SPECIAL FEATURE

AFGHANISTAN’S BOUNTY

FROM THE FARM TO THE ARM

TRACKING THE GLOBAL NETWORK OF AN OPIATE ECONOMY
s the needle pierces Reza Ete-
samifard’s skin in central London, the heroin entering his blood stream is on the fi-
nal stage of a journey that most likely originated in Afghanistan. The drug in his veins has traveled more than 6,000 kilometers across battlefields, mountain ranges, deserts, rivers and seas, changing hands dozens of times. Along the way it has crossed at least 10 borders, eluding customs and law en-
forcement agencies at every stage.

Only moments after Reza removes the sy-
ringe, the heroin starts to kick in and he begins to scratch his face irritably, a common symptom among heroin users. As chance would have it, Reza is a refugee from Iran, one of the many countries that the heroin he uses most likely passed through en route to Britain. Unlike the vast majority of the United Kingdom’s users, his path to addiction began by smoking opium when still in Iran.

Reza would be the first to attest to how ad-
dictive heroin is and confesses that he will do anything to get his next fix and avoid the with-
drawal pains, which he describes as being like “ants crawling around your skeleton.”

Although the 10 British pounds [$16.20] that he pays for 0.2 grams of heroin on a daily basis may not seem like much, he is just one of more than 11 million heroin addicts across the world whose com-
bined payments make the heroin trade a $55 billion industry. Though highly profitable to some, the trade is lethal to oth-
ers, with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) estimating that as many as 100,000 people die from the use of Afghan opiates every year. Some one million people worldwide are involved in heroin trafficking alone, while as many as three million Afghans play some part in the cultivation of poppy plants that yield the raw opium from which heroin is made.

One of those poppy farmers is Wali Jon, who supplements subsistence farming with cash from poppy crops in order to help support...
Although the so-called “Golden Crescent” covers parts of Iran and Pakistan, virtually all of the opium production in this area now takes place in Afghanistan – half of it in Helmand and Province alone, which by no coincidence is also the heartland of the Taliban insurgency. The “Golden Crescent” was named after the “Golden Triangle”, consisting of Burma, Laos and Thailand, which had previously been the largest opium producing area until the 1970s, when it was overtaken by Pakistan and subsequently Afghanistan. Most heroin processing occurs inside Afghanistan, but there is also significant processing along the Pakistani border. Once processed, most of the heroin transits through Pakistan, Iran and Turkey in bulk, where seizures of hundreds of kilograms (kg) at a time are not uncommon. Beyond this point, shipments are usually broken into much smaller packages with the average size of European heroin seizures in the tens of kg.

It is worth noting that seizures in Pakistan, Iran and Turkey alone accounted for 62 percent of global seizures in 2008 and almost half the European seizures in the same year were made by just three countries, namely the United Kingdom (18 percent), Italy (14 percent) and Bulgaria (13 percent). The combined volume of heroin estimated to enter Iran is some 140 tons, of which 14 tons is consumed in-country and 32 tons is seized, giving Iran the best interception record at some 22 percent of its overall flow, compared to 18 percent in Pakistan and 10 percent in Turkey. Iran’s seizure efforts are not surprising given the scale of its heroin problem, with more than 400,000 addicts. Taking into account Iran’s international isolation, common ground in the fight against drugs serves as one of the few political bridges between the West and Afghanistan. Although the so-called “Golden Crescent” covers parts of Iran and Pakistan, virtually all of the opium production in this area now takes place in Afghanistan – half of it in Helmand and Province alone, which by no coincidence is also the heartland of the Taliban insurgency. The “Golden Crescent” was named after the “Golden Triangle”, consisting of Burma, Laos and Thailand, which had previously been the largest opium producing area until the 1970s, when it was overtaken by Pakistan and subsequently Afghanistan. Most heroin processing occurs inside Afghanistan, but there is also significant processing along the Pakistani border. Once processed, most of the heroin transits through Pakistan, Iran and Turkey in bulk, where seizures of hundreds of kilograms (kg) at a time are not uncommon. Beyond this point, shipments are usually broken into much smaller packages with the average size of European heroin seizures in the tens of kg.

It is worth noting that seizures in Pakistan, Iran and Turkey alone accounted for 62 percent of global seizures in 2008 and almost half the European seizures in the same year were made by just three countries, namely the United Kingdom (18 percent), Italy (14 percent) and Bulgaria (13 percent). The combined volume of heroin estimated to enter Iran is some 140 tons, of which 14 tons is consumed in-country and 32 tons is seized, giving Iran the best interception record at some 22 percent of its overall flow, compared to 18 percent in Pakistan and 10 percent in Turkey. Iran’s seizure efforts are not surprising given the scale of its heroin problem, with more than 400,000 addicts. Taking into account Iran’s international isolation, common ground in the fight against drugs serves as one of the few political bridges between the West and Afghanistan. Although the so-called “Golden Crescent” covers parts of Iran and Pakistan, virtually all of the opium production in this area now takes place in Afghanistan – half of it in Helmand and Province alone, which by no coincidence is also the heartland of the Taliban insurgency. The “Golden Crescent” was named after the “Golden Triangle”, consisting of Burma, Laos and Thailand, which had previously been the largest opium producing area until the 1970s, when it was overtaken by Pakistan and subsequently Afghanistan. Most heroin processing occurs inside Afghanistan, but there is also significant processing along the Pakistani border. Once processed, most of the heroin transits through Pakistan, Iran and Turkey in bulk, where seizures of hundreds of kilograms (kg) at a time are not uncommon. Beyond this point, shipments are usually broken into much smaller packages with the average size of European heroin seizures in the tens of kg.

It is worth noting that seizures in Pakistan, Iran and Turkey alone accounted for 62 percent of global seizures in 2008 and almost half the European seizures in the same year were made by just three countries, namely the United Kingdom (18 percent), Italy (14 percent) and Bulgaria (13 percent). The combined volume of heroin estimated to enter Iran is some 140 tons, of which 14 tons is consumed in-country and 32 tons is seized, giving Iran the best interception record at some 22 percent of its overall flow, compared to 18 percent in Pakistan and 10 percent in Turkey. Iran’s seizure efforts are not surprising given the scale of its heroin problem, with more than 400,000 addicts. Taking into account Iran’s international isolation, common ground in the fight against drugs serves as one of the few political bridges between the West and Afghanistan. Although the so-called “Golden Crescent” covers parts of Iran and Pakistan, virtually all of the opium production in this area now takes place in Afghanistan – half of it in Helmand and Province alone, which by no coincidence is also the heartland of the Taliban insurgency. The “Golden Crescent” was named after the “Golden Triangle”, consisting of Burma, Laos and Thailand, which had previously been the largest opium producing area until the 1970s, when it was overtaken by Pakistan and subsequently Afghanistan. Most heroin processing occurs inside Afghanistan, but there is also significant processing along the Pakistani border. Once processed, most of the heroin transits through Pakistan, Iran and Turkey in bulk, where seizures of hundreds of kilograms (kg) at a time are not uncommon. Beyond this point, shipments are usually broken into much smaller packages with the average size of European heroin seizures in the tens of kg.

It is worth noting that seizures in Pakistan, Iran and Turkey alone accounted for 62 percent of global seizures in 2008 and almost half the European seizures in the same year were made by just three countries, namely the United Kingdom (18 percent), Italy (14 percent) and Bulgaria (13 percent). The combined volume of heroin estimated to enter Iran is some 140 tons, of which 14 tons is consumed in-country and 32 tons is seized, giving Iran the best interception record at some 22 percent of its overall flow, compared to 18 percent in Pakistan and 10 percent in Turkey. Iran’s seizure efforts are not surprising given the scale of its heroin problem, with more than 400,000 addicts. Taking into account Iran’s international isolation, common ground in the fight against drugs serves as one of the few political bridges between the West and Afghanistan. Although the so-called “Golden Crescent” covers parts of Iran and Pakistan, virtually all of the opium production in this area now takes place in Afghanistan – half of it in Helmand and Province alone, which by no coincidence is also the heartland of the Taliban insurgency. The “Golden Crescent” was named after the “Golden Triangle”, consisting of Burma, Laos and Thailand, which had previously been the largest opium producing area until the 1970s, when it was overtaken by Pakistan and subsequently Afghanistan. Most heroin processing occurs inside Afghanistan, but there is also significant processing along the Pakistani border. Once processed, most of the heroin transits through Pakistan, Iran and Turkey in bulk, where seizures of hundreds of kilograms (kg) at a time are not uncommon. Beyond this point, shipments are usually broken into much smaller packages with the average size of European heroin seizures in the tens of kg.

It is worth noting that seizures in Pakistan, Iran and Turkey alone accounted for 62 percent of global seizures in 2008 and almost half the European seizures in the same year were made by just three countries, namely the United Kingdom (18 percent), Italy (14 percent) and Bulgaria (13 percent). The combined volume of heroin estimated to enter Iran is some 140 tons, of which 14 tons is consumed in-country and 32 tons is seized, giving Iran the best interception record at some 22 percent of its overall flow, compared to 18 percent in Pakistan and 10 percent in Turkey. Iran’s seizure efforts are not surprising given the scale of its heroin problem, with more than 400,000 addicts. Taking into account Iran’s international isolation, common ground in the fight against drugs serves as one of the few political bridges between the West and Afghanistan. Although the so-called “Golden Crescent” covers parts of Iran and Pakistan, virtually all of the opium production in this area now takes place in Afghanistan – half of it in Helmand and Province alone, which by no coincidence is also the heartland of the Taliban insurgency. The “Golden Crescent” was named after the “Golden Triangle”, consisting of Burma, Laos and Thailand, which had previously been the largest opium producing area until the 1970s, when it was overtaken by Pakistan and subsequently Afghanistan. Most heroin processing occurs inside Afghanistan, but there is also significant processing along the Pakistani border. Once processed, most of the heroin transits through Pakistan, Iran and Turkey in bulk, where seizures of hundreds of kilograms (kg) at a time are not uncommon. Beyond this point, shipments are usually broken into much smaller packages with the average size of European heroin seizures in the tens of kg.
been identified by law enforcement agencies and bodies such as the UNODC and the European Monitoring Center for Drugs and Drug Assistance (EMCDDA).

Essentially heroin and opium take one of three routes out of Afghanistan; either the “Northern Route” through central Asia and into Russia, the “Southern Route” through Pakistan, or the “Balkan Route” via Iran and then onwards through Turkey and the Balkans to Western Europe. Much of the drugs that transit through Pakistan subsequently also pass onto the Balkan Route.

The UNODC estimates that some 25 percent of all Afghan heroin (95 tons) leaves via the Northern Route, 40 percent (150 tons) via Pakistan and around 35 percent (130 tons) via Iran. From the combined Iranian and Pakistani routes around 37 percent of Afghanistan’s total heroin production continues onto Europe via the Balkan Route (see map page 37).

The vast majority of the 95 tons of heroin that leaves via the Northern Route is consumed within Russia, while the Southern Route’s supply satisfies Pakistan’s demand (19 tons) and that of other destinations, including Iran (35 tons), South East Asia (25 tons), Africa (20 tons) and the United Arab Emirates (11 tons), the latter of which is almost exclusively for onward shipment, mostly to China and South Africa. Of the Balkan Route heroin, after accounting for seizures and consumption in the countries en route, some 88 tons make it to the high-value sales in Europe, where four countries alone are thought to account for more than half the market, namely the UK (19 tons), Italy (18 tons), France (10 tons) and Germany (7 tons).

The Balkan Route carries the largest volume the greatest distance and to the highest value market. Heroin was smuggled along the Balkan Route well before Afghanistan became the chief producer, during the period when it originated from Pakistan and Burma.

Source: UNODC
1. In the backstreets of west Kabul, two addicts ‘chase the dragon’ under a scarf used to trap heroin vapors.

2. In order to get their next hit, many of Kabul’s addicts make what little they can by begging.

3. An impromptu musical performance by one of the patients at a residential heroin rehabilitation clinic in Kabul.

4. A patient in withdrawal at a residential heroin rehabilitation clinic in Kabul.

5. Members of the Afghan national Army in Khost province, eastern Afghanistan, who made no secret of the fact they were high, probably having smoked hashish. Opium and hashish use are a significant problem within the Afghan security forces, compounding the fight against illegal drugs.

Photographs and text by Adam Pletts
Laurent Lamiel, an analyst at the EMCDIDA, described the route as “the illegal version of the silk road.”

“The thing that is very important to understand is that the big players on the Balkan Route are Turkish criminals and traffickers,” Lamiel explained. “[They] are able to concentrate a large amount of heroin produced in Afghanistan into their hands and act as wholesalers to the British market as well as other European markets.” The UK’s Serious Organized Crime Agency (SOCA) backs this assertion, believing that some 140 Turkish networks control the heroin supply to Europe.

That Turkish criminal groups have taken dominance over other criminal organizations along the route is hardly surprising, not only because the route traverses some 1,600 kilometers of Turkish territory but also because Turkey controls the Bosphorus Straits, the most direct access point to Europe from South Asia without having to pass north of the Caspian and Black Seas. Turkey also shares a long land border with Iran, where heroin can be bought at prices similar to those in Afghanistan, and there are extended communities of Turks in London and elsewhere in Europe, particularly Germany, who can facilitate connections and legitimate travel. In a similar way, Pakistani groups that smuggle heroin direct from Pakistan to the UK, by air or sea, exploit their connections within the UK and their close proximity to the Afghan market, cutting out middlemen to maximize profits on a route where they can buy at around $3,000 per kg and sell at $30,000 per kg; that route only accounts for small volumes of traffic, however, at most some five tons between ships and flights from Pakistan to the UK or the Netherlands.

Although Turkish and Pakistani groups largely control the Balkan and direct air and sea routes, respectively, individuals and groups from many other countries are also involved, as the arrest figures for heroin traffickers attest. In the Netherlands, for example, which could be considered the end point of the Balkan Route and is a key hub for onwards shipment to various European countries including the UK, Dutch citizens account for 20 percent of arrests, followed by Nigerians (19 percent), Turkish (16 percent), British (5 percent), Brazilians (5 percent) and Americans (3 percent).

Similarly, at several points along the route ethnic groups that straddle national borders, or have large diaspora populations, facilitate trafficking, examples being Kurds along the Iran-Turkey border, Azeris along the Iran-Azerbaijan border across which a sub-route branches north from Iran into Russia or Europe, and Albanians who are particularly visible in the trade in Greece, Italy and Switzerland.

**Control of the routes**

“The thing that is very important to understand is that the big players on the Balkan Route are Turkish criminals and traffickers,” Lamiel explained. “[They] are able to concentrate a large amount of heroin produced in Afghanistan into their hands and act as wholesalers to the British market as well as other European markets.” The UK’s Serious Organized Crime Agency (SOCA) backs this assertion, believing that some 140 Turkish networks control the heroin supply to Europe.

That Turkish criminal groups have taken dominance over other criminal organizations along the route is hardly surprising, not only because the route traverses some 1,600 kilometers of Turkish territory but also because Turkey controls the Bosphorus Straits, the most direct access point to Europe from South Asia without having to pass north of the Caspian and Black Seas. Turkey also shares a long land border with Iran, where heroin can be bought at prices similar to those in Afghanistan, and there are extended communities of Turks in London and elsewhere in Europe, particularly Germany, who can facilitate connections and legitimate travel. In a similar way, Pakistani groups that smuggle heroin direct from Pakistan to the UK, by air or sea, exploit their connections within the UK and their close proximity to the Afghan market, cutting out middlemen to maximize profits on a route where they can buy at around $3,000 per kg and sell at $30,000 per kg; that route only accounts for small volumes of traffic, however, at most some five tons between ships and flights from Pakistan to the UK or the Netherlands.

Although Turkish and Pakistani groups largely control the Balkan and direct air and sea routes, respectively, individuals and groups from many other countries are also involved, as the arrest figures for heroin traffickers attest. In the Netherlands, for example, which could be considered the end point of the Balkan Route and is a key hub for onwards shipment to various European countries including the UK, Dutch citizens account for 20 percent of arrests, followed by Nigerians (19 percent), Turkish (16 percent), British (5 percent), Brazilians (5 percent) and Americans (3 percent).

**Control of the routes**

“The thing that is very important to understand is that the big players on the Balkan Route are Turkish criminals and traffickers,” Lamiel explained. “[They] are able to concentrate a large amount of heroin produced in Afghanistan into their hands and act as wholesalers to the British market as well as other European markets.” The UK’s Serious Organized Crime Agency (SOCA) backs this assertion, believing that some 140 Turkish networks control the heroin supply to Europe.

That Turkish criminal groups have taken dominance over other criminal organizations along the route is hardly surprising, not only because the route traverses some 1,600 kilometers of Turkish territory but also because Turkey controls the Bosphorus Straits, the most direct access point to Europe from South Asia without having to pass north of the Caspian and Black Seas. Turkey also shares a long land border with Iran, where heroin can be bought at prices similar to those in Afghanistan, and there are extended communities of Turks in London and elsewhere in Europe, particularly Germany, who can facilitate connections and legitimate travel. In a similar way, Pakistani groups that smuggle heroin direct from Pakistan to the UK, by air or sea, exploit their connections within the UK and their close proximity to the Afghan market, cutting out middlemen to maximize profits on a route where they can buy at around $3,000 per kg and sell at $30,000 per kg; that route only accounts for small volumes of traffic, however, at most some five tons between ships and flights from Pakistan to the UK or the Netherlands.

Although Turkish and Pakistani groups largely control the Balkan and direct air and sea routes, respectively, individuals and groups from many other countries are also involved, as the arrest figures for heroin traffickers attest. In the Netherlands, for example, which could be considered the end point of the Balkan Route and is a key hub for onwards shipment to various European countries including the UK, Dutch citizens account for 20 percent of arrests, followed by Nigerians (19 percent), Turkish (16 percent), British (5 percent), Brazilians (5 percent) and Americans (3 percent).

**Control of the routes**

“The thing that is very important to understand is that the big players on the Balkan Route are Turkish criminals and traffickers,” Lamiel explained. “[They] are able to concentrate a large amount of heroin produced in Afghanistan into their hands and act as wholesalers to the British market as well as other European markets.” The UK’s Serious Organized Crime Agency (SOCA) backs this assertion, believing that some 140 Turkish networks control the heroin supply to Europe.

That Turkish criminal groups have taken dominance over other criminal organizations along the route is hardly surprising, not only because the route traverses some 1,600 kilometers of Turkish territory but also because Turkey controls the Bosphorus Straits, the most direct access point to Europe from South Asia without having to pass north of the Caspian and Black Seas. Turkey also shares a long land border with Iran, where heroin can be bought at prices similar to those in Afghanistan, and there are extended communities of Turks in London and elsewhere in Europe, particularly Germany, who can facilitate connections and legitimate travel. In a similar way, Pakistani groups that smuggle heroin direct from Pakistan to the UK, by air or sea, exploit their connections within the UK and their close proximity to the Afghan market, cutting out middlemen to maximize profits on a route where they can buy at around $3,000 per kg and sell at $30,000 per kg; that route only accounts for small volumes of traffic, however, at most some five tons between ships and flights from Pakistan to the UK or the Netherlands.

Although Turkish and Pakistani groups largely control the Balkan and direct air and sea routes, respectively, individuals and groups from many other countries are also involved, as the arrest figures for heroin traffickers attest. In the Netherlands, for example, which could be considered the end point of the Balkan Route and is a key hub for onwards shipment to various European countries including the UK, Dutch citizens account for 20 percent of arrests, followed by Nigerians (19 percent), Turkish (16 percent), British (5 percent), Brazilians (5 percent) and Americans (3 percent).
Turkey, to $30,000 per kg in the UK (see map page 37). Part of the explanation for this is that, in broad terms, the route travels up two gradients: firstly from less developed to more developed countries, where higher prices can be charged, and secondly from an area of abundance to one of relative scarcity. There is also the fact that the further the heroin travels, the more hands it passes through and the more costs are incurred, which must be recouped in the eventual sale price.  

“Although the UK is the highest value market in Europe, with some of the highest street prices for heroin anywhere in the world, there is more money flowing into Afghanistan from opiates consumed in Iran than there is from the UK,” explained a SOCA financial specialist who requested only to be identified as ‘Richard’ due to the sensitive nature of his work. To understand this, one must break down the price and look at where the revenues from street sales go. At approximately $30,000 per kg the UK’s wholesale heroin price is below the European average of $36,000 per kg. This perhaps reflects the fact that, barring Russia, the UK has the single highest consumption in Europe and the pull of the market pushes the price down even after factoring in the risk to dealers, which is considerable given that the UK makes among the highest number of seizures in Europe. However, the street value of about $80 per gram is above the European weighted average of $77 per gram, so that UK dealers are in a privileged position of buying at lower-than-average prices and selling at above-average prices. The majority of the street value stays in the UK, with criminals making $50,000 for every kg of heroin sales, albeit most of these sales at street level will be in very small quantities, typically of 0.2 grams. Most of the wholesale import price of the heroin has to be paid down the chain of traffickers to pay costs incurred on the way, with any significant profits being retained well before Afghanistan by the controlling criminal groups.

This model is widely applicable to the high-value European markets, meaning the largest revenues from heroin sales are retained within the countries of final sale, even if they may be distributed between large numbers of dealers. Richard makes the point that, “When you go back to the cultivators and the processors in Afghanistan the price has nothing to do with the destination market, so they’re getting as much for each jirah [approximately 2,000 square meters] of land that they’ve cultivated whether the opium is smoked in Pakistan or the UK.” Like so many things in life it’s a question of who you know.

“‘In reality if [Afghan traders] could get [heroin] to the UK themselves they would,’” Richard said. “‘They’re entrepreneurs to a degree, but they can only sell it to the people they know who will buy it from them and they tend to be across the first border in Iran or Pakistan.”

Mechanisms of trade in Afghanistan

It is widely understood that the majority of Afghan opium farmers make very modest profits and are simply trying to make a living. In fact, many are stuck in an economic trap not dissimilar to that of coffee plantation laborers in various parts of the world who, after working hard in the fields, only receive a fraction of the profits that up-market Western coffee shops reap. The difference is that poppy crops are illegal and there will likely never be a “fair heroin trade” campaign. To this end the UNODC, together with most organizations, do not generally consider that the line of criminality has been crossed until the opium or heroin reaches the

The Middle East plays its part

Looking beyond the main trade routes that run through Iran and Turkey, the rest of the Middle East has in its own right been a player in the global heroin market. During Lebanon’s lawless civil war years, poppies were grown extensively in the Bekaa Valley. According to Laurent Lamiel, analyst at the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Assistance (EMCDDA), Beirut has a long history as a drug port. “Beirut was a big connection point before the French era, when poppies were grown in Turkey and then the morphine or heroin was made in Lebanon for export to France via Marseille, in a Turkish-French criminal drugs venture,” he said.

But Lebanon, and also Egypt, have reported poppy eradication in recent years. Lebanon’s eradication fell from 0.67 square kilometers in 2004 to 0.08 square kilometers in 2007, Egypt has seen eradication increase from 0.15 square kilometers in 2002 to 0.98 square kilometers in 2007. To this day the United Arab Emirates forms an important part of the heroin trade, not so much as a significant market destination but as a staging post for onwards shipment to other locations and a money laundering center. The United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime estimates that 11 tons of heroin pass through Dubai each year, by comparison Hiz is more than half as much as enters the United Kingdom, Europe’s single largest market apart from Russia.

The trade has also become more sophisticated in its money laundering capabilities, as journalist and Afghanistan expert Ahmed Rashid told Executives. “One of the benefits that Al Qaeda has offered the Taliban is to provide links that they didn’t have before. Of course drugs were going off to the Gulf well before 9/11 — they had planeloads of drugs landing at Sharjah, and this was all being facilitated by (Osama) bin Laden at that point. I’m sure that whole route and source of funding and sales has expanded a lot.” A financial specialist with the UK’s Serious Organized Crime Agency said that Dubai is crucial to the laundering process.

“Wherever you see flows of illicit money you’ll see flows of illicit money tagged onto it,” he explained. “Dubai has a large money exchange market so it’s got the ability to act as a focal point for laundering of all kinds. There is a concentration on working with the Dubai authorities, the central bank and the police, to make it as hard a market for (traffickers) to penetrate as possible but it does come up in a significant number of our operations and other people’s around the world.”
Although most harvests sum from their poppy
An Afghan poppy
which is a fairly simple operation that can be carried out in nothing
lected directly from the poppy flower is heated with lime in boiling water for several
hours, resulting in a frothy white foam on the surface, which is then collected. This
boiled with acetic anhydride and concentrated through a series of four reactions, the
last of which involves ether and hydrochloric acid and can cause powerful explosions
when not properly handled.

Price fluctuations and their causes
This year the average raw opium price in Afghanistan is estimated to be much higher than last — some $280 per kg compared to just $80 per kg in 2010. A very small portion of this rise can be attributed to successful eradication, which reduces supply and hence pushes up prices. However, there are two much more significant factors in the price increase: the first being that widespread disease triggered a blight in the crops last year and tightened supply, second and more importantly, is speculation.

The military operations mean that a lot of farmers are very uncertain about their future prospects and so they start to stockpile opium because in times of war it’s one of the best commodities to have,” said Lemahieu, pointing out the similarities to the classic economic model of the ‘Dutch tulips’.

Essentially the opium farmers are asking the same questions that any Afghan observer asks: “Is the troop surge going to work?” The farmer, however, must think beyond this to ask: “If the surge does work, will I be able to plant opium in the future and should I stockpile some of what I have?”

As Lemahieu notes, “It’s Wall Street all over again — except in Helmand and Kandahar — and these are not high paid bonuses for bank ex-
cecutives, these are poor farmers thinking ahead and saying ‘in this uncertainty, I’m not selling. I want to sit on it and see what happens to the price’.” The recent price ris-
es are substantial enough so as to have provided many farmers who had previously abandoned poppy crops with the extra incentive to renew cultivation. The UNODC estimates that of the 20 provinces (from a total of 34) in Afghanistan that were for all intents and
Afghan production of opium has become so great that if it were all converted into heroin it would outstrip global demand three times over.

“...they’re no different to other commodity brokers, which is essentially what they are, in terms of the ways they absorb price fluctuations and try to manipulate the market and the supply,” said Steve Coates, deputy director of SOCA.

Becoming the sultan of smack

It is only since the early 1990s that Afghanistan became the world’s dominant opium and heroin supplier (see figure page 36) and, effectively, the current war in Afghanistan has only consolidated its position. There had always been some opium production in Afghanistan but it wasn’t until the Soviet war through the 1980s that it became a major supplier. Previously, Pakistan had been the world leader in opium and heroin production, but as the Afghan mujahedin who were fighting the Russians began to use opium as fuel for war, a fact that continues to this day.

ISI continued to turn a blind eye to Afghan opium traders using the preexisting routes and processing infrastructure within Pakistan.

Following the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, a fierce civil war was fought between different Afghan factions, all of whom used opium revenues partly to fund their war effort. The Taliban, who had conquered all but the furthest northern reaches of Afghanistan by 2001, were no different in their use of opium as fuel for war, a fact that continues to this day.

What has changed is that opium production has roughly doubled since 2003 and has become increasingly concentrated in Afghanistan’s em-
battled southern areas, while it was not until the last decade that the majority of heroin began to be processed inside Afghanistan.

An end in sight

The extent to which the Taliban profit from the opium and heroin trade is often misunderstood. Of the $2.4 billion value of the opiates trade that is retained in Afghanistan, the UNODC estimates the Taliban’s total share would be around $125 million, with other less conservative estimates suggesting it to be as high as $400 million. Even the higher figure gives the Taliban only a 0.6 percent share of the total revenue generated from foreign sales of Afghan opiates. As a portion of Afghanistan’s share of the global spoils, it is only 17 percent. Nonetheless, in a country where entry-level police salaries are less than $100 per month, this allows the Taliban to compete with, and often outpay, state security forces’ salaries.

Successfully ending the opium trade would cut off a significant source of insurgent funding, but eradication is a double-edged sword that can sometimes act to alienate Afghan farmers, pushing them closer to the insurgents. In the past this has led US forces to back away from tackling the drugs problem, which they haven’t considered part of their main mission. Thanks to a change of policy in recent years, a slow decline in cultivation is beginning to take place.

“The real change [regarding opium] came about two years ago when the US military decided to go after the drugs, which they had not been doing for nine years,” said journalist and Afghanistan expert Ahmed Rashid. “If [former US Secretary of Defense Donald] Rumsfeld had not had that policy for so many years there wouldn’t have been such an awful situation.”

This year was the first that the US marines had a permanent presence in Marjah, previously one of the centers of the opium trade in Helmand. Although the farmers had been warned that eradication would go ahead many still planted poppy. As the harvest period approached, government tractors began to plow up the fields with marines providing security. Usually the harvest is the last quiet period before the Taliban’s yearly spring offensive begins, but this year in Marjah hostilities got off to an early start. No sooner had the tractors been sent into the fields than the drivers found themselves under fire from angry locals, some of whom had just crossed the line from farmer to insurgent. In a classic Catch-22, the eradication that is necessary to end the insurgency has also fueled it.

Until stability returns to Afghanistan it will continue supplying the world with the deadly by-product of its wars. It is estimated that there are more than 10,000 deaths per year from heroin overdoses in NATO countries, more than four times the total number of NATO troops that have been killed in Afghanistan since hostilities began in 2001. As Rashid sees it, “You cannot eradicate drugs until the war comes to an end. That’s the bottom line. When that happens, you can talk about a nationwide policy but you can’t really effectively tackle the problem until the war is over.”

The problem, however, is not simply to defeat the insurgents but to extend the government’s reach throughout Afghanistan. In many parts of Southern Helmand the first real evidence that the farmers had seen of any government action was the eradication of their precious poppy crops, before alternatives were put in place or any significant services provided. As Wali Jon, the poppy farmer, insists, “If the government provided any services or alternatives, I wouldn’t grow poppy.”

That certainly doesn’t seem like a reality in the near future and in the distant streets of London, Reza Etesamifard, has little concern that supply will dry up. As he strolls comfortably around his adopted city he points out the many locations where it’s easy to score heroin, from Soho back alleys to upper class suburbs.

“In every part of London there are dealers; it’s an epidemic and nobody is dealing with it,” he said. “Plenty of users hold onto a job — its only the ones who have lost everything that you notice.”

Reza is frank about his addiction; he knows he’s lost everything. Although young, bright and energetic, he is homeless, penniless and without a friend he can trust, willingly confiding that the addicts he spends his time with would put heroin before their friendship, no matter the cost.

The only thing forming any structure to his life is the acquisition of his next pain-staving, euphoria-delivering fix.