
Challenges of the Heroin Trade in Afghanistan

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On 19 May, the Center for Complex Operations (CCO) brought together thirty interagency personnel from policy and counter-narcotics organizations for a discussion on the heroin trade in Afghanistan with journalist Gretchen Peters, author of the recently released: *Seeds of Terror: How Heroin is Bankrolling the Taliban and al Qaeda*. While most Taliban members do not grow the opium themselves, Ms. Peters argued that most of the Taliban should be seen as middle managers in a criminal syndicate analogous to modern day crime families. They provide protection to poppy fields and poppy convoys, and in exchange they collect up to 10 percent of the opium output and tax drug refineries. They, in turn, provide a portion of what they collect to the Quetta shura [Taliban council]. The heroin trade, however, is by far the Taliban's most profitable business, earning them, in Ms. Peters' estimation, nearly \$500 million each year. Like the mafia, there are separate "families" involved in the heroin trade; and representatives of each meet frequently in Pakistan.

Ms. Peters presented the many challenges the Afghan government, as well as the United States and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), faces in dealing with the heroin trade. Perhaps one of the more intractable issues is that some key members of the government, as well as other state actors, are intimately linked to the heroin trade. Poor infrastructure, including a shortage of roads, gives the advantage to the Taliban, who can more easily traverse the country's rugged terrain, while the Americans have much more difficulty maneuvering their mine-resistant vehicles and armored Humvees.

Even with these challenges, Ms. Peters identified a number of opportunities for reshaping American counter-narcotics strategy for Afghanistan. She placed emphasis on the need for security. If the U.S., and eventually the Afghan security forces, is able to provide security for the population, the farmers would likely be more confident that ending their support for the Taliban would not result in Taliban reprisals. They might also be more willing to consider alternative crops at that point as well. Additionally, the decentralized structure of the industry, with the involvement of many different "families," provides opportunity to exploit differences between these groups, just as law enforcement does with mafia families. Finally, Ms. Peters proposed the need for an extensive nation building effort that will provide the Afghan government with the capacity to fight the heroin trade and protect the farmers from Taliban intimidation without the continued presence of the Americans or NATO. While she recognized that nation building is always a controversial policy in the United States, she argued that the costs of constant intervention and/or keeping troops in the region may be greater than the costs of a nation building effort, even though the latter costs are concentrated over a shorter period of time and therefore seem to be greater.

Ms. Peters' talk is the first of a series of book discussions the CCO plans to host in the future. Stay tuned to the CCO portal <http://ccoportal.org/>, including the events calendar, for additional information.