

OPINION

Narco Terrorism & Taliban

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Opium has been a traditional cash crop in Afghanistan but Narco-terrorism has emerged as a dangerous new phenomenon in the last two decades becoming a financial backbone for terrorist organizations. It's not a by-product of recent foreign invasions; it has become an added component to terrorist operations as there has been a substantial increase in the opium production and export since the arrival of NATO forces in Afghanistan.

The NATO forces in Afghanistan have not paid much attention to this booming enterprise which has become the main source of terrorists' growth and survival. To gain support of powerful warlords who are involved in opium cultivation and export, they have quietly allowed them to operate.

Knowing there is a strong

connection between the Narco-industry and terrorism, the allies do not see it as their responsibility to curtail the drug production. As they perceive al-Qaida as their main enemy whose survival depends on funding from the Middle East and Gulf states, the U.S. and its allies think it is the Taliban who are involved in the drug business.

Washington's strategy to eradicate terrorism within the United States depends on legal and illegal security measures and rooting out the financial base of terrorism. On the other hand, destroying the financial networks of terrorists and their organizations has been widely set aside in Afghanistan and Pakistan where terrorism is primarily viewed as a security and criminal issue.

As a result the drug business has been booming in the aftermath of 9/

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11 in Afghanistan. While most of the opium farming is carried out by warlords, landlords and powerful business leaders, the Taliban provide security and protection with a huge compensation in return. In this role as Narco-cops, they are extremely successful in supporting terrorist activities with the drug money.

A UN report released last month concludes that after a plant disease that reduced the opium production in the last few years, it has surged again in 2011 in Afghanistan. The report provides the following data for different years:

“Estimated potential opium production increased from 4,700 tons in 2010 to 7,000 tons in 2011, reaching levels comparable to the levels of previous years. In Afghanistan itself, potential opium production fell to 3,600 tons in 2010 but resurged to 5,800 tons in 2011” (UN Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC) Report, June 2012).

According to an estimate, 70% of Taliban’s income comes from managing and taxing the illicit drug business. Preaching a narrowly defined religious ideology, they have found a way out to conveniently justify their drug dealings. Although Islam strictly bans producing, using and trading drugs, Taliban’s justification for gaining profits from

the dirty business rests on the misconception that by supplying opium they are paralyzing Western societies indirectly and thus it is permissible.

Contrary to their assumptions, however, production and export of opium is adversely affecting a large Muslim population in neighboring countries in South Asia, Central Asia and Far East. Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Iran, and Pakistan are the most affected countries of this drug business where mixed with other factors of unemployment, poverty and illiteracy, druggies are fast becoming living zombies as a dysfunctional section of the society. Thanks to the drug industry, there are 400 million drug users in Iran and Pakistan only and about 3% of the opium produced in Afghanistan is consumed domestically.

Narco-terrorism as a global, economic, social, political and security phenomenon has also been mishandled by the Karzai government. This negligence has ultimately strengthened the power and influence of the Taliban in Afghanistan, Pakistan and neighboring countries.

Consequently, the drug industry in Afghanistan has become a main source of income and survival for the Taliban. Their ability to influence and

infiltrate poppy growers, transporters and political leaders keeps the supply lines booming.

As an intra and interstate issue, production and trade of narcotics also depends on external demands and internal production. Drug trafficking and production in the so-called Golden Triangle of Southeast Asian countries, for example, has been reduced to a lower level recently but its global demand has not declined which has benefited production in Afghanistan. Obviously, without a global and holistic approach, the issue can hardly be resolved.

Afghanistan has become the main source of drug supplies to the world as 90% of narcotics in European countries come from Afghanistan. Highlighting the use of drugs globally, the above mentioned UN Report also reveals that between 153 to 300 million people aged 15-64 have used drugs at least once

recently.

According to the World Bank, the drug business has grown to 27% of national GDP in Afghanistan. In a country where people have limited means of employment with a widening gap of income between upper and lower classes, the drug business has become a main source of income for farm workers, warlords, landlords and the Taliban.

Elimination of Narco-terrorism needs a long term, collaborative and holistic approach rather than sporadic destruction of poppy fields.

If Petro-dollars have become the backbone of terrorism in Pakistan, Narco-dollars are the major source of funding for the Afghan Taliban. Without eliminating financial networks in both countries, terrorism will remain a force to be reckoned with for a long time to come. ■

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