

REPOSITIONING A PARIAH REGIME

THE TALIBAN BAN OF 2000/1

Introduction

This chapter draws on primary research undertaken before, during and after the Taliban ban. It is divided into four sections and a conclusion. The first section explores the international political context that influenced the Taliban leadership's decision to ban opium, placing prohibition within the regime's wider efforts to obtain international recognition. The second section examines how the Taliban exploited the opium ban's impact on the rural population as a way of extracting development assistance from the international community. It discusses the role of the United Nations, and in particular UNDCP in supporting these efforts. The third section looks at the image of state authority that the Taliban sought to project through its implementation of the opium ban and how this was subsequently perceived by the international community when the regime failed to act against the opium trade. The fourth section examines the domestic political environment and highlights the fragility of the ban, particularly in the more remote parts of the country, where even the Taliban regime found its authority challenged.

The Taliban prohibition of the 2000/1 growing season is the best known attempt at the cessation of opium production in Afghanistan, and it is the only ban to have been implemented effectively nationwide. At the time it was called 'one of the most remarkable successes ever' by UN officials, and since then it has often been used as a benchmark against which to judge subsequent

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narcotics efforts (Jelsma, 2005: 1). Announced by decree on 27 July 2000, the Taliban ban ordered the complete cessation of opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan. By August 2001, UNDCP¹ reported that cultivation in Afghanistan as a whole had fallen from 82,000 hectares to 8,000 hectares between 2000 and 2001, and in Taliban-held areas had fallen from 78,885 hectares to 1,220 hectares.

Since the fall of the Taliban in late 2001, interpretations of the Taliban ban on opium production have been influenced by the narrative on the ‘war on terror’ and the subsequent ‘demonisation’ of the Taliban regime (Donini et al., 2004: 130; Johnson and Leslie, 2004: 89–98). Most accounts of the prohibition have been written by academics and journalists who were not acquainted with the regime at the time and have relied heavily on secondary sources, in particular UNDCP (Shanty, 2011; Farrell and Thorne, 2005; Peters, 2009a and 2009b). Even some who were critical of the Taliban at the time have sounded like apologists for the regime in their description of the dramatic reduction in opium poppy cultivation achieved under their rule and the subsequent upswing in cultivation that followed their fall. Implicit within this narrative is a critique of the failure of the post-2001 administration and the international community—most notably the governments of the US and UK—to control the level of opium poppy cultivation to the same extent.

Many critics of the Taliban regime of the 1990s have cited the regime’s human rights record and implied that the opium ban was implemented with greater repression than was actually found to have occurred at the time (Windle, 2011: 150).² They have countered any criticism of the ineffectiveness of counternarcotics efforts under the Karzai administration by arguing that, were such a ban to be implemented now, it would require an authoritarian regime inconsistent with current statebuilding efforts.

The most common explanation of the Taliban ban, however, has been based on the view that prohibition was motivated by a desire to raise the farmgate price of opium and increase the value of inventory held by senior Taliban or their associates (Perl, 2001: 1–5; United States Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, 2009: 4; UNODC/MCN, 2007: iv).³ Evidence to support this price manipulation by the Taliban has, to date, been largely circumstantial. It has typically been informed by UN assertions that significant stockpiles of opium were present in Afghanistan in the late 1990s (Peters, 2009b: 94; Felbab Brown, 2010: 131) despite the lack of supporting evidence in either the opium bazaars or the market behaviour of traders at the time (Donor Mission, 2001: 13–14; Gannon, 2008: 55). This market manipulation thesis also overlooks the

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persistence of high opium prices into 2003, long after the collapse of the Taliban regime (Paoli et al., 2009: 70). Those who press this view tend to see the financial gains made by opium traders closely associated with the senior Taliban leadership as the primary reason for implementing the ban, rather than as an externality of it (UNODC/MCN, 2007; Peters, 2009b: 94).

For a full understanding of the Taliban's prohibition of opium in the 2000/1 growing season and its likely sustainability at the time, it is necessary to move beyond the simplistic explanations that have been offered since the regime's collapse, and to contextualise the ban within the international and domestic political challenges that the Taliban faced. It is also important to examine the multiple interests of the different stakeholders involved in the promulgation of the ban, including the role of the UN.

Taking the Moral High Ground

The Taliban's decision to ban opium production during the 2000/1 growing season has to be considered within the context of the regime's isolation at the time and its broader efforts to improve its political and economic position, both regionally and internationally.

Although many considered the regime isolationist, with little regard for what other member states thought of it and its policies, recognition had long been an objective of more moderate parts of the leadership since the mid-1990s (Nojumi et al., 2002: 172–4; Johnson and Leslie, 2004: 147; Crews and Tarzi, 2008: 49; Fergusson, 2011: 130). Despite the Taliban's presence across as much as 90 per cent of Afghanistan, the only countries to recognise it as the legitimate government of the country were Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (Barfield, 2010: 264; Fergusson, 2011: 112). At the UN, Burhanadin Rabbani remained the formal head of state for Afghanistan, and the United Front had permanent representation in 2000 when the ban on opium was announced (Gannon, 2005: 55). The UN Security Council imposed sanctions on the Taliban in November 1999 (Resolution 1267) for its support of Bin Laden. Additional restrictions in December 2000 (Resolution 1333) further increased the regime's sense of isolation before and during the opium ban (Barfield, 2010: 265; Crews and Tarzi, 2008: 268).

International sanctions and lack of recognition not only had political ramifications for the regime but also made it ineligible for financial support from international financial institutions such as the World Bank, and from the private sector. The Taliban's policies—particularly those regarding women—

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had already rendered it unpopular with international development donors who might otherwise have responded more positively to the fact that Afghanistan was one of the poorest countries in the world. These policies and the ongoing conflict resulted in the failure of numerous efforts to attract private investment in the late 1990s, culminating in the collapse of what had proved to be rather productive negotiations with the Union Oil Company of California (Nojumi et al., 2002: 176, 199, 201) and the cessation of Saudi donations in 1998 (Rubin, 2000: 1767; Sinno, 2008: 233).

A protracted drought, with some parts of the south exposed to a fourth consecutive year in the 2000/1 growing season, increased the vulnerability of the rural population but did little to increase aid flows (Fergusson, 2011: 132; Donini, 2004: 133; Rashid, 2001: 127; Marsden, 2009: 86). Even UNDCP's efforts to raise development funds for countering drug crop cultivation remained only partially funded despite the fact that such programmes were often seen as catering to the interests of European consumer nations (Marsden, 2009: 121; Mullah Hassan Rahmani, personal communication, 2 May 2001;⁴ Mullah Kabir, personal communication, 26 April 2001;⁵ Rashid, 2001: 124).

Within this context, the Taliban's cessation of opium poppy cultivation can be seen as an attempt to recast the dialogue with the international community, a dialogue that had become dominated in the late 1990s and 2000 by discussions about the movement's relationship with Osama Bin Laden, its poor record on women's and other human rights and latterly the destruction of the Buddhas in Bamian (Zaeef, 2010; Barfield, 2011: 266; Fergusson, 2011: 138). The ban followed previous efforts in the late 1990s to draw attention away from criticism of these social policies (Mansfield, 1999).⁶ It was also part of a broader diplomatic effort in 2000 and 2001 aimed at improving the Taliban's international reputation in the run-up to the meeting of the Credentials Committee at the UN General Assembly in October 2001. This effort included citing the Taliban's role in mediating the release of hostages in Kandahar from a hijacked plane from Kathmandu (Jaggia and Shukla, 2000), as well as the arrest and subsequent trial of international staff of a Christian NGO (Shelter Now International), who were accused of proselytising, contrary to Afghan law at the time (Zaeef, 2010: 132; Gannon, 2008: 83–4; Maley, 2001: vii).

As with the hijacking and the trial of the Christian missionaries, the prohibition of opium provoked the international community to engage more proactively with the Taliban as legitimate interlocutors and potentially to offer the regime technical and financial support (Crews and Tarzi, 2008: 254).

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The ban offered advantages over these other events in that few governments in the international community could argue—particularly given their treaty commitments—that the complete cessation of opium was undesirable.

In his discussions with the donors, Mullah Mohammed Hassan Rahmani, the Regional Governor for the South Western Region, presented the ban as a 'humanitarian issue' and argued that the international community should treat the prohibition of opium as distinct from any political differences with the Taliban movement (personal communication, 2 May 2001). As Hassan explained at the time:

The Taliban has done its bit and the international community should not mix politics with drugs—this is a humanitarian issue. If the international community wants drug control in Afghanistan it needs to separate the issues of politics and drugs. Neither short term nor long term assistance [in response to the ban] should be related to politics. (Mullah Mohammed Hassan Rahmani, personal communication, 2 May 2001)

With the imposition of the ban on opium, the Taliban authorities found themselves in the rare position of occupying the moral high ground on the international stage. It provided an opportunity to counter the image of Afghanistan as a pariah state and allowed the leadership to present the ban as the conduct of a responsible member of the international community: an act of self-sacrifice where the interests of consumer nations were given priority over the economic needs of the rural population of Afghanistan. During the donors' mission to Afghanistan to explore the sustainability of the opium ban, Taliban leaders emphasised their altruism, citing their objective of reducing the impact of drug use in neighbouring countries and in Europe (Donor Mission, 2001: 10).

The State High Commissioner for Drug Control, Akhundzada, framed the prohibition as an 'obligation under the international treaties' (personal communication, 29 April 2001) and suggested that it was always the intention of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan to prohibit opium production across the country and that the ban in 2000/1 was the culmination of efforts that had begun in 1997 with Mullah Omar's original edict outlawing opium production (UNDCP, 1998a: 6).⁷ The religious sanctity of the ban, as one of many edicts against opium promulgated by Mullah Omar, was mentioned only in passing by Taliban leaders and was featured far more in conversations with internationals.⁸

The Taliban leaders were particularly keen to juxtapose their concerted efforts to control opium in the 2000/1 growing season with continued cultiva-

tion in those areas controlled by the United Front. A permanent and nationwide ban was presented to the donors as a benefit of a Taliban victory in the north-east of the country and a vision of what the country could look like once the regime achieved its political and military goals (Haqqani, personal communication, 15 April 2001). To the Taliban leadership, prohibition did not just serve to place the regime on the moral high ground internationally; it also highlighted the inconsistency of the way the international community favoured the United Front (Nojumi et al., 2002: 140).

The Ball is in Your Court: Negotiating with the International Community

While the Taliban leaders were adamant that the prohibition of opium poppy cultivation was permanent and unconditional, it was clear that they had put nothing in place to mitigate the severe loss of welfare that farmers experienced due to the ban (Donor Mission, 2001: 4,10). The Taliban leadership expected that development assistance would follow in response to the ban, and references were made to the obligation of the European countries that consumed Afghan opiates to respond accordingly and prevent farmers from returning to opium poppy cultivation (Mullah Kabir, personal communication, 26 April 2001).

Maulavi Amir Mohammed Haqqani, head of the Nangarhar Drug Control and Coordination Unit, referred to an impending 'disaster' due to the opium poppy ban and argued that the '[Taliban] may not be able to sustain the ban unless the international community provides assistance' (personal communication, 25 April 2001). He warned that 'if a disaster happens, then it is the responsibility of the international community'. Mullah Mohammed Hassan Rahmani claimed that a second year of the ban would be pursued, but implementation would require 'many people to be killed and others to face starvation' (personal communication, 2 May 2001). Were this to happen, the 'responsibility would lie directly with the international community if it failed to deliver sufficient development assistance to the people of Afghanistan' (ibid.). Haqqani expressed concerns about the potential for an increase in crime as a consequence of the ban, and in central Helmand there were claims that the rise in the price of opium had already led to an increase in household robberies (Haqqani, personal communication, 15 April 2001; Helmandi resident, personal communication, 23 April 2001).

The ban caused notable hardships for the rural population, including reducing the quality and quantity of food consumed, postponing health expenditures and having to sell long-term productive assets such as livestock

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and land. The rise in opium prices, from around US\$100 to US\$500 between September 2000 and July 2001, led to an exponential rise in the level of opium-denominated debt. Faced with the ban, farmers were unable to repay in opium the advance payments that they had received on their crop. Traders swiftly converted these opium-denominated debts into cash at the prevailing market price. For these farmers, an advance payment of just US\$50 per kilogram of opium, agreed prior to the planting season of 2000/1, had risen to a debt of US\$500 per kilogram at harvest time (Mansfield and Pain, 2008: 8–9). This increase led to the mortgaging of land and the exchange of daughters as payment on outstanding loans (UNODC, 2004).

The ban also affected the wider economy, leading to higher levels of rural unemployment. Groups of young men lost their work as itinerant harvesters at a time when there were few wage labour opportunities. Migration to Pakistan was a common response to the imposition of the ban in both the southern and eastern provinces. The Donor Mission (2001: 9) concluded that ‘in the coming winter season [2001/2] it is expected that many former opium poppy households will be unable to meet their basic needs’ and raised concerns that ‘without alternatives there would be a growing resistance to the ban amongst the rural population’ (Donor Mission, 2001: 11).

Requests from the Taliban leadership for development assistance in response to the ban were reiterated by rural communities. For example, meetings arranged by the Taliban authorities and UNDCP between the donors’ mission and representatives of different tribal groups in the eastern and southern provinces typically involved detailed requests for development assistance involving exhaustive lists of projects. The orchestrated nature of these events meant that the discussions of assistance were invariably accompanied by requests from tribal elders that the international community recognise the Taliban as the legitimate government of Afghanistan (elders from Rodat and Shinwar, personal communication, 26 April 2001). Conversations with individual farmers on their land in the absence of Taliban soldiers took a different direction; the farmers expressed considerable anxiety over their economic predicament and directed their anger at the decision of the Taliban to ban opium (Gannon, 2008: 59; personal communication with farmers during Taliban ban mission, 2001).

During the Taliban’s efforts to attract development aid from the international community in response to the prohibition, they found advocates within the UN. Barfield (2010: 256) refers to a ‘co-dependency’ between the Taliban and the UN in the late 1990s: a situation in which they tolerated each other

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in order to ensure the flow of humanitarian assistance into the country. With regard to the prohibition of opium production, for once the UN was not in dispute with the Taliban. Instead, they found themselves working in partnership to respond to the regime's delivery of what was viewed as a global public good and to address the humanitarian crisis that was developing due to the successful implementation of the ban.

Rather than being neutral observers and facilitators of the donors' mission investigating the Taliban ban, some in the UN in Afghanistan welcomed the ban as an opportunity for a more constructive dialogue and to improve the flow of aid to the country (Donini et al., 2004: 129–30; Johnson and Leslie, 2004). The donors' mission was confronted with an unusually unified UN effort, involving agencies that had seldom been advocates of drug control in the past. The UN coordinator at the time, Erick de Mul, stressed the importance of the donors responding to the ban by 'doing something, and doing it quickly' (personal communication, 23 April 2001).

UNDCP, in particular, anticipated that it would be at the forefront of the response to the ban and would benefit as the main interlocutor between the Taliban and the international community, as well as the recipient of renewed funding at a time when the country programme had closed due to inadequate funds (Farrell and Thorne, 2005: 84–5; Mansfield, 2002b: 7). Pino Arlacchi, the Executive Director of UNODC at the time, had already sought to elicit a ban from the Taliban leadership in return for a ten-year programme valued at US\$250 million (Steele, 2011: 196–8; UN Office of Internal Oversight Services, 2001: 5). Mullah Mohammed Hassan Rahmani (personal communication, 2 May 2001) highlighted the shared interests of the Taliban and UNDCP for the donors' mission, stating that, 'UNDCP told the Taliban that they should take this important step and ban poppy and then [the Taliban] would get assistance'. The UN coordinator also referred to UNDCP's role in encouraging the Taliban's prohibition (Erick de Mul, personal communication, 23 April 2001).⁹

In fact, during the late 1990s UNDCP had worked more closely with the Taliban authorities than many other UN agencies (Farrell and Thorne, 2005: 84).¹⁰ UNDCP had facilitated meetings between the Taliban leadership and the international donors and provided financial and technical support to the Islamic Emirate's State High Commission for Drug Control (SHCDC) in Kabul as well as to the regional Drug Control and Coordination Units (DCCUs), which were implementing partners for UNDCP's demand reduction and rural development efforts in the country (Farrell and Thorne, 2005:

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84). The relationship prompted criticism from the donors in 1997 during a review of UNDCP's country programme in Afghanistan. Of particular concern to the donors were UNDCP's capacity-building work with Taliban institutions,¹¹ the technical and financial assistance it provided to the Taliban's efforts to electrify Kandahar,¹² and the Executive Director's efforts to launch a ten-year national programme¹³ which would undoubtedly have led to further support being channelled to the Taliban (UNDCP, 1997: 15, 17).

While the close relationship was in part a function of UNDCP's drug control mandate and its need for a partner with coercive capability, it was also a consequence of UNDCP's contractual approach to development assistance in the 1990s. Much of UNDCP's dialogue with the Taliban was structured around signed agreements known as Drug Control Action Plans (DCAP); these plans outlined development interventions to be undertaken in specific districts and a corresponding timetable for reductions in opium poppy cultivation (Mansfield, 2001b: 5–6). Although these plans, and their predecessor, 'the opium clause', had been assessed as unrealistic and counterproductive by a series of reviews in the 1990s and in 2000, they continued to inform UNDCP's understanding of how to address the drugs issue in Afghanistan into the 21st century (Brailsford, 1989a: 22–4; UNDCP, 1995c: 24; Gebert, 2000; Mackrell, 1999; UNDCP, 1999: 10; UN OIOS, 201: 5).¹⁴ The Taliban's prohibition was based on a similar model of conditional development, in which reductions in cultivation would result in the inflow of development assistance (Farrell and Thorne, 2005: 85).¹⁵

The creation of a humanitarian crisis through an opium ban that had been welcomed by the international community placed strong pressure on donors to respond with development assistance. The Taliban leadership likely calculated that the international political support gained by prohibiting opium outweighed the unpopularity the ban would engender among the rural population. This perception was reinforced in conversations between UNDCP and Taliban leaders. It was calculated that if the international community kept their part of the deal, the economic impact of the ban on the rural population would be short-lived, while if the international actors failed to deliver, the ban could simply be rescinded. In April 2001, the USG announced that it would provide an extra US\$43 million to Afghanistan, and Secretary of State Colin Powell stated that there was a need to 'continue to look for ways to provide assistance the Afghans, including those farmers who have felt the ban on poppy cultivation—a decision by the Taliban that we welcome' (cited in Bearak, 2001).

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Damned if You Do, Damned if You Don't

By prohibiting opium production in 2000, the Taliban was not only interested in presenting itself as a credible interlocutor; it was also keen to confront the allegations that it benefited financially from the opium trade. Taliban leaders pointed to the ban as evidence that they were not dependent on opium as a source of finance (Mullah Mohammed Hassan Rahmani, personal communication, 2 May 2001; Zaef, 2010: 132; Fergusson, 2011: 105–7), refuting the prevailing opinion that the ban was imposed to increase the price of opium and the movement's revenues (Saikal, 2004: 222; Stepanova, 2011: 295).

The prohibition of opium certainly succeeded in conveying the image of state authority that the Taliban wished to project to the international community. It was, after all, the only edict that was implemented consistently across the entire occupied area. Ironically the Taliban's success in implementing the ban only increased the expectations of the international community (Gannon, 2005: 55; Johnson and Leslie, 2004: 127). If the Taliban could deliver a complete cessation of cultivation, why were its leaders reluctant to impose an immediate ban on the opium trade, particularly given concerns that 'over-production' in Afghanistan during the 1990s had led to significant stockpiles? The Taliban's failure to act against these alleged stockpiles provoked criticism that the regime was benefiting from the rise in opium prices, indirectly through the taxation of opium and directly through involvement in the trade (UN Security Council, 2001: para 58).¹⁶

Senior leaders unsurprisingly denied the presence of stockpiles, arguing that the dramatic increase in farmgate prices which accompanied the ban was evidence that there was no such inventory (Haqqani, personal communication, 25 April 2001). They also dismissed as 'propaganda' the claims that the Taliban had appropriated the agricultural tithe known as *ushr*, payable on all crops including opium, and had imposed a tax on the drugs trade (Mullah Kabir, personal communication, 26 April 2001; Mullah Hassan Rahmani, personal communication, 2 May 2001). Mullah Hassan Rahmani further argued that, 'There is massive propaganda against the Taliban with regard to the use of poppy as a source of finance for the war; now there is a ban and no opium it shows we are not reliant on opium' (personal communication, 2 May 2001).

While these views are clearly partial, empirical evidence at the time presented a far more complex picture of Taliban finances than is often presented, particularly since the collapse of the regime in 2001 (Naqvi, 1999; Rubin, 2000: 1796; UNDCP, 1998c). Although there is little doubt that taxes were imposed on the production and trade of opium and that members of the

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Taliban regime benefited from the business, the assertion that these revenue streams formed part of a regularised and national system of taxation is not consistent with the political realities of the time. For example, in considering the feasibility of a more coherent and centralised taxation system, it is important to recognise the degree of autonomy that local commanders were able to maintain, even under Taliban rule (Marsden, 2009: 91; Sinno, 2008). It is equally important to question the political wisdom of appropriating the agricultural tithe, which was essentially the salary of the village mullahs who were viewed as the bedrock of Taliban support.¹⁷

Fieldwork during the late 1990s showed the varied and localised nature of payments for both *ushr* and income tax (generically referred to as *zakat*), negating claims that the Taliban authorities were implementing a uniform system of rent extraction on the cultivation and trade of opium (UNDCP, 1998c: 21; UNDCP, 1999c: 26). Primary research with opium traders in Nangarhar, Kandahar and Helmand in the late 1990s revealed that the growth in the opium trade during the Taliban's rule had been fuelled by the improving security environment and the removal of both checkpoints and taxes that had been imposed under the *mujahidin* government (UNDCP, 1998c: 23, 25).

Typically opium traders reported that, apart from the initial capital required for investment, there were no barriers to entering the trade; they could travel freely between areas and did not incur taxes en route. Opium traders in Musa Qala claimed that before the Taliban captured the area, business had suffered and moved to Sangin due to the predation of the local *mujahidin* leader Mullah Ghulam Rasul Akhundzada. With the removal of the Akhundzadas by the Taliban, business had recovered in Musa Qala, and Balochi traders were once again travelling directly to the area to purchase opium in bulk. Only a small number of traders in the south reported making contributions to the local authorities. In some cases this was referred to as a 'gift', others paid *zakat* based on their overall wealth, including the money they generated from the opium trade (UNDCP, 1998c).¹⁸

Moreover, contrary to some of the historical revisionism following the 'war on terror', the drugs trade was not the 'regime's sole source of foreign exchange at the time' (UNODC, 2007: iv). The World Bank reported in 1999 that the taxation of the Afghan Transit Trade Agreement and the smuggling of licit goods into Pakistan were the Taliban's primary sources of income (Naqvi, 1999; Rashid, 2001: 124). This point was reiterated in 2001 when the Committee of Experts appointed by the UN Security Council to monitor Resolution 1333 (UN Security Council, 2001: para 68). Rubin (2000: 1796)

concluded that 'Afghans, including the Taliban, earn relatively little from [the opium] crop' and 'less revenue from opium trade than the transit trade'.

This complex picture of the Taliban delivering a relatively secure environment in which the drugs trade prospered and local systems of taxation and payments prevailed is a more accurate reflection of the situation on the ground. In this environment, the tax revenues of local commanders as well as individuals with inventories of opium undoubtedly increased with the rise in opium prices as a consequence of the Taliban ban. It would be a surprise if some of these individuals were not close to the Taliban leadership and did not have prior knowledge of any plan to prohibit opium production; one example is Hajji Bashir Noorzai, who is reported to have funded the Taliban during the 1990s¹⁹ and was subsequently imprisoned in the US on drugs charges.²⁰ However, the fact that some individuals gained by what might be called 'insider trading' does not explain the primary motivation for the ban, particularly when considered in relation to the international and national political context.

A Movement, Not a Monolith

The State High Commissioner for Drug Control stated that '... there was little that the Taliban could do on stockpiles'. He argued that '... if the Iranian government can't control traffickers [the international community] cannot expect the Taliban to control the drugs trade' (Akhundzada, personal communication, 24 April 2001). While the Taliban ban gave an impression of consolidated territorial control, informed accounts stress a different reality, arguing that the administration was dysfunctional and inconsistent (Rashid, 2001: 212; Johnson and Leslie, 2004: 152–3; Donini et al., 2004: 190; Marsden, 2009: 93). Ministries were largely a façade; they lacked budgets, policies and an effective bureaucracy. Instead, the regime largely relied on the development community to deliver social services and in many cases infrastructural projects.

Furthermore, policy positions adopted in Kabul would often be undermined by those in Kandahar with a far more conservative agenda. In the countryside there was considerable scope for pragmatism; non-governmental organisations and the UN continued to deliver education to women and girls in parts of the country where local leaders and communities were more supportive and pragmatic than the edicts of Mullah Omar would suggest. Even the claims that the population had been disarmed were overstated; rural communities, particularly those in the mountainous areas, retained their weapons but consented to withdraw them from public space as long as the Taliban maintained security. As Maley (2002: 217) notes: 'The claim that the Taliban

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“controlled” large tracts of Afghanistan was misleading, since the Taliban presence in rural areas was light.’

In reality, the Taliban regime—like Afghan governments before it—ruled through a combination of coercion and negotiation. In the lower areas located along the main trading routes and river valleys, the Taliban regime could easily impose its will on a population that was more accessible and consisted of different tribes settled over many years. This can be understood as the ‘state space’ that previous regimes had also governed with relative ease (Scott, 2009). However, in the more mountainous areas, the population was more cohesive, often consisting of a single tribal group, and had historically been given greater autonomy. In these hinterlands there was little evidence of Taliban presence beyond a few armed militiamen located in the district governor’s office. In these areas the Taliban regime, like its predecessors, adopted a strategy of containment, working with the rural elite to co-opt and neutralise dissent (Scott, 2009; Barfield, 2010).

When the Taliban expanded their base from the south across the country they defeated some of their opponents militarily but reached political settlements with others. Tribal and military elites may have acquiesced to Taliban rule but they were given varying degrees of autonomy depending on the political and military capital at their disposal (Johnson and Leslie, 2004: 145; Sinno, 2008; Crews and Tarzi, 2008: 111–12). Moreover, these settlements were constantly evolving, particularly in the late 1990s when the Taliban faced growing dissent and increasing financial difficulties (Vendrell, personal communication, 24 April 2001; Crews and Tarzi, 2008: 262, 265).

The Taliban prohibition on opium was illustrative of the kind of negotiated settlements with which the leadership had to engage. For example, earlier attempts by Mullah Omar to impose a one-third reduction on opium poppy cultivation in the 1999/2000 growing season had been largely ignored. However, in the 2000/1 growing season there were reports that elders from the Shinwari tribe had received a direct payment of US\$150,000 from the Taliban to comply with the ban. They were also given preferential access to the donors’ mission to make direct appeals for development assistance (Donor Mission, 2001: 6). Even when the donors’ mission was investigating the prohibition, the Taliban leadership in the east had to negotiate safe passage for the mission to visit the Mahmand and Pekhar valleys in Achin. This was an area where the mix of civil disobedience in protest against the ban, the presence of traders and drug processing facilities, and reports of the inflow of weapons raised major security concerns for the Taliban, given the seniority of some of the diplomats on the donors’ mission.

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In the southern provinces of Helmand and Kandahar, the population largely accepted the ban in the 2000/1 growing season. There were reports of a delegation of tribal elders from Nade Ali visiting Mullah Omar to present their case against the ban, but these did not yield a change in position. However, fieldwork during the period that would in a normal year have been the opium poppy harvest season revealed an underlying resentment of the authorities that had imposed the ban. Implicit threats were common. As one farmer in Musa Qala recounted (personal communication, April 2001), when asked about the sustainability of the ban: 'There have been many Amirs in my lifetime, I am sure there will be many more!'²¹

It is also important to acknowledge that the ban was implemented amidst a backdrop of growing resentment and dissent against Taliban rule even in Pashtun areas (Rashid, 2001; Crews and Tarzi, 2008: 259–68). As with their predecessors, conscription made the Taliban increasingly unpopular, particularly as many conscripted fighters were dying in battles in the north (Vendrell, personal communication, 24 April 2001; Crews and Tarzi, 2008: 262, 265). The Taliban's inability to bring economic stability, despite improvements in physical security, led to growing frustration among the population. Incidences of corruption became more widespread and there were a number of armed rebellions throughout their rule, even in districts that were considered to be the heart of Taliban territory, including Arghandab in the province of Kandahar, and Kajaki in Helmand (Crews and Tarzi, 2008: 262).²²

There were also tensions within the Taliban's leadership, which had evolved from a core of Kandahari conservatives in the mid-1990s to include a variety of groups (including former communists from the Khalqi party) who did not necessarily share the same moral and social vision for the country (Goodson, 2001: 107). There were reports of disputes between the 'conservatives' in Kandahar, headed by Mullah Mohammed Omar, and the 'moderates' under the Mullah Rabbani, who was based in Kabul (Crews and Tarzi, 2008: 238–73; Nojumi et al., 2002: 179–81; Gannon, 2005: 51–65; Johnson and Leslie, 2004; Donini et al.: 2004: 190). The divisions were such that Rashid (2001: 212) saw the potential for the moderates to stage a coup against Mullah Omar.

As late as 1999, UNDCP recognised the limitations of the verbal and written agreements that it had reached with the Taliban and expressed doubts as to whether the authorities would comply. A note to file stated:

The fluid nature of the conflict in Afghanistan would certainly call into question the ability of the authorities to comply with the written and verbal agreements they have reached with UNDCP. The shifting alliances and the absorption of different

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factions and parties of the *mujahidin* into the Taliban movement pose particular problems for centralising decision making. Institutionally the Taliban would appear to be a loose coalition of factions, many of which are regionally based and pre-exist the Taliban. Consequently policies and attitudes differ from region to region as is evident by the differing stances of the southern and eastern authorities to the gender issue. With this fluid political environment, compromises and agreements are made to ensure that the alliance holds together, and in some cases this may include the acceptance of some factions involvement in the drugs trade. (UNDCP, unpublished note)

While projecting the image of state control, the Taliban's authority in the country was more tenuous than it appeared. At the time there were considerable doubts about whether the Taliban could sustain the ban into a second consecutive year (Donor Mission, 2001). Pressing the rural population to abandon opium poppy cultivation during the 2000/1 growing season was a political gamble, given the number of farmers involved in cultivation and the rural origins of the movement. But there was the potential to mitigate some risks if they succeeded in extracting development assistance from the international community. There is no doubt that pressing for the cessation of the opium trade risked confronting more powerful elements within the country, and possibly within the Taliban itself, and could have proved to be political suicide.

Conclusion

It is widely believed that the prohibition of opium in the 2000/1 growing season demonstrated the Taliban's capacity to extend its rule over remote rural peripheries. However, a closer examination of the motives behind the ban—as well as the highly localised and rather fragile political processes involved in negotiating compliance with rural communities—suggests that the ban was a political gamble designed to reposition the Taliban on the international stage and attract development assistance at a time when the regime was facing increasing isolation, growing fissures within the leadership and experiencing signs of rural unrest (Crews and Tarzi, 2008: 263; Rashid, 2002: 103–4).

Through historical revisionism, the Taliban ban has been dismissed as an act of market manipulation by a rogue regime that sought to increase its revenue stream. This view fails to take into consideration the unregulated structure of the drugs trade, as well as the negotiated and fluid nature of the Taliban's authority over the regions. While members of the Taliban and their associates may have engaged in 'insider trading,' simply dismissing the ban as a cynical attempt to manipulate prices ignores the wider geopolitical goals

served by the prohibition of opium and the political context in Afghanistan at the time.

Caricaturing the Taliban ban as simply an attempt to increase market prices does not help us understand the efficacy of this and more recent drug control efforts under the Karzai government. At the time, the ban succeeded in its purpose. It gave the Taliban regime the appearance of having the moral high ground with the international community, when in the past it had been censured for its poor record on human rights and for the sanctuary it gave to Osama Bin Laden. The ban also served to embarrass the United Front and challenge their legitimacy as the internationally recognised head of state with an official seat at the United Nations. The prohibition of opium production also forced Western nations to engage with the Taliban as a credible interlocutor, as seen in the seniority of many members of the donors' mission sent to Afghanistan to investigate the impact and sustainability of the ban.

Finally, the prohibition compelled Western donors to provide short-term development assistance in response to the humanitarian impact of the ban, and to consider how they might engage with the regime regarding medium- to long-term development support (Donor Mission, 2001: 5). In fact, were it not for the tragic events of 11 September 2001 and the subsequent international intervention in Afghanistan, the Taliban's success in prohibiting opium production might have changed the way in which the international community engaged with the regime, leading to an increase in development assistance for a rural population that increasingly saw the Taliban as failing to deliver improvements in their economic welfare.

In terms of domestic politics, the ban was far less successful. When the Taliban banned opium there were few other economic opportunities in Afghanistan. Consequently, when the donors' mission visited districts such as Achin and Khogiani in Nangarhar and Musa Qala and Kajaki in Helmand, it found itself surrounded by young men with little to do. These were areas where only twelve months earlier farmers would be willing to spend time talking with researchers in the field only while harvesting their opium crop. With the cessation of opium poppy cultivation across the entire area and the widespread cultivation of wheat, farmers had not only lost the opportunity to cultivate opium on their own land but they had lost the daily wages they earned from working as itinerant harvesters in a neighbouring district or further afield.

At the time the income from opium production had become an important part of the overall income of numerous farmers, not only in those areas where opium poppy was cultivated but in areas where there was no tradition of cul-

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tivation. For example, many seasonal workers employed in Helmand during the harvest came from the province of Ghor, which did not have a history of intensive opium poppy cultivation (UNDCP, 1999a: 9). The experience of some of these workers was such that they were preferred by landowners who were looking to maximise the amount of opium extracted from the plant during the harvest. For example, the Taimani, a tribe from southern Ghor, were referred to as 'surgeons' for their harvesting skills, which enabled them to collect more opium than others.

The loss of both on-farm and off-farm income from opium production during the Taliban ban was significant. The crowds of men surrounding the donors' mission were not violent, but they resented the economic impact of the Taliban's ban and blamed Western nations as much as they did the Taliban. Most reported that, in the absence of opium production, they would travel to Pakistan in search of employment; there were already reports of growing numbers of families leaving the country. A few of those interviewed threatened to look for opportunities to join armed groups in Afghanistan and in other countries, where at least they would be fed regularly.

The economic consequences of the ban had not yet been fully realised at the time of the donors' mission. The loans that many had taken on their opium crop before the planting season were not yet due until June 2001. As these had been monetised at the new inflated price of US\$500 per kilogram, the prospects of repaying were bleak and there were already reports of people absconding to Pakistan to avoid repayment. Furthermore, food shortages in rural Afghanistan are typically most acute in the winter. Even with the widespread cultivation of wheat in the 2000/1 growing season, many farmers would have faced the winter of 2001/2 without either wheat flour or cash with which to purchase it and other basic necessities. Despite the debate on stockpiles that prevailed amongst policy-makers and in the Western media, there was little evidence of these being held by farmers or farmgate traders in rural Afghanistan.

Maintaining order in the face of the widespread economic dislocation that the ban had caused would have been a challenge, particularly in areas where the Taliban did not have a strong presence. The imposition of the ban changed the nature of the relationship between rural communities, the Taliban and those in the rural elite who had played a part in imposing prohibition. While coercion had been an important element of the bargaining process with rural elites and the local population, it was largely what Kalyvas (2006: 12) would call an act of 'selective violence', used judiciously to encourage compliance. A

far more critical element in gaining consent in these more autonomous areas was the potential for patronage and rent from future development assistance. As this chapter has shown, the expectation that development assistance would be forthcoming was high at all levels of society, but particularly among the rural population and key tribes like the Shinwari who had been instrumental in the imposition of the ban in the eastern region.

Ultimately the ban on opium shifted the political settlement that had been reached between the Taliban and much of rural Afghanistan during their rule. If it had been sustained, prohibition had the potential to challenge the political and financial autonomy of the periphery, making them reliant on the patronage of the centre. Without the concentration of violence and the development funds needed to shore up the support of local elites and lessen the impact of the ban on large swathes of the rural population, there was little prospect of prohibition being pursued for another year. It is important to recognise that in Afghanistan every leader has both his constituents as well as political and military adversaries who are adept at capitalising on their opponent's failure to deliver patronage. The fragile deals that were struck at the periphery would have been hard to maintain without some evidence that the rural population's economic prospects would not continue on a downward trajectory. It is highly likely that, if development assistance were not delivered, the Taliban would have come under considerable political pressure from key tribal groups to abandon the ban. It is equally likely that the leadership would have capitulated, particularly given the availability of weaponry within Afghanistan and throughout the region, the ongoing conflict, and the Taliban movement's own internal struggles.

Negotiating a second year of a ban under these conditions would have presented a major challenge for the rural elite as well as the Taliban leadership. Considerable political capital had been expended by the Taliban leadership, tribal leaders and local elders in the process of implementing prohibition. The resistance that was seen in the upper parts of Achin during the spring of 2001 could easily have turned into a widespread rural rebellion, challenging the image of sovereignty that the Taliban looked to project internationally and domestically. In fact, in April 2001 there were already reports that Hajji Qadir was moving weapons across the border into eastern Afghanistan, and the potential for dissent in other parts of the country was extremely high. As Francesco Vendrell noted at the time of the ban, while reflecting on what he saw as the 'rebellious mood amongst the rural population, the Taliban will not put religious purism ahead of their military ambitions' (personal communication, 24 April 2001).