

Afghan drug trafficking: Did the Taliban manage to eliminate distribution channels

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According to the UN, Afghanistan, one of the world's largest producers of heroin and methamphetamine, is home to about four million drug users. At the same time, huge flows from this country are used for illegal export. An international observer from the Kazinform News Agency investigated the current state of affairs with the largest drug distribution channel and how the Taliban is coping with the suppression of the traffic.

The problem of drug production, mainly in the form of opium poppy products, and supplying them to the world market has always accompanied the conflict in Afghanistan, starting with a series of coups in the 1970s, foreign invasions and internal conflicts from the 1980s to 2020. First of all, because such wars in any case weakened the central government, even if it was quite tough. At the same time, opium brought 'easy money' to all participants in the process – from the farmers growing opium to the traders, transporters and, of course, the warlords.

Therefore, the problem of drug production is connected with the nature of the central government, with its ability to control the situation in the country, especially its internal provinces. In this sense, the Taliban movement is the first government in Afghanistan in 45 years whose power extends to most of the country and, most importantly, is not contested by any internal opponents. Or rather, they certainly exist in Afghanistan. These include some representatives of the former republican government, mostly from the former Northern Alliance, which fought against the Taliban from 1996 to 2001. At the same time, those loyal to ISIS are also very active.

However, in general, the Taliban exercise power over almost the entire territory of the country and there is no information about the presence of areas not under their control, especially those where regular military actions would take place.

Taliban successes

In this situation, the ban on opium production is a kind of demonstration of the Taliban's ability to realize the potential of the central government. If they can eliminate production, it will clearly demonstrate their power. This is an important point for their rule, at least as important as religious reasons.

The first time the Taliban tried to ban drug production was in 2000–2001, when they were in power. Then they reduced the area under opium by 10 times, from 80 to 8 thousand hectares, which immediately led to an increase in prices from 100 to 750 dollars per kilogram. This is largely why, when they came to power in August 2021, they immediately announced that Afghanistan would no longer be a country where opium is produced. This was following tradition.

On August 18, 2021, Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid spoke about this. At the same time, he noted that Afghanistan would need the help of the international community for this. On April 3, 2022, the movement's supreme leader Haibatullah Akhundzada said that the cultivation of opium poppy is strictly prohibited throughout Afghanistan. So, the official position is quite clearly defined.

At first, the Taliban failed to achieve quick results. In 2022, opium poppy cultivation increased by 32% and amounted to 233 thousand hectares. At the same time, prices increased threefold in a year. But already in 2023, according to the UNODC, cultivation decreased from 233 thousand hectares to 10,800 hectares. The organization relies on satellite images. According to it, income from poppy cultivation and drug production decreased from 1 billion 360 million in 2022 to 110 million in 2023.

Channel to Iran

In general, there are many reports that the Taliban are eradicating opium poppy crops. In addition, it is characteristic that they are conducting joint operations with the Iranian police against drug dealers. For Iran, Afghan opium and the heroin produced from it are a very complex and long-standing problem. According to the UN, in 2019, Iran accounted for 90% of opium consumption in the world, as well as 72% of morphine and 20% of heroin. Iranian authorities say that there are two million opiate addicts in the country. Of course, this is a matter of accounting and statistics. It is difficult to calculate how much is consumed of certain illegal drugs. Perhaps the point here is that Iran is uncompromisingly fighting drugs and does not hide all the statistics.

The Iranian-Afghan border has traditionally been a transit point for drugs, and there have even been occasional clashes with smugglers. Naturally, this was due to the weakness of the central government in Afghanistan. Now, however, the situation seems to

be changing somewhat due to the Taliban's drug policy. In August 2022, Iranian border guards, with the support of Afghans, seized 1.4 tons of opium on the Afghan border. A month earlier, a batch of 800 kg of opium, hashish, etc. was seized. So, opium in Afghanistan is becoming difficult not only to produce, but also to transport.

Supplies to Central Asia

But despite such positive changes, drug production in Afghanistan continues. This is best demonstrated by the ongoing interceptions of large quantities of drugs. In September 2023, Tajik President Emomali Rahmon said at a meeting of Central Asian heads of state that 5 tons of narcotics were seized at the border in 2022.

In December 2023, the director of the Central Asian Regional Center for Combating Illicit Trafficking of Narcotic Drugs, Atageldy Yazlyev, said that, based on the results of 9 months of 2023, the volume of drugs seized in Central Asian countries increased by 100% compared to 2022. In his opinion, this is due to either the fact that old stocks from Afghanistan are being sold, or production continues.

In August 2024, Kazakhstan border guards reported the detention of a record batch of 775 kg of heroin in the Turkistan region on the border with Uzbekistan. Only some part of the drug trafficking is detained. It is believed that in general, from 50 to 65% of all drug trafficking passed through Central Asia in different years. What the situation is now is not entirely clear. Although there is information that in connection with the Taliban ban in Afghanistan, the production of methamphetamine has noticeably increased, and it is also involved in deliveries, including through our region.

So, on the one hand, opium production in Afghanistan is decreasing, and the UNODC confirms this based on indirect data. On the other hand, there is an opinion from neighboring regions and countries that some production is continuing, as evidenced by the ongoing seizure of drugs at the border. In addition, there is also the question of the situation in the main consumer markets for Afghan drugs. This is the same Iran, Europe, Central Asia and some others. A sharp reduction in production should lead to higher prices and a shortage of products. But this has not yet been confirmed.

It is possible that old stocks produced before the Taliban ban are still being shipped in. But it is also highly likely that the Taliban do not fully control, or at least do not have a full presence in, all regions of Afghanistan.

Shadow business

It should be noted here that the Taliban do not have a police system like modern bureaucratic states.

The administrative apparatus is not enough for this, mainly because of the general intention of the Taliban to build a Muslim community. In a community there is no need for the bureaucracy of a modern state. Of course, the Taliban retained many elements of state administration from the Islamic Republic that preceded it. But here another complication arises. Even if the Taliban decide to strengthen the bureaucracy, they lack the resources to maintain it. So, in many interior areas they must still rely on powerful local clans, primarily Pashtun tribes. In any case, Pashtun militias form the backbone of the Taliban's military power. They require less funding from the state than the regular army and police, but they still need to be paid.

Of course, the Taliban fully implements the "state monopoly on violence." Therefore, its decisions are carried out, and it has no internal opposition, especially armed. But it has Pashtun tribes, whose loyalty it values, and the farther from the center of power, the more independent they are. Therefore, the Taliban destroy opium poppy crops in Helmand near Kandahar or in Herat, where the Dari-speaking population lives, and where the Taliban ensure military and police control. But what is happening in the predominantly Pashtun southeastern provinces - Nangarhar, Zabol Paktia, Paktika - is not entirely clear.

Either way, the Taliban have done a lot to combat drugs. However, they clearly lack the capacity to enforce their decision throughout the country. Someone, somewhere, is still growing opium poppies and producing methamphetamine, and then shipping it around the world. Most likely, this is happening farther from the Taliban's centers of power, where they have less control.

