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# ILLICIT ECONOMIES IN AFGHANISTAN UNDER THE TALIBAN

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The brief draws on the analysis conducted by the GI-TOC's Observatory of Illicit Economies in Central and South Asia and a series of GI-TOC publications for the Serious Organised Crime & Anti-Corruption Evidence (SOC ACE) Research Programme, based on the findings of local field research representing a collation of provincial and district-level assessments of developments in drug economies, migrant smuggling services and illicit mining since the return of the Taliban to power.

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# ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

|               |                                                  |
|---------------|--------------------------------------------------|
| <b>ISIL-K</b> | Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant – Khorasan  |
| <b>PWUD</b>   | People who use drugs                             |
| <b>TTP</b>    | Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan                       |
| <b>UNAMA</b>  | United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan |
| <b>UNHCR</b>  | United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees    |
| <b>UNODC</b>  | United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime         |
| <b>UNSC</b>   | United Nations Security Council                  |
| <b>WHO</b>    | World Health Organization                        |



## INTRODUCTION

**M**ore than two years after the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan on 15 August 2021, the country is once again high on the UN's agenda. The levels of conflict-related violence may have significantly decreased compared to the Taliban's time as an insurgent group, but extrajudicial killings, arbitrary arrests and detentions, and other gross human rights violations have continued, targeting in particular women, ethnic minorities, former state officials and people who use drugs (PWUD).<sup>1</sup> The security situation has been further undermined by the alleged presence and escalating activities of non-state armed groups, such as the Islamic State in Iraq, the Levant-Khorasan (ISIL-K) and the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) – although the Taliban has repeatedly denied the TTP's presence in Afghanistan.<sup>2</sup>

In March 2024, the mandate of the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) will be reviewed.<sup>3</sup> It follows the release (on 8 November 2023) of the independent assessment of the international response in Afghanistan, which the UN Security Council (UNSC) requested in Resolution 2679 (2023).<sup>4</sup> The independent assessment's recommendations for the international community's activities in Afghanistan include a structured engagement strategy to address the basic needs of the Afghan people, cooperation on issues affecting regional and global security, and political engagement with the state of Afghanistan and Afghan stakeholders.<sup>5</sup> On 29 December 2023, subsequent to the independent assessment, the UNSC adopted Resolution 2721, in an attempt to balance a call to reintegrate Afghanistan into the international community and the need to meet international obligations. The UNSC's request for a Special Envoy for Afghanistan, with robust expertise on human rights and gender, sent a call from the main security body that these issues should be front and centre in a coordinated international response.<sup>6</sup>

The independent assessment lists the country's counter-narcotics strategy as a key reason to engage with the Afghan government, noting the Taliban's success in significantly reducing the 'cultivation, processing and trafficking of narcotics' in Afghanistan. It indicates that '[m]any stakeholders expressed interest in exploring greater international cooperation in this area, in particular on alternative crops and livelihoods for the hundreds of Afghans that have relied on the production and trade of narcotics for income',<sup>7</sup> and that counter-narcotics efforts are linked to addressing the basic needs of the Afghan people through livelihoods programmes. The country's potential to become a source of uncontrolled outmigration is also listed as a risk factor for regional security.

Since returning to power in August 2021, the Taliban has established and enforced stricter controls of the country's vast informal economy. Some of the economies have been absorbed by the Taliban, while others have been strictly enforced against – the major trend has been consolidation in one way or the other from more heterogeneous markets. For instance, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) has reported a major reduction in opium cultivation (estimated at 95 per cent year-on-year).<sup>8</sup> This short-term success in significantly reducing illicit opium cultivation has had dire implications for the Afghan population and exacerbated the ongoing humanitarian crisis in the country.

Over time, the country's illicit economy has diversified to include a range of markets – from the trafficking of arms, mineral resources, timber, antiquities and licit commodities to human trafficking. This brief traces changes in the regulatory landscape and enforcement efforts by the Taliban in relation to various illicit markets within the context of the Taliban's consolidation and centralization of power in Afghanistan. Its objective is to outline developments in illicit economies since the Taliban returned to power in Afghanistan in August 2021 and transformed from an insurgency group into a de facto government. In doing so, its aim is to provide the UN, member states and other stakeholders with a better understanding of the potential security risks and obstacles to sustainable development linked to the recent trends in the operations of Afghanistan's illicit economies.



## AFGHANISTAN UNDER THE NEW TALIBAN REGIME

### An 'everything crisis'

In the months leading up to the fall of Kabul in August 2021, Afghanistan was mired in overlapping and mutually reinforcing crises. Escalating levels of violence undermined the livelihoods of millions of Afghans, while the worst droughts for 30 years exacerbated water shortages and food insecurity.<sup>9</sup> With the Taliban's return to power, the situation in Afghanistan worsened, as the country was practically cut off from international markets, and the suspension of foreign aid sent the economy into a tailspin. International sanctions resulted in nearly US\$9.5 billion of Da Afghanistan Bank's assets (mostly held in the US) being frozen,<sup>10</sup> and the international community halted its funding of development programmes.<sup>11</sup> After the Taliban took over, hundreds of thousands of jobs were lost and women were excluded from the workforce, plunging the Afghan population into even higher levels of poverty and food insecurity.<sup>12</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic and associated healthcare crisis were made worse by a shortage of medical professionals resulting from political unrest, as well as the reduction of foreign aid.<sup>13</sup> These overlapping and mutually reinforcing crises have sunk over 90 per cent of the population below the poverty line – by 2023, an estimated 29 million Afghans were in need of humanitarian assistance (out of a population of around 41 million).<sup>14</sup> While the 'humanitarian exemption' provided for in UNSC Resolution 2615 (2021)<sup>15</sup> allowed humanitarian aid to flow into the country to support the basic needs of the population, the delivery of aid was complicated by a sanctions regime, which humanitarian NGOs struggled to navigate,<sup>16</sup> and undermined by alleged Taliban interference.<sup>17</sup>

The decades-long conflict disrupted formal economic activity,<sup>18</sup> resulting in around 80 per cent of Afghanistan's economy being informal, according to a 2022 estimate.<sup>19</sup> Enabled by institutional corruption under several consecutive governments, illicit economies proliferated, dominated by loose and decentralized criminal networks, which were characterized by the involvement of state-embedded officials and links to local warlords, insurgency groups and terrorist organizations.<sup>20</sup>



Civilians evacuate Kabul after the Taliban take over, August 2021. © Master Sgt Donald R Allen/US Air Forces Europe–Africa via Getty Images



Afghans gather near the airport in Kabul hoping to flee from the country after the Taliban's military takeover of Afghanistan, August 2021. © Wakil Kohsar/AFP via Getty Images

## Crime and politics after the end of insurgency

Before their return to power in August 2021, the Taliban strived to enhance the group's organizational cohesion and avoid ideological rifts that could have challenged their central authority and led to the group's fragmentation.<sup>21</sup> Due to these efforts, they were able to evolve from a loose network with a diverse membership into a relatively cohesive insurgent group and eventually establish themselves as a de facto government with a central authority. Crucial to this transformation was the Taliban's ability to take advantage of the Afghan population's grievances, which included the widespread perception of corruption within the previous government, the political alienation of the Pashtuns (the majority ethnic group in Afghanistan who were largely excluded from the central government), and the insecurity and violence associated with the presence of the international coalition forces in the country.<sup>22</sup> As a predominantly Pashtun group that presented itself as an anti-corruption force, the Taliban were able to garner significant support from the country's population. However, once in power, the Taliban's de facto government has eliminated any oversight mechanisms aimed at combating corruption and increasing transparency.

Organized crime was instrumental in the Taliban's transformation, funding the insurgency through taxing illicit economies, protection rackets, kidnapping schemes and environmental exploitation. Since at least 2001,<sup>23</sup> when the first Taliban government collapsed, and the insurgency was striving to expand its financial base,<sup>24</sup> all three main factions of the Afghan insurgency – the Taliban's core known as Quetta Shura, the Haqqani network (a semi-autonomous faction of the Taliban represented in key ministerial positions in the de facto government)<sup>25</sup> and Hezb-e-Islami Gulbuddin – have sought to benefit from illicit economies.

## The competition for illicit markets

Organized crime functioned as a double-edged sword in relation to the centralization of the Taliban's power and their organizational cohesion: while propping up the insurgency, it also gave rise to internal competition.<sup>26</sup> Achieving internal coherence required the Taliban's leadership to negotiate power arrangements with local factions and navigate a complex environment where multiple actors sought control over illicit profits. Researchers have suggested that, during their time as an insurgent group, the Taliban may have allowed local commanders to engage at some level in illicit economic activities, such as drug trafficking, illegal mining and logging – mainly by charging taxes on the illicit flows – to avoid dissatisfaction and prevent the Taliban soldiers from being tempted to join other armed groups, such as the rival ISIL-K.<sup>27</sup> The rivalries between actors seeking to control Afghanistan's illicit economies have been closely linked to the competition for control of territory and infrastructure.<sup>28</sup> Besides the local power brokers and Taliban affiliates, these actors comprised an array of militant groups, including internationally designated terrorist networks, such as al-Qaeda and the ISIL-K, and groups with a narrower regional or local focus, such as the TTP.<sup>29</sup> Thus access to and control over illicit flows had to be continuously negotiated between the growing number of actors seeking to reap the benefits of Afghanistan's illicit markets.

As the interactions between these diverse actors are likely to continue shaping Afghanistan's illicit economies, it is important to closely monitor the changes in political constellations – for instance, the appointment of new officials by the Taliban's de facto government or the intra-group opposition to Taliban's edicts revealing internal rifts and tensions<sup>30</sup> – as well as the activities of other non-state actors, such as the resurgence in the TTP's activities since the Taliban's takeover.<sup>31</sup> Criminal markets affect power, and power has an impact on who controls criminal markets.



Women protest in support of the Taliban regime in front of the US embassy in Kabul, January 2022. © Wakil Kohsar/AFP via Getty Images



## THE STATE OF ILLICIT ECONOMIES SINCE THE TAKEOVER

Relatively soon after returning to power in August 2021, the Taliban took steps to suppress Afghanistan's various illicit economies. Although the measures, which they took to prohibit the cultivation of and trade in narcotics and to restrict illegal logging and mining, seemed to undermine the Taliban's reliance on such activities as a rare and badly needed source of income, they were not unprecedented. The Taliban had tested the prohibition of opium and hemp cultivation both during its previous period in government (1996–2001) and, more recently, during the two-decade-long insurgency (2001–2021).<sup>32</sup>

However, the policy was fraught with risks and threatened to alienate the very group that constituted the mainstay of the Taliban's support, namely the rural poor marginalized under the government of Hamid Karzai (2002–2014) who relied on the support of landowning warlords and tribal leaders. During Karzai's government, the Taliban protected the rural farmers' opium crops.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, by providing protection for illicit economies and those who engaged in such activities, the Taliban had won – in addition to a steady revenue stream for the insurgency – the support of local communities who derived their livelihoods from opium cultivation.<sup>34</sup> However, in 2021, after amassing control of the government apparatus, the Taliban also gained a monopoly of power in the country that appeared practically unchallenged apart from the looming threat of non-state groups. These included the ISIL-K and the National Resistance Front – a small-scale anti-Taliban insurgency comprised of former members of the Northern Alliance and anti-Taliban fighters affiliated with the previous government, neither of which have assumed critical dimensions to date.<sup>35</sup>

The clampdown on illicit markets since the Taliban's return to power in 2021 is often seen as an attempt to win the goodwill of the international community and even to appeal to certain demographics, such as the urban population reeling from one of the largest opioid-use epidemics in the world.<sup>42</sup> Other observers have suggested that the Taliban's move to curb illicit markets represents a calculated strategy to deprive potential opponents (or even some Taliban commanders) of independent funding streams.<sup>43</sup> To some extent, the move against illicit markets may be a reflection of the realities of the Taliban having to govern rather than being insurgents. When fighting the government, the Taliban relied on support from rural, poor and marginalized populations. However, now that the group has amassed substantial power and a degree of centralized authority, the livelihoods of the rural populations have moved down the Taliban's agenda. Arguably, multiple factors are simultaneously at play, given the differing views and motivations of various factions of the Taliban.

| Date            | Policy of the state/regime                                                                                                       | Impacted illicit economies                 |
|-----------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|
| 15 October 2021 | Taliban reinstates the prohibition of logging and timber trade <sup>36</sup>                                                     | Illicit logging and timber trade           |
| December 2021   | Taliban establishes a special military unit ('Green Unit') to enhance enforcement of the logging ban                             | Illicit logging and timber trade           |
| December 2021   | Taliban announces a ban on ephedra harvesting across Afghanistan's central provinces (Bamian, Ghor, Farah, Nimroz) <sup>37</sup> | Methamphetamine trafficking                |
| 3 April 2022    | Taliban bans opium poppy cultivation and all types of narcotics <sup>38</sup>                                                    | Opium and heroin trafficking               |
| 4 November 2022 | Taliban bans illegal mining in the Takhar province <sup>39</sup>                                                                 | Illicit mining and trafficking in minerals |
| 19 March 2023   | Taliban announces a ban on cannabis cultivation and production of hashish <sup>40</sup>                                          | Cannabis trafficking                       |
| 3 October 2023  | Pakistan's Apex Committee announces the 'Illegal Foreigners Repatriation Plan' to deport undocumented migrants <sup>41</sup>     | Migrant smuggling and human trafficking    |

**FIGURE 1** Timeline of policies affecting illicit livelihoods and clandestine migration in Afghanistan.

Deprived of a valuable source of revenue and without adequate viable alternatives available to them, rural farmers found themselves unable to provide for themselves and their families, to access healthcare or to maintain housing. This situation forced many households to pursue desperate strategies, such as marrying off their daughters at a young age or selling organs to traffickers,<sup>44</sup> to avoid falling even deeper into debt. Outmigration continued unabated, as Afghans sought to escape the dire living conditions, unemployment and, in many cases, political persecution.<sup>45</sup> The move by Afghanistan's neighbours, Pakistan and Iran, which host some of the largest refugee communities in the world, to expel undocumented migrants (many of Afghan origin) from their territories dealt another blow to the Afghan refugee population struggling to access basic goods and services. It forced many returnees to repeatedly seek refuge, thereby increasing their vulnerability to potential exploitation and revictimization.

During the first two years of the new regime, bans issued by the Taliban had a limited effect on curbing the illicit activities. Instead, these efforts, to formalize or enforce the prohibition of the previously illicit economies, have led to the control of the illicit commodities and the illicit financial flows associated with them being centralized in the hands of the Taliban. Arguably, the financial incentives linked to illicit markets are too large – and too significant in the context of a collapsing formal economy – to be ignored by the Taliban. According to the Global Organized Crime Index, since the Taliban took over in August 2021, criminality has remained pervasive in Afghanistan, with a lucrative human smuggling economy and continuous trafficking of drugs and environmental resources despite bans and restrictions.<sup>46</sup> While the stricter regulation and enforcement of illicit commodities look more like an attempt to monopolize the market in the hands of the new authorities and serve their public image, the price is paid by the local communities deprived of livelihoods. This is the overarching dynamic that has been witnessed in the years since the Taliban resumed control. Below, the paper outlines shifts in specific markets.

## Drug production and trafficking

In 2021, the UNODC estimated the production of and trafficking in opiates (including opium, morphine and heroin) to be Afghanistan's 'largest illegal economic activity'.<sup>47</sup> The scope of drug trafficking in Afghanistan goes beyond opiates, as hemp cultivation, the rapidly increasing market for methamphetamine and limited synthetic drug production contribute to the country's vast narco-economy. A series of measures by the Taliban – epitomized by the April 2022 narcotics ban – have dealt a blow to this illicit economy and had an especially disruptive impact on the well-established opiate markets and the burgeoning methamphetamine trade.

The cultivation of opium poppy had provided one of the few viable livelihood options and employment opportunities for hundreds of thousands of Afghans. In 2020, it generated the equivalent of 6–11 per cent of the country's gross domestic product, exceeding all recorded licit exports<sup>48</sup> and making Afghanistan the single largest producer of opium in the world, supplying around 85 per cent of the global trade.<sup>49</sup> While most opium produced in the country was destined for demand markets abroad, the accessibility of cheap drugs, together with widespread poverty and the psychological consequences of war, has led to soaring levels of drug use.<sup>50</sup> According to a recent UN estimate, 10 per cent of Afghanistan's population (almost 4 million people) use drugs,<sup>51</sup> while the treatment provision for people who use drugs is insufficient and inadequate.<sup>52</sup>

Actors in both illicit markets had to adapt and innovate, while moving their operations underground. Opium poppy cultivation has been reportedly nearly eliminated,<sup>53</sup> and opium prices are higher now than at any point in the last 20 years.<sup>54</sup> Simultaneously, the rising production of methamphetamine in Afghanistan<sup>55</sup> adds to a drug-use epidemic racking the Afghan population and raises concerns over the expansion of consumer markets in Pakistan and Turkey, where methamphetamine abuse is widespread,<sup>56</sup> and in Europe, where Afghan methamphetamine has become more available in recent years.<sup>57</sup>

### Opium and heroin

After their return to power, the Taliban faced the challenging task of balancing the profitability of the drug trade with the prohibition of narcotics under Islamic law and the quest for international recognition. In April 2022, a ban on 'Poppy Cultivation and All Types of Narcotics',<sup>58</sup> announced by the Taliban's supreme leader Mullah Habibullah Akhundzada, signalled the group's commitment to enforcing the prohibition of the production, trade and use of all drugs. Doubts arose initially about the seriousness of the regime's intentions, given the ongoing humanitarian crisis and the suspension of development aid, which were expected to increase the country's reliance on the informal and illicit economy.

Perhaps these concerns led the Taliban to approach the enforcement of the ban with a degree of caution. An initial grace period of two months allowed farmers in the southern provinces to finish harvesting the season's crop.<sup>59</sup> Despite the ban, the export of opium from the existing stockpiles reportedly continued unobstructed, allowing landowning households who were able to retain ownership of their inventories and the local Taliban commanders in control of storage facilities to reap the benefits of the rising prices.<sup>60</sup> Indeed, considering the relatively large surplus of opium in the stockpiles, accumulated over several years of ample harvests and decreased exports (due to heightened fighting before the takeover and enhanced security at Afghanistan's external borders, especially with Iran and Pakistan, in its aftermath),<sup>61</sup> the ban actually led to a boom rather than a bust for opium traders, at least in the short term.

| Before the opium ban | After the opium ban |
|----------------------|---------------------|
| 40 000 PKR           | 340 000–350 000 PKR |

**FIGURE 2** Prices for one Kandahari Man (traditional measurement unit equivalent to 4.5 kilograms) of opium, in Pakistani rupees, the preferred currency for drug transactions in Afghanistan.

NOTE: Prices as of February 2023. Before the imposition of the opium ban, opium prices were approximately US\$150 for a Kandahari Man and surged to between US\$1 250 and US\$1 300 after the ban (based on exchange rates on 1 February 2023).

SOURCE: P Mahadevan et al, Opioid market trends in Afghanistan: Poppy cultivation, policy and practice under the new regime, SOC ACE Research Paper 27, University of Birmingham, 2024.

The Taliban's opium-eradication campaign, which targeted the spring and summer crops planted in 2022<sup>62</sup> in the eastern province of Nangarhar,<sup>63</sup> appeared to be limited in scope and focused on visible areas around urban centres and along highways.<sup>64</sup> Anecdotal evidence suggests that shopkeepers were in some cases allowed to continue selling opium, so long as the sales were made inconspicuously and the product was not openly displayed in the shops.<sup>65</sup>

However, some anti-drug action by the Taliban had immediate and apparent repercussions, which affected some of the most vulnerable population groups. According to media reports, the Taliban began forcibly detaining PWUD, placing the detainees in overcrowded and undersupplied 'treatment facilities' that in practice lacked access to adequate treatment,<sup>66</sup> food and medication.<sup>67</sup> Human rights abuses and violence against PWUD have been frequently reported in these facilities. As drug use has been perceived as a major problem in the country, this policy has enjoyed some degree of popular support.



Taliban security personnel destroy a poppy plantation in Sher Surkh village, Kandahar province, April 2023. © Sanaullah Seiam/AFP via Getty Images

To summarize, in the period between the announcement of the ban in April 2022 and the beginning of a new harvesting season in April–May 2023, the Taliban's drug policy was carried out on two levels. The crackdown on drug consumers constituted the outward-facing campaign, likely aimed at achieving publicity and public support.<sup>68</sup> At the same time, the Taliban gradually escalated the implementation of the opium ban, while taking measures to avoid widespread dissent – for instance, by allowing most poppies already planted to be harvested, narrowly targeting eradication efforts and ensuring that trade could continue, albeit discreetly.

In the summer of 2023, reports began emerging of a near unprecedented decline in the cultivation of opium poppy,<sup>69</sup> by 95 per cent compared to the previous year, according to the UNODC.<sup>70</sup> This dramatic reduction appears to have resulted from the pressure put on farmers to stop cultivating opium poppy rather than from comprehensive eradication campaigns.

Past examples have revealed flawed assumptions of prohibition and the negative consequences of efforts to eliminate the cultivation of illicit crops.<sup>71</sup> Instead of curbing the trafficking of opium and heroin, enforcing the prohibition often causes a so-called 'balloon effect', displacing the production and trafficking of the illicit commodity to other localities, or prompting an increase in the production of another (comparable) illicit commodity. The resurgence of Myanmar as a major opium supplier<sup>72</sup> and the increasing production and trafficking of the Afghan methamphetamine<sup>73</sup> are a case in point. In the past, reduced opium-poppy cultivation in parts of Afghanistan in response to the state or regime policy led to increased cultivation in other provinces, exemplified by the shift from Badakhshan and Balkh to Helmand and Kandahar.<sup>74</sup> Given the reports of the continuous cultivation in Badakhshan since the 2022 ban,<sup>75</sup> there is a need to closely monitor the potential increase of illicit opium-poppy farming in the provinces with previously marginal cultivation.

## Methamphetamine

The first crystal meth seizure in Afghanistan was recorded in 2014, and seizures surged in 2018 and 2019.<sup>76</sup> The establishment of the methamphetamine market coincided with the curtailing of methamphetamine production in neighbouring Iran in response to enhanced enforcement, and researchers have suggested that Iranian producers passed their methamphetamine-manufacture knowledge onto Afghan producers to maintain regional production.<sup>77</sup> However, the expansion of methamphetamine production in Afghanistan took place largely due to the natural occurrence of the shrub *Ephedra sinica*, which contains ephedrine, a precursor used in the manufacture of methamphetamine.<sup>78</sup> Since around 2016, methamphetamine producers in Afghanistan have largely switched to using ephedra rather than relying on chemical precursors obtained from more expensive over-the-counter medicines.<sup>79</sup>

In the years leading up to the Taliban's takeover, the trafficking of Afghan methamphetamine expanded rapidly, reflecting the increasing production of methamphetamine in those Afghan provinces that had been major opium poppy-cultivating regions.<sup>80</sup> The Afghan methamphetamine saturated the domestic demand and that of neighbouring countries such as Iran and Pakistan, and began reaching new destination markets around the globe, with seizures reported across Asia, the Gulf states, Australia and Europe, as well as in Eastern and Southern Africa.<sup>81</sup> The established supply chains of opium and heroin, the Balkan and southern routes, are used for methamphetamine trafficking<sup>82</sup> and joint shipments of heroin and methamphetamine are common.<sup>83</sup> This supports the view that the same actors and networks are involved in the trafficking of opium and methamphetamine. As of early 2023, the Taliban

were reportedly taxing shipments of methamphetamine, opium and heroin transiting Afghanistan's border to Pakistan, based on the type of drug and the weight of the shipment.<sup>84</sup>

The announcement of the Taliban's narcotics ban was followed by enhanced enforcement against the harvesting of ephedra and methamphetamine manufacture, resulting in the closure of over 700 methamphetamine labs.<sup>85</sup> However, the production can take place in any location and does not depend on the climatic conditions, and labs can be relatively easily set up. For instance, the production of methamphetamine requires knowledge and technical skills, whereas ephedrine extraction is a relatively simple and cheap process that often takes place in household compounds and engages a large number of non-specialist 'cooks'.<sup>86</sup> The restrictions on ephedra harvesting and methamphetamine production have dispersed the trade and made it more challenging, forcing the producers to operate more discreetly and contributing to the rising production costs. The fact that the measures failed to contain the trade, despite significantly increasing the operating costs, points to the lack of viable alternatives.

## Migrant smuggling

The inability of many Afghans to access legal migration pathways becomes especially pronounced in the context of a humanitarian emergency, and imminent danger leads to the expansion of a migrant smuggling economy. While irregular migration provided a lifeline for those Afghans seeking to escape an increasingly precarious and potentially life-threatening situation in their country, it also made them vulnerable to criminal exploitation and human trafficking. Amid concerns over the destabilizing effects of large refugee populations in host and transit countries and an increasingly hostile policy towards Afghan refugees in the region, many Afghans who had escaped the country have found themselves in a state of uncertainty. The deportations of Afghan migrants from Pakistan, which began in late 2023, have strained the borders and overwhelmed NGOs seeking to provide basic services to the returnees, further exacerbating the humanitarian crisis.

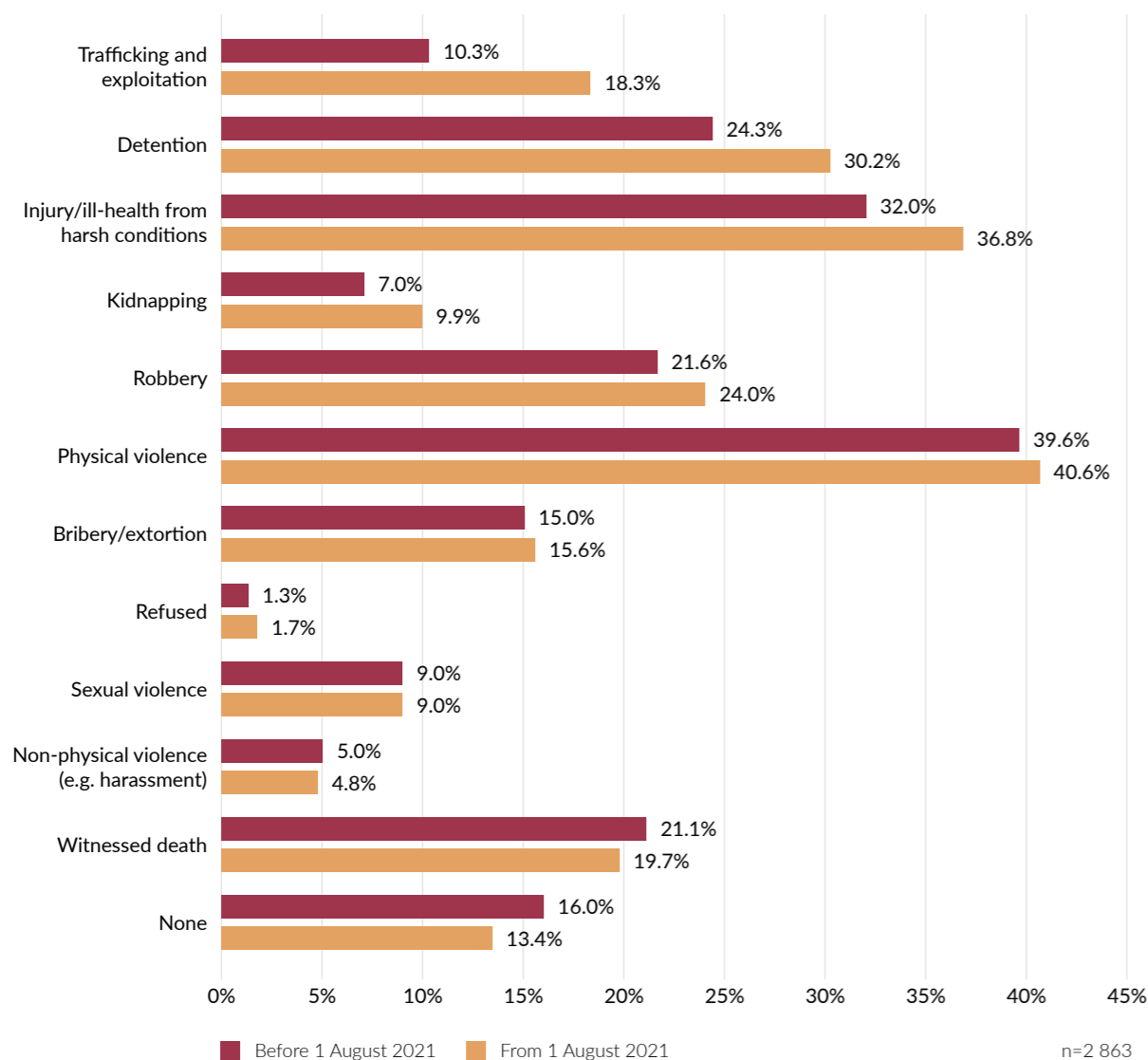
The return of the Taliban to power sparked a massive wave of emigration, which followed decades of displacement caused by conflict and instability since the beginning of the Soviet occupation in 1979.<sup>87</sup> Today, Afghans represent the second-largest refugee population in the world, estimated to be around 6.1 million people.<sup>88</sup> Since the Taliban's takeover in August 2021, over 1.6 million Afghans are estimated to have fled the country (including those who returned to Afghanistan in the following months).<sup>89</sup>

**Afghan migrants en route toward the Afghanistan–Iran border in Nimruz, February 2022. Many Afghans who lacked the necessary documents to leave the country legally were smuggled along this route.**

© Wakil Kohsar/AFP via Getty Images







**FIGURE 3** Incidents experienced by Afghan migrants during their journey to Turkey before and after August 2021.

SOURCE: Mixed Migration Centre, The changing dynamics of Afghan migration after August 2021, 2023, 17, <https://mixedmigration.org/resource/changing-dynamics-afghan-migration/>

Throughout the four decades of exodus, neighbouring Iran and Pakistan have been the largest host countries for millions of Afghan refugees, many undocumented.<sup>90</sup> However, in the aftermath of the Taliban takeover, Iran enhanced security at its Afghan border, which was already fortified by a 15-foot-high concrete wall and deep trench. As a result, Afghans who lacked the required documents to legally leave the country often travelled through the Balochistan region – a historical region administratively split between Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan. The route involved crossing the dangerous terrain of the Dashti Margo desert in the southern Afghan provinces of Nimruz and Helmand, and passing Pakistan's Balochistan province before entering Iran's Sistan and Balochistan province.<sup>91</sup> Research coordinated by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime in Afghanistan revealed that the Balock community is actively involved in the migrant smuggling infrastructure of the frontier region, as financiers and transporters.<sup>92</sup> Throughout the journey, Afghan migrants face the risk of being kidnapped for ransom by armed groups and increased vulnerability to human trafficking.<sup>93</sup>

The new wave of outmigration from Afghanistan following the Taliban's return took place amid the growing reluctance of Iran and Pakistan to accept refugees, as they claim to have already overstretched their capacity to provide for the existing large Afghan refugee populations. At the same time, Turkey and the EU were eager to prevent the resurgence of uncontrolled mass migration experienced in 2015–2016<sup>94</sup> (many Afghans arriving in Turkey moved onwards to the European states along the so-called 'Western Balkan route', transiting Bulgaria, North Macedonia, Serbia, Albania, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina).<sup>95</sup> In the aftermath of the Taliban takeover, the neighbouring states closed border-crossing points and suspended the issuance of visas. Pushbacks and deportations were widespread. For instance, 65 per cent of the 1 million Afghans who entered Iran in 2022 were deported back to Afghanistan.<sup>96</sup>

The more difficult it became to leave the country, the more lucrative the market for migrant smugglers. New routes for clandestine migration opened in response to the increased restriction of movement along Afghanistan's borders since the Taliban takeover. Since 2021, Cyprus has emerged as a common transit point, offering relatively easier entry than the rest of the EU. Afghan smugglers with links to international smuggling networks and the Cypriot business community provided prospective migrants with false documentation, allowing them to take advantage of a legal pathway of obtaining residency in Cyprus by buying a residential property.<sup>97</sup>

Across the Atlantic Ocean, Brazil began granting humanitarian visas and residence permits to Afghan refugees in the aftermath of the Taliban's return, allowing those Afghans able to obtain the visas to take a plane to Brazil. In Afghanistan, prospective migrants sought the services of smugglers to obtain the required documentation through the humanitarian programmes and to arrange for travel from Brazil to the US and Canada – the latter was especially attractive due to its commitment to accept a relatively large number of Afghan refugees.<sup>98</sup> Those who were able to arrive in Brazil embarked on a long and dangerous journey to North America.<sup>99</sup> At the border between Colombia and Panama, the notorious Darién Gap, Afghans joined irregular migrants from different parts of the world on a 97-kilometre-long trek through the jungle, facing the heightened risk of kidnapping and violence, given that the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) and drug trafficking gangs are known to operate in the region.<sup>100</sup>

| Destination | 2021            | 2022              |
|-------------|-----------------|-------------------|
| Iran        | US\$100–300     | US\$300–400       |
| Turkey      | US\$1 500–2 000 | US\$3 000–4 000   |
| Germany     | US\$3 000–4 000 | US\$8 000–10 000  |
| Brazil      | US\$4 000–5 000 | US\$12 000–13 000 |

**FIGURE 4** Comparison of fees charged by migrant smugglers for different destinations before and after the Taliban takeover.

SOURCE: P Mahadevan et al, A new exodus: Migrant smuggling from Afghanistan after the return of the Taliban. SOC ACE Research Paper No. 23, University of Birmingham, 2023

Despite the overall diminishing levels of violence since the Taliban retook Kabul, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has maintained a non-return advisory for Afghanistan, calling on states to stop forced deportations of Afghan migrants.<sup>101</sup> However, in September 2023 (two years after the takeover), both Iran and Pakistan independently announced plans to deport millions of undocumented Afghans,<sup>102</sup> citing a security threat to Pakistan and alleged ties to terrorism and 'other illegal activities'.<sup>103</sup> The decision was likely prompted by the rise in violence associated with the activities of the TTP in Pakistan – a group that pledges allegiance to the Afghan Taliban<sup>104</sup> and has been reportedly carrying out cross-border attacks on Pakistan from its Afghan sanctuaries.<sup>105</sup>

Pakistan's caretaker Interior Minister Sarfraz Bugti announced that 1 November 2023 was the deadline for all undocumented migrants – most of whom are Afghans – to leave the country, or else face the risk of imprisonment and deportation.<sup>106</sup> The announcement was accompanied by a surge in police brutality and abuses<sup>107</sup> by Pakistani officials, including arbitrary arrests and detention, extortion and the destruction of property and personal belongings.<sup>108</sup> This sparked a wave of returns, as nearly 357 000 Afghans reportedly left Pakistan for Afghanistan, overwhelming the Torkham and Spin Boldak border crossings (near Kabul and Kandahar, respectively) and putting a strain on resources and infrastructure.<sup>109</sup> The decision was later reversed, with Pakistan granting an extension of legal residence for the Afghan refugees until the end of 2023.<sup>110</sup>

In a parallel development, Iran's Interior Minister Ahmad Vahidi stated that 5 million Afghan refugees 'illegally' residing in the country would be deported.<sup>111</sup> It is expected that the returnees may seek the services of human smugglers to escape the country. As the two most important host countries for Afghan refugees are adopting measures to push back Afghans who lack valid documentation, smuggling routes are likely to be significantly impacted. The policy of containment and repression adopted by the countries in the region will invariably exacerbate the problem.

The policies aimed at combating the smuggling of migrants have predominantly focused on curtailing the supply side by introducing restrictions on the visa regime, increasing border security, externalizing border controls to countries of origin and transit, and criminalizing migrant smuggling. Such measures often lead to greater criminal professionalization, as small-scale, self-organized smuggling networks are replaced by larger, more organized and sophisticated structures that often operate transnationally and are able to handle rising entry barriers through the use of corruption and violence.<sup>112</sup> This means that local smugglers who often enjoy close ties with the communities in which they operate are driven out of the market, disrupting the relationship of trust, which is key to any interactions in the context of irregular migration, especially so in Afghanistan.<sup>113</sup> As a result, irregular migrants may become more vulnerable to extortion, exploitation and violence.

## The exploitation of environmental resources

Although drug trafficking and the smuggling of migrants represent the two major illicit markets profoundly affected by the Taliban's return in August 2021, the Taliban's policies have affected a host of other illicit economies in the country. The Taliban's return to power sparked concerns about environmental degradation exacerbated by the exploitation of natural resources on behalf of the new regime.

Afghanistan is extremely rich in natural resources. The country possesses large petroleum deposits and a range of non-fuel minerals including gold, marble and precious stones, such as lapis lazuli and emeralds, as well as large reserves of minerals crucial for green energy transition, such as chromite, cobalt, copper, iron ore and lithium. The Afghan constitution under the previous government established that all mineral reserves in the country were state property, and government-issued licences were required to operate mining sites anywhere in the country. Despite this requirement, unlicensed mining was carried out across Afghanistan without government control or intervention. The Taliban and other non-state actors engaged in the trafficking of minerals by controlling the mines or collecting 'taxes' on the extractives transported through the territories under their control. However, after amassing power in Afghanistan, the Taliban took control of the entirety of the mineral reserves in the country. Although the constitution was later abolished, the Taliban as a de facto authority retained the ownership of Afghanistan's natural resources.<sup>114</sup>

After five people were killed in a mining accident in the north-eastern province of Takhar – one of the key sites of gold mining in the country – the Taliban's local administration announced the suspension of all gold mining and a ban on illicit mining activities in Takhar.<sup>115</sup> The move did not appear to reduce the illicit mining activities but provided the Taliban with the opportunity to centralize control over informal mining sites. The Haqqani network operating in the region reportedly introduced a new 'tax' collected from the mine owners, amounting to 20 per cent of the value of the mined gold.<sup>116</sup>



## RECOMMENDATIONS

Since their return to power, the Taliban have demonstrated an ability to exert control over the country's vast illicit economies, most evident from the initial success of the April 2022 narcotics ban in drastically reducing domestic opium poppy cultivation. However, without addressing root causes such as widespread poverty and unemployment, the long-term efficacy and sustainability of the Taliban's policies are uncertain, while their implications include further staving off economic recovery and pushing more Afghans to engage in illicit economies. The findings presented in this report suggest that the illicit markets in Afghanistan persist and are adapting to the new regulatory environment.

The international community is likely to pay close attention to the situation of Afghanistan's illicit economies and the plight of the large groups of the Afghan population who depend on them for sustenance. Measures to respond to illicit economies need to be integrated into the humanitarian aid and development agenda for Afghanistan. This is crucial not only to alleviate the immediate suffering of the Afghan population but also to foster long-term stability and resilience within local communities. A more coherent and coordinated international engagement should be based on clearly outlined objectives and commitments to uphold and protect the human rights of all population groups, including women, migrant communities, Afghan refugees and PWUD.

Investment in sustainable development is crucial, but it must be based on a realistic assessment of the feasibility of development interventions and informed by lessons learned from the failure of past alternative development programmes in the country. In terms of international counter-narcotic cooperation, caution should be taken in ensuring that the reduction in cultivation of illicit crops is accompanied by a holistic strategy that incorporates sustainable development. Furthermore, steps should be taken to support informal economies, such as artisanal and small-scale mining, and to promote investment in infrastructure, including irrigation systems. The new reality of persistent climate stress must be taken into consideration, as it will continue to alter the organization of social life in Afghanistan and cause displacement, endangering regional security (as seen from the increasing number of border disputes over access to water)<sup>117</sup> and undermining development programmes that promote rain-fed agriculture as an alternative to illicit livelihoods.

Some recommendations that support the UNSC's objective of creating 'a substantive roadmap that will enable more effective negotiation and implementation of the priorities of Afghan and international stakeholders,'<sup>118</sup> are outlined below.

- **Monitor the development of illicit economies.** The UNAMA's mandate should include monitoring and reporting on the development of illicit economies in Afghanistan and the impact of law enforcement interventions aimed at countering organized crime on the human rights situation in the country. These issues should be addressed in the UN-led talks with the Taliban. The Special Envoy for Afghanistan, appointed by the Secretary-General as requested by UNSC Resolution 2721, should report on the impact of Afghanistan's illicit economies for post-conflict reconstruction, development and regional security. Key trends to watch include the continuous enforcement of the bans on illicit activities, which may provoke popular discontent domestically, and the rivalries and competition over illicit flows between the Taliban factions and commanders, and non-state armed groups.
- **Anticipate shifts in opium cultivation and methamphetamine production.** The UN, in collaboration with independent NGOs and research organizations, should establish monitoring and early warning systems to respond to developments in illicit opium cultivation and methamphetamine production in Afghanistan, and to anticipate shifting production and potential spillovers. There is a need for greater multilevel monitoring of both opium poppy cultivation and methamphetamine production, including using satellite earth-observation imagery and district-level field research to identify the changes in the planting and harvesting of the crop.
- **Support evidence-based and human rights-conscious treatment of drug use disorders.** The international community should increase its support to local NGOs that provide services for PWUD and support evidence-based treatment of drug use disorders. While the EU's allocation of €10 million to the World Health Organization (WHO) and UNODC, aimed at improving access to and the quality of mental health and drug use disorder treatment services in Afghanistan, represents a welcome development,<sup>119</sup> all programming must contain safeguards that protect the PWUD's human rights, including the right to freedom from arbitrary arrest or detention, torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. Programmes should cater for diverse populations, and there is a strong need for gender-informed drug use disorder treatment services. Further investment in evidence- and human rights-based treatments should be encouraged, in accordance with the international standards for the treatment of drug use disorders that were jointly developed by the WHO and UNODC.<sup>120</sup>
- **Introduce safeguards in mineral exploration.** The UN member states who engage in business relations with Afghanistan's de facto authorities and invest in the exploration of Afghanistan's mineral and energy deposits need to ensure that adequate oversight mechanisms are in place at mining locations and invest in infrastructure to increase safety and reduce the risk of injury at the mining sites.



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