



**GLOBAL
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AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL
ORGANIZED CRIME

Armed conflict and organized crime

The case of Afghanistan

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SUMMARY

This paper contributes to research on the relationship between conflict and organized crime (the crime–conflict nexus), using Afghanistan as a case study. For the past four decades, Afghanistan has been plagued by internal armed conflict, influenced by local, national, regional and international external actors, and the intricate relationships among them. To varying degrees, power, politics and criminality informed these relationships. Organized crime provides actors in Afghanistan with significant political power, while powerful political actors are uniquely positioned to reap the profits of the country’s criminal markets. This paper gives an account of the existing literature on Afghanistan’s crime–conflict nexus, identifying some of the key insights that this literature has revealed. To do so, it uses a four-pronged framework, exploring how conflict has fuelled organized crime in Afghanistan; how organized crime has fuelled conflict; how conflict over the control of illicit markets has resulted; and how organized crime has contributed to the erosion of the state. By assessing the literature on Afghanistan’s crime–conflict nexus, the paper identifies knowledge gaps and suggests areas for future research. ■



INTRODUCTION

For the past four decades, Afghanistan has been battered by internal armed conflict, influenced by local, national, regional and international external actors, and the intricate relationships among them. One particularly poignant issue in the conflict has been Afghanistan's sizeable illicit economy, which exerts strong influence both internally and outside of the country. In light of this, this paper outlines the literature on the nexus between organized crime and conflict (the crime–conflict nexus) in Afghanistan. Establishing the state of the art of the literature on Afghanistan's crime–conflict nexus can identify gaps in knowledge and point towards areas for future research.¹

There are many ways in which one could group the literature on Afghanistan's crime–conflict nexus. For example, one could group the literature according to the criminal market under scrutiny. However, this approach would struggle to capture the interlinkages between different illicit economies and risk oversimplifying the relationship between crime and conflict. To avoid such limitations and to capture the nuances of crime–conflict dynamics, we apply a four-pronged framework of the relationship between organized crime and conflict to the literature, considering how conflict has fuelled organized crime in Afghanistan, how organized crime has fuelled conflict, how conflict over the control of illicit markets takes shape, and how organized crime has eroded the state.² After an overview of the literature on Afghanistan's crime–conflict nexus, the paper discusses each of the four dimensions of this nexus. The paper then concludes with key takeaways and pathways for future research.

Afghanistan is a heterogeneous country in terms of its ethnic, geographic and socio-demographic composition. The relationship between organized crime and conflict in Afghanistan varies not just between provinces but between districts and sometimes even from village to village. Hence, claims about crime and conflict that are true in one locality at one point in time may not hold for another locality at the same time. The aim of this paper is to identify key insights that the literature on the Afghan crime–conflict nexus has revealed.

Quick facts about Afghanistan

Afghanistan is a landlocked country lying at the crossroads of central and South Asia. It borders Iran to the west, Pakistan to the east and south, and Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan to the north. In the north-east, Afghanistan shares a relatively short border with China. The country's terrain is characterized by rugged mountains and some plains in the north and south-west.³ Afghanistan consists of 34 administrative provinces. Its capital is Kabul, which lies in the east of the country.

Afghanistan's population is estimated at between 33 and 40 million people.⁴ The population is diverse, with the main ethnic groups being Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks, Turkmen, Baluch, Pashai, Nuristani, Aymaq, Arab, Kyrgyz, Qizilbash, Gujur and Brahui.⁵ These ethnic groups further comprise different tribal groups. The main religion in Afghanistan is Islam. According to a 2009 estimate, 99.7 per cent of the population are Muslim, with the majority belonging to the Sunni branch of Islam and the minority belonging to the Shia branch.⁶

According to a 2016 estimate, Afghanistan's economy (excluding the illicit economy) is mainly based on agricultural products (23 per cent) and the service industry (56 per cent).⁷ The country maintains a large trade deficit. In 2019, its largest trading partner was the UAE, followed by neighbouring Pakistan.⁸ ■



FIGURE 1 Afghanistan.

SOURCE: UN Geospatial, Afghanistan, 2011, <https://www.un.org/geospatial/content/afghanistan>



ORGANIZED CRIME AND CONFLICT IN AFGHANISTAN: A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Organized crime in conflict settings has implications for people-centred security and the resolution of conflicts. Despite the salience of the phenomenon, the concept of organized crime remains contested,⁹ with analysts disagreeing over the extent to which organized crime is truly organized as well as the degree to which a distinction between illegality and legality can be drawn.¹⁰ In this paper, we understand organized crime broadly to refer to those illicit economic activities that can reasonably be argued to necessitate some form of organized coordination between three or more individuals.

Overall, the historical understanding of the links between Afghanistan's illicit economies and conflict is limited. For example, Afghanistan's drug policies have received significant attention since the Soviet invasion in 1979, but the pre-1979 history has been neglected almost entirely by Western observers.¹¹ In fact, Afghanistan's pre-eminent role in the illicit drug trade has been centuries in the making, only coming of age in no small part due to an intersection between weak governance, regional drug markets, sustained and severe conflict and economic instability, and the relationship between national drug control and multilateral regulations.¹²

Dating back to 1840, Qing Chinese officials commented that 'Kashmir and Badakshan are the worst' cross-border smugglers of opium.¹³ Indeed, parts of modern day Afghanistan proved key transit points between Chinese and British-Indian opium markets.¹⁴ Up until the 1970s, Afghanistan's role in the 20th-century licit and illicit drug economy was simultaneously marginal and pivotal. Afghanistan was too small a producer to influence global markets, but it was significant enough to serve as a spoiler for international negotiations, particularly given its relationship to Iranian drug markets.¹⁵ When Iran imposed prohibitions on domestic production in the 1950s, Afghanistan stepped into the void. As its role in the Iranian domestic market grew, geopolitical and climatic conditions in South East Asia, together with the breaking up of the French Connection heroin-trafficking ring linking Turkey, Marseilles and the United States, drew Afghanistan and Pakistan ever closer the global heroin market.¹⁶

Even tourism conspired to fuel Afghanistan's role in the illicit drugs market, with 'hippies' in Kabul in the early 1970s establishing key smuggling infrastructure into Europe, at that time for hashish.¹⁷

Since 1978, Afghanistan has been trapped in conflict that has produced, and is reinforced by, an illicit economy that intersects with ethnic, ideological and socio-economic grievances throughout the country. Most historians highlight three key periods that have facilitated the emergence and importance of Afghanistan's illicit economy: the Saur Revolution in 1978 and the invasion and occupation of Afghanistan by the Soviet Union from 1979 to 1989; the emergence of the Taliban insurgency and a civil war in the 1990s; and the US military intervention in Afghanistan between 2001 and 2021.

The Saur Revolution and the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan (1978–1989)

Many analysts begin their account of Afghanistan's crime–conflict nexus with the communist Saur Revolution in April 1978 and the subsequent invasion of Afghanistan by the Soviet Union in December 1979.¹⁸ The conflict that proceeded from these events triggered an international reaction led by the United States, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, among others, to supply arms and funds to forces opposing the communist regime. These forces became known as the mujahideen. Far from being one homogeneous group, the mujahideen consisted of myriad armed groups who clashed over the control of territories and criminal markets.¹⁹ For example, according to Gretchen Peters, 80 different mujahideen groups were active in Afghanistan in the late 1970s.²⁰ Under arbitration of the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence and pressure from the United States, these mujahideen groups reorganized under seven different leaders and their political parties.²¹ The Peshawar Seven – named after the Pakistani city in which many of their leaders were in exile – were able to accrue immense fighting power as a result of international support.²²



Soviet troops withdraw from Kabul after agreements to end foreign interventions in Afghanistan, May 1988.

© Robert Nickelsberg/Getty Images

The mujahideen factions and commanders in Afghanistan relied on a convoluted web of traders, who managed to move goods across the porous border between Afghanistan and Pakistan.²³ These traders and truckers built their networks over years under the Afghanistan Transit Trade Agreement – a bilateral trade agreement that allowed goods that entered through the Pakistani city of Karachi to be shipped duty free to Afghanistan. Once there, some traders would smuggle some of the surplus goods back to Pakistan and, in doing so, avoid having to pay Pakistani duties.²⁴ With the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and American and Pakistani demand to supply weapons to Afghan mujahideen, these trading networks amassed significant wealth and political power.²⁵ For example, Pakistani police officers would not interfere with other illicit activities pursued by these trading networks.²⁶ As Aisha Ahmad shows, amid the distrust and insecurity that prevailed in the porous borderlands between the different trading networks and mujahideen factions, these factions would turn to Islamist institutions to build trust with one another.²⁷ These networks have facilitated, and are still facilitating, the movement of gemstones, opium, weapons, antiquities and humans across the Afghanistan–Pakistan border.

Using this material support, some local mujahideen groups were able to gain control over certain territories and provide security, logistical and other types of services necessary for the running of illicit economies in the regions they controlled.²⁸ This included some regions with high levels of poppy cultivation.²⁹ These mujahideen groups also controlled illicit economies beyond the opium trade, such as illegal mining, arms and human trafficking, and extortion.³⁰ Mujahideen groups further used their territorial control to tax illicit economies and offer protection to traffickers.³¹

As the Soviet Union withdrew from Afghanistan, the incumbent communist Najibullah regime attempted to leverage its limited remaining power to strike deals with mujahideen militias. According to the anthropologist Thomas Barfield, Najibullah was able to incorporate 20 per cent of the mujahideen militias into his own regime, while striking ceasefire deals with another 40 per cent of mujahideen militias.³² Nevertheless, the regime continued to rely on Soviet aid. The flow of Soviet aid was dependent on key transport routes between Kabul and the northern parts of Afghanistan that bordered the Soviet Union. To guarantee the security of these routes, Najibullah increased the power of regional militias and set up a patronage network between the regime and local Afghan mujahideen forces.³³ This in effect increased the powers of various militias in their respective territories, particularly in the north, who were able to consolidate their control over illicit markets.³⁴ Importantly, throughout the occupation, the Soviets held urban areas while struggling to make territorial gains in the countryside where mujahideen commanders were strong.

The Afghan Civil War (1989–2001)

The next key period underscored by the literature on the history of Afghanistan's illicit economy is the civil war from 1989 to 2001.³⁵ The literature highlights three developments of this period as important for the emergence of the illicit economy.

First, the end of the Cold War and the dissipation of American and Soviet aid to Afghanistan's mujahideen groups amplified the importance of illicit economies for revenue streams to the various mujahideen factions.³⁶ This was significant given that many, though not all, of the political party leaders controlling the mujahideen factions did not maintain a strong political base in Afghanistan.³⁷

Secondly, because of the fragmentation of power under the Najibullah regime, the political economy of Afghanistan became more decentralized. Provincial capitals in Afghanistan's border provinces developed close economic ties to neighbouring states.³⁸ This allowed economic opportunities to



Members of the Taliban ride a tank near Kabul, October 1996. © Roger Lemoyne/Liaison

flourish in those cities, while militias and business elites controlling the borderlands were able to reap the benefits. This also linked Afghanistan more closely to transnational illicit and licit markets as well as increasing the dependence of these cities and militias on political developments across the border in places such as Tajikistan and Kashmir.³⁹

Thirdly, the emergence of the Taliban altered the balance of power and intensified violent contestation over political power within the country. After the fall of the Najibullah regime in 1992, the different mujahideen factions in Afghanistan fought against one another in a brutal civil war.⁴⁰ The fall of Najibullah in 1992 triggered an inflow of an estimated 1.2 million Afghans who had previously fled the Soviet occupation.⁴¹ The Taliban were founded by a group of predominantly Pashtun Afghan returnees who had hoped that the fall of the Najibullah regime would usher in a peaceful era in Afghanistan.⁴² These refugees spent time in Pakistani refugee camps where they attended religious schools called madrassas.⁴³ After returning to Afghanistan, the former refugees witnessed the rampant violence, injustice and criminality that persisted despite the fall of the Najibullah regime. In 1994, under the leadership of the Islamic cleric Mullah Omar, and together with a group of business elites and religious leaders, they founded the Taliban.⁴⁴ Their power base was in the south-western province of Kandahar. From there, the Taliban advocated their strong opposition to the predation of mujahideen militias and became a powerful political actor in Afghanistan – in part because of their links to the Pakistani intelligence services and the illicit economy.⁴⁵ The Taliban's law-and-order politics (based on religious-fundamentalist ideas), and the violent enforcement thereof, allowed them to appeal to the rural population and gave them a strategic advantage over mujahideen leaders, some of whom lacked political bases of support.⁴⁶

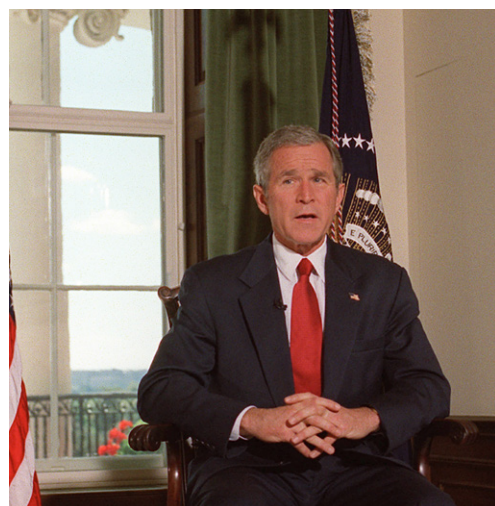
By 1996, the Taliban had taken Kabul and ousted some of the most powerful mujahideen leaders who had retreated to the last remaining areas where resistance was strong, such as the Panjshir Valley, or had gone into exile.⁴⁷ The Taliban's takeover transformed the Afghan political landscape, with mujahideen militias losing power over both criminal markets and political institutions.⁴⁸ Holding control of key roads, ports, airports, cities and border crossings, the Taliban regime was able to

exert a 'monopoly of violence and predation in Afghanistan'.⁴⁹ The movement established order based on Hanafi Islamic jurisprudence influenced by Pashtun custom, which connected with 'the rural mores of southern Afghanistan'.⁵⁰ Under Taliban law, the cultivation of poppies for the opium trade was outlawed, there was a crackdown on crime, and the education and employment of women were curtailed. Islamic law was enforced through public executions and amputations.⁵¹ While Taliban leaders made a commitment to end poppy cultivation in a series of communiqués in 1994 and 1995, they quickly adopted a laissez-faire approach to cultivation.⁵² In 2000, a shift in Afghanistan's illicit economic structure occurred as a result of a Taliban-imposed ban on opium production – Afghanistan's largest illicit economy.⁵³ This ban resulted in a significant drop in poppy cultivation.⁵⁴ However, while the cultivation of opium poppy was banned, the Taliban still allowed for the sale and trafficking of opium and poppies.⁵⁵

The US military intervention in Afghanistan (2001–2021)

The last key period is the US invasion, starting in 2001 and lasting until 2021, which saw the reintroduction of the United States in Afghanistan's internal affairs. The US invasion followed the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, which were carried out by al-Qaeda. The group's leader, Osama bin Laden, was hiding in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan.⁵⁶ International pressure and an ultimatum by the United States to the Taliban to extradite Bin Laden failed to achieve their goals. Subsequently, the United States launched a military intervention in Afghanistan in October 2001.⁵⁷ The United States sought to avoid becoming dragged into a long occupation in Afghanistan and thus designed the intervention to be 'light-footed', characterized by the use of air power, special forces and local allies.⁵⁸ The Taliban regime was quickly defeated, and the United States and their Afghan allies signed the Agreement on Provisional Arrangements in Afghanistan Pending the Re-establishment of Permanent Government in Afghanistan (the Bonn Agreement) in 2001.⁵⁹ The end of the Taliban regime arguably added two new actors to the mix of players in the illicit economy – namely, corrupt state officials belonging to a highly centralized state and the international community.⁶⁰

The Bonn Agreement failed to bring peace to the country. The talks leading up to the drafting and signing of the document left out key, albeit violent, actors in Afghanistan's conflict, such as the Taliban, the Hezb-i-Islami Gulbuddin and the Haqqani network.⁶¹ It also failed to demobilize and disarm the existing armed groups, instead arguing that they should reorganize under an Interim Authority.⁶² Few militia leaders and warlords were willing to give up power.



US President George W. Bush announces military intervention in Afghanistan, October 2001.

© Chris Kleponis/AFP via Getty Images

In invading Afghanistan, the United States allied with an existing military alliance known as the Northern Alliance.⁶³ Many of these mujahideen leaders had lost significant shares of power under the Taliban regime. The US priority of fighting the Taliban and al-Qaeda led it to ignore the transgressions of former mujahideen leaders who were often guilty of human rights violations and other crimes. Instead, these leaders and power brokers were seen as allies in the 'war on terror'.⁶⁴ In effect, US support to the Northern Alliance put the former mujahideen leaders and their militias back on Afghanistan's political map.

The two decades that followed were marked by the re-emergence of the Taliban as an insurgency, and the United States and international community's struggle to curb government corruption and patrimonialism in Kabul.⁶⁵ The international community were unable to agree on a clear strategic or tactical framework for responding to the illicit economy in Afghanistan.⁶⁶ At the same time, members of Afghanistan's ruling elite and their patrimonial networks were able to distribute resources and direct state action in exchange for revenue from their clients.⁶⁷

Decades of conflict have thus sustained an illicit economy in Afghanistan. The war in Afghanistan destroyed legal economic opportunities for civilians, many of whom either joined militias or engaged in illicit activities to survive.⁶⁸ War also created a strong market of protection for militias and other violent entrepreneurs.⁶⁹ Thus, by the time the United States intervened in Afghanistan, a sophisticated illicit economy was already in place, with warlords and a criminal business elite maintaining significant economic interests in that economy. While warlords, insurgents, and governments were benefitting the most from the illicit economy through taxation, participation or other means, they were not the only actors in the illicit economy.⁷⁰ Other key actors in Afghanistan's illicit economy were independent drug lords or power brokers and business elites.⁷¹

The next section discusses the literature on Afghanistan's illicit economy, beginning with a review of work highlighting links between conflict and organized crime in Afghanistan. In order to do so, it follows Idler's four-pronged framework on the conflict-crime nexus.⁷²



CONFLICT-FUELLED ORGANIZED CRIME IN AFGHANISTAN

The first grouping of the literature includes studies that highlight how armed conflict in Afghanistan has fuelled organized crime. Conventional wisdom holds that conflict creates opportunities for organized crime to flourish.⁷³ This dynamic has played out in conflicts across the world and Afghanistan is no exception. This section seeks to review the literature that has explored how conflict has produced opportunities for criminal predation. It is important to avoid a narrative that depicts workers in illicit economies in Afghanistan as cunning, greedy and profit-maximizing actors.⁷⁴ Although Afghanistan's illicit economy certainly hosts some characters who fit this description, there are many who engage in criminalized activities for other reasons.⁷⁵ Indeed, one key point raised in the literature is that conflict produces a number of different motivations for individuals to engage with an illicit economy – among these, economic interests, survival, coping and protection.⁷⁶

The Afghan armed conflict creates demands and opportunities for organized crime

Beginning in the 1970s, the fragmentation of the state and devolution of power to a number of regional power brokers meant that no centralized authority exercised control over Afghanistan's lucrative markets, whether licit or illicit.⁷⁷ According to Romain Malejacq, Afghanistan's regional warlords used different forms of power to prevent the emergence of a centralized Afghan state.⁷⁸ Despite this, as Dipali Mukhopadhyay argues, on a regional level warlords were able to consolidate power and helped extend the Afghan state into rural areas, albeit in a form incongruent with Western ideas of state governance.⁷⁹ In the absence of centralized control, Afghanistan's power brokers were able to tax key smuggling routes, sponsor the cultivation of opium poppy, control mines for gemstones and rare earth minerals, as well as levy illegal taxes on cross-border trade.⁸⁰ Furthermore, the lack of rule of law allowed individual militias to pillage, rape, kidnap or murder civilians living under their control. Kimberley Thachuk suggests that power brokers sanctioned this violence to prevent mutinies or defections by either civilians or their own militias.⁸¹

Likewise, armed conflict in Afghanistan generated the demand for protection and mechanisms for the enforcement of rules and agreements in the country. This demand for protection and enforcement

mechanisms created ample opportunities for warlords, insurgents and criminal actors to exercise control and build local power bases in areas in which the need for protection was high.⁸² For example, in Kandahar, the Taliban were able to use protection services to gain the support of local populations.⁸³ Elsewhere in Afghanistan, local criminal groups, strongmen and militias used their relative military power to offer protection services to local populations.⁸⁴ Through participating in or sponsoring criminal markets, belligerents and other non-state violent actors can accrue political and material capital, which can strengthen their position in the armed conflict itself.⁸⁵

The armed conflict in Afghanistan also increased opportunities and demand for organized crime beyond Afghanistan's borders. For instance, Russian organized criminal groups supplied weapons to mujahideen militias in Afghanistan.⁸⁶ Similarly, in Kyrgyzstan, political elites exploited US geostrategic reliance on airbases in the country to procure bribes, fuel contracts and enable criminal organizations in the country.⁸⁷ Trafficking in opium and other illicit goods from Afghanistan to other destinations, which increased with the onset of conflict, also strengthened organized crime in countries located along the various smuggling routes. For example, in central Asia, organized criminal groups accrued significant power and wealth by helping streamline the 'northern route' – a trafficking route that leads from Afghanistan over its northern neighbours to Russia.⁸⁸ In both Iran and Pakistan, criminal groups and trafficking outfits also benefitted from Afghanistan's conflict and heightened opium production.⁸⁹ Beyond central and South Asia, West and East Africa have also been affected by opium trafficking from Afghanistan to the rest of the world.⁹⁰ In Europe, organized crime groups from the Balkans capitalized on the Afghan drug trade and conflict dynamics.⁹¹

Conflict appears to reduce licit opportunities for economic survival in Afghanistan

Conflict in Afghanistan also appears to reduce the civilian population's access to licit opportunities for economic survival and the sustaining of economic livelihoods. A 2021 study on the impact of conflict on economic activity in Afghanistan found that conflict intensity in different districts of Afghanistan is usually associated with a decline in the formal economic sector, an increase in informal economic activity and a surge in illicit economic activity.⁹²

Elsewhere, Jo Thori Lind et al show that opium poppy is not only an economically more valuable crop to grow in Afghanistan, it is also more resistant to the shocks and disruptions of armed conflict compared to main alternative crops such as wheat.⁹³ Furthermore, opium is more labour intensive than other crops, providing employment to people living in conflict-affected areas where licit economic opportunities are lacking.⁹⁴

The economic opportunities of illicit opium cultivation in Afghanistan affect the country as a whole. For example, people from areas where there is no opium production will go on to work on farms that cultivate opium poppy during harvesting seasons.⁹⁵

Another way in which conflict affects crime is by promoting coping or survival mechanisms, which include involvement in the illicit economy.⁹⁶ Goodhand argues in favour of a framework that divides Afghanistan's illicit political economy into three categories: a combat economy, a shadow economy and a coping economy.⁹⁷ The combat economy serves the combat on the ground and is run by commanders, fighters and conflict entrepreneurs. The shadow economy contains profiteers, people within the transport sector, businessmen and downstream actors, who recognize and capitalize on the demand and the economic opportunities of the conflict. The coping economy consists of the

poorer parts of the population, who attempt to use the economy to cope and maintain asset bases and survive asset erosion.⁹⁸ Farmers in Afghanistan tend to distribute their income and wealth along different asset bases, including a ceremonial fund, a social capital fund and a fund for daily expenses.⁹⁹ By risking the various asset bases of civilians in Afghanistan, the armed conflict has increased the need for civilians to engage in coping mechanisms, including crime.

Using opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan as an example, Mansfield shows how Afghan farmers, who are often poor, use the cultivation of poppy to sustain their livelihoods and cope with the harms of armed conflict.¹⁰⁰ In this way, people do not only engage in the opium economy because of economic profitability but to achieve a range of livelihood outcomes, such as income, well-being, reduced vulnerability to armed conflict and improved food security.¹⁰¹ As armed conflict increases the need for Afghans to cope, they may turn to criminal markets or actors within the illicit economy. Turning to the illicit economy as a coping mechanism applies to other illicit sectors and activities across Afghanistan. For example, cross-border smuggling provides livelihoods particularly to those households living in Afghanistan's borderlands.¹⁰²



A farmer cultivates poppies near Kandahar. Poppy cultivation in Afghanistan is mostly used to sustain livelihoods and help mitigate the harms of armed conflict. © Majid Saeedi/Getty Images

Foreign intervention by the US and NATO allies contributed to impunity and corruption

Intervention in Afghanistan by the United States and their NATO allies neglected to address, and potentially fuelled, organized crime in Afghanistan. Although the literature on this is still developing, there are two identifiable ways in which military intervention by the international community may have contributed to organized crime in Afghanistan: first, concerns over terrorism on the part of the United States and its NATO allies often trumped concerns about organized crime, and second, the large injection of money into the country in the form of development and security contracts allowed for the siphoning off of money from aid and security projects.

Military intervention in Afghanistan was motivated by the United States and their NATO allies' desire to fight what they perceived to be a global war on terror. At that time, US policymakers were seen to prioritize the fight against terrorism over other security concerns, such as organized crime, human rights violations and wider human security concerns. This meant that in Afghanistan, the United States and their NATO allies backed an elite of mujahideen commanders and other power brokers who were known to be involved in Afghanistan's illicit economies.¹⁰³ This elite reportedly provided the United States with intelligence on both the Taliban and al-Qaeda and, in exchange, enjoyed the political backing of the United States and the Afghan political elites.¹⁰⁴

As the armed conflict in Afghanistan destroyed much of the country's infrastructure and caused widespread insecurity, the United States and their allies were confronted with the task of reconstructing Afghanistan and securing military bases and supply lines.¹⁰⁵ The United States and their allies used contracting agreements for reconstruction and development projects as well as to guarantee security for their own transport routes.¹⁰⁶ However, contracting often led to the misuse of funds, as some procured contracts and siphoned off money destined for the project.¹⁰⁷ The massive injection of money meant that some individuals were able to use the subversion of contracting agreements to accrue wealth and, with it, access to patronage networks and political power.¹⁰⁸

In effect, these two mechanisms continue to potentially fuel organized crime in Afghanistan. The past contracting of private security companies also led to a further erosion of the sovereignty of the Afghan state by increasing the dependence on militias and other power brokers for state security.¹⁰⁹ Some analysts describe this phenomenon as 'legal corruption', illustrating the blurred boundary between organized crime and licit activities.¹¹⁰



HOW ORGANIZED CRIME DRIVES CONFLICT IN AFGHANISTAN

Another relationship between organized crime and armed conflict in Afghanistan is evident from the ways in which crime has fuelled the Afghan conflict. Crime and impunity have amplified grievances among the local population and contributed to more general violence.¹¹¹ Criminal markets in Afghanistan are often tied to both state and non-state belligerents in the country. They may participate in criminal markets to gain either material or political benefits, which could then provide them with a strategic advantage in the conflict.¹¹² In essence, a 'criminal arms race' could ensue, in which participation in criminal markets is equated with political power.

Organized crime fuels violence and grievances

One of the most obvious ways in which organized crime fuelled armed conflict in Afghanistan is by enabling violence and predation. This often amplifies grievances among the civilian population towards perpetrators (which can sometimes include the government and its security forces). This is not ubiquitous across Afghanistan; indeed, in some parts of the country, the opposite may be true. For example, in certain areas of Afghanistan, especially those reliant on income from the opium economy, illicit economies increased the Taliban's legitimacy.¹¹³

A number of illicit economies in Afghanistan were used by various conflict actors to sustain their military operations in Afghanistan. These economies include the production and trafficking of narcotics (including opium and crystal meth); the mining and trafficking of gems and minerals; extortion and illegal taxation; wildlife trafficking, and the smuggling of legal goods (such as timber).¹¹⁴

The Taliban, for example, have engaged in opium trafficking, extortion and illegal taxation to fund their military operations.¹¹⁵ Other belligerents, including the mujahideen militias, have financed their activities through the opium trade and other illicit economies in Afghanistan.¹¹⁶ Government officials and police officers also often sap profits from Afghanistan's illicit economy.¹¹⁷ All these activities help certain power brokers and belligerents to access the material and financial resources they need to sustain war operations, thereby fuelling conflict in Afghanistan.¹¹⁸



Miners carry bags of lapis lazuli from a mine. Illicit economies in Afghanistan have been used by conflict actors to sustain their military operations. © Franz J. Marty/SOPA Images/LightRocket via Getty Images

Criminality also aggravated grievances among the civilian population in Afghanistan when these power brokers and belligerents allowed it to run rampant. People's demands for justice or protection from predatory criminals motivate them to support one conflict party over another.¹¹⁹ This has been particularly the case in Afghanistan where many of the warlord elite who have preyed on the civilian population have become important allies for the US 'war on terror'.¹²⁰ With the United States as their key source of support, these power brokers were able to obtain powerful positions in the Afghan government.¹²¹ They were then able to use these positions for criminal patronage and other illicit activities.¹²² As local civilians become disillusioned with the peace and state-building efforts of the international community, they may turn to belligerent groups, in turn fuelling the conflict. Efforts by the international community to build peace were often hampered by corrupt elites.¹²³

Organized crime cements power position of warlords, power brokers and belligerents

A core insight of research from the past decade is that organized crime in Afghanistan is not solely perpetrated for material benefit. Instead, it maintains a certain political capital, which can be used by conflict actors for strategic gain.¹²⁴ This political capital consists of perceived legitimacy of and support for a particular conflict party.¹²⁵

Vanda Felbab-Brown analyzed this phenomenon in the context of Afghanistan.¹²⁶ Focusing on the opium economy, Felbab-Brown argues that four characteristics of Afghanistan's illicit economy allow it to contain a high degree of political capital. First, Afghanistan's overall economy is poor, meaning that alternative means for sustaining livelihoods are limited. Second, Afghanistan's opium economy is labour intensive, with many people living in Afghanistan therefore depending on it. Third, the

presence of traffickers allows belligerents to strike alliances that keep rivals out of criminal markets while local populations can engage in poppy farming without retaliation from other actors. Lastly, punitive government responses against illicit economies in Afghanistan have alienated civilians and pushed them to further support belligerents, particularly the Taliban.¹²⁷

In addition, warlords and their control over regional illicit economies may have made them attractive partners for the Afghan state as well. As Mukhopadhyay argues, prior to the Taliban's coming to power in 2021, warlords and their control over peripheral regions in Afghanistan had become part of the Afghan state's strategy to assert itself in those regions.¹²⁸

Malejacq seeks to explain why warlords and power brokers in Afghanistan survived decades of conflict.¹²⁹ He concludes that they made themselves 'indispensable' to various stakeholders in the country, including the international, national and local communities. While none of these stakeholders particularly 'liked' warlords, it was the ability of warlords to serve the demands of their respective audiences that allowed them to stay in power, even when they lacked material fighting power.¹³⁰ For example, for the international community and the Afghan state, warlords may have been crucial for rallying the respective communities they represent.¹³¹ For local communities, on the other hand, warlords may have provided jobs, access to patronage and justice.¹³² To these ends, Malejacq argues, warlords used power conversion (how they accumulate and convert power resources) and power projection (how they use power resources to convince international, national and local audiences of their authority).¹³³

Similarly, warlords and militias sponsored illicit economies to accrue a political power base in Afghanistan, which they otherwise would not have enjoyed.¹³⁴ In this way, sponsoring criminal markets in Afghanistan cemented the power positions of many belligerent and conflict actors. This subsequently contributed to the armed conflict in Afghanistan.

Vested interests in organized crime spoil peace processes

One final way in which crime fuelled conflict in Afghanistan is by spoiling peace and reconciliation processes.

As mentioned in the previous section, criminal markets have helped power brokers and belligerents to accrue a significant share of political power. However, this power is highly fragmented across Afghanistan's different regions. After 2001, the United States tried to create a highly centralized state in Afghanistan.¹³⁵ This new regime failed to scale back the regional power of key power brokers. Those at the levers of power of the centralized state distributed patronage to regional power brokers to prevent them from ousting those at the centre.¹³⁶

However, amid this perpetuation of war and conflict, some form of order and stability was able to emerge. This mainly depended on whether lootable resources, such as opium poppy, and other criminal markets were extracted jointly with the government or not. As Goodhand argues, in cases of joint-extraction regimes, regional peace and order could emerge, while in cases of private-extraction regimes, peace and order would erode.¹³⁷ Similarly, peace negotiations and deals are often seen as opportunities for power grabs. Goodhand criticizes the Bonn Agreement, for example, as merely distributing power to various warlords.¹³⁸ Elsewhere, James Weir and Hekmatullah Azamy rely on interviews with Taliban fighters to argue that given the bottom-up flow of finances in the insurgency,

some fighters may split with the group and continue fighting if peace processes do not safeguard their own (illicit) financial revenue streams.¹³⁹

In a similar vein, smaller peace initiatives are also rendered moot by criminal actors. Aid intended to help rebuild Afghanistan, build a licit economic infrastructure in the country or simply help Afghan civilians is often subverted by criminal actors and regional power brokers. This does not only fill the war chest of these actors, it also contributes to the grievances of civilians and leads them to support anti-government forces, further fuelling conflict.¹⁴⁰

Lastly, corruption in the higher echelons of the Afghan government prevented the development of a state that catered to its citizens instead of criminal interest groups.¹⁴¹ The United States' concern over long-term occupations and their dependence on regional and local allies meant that some officials belonging to the Afghan government were corrupt and served the interests of only a select few.¹⁴² Warlords who allegedly helped the United States fight the Taliban were reportedly enabled and rewarded different higher-level positions in the former Afghan's president's administration.¹⁴³ As warlords and criminal power brokers used the government as an instrument to achieve their interests, the development of a state that can act as an agent for stability and peace in Afghanistan was hindered. This did not only deprive Afghanistan of a major instrument for peace, but it also aggravated civilian grievances, which were exploited by insurgent forces.



Armed men at an outpost to protect lapis lazuli mines, Kuran Wa Minjan district, Badakhshan province. Control over profitable local resources can be a powerful driver of conflict. © Franz J Marty/SOPA Images/LightRocket via Getty Images



CONFLICT OVER THE CONTROL OF ILLICIT MARKETS IN AFGHANISTAN

The third relationship between crime and conflict in Afghanistan is that conflict is an instrument with which criminal actors can gain control over respective territories and markets. Criminal actors in Afghanistan may therefore fight one another to reap the benefits of criminal markets.¹⁴⁴ Meanwhile, the international community and the Afghan state attempted to curb crime through various policies, and control over criminal markets in Afghanistan is commonly associated with political power. As a result, actors may be motivated to violently challenge one another to gain control over criminal markets in certain territories. At other times, conflict over criminal markets may be pursued simply for economic reasons. In all cases, contestation over criminal markets increases violence and exacerbates harms for civilian populations.

Organized criminal activities linked to specific localities

Organized criminal activities in Afghanistan are linked to the control over certain territories and the characteristics of specific localities. Different localities in Afghanistan perform distinct functions in the illicit supply chains and criminal markets that help prop up many warlords and belligerents.¹⁴⁵ These sites include border crossings, key roads in the country, provincial capitals, smaller towns and the capital, Kabul.

Local disputes can trigger armed violence independently of broader insurgency-linked politics – instead, control over profitable local resources can be a powerful driver of conflict in particular locations. The profitable lapis lazuli reserves in Kuran Wa Minjan district in Badakhshan province, for instance, provided a lucrative source of income for those controlling the trade.¹⁴⁶ Two major warlords in the province (one the former head of the local unit of the Mine Protection Force, a part of the national police force, and the other a former Northern Alliance member) vied for power over Kuran Wa Minjan and its lapis lazuli mines, leading to armed clashes in 2011, 2012 and 2014.¹⁴⁷ Notably, neither power broker was associated with the Taliban, highlighting the complexity of Afghanistan's conflict landscape.

Another example is the control over different localities of illicit supply chains. For example, border regions and the control over border-crossing points are important for both licit and illicit trade. Controlling these sites guarantees access to high revenue streams through the levying of taxes on trade flows.¹⁴⁸ Similarly, control over key highway routes within the country provides belligerents and criminal groups with the ability to tax trade or provide protection services to both licit transporters and illicit traffickers.¹⁴⁹

Use of violence and patronage to ensure control over criminal markets

A review of the literature on crime and armed conflict in Afghanistan highlights that illicit stakeholders employ two strategies to ensure control over criminal markets in Afghanistan – namely, the use of patronage networks and the use of violence.

Large and relatively wealthy urban centres, such as Kabul, exert a lure of their own over powerful figures willing to control illicit economies. Research shows how Kabul, in a fashion similar to other large cities near sites of armed conflict, attract former warlords and military commanders ‘willing and able to confront or co-opt public-security agents, threaten the local population, acquire resources illegally and exploit political institutions’ for profitable contracts in infrastructure or development projects.¹⁵⁰ Different criminal groups used their linkages to political elites to guarantee control over disparate areas of the city, while political elites used criminal groups as political enforcers.¹⁵¹ Alliances with regional or other political elites can help criminal networks and their power brokers to run their businesses smoothly and ensure control over markets. In Kandahar, for instance, connections between criminal networks and political elites, linked to the highest echelons of the Afghan government, benefitted traffickers and power brokers.¹⁵²

In large cities, such as Kabul and Kandahar, these webs of criminality and corruption tended to operate discreetly – meaning that they did not regularly escalate into street clashes or cause civilian casualties, probably due to the proximity to government security forces. Despite this, many former warlords based in Kabul to participate in politics or to vie for lucrative contracts maintained their own private militias.¹⁵³ Through the combination of political influence and (mostly) discreet but occasionally visible armed militias, powerful political actors in Kabul were involved in extortion rackets and the intimidation of opponents in land disputes.¹⁵⁴ With a large segment of Kabul's economy belonging to the informal economy, this meant that – at least prior to the Taliban's victory – many street vendors paid taxes to local warlords and not to the government.

Violence has also been frequently used by power brokers to ensure access or control over criminal markets. Violent contestation over the lapis lazuli mines in Kuran Wa Minjan is a case in point.¹⁵⁵ Another way in which criminal actors use violence to ensure control over criminal markets is by forging alliances with insurgents or other conflict actors.¹⁵⁶ For example, in the 1990s, the Afghan trucking mafia was subject to tolls and taxes levied by mujahideen warlords in exchange for safe passage.¹⁵⁷ However, the ongoing civil war raised the costs for the warlords, who subsequently increased their levies on the trucking mafia. Growing increasingly frustrated with the high taxes levied by warlords in Afghanistan, the mafia looked for alternative protectors. The trucking mafia did not have to look far, as the Taliban were happy to take on the ‘new client’.¹⁵⁸ This led to an ‘alliance’ between the Taliban and the trucking mafia. The armed group agreed to protect shipments and levy a smaller toll compared to the warlords for passage.¹⁵⁹



ORGANIZED CRIME HAS ERODED THE STATE IN AFGHANISTAN

Another factor that undermined overall security in Afghanistan was the implementation of misinformed crime-control responses by the Afghan government and the international community.¹⁶⁰ This may have been in part because organized crime eroded the Afghan state and, with it, efforts by the international community to reduce organized crime.¹⁶¹

When the United States first invaded Afghanistan, they refused to get involved with crime control in the country, considering it a distraction to the wider objective of achieving strategic goals.¹⁶² Organized crime, and in particular the narcotics trade, was nonetheless considered a problem among coalition partners, and the United Kingdom was tasked with implementing programmes aimed at curbing it.¹⁶³ However, initial crime responses by the United Kingdom were ineffective due to design flaws in its alternative-development programme.¹⁶⁴ For example, the United Kingdom would reimburse Afghan farmers for every *jerib* (unit of farmland area) of poppy eradicated.¹⁶⁵ Local strongmen responsible for paying reimbursements to farmers often ‘pocketed the money’, while elsewhere the programme incentivized farmers to grow more poppies to receive more compensation.¹⁶⁶

A growing concern over the role of crime in funding the Taliban and al-Qaeda led to a reconsideration of the role of counter-narcotics in the Afghan security landscape. Beginning in 2003, the United States became more closely involved with counter-narcotics efforts in Afghanistan.¹⁶⁷ US counter-narcotics policies, however, undermined human security and often played into the hands of Taliban and insurgent fighters.¹⁶⁸ This is because counter-narcotics responses became increasingly militarized and disproportionately targeted farmers and lower-scale traffickers.¹⁶⁹ Such a strategy failed to dismantle the political connections that propped up the drug-trafficking networks in Afghanistan and allowed the Taliban and other groups to gain support from farmers and traffickers who suffered under arbitrary crime-response operations.¹⁷⁰ This, in turn, meant that the US involvement in the fight over criminal markets may have been counterproductive.¹⁷¹ Instead of curbing crime and eroding the funding and political basis of the Taliban, these measures may have perpetuated insecurity in the country by alienating civilians from the international community and the Afghan state.¹⁷²

Likewise, the United States’ concern over the link between the Taliban and al-Qaeda groups offered opportunities for savvy power brokers in Afghanistan to manipulate intelligence to frame rivals as Taliban-linked drug traffickers.¹⁷³ In this way, US counter-narcotics operations served as a powerful tool for power brokers to fight one another, further eroding security in the country.



WHAT IS MISSING? GAPS IN THE LITERATURE ON AFGHANISTAN'S CRIME–CONFLICT NEXUS

While an enormous amount has been written on Afghanistan, including its illicit markets and conflict over the years, there remain gaps in knowledge that need to be addressed in order for effective policy implementation to be possible. We have identified five key avenues for future research: exploring why and under what conditions crime contributes to conflict in Afghanistan; enhancing understanding of the role of the international community in Afghanistan's crime–conflict nexus; interrogating markets beyond Afghanistan's opium industry; critically assessing the burgeoning literature of crime and development in the context of Afghanistan, and identifying pathways for viable policy alternatives.

The relationship between organized crime, conflict and cooperation

While the literature is replete with discussions of how crime in Afghanistan has perpetuated the conflict in the country, important questions remain regarding the relationship between organized crime, conflict and cooperation in Afghanistan. Research from other conflict-affected countries has shown that conflict actors and criminals at opposite ends of the conflict occasionally collaborate with each other.¹⁷⁴ Similarly, research on Afghanistan suggests that as much as illicit economies are a recipe for conflict, they can also help provide some form of cooperative order between actors.¹⁷⁵ This research has often analyzed the relative bargaining power of different actors involved in Afghanistan's opium economy.¹⁷⁶ Therefore, instead of asking *whether* organized crime causes conflict in Afghanistan, researchers should consider *under what conditions* organized crime contributes to armed conflict in Afghanistan. This type of research could help identify factors that interact with organized crime to contribute to different types of order amid armed conflict.

Role of the international community

One important factor currently underrepresented in the literature on Afghanistan is the role of the international community and diplomacy in the crime–conflict nexus. Authors have explored the ways in which the international community has been relevant for the crime–conflict nexus in Afghanistan by, for example, critically interrogating counter-narcotics policies and the United States' reported practice of striking alliances with local power brokers involved in Afghanistan's illicit economies.¹⁷⁷

However, with the takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban in 2021, important questions arise regarding the international community's diplomacy with respect to the Taliban government. For example, the international community needs to make assessments regarding whether or not they should recognize the Taliban government. This opens questions about the potential effects of (non)recognition of the Taliban by the international community on Afghanistan's illicit economies. The lack of recognition may render Afghanistan isolated from international markets and the potential licit opportunities that international integration may provide. On the other hand, recognition itself may yet again strengthen the various power brokers in Afghanistan who may use the perks of internationally recognized statehood to cement a criminal oligarchy, aided by the international community.

Future research should also highlight the relationship between international engagement and contracting agreements in Afghanistan. This research could help us to pinpoint possible risk factors in striking contracting agreements and to identify how to build resilience against the criminal exploitation of contracting agreements in armed conflict.

Overemphasis on opium economy

Analyses of the relationship between Afghanistan's illicit economy and conflict have often focused exclusively on the opium economy and its derivative products. Undoubtedly, opium production and poppy cultivation play a major role in Afghanistan's political economy. However, this is not the only illicit market in Afghanistan that is connected to criminal markets. There is a growing debate regarding the diversification of the narcotics market in Afghanistan. For example, the issue of the emerging ephedra economy as a key ingredient in crystal meth is a pointed debate with differing views on its potential significance. Some commentators suggest that the ephedra economy is nothing short of revolutionary,¹⁷⁸ and others point to the emergence of ephedra-derived meth in remote parts of the African continent. UN agencies tend to downplay the relevance, with some independent analysts suggesting that the issue is overblown and that ephedra-based meth has little chance of displacing South East Asian meth, which is of far higher quality.¹⁷⁹ Furthermore, Afghanistan's illicit economy consists of illegal mining, the wildlife trade, logging, the illicit trafficking of legal goods, arms trafficking, kidnapping for ransom and robbery, among others. These various sectors require more attention, as they are likely to be operating differently from the opium economy. Yet they are nevertheless important sectors in the crime–conflict nexus that exists in Afghanistan.

Crime, conflict and development: A burgeoning literature

Another potential focus for future research is the relationship between organized crime, conflict and development.

The relationship between illicit economies and alternative-development policies is complex. In the case of drugs, there is a contested approach to development principles in rural settings. Under common UN language, member states pursue 'alternative development' to provide livelihood opportunities to those in areas affected by drug-crop cultivation. This approach seeks to place drug policy within a more comprehensive cross-sectoral and cross-disciplinary perspective. Analysts with such a perspective point to a paradox of illicit markets by which marginalized communities who suffer under prohibitionist policies are also those enabled to earn an income from illegality and the often above-licit market returns accruing to these crops and activities.¹⁸⁰

Removing illicit opportunities in the absence of licit ones, without any 'proper sequencing', is thereby not a viable long-term development strategy.¹⁸¹ Finally, these analysts advocate a holistic, problem-solving development approach, recognizing the centrality of identifying and addressing the root causes of the emergence and persistence of illicit drug economies, the complex structures created by prohibition, and the systemic barriers that illicit drug economies pose to linear processes of development and peace building.¹⁸²

Future research could build on this strand of thought and seek avenues to improve the sequencing of different alternative-development policies. Such research may also move beyond drugs to focus on alternative-development policies targeted at other illicit economies.¹⁸³

An intractable problem? Lack of evidence for policymaking

In conflict-affected areas where criminal markets are rampant, the idea of alternative-development policies has been suggested as a way of breaking the vicious circle of crime and conflict.¹⁸⁴ Alternative-development policies, which here refer to a group of policies that seek to offer licit opportunities for people to sustain their livelihoods, seem to be more effective in reducing crime in conflict-affected areas when compared to more punitive responses.¹⁸⁵ Yet in the context of Afghanistan, there exists a dearth of research on viable alternative-development policies and what these might look like. Future research could supplement this literature in several ways.

First, researchers should try to identify what development in different parts of Afghanistan could look like. This would include a better account of the aspirations and needs of people participating in Afghanistan's illicit economies as well as the constraining and enabling factors that allow people to fulfil these aspirations and needs.¹⁸⁶

It is also important to bear in mind that Afghanistan is a heterogenous country in both its geographic and socio-demographic make-up. Future research needs to be mindful that trade-offs and tensions in policymaking vary between different regions and provinces.¹⁸⁷

One dimension currently under-represented in the literature on Afghanistan's crime-conflict nexus is the role of women.¹⁸⁸ A research brief by the German Agency for International Cooperation attempted to shed light on the role of women in drug-crop-cultivating areas around the world.¹⁸⁹ It highlights how women and the roles they fulfil in drug-crop-cultivating areas are often under-represented and not targeted by alternative-development policies. However, the report does not offer country-specific

data or recommendations. Elsewhere, María Parada-Hernández and Margarita Marín-Jaramillo find that women involved in illicit-drug-crop cultivation in Colombia experience increased income, better time control and greater decision-making power.¹⁹⁰ Taking the case of Colombia, the authors argue that peace agreements in conflict-affected countries need to recognize the possibility that participating in illicit economies can have positive impacts on the social empowerment of women.¹⁹¹ Future research could build on this to explore the relationship between women and illicit economies. Of course, such research would be difficult to conduct given the current situation in Afghanistan, and the safety and security of any participants should always be prioritized.

Another dimension that needs exploring is whether development, peacebuilding and crime reduction are irreconcilable in Afghanistan.¹⁹² Goodhand et al argue that these three goals cannot all be achieved at the same time.¹⁹³ What is needed is further research into the proper sequencing of policies aimed at achieving economic development, peacebuilding and crime reduction in Afghanistan.



CONCLUSION

This paper has provided an overview of the research on organized crime and armed conflict in Afghanistan. It has highlighted the emergence of the crime–conflict nexus in Afghanistan as well as its development over the past 40 years. The paper has then summarized the various advances made by the literature on three types of relationships between crime and conflict: how conflict has fuelled organized crime in Afghanistan, how organized crime has fuelled conflict, how conflict over the control of illicit markets has resulted, and how organized crime has contributed to the erosion of the state. This has allowed the paper to identify important gaps in the literature.

A general shortcoming of the research on crime and conflict in Afghanistan is that it is highly derivative and affected by institutional interests. Data on Afghanistan’s illicit economies is difficult to access, largely because of the political situation in the country. Data sources on Afghanistan’s illicit economies outside of the country (such as the UN Office on Drugs and Crime and the US government) can be highly problematic. Therefore, research on illicit economies in Afghanistan often suffers from significant biases that need to be considered when engaging with the literature.

Nonetheless, the existing literature underscores important insights on the crime–conflict nexus in Afghanistan. Chief among these is the interrelationship between political power and crime. Crime provides actors in Afghanistan with a significant amount of political power, while powerful political actors are uniquely positioned to sap the criminal markets in the country. Suffering under these dynamics is an impoverished population. This is reflected in the increase in social-welfare issues in the country, such as rising rates of drug addiction, poverty and overall lack of access to public goods and opportunities.

Despite these insights, significant knowledge gaps remain. This paper points future researchers interested in the crime–conflict nexus in Afghanistan to possible lines of further inquiry that may enhance understanding of the relationship between crime and conflict in Afghanistan.

NOTES

- 1 This paper is based on a review of the literature on the crime–conflict nexus in Afghanistan. The literature included here comprises peer-reviewed academic publications as well as reports by government entities, non-governmental organizations and think tanks, publications by other research institutes and/or journalistic publications. To identify relevant publications, the authors used academic databases, academic journal archives and the library search engine of the University of Oxford. Other relevant material was identified through joint discussions among the authors, who drew on their expertise of researching Afghanistan and the crime–conflict nexus more generally in identifying relevant material. Lastly, a 'snowballing' technique wherein the citations of previous publications are checked and read was used to supplement the literature identified. To be included in the literature review, the literature needed to have undergone a peer-review process or be from an otherwise verified source. Snowballing and discussions among the expert authors helped this process of identifying reputable sources.
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