant that any problems with data collection and security could be discussed and resolved but also allowed the research to adapt to interim findings, including the discovery of further unofficial border crossings that had not been built into the original research design and shifts in the patterns of trade of specific commodities. This was particularly important given just how much trade on the Afghan-Iran border had changed with the devaluation of the Iranian rial and the government of Iran's construction of a border wall and the impact on the economy of what were considered traditional informal border crossings—the guder.

The final stages of the research consisted of an in-depth debrief with OSDR and further Geospatial Information System (GIS) analysis. Initial GIS analysis and mapping products were used extensively in the debrief. These helped overcome the lead researcher's inability to go to the research sites due to the prevailing security situation in Nimroz and the ethical implications it posed to both Afghan colleagues and respondents. Detailed satellite imagery of each of the research sites, covering multiple years, provided the research team with a vehicle to develop detailed histories of each location and annotate points of interest for further imagery analysis if required. The debrief included a review of many of the interviews conducted with the producers, traders, and

transporters along the supply chains of each of the commodities studied. Finally, further imagery analysis was conducted by Alcis at the request of the lead researcher. This work involved a closer analysis of key visual signatures of changing patterns of trade and events reported by the fieldwork for the purpose of verification of findings and, where possible, their extrapolation.

In sum, the research strategy for this first phase of the project was inductive and iterative, shaped by observations and the results of data collection from respondents actively and from high resolution satellite imagery. Moreover, the underground and illicit nature of the subject matter, as well as the highly challenging security environment demanded caution in terms of methods, data handling and the verification and subsequent sharing of findings. Interviewing multiple actors, in multiple locations along multiple commodity chains, and integrating this work with high resolution satellite imagery was judged to be good research practice as well as the most effective way of managing the limited resources available for research in such challenging circumstances. As such, this first phase of the research places the political economy of drugs in context, positioning it as one of many commodities around which actors and institutions align, compete, and extract rent and favour.

3. Background: Nimroz

The province of Nimroz is located in the southwest corner of Afghanistan bordering both Iran and Pakistan. Covering 42,409 square km, the province is divided into five districts, Charburjak, Asl i Chakhansur, Kang, Khashrud and Ziranj, where the provincial capital is found. Part of the greater Farah province until 1964, the population of Nimroz is thinly spread, and largely concentrated in and around the city of Ziranj, founded in 1970.¹⁴ The estimated population of 309,096 consists mainly of Baloch, along with Pashtun, Tajik and Brahui minorities.¹⁵

The terrain and climate of Nimroz is harsh despite being fed by three major rivers: the Helmand, the Hari Rud and the Khash Rud. A vast amount of the land area is desert, and includes the infamous Dasht i Margo, “the desert of death”. Persistent drought and floods beleaguer the province and during the hot summer months a strong north wind blows for 120 days from 15 May until 13 September.¹⁶ Sand storms can blow through the area covering buildings, the main highway, minor roads and tracks across the desert area, making it particularly difficult to navigate.

The population of Nimroz is particularly poorly served by the central government in Kabul, a fact that features in many of the socio-

economic indicators for the province. It typically ranks near, or, at the bottom, of provincial tables in terms of coverage for healthcare (comprehensive health centres, basic and sub-health centres, medical personnel, immunization, etc.)¹⁷ and education (students enrolled for primary, secondary and tertiary education, student to teacher ratios).¹⁸ There are few nongovernmental organisations in the province and private sector services are also limited.¹⁹

The national security and military presence in the province is particularly thin, a surprise considering its strategic position on the borders of both Pakistan and Iran, its role as a major conduit for goods to and from Iran, and the high incidence of smuggling of people and illicit drugs.²⁰ It is also notable that, in contrast to many other provinces, there was no Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) in Nimroz during the Afghan reconstruction following the fall of the Taliban. While often a source of tension and a target for insurgent attacks, PRTs did bring development aid and military assistance, especially where led by the US government (USG) or other major western donors. Rather, there was a more limited US presence in Delarem²¹ to the northeast of the province

14 Lutz Rzehak, “Remembering the Taliban” in *The Taliban and the Crisis of Afghanistan*, eds. Robert Crews and Amin Tarzi, 184. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).

15 This is the population estimate from the World Pop Flowminder project, which draws on high-resolution domestic compound data from Alcis and satellite imagery to map domestic compounds (Flowminder, “Final Population Mapping for Afghanistan 2017.” Unpublished Report, page 18). The Afghan government’s population estimate, which is based solely on a ground-based survey estimates the population at 167,863.

16 Anna Larson, “Government structures in Nimroz” AREU Case Study Series, November 2010, page 6.

17 National Statistics and Information Authority, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, “Afghan Statistical Yearbook 2018-2019,” 125, 128-132, 134-136.

18 National Statistics and Information Authority, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, “Afghan Statistical Yearbook 2018-2019,” 93-97.

19 National Statistics and Information Authority, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, “Afghan Statistical Yearbook 2018-2019,” 73, 100, 113, 126, 250, 251.

20 Nimroz is covered by the Afghan National Army 205th Corps but they have limited presence there.

21 This was the 2nd Marine Regimental Combat Team. The Diplomat, “Afghanistan’s Forgotten Province”, 1 December 2010,

on the main highway to Kandahar; small in size and sufficient distance from the Iranian border, this was enough not to provoke the government in Tehran but did little for the security and development of Nimroz.

Iranian influence in Nimroz is significant. The rial, or toman (10 rial is equal to one toman) is the currency most commonly used.²² Iran provides electricity to Zaranj and cell phone coverage also comes from Iranian providers.²³ Cultural, linguistic and family ties are also strong with many on the border, particularly the Baloch, having relatives in both Iran and Afghanistan and many are believed to have identity cards issues from both countries. The cross-border bonds grew stronger during the Russian occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s, when many fled across the border to Iran to escape the war, including some of the province's politico-military elite such as Abdul Karim Brahui, leader of the Nimroz Front (Jabha e Nimroz) in 1979, and governor of the province no fewer than three times (1992-95; 2001-05; and 2010-12).

Historically, the border between Afghanistan and Iran has been subject to dispute, leading to skirmishes. In 1872, under the auspices of the British, it was agreed that the Helmand River would delineate the southern part of the two territories. The shifting course of the river meant that a more permanent demarcation was required. Over more than 40 years, the border between Iran and Afghanistan was agreed upon, culminating in 172 stone pillars being erected to mark the official boundary. Locally, respondents claimed that many of these markers now lie up to 1 km inside Iranian territory.

Unofficial travel between Iran and Afghanistan, and to a lesser extent Pakistan, has long been a part of life for those living in Nimroz. Many crossing points have developed over the years where local inhabitants could travel across the border by foot, mule, boat and, in some cases, vehicles. Iran's efforts to inhibit the cross-border smuggling of people and drugs, as well as the concerns it had at the time about the Taliban regime, prompted it to invest increasing amounts in border controls. In the late 1990s, the Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran (GoIRI) built berms, ditches and sentry points and posted up to 30,000 personnel on the border with Afghanistan, limiting but certainly not eliminating cross-border movement (see Figure 2).²⁴ Indeed, some of this infrastructure separated Afghan villages from their agricultural land, necessitating the construction of crossing points to allow farmers to pass by foot and on their tractors.

<https://thediplomat.com/2010/12/afghanistans-forgotten-province/> (accessed 27 August 2020); Baba Tim, "The Counterinsurgency Fight in Zaranj, Afghanistan, 2010-2012", 24 May 2019, <https://thefreqmedia.com/2019/05/24/analysis/patbristol70/the-counterinsurgency-fight-in-zaranj-afghanistan-2010-2012/> (accessed 27 August 2020).

22 Fabrizio Foschini, "Economy and Development: Bad Lieutenants in Nimroz", 23 August 2011, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/bad-lieutenants-in-nimroz/> (accessed 27 August 2020).

23 The Diplomat, "Afghanistan's Forgotten Province"; Baba Tim, "The Counterinsurgency Fight in Zaranj, Afghanistan, 2010-2012."

24 Pierre Arnaud Chouvy, *Opium: Uncovering the Politics of the Poppy* (IB.Taurus: London, 2009): 85-86.

Iran - Afghanistan Border
Border Wall, Facilities and Watch Towers

The map displays the border between Iran and Afghanistan, with a legend indicating the locations of Border Area Locations (red dots), Border Facilities (pink dots), Border Wall Features (yellow line), and the Border Wall (thick black line). Key locations marked include Gulistan, Khashrod, Chahkhanzar, Nimroz, Qala Fatah, Daki Dala, Morengi, Gura, Guder Mashkel, Charburjak, and Farah. The map also shows the Helmand river and the border with Pakistan to the south. An inset map in the top left corner shows the location of the border area within Iran.

Since 2005, the GoIRI has funded major infrastructural works that have sought to further strengthen the border and boost its official trade with Afghanistan via Nimroz (see Figure 3). Its first move was to build the Pol e Abrisham bridge across the Helmand river at Milak, on the outskirts of Ziranj. This was followed by investments in border facilities on the Iranian side to encourage trade, and the construction of a 70 mile length of 5 meter high wall, reinforcing the ditches and berms that had been built in the late 1990s and channelling trade through Ziranj

(see Figure 4). Between 2005 and 2009, India provided US\$100 million for the improvement of the 135 mile road between Ziranj and Delarem, connecting the border crossing at Milak to Highway One for onward travel to Herat, Kandahar and Kabul (see Figure 5).²⁵ India had made further investments in Chabahar Port in Iran, and its surrounding infrastructure, all aimed at strengthening economic ties between India, Iran and Afghanistan and reducing Afghanistan's dependence on Pakistan for international trade.²⁶

Figure 3: A comparison of the physical infrastructure at Milak/Ziranj the border crossing, prior to 2005 and 2019.



Investments in physical infrastructure in Nimroz, as well as in Iran, have transformed Nimroz into one of Afghanistan's major hubs for international trade. For example, in 2018, Nimroz generated US\$37 million in customs duties, more than Kandahar (US\$36.5 million), and ranked

fourth after Nangarhar (US\$119 million), Herat (US\$117 million) and Balkh (US\$71 million), where the major official border crossings of Torkham, Islam Qala and Hairatan are located.²⁷

25 Afghanistan Institute for Strategic Studies, "Strategic Analysis of the Chabahar Port: Afghanistan-Iran-India Relations" <https://www.slideshare.net/RobSentseBc/afghanistan-iran-india-relations-march-2018> (accessed 27 August 2020).

26 Thomas Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 344-45.

27 National Statistics and Information Authority, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, "Afghan Statistical Yearbook 2018-2019," 245.

Figure 4: Image of the border wall built by the Iranian government along 70 miles of the Zaranj district boundary with Iran.



These investments have also contributed to a growing non-agricultural economy in the province, which is critical given that increasing temperatures, major upstream irrigation works and persistent drought have led to growing problems for a population that has historically relied on agricultural production and livestock for a living.²⁸ For example, wetlands, such as the Hamoun Puzak in the district of Kang, and the Hamoun i Sabari on the border with Iran—

important sources of livelihood for the population on both sides of the border—are shrinking at a rapid rate, leading to livestock losses, migration, dust storms and increasing tensions between Iran and Afghanistan.²⁹ Alongside drought, the province is also subject to intermittent downpours and flooding that has led to a number of villages, like Kruki in the northwest of Kang, which both fieldwork and imagery show has been all but abandoned.

Figure 5: An asphalt road was built between Ziranj and Delarem funded by the Government of India between 2005 and 2009.



Aside from the environmental challenges, agricultural cropping systems in Nimroz are basic and limited in area, consisting largely of wheat³⁰ and opium poppy in the winter, melons in the spring and maize and mung beans during

the summer. Freezing temperatures between November and March make the growing season too short for tropical and subtropical vegetation.³¹ Livestock have been severely depleted by drought and annual and perennial horticultural

28 Fatemah Aman, "Water Dispute Escalating between Iran and Afghanistan" (Atlantic Council, Issue Brief, August 2016), 3-4.

29 ICRA, "Water and Conflict: The Growing Challenge" (Discussion Paper, 2018), 20-26; Fatemah Aman, "Water Dispute Escalating between Iran and Afghanistan."

30 National Statistics and Information Authority, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, "Afghan Statistical Yearbook 2018-2019," 159.

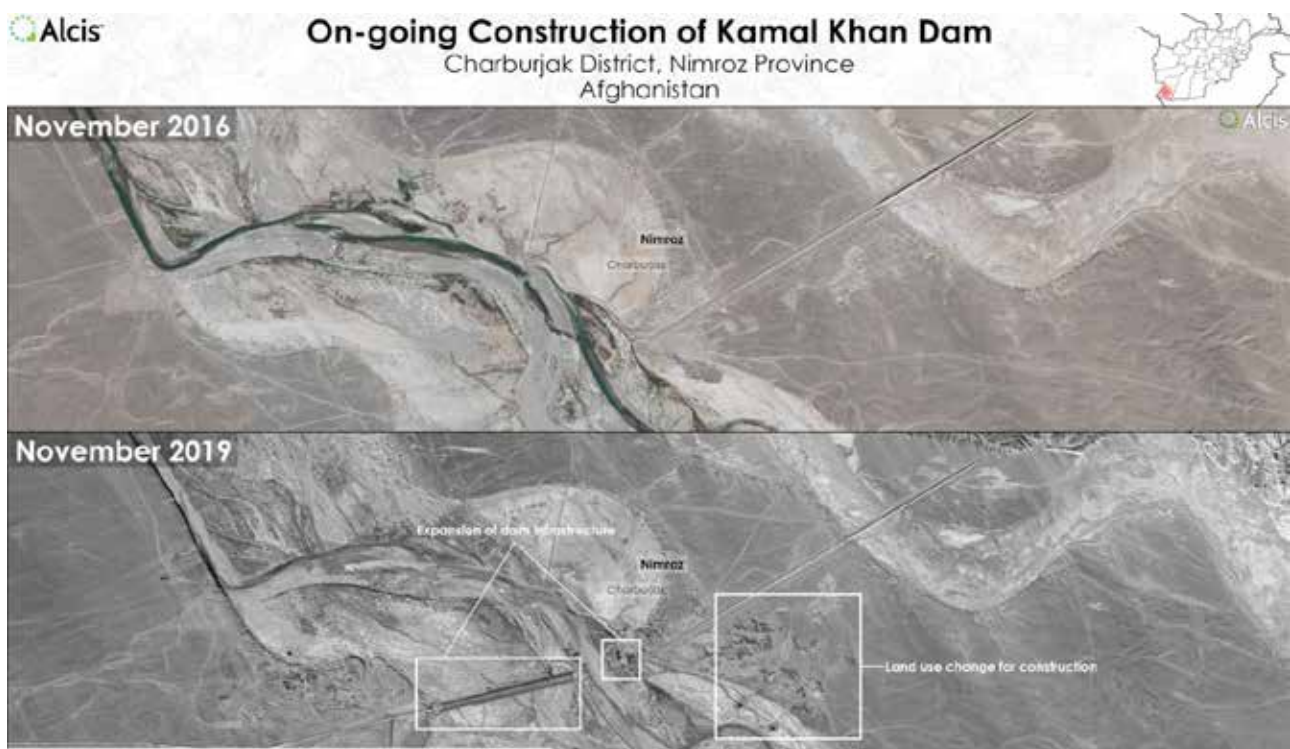
31 Whitney, John. "Geology, Water, and Wind in the Lower Helmand Basin, Southern Afghanistan", Scientific Investigations Report 2006-5182, US Department of the Interior. US Geological Survey, 2006, 15-16. https://pubs.usgs.gov/sir/2006/5182/pdf/SIR06-5182_508.pdf

production is limited.³² In the absence of viable agricultural production, the population of Nimroz has increasingly drawn on its cross-border connections with Iran and Pakistan as a way of earning a living, including the smuggling of people, drugs, fuel and other items.

There are few efforts to support agricultural production in the province. By far the most significant is the development of the Kamal Khan dam 45 miles to the south of the city of Ziranj (see Figure 6). At a cost of US\$100

million, and now in its third and final phase, this project, once completed, has the potential to transform the agricultural base of Nimroz, irrigating up to 100,000 hectares of new agricultural land and generating 8.5 MW of electricity.³³ However, the project remains contentious, linked to ongoing disputes over water rights with Iran and the perception that it will have further effects downstream, including the loss of water to the Hamoun e Helmand.

Figure 6: A comparison of the Kamal Khan dam site near Ziranj city, 2016 and 2019.

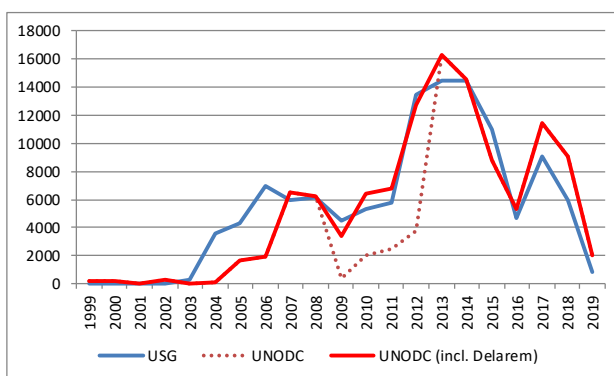


32 National Statistics and Information Authority, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, "Afghan Statistical Yearbook 2018-2019," 165.

33 Wadsam, "Completion of Kamal Khan Dam in Nimroz Province", 3 December 2018. <https://wadsam.com/afghan-business-news/completion-of-kamal-khan-dam-in-nimroz-province-232/> (accessed 27 August 2020).

Even in the case of opium poppy, Nimroz does not have a comparative advantage. Historically, it has not been a major producer, cultivating little more than 6,000 hectares of opium poppy in the early part of the 21st century when the price was at its peak and there were few government controls (see Figure 7). The dry conditions across much of the province largely mitigate against widespread cultivation, apart from in the better irrigated area of the district of Khash Rud and in the desert areas to the north where the ground water is not so heavily salinated as it is in other parts of the province.³⁴

Figure 7: Levels of opium poppy cultivation in Nimroz province, 1999-2019



USG = US government, UNODC = United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime.

Patterns of opium poppy cultivation began to change in the latter part of the first decade of the 21st century, with growing levels in the former deserts of Khash Rud. Here, as in the district of Bakwa in Farah, and the area north of the Boghra canal, former desert land was settled

and irrigated using deep well technology, funded largely by opium poppy cultivation (see Figure 8).³⁵ Shifts in the administrative boundaries of Nimroz and Farah added to the fluctuations in official estimates of cultivation with the area of Delarem—to the north of Highway One and what became a major poppy growing area—being transferred to the province of Farah between 2009³⁶ and 2012, before once again being included in Khash Rud, and therefore Nimroz, in 2013.³⁷ The inclusion of the Delarem area would have added a further 3,000 to 9,000 hectares of cultivation to the provincial total during these years (see Figure 7).³⁸

Since the Taliban ban in the 2000-01 growing season, when levels of cultivation were negligible anyway, there have been few government or international efforts to contain opium poppy cultivation in Nimroz. During the initial years of the Afghan government's crop eradication campaign, between 2003 and 2007, reports of crop destruction were often exaggerated and unverified, and even then there was little evidence of much of the crop being destroyed.³⁹ Since then crop destruction has been minimal, rarely exceeding more than 150 hectares and having little effect (see Figure 9). The reductions in cultivation that have occurred such as those between 2009 and 2012, and more recently since 2017, have largely been in keeping with other parts of southwestern Afghanistan and a function of overproduction, falling opium prices and drier conditions.⁴⁰

34 Ramin, "Ministry in Quest of Funds for Completing Vital Dam Project", Pajhwok, 29 November 2015. <https://www.pajhwok.com/en/2015/11/29/ministry-quest-funds-completing-vital-dam-project> (accessed 27 August 2020).

35 David Mansfield, "Still Waters Run Deep: The Transformation of the Deserts of Southwest Afghanistan.", May 2015, 12-16

36 UNODC, "Afghanistan Opium Survey 2009" (Kabul: UNODC December 2009, page 44. https://www.unodc.org/documents/crop-monitoring/Afghanistan/Afghanistan_opium_survey_2009_summary.pdf

37 UNODC, "Afghanistan Opium Survey 2013," p. 28. https://www.unodc.org/documents/crop-monitoring/Afghanistan/Afghan_Opium_survey_2013_web_small.pdf

38 UNODC, "Afghanistan Opium Survey 2018; Cultivation and Production", UNODC, Kabul, November 2018, page 62. https://www.unodc.org/documents/crop-monitoring/Afghanistan/Afghanistan_opium_survey_2018.pdf

39 SIGAR, "Counternarcotics: Lesson from the US Experience in Afghanistan", June 2018, page 88-91. <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/lessonslearned/SIGAR-18-52-LL.pdf>

40 UNODC, "Afghanistan Opium Survey 2019", October 2019.

Figure 8: Expansion of agricultural land into the former desert areas of Southwestern Afghanistan, 2003-19

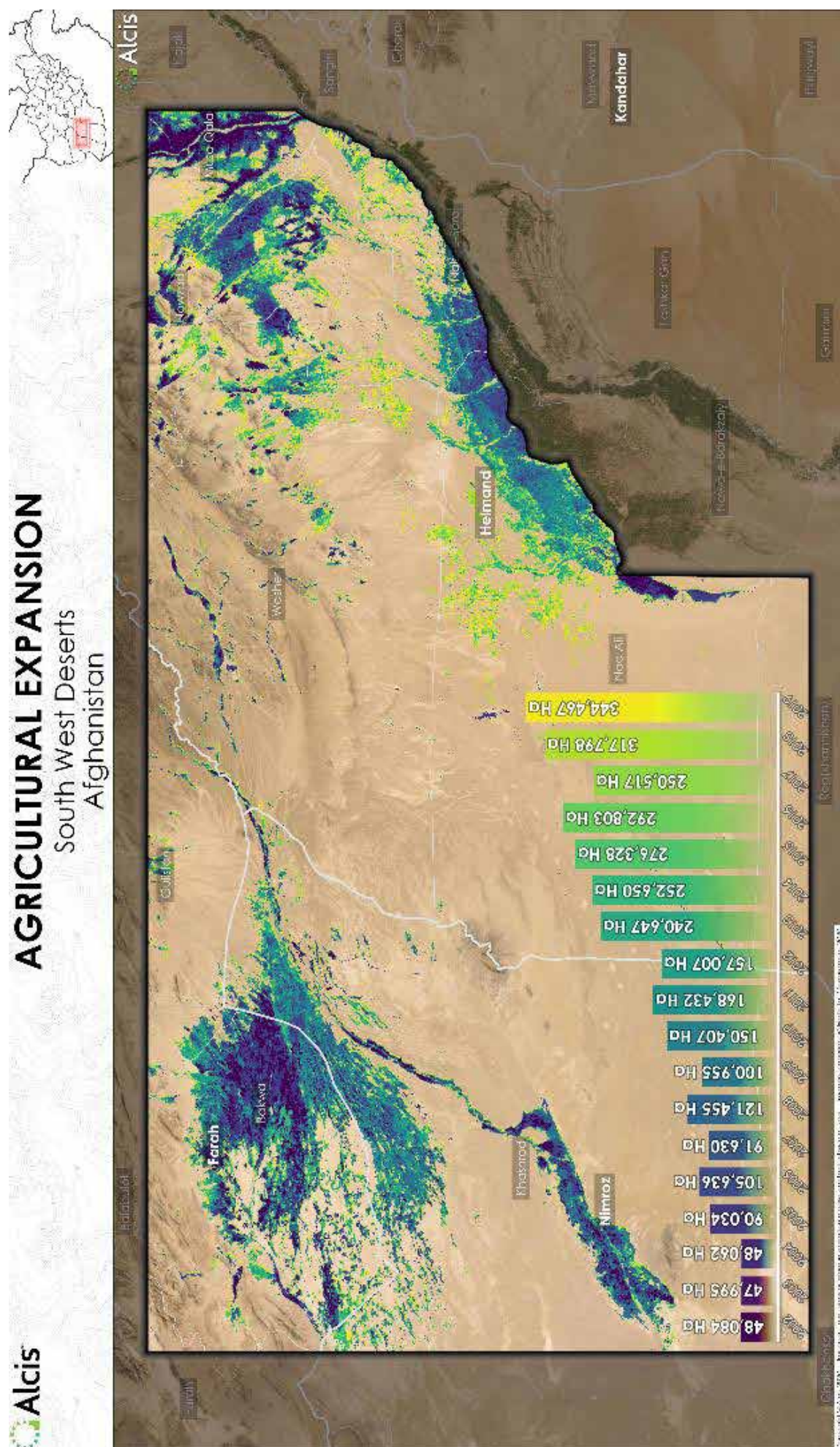
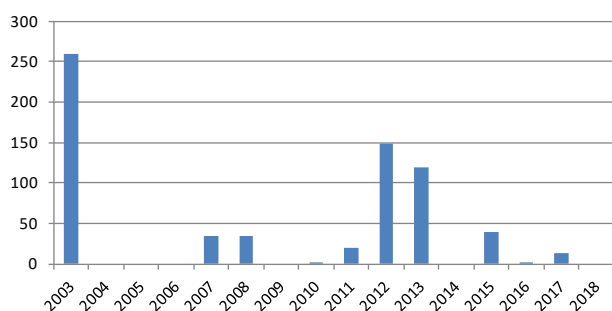


Figure 9: Levels of opium poppy eradication in Nimroz province, 2009-18⁴¹



Of much greater importance to the drugs economy of Nimroz than cultivation has been the scale of cross-border smuggling and both opiate and, increasingly, methamphetamine production; and Nimroz's position between consumer markets in Iran and some of the most prolific drug producing provinces of Helmand and Farah further increase its significance.⁴² The rapid expansion of opium poppy cultivation in the 1990s under the Taliban regime was accompanied with a growing cross-border trade and increasing capacity to produce opiates in-country. Located on both Pakistan and Iranian borders, with tribal and familial links across both, Nimroz became an important hub for the illegal drugs trade. Fieldwork for this report indicated that, under the Taliban, opiates were traded

openly in the provincial bazaar opposite the Governor's office. Indeed, while it is claimed that Mullah Mohammed Rasul Akhund, attempted to regularise the drugs trade during his governorship prior to 2001 and bring it under his control,⁴³ local experience is one of a local boon, with a multitude of people engaged in the purchase, sale and cross-border trade of drugs.

Other senior Taliban in Nimroz, and close associates, are also directly linked to the drugs trade. Individuals like Hajji Juma Khan, an ethnic Brahui from Nimroz—initially arrested by US military forces in 2001 before being released and then subsequently detained by the US authorities and imprisoned in the US in 2008—was designated “one of the world's top drug traffickers” and alleged to have funded the Taliban, and been close to the senior leadership, for many years.⁴⁴ Hajji Juma Khan is said to own property in the city of Ziranj and believed to be one of the primary investors in the border town of Baramcha in Helmand, where a significant amount of drugs are processed and shipped into Pakistan and onto the Makran coast and the Gulf. He was also said to be an informant for the USG including the Central Intelligence Agency.⁴⁵

- 41 UNODC, “Afghanistan Opium Survey”, October 2003, 96; UNODC, “Afghanistan Opium Survey”, November 2004, 77; UNODC, “Afghanistan Opium Survey”, November 2005, 53; UNODC, “Afghanistan Opium Survey”, October 2006, 146-147; UNODC, “Afghanistan Opium Survey”, October 2007, 165; UNODC, “Afghanistan Opium Survey”, November 2008, 182; UNODC, “Afghanistan Opium Survey”, September 2009, 47; UNODC, “Afghanistan Opium Survey”, December 2010, 118; UNODC, “Afghanistan Opium Survey”, December 2011, 113; UNODC, “Afghanistan Opium Survey”, May 2013, 100; UNODC, “Afghanistan Opium Survey”, December 2013, 105; UNODC, “Afghanistan Opium Survey”, November 2014, 67; UNODC, “Afghanistan Opium Survey”, December 2015, 69; UNODC, “Afghanistan Opium Survey”, December 2016, 65; UNODC, “Afghanistan Opium Survey”, November 71; UNODC, “Afghanistan Opium Survey”, November 2018, 69.
- 42 David Mansfield, “Denying Revenue or Wasting Money? Assessing the Impact of the Air Campaign Against ‘Drugs Labs’ in Afghanistan” (London School of Economics, International Drug Policy Unit, April 2019).
- 43 Lutz Rzehak, “Remembering the Taliban,” 186; Afghan Biographies, “Mullah Mohammed Rasul Akhund”, 30 November 2018, http://www.afghan-bios.info/index.php?option=com_afghanbios&id=3426&task=view&total=3357&start=1972&Itemid=2 (accessed 27 August 2020).
- 44 Johnny Dwyer, “The US Quietly Released Afghanistan's ‘Biggest Drug Kingpin’ From Prison. Did He Cut A Deal?”. The Intercept, 1 May 2018. <https://theintercept.com/2018/05/01/haji-juma-khan-afghanistan-drug-trafficking-cia-dea/> (accessed 27 August 2020).
- 45 James Risen, “Propping Up A Drugs Lord, Then Arresting Him” New York Times, 10 December 2010, <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/12/world/asia/12drugs.html> (accessed 27 August 2020).

Of course, it is not just the Taliban that are alleged to be directly involved in drugs trafficking. In Nimroz, these same accusations have been levelled at those working in the government, including the senior leadership in Nimroz and members of the security forces, particularly the Afghan Border Police (ABP).⁴⁶

Over the last decade there has also been an increasing concentration of drugs processing in Nimroz, particularly in the district of Khash Rud. This area became a target for the United States Forces Afghanistan (USFOR-A) aerial bombing of heroin labs in April 2018,⁴⁷ and methamphetamine labs in May 2019.⁴⁸ Justified by the USG as a campaign against insurgent revenue on the assumption that the Taliban earned as much as 60 percent of their total revenues from illegal drugs,⁴⁹ a detailed independent evaluation reported it had little effect,⁵⁰ while the United Nations Assistance Mission to Afghanistan reported up to 30 civilian casualties.⁵¹

In fact, it is not drugs per se but the burgeoning cross-border economy in Nimroz that appears to have become an increasingly important

source of revenue for elements within the Taliban, the Afghan government, as well as different political groups on both the Iranian and Pakistani sides of the border.⁵² Along with drugs and people, the transportation of licit goods such as fuel, cement and transit goods are all being exploited as a source of rent and income for politico-military actors and are, therefore, as much a potential source of violence and conflict between groups as they are an incentive for negotiation and bargaining, whereby the dividends of the growing cross-border trade can be shared, even across groups with quite different political interests. The next section draws on the results of extensive fieldwork and high-resolution satellite imagery to examine the wider political economy of Nimroz, and consider the relative importance of a number of commodities, events, policies and histories, to determine the nature of the relationship between illicit drugs and violence and (dis)order.

46 Foschini, "Economy and Development: Bad Lieutenants in Nimroz."

47 Kyle Rempfer, "Airstrikes Against Taliban Drugs Labs Extend to Western Afghanistan", Military Times. 10 April 2018. <https://www.militarytimes.com/flashpoints/2018/04/10/airstrikes-against-taliban-drug-labs-extend-to-western-afghanistan/> (accessed 27 August 2020). Khaama, "NDS Special Force Storm Taliban Hideout, Prison and Drug Lab in Nimroz Province", 14 March 2019, <https://www.khaama.com/nds-special-force-storm-taliban-hideout-prison-and-drug-lab-in-nimroz-province-03483/>

48 BBC, "US Meth Lab Strikes in Afghanistan Killed at Least 30 Civilians, Says UN", 9 October 2019. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-49984804> (accessed 27 August 2020); David Mansfield and Alex Soderholm, "New Airstrikes Obscure a Dramatic Development in the Afghan Drugs Industry - The Proliferation of Low Cost Methamphetamine", London School of Economics blog, 28 May 2019, [https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/usappblog/2019/05/28/new-us-airstrikes-obscure-a-dramatic-development-in-the-afghan-drugs-industry-the-proliferation-of-low-cost-methamphetamine/\(accessed 27 August 2020\)](https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/usappblog/2019/05/28/new-us-airstrikes-obscure-a-dramatic-development-in-the-afghan-drugs-industry-the-proliferation-of-low-cost-methamphetamine/(accessed%2027%20August%202020)).

49 U.S. Department of Defense News Transcript, Department of Defense Press Briefing by General Nicholson in the Pentagon Briefing Room, 2 December 2016. <https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/1019029/departement-of-defense-press-briefing-by-general-nicholson-in-the-pentagon-brief/>

50 Mansfield, "Denying Revenue".

51 United Nations Assistance Mission Afghanistan and United Nations Human Rights, Office of the High Commissioner, "Afghanistan Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict, Special Report: Airstrikes on Alleged Drug Processing Facilities, Farah 5 May 2019", (Kabul, October 2019).

52 Khalili Noorzai and Mohammed Habibzada, "Taliban Looking for New Means to Support Insurgency in Southern Afghanistan", Voice of America, 7 January 2018, <https://www.voanews.com/extremism-watch/taliban-looking-new-means-support-insurgency-southern-afghanistan> (accessed 27 August 2020); Mohammed Habibzada, "Taliban Rebels Impose Taxes on Media Outlets in Restive Ghazni", Voice of America, 21 February 2018, <https://www.voanews.com/extremism-watch/taliban-rebels-impose-taxes-media-outlets-restive-ghazni> (accessed 27 August 2020).

4. Emerging Answers to the Research Questions

Barfield (2010) refers to the routes by which commodities are transported in Afghanistan as critical to the political economy and cultural of the country:

...while the mountain peoples live in a world dominated by problems of basic subsistence many of the routes through the mountains have been conduits of international trade that have consistently brought outsiders and high levels of culture through these regions. Like a high voltage electricity line, these routes run through such regions not because they have an intrinsic value in themselves but because they link regions with resources that do. As a consequence, they serve as economic and cultural interfaces between different worlds. This influence rubs off economically, culturally and politically.⁵³

While Barfield's statement may neglect the monetary value of the commodities currently produced in Afghanistan, particularly the illicit drugs grown and processed in areas like Khash Rud in Nimroz, it highlights the historical importance of trade and the vital role rent seeking plays in the local and national economy. The statement also reflects the challenges that physical geography presents to those wishing to transport goods through Afghanistan from markets in India and China onto Iran, Central Asia and Europe, and vice versa. Constrained by a hostile physical geography that limits the potential routes,

and a central government whose writ barely extended beyond the valley plains, traders often risked violent attack and predation by armed actors and regulation and rent seeking by the Afghan state. Managing these risks has required drawing on multiple tribal, familial, and business networks, brokerage with different armed actors as well as a logistical agility to reroute when risks and costs of a route prove too punitive.

What is of interest in this research is why some conduits have been more important than others during different periods of time. What are the factors that impinge on the movement of goods along a route, resulting in traders all but abandoning it, only to see a surge in traffic later? In terms of understanding more about the political economy of cross-border trade between Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan it is particularly important to explore the role different political and economic networks on both sides of the border have played in channelling the movement of commodities through particular conduits and chokepoints, as well as how they have inhibited transshipment through other conduit, and in some cases closing them altogether. In the context of the illicit drugs economy of the border area of Nimroz, it is also important to examine whether there is anything intrinsically different about their production, trade and movement from other commodities; in particular, are greater levels of violence associated with illicit drugs than with other commodities, such as minerals, fuel, fertiliser, and the transit trade.

53 Barfield, Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History, 45-46.

This section outlines the findings of this first phase of this research and the role physical geography, infrastructure, geopolitics, violence—both formal and informal—and patronage, play in shaping patterns of trade in Nimroz. As outlined in the methodology

section, the findings are primarily based on 303 interviews conducted in 19 research sites in Nimroz in the spring of 2019 and the analysis of high-resolution satellite imagery (see Figure 1 and Table 1). As exploratory research, the findings are preliminary.

4.1. Physical Geography

The mountains that border Nangarhar and Pakistan present an obvious barrier to the movement of people and goods; the mountain passes are natural chokepoints, the control of which provide opportunities for monopolising trade and rent extraction. From a distance, the southwestern corner of Afghanistan stands in stark contrast. Much of it might appear to be an open desert and therefore without the same natural barriers to cross-border movement and trade that can be seen on the eastern border with Pakistan. With the Iranian, Pakistani and Afghan sides of the border dominated by the ethnic Baloch, the border can appear all the more porous.

In fact, physical geography plays a critical part in the history of trade and politics in the province of Nimroz and the southwestern region. Perhaps the most significant natural barrier to trade, and an opportunity to create points of rent extraction for economic and political actors, is the Helmand river. This runs east to west though Nimroz to the south of the expansive Dasht e Margo for 60 miles before turning north near Kamal Khan for 50 miles. The river then skirts the border with Iran along the boundary of the district of Ziranj for 15 miles, before heading east to the district of Chakhansur. While not as challenging to cross as it is further upstream in central Helmand, in some parts of Charburjak the Helmand river is 250 m across; in many parts, it is over 100 m from one side to another.

Less challenging than the Helmand river, but nevertheless a natural terrain that needs to be catered for, are the wetlands and lakes found in the province, some of which are particularly large. In the district of Kang, the Hamoun e Puzak is a wetland area fed by the Khash Rud, Farah Rud and Helmand rivers. Seasonal and dependent on precipitation and snow melt from central Afghanistan, the Hamoun e Puzak can cover an area of up to 1,500 square km with up to 3 m of water in late winter and spring.⁵⁴ A further large freshwater lake is the Gowd e Zereh, covering an area of around 2,000 square km in southern Charburjak that has to be circumvented by those en route to the southern border with Pakistan.

These waterways are passable, but the width of the Helmand river does require a boat and suitable loading areas on both riverbanks for those transporting large amounts of goods, creating chokepoints for the extraction of income and rent. There are a variety of locations on the river in Charburjak where this has occurred (see Figures 10 and 11). Smaller amounts of goods, more mobile items, or high-value-low-weight goods like drugs, can be more easily transported by foot or basic raft, which allows for more decentralised and localised forms of cross-border smuggling.

54 John Whitney, "Geology, Water, and Wind in the Lower Helmand Basin, Southern Afghanistan", (Scientific Investigations Report 2006-5182, US Department of the Interior. US Geological Survey, 2006), 26.

Figure 10: River crossing at Charburjak district centre, Nimroz.



Figure 11: Photograph of boat crossing the Helmand river at Dakmashkel, Charburjak, Nimroz. Source: OSDR



For example, during the dry season, or extended drought, the border areas of parts of the district of Ziranj and most of Kang proved easy to cross, making some locations popular points for smuggling, such as Derwishuk and Telai (see Figure 12). Some locations even became concentrated hubs with hotels, a bus station and a steady supply of labour and services such as mechanics. For example, according to key informants and traders the village of Kruki, to the north of Kang and bordering the Hamoun e Puzak was a major

smuggling route for fuel, drugs, carpets, and electrical items in the 1980s and 1990s as the open border during the dry season and the use of boats in the spring allowed larger loads to be smuggled directly into a number of locations inside Iran. Imagery and fieldwork show this area was all but abandoned in 2004 after being damaged by floods (see Figure 13).

Figure 12: Comparison of Helmand river crossing during drought years, Ziranj 2016 and 2019.



Figure 13: The village of Kruki, Kang district, once a major crossing point now abandoned due to flooding.



The final natural barrier to cross-border movement and trade in Nimruz is the desert terrain. The Helmand basin is defined as “hyperarid” and in Nimruz there are a number of deserts that are expansive and hostile.⁵⁵ For example, the Dasht e Margo—the “Desert of Death”—is the 20th largest desert in the world and comprises of much of the area of the district of Chakhansur and large parts of eastern Charburjak. Dasht e Jahannam lies to the west of Dasht e Margo and along with the barren lands of Ghulgola make up much of the area north of the Helmand river in Charburjak and southern Ziranj. Smaller deserts such as Dasht e Serbaz and Dasht e Sarpat dominate the landscape south of the Helmand river in the district of Charburjak, and the onward journey to the border towns of Dak and Rabat.

In July, the warmest month of the year, the average temperatures in these deserts is 35 degrees centigrade, but temperatures can rise to as high as 50 degrees centigrade.⁵⁶ The route from Khash Rud to Baramcha, a key border town in Helmand—and a hub of illicit

drugs production and trade—entails a 150 km journey through the Dasht e Margo to the Helmand River followed by a further 150 km journey through the deserts of Registan in Helmand. The journey from Bakwa to Kang is 135 km through the deserts of Malmal Sar Dasht, Dasht e Artowmi, and Dasht e Zulak. The journey for those involved in people smuggling is even more challenging, travelling 70 km in a Toyota pickup from Ziranj to Charburjak though the Dasht e Jahannam, crossing the Helmand River by boat, then a further 200 km to Dak on the Pakistani border.

These desert journeys are not easy. Routes are not signposted and the tracks can be easily hidden by the constantly shifting sands, particularly in the summer. As journeys are undertaken in the afternoon and evening when the light is dim and it is cooler so as to attract less attention, drivers get lost and cars get stuck in the sand. Knowledge of the area is critical and has traditionally meant that the cross-border trade to the south was dominated by ethnic Baloch (see Figure 14).

Figure 14: Photograph of shifting desert sands, Charburjak, Nimroz. Source: OSDR



55 Whitney, “Geology, Water, and Wind,” 15.

56 Whitney, “Geology, Water, and Wind,” 16.

4.2. Physical Infrastructure

Investments in physical infrastructure can both facilitate and deter cross-border trade, providing advantages to some routes—and those that reside alongside—over others. For instance, allocating funds to a particular bridge, road or to border controls, such as Customs facilities, can encourage greater amounts of legal trade to move through one particular entrepôt, rather than another. In the same vein, border infrastructure, such as fences, walls or ditches can deter the movement of people and goods along a route and help to channel trade through a favoured crossing point. Other infrastructural investments, such as those in the hinterlands, can support the production and extraction of commodities and their transportation to internal or external markets.

In contrast to other provinces like Nangarhar, the province of Nimroz has had very few investments in physical infrastructure since the Afghan reconstruction that began in 2002, and even less before then. What it has seen is a number of strategic investments that support a much broader physical infrastructure aimed at transforming the province, and Ziranj in particular, into a major conduit for goods travelling to and from Iran, such as the bridge at Milak and the road linking Ziranj to Delarem. In fact, far more significant investments in physical infrastructure have been made in Iran itself, not just those in the port at Chabahar but also along the borders with Afghanistan.

Respondents reported that investments in initial border structures began in the late 1990s with the Iranian government establishing a series of walls, berms and ditches along its 921 km border with Afghanistan. This followed growing tensions with the Taliban regime, particularly after their soldiers took Mazar-i-Sharif in the north of Afghanistan in 1998, occupied the Iranian embassy and killed nine embassy staff.

In 2007, these initial border structures were reinforced with fencing, further forts and bases along the boundary, and a wall 35 miles to both the north and south of what had become the official border crossing at Ziranj.

This combination of Iranian border structures, the bridge at Milak and the Ziranj to Delarem Highway, as well as the regulation of cross-border travel, transformed the cross-border trade in both licit and illicit goods in Nimroz. Most notably, these measures served to centralise the trade of licit products—smuggled or not—through Ziranj. Whereas before, respondents reported, goods could take a multitude of routes from Iran through Nimroz, or vice versa, crossing by foot, donkey and/or boat, and trade was largely directed through the border at Milak, transported by up to 200 container trucks per day. This did not rule out the continued importance of smuggling through unofficial crossings. In fact, the smuggling of items like fuel continues but the scale of trade and its canalisation through Milak and Ziranj has fundamentally changed the nature of trade in Nimroz and how the benefits are distributed.

For example, a fuel tanker from Iran officially weighs 23 MT, the equivalent of 28,520 L of diesel. Fieldwork revealed that many of these tankers also have two “false tanks,” with the equivalent of up to 5 MT of additional smuggled fuel, a further 6,200 L. Along with the tanker’s own fuel supply (filled in Iran just prior to its arrival in Milak) and the numerous bottles (1 to 3 L) secreted about the cab, the fuel moved through the official crossing at Milak probably outweighs what can be moved across unofficial crossings in Nimroz, such as the 80 L of diesel per day a farmer with a tractor in Derwishuk in Kang might be able to bring across the border from his land on the Iranian side of the fence, or the 1,600 L of fuel collected in a pickup from a number of

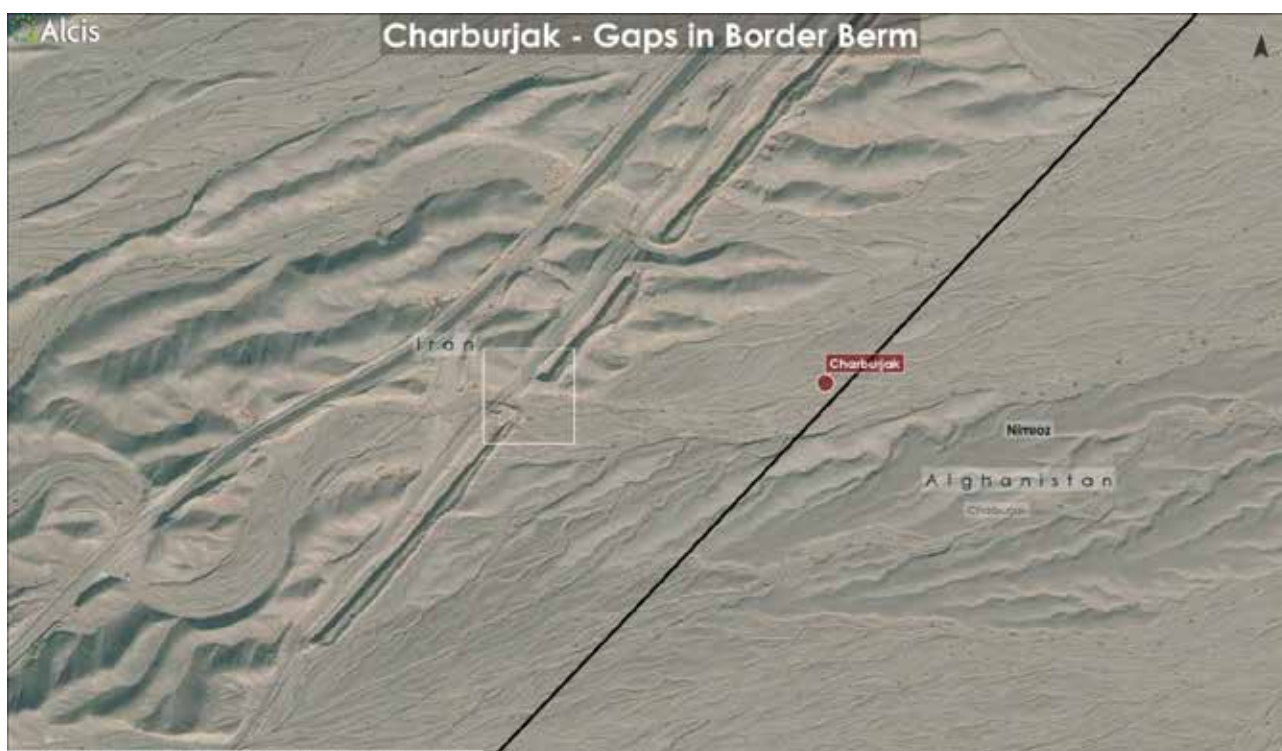
individual smugglers by a small trader, a Baduki, in Makaki and transported to Ziranj for sale. This shift in the route, and the method of transport, has concentrated wealth and opportunities in the hands of large traders. As one respondent in Moshtarak commented, “in the past everyone had a change of work [in cross border trade] now there is nothing for the young.”

The same shift can be seen in the cross-border movement of illegal goods, although not always as pronounced. For example, whereas in the past the business of smuggling people involved multiple local actors supporting individuals cross the border near Ziranj, Iranian border controls—and in particular the wall—has shifted the transport route southwards to the border with Pakistan, first at Rabat, then Dak, and onto Iran via Mashkel.⁵⁷ While this research suggests that the people-smuggling business still involves a large number of people as drivers, the business

and the profits are very much centred on the hoteliers and their agents in Ziranj, as well as their contacts en route, including district officials and the national security forces across the district of Ziranj and Charburjak.

It is not just people smuggling; the illicit drugs trade has also had to respond to the more robust border controls established by Iran. The initial border structures in the 1990s dampened but did not eliminate the cross-border trade in cannabis and opiates, and traders still report being able to transport drugs across the border into Iran including using vehicles, particularly in Kang and the lower parts of Charburjak where the border controls were often inadequate, damaged and unmanned (see Figure 15). This changed with the completion of the wall and further fencing by the Iranian government, as well as the posting of mobile teams of Iranian Border Guards along the perimeter.

Figure 15: Imagery showing gaps in the border structure Charburjak, Nimroz.



57 Luke Mogelson, “The Scariest Little Corner of the World”, The New York Times Magazine, 12 October 2012. <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/21/magazine/the-corner-where-afghanistan-iran-and-pakistan-meet.html> (accessed 27 August 2020).

While local Afghan smugglers located along the border continue to move small amounts of drugs across the border using ladders and arrangements with both Iranian and Afghan border forces, they complain that the business is not as easy as it once was and is often “dangerous”, particularly if they are seen by the mobile Iranian border guards, who are not local to the area, not part of local kinship networks, and prone to firing on those encroaching on the border.⁵⁸ Some have taken to building large sling shots, or catapults, known as Ghollak, that are capable of launching a 1 kg weight 200 m across the border, as a way of reducing the risks of capture, injury and the costs of bribing the Iranian Border Guards (see Figure 16) .

Figure 16: Photograph of catapult, standing around 1-1.5 meters high and used to smuggle cannabis, opiates or methamphetamine across the border with Iran. Source: OSDR



However, with enhanced structures on the Iranian border, those smuggling larger amounts of illicit drugs are compelled to either use the formal border crossing in Ziranj—concealing their loads in containers or the cabs of trucks—or convoys of vehicles to travel to Baramcha on the southern border with Pakistan. Either way, these methods require greater investment and access to powerful patronage networks, including with officials on both sides of the border, and represent an example of the centralisation and specialisation of cross-border trade brought about by the border controls imposed by Iran.

The impact of this trend has been profound. Linked with the worsening climatic conditions, particularly prolonged drought, the reductions in both the quantity of licit and illicit goods moving across unofficial border crossings with Iran over the last decade, and the income that can be earned by small traders, has provoked massive outmigration. The vast majority of villages in Nimroz that have traditionally played an important role as unofficial cross-border crossings report significant reductions in their population, up to 70 percent according to many key informants.⁵⁹

As such, the landscape of these border areas has undergone fundamental change with the formalising of political and trade relations between Afghanistan and Iran and the opening of the border at Milak. These are no longer the porous borderlands of the past where communities residing on both sides of the Iranian and Afghan borders could pass at will, transporting diverse goods such as fuel, carpets, drugs and consumer goods to supplement their incomes in the absence of viable agricultural livelihoods. Rather, the border between Afghanistan and Iran is now largely controlled, the profits on cross-border

58 Mogelson, “The Scariest Little Corner of the World”; Zurutuza, “Afghans Living Under a Shadow of Iranian Guns”.

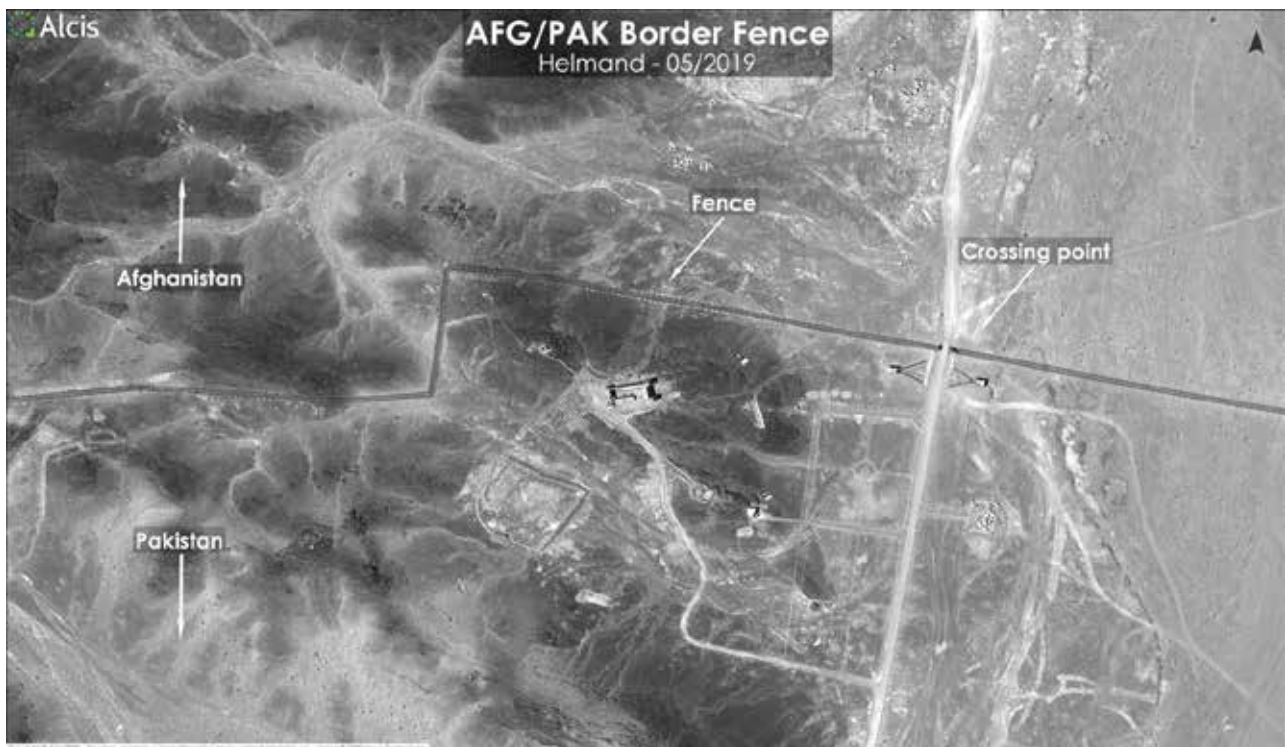
59 Zurutuza, “Afghans Living Under A Shadow of Iranian Guns”.

trade are small and there is an increasing need to transport larger quantities of licit goods across the border to make a sufficient income.

Smugglers now prefer the border with Pakistan, particularly those engaged in the movement of illegal goods such as drugs and people, but that too is under threat with the Government of Pakistan constructing border

fences in Baluchistan—or some distance inside Afghanistan as the high-resolution imagery shows (see Figure 17). The next section will address the geopolitical factors that led to these changes in cross-border relations, the impact it has had on conduits and chokepoints, and how populations have reacted.

Figure 17: Image of border area with Pakistan showing fence built by the Government of Pakistan, 2019.



4.3. Geopolitical

Clearly Afghanistan's political relations with its neighbours have played a determining role in the patterns of trade in its borderlands and shaped their political economies. For Nimroz, relations with Iran have been key. Prior to 1980, relations between the two countries were cordial, with Iran providing the bulk of fuel imports to both the governments of Zahir Shah (1933-73) and Daoud (1973-78) through the border at Islam Qala.⁶⁰ The Islamic Revolution in Iran and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan put a stop to this. The Iranian government under the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini closed its embassy in Kabul; the Afghan government under the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan did the same in Tehran.

In Nimroz, the hostility between the two governments manifested in Iranian support for the mujahiddin, especially the Nimroz Front (Jabha e Nimroz) under the leadership of Abdul Karim Brahui, who based their military operations out of Iran. Respondents report of Tehran allowing the free movement of mujahiddin forces across the border and the majority of the population of the border areas of Nimroz, residing in Iran as refugees for the duration of the communist government rule, returning home only after the Najibullah's government fell in 1992. Many still retain identity cards for both countries and have part of their family across the border in Iran.

In the late 1990s, Iran's relationship with Afghanistan was particularly hostile. The

Shia government in Tehran opposed the Taliban regime. The Taliban's treatment of the Shia minority in Afghanistan, as well as the Baloch,⁶¹ and ongoing disputes over water rights—exacerbated by the Taliban cutting off the flow of the Helmand River to Iran during the drought in the late 1990s—served to fuel Tehran's support for the Taliban's opposition, i.e., the United Islamic Front for the Salvation of Afghanistan, more commonly known as the Northern Alliance.

Tensions became particularly heightened in 1998 when the Taliban attacked the Iranian embassy in Mazar-i-Sharif, killing their staff.⁶² Reports at the time claimed there were as many as 100,000 Iranian soldiers deployed on the Afghan border, and within Afghanistan there was talk of the border being impermeable—even to drugs smugglers—and the prospect of a war with Iran.⁶³ Once tensions had dissipated, each regime countered with measures designed to limit the influence of the other. For example, Iran built the border infrastructure detailed in the previous section, and the Taliban, under the Governorship of Mullah Rasul, moved the provincial centre of Nimroz from Ziranj to Ghorghory, 93 km from the border with Iran.⁶⁴

With the fall of the Taliban, relations with Afghanistan improved significantly. As the Iranian government had long supported factions like the Northern Alliance, as well as the Shia, both of whom gained considerable

60 Anna Patterson, "Understanding Markets in Afghanistan: A Study of the Market for Petroleum Fuels", (Afghanistan Research Evaluation Unit, Case Study Series, October 2005), 5.

61 Rzehak, "Remembering the Taliban," 186.

62 Mogelson, "The Scariest Little Corner of the World".

63 Author was doing fieldwork with drugs traders in Helmand and Kandahar during this period.

64 Casey Garret Johnson, "A Good Taliban, Bad Taliban Strategy for the US and Afghanistan?", *The Diplomat*, 28 May 2016. <https://thediplomat.com/2016/05/a-good-taliban-bad-taliban-strategy-for-the-us-and-afghanistan/> (accessed 27 August 2020); Rzehak, "Remembering the Taliban," 186; Afghan Biographies, "Mullah Mohammed Rasul Akhund".

political power and influence over the security apparatus in the Interim Administration (2001-03) and the Karzai government (2004-14) that followed, they were well positioned to work with the newly constituted Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan.

Iran's trading relationship prospered, particularly as relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan became more strained during the latter years of the Karzai government and then under President Ghani (2014-). Determined to reduce the country's dependency on Pakistan as a trading route with the outside world, particularly to India, the Afghanistan government increasingly looked to Iran. This led to some readjustment in economic and political relations and a larger volume of goods passing through the official border crossing at Islam Qala in Herat and on to the busy port of Bandar Abbas in southern Iran on the straits of Hormuz.⁶⁵

In 2017, in partnership with the Iranian and Indian governments, Afghanistan officially opened a trade corridor through Chabahar port on the Gulf of Oman (see Figure 18). This allowed Afghan goods quick passage to India, as well as other markets, that had previously required transshipment through Pakistan. Iran also offered low tariffs and import fees to attract Afghan trade and encourage Afghanistan and other Central Asian republics to bypass Pakistan's major port development—built in partnership with China under the Chinese-Pakistan Economic Corridor initiative—in Gwadar on the Makran coast of Baluchistan. India played a significant role in the development of Chabahar port and the transport corridor, funding the

construction of a large amount of physical infrastructure in Nimroz as well as investments in Iran (see Figure 19). It has also taken on the management of Chabahar port itself. By doing so, India has further strengthened its political and economic relations with the Afghan government and reduced Afghanistan's dependency on Pakistan as a trading partner, contributing to India's own geopolitical objectives in the region.⁶⁶ So much so that, by 2018, the value of trade with Iran was US\$2 billion and surpassed that of Pakistan,⁶⁷ and the vast majority of diesel imports were routed via Iran and not Pakistan.

65 Asha Sawhney, "Chabahar Port: Unlocking Afghanistan's Potential", *New Perspectives*, April 2019, https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/NewPerspectives_APRIL2019_Sawhney.pdf

66 Khesrew Omid Farooq, "Chabahar Port a Step Toward Connectivity for India and Afghanistan", *The Diplomat*, 3 July 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/07/chabahar-port-a-step-toward-connectivity-for-india-and-afghanistan/> (accessed 27 August 2020).

67 Financial Tribune, "Iran Biggest Trade Partner of Afghanistan in 2017-2018", 11 December 2019, <https://financialtribune.com/articles/economy-domestic-economy/84309/iran-biggest-trade-partner-of-afghanistan-in-2017-18> (accessed 27 August 2020).

Figure 18: Map showing the routes from Ziranj to Bandar Abbas and Chabahar in Iran.

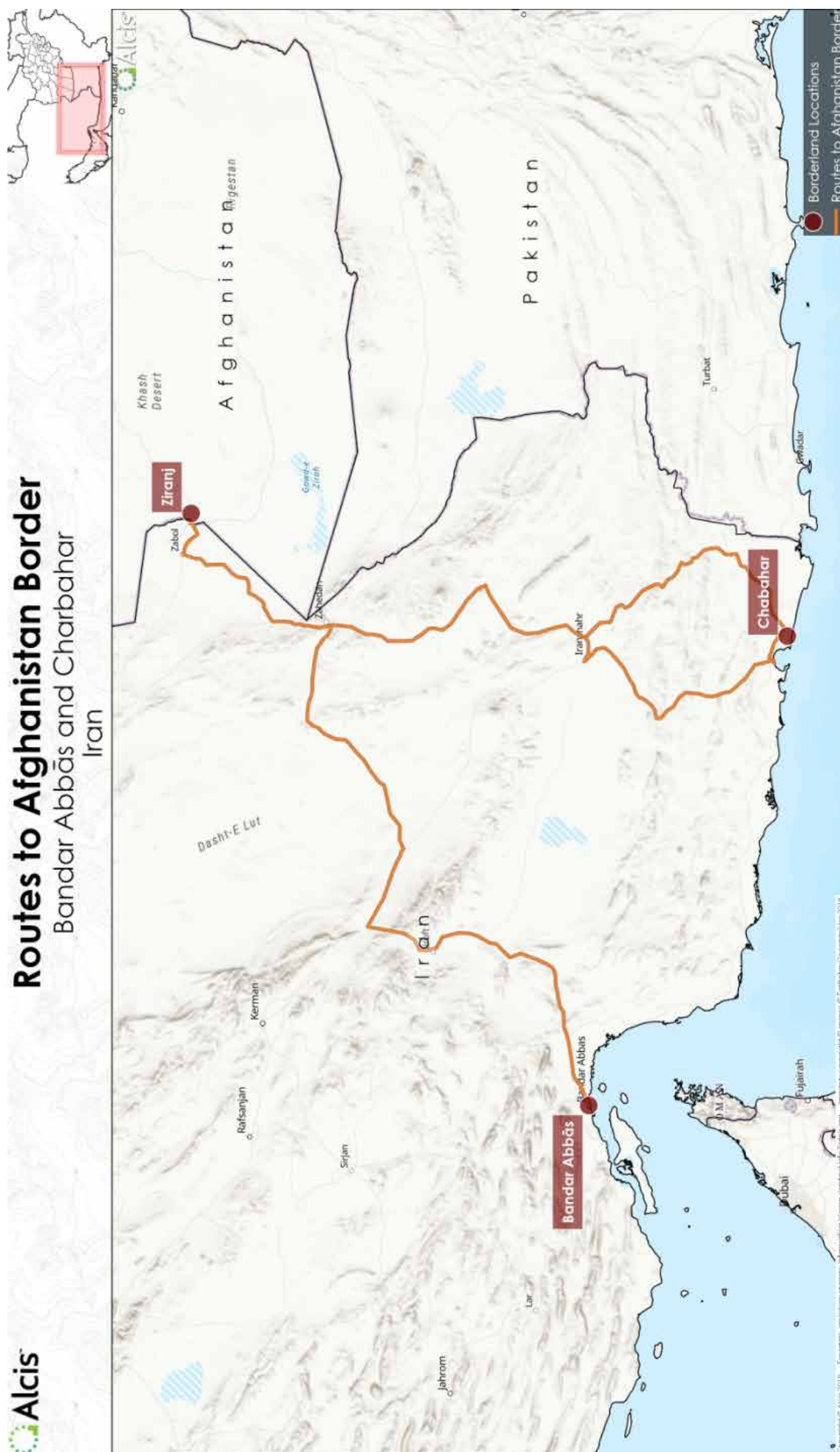


Figure 19: Imagery showing the development of Chabahar Port between 2016 and 2020.



Underpinning this improving political and trade relationship between Iran and Afghanistan are a number of political challenges that directly impact on the borderlands of Nimroz. For one, Iran's problems with its own minorities shape its interactions with the Afghan province of Nimroz and the rest of western Afghanistan. An ethnic group divided by three countries, the Baloch pose a challenge to the Iranian government. The Baloch are, after all, Sunni Muslims who complain of systematic discrimination by the Shia government in Tehran and under-investment in the province of Sistan Balochistan.⁶⁸ They are also an ethnic group of up to 8 million people divided by three countries, with more than 6 million in Pakistan, up to 2 million in Pakistan and an estimated 500,000 in Afghanistan, most of them in Nimroz, and a nationalist and secessionist urge. In both Pakistan and Iran, antipathy to the state has led to violent insurrection in the form of Baloch nationalist movements, such as the Balochistan Liberation Army and Baloch People's Liberation Front in Pakistan, and violent insurgents such as the People's Resistance Movement of Iran, also known as Jundallah, in Iran.⁶⁹

Tehran is keen to subdue Baloch militancy and calls for secession in Sistan Balochistan. Respondents typically view the operationalising of this policy having changed over the last few decades, from one that showed a high degree of acceptance—or “forbearance”—of cross-border smuggling as a way of supporting a neglected borderland population, to one of more overt investment in the region, supported by the Indian government, in infrastructure and the opening up of official trade through Nimroz.⁷⁰ There are also transfer payments, in the form of subsidies on food, and in particular, fuel, to the population of Sistan Balochistan,

which are viewed as a way of supporting the Baloch population and reducing the incentives to migrate to places like Tehran in search of work. Locally, the subsidies on fuel, and the difference in quality of diesel for domestic use and export—as well as the Iranian Border Guards' facilitation of cross-border movements of small amounts—is seen as critical to the cross-border economy of both Sistan Balochistan and Nimroz and the Iranian government's continued acceptance of low-level smuggling as a livelihood strategy for an impoverished Baloch population.

A second critical foundational element to Iran's relations with Afghanistan is that of water rights and how the GoIRI believes the population of Sistan Balochistan will be negatively affected by the large dams the Afghan government is building upstream in places like Farah (Bakshabad), Herat (Salma) and Nimroz (Kamal Khan), as well as the existing dam in Helmand (Kajaki). Disputes over Iran's right to water flowing from the Hari Rud, Khash Rud and Helmand Rivers are historical and were only resolved by the signing of a bilateral water agreement in 1973. However, with the coup in Afghanistan, the Iranian revolution, then the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, and the civil war, it was never ratified or implemented.

Such is the significance of the water dispute between Iran and Afghanistan that it has prompted public comments from the presidents of both Afghanistan and Iran, and discussions between the Iranian Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei and President Ghani. Iran believes that access to the 850 cubic m of water it is entitled to under the treaty is critical to the livelihoods of their Baloch minority and will mitigate the droughts, sandstorms and outmigration that beleaguer Sistan Balochistan,

68 Edward Joy Hernandez, “Balochistan and Nationalism” (Report for Master of Arts, University of Texas, Austin, December 2012), 16.

69 Hernandez, “Balochistan and Nationalism,” 19, 25.

70 Hernandez, “Balochistan and Nationalism,” 16.

something Tehran is keen to avoid.⁷¹ There are repeated allegations that the Iranian government has supported Taliban factions in western Afghanistan—including that of former Taliban Governor Rasul,⁷² with whom they had such a poor relationship in the 1990s—to attack and disrupt construction of the Salma and Kamal Khan dams.⁷³ Improving trade relations between the two countries, and the pivotal role Nimroz plays in this, appears to be part of the negotiations by Iran to get Afghanistan to comply with its obligations under the treaty in return for access to the port of Chabahar.⁷⁴

The final political challenge underpinning this improving trade relationship between Iran and Afghanistan is Iran's relations with the US. These are complex, more so with the open hostilities that manifested in early January 2020 following the killing of General Qasem Solemani, Head of the Qods force of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps and the subsequent Iranian missile strike on joint US-Iraqi military bases in Iraq. In the context of Nimroz, the deep suspicions between Iran and the US—and a desire to minimise confrontation—has led to a very small foreign military footprint in the province, with only a small US military base in Delarem, which had implications for the flow of western funds.

However, for the people of Nimroz, the most important element of the US-Iran relationship is the sanctions the US imposed following their withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, more commonly known as the Iran nuclear deal, in August 2018. This led to a dramatic devaluation of the Iranian rial

with deleterious effects on the population of Nimroz, many of whom relied on either or both seasonal employment in Iran and remittances from family members who reside there permanently. This was not just in the legal economy; the smuggling of drugs and people were also affected. For example, with the rial worth less against the dollar and Afghani, fewer Afghans looked to be smuggled to Iran in search of employment. Drug smugglers were also found to be reluctant to sell opium, cannabis or methamphetamine to cross-border traders that would agree to pay them in a currency that was rapidly falling in value.

The need for hard currency also affected Iran's policies towards trade with Nimroz and Afghanistan. On the one hand, it has made the Iranians even more predisposed to trade relations with Afghanistan and the strategic role Nimroz can play as a conduit; on the other hand, the costs of doing business increased for Afghan traders with the Iranian authorities fixing the payments for visas, as well as road and fuel permits, in either US dollars or Euros. Some respondents also claim it has led to a hardening in attitudes to the smuggling business and renewed efforts to direct trade through the official border crossing at Ziranj.

71 ICRA, "Water and Conflict," 25.

72 Johnson, "A Good Taliban, Bad Taliban Strategy".

73 Dominic Dudley, "War of Words Heats Up between Iran and Afghanistan over Water Resources", Forbes, 12 July 2017. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/dominicdudley/2017/07/12/iran-afghan-water-dispute/#5f27b826203c> (accessed 27 August 2020); Ramin, "Taliban Attack Kamal Khan Dam in Nimroz"; Rasmussen, "Dam Project Promises Water".

74 Aman, "Water Dispute Escalating," 4-5.

4.4. Violence

Incidences of violence and conflict have had little direct effect on patterns of trade in Nimroz—be that the types of goods or their direction of travel. In fact, Nimroz has seen some of the lowest levels of violence compared to Afghanistan's other provinces, particularly those in the south and southwest. There is a consensus amongst respondents that it was during the communist government that the province experienced its highest levels of violence, which prompted the exodus of the majority of its population to Iran. However, this was a time when there was very little trade taking place for it to have an impact.

Nimroz has also seen little violence associated with the illicit drugs business. Multiple actors use multiple routes across the deserts of Farah, Nimroz and Helmand to transport opium, cannabis, opiates and methamphetamine to the border; there seems to be plenty of business to go round. As highlighted in previous sections, there has also been very little eradication of the standing opium crop and it was only in 2018 that Delarem and Khash Rud were subject to any degree of law enforcement efforts, under the auspices of the USFOR-A aerial campaign against drugs labs.

Rather, it would seem Nimroz has benefited indirectly from growing levels of violence in other provinces, in particular the neighbouring provinces of Farah and Helmand. Conflict in these two provinces has reportedly led to an inflow of wealthy traders to Ziranj, which is seen as a relatively secure and growing city (see Figure 20). This, in turn, has brought investments in properties and businesses that has been welcomed by others.

Violence has also redirected trade through Nimroz. For example, according to respondents the primary route for people smuggling to Iran until the Najibullah government was through Khan Shin in Helmand, and then from to Pakistan and onto Iran. Fighting in this area during the mujahiddin government led to Ziranj becoming the hub of the people-smuggling business direct to Iran, a position it retains to this day despite the border controls erected by the Iranian authorities.

Limited acts of violence and robbery have also deterred people smugglers from taking particular routes from Ziranj through the desert area. The tri-border area in Charburjak, once a favoured route is seen as particularly problematic, a combination of the high number of Afghan National Defense and Security Forces, and in particular the ABP, deployed to protect the Kama Khan dam construction site, and the threat of violent robbery further south towards the Iranian/Afghan/Pakistani border (see Figure 21). Smugglers report a preference for the much longer but more secure route via Dak in Dishu, Helmand, where the Taliban holds sway and has dealt with recent incidents of robbery with the level of brutality that they have become known for.

Figure 20: Imagery showing the growth in the city of Zaranj between 2008 and 2019.

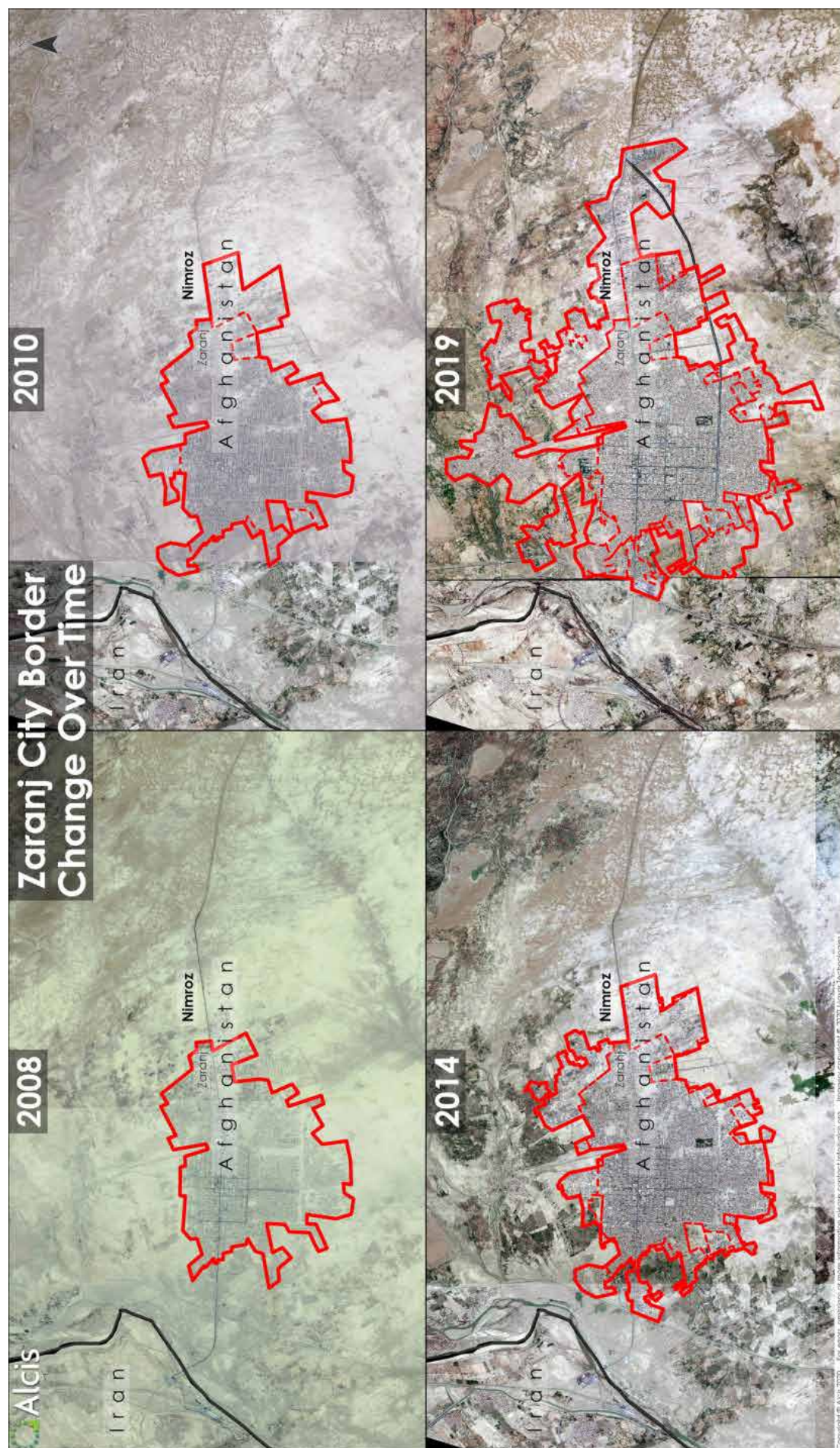
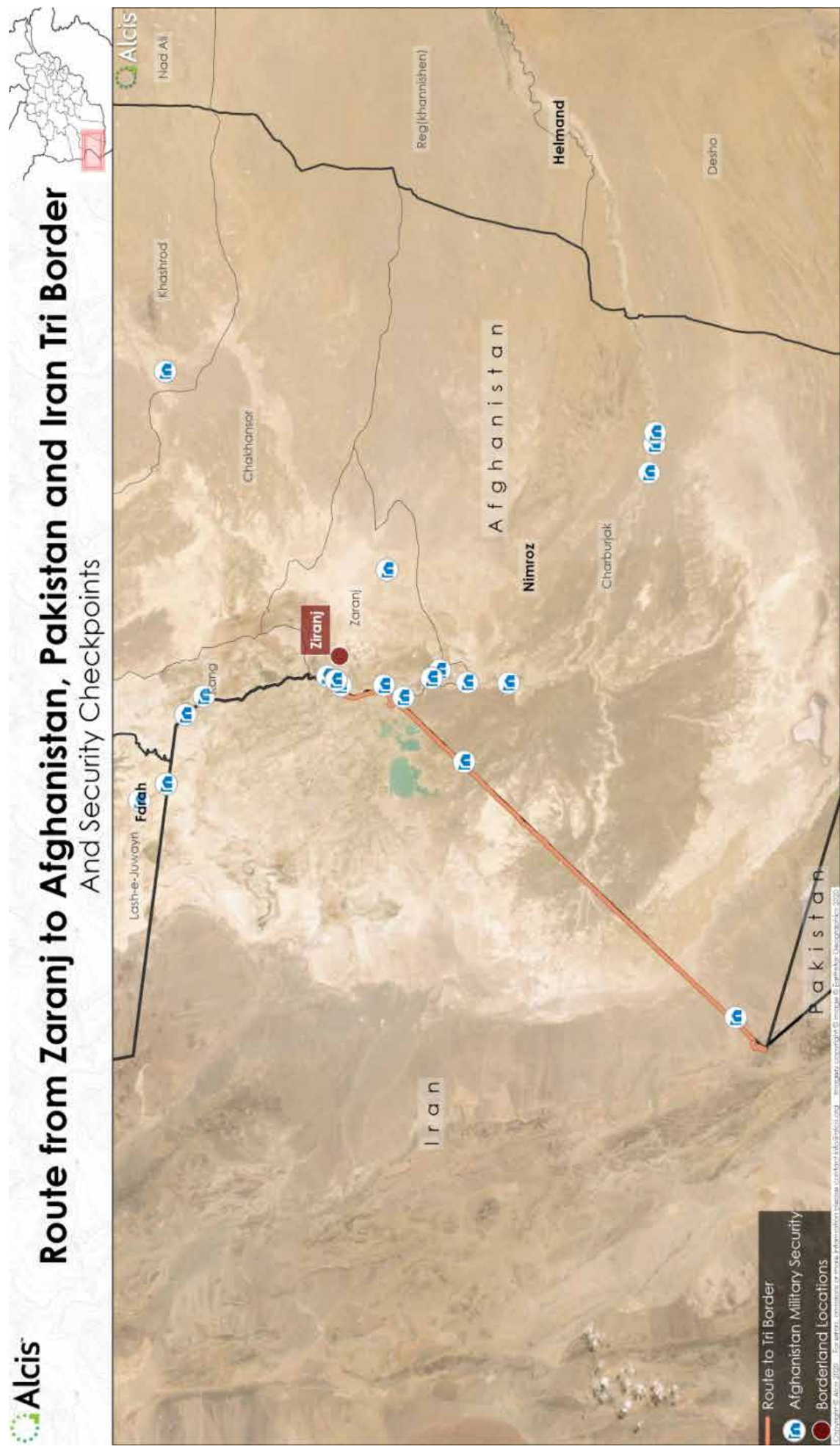


Figure 21: Map showing the density of Afghan National Defense and Security Forces bases to the south of Zaranj city near Kamal Khan dam.



4.5. Regulatory regimes

The regulation of production, trade and cross-border movement provides the means by which a variety of actors, state and non-state alike, encourage and direct the commodities along specific routes. Regulation also provides an opportunity to extract a variety of payments including taxes and facilitation fees, as well as providing income-earning opportunities to constituents and patrons. Along some conduits, regulations are formal and imposed by the state; along others, it is local communities, private state actors and insurgents that regulate.

In many cases, there is state tolerance of the rules imposed by these other groups, as well as allegations of involvement in the smuggling of legal and illegal commodities and the rents that are accrued. This tolerance is indicative of what Holland (2014) refers to as “forbearance”,⁷⁵ of state actors recognising the redistributive aspects of the illegal economy particularly in the hinterlands, as well as the risks that punitive action may pose to their position and potentially the state itself, and consequently being unwilling to enforce the rules. It can be argued that it is in the interests of all involved that production and trade continues as each party derives some benefit. In this context, enforcement—restricting the extraction or movement of goods—by the state or other actors, is often viewed locally as temporary action and a means of negotiating the redistribution of the benefits rather than attempt to permanently prohibit the trade in goods, be they legal or illegal.

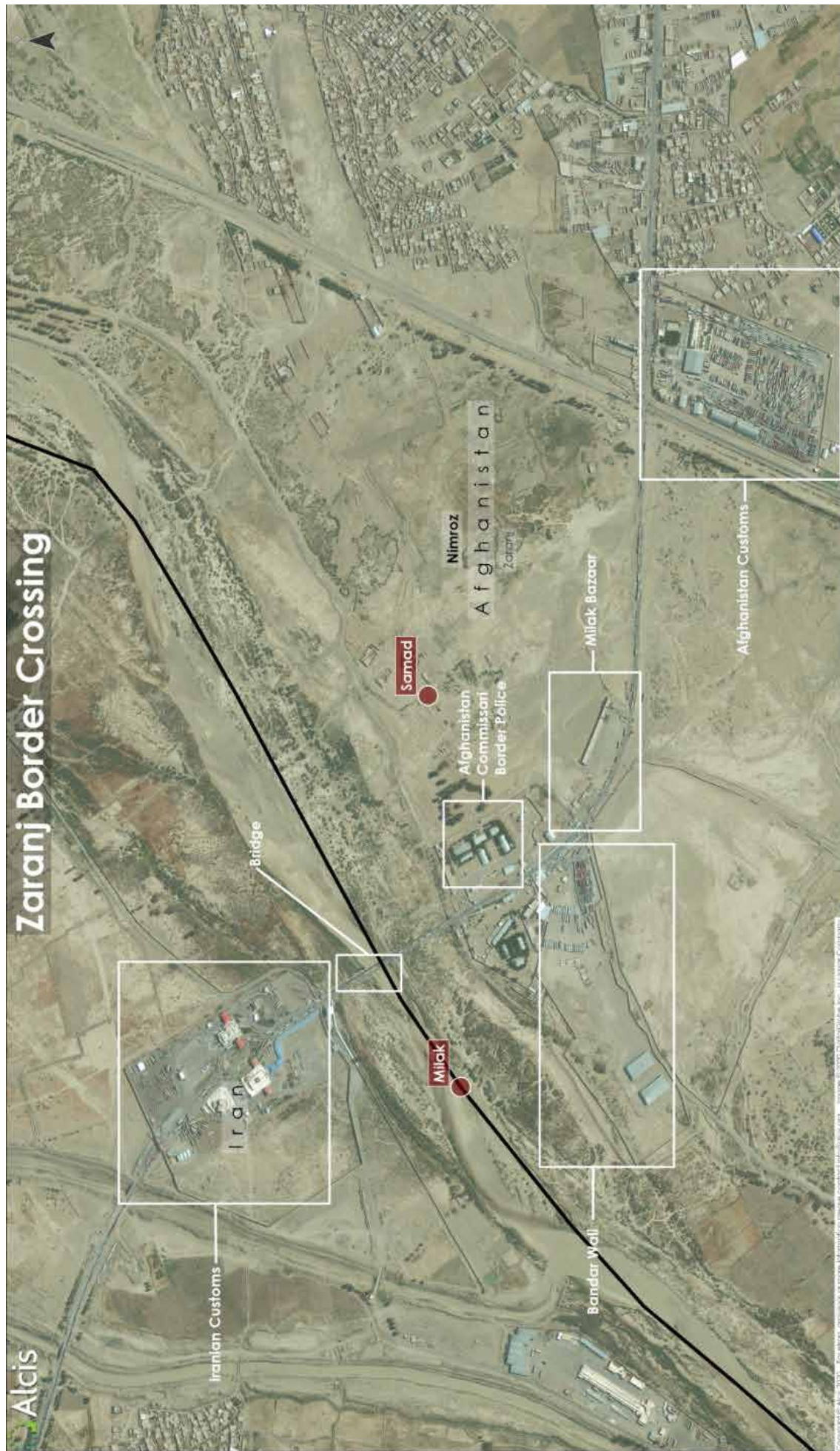
Formal regulations are bound in law and enforced by state institutions and have had a dramatic effect on trading patterns in Nimroz in recent years. As has already been

highlighted in a number of previous sections, trade in Nimroz went through some profound changes once Milak was recognised as an official international border crossing by the governments of both Iran and Afghanistan, and both began to make investments to control and canalise trade through Ziranj. The physical border structures that supported this have already been discussed, but alongside these were regulatory procedures by the Iranian government that reinforced the importance of Ziranj as a central hub for trade through Nimroz and onto Iran.

The most obvious example of a formal regulation can be found at the official crossing point at Milak. The Commissari’s office and the customs system on the Afghan side of the border, as well as their counterparts on the Iranian side, did not exist until 2005 (see Figure 22). Even as late as 2012, there were neither the professional staff, facilities, nor the system to facilitate the large amount of trade that passes through Milak as of 2019. By mid-2019, this crossing processed around 150 trucks per day, the bulk of which were cement (40 trucks), diesel (35 trucks), iron (15 trucks) and food items (10 trucks), but also included items such as car parts from Dubai (six trucks) and meat from Brazil (one truck). The scale of the official trade through Nimroz was in part matched by the rents collected. In 2019, the various taxes charged on a tanker of diesel at Milak amounted to the equivalent of US\$1,405, and US\$750 on each truck of cement, providing significant revenue for the government in Kabul and a further incentive to direct trade through the official border crossing.

⁷⁵ Alisha Holland, “Forbearance: Theory and Measurement in the Study of Enforcement Politics”, 2 October 2014, http://cpd.berkeley.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Holland_BerkeleyCP_10.02.14.pdf (accessed 27 August 2020).

Figure 22: Border crossing and facilities at the Milak/Ziranj crossing, 2019



On the other side of the border, the Iranian government has also directed trade toward the formal crossing at Milak and looked at ways to extract rent, and hard currency, from businesses. For example, one of the regulatory measures many respondents referred to was the imposition of visa controls on Afghans visiting Iran. While always required, the rules on passports and visas were rarely enforced until the border controls were built. Until then, Afghan nationals could easily cross the border and travel within Sistan Balochistan. With visas costing US\$430, the price is set at a level that many feel they cannot afford and is a barrier to entry and trade. The Iranian government imposes further hard currency payments on road permits (EUR253) and fuel (US\$120) for trucks, further raising the cost of conducting business in Iran, and, so many believe, limiting the trading opportunities for the kind of small traders that used to thrive on the borders.

Where the formal regulatory system operates, there is often an informal one running in parallel that also exacts a toll. In the case of diesel, this informal economy is in part fuelled by an Iranian regulatory system that determines the quality that can be sold domestically and for export. Locally it is recognised that the diesel sold on the domestic market (often heavily subsidised in Sistan Balochistan as part of the government's transfer payments) is of higher quality than that which is exported. This itself has led to a vibrant cross-border trade in smuggled domestic fuel from Iran; an economy that is so important to the livelihoods of those in Nimroz that diesel is viewed as the primary currency of the area, followed by the rial and then the afghani. Transported in bottles (1-3 L) and Bushka (20 L), domestic diesel is smuggled across the border at Milak and many of the traditional unofficial crossing points in the district of Ziranj, Kang and Charburjak. From

there it is transported to Ziranj, sold to the large traders and mixed with the lower-quality export fuel before onward shipment to Kabul. Along each section of the route from the border to Ziranj, a variety of actors, including landowners, border guards and the police take a payment, all beneficiaries of the regulation (or lack thereof) imposed on the border areas.

Similar systems of rent extraction operate on the movement of illegal goods. These systems also serve to favour particular trading routes. As described in the previous section, the people-smuggling route through Charburjak is preferred by traders, as it offers a degree of certainty and security, despite passing through the territories and chokepoints of private actors, government officials, and the Taliban, each of which charges a toll. Despite the length of the journey—it is a 580 km journey to Mashkel on the Pakistan/Iranian border compared to 150 km to the tri-border area—it is proven with some degree of protection from those that provide informal regulation over the different stages of the journey. This has all impacted on the costs of smuggling. For example, in 2005 before border the Iranian border controls, smugglers said people were paying as little as US\$150-180 to cross the border.⁷⁶ By 2019, migrants were typically paying as much as US\$715 for transit to Iran.

The same kind of protections are offered with the movement of illicit drugs in bulk from Bakwa and Delarem to the border with Pakistan. Instead, it is where the quantities are small, rents are punitive, or protection is thin and unreliable, that trade begins to flounder. This is possibly at its most pronounced with the more traditional low-level smuggling of illicit drugs across the Iranian border at the unofficial crossings in Ziranj and Kang. What was once a relatively open market with few costs or regulations has become increasingly

76 Elca Stigler, "Transnational Networks and Migration from Herat to Iran" (AREU Case Study Series, January 2005).

regulated and restrictive. More robust Iranian border structures and the deployment of security forces with limited or no attachment to the local area has increased both the costs and risks of transporting drugs across the border. Payments to both Iranian and Afghan border guards and the Afghan Police—as well as the costs of transporting opium from Bakwa and across the Iranian border to the point of sale—are such that the profits are typically little more than US\$40 per kg.

Where they have leverage, i.e., where there are fewer actors and there is sufficient financial and political gain, traders can prompt regulatory reform. For example, it was reported that such was the need to regulate the extraction of rent by the Taliban in Khash Rud that in 2017 traders approached the government in Ziranj and Kabul, as well as the Taliban, to agree that a Taliban representative be appointed in Milak for the collection of their taxes. This extraordinary move was prompted by the repeated attacks on trucks travelling along the Ziranj-Delarem road between 2015 and 2017. Traders complained that their trucks were being repeatedly stopped by the Taliban as they passed along the road north of Ghorghory and made to pay bribes; some trucks more than once in a single journey by different Taliban commanders. Drivers might be beaten, and some, along with their loads, were diverted into the desert area to the north of the highway and held for days at a time. Traders in Ziranj would be contacted by Taliban commanders and forced to make payments in exchange for the release of their drivers and goods.

It is said that, frustrated that this practice was imposing significant losses on their businesses and heightening uncertainty, representatives of the traders approached the Governor of Nimroz before travelling to Kabul to speak with the central government about regularising the Taliban's taxation regime. It is claimed that following these discussions it was agreed that

a trader—a local Balochi—would sit in the Customs House in Milak and collect the taxes for the Taliban. This practice continued for 9 months, collapsing in July 2018 when Taliban commanders in Ghorghory realised that the trader in Milak was short-changing them, reporting fewer vehicles than had actually passed through the border area. After being punished with imprisonment for six weeks and a fine of US\$1.16 million by the Taliban (the estimated shortfall in taxes), the trader fled to Iran, and the Taliban established their own mobile checkpoint for the collection of taxes in Ghorghory with agreed duties on the different commodities transported from Iran. These taxes are now part of the cost of doing business for traders in Ziranj—lower than the government's rates—and built into prices further downstream.

This example, and others described here, are illustrative of the agency of the political and economic networks that underpin these borderland economies. Far from being passive in the face of coercive actors such as the Taliban and the government, they use the political and economic leverage they have, including the financial interests that the continuation of trade represents to those seeking rents, to bargain and negotiate, including for greater regulation and controls. It is certainly worth recognising that traders were some of the earliest advocates for the Taliban in the early 1990s. Faced with a fractured mujahiddin government, and a multitude of checkpoints along the main highways, each manned by a different group demanding monies, the Taliban offered a rational regulatory system that reduced costs and risks. Traders and those earning their livelihoods plying these routes have exactly the same interests today.

4.6. Networks and Patronage

Patronage has been another factor shaping chokepoints and points of rent extraction in Nimroz. For example, there are claims that the dominance of the Baloch strongman Karim Brahui during the mujahiddin and then in the early years of the Karzai government favoured the interests of the Baloch tribe and in particular Brahui's own network. However, with his departure and replacement by Pashtun Governors from 2012—Amir Mohammed Akhundzada then Mohamed Samiullah—the balance of power between the two tribes is said to have shifted. The movement of wealthy Pashtuns from Farah and Helmand—in part fleeing violence in their own province—is also thought to have supported the growing influence of Pashtun traders in Nimroz.

An example of the growing dominance of Pashtuns can be seen in the people-smuggling business. Whereas in the past the travel agents that arranged the movement of people from Ziranj to the border were all Baloch, this began to change in 2014 with an influx of Pashtun traders from Helmand and Farah. Respondents claim that attempts to establish

a Pashtun travel agent were resisted initially, leading to a fight in the bazaar, and the closure of the trade for around 15 days. Elders from both tribes were called to resolve the dispute and the agreement they reached favoured the establishment of Pashtun travel agents. By 2019, a minority of these businesses were run by ethnic Baloch, and local Pashtuns were heavily engaged in transporting migrants to the southern border with Pakistan.

Yet, despite this change, the Baloch maintain a strong foothold in the people-smuggling business. Karim Brahui's son is district governor in Charburjak, a key entrepôt for commodities (including people) moving south, and, once they are cross-decked at Dak in Dishu, it is primarily Pakistani Baloch that control the onward journey to the Iranian border. Nevertheless, the Baloch no longer have a monopoly on the people-smuggling business—or any business in Nimroz, highlighting how fluid political and economic power in these Afghan borderlands can be.

5. Key themes or lines of analysis that require further research

This initial phase of the research set out to answer four main research questions:

- i. How does the production and transportation of key commodities, such as minerals, drugs and fuel, impact on the political and economic stability of borderlands?;
- ii. Do these impacts differ depending on whether commodities are (a) illegal or (b) legal commodities moved illegally?;
- iii. What is the reason for the shifting relative importance of different commodities and transportation routes and how do these relate to changes in economic and political networks and/or violence?; and
- iv. Which interventions supported/undermined the production and transportation of these commodities; what decisions guided their design and implementation; and ultimately how did these interventions effect the political and economic stability of borderlands?

With regard to the first research question, and how the production and transportation of key commodities impact on the political and economic stability of borderlands, this initial phase of the research points to a number of preliminary conclusions.

The first and most important conclusion is the redistributive nature of cross-border illicit economies: consisting of multiple segmented journeys, where different local actors are responsible for the trade and transportation of commodities across specific areas, these

economies provide significant income, employment and rent to multiple groups. The people smuggling business for example, pays a “finder’s fee” to people (known locally as a commissionkar) in the provinces where migrants originate from, as well as those working in the hotels in Ziranj, “travel agents”, and multiple groups involved in providing the different kinds of transport required just to get from Ziranj to the Afghanistan/Pakistan border at Dak (Ziranj, Datsun pickup and boat). There are at least eight further payments made along the route within Afghanistan, including to landowners, corrupt officials and the Taliban, and further modes of transport (motorbikes and walking) and payments from the Afghan border with Pakistan to the Pakistan border with Iran. The smuggling of drugs and fuel consists of a similar number of layers that spread the income derived from these illicit businesses amongst a variety of different local actors, private, official and insurgent.

In turn, this multiplicity of actors, incomes and rents has created a strong constituency for the continuation of these economies and a climate of protest, negotiation and even violent resistance when the state or other actors restrict production and trade along particular routes or at specific locations. The agency of many of these groups, some with strong links to provincial and national powerbrokers, further constrains the capacity of the formal authorities and the insurgency to act. Perhaps the exemplar of this local agency and its reach is the efforts of traders in Nimroz to press the Taliban commanders in Ghorghory to better organize their rent seeking, even requesting the government allow a Taliban representative to sit in the customs post in Milak. Continued government “forbearance” of the smuggling

of small amounts of fuel, drugs, people and other goods across the Afghan border with Iran and Pakistan highlight the redistributive nature of these illicit economies and their role in subsidising these borderland communities.

The second conclusion that this phase of the research highlights is that the cost of doing business in an economy with so many horizontal cleavages can be high, restricting both profit margin and rents. As the examples above illustrate, there are numerous parties that require payment for providing direct services, such as transport, or a “finder’s fee”, or even passing through their land, and there are others that require rent in part due to their capacity to coerce and/or to act as spoilers. It is this high cost of doing business—and the multiple bribes to both Afghan and Iranian border officials that impinge on their profit margins—that has prompted drug smugglers in the district of Kang to experiment with using catapults to get their cannabis, opiates and methamphetamine across the border with Iran.

The research also indicates that rents are typically negotiated, recognising that punitive rates will deter production and trade and lead to a loss of income. A strategy for maximising rents will be more effective if it supports the production and movement of commodities en masse. As in other borderlands, such as Nangarhar, rents and regulation are subject to renegotiation and leverage. Traders in Nimroz look for certainty and security along trading routes and will look to negotiate punitive or unpredictable payments, and/or redirect goods and people along routes where some degree of surety can be obtained. Investments in physical infrastructure to facilitate trade and establishing formal and regulatory regimes—such as the example with the Taliban representative at the customs office at Milak—offer a certainty to private sector traders that allow them to better manage price fluctuations of cross-border

markets and the high cost of business in this environment.

This research shows that similar motivations led to the redirection of people smuggling from the tri-border area to Dak in Helmand. Despite the distance—and the associated rise in diesel costs and travel time—this route allows smugglers to mitigate the risks of violence and robbery, as well as excessive payments to ABP checkpoints around the Kamal Khan dam, that would undoubtedly impact on their profit margins.

The second research question sought to examine whether the impact on political and economic stability differed depending on whether a commodity is legal or illegal. Here we do see divergence in part as a function of the legality of the commodity, as well as the scale of the trade. The research shows that the cross-border trade in licit and illicit goods in Nimroz was largely decentralised and open in the absence of formal trade relations with Iran and the supporting infrastructure and regulatory systems. While this began to change as early as 2005 with the building of the Milak bridge and the recognition of Ziranj as an international border crossing, the full effects of the changing geopolitics were not fully realised until 2010 when Afghanistan and Iran began to develop much stronger economic ties in the wake of Afghanistan’s deteriorating relationship with Pakistan. Further outreach to India, and their subsequent investments in the deep seaport of Chabahar in Iran, bolstered the economy of Nimroz and made it an important conduit for international trade, generating more customs duties than Kandahar in 2018.

As such, investments in physical and border infrastructure and the regulation of cross-border trade at Milak/Ziranj transformed the political economy of Nimroz. Iranian border controls, in particular the wall along the boundary of Ziranj district, have directed trade towards Milak and limited the amount of licit and illicit goods that can

be moved via unofficial crossings in the districts of Ziranj, Kang and Charburjak. The canalisation of the trade in licit goods through Milak and Ziranj has been further supported by the imposition of a visa system for Afghans and the construction of infrastructure in both Iran and Afghanistan. The impact on border communities has been pronounced. The costs and risks of cross-border smuggling have risen dramatically, and, along with the effects of prolonged drought, led to a massive outmigration from many of the traditional unofficial border crossings that prospered during the 1990s. The movement of illicit goods has also been affected, leading to the opening up of new routes to the southern border with Pakistan, through chokepoints controlled by both private state actors and the Taliban. The construction of fencing along the Pakistani border in Baluchistan is likely to threaten these routes and lead to a further redirection of illicit trade and new conduits might bypass Nimroz entirely, further impacting the local economy.

The third research question examined the reasons for the shifting relative importance of different commodities and transportation routes and how these related to changes in economic and political networks and/or violence. Here the initial phase of the research provides substantial and rich evidence of the shifts in trade flows over space and time, linked to several factors, most notably geopolitics, investments in physical infrastructure and conflict.

The research has clearly shown how important geopolitics has been in shaping cross-border trade through Nimroz and the Afghan government's attempts to realign its political and trade relations with the support of both Iran and India in recent years. Iranian and Indian interests in opening up new avenues for trade as well as providing competition to CPEC prevail. The investments they have made in infrastructure, including the bridge at Milak, the Ziranj-to-Delarem road and the port at Chabahar

(and the proposed railway between Chabahar and Zahedan) reflect the financial and political interests of both countries in expanding the role of Nimroz as a strategic port of entry into Afghanistan. With over US\$2 billion in official trade with Afghanistan crossing the border, not just through Ziranj in Nimroz, but Mahiroud in Farah, and Islam Qala in Herat, as well as a significant unofficial trade, Iran has considerable interests in a government in Kabul that favours Tehran. Keen to earn hard currency in the wake of US sanctions, and work with the Afghan government to resolve historical water disputes and temper its restive Baloch population, Iran's economic and political interests will undoubtedly impact on the ongoing discussions in Afghanistan about a political settlement—with those in Nimroz most impacted by any deterioration in Iran's economic and political position vis-à-vis a settlement.

Similarly, relations with Pakistan are important to the political economy of Nimroz. As the border structures with Iran reshaped and transformed trade relations, so the Pakistan border fence completed in 2019 will impact on both trade and the politics of the province. There continue to be strategic gaps in these border structures that support the trade in illicit drugs and people, as well as the networks on both sides of the border that derive revenue and rents from these value chains. It remains unclear why these gaps remain and whose interests are best served by an absence of border controls at these nodal points.

At this stage, the research indicates conflict and violence has had little direct effect on the cross-border economy in Nimroz. Rather, Nimroz has gained from the fact that it is relatively secure. The redirection of people smuggling to Nimroz due to fighting during the Najibullah regime, and then, since 2008, the inflow of wealthy traders from Farah and Helmand fleeing violence, has boosted the

local economy. Where more limited acts of violence, such as violent robbery, have interfered with cross-border economies, traders have been relatively adept at rerouting, and/or government officials and the Taliban have acted to curb the threat and thereby maintain opportunities for rent extraction. Examples can be seen in the deserts of Charburjak where the Taliban have dealt with acts of robbery and kidnapping when it has directly impacted on the people-smuggling business. These kinds of actions and their performative role in offering security guarantees to those plying trading routes is critical for building confidence, especially for those transporting illicit goods.

The fourth and final research question looked to identify which interventions supported/undermined the production and transportation of these commodities; what decisions guided their design and implementation; and ultimately how did these interventions effect the political and economic stability of borderlands. Ultimately it proved beyond the capacity of this phase of the research to answer the second part of this question with regard to how decisions were made. However, preliminary conclusions point to the critical role investments in physical infrastructure played in both encouraging and deterring the movement of goods.

As with the research in Nangarhar, this second paper highlights the pronounced role that infrastructure played in not just redirecting trade in Nimroz but in reshaping and restructuring it. The strengthening of the border infrastructure by the Iranian government, from a series of berms and ditches in the 1990s, to a more impermeable border structure consisting of a vertical barrier of either a wall or fence with armed guards located at regular intervals in watchtowers, as well as a mobile border force designed to counter specific threats, is seen as a game changer for those who have spent much of their life moving goods across the Afghan/Iranian border.

The bridge at Milak and accompanying road to Delarem, along with the various facilities established for facilitating the movement of goods, served to regulate and canalise trade through the formal border crossing and has led to higher barriers to entry and greater market concentration, particularly with the trade in fuel, people and drugs. A rise in market costs and risks in these economies has been accompanied by falling profits, placing greater pressure to move in bulk. This requires more capital and access to powerful patronage networks. As such, traditional, small-scale cross-border traders have been crowded out, and, in the case of the smuggling of illicit drugs, are relying on innovation to reduce their costs and stay in business.

Counternarcotics interventions per se have had no direct impact on the economic and political stability of the province. Unlike other provinces, like Nangarhar, Helmand and Balkh, there have been no attempts to ban the opium crop in Nimroz. Constrained by the amount of irrigated agricultural land, and the amount of salt in the groundwater, thereby limiting the scope for the uptake of deep well technology that has been seen in other provinces of the southwest, cultivation has largely responded to market conditions. Efforts to destroy heroin labs have also had limited effect. As such, it is the Iranian border structures that have had the greatest impact on the drugs trade in the province. However, far from curtailing the scale of the trade, the border wall/fence has restructured it, concentrating the trade amongst those with sufficient capital, coercion and patronage to move large amounts of product via convoy through the southern border with Pakistan or through the official crossing at Milak. The kind of decentralised cross-smuggling that was seen in the past, and which many border communities survived on, is an increasingly risky and costly exercise where continued ingenuity and innovation is a prerequisite to earning a living.

6. Conclusions and wider implications

This initial phase of the research was exploratory. It was specifically designed to overcome many of the challenges associated with conducting research on illicit economies in conflict affected areas and to assuage the “drugs fetishism” that dominates much of the official and scholarly literature. This literature, which draws heavily on the quantitative surveys of drug control agencies like UNODC, typically presents the illicit drugs economy—or efforts to control it—as the primary driver of economic activity, social change and conflict in border areas like Nimroz. As such, the cultivation, production and trade of illicit drugs—or counternarcotics interventions—become almost the sole cause of social ills, instability and conflict despite the different primary commodities produced and traded, and the contested nature of political power in most of the areas where illicit drug crops are concentrated.

The purpose of this research was to examine illicit drugs in situ amidst the wider political economy in which they are grown, processed and traded; not to abstract and rarefy drugs, but to locate them firmly within the physical, political and economic space of the tri-border region straddling Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan. Widening the enquiry to include the production and trade of other commodities was instrumental in providing the means by which to examine the relative importance of different conduits and chokepoints, actors, and periods of disruption, and identify whether there was anything specific about the illicit drugs economy—or those involved—that render the production and trade of illicit drugs intrinsically different from other commodity chains, particularly in these contested border areas.

This first phase of the research also built on a methodology developed over many years by the three primary research partners, under the leadership of the author. This approach integrates well-focused fieldwork and high-resolution satellite imagery, along with detailed time and space geospatial analysis to examine, verify and, where possible, extrapolate research findings in areas where the subject matter and the security situation has rendered wide-scale surveys and other quantitative techniques all but impossible. An approach that has been used for many years by the primary research partners to examine drug crop cultivation—a phenomenon that has a distinct visual signature for remote sensing—this was the first time it had been deployed to research the trade and transportation of both illicit and illicit commodities.

A further important element of the methodology was to structure interviews in the field so as to disaggregate by commodity, location, role and task, and focus on “what people do”, not what they think, or what they think researchers should hear. This was critical at this initial stage of the research as a way of mapping the relative importance of different conduits, chokepoints and commodities and verifying the component parts of the data sets. While narratives and perceptions around the role of drugs and drug control efforts can be of value, this initial phase sought to avoid more speculative claims beyond the knowledge and practice of respondents and focus down on the day to day realities of the functioning of cross-border commodity chains and markets.

This phase of the research also highlighted the importance of “talking around drugs not about drugs”, particularly when interviewing those directly involved in the production, trade and transportation of commodities like opium, heroin and cannabis in both Nimroz and Nangarhar. Treating illicit drugs as just one of many the many commodities produced and traded in an area was important not just for better understanding context. As a methodological tool, it can desensitise this kind of research and mitigate some of the risks of denial, exaggeration and aggrandisement by those involved in the trade. It also tempers the tendency for respondents to attribute all kinds of social, economic, political and environmental phenomena directly to the production and trade of illicit drugs.

Nevertheless, despite these efforts to “talk around drugs” and focus on “what people

do”, discussions with those involved further up the value chain in the processing and movement of heroin—as well as with officials involved—proved much more problematic. This is work that requires many longer-term contacts in the field and an extended period of trust building between all partners as well as respondents. It also requires careful handling of sensitive data and systems for the handling, sharing and publication of this material. Ultimately, this initial phase of the research has established the networks for conducting pioneering research on illicit economies in Afghanistan but also built the methodological foundations for similar work in other conflict-affected places, where robust and verifiable data have so often proven inaccessible.

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