

Drugs in Afghanistan

Opium, Outlaws and Scorpion Tales

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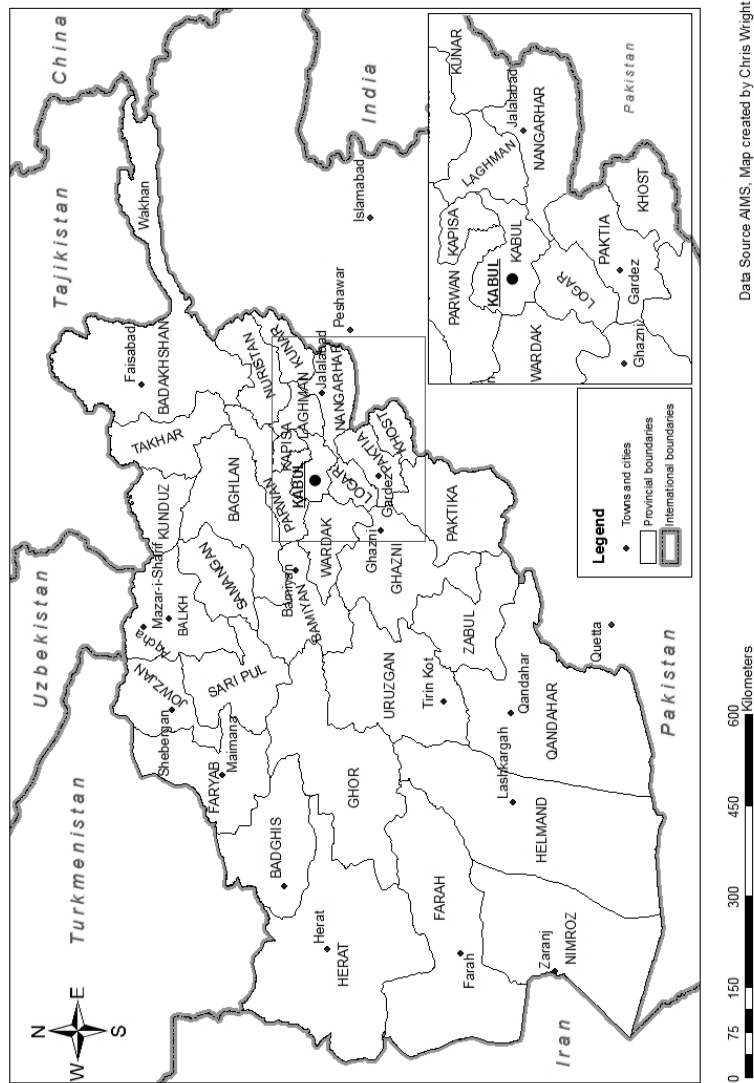
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Dedicated to the memory of Behar

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Abbreviations

AIDS	Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome
AK-47	Kalashnikov automatic assault rifle
AKF	Agha Khan Foundation
AMF	Afghan Military Force
AMRC	Afghan Media Resource Centre
ANF	Anti-narcotics Force
ASNF	Afghan Special Narcotics Force
ATS	Amphetamine type stimulants
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
BCCI	Bank of Credit and Commerce International
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CND	Commission on Narcotic Drugs
CNPA	Counter Narcotics Police Afghanistan
DCCU	Drug Control Coordination Unit
DDR	Disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration
DDTC	Drug Dependency Treatment Centre
DEA	Drug Enforcement Administration/Agency
FDA	Food and Drug Administration
HIV	Human immunodeficiency virus
IDP	Internally displaced person
IDU	Injecting drug use
IDUs	Injecting drug users
INCB	International Narcotics Control Board
ISAF	International Security Assistance Force
ISI	Inter Services Intelligence (Pakistan intelligence agency)
IWPR	Institute for War and Peace Reporting
LEAP	Law Enforcement against Prohibition
LSD	lysergic acid diethylamide (a hallucinogenic drug)
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
NIFA	National Islamic Front of Afghanistan
NSP	Needle and syringe access and disposal programme
NWFP	North West Frontier Province
ORA	Orphans, Refugees and Aid (international NGO)
PNCB	Pakistan Narcotics Control Board
PTSD	Post traumatic stress disorder

RAWA	Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan
RPG	Rocket propelled grenade
RSA	Rapid situation assessment
RTA	Radio-TV Afghanistan
SAS	Special Air Service
SHCDC	State High Commission for Drug Control
SP	Spasmo Proxyvon
SUV	Sport utility vehicle
THC	Tetrahydrocannabinol (the main active constituent of cannabis)
TRIPS	Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights
UMRC	Uranium Medical Research Center
UNAMA	United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan
UNDCP	United Nations International Drug Control Programme
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
UNHCR	United Nations High Commission for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Emergency Fund
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
UNODCCP	United Nations Office for Drug Control and Crime Prevention
UXO	Unexploded Ordnance
VOA	Voice of America
WFP	World Food Programme
WHO	World Health Organization
WTO	World Trade Organization

Glossary

<i>Afs</i>	shortened form of the Afghani, the currency of Afghanistan
<i>al-khamr</i>	intoxicants or drugs (originally meaning alcohol)
<i>andiwāl</i>	friend
<i>ashar</i>	the use of reciprocal labour
<i>ashrar</i>	those who spread discord; a term used by the communist regime to describe <i>mujahideen</i>
<i>bhang</i>	herbal cannabis
<i>bhangawa</i>	drink prepared with herbal cannabis
<i>burshesha</i>	type of medicine made by <i>hakims</i> (often with intoxicating properties)
<i>chai khana</i>	tea room or tea house
<i>chando</i>	form of refined opium
<i>charas</i>	hashish
<i>charasi</i>	habitual hashish user
<i>chillum</i>	water pipe for smoking hashish (in Afghanistan)
<i>chowkidor</i>	watchman or guard
<i>cristal</i>	type of heroin
<i>dawa</i>	medicine
<i>daya</i>	midwife
<i>djinns</i>	spirits
<i>faqir</i>	Islamic (Sufi) ascetic holy man
<i>farman</i>	edict
<i>ghamza</i>	form of opium smoking
<i>girda</i>	crumbly powdered cannabis resin
<i>hakim</i>	practitioner of herbal medicine
<i>haram</i>	forbidden
<i>Hijra</i>	the Islamic calendar
<i>jiḥād</i>	holy war
<i>jirga</i>	a tribal council or assembly (Pashtoon)
<i>kafila</i>	caravan
<i>khans</i>	the equivalent of aristocratic feudal lords
<i>konjara</i>	animal fodder
<i>Kuchis</i>	nomadic tribespeople; usually referring to a tribe of Pashtoon nomads in Afghanistan
<i>lashkar</i>	tribal army

<i>Loya Jirga</i>	grand assembly or council
<i>madak</i>	pills made from opium mixed with water and rice or barley husks
<i>madrassa</i>	Koranic school
<i>majun/majoun</i>	edible mixture of hashish and other ingredients
<i>malang</i>	a Sufi ascetic or mendicant
<i>maliks</i>	community leaders or tribal elders
<i>mast</i>	state of intoxication
<i>mofarah</i>	intoxicating mixture
<i>mothad</i>	drug addict
<i>mujahid</i>	(pl. <i>mujahideen</i>) one who leads the faithful in holy war or takes part in holy war
<i>mukhadir</i>	intoxicant or drug
<i>narghile</i>	water pipe for smoking hashish
<i>nashaimawad</i>	intoxicating substance
<i>naswar</i>	a type of chewing tobacco
<i>Pashtoonwali</i>	the Pashtoon social code of conduct
<i>patou</i>	blanket
<i>pir</i>	spiritual leader (usually of a Sufi order)
<i>poder</i>	powder, a term used to refer to heroin
<i>poderi</i>	heroin addict
<i>puri</i>	weight just under 1 g
<i>riba</i>	usury, interest on loans
<i>rubab</i>	Afghan lute
<i>sadhu</i>	Hindu ascetic holy man
<i>saglahoo</i>	type of sea otter
<i>salaam</i>	loan as advance payment for a fixed amount of agricultural product
<i>serai</i>	traveller's lodging place
<i>shabnama</i>	'night letter', often referring to a clandestinely distributed leaflet
<i>sharab</i>	alcohol
<i>Sharia</i>	Islamic law
<i>shirac</i>	high quality Afghan hashish
<i>shura</i>	village council
<i>tariak</i>	opium (Afghanistan)
<i>tarra</i>	home-brewed liquor
<i>tchilim</i>	type of water pipe
<i>thariac</i>	opium (Iran)
<i>topakai</i>	gunman or armed bandit
<i>toshak</i>	floor cushion

<i>Ulema shura</i>	the council of Islamic scholars, acting as advisers to the government
<i>usher</i>	traditional Islamic tax (10 per cent of all agricultural products)
<i>Wolesi Jirga</i>	Lower House of Parliament
<i>zamzam</i>	holy water from Mecca
<i>zina</i>	sexual activity outside marriage

Acknowledgements

Although this book covers many different topics related to drugs in Afghanistan, as well as other areas of the world, its essential focus is on the increasing number of Afghans who have turned to drug consumption to mask the pain of their existence in an impoverished and war-wracked land.

Over the seven years that I have visited and worked in Afghanistan, untold numbers of people have influenced this book, sometimes subtly, sometimes more overtly. But all have unfailingly, with good humour, grace and dignity, been willing to discuss their views and ideas on Afghanistan's many drug problems—usually over several cups of green tea.

Thanks are due to a great many: the staff of the few available drug treatment services in Kabul and Gardez; ex-colleagues in UNODC and the Ministry of Counter Narcotics in Afghanistan; residents of the UN Flower Street guesthouse in Kabul between August 2002 and September 2003; community members; families of drug users; and, most importantly, drug users themselves.

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However, while thanks are due to all the above for their contributions, the book reflects only my own views, any unforeseen scorpion tales are my responsibility. I can categorically say that the author does not guarantee the accuracy of the data included in this work except that based on his own personal experience and the research findings that he has been responsible for producing himself. Such is Afghanistan.

Perthshire, Scotland, July 2006
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Our obsession with fact and reason, a consequence of the scientific revolution, has allowed us to dismiss myth because it is not rooted in verifiable certainty. In doing so, we ignore the extent to which myth deals in emotional, rather than literal truths. Myth does not try to provide concrete answers, but it is better viewed as a flag for our lack of understanding. We hoist these flags in order to help us make sense of the incomprehensible, and to deepen our understanding of what it means to be human.

Sunday Herald Seven Days, 23 October 2005

The developed country does not, as Marx thought, show the backward country its future; the fragmenting countries show the integrating ones the dark side of their common present.

Barnett R. Rubin, 1996,
The Fragmentation of Afghanistan,
Lahore: Vanguard Books, p. 5

Prologue

Stories shift like sand in a place where no records exist.¹

In March 1999 I was unexpectedly summoned to a meeting in the dry dusty city of Quetta, situated in Pakistan's southern province of Baluchistan, with Mullah Abdul Hameed Akhundzada, head of Afghanistan's SHCDC (State High Commission for Drug Control) based in Kabul. Akhundzada had arranged the meeting to discuss any plans UNDCP might have for drug demand reduction activities in Afghanistan.* A few months previously my appointment as the UNDCP international drug demand reduction specialist for Afghanistan had given me some negotiating power to make decisions about who should receive any available funding for the prevention of problem drug use in that country, the mullah's domain. Not that there was much funding available, however, as demand reduction featured low on the list of priorities for Afghanistan, and far below the twin gods of global drug control policy—law enforcement against the cultivation, production, trafficking and consumption of illicit drugs and the elusive search for sustainable alternative development and livelihoods for farmers in opium poppy and coca bush cultivation areas. It was deemed more politically expedient and of a higher strategic priority to prevent the supply of heroin to western countries than respond to its burgeoning use within Afghanistan itself.

The meeting was to be held in a temporarily converted bedroom on the second floor of a hotel in Quetta's noisy main bazaar. As head of the Taliban-led SHCDC, Akhundzada was an important man and held a powerful position in a country that at the time provided up to 75 per cent of the world's illicit opium. This was also a country with an extreme fundamentalist government officially unrecognised by every state but three (Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates) except as a presumptive authority. Beds had been cleared

* In 1997 UNDCP (United Nations International Drug Control Programme) combined with the CICP (Centre for International Crime Prevention) to form UNODCCP (United Nations Office for Drug Control and Crime Prevention), although it also retained its own name. On 1 October 2002 UNODCCP became UNODC (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime) including UNDCP. These different names are used where applicable throughout the text.

away and bottles of water and sweetmeats provided on a low wooden table surrounded by soft green armchairs. My two colleagues and I sat and waited for the mullah and his entourage to arrive. After an hour or so they swept into the room with rough black cotton cloaks matching their long untrimmed beards. Uniform black turbans were wrapped around their heads, the ends trailing down their backs to their knees.

My first impression of Mullah Akhundzada was startling. With his long black hair and dark enigmatic expression, his face looked remarkably similar to that depicted on an early poster of Jim Morrison, lead singer of the Doors, a 1960s American rock band. The only difference was a broad flat brown scar on the mullah's right cheek that he sometimes hid with his hand, the result of flying shrapnel during the war against the Soviets. That and the fact that he was an Afghan commander who controlled what amounted to a medieval fiefdom near Qandahar with over 200 armed men at his disposal.

The comparison between a man like Akhundzada and the old clan warrior-chiefs of Scotland was hard to resist. If a feather had been stuck in his turban, his clothes made of rough wool instead of black cotton, and a claymore belted at his side instead of an AK-47 slung over his shoulder, he would have looked and acted the part. An Afghan writing in 1928 compared his own country's highlands and 'clan system governed by predatory chiefs' to those of Scotland, although it has also been noted that Afghanistan typically evokes images of *Macbeth* rather than of the Scottish Enlightenment.² Indeed, the prevailing situation in Afghanistan, particularly after the Soviets were driven out in 1989, mirrors that of Scotland up to the seventeenth century when banditry, protection racketeering and feuding clans were commonplace until the pacification of the clan system wrought by the English invaders from south of the border. Rory Stewart, a young Scot who courageously walked from Herat to Kabul in January 2002, recounts how Afghans he met along the way defined their landscape by acts of violence and death in the same way that places in the Scottish Highlands are also remembered by acts of violence. The difference, however, was that in Afghanistan 'the events recorded were only months old'.³

Akhundzada's interpreter, a smiling and gregarious Qandahari, began every sentence with the phrase: 'His excellency the mullah Abdul Hamid Akhundzada proclaims that...' But such formalities were soon dispensed with and we discussed a wide range of issues around drugs and the ravages of war in Afghanistan. As Akhundzada was

responsible for all drug control issues in Afghanistan, it was agreed that we would maintain contact with him and his office on matters concerning the prevention of problem drug use in the country. We had little choice if we wanted to offer any drug demand reduction activities inside Afghanistan. This was at a time when the uncertain communications and relationships between the international community and the Taliban authorities were adversely affecting aid and development assistance reaching the Afghan people.

After the official meeting was over and the mullah and his entourage had returned from another room where they had gone to say their prayers, vast amounts of Afghan pilau rice, roast lamb, naan bread, salad and soft drinks were brought to the room and we ate in silence. Over the ubiquitous green tea and sweets at the end of the meal, the mullah regaled us with stories about his days as a *mujahid* fighting against the Soviets. One particular story concerned the many *mujahideen* who were paid or rewarded for their fighting with hashish, which they often consumed before going into battle. When there was no hashish, Akhundzada claimed that some of them would cut the heads off snakes and the tails from scorpions, then dry and smoke them: 'I have seen this with my own eyes.'

His graphic account of the use of snake heads and scorpion tails as substitutes for hashish led my colleagues and me over the next three years to search for Afghans who had used such substances. While conducting an assessment of problem drug use in rural eastern Afghanistan in 2000, UNODC fieldworkers reported several accounts of people smoking preparations made from snakes and scorpions, although they never came across an actual user.⁴ One informant suggested that there was a remote mountain village in Azro district to the southeast of Kabul where 'many people' killed scorpions before drying, crushing and smoking them. Our questions were legion: What type of scorpion? Did they use the whole scorpion or just the tail? What was the effect? How did people first find out about the supposed psychoactive properties, if any, of scorpions? Were such preparations taken mainly for medicinal or ritual purposes, or just to become intoxicated? What was the likelihood of toxic poisoning or even death? Or were these tales about using scorpion preparations just a myth?

In February 2001 we were informed about an ex-heroin addict living in Islamabad in Pakistan who had used preparations made from snake venom as an intoxicating drug. On interviewing him we soon discovered that he had been apprenticed to a *pir* who had shown him

ways to be bitten by poisonous snakes without any apparent ill-effect. This had greatly enhanced his status among his friends and, anyway, he had felt a definite psychoactive effect from the snakebite, although this was not the main reason for taking the venom. Having been a drug user since the age of ten, when his mother first introduced him to hashish, he was more than qualified to report on this. At that time we had no conclusive evidence of the use of preparations made from snakes or scorpions for their psychoactive intoxicating properties in Afghanistan.

What such a search for users of snake heads and scorpion tails signifies, however, is that the search for the truth about drugs and their uses in Afghanistan, like many other topics in that country, is an elusive enterprise often clouded by exaggeration, rumour, innuendo, myth, half-truths and a sheer lack of reliable information. It is the Afghan equivalent of the contemporary urban legend spread by ancient Chinese whispers, or what can be referred to as a 'scorpion tale'. Visiting Kabul in the early 1920s, the American traveller Lowell Thomas described how information was conveyed 'by that whisper from sources unseen which wings its way from bazaar to bazaar in Central Asia'.⁵

The basic lines of communication haven't changed all that much in Afghanistan since then, apart from the odd satellite phone and the mushrooming of mobile phones in the main urban centres. The vast majority of the population still rely on a highly interpersonal oral tradition, receiving news primarily by word of mouth. Even before the Soviet invasion of 1979, only three of the 32 provinces were linked by telephone to Kabul the capital city. In Afghanistan the bazaar still functions as the mass media. As a character in a novel set during the struggle against the Soviets says, 'People come to the teahouses to hear things. That is why these places were called the Newspapers of Bricks.'⁶ During the Soviet occupation the *mujahideen* spread news by means of *shabnamas* or 'night letters'. These were leaflets passed from hand to hand throughout the country and read and re-read to relatives, friends and neighbours by the few who could read. More recently the re-emergent Taliban has used *shabnamas* to spread underground anti-government messages in Qandahar, Kabul and other areas.

Undoubtedly the air of intrigue and mystery that seems to pervade much public discourse and political debate is fuelled by the fact that more than 70 per cent of Afghans aged 15 and over are illiterate and have little recourse to news apart from radio, accessible to less than half

the population, and what they hear directly from others.⁷ If conspiracy theories abound in Afghanistan, then they are at least in part, as the journalist Robert D. Kaplan notes, 'inflamed by illiteracy: people who can't read rely on hearsay'.⁸ People also now increasingly rely on the radio for news, information and entertainment, Afghanistan has become a radiocentric nation. Apart from international radio stations such as the BBC and VOA, by January 2004 the central government had issued licenses for 30 independent FM radio stations, as well as 6 TV stations, although mostly in Kabul and with limited production capabilities and reception areas. By mid-2006 there were over 50 private radio stations, many in the provinces. In Kabul and Mazar-i-Sharif, 40 per cent of respondents maintained that the state RTA was the most trustworthy source of news and current affairs. At the same time, a UNICEF study in 2003 showed that 33 per cent of households in Afghanistan had no working radio and it is likely to be some time before there is a more developed Afghan media capable of shaping public attitudes and opinions.⁹

In December 2004 this was how a BBC correspondent described conditions inside the poorly resourced RTA newsroom:

The news team occupies a few rooms along a squalid corridor in one of the few buildings on the site that is still intact. The newsroom itself is a tiny sliver of a room furnished with a couple of ramshackle tables and a motley collection of plastic picnic chairs.¹⁰

In Bakhtar, Afghanistan's official news agency located in the Ministry of Information building,

The favoured method of communication is the fax machine, and I mean THE fax machine. There was just one, attended by two men in what appeared to be a small bedroom overlooking the street. The fax machine was rather hi-tech compared to everything else I was shown at Bakhtar.¹¹

However, information, from whatever source, is not always reliable or immediately verifiable, although this does not mean that it should be discounted as the evidence to substantiate it may eventually be discovered. This is particularly true of scorpion tales because, as everyone knows, the scorpion carries a sting in its tail and no one wants to get stung. Media images, impressions and personal narratives are useful for complementing the more limited harder data that is available—although any source is always subject to a scorpion tale or two. This is particularly the case in trying to unravel the puzzle of what drugs mean in Afghanistan—a country that has never had

any institutional mechanism for gathering national data in the first place. Certainly all official estimates and figures emanating from Afghanistan, right up to the present day and whether collected by government or international agencies, are subject to wide variation and should be treated with caution. Although they may be useful for indicating general patterns and trends, they are frequently reified into concrete numbers and 'facts' that carry significant political weight, determine social policy and influence foreign attitudes towards Afghans and Afghanistan.

Globally, however, and not without some irony, there are probably more scorpion tales about psychoactive drugs, that vast array of intoxicating substances that have carved their enigmatic trail through human history, than there are circulating in, and about, Afghanistan.

1

Introduction

[Afghanistan] promises mystery, a movement back into time of medieval chivalry and medieval cruelty, an absence of the modern world that is both thrilling and disturbing.¹

Our country is completely different from those that are 100 years ahead of us. The freedom these Afghans from the West have seen is not suitable for here.²

It is more appropriate to consider Afghanistan as a place of enormous complexity that has been subject to a constant state of flux throughout history rather than to view it as somehow caught in a time-warp, with life going on as it has always done.³

To outsiders it had seemed more of a fairytale than a real place: it had never been a single country but a historically improbable amalgam of races and cultures, each with its own treasures of custom, languages and visions of the world, its own saints, heroes and outlaws, an impossible place to understand as a whole.⁴

In trying to describe, understand and explain drug use in Afghanistan useful comparisons and analogies can be made with other areas of the world. The golden chessboard that constitutes the global drug trade is all-encompassing and far-reaching. Apart from Afghanistan, I have worked in the drugs field in several such areas, for example, in southern Africa with Basarwa (Kalahari Bushmen), in Pakistan with Afghan refugees and even in Scotland with the urban dispossessed. Although the cultural contexts may be very different, common patterns and themes inevitably emerge and some aspects remain remarkably similar despite the separation of historical, geographical and cultural distance. This book has been written with a wide readership in mind: the specialist who is interested in drugs and their myriad forms and uses, the academic or development worker looking at the interface between Afghan history, politics and drugs and the general reader who is curious (and concerned) about how 'fragmenting countries show the integrating ones the dark side of their common present'.⁵

2 Drugs in Afghanistan

Afghanistan itself is a multi-faceted place, consisting historically of several distinct tribal groups with different social structures, hierarchies and styles of political leadership, not to mention culture and customs. It is a country of marked contrasts and complexities. There are still mountain valley communities three or more days' donkey ride from the nearest bazaar, untouched by the Soviet invasion or the tyranny of the Taliban, where life has changed little in centuries. In September 2005, election officials had to hire 1,200 donkeys, 300 horses, 24 camels and nine helicopters just to deliver ballot boxes to the remoter areas of the country. At the other end of the social spectrum, mobile phone shops compete for customers in the congested vehicle-clogged streets of the booming capital Kabul where 4x4s roar past grand new buildings sprouting up like mushrooms, funded (at least partly) by profits from the drug trade and other criminal activities such as extortion, protection racketeering and the diversion of money from international aid programmes.

Some years ago a colleague visited a small village on a high plateau near Kabul in the winter where he sat outside wrapped in a blanket drinking tea with the village headman, similarly clad to keep out the biting cold. A small child ran past wearing only a thin cotton nightdress. Noticing that the child was blue with cold my colleague asked, 'Aren't you concerned that the cold is affecting that child and he might get sick?' The headman laughed, shrugged his shoulders and replied, 'If he is strong he will survive, if he is weak he will die.'

This response was a simple acknowledgement of the harsh reality of daily life in a war-torn country where insecurity, extreme poverty, malnutrition and lack of healthcare is endemic in many areas. Apart from what is left of the close-knit extended family system after decades of war and social dislocation, there are few social safety nets available for the ordinary Afghan.

THE CRITICAL SOCIAL DIVIDE

At the risk of over-simplification, two of the main competing social forces at work in contemporary Afghanistan can be described as traditional conservative Islam at one end of the spectrum and a more secular liberal modernity, with its emphasis on democratic processes such as the emancipation of women and individual human rights, at the other. Anybody who lives or works in Afghanistan will daily experience the increasing duality and tensions posed by these two competing forces. Abdul Rab al-Rasul Sayyaf is a warlord and founder

of the *Ittihad-i-Islami Bara-i Azadi Afghanistan* (Islamic Union for the Freedom of Afghanistan) *mujahideen* group. Based in Paghman a few miles to the west of Kabul he is an elected member of the *Wolesi Jirga*. He is in no doubt about who Afghanistan belongs to. It belongs to the *mujahideen* who fought against the Soviets, not to members of the Afghan diaspora returning from neighbouring countries like Pakistan and Iran, as well as further afield from Australia, Europe and the Americas. Sayyaf urges that:

This nation is a *Mujahid* nation. Stones, trees, rivers, woods, mountains and deserts in this country are *Mujahideen*. This country exists because of the *Mujahideen*. This country was in Russia's throat, before the *Mujahideen* took it back out, by God's mercy. Then it was nearly destroyed by Taliban and terrorists and again the *Mujahideen* saved it. *Mujahideen* do not need posts and money, but the government needs the *Mujahideen*.⁶

An interview with Ismail Khan, the deposed self-styled Emir of Herat, one of the most famous, and probably most prosperous, of the Afghan warlords, provides an answer to the charge of how he feels about being described as a warlord:

During the Soviet invasion, I was called *Ashrar*, during the Taliban regime *Topakai* and now they call me a Warlord. The people who call me that do not have a good understanding of Afghanistan. Undoubtedly, guns shed blood but there is a difference between the gun one raises for protection of one's country and honour and the gun one raises to scare and harass. If we had weapons during the *Jihad*, it was to protect our rights, values, honour, freedom and independence and to ensure the security of our people, not to abuse them.⁷

Significantly, Khan does not say why he, like many other *mujahideen* commanders, retained a large standing army and its weaponry long after the *jihad* against the Soviet invaders had ended and a central government had been established in Kabul. While security of the populace may be one answer, the maintenance of personal power including a private militia secured by the huge profits derived from taxing the lucrative border trade with Iran, is perhaps a more appropriate one.

Nevertheless, both Khan and Sayyaf make the important point that it all depends which side of the ideological fence you are standing on. Looking at Afghanistan through a modern democratic lens, groups defined as warlords are often perceived as predatory violators of human rights who are more likely to prey on communities than to protect them. Many documented examples of this are cited in

Chapter 6. From the more traditional Islamic and pre-modern perspective of the warlords such activities can be rationalised by pointing out that the social relationships and structures of the 'new' Afghanistan as defined by foreigners and Afghan returnees are not the social relationships and structures that they live in, understand or even want.

The fate of Afghanistan will largely be determined by which of these ideologies comes to prevail in the country over the next few decades, or in what manner they become reconciled and integrated. Already some warlords and militia commanders have come to be perceived as legitimate autonomous local leaders, others have been removed from the power bases of their provincial fiefdoms and co-opted to central government posts or elsewhere, and some have been elected to the *Wolesi Jirga*. However, any legitimisation process will have to consider that while 'some of these leaders are responsible, most are old-fashioned warlords—in many cases the very same warlords whose depredations, including toward women, paved the way for the rise of the Taliban'.⁸ The parliamentary elections held in September 2005 included 207 'commander-candidates' with their own private militias who had all been identified before the poll. Only 32 of them were disqualified from standing and a significant number of the rest were elected. Others, like Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, had never bought into the new democratic process in the first place.

In 2003 the former Afghan leader Maluvi Younis Khalis (who subsequently died at the age of 87 in July 2006) announced a holy war against US troops in Afghanistan, asking Afghans to resist the 'crusaders' as had their Iraqi brethren. Apart from calling the presidential election in Afghanistan 'a drama', he is also reported as saying, 'A puppet government has been installed in Afghanistan. It does not represent the aspirations of the Afghan nation. We consider struggling and waging a holy war against this government our religious obligation.' He also claimed that foreign 'invaders' had endangered Afghanistan's identity by introducing 'obscurity, vulgarity and an ideology of disbelievers'.⁹

Yunus Qanooni, a senior political and military adviser to the assassinated *mujahideen* leader Ahmad Shah Massoud and the chief rival to Hamid Karzai in the 2004 presidential election, as well as former Education and Interior Minister in the Interim Government and now an elected independent Member of Parliament, believes that the *mujahideen* are crucial to Afghanistan's future. He also believes that 'there is no place for secularism in Afghanistan', although he

stresses the progressive and tolerant nature of Islam, rejecting out of hand its repressive reinterpretation by the Taliban.¹⁰

However, the dynamic of this critical social divide between a relatively westernised urban elite and a rural Afghan tribal society traditionally dominated by mullahs, *maliks* and *khans*, is not new, it started with the modernising reforms that King Habibullah tried to initiate in the early part of the twentieth century. His son Amanullah who succeeded him then began to develop programmes for the reform, secularisation and modernisation of the Afghan state and society until he was deposed by the bandit leader, Bacha-i-Saqao, in 1928.¹¹ Amanullah had returned from a 'Grand Tour' of several western countries, India, Egypt and Turkey, and had tried to initiate over-ambitious and unrealistic reforms such as the abolition of purdah, monogamy for government employees, a minimum age for marriage and curtailment of the mullahs' power. At the time one popularly held explanation given for this deviation from Afghan Islamic tradition was that Amanullah had embraced Catholicism during the tour and 'had become deranged through drinking alcohol and eating pork'.¹²

ACROSS THE CULTURAL DIVIDE

The continuing polarity between the rules and regulations that govern human rights-based secular modernisation and the customs and traditions of conservative Islam was exemplified by the furore over the publication of a bestselling book by the Norwegian journalist Asne Seierstad called *The Bookseller of Kabul*.¹³ While conducting research on the bookseller in question, Mohammad Shah Rais, whose books had been looted by the *mujahideen* and burned by both the communists and the Taliban, Seierstad was invited into his home as a guest with no restrictions placed on her with regard to which family members she could talk to. In her own words she became 'bi-gendered' with equal access to both the separate male and female worlds of the Afghan family. The resultant book mainly provided a detailed account of the social relationships in the family with Shah appearing as 'a cruel, tyrannical patriarch' who treated the women of his family like chattels and his sister as 'a virtual slave'.¹⁴ It is a document, according to another journalist, of 'the appalling subjugation of Afghan women, their cultural invisibility, the hardship of their lives', although at the same time, 'Seierstad seems not to understand anything about Afghan pride or the social ruination of

dishonour'.¹⁵ Shah, understandably, felt let down by what he saw as a betrayal of trust, and accused Seierstad of impugning and defaming not only himself but the entire Afghan nation and he sued her in the European courts for compensation and damages.

Interestingly, it has been suggested that Seierstad's excessive use of journalistic licence may have led to her spinning a few scorpion tales of her own. A Norwegian professor of anthropology and Middle Eastern studies, Unni Wikan, has suggested that some of the book may not be authentic as it is doubtful that such insights into 'hearts and minds' was possible. Furthermore, 'she has revealed the secrets of the women which is shameful and dishonourable. It will be regarded as an affront for its lack of respect for Afghans and Muslims.'¹⁶ Who knows what the consequences of such revelations may be for Shah and his family, now easily identifiable and open to gossip and ridicule.

This conflict between Seierstad and Shah symbolises the problem, and the unintended consequences, of interpreting Afghan cultural traditions and practices through the lens of a modern human rights perspective. While universal human rights are to be fully endorsed and respected, in many developing countries like Afghanistan they may make little sense, as concepts based on individualism may be culturally inappropriate, if not nonsensical and politically non-viable. Rights in such societies are more likely to centre on the extended family, the community and the tribe and the rights of the individual are not perceived as paramount. For most Afghans, human rights, as understood by people in the west, remain a distant and abstract notion. At the same time, it is hypocritical of the west to preach human rights for Afghanistan when the US has so flagrantly breached them in its treatment of individual prisoners at Bagram and other military prisons in Afghanistan (see Chapter 6 on outlaws and warlords), not to mention the unarmed civilians, including women and children, killed by US bombing in Bibi Mahru, Kili Sarnad, Lashkargah and Takhta-Pul, for example, during Operation Enduring Freedom. In May 2006 further coalition bombing resulted in the death of over 30 civilians in Azizi village to the west of Qandahar, an action unlikely to convert many Afghan villagers to western ideas about what constitutes human rights.

Another cultural event that symbolised the ideological struggle for Afghanistan's heart and mind was the entry of Vidsa Samadzai as Miss Afghanistan in the Miss Earth beauty pageant held in Manila in November 2003. Her onstage appearance in a bright red bikini caused

outrage in Afghanistan and prompted the Minister of Women's Affairs to denounce Samadzai's actions as 'lascivious' and 'not representing Afghan women'.¹⁷ A member of the Supreme Court in Kabul stated that her appearance in a bikini was completely unacceptable and unlawful in Islam, and the Afghan government, through its embassy in Washington, lost no time in publicly stating that her appearance in the pageant had not been authorised by them. Fears were expressed that Vidsa could have unwittingly undermined the cause of women's emancipation in Afghanistan as well as endorsing widespread perceptions of the moral corruption and excessive freedoms of western democracy.¹⁸ In a country where most social events and celebrations are segregated by gender, all post-primary schools are single sex, the majority of marriages are arranged and women are still in purdah and shrouded from men who are not close relatives, this is hardly surprising.

MEDIA WARS

A further example of this ideological struggle is the ongoing media war, where new innovative TV stations show programmes denounced by the more conservative members of the community, along with government officials. The Kabul-based TV station Tolo has been at the cutting edge by presenting MTV-style music shows, fashion shows and western films, with young male and female presenters working together on-screen. Tolo is rightly proud of its investigative journalism and has covered hitherto taboo news topics such as paedophilia, the power of warlords, illegal logging and corruption in government. In March 2005, Afghanistan's *Ulema shura* criticised Tolo and other TV stations for showing inappropriate programmes 'opposed to Islam and national values'.¹⁹ Two months later a young female presenter, Shaima Rezayee, who had been forced to resign from her job at Tolo under pressure from clerics, was gunned down in Kabul, a real-life victim of the country's culture wars. A young male presenter, Shakeb Isaar, also received death threats from the Taliban and al-Qaeda, and Chief Justice Fazl-e Hadi Shinwari, branded him 'a corrupter of youth'. One of the founders of the programme, Mohammad Mohseni, made the following point: 'Look at the demographics of this country, it has one of the youngest populations in the world. The old conservatives fear becoming irrelevant. A few years down the line and they will have lost most of their power.'²⁰ This remains to be seen, a new generation of conservatives may well replace the old.

Human Rights Watch has reported that members of the press and the media generally have been harassed, intimidated and threatened in Afghanistan. Journalists have been physically attacked and some threatened with death as retribution for past and future publications and broadcasts. Such attacks 'have led to self-censorship as many journalists have decided not to publish critical or objective articles'.²¹ In October 2005, the editor of a magazine called *Haqq-e-Zan* (Women's Rights), Ali Mohaqiq, was jailed for two years for questioning Islamic law. Articles he had written that were critical of the harshness of some interpretations of the law were considered blasphemous, such as a provision that someone found guilty of adultery be sentenced to 100 lashes and that giving up Islam was a crime that should be punished by death. Mohaqiq was arrested after the Supreme Court sent a letter to the public prosecutor's office, also signed by the *Ulema shura*, complaining about him.²² In February 2006, one of Kabul's four private TV stations, Afghan TV, was fined \$1,000 by a special media commission, headed by the Minister of Information, Culture and Tourism, for screening 'un-Islamic' material. By that time two of the other stations, Tolo and Ariana, had established offices to control and self-censor their broadcasts, and Tolo blanked the screen during risqué music videos and films, mainly from India.²³ In June 2006 Afghan intelligence services issued a list of directives to Afghan journalists (international journalists were excluded) banning them from criticising the US-led coalition, representing the Afghan armed forces as weak or criticising the government's foreign policy.²⁴

A central issue, then, is how realistic is it for a society steeped in such conservative traditions, laws and customs to adapt and change to a more modern democratic rights-based polity. While it has taken western countries hundreds of years to undergo a (continuing) process of democratisation and establish rights for women and other marginalised groups there is a western expectation that this can be achieved in countries like Afghanistan in little more than a few decades, or worse, that the process can somehow be fast-tracked. In terms of future political structures various possibilities exist, although it is likely that if international armed forces leave in the foreseeable future the country will relapse into some form of civil war.

Differing scenarios have been put forward by the ex-Finance Minister and now Vice-Chancellor of Kabul University, Ashraf Ghani, who has starkly outlined three of the leading contenders: (1) the country will become stable, relatively prosperous and western-friendly with a strong rule of law and internal disintegration and

conflict a fading memory as the economy is driven by a growing private sector; (2) the country will become yet another 'failed state' lurching from crisis to crisis, stagnating in poverty and unable to repay its international debt; (3) the country will become a narco-mafia state, with all trade and industry, including drug production, controlled by criminal syndicates both Afghan and foreign, where there will be extreme disparities between the few rich and the mass of the poor and militias will continue to protect, and fight over the economic interests of the various 'mafias'.²⁵ But in trying to predict the future of Afghanistan, as Barnett Rubin has stated, 'There are too many imponderables.'²⁶ It would take a very large crystal ball indeed to predict what the country will look like even a few years from now.*

Afghanistan is yet again at a crucial juncture in its history, ready to choose, or have chosen for it through the influence and political machinations of external forces, some permutation of life between conservative Islamic tribalism at one extreme and consumer-driven secular modernism at the other. While over the last 15 years of internecine violence between a bewildering array of warring factions Afghans have already had a taste of one end of the continuum, they are only now beginning to taste, as well as resist, the other end, so aptly described by that great traveller and explorer of Islamic countries, Wilfred Thesiger:

The long-term effect of US culture as it spreads to every nook and cranny in every desert and every mountain valley will be the end of mankind. Our extraordinary greed for material possessions, the ways we go about nurturing that greed, the lack of balance in our lives, and our cultural arrogance will kill us off within a century unless we learn to stop and think. It may be too late.²⁷

CONTINUING DUALITIES

There are other related dualities to be found in Afghanistan. As Bergen (2001) suggests, there can be little doubt that many Afghans still

* To give but one example: the week I sent this manuscript to the publishers it was announced that the government was considering re-establishing the notorious Ministry of Enforcement of Virtue and Suppression of Vice originally set up by the Taliban, most likely to appease the conservative lobby. This would undoubtedly impact negatively on perceptions and treatment of problem drug users and push drug use further underground, making contact with drug users in need of help, particularly injectors, more difficult.

subscribe to a double-edged code of social behaviour not found in western societies, or indeed in many developing ones. On the one hand, Afghans are among the most polite and hospitable people on earth; on the other, they are a proud, ruthless and unyielding enemy if slighted or provoked:

They will carry hospitality to embarrassing extremes, but are implacable as enemies. If there has been an overriding feature of their history, it is that it has been a history of conflict—of invasions, battles and sieges, of vendettas, assassinations and massacres, of tribal feuding, dynastic strife and civil war.²⁸

One British traveller journeying through Afghanistan in 1783 suggested that Afghans were 'generally addicted to a state of predatory warfare'.²⁹ Like Scotland, where 'Highland hospitality was traditionally inviolable, whatever the bitterness between guest and host',³⁰ *Pashtoonwali*, the Pashtoon code of conduct, is centred round hospitality and sanctuary, as well as revenge and retribution, particularly for insults to family honour that frequently result in blood feuds.

Afghanistan has long been a victim, as well as a resolute and brutal defender, of its strategic geographic position bridging the crossroads of south and central Asia. Unfortunately it has rarely been left alone to determine its fate, least of all by its immediate neighbours Iran, Pakistan and the central Asian states. Other foreign powers, the British in the nineteenth century, the Soviets in the twentieth century and now the Americans in the twenty-first century have all used force to try and build strategic partnerships with Afghanistan, peddling their various brands of civilisation, imperialism and ideology in the process. While invasions by outsiders have frequently resulted in feuding groups within the country banding together against a common enemy, old enmities and feuds are soon resumed after the invaders have been vanquished.

It has also been argued that the characteristics of modern *mujahideen* and militia groups, such as 'charismatic leadership, fierce local loyalties, shifting alliances, guerrilla tactics, gritty endurance and inborn xenophobia', originated with Bactrian warlords combating Alexander the Great and his forces over 2,000 years ago.³¹ At that time, with a foreign empire stretching through Egypt, Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran, Alexander had to leave his largest army of occupation in what is now Afghanistan. Over 40 per cent of his infantry and over 95 per cent of his cavalry posted to foreign garrisons were left in Bactria (modern-day Balkh) in an attempt to pacify local warlords.

Tactics stemming from this period have been honed over the centuries and are still extant today, typifying the campaigns of modern Afghan militants: 'the element of surprise, the avoidance of warfare waged from a fixed position, the use of terror, the exploitation of weather and terrain, the application of primitive technologies to achieve unexpected results'.³²

Even the national Afghan game of *buzkashi*, where two teams involving hundreds of horsemen chase a headless goat carcass around a large field, has been interpreted as a metaphor for chaotic, uninhibited and uncontrollable competition among Afghans, particularly in the political arena, as well as a commemoration of cultural heritage. As the original author of this metaphor, American anthropologist Whitney Azoy, explains, his view of the country offended some Afghanophiles because they were 'confounded by the emphasis on aggression, opportunism and maximisation of spoils'. However, as succinctly suggested in the preface to the second edition of his book, *Buzkashi: Game and Power in Afghanistan*, while *buzkashi* does not represent all of Afghan experience, it serves as 'an apt metaphor for ongoing political chaos since 1978'. Certainly it would be delusional to neglect it. As Azoy says, 'delusion will only invite a continuation of Afghanistan's agony'.³³

Flying back to Dubai from Islamabad in August 1998, I sat next to a young Pakistani businessman who was in the oil business in the Gulf States. We started chatting, and I explained that I had intended to travel to Afghanistan to complete a consultancy for UNDCP but had been thwarted by the Americans who had reached there first as their Cruise missiles crashed into terrorist training camps outside Jalalabad in reprisal for the bombing of American targets in east Africa. Instead, I had spent the time in Peshawar interviewing drug users and NGO staff before being evacuated back to Islamabad. 'Ah!' he replied, 'The Afghan, your best friend and your worst enemy.'

While subscribing to such national stereotypes may be a dubious and sometimes dangerous pastime, this phrase neatly encapsulates the polar complexities of the Afghan character paraphrased by Bergen as 'medieval chivalry and medieval cruelty'. As Bergen further points out, there is in Afghanistan 'an absence of the modern world that is both thrilling and disturbing' that can easily seduce westerners into over-romanticised notions about the country and its people. While one female western journalist reported that, 'from schoolboys at play to University students, Cabinet Ministers to legendary commanders, Afghans were quieter, gentler and more self-contained

than Americans',³⁴ she fortunately had not been privy to the other more martial side of the Afghan character, unlike many of her Afghan sisters who continue to suffer at the hands of warlords, commanders, their militias, and corrupt police.

GLOBAL CONSIDERATIONS

While this book can do little justice to the complexities of the political dramas and the extent of human suffering performed on Afghanistan's stage over the past three decades, it seeks to illuminate the many seemingly unrelated and disparate, yet interdependent, factors that need to be considered to reach an understanding of the complexities of drugs and their uses in such a context. Inevitably it has to take liberties with the truth, a commodity hard to grasp in a country where scorpion tales abound and the boundaries between fact and fiction are frequently blurred. Public truth remains where it has always been, on the shadowy margins between media images and the ideologies of the powerful. The book's main purpose is to try and clarify what drugs mean in Afghanistan and to the people who consume them, why they use them, and the types of problems that arise from their consumption.

To understand how and why drugs are consumed by increasing numbers of Afghans it is also necessary to provide a glimpse of the convoluted dynamics and processes involved in the cultivation of opium and cannabis, the production and trafficking of heroin and hashish, the importation and availability of other psychoactive substances, and a brief description of the outlaw territory that is Afghanistan. Increasingly there is recognition that in the matter of drug control, both supply and demand issues are inextricably linked, as are producer and consumer countries. And while the demand for drugs stimulates supply, the availability of drugs creates a demand as more people use them and become dependent on them.³⁵ The consequences of these dynamics and processes reach far beyond the borders of Afghanistan. Through no accident of history it is a country whose tragic past shows us, as Rubin so eloquently states, 'the dark side of our common present' and, just perhaps, our common future. There are lessons to be learned here for drug control policies and strategies that stretch far beyond the boundaries of Afghanistan.

Indeed, Afghanistan holds up a mirror to the developed world and the anomalies and paradoxes inherent in its drug policies. For the better part of a century international drug control has been dominated

by a western model based on prohibition and the criminalisation of drugs and those who use them. Punishment and imprisonment have been the lot of those caught in possession of substances defined as illegal. A criminalised economy and the rise of mafias and organised crime groups involved in drug trafficking and associated corruption and violence to protect illicit enterprises the result.

As a consequence of prohibition-based policies, in the US over 2 million Americans are currently incarcerated for non-violent drug offences, with over 1.5 million arrested each year for similar offences—more per capita than any other country in the world. Annually the drug war costs US taxpayers around \$69 billion and there is a growing anti-prohibition lobby, including the organisation LEAP, consisting of current and former members of law enforcement who support drug regulation rather than prohibition. As LEAP say in their mission statement:

Despite all the lives we have destroyed and all the money so ill spent, today illicit drugs are cheaper, more potent, and far easier to get than they were 35 years ago at the beginning of the war on drugs. Meanwhile, people continue dying in our streets while drug barons and terrorists continue to grow richer than ever before. We would suggest that this scenario must be the very definition of a failed public policy.³⁶

Even in Scotland the futility of prohibition is recognised by powerful groups such as the Strathclyde Police Federation which represents nearly all the 7,500 rank and file police officers in the area. In April 2006 the Federation called for the legalisation and licensing of all drugs including Class A drugs, such as heroin and cocaine, under the UK Misuse of Drugs Act.³⁷ At the same time, over 3,000 UK troops were preparing to head for Helmand province in southern Afghanistan, part of their mission being to support Afghan soldiers in the task of eradicating opium poppy fields and destroying heroin laboratories. Helmand produces nearly 20 per cent of the world's illicit opium. The effects of such a war against opium farmers and the inevitable rise of drug trafficking mafias will be explored in Chapters 4 and 5.

One of the main inconsistencies in global drug control policy is that its definition of 'drugs' does not include alcohol. As in all other Islamic states, Afghanistan has long considered alcohol one of the most harmful and forbidden intoxicating drugs, yet to the non-Muslim world it remains socially acceptable, infinitely available and legally profitable. Conversely, opium and cannabis, two of the three main drugs considered harmful and prohibited by UN conventions