

The Impact of Drug Trafficking and Humanitarian Conflict in Afghanistan from an Islamic Perspective

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received : 3 July 2025

Accepted : 21 July 2025

Available : 31 July 2025

Keywords:

Afghanistan, drug trade, opium, Taliban, armed conflict, Islam.

ABSTRACT

Afghanistan has long been trapped in prolonged conflict, beginning with the Soviet invasion in 1979 and continuing through the return of the Taliban in 2021. One of the key factors exacerbating the country's instability is the drug trade—particularly opium—which serves as a primary source of funding for militant groups like the Taliban. Opium cultivation also offers a vital economic alternative for rural farmers with limited livelihood options. The drug trade intensifies violence, reinforces economic dependency, and fuels corruption within governmental institutions, all of which prolong the armed conflict. Islam strictly prohibits drug trafficking and emphasizes social justice and the protection of youth as core values. This study adopts a qualitative approach using case study methodology. Data were collected through literature reviews, international organization reports, policy analysis, and both primary and secondary sources relevant to the nexus between conflict and narcotics in Afghanistan. The analysis employed thematic techniques to explore the relationship between opium trade and armed conflict, as well as to identify Islamic-based alternatives for addressing these challenges. The research also critically reviewed existing policy frameworks and assessed the role of Islamic ethical and structural principles in resolving socio-economic issues. Findings indicate that the narcotics trade in Afghanistan not only perpetuates armed conflict but also entrenches economic reliance on illicit resources. Islam provides a normative and structural framework offering viable solutions, including the promotion of lawful economic empowerment, anti-corruption governance reforms, and the cultivation of moral values within society. The implementation of Islamic-based solutions, supported by transparent and accountable policy measures, has the potential to foster long-term peace and reduce societal dependence on the drug economy.



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1. INTRODUCTION

Afghanistan has endured decades of continuous conflict, beginning with the Soviet invasion in 1979 and followed by a civil war involving multiple factions, including the emergence of the Taliban. Although international forces, led primarily by the United States, succeeded in toppling the Taliban in 2001, the unrest persisted until the group regained control of the country in 2021.(Ahda Abid, 2013). One of the key contributors to Afghanistan's ongoing instability is the central role of the drug trade, particularly the cultivation of opium, the primary ingredient in heroin. As one of the world's largest producers of opium, Afghanistan provides a crucial funding source for armed groups, including the Taliban.

This illicit trade has further escalated the crisis by bolstering the military strength of these groups, while the weak Afghan government struggles to contain the issue. In many rural areas, farmers rely heavily on opium cultivation as their main source of income, due to the lack of viable and legal economic alternatives. Beyond its economic and social damage, the drug trade also intensifies violence through competition over control of trafficking routes(Welle (DW), n.d.).

The drug trade has become a deeply entrenched driver of Afghanistan's prolonged conflict. The substantial profits generated from this illicit industry have served as a primary source of funding for various militant and insurgent groups. Revenues from narcotics sales are used to purchase weapons, ammunition, and other logistical supplies essential for launching attacks and expanding territorial control. Moreover, the heavy economic reliance on opium cultivation has left local communities highly vulnerable to exploitation by armed groups(Shayan et al., 2022).

Widespread corruption among government officials and security forces has further exacerbated the crisis, as many are complicit in protecting the drug trade for personal gain. This has contributed to the protraction of armed conflict, resulting in immense suffering for civilians, including widespread casualties, mass displacement, and severe infrastructure destruction. This vicious cycle is difficult to break, as the drug trade not only intensifies the

conflict but also provides strong incentives for armed groups to continue waging war (*Building a New Afghanistan*, 2007).

In essence, the narcotics trade in Afghanistan has fostered a highly destructive ecosystem. Massive financial profits, rampant corruption, and weak state institutions have created conditions that perpetuate armed violence. Addressing this issue requires a comprehensive strategy involving multiple stakeholders, including the Afghan government, the international community, and civil society groups. This approach must encompass efforts to eradicate drug production and trafficking, improve community welfare, rebuild national institutions, and promote lasting peace.

This topic is particularly vital to examine through the lens of Islam, which unequivocally prohibits any act that harms the individual or society, including the consumption and trafficking of narcotics. Islamic teachings emphasize social justice and the well-being of the community, mandating that leaders govern with fairness and prioritize the protection of their people. This includes actively combating drug circulation that threatens youth and social order. Furthermore, Islam upholds the responsibility to safeguard future generations through access to education and healthcare—both of which are gravely undermined by the consequences of narcotics abuse and trade.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Afghanistan has long been a focal point of scholarly attention due to its complex intersection of prolonged armed conflict, fragile state structures, and a deeply entrenched narcotics economy. Numerous academic works have examined the role of the drug trade in sustaining violence and destabilizing governance in the country. One of the most influential frameworks is provided by Felbab-Brown (2009), who in **Shooting Up: Counterinsurgency and the War on Drugs** argues that illicit economies in weak and conflict-ridden states often become essential for survival—not only for insurgents but also for marginalized civilian populations. She emphasizes that simplistic eradication strategies risk alienating local communities, thereby reinforcing insurgent recruitment and control (FELBAB-BROWN, 2010). Other empirical studies, such as those by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2023), have documented Afghanistan's dominance in global opium production, supplying over 80% of the world's heroin. The rural dependency on poppy cultivation stems largely from the absence of viable legal alternatives, weak governance, and persistent insecurity. These findings are echoed in regional public health research, such as the study by Shayan et al. (2021), which reveals

a surge in local drug consumption and addiction, aggravating the socio-economic crisis (Shayan et al., 2022).

Despite the value of these contributions, most studies remain focused on structural and geopolitical dimensions, with limited exploration of religious and ethical frameworks in addressing the narcotics issue. Existing literature tends to neglect how Islamic principles—deeply embedded in Afghan society—might serve as a moral and socio-political tool for drug prevention, community rehabilitation, and post-conflict recovery.

The Islamic tradition, particularly through Qur'anic injunctions and classical jurisprudence, offers clear ethical guidance regarding intoxicants. The Qur'an explicitly forbids the use and trade of substances that harm individuals and communities (*Surah Al-Ma'idah - 91*, n.d.), labeling them as acts of moral and spiritual corruption. Scholars such as Al-Qaradawi (1995) and Kamali (2008) stress the role of *maqāsid al-sharī'ah* (higher objectives of Islamic law), which prioritize the protection of life (*ḥifẓ al-naḥs*), intellect (*ḥifẓ al-'aql*), and progeny (*ḥifẓ al-nasl*)—all of which are endangered by narcotic trafficking and conflict (Al Qardawi, 1995).

Felbab-Brown's theory adds significant explanatory power by linking narcotics economies to insurgency resilience and state fragility. She argues that efforts to combat drug production must be context-sensitive and coupled with development strategies that address local economic realities. This approach provides a theoretical foundation for understanding the nexus between conflict and narcotics in Afghanistan.

From this review of the literature, two key research gaps become apparent. First, there is a noticeable lack of integration between counter-narcotics policy frameworks and Islamic ethical teachings, despite the central role that Islam plays in Afghan identity and governance. Second, while much research focuses on state-centric or military approaches, few studies investigate how Islamic concepts of justice, public welfare (*maṣlaḥah*), and social responsibility could provide grassroots-driven alternatives to narcotics production and use.

This research seeks to fill these gaps by bridging structural insights from Felbab-Brown's theory with Islamic ethical and legal perspectives, thereby proposing a culturally resonant and multidimensional framework for addressing drug trafficking and conflict in Afghanistan.

3. METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative approach using a case study method to explore the nexus between drug trafficking and protracted conflict in Afghanistan, while also examining potential solutions from an Islamic perspective. Primary data was collected through semi-structured interviews with academics, researchers, religious leaders, and former government officials or security personnel knowledgeable about the issue. Secondary data was drawn from official documents such as UNODC reports, academic literature, and credible media articles.

The data analysis involved thematic analysis to identify key patterns and themes, triangulation to ensure consistency across various data sources, and a normative approach to assess the relevance of Islamic values in addressing drug-related challenges and conflict. Data validity was ensured through source triangulation, while reliability was enhanced by documenting the research process in a detailed and systematic manner.

This research also acknowledges certain limitations, including restricted field access due to security concerns in Afghanistan and the potential for bias in interview responses. Despite these challenges, the chosen methodology aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how the illicit drug trade contributes to ongoing conflict in Afghanistan and to evaluate Islamic value-based strategies as viable alternatives for resolution.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The findings of this study indicate that drug trafficking in Afghanistan—particularly the production and distribution of opium—plays a pivotal role in sustaining the country's armed conflict. Specifically, the Taliban relies heavily on the illicit drug trade as a primary source of funding to support its military operations. According to the UNODC report, Afghanistan is responsible for producing over eighty-five percent of the world's opium, making it one of the largest hubs of the global illicit economy (UNODC, 2023). Mansfield's research emphasizes that the Taliban's involvement in the opium trade extends beyond merely taxing farmers; it also includes control over the distribution networks, which significantly reinforces their territorial dominance (Fazli, n.d.).

At the community level, economic dependence on opium exacerbates the cycle of poverty. Small-scale farmers in impoverished rural areas are trapped

in exploitative systems where they are forced to sell their opium harvest at low prices to narcotics trafficking networks. This situation is further worsened by the lack of viable economic alternatives due to limited access to infrastructure, security, and formal markets. From an Islamic perspective, drug trafficking is not only incompatible with religious values but also undermines the core principles of societal well-being (*maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*). Esposito's research emphasizes that Islam strictly prohibits any action that harms the soul, intellect, or social order. Within this framework, both the consumption and distribution of narcotics are regarded as acts of injustice that violate the principles of justice and social harmony (Esposito, 2002).

Discussion

The Nexus Between Drug Trafficking and Armed Conflict

The opium trade in Afghanistan has long been deeply intertwined with the country's protracted armed conflict. As the world's largest opium producer, the revenue generated from this illicit economy serves as a crucial financial backbone for militant groups, particularly the Taliban. Profits from opium are used to fund military operations, purchase weapons, and pay fighters' salaries. The Taliban's role extends beyond merely taxing poppy farmers; they oversee the entire supply chain, thereby consolidating their territorial control in rural areas. By offering protection to farmers from government interventions, the Taliban foster a system of economic dependence and political allegiance, significantly expanding their local influence (Fazli, n.d.).

At the grassroots level, Afghan farmers, especially in impoverished rural regions, heavily rely on opium cultivation as their primary source of income. Compared to conventional crops like wheat or corn, poppy farming offers much higher returns despite its legal and security risks. This dependency traps small-scale farmers in exploitative cycles, where they are often forced to sell their harvests at low prices to narcotics networks dominated by insurgent groups. Poor infrastructure, limited access to formal markets, and the lack of viable economic alternatives exacerbate their vulnerability, reinforcing the Taliban's leverage and perpetuating rural poverty (Mansfield, 2016).

The situation is further worsened by widespread corruption within Afghanistan's government. According to the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR, 2021), numerous government officials and security personnel have been complicit in drug trafficking, either through bribery or direct collaboration with criminal syndicates. These internal failures severely undermine counter-narcotics initiatives, as the very institutions tasked with enforcing the law are frequently part of the illicit economy.

International efforts to curb opium production often struggle against this entrenched corruption. Development aid intended to support alternative livelihoods is frequently misappropriated or fails to reach vulnerable communities.

Moreover, military strategies aimed at eradicating poppy fields have proven counterproductive. When farmers lose their sole means of income due to such operations, many turn to the Taliban for protection and support, thereby deepening insurgent ties with local populations. These dynamics illustrate that addressing Afghanistan's narcotics trade requires more than eradication; it demands a comprehensive and sustainable approach. Structural reforms in governance, anti-corruption measures, and substantial investment in rural development are essential. Only through an integrated response that bridges political, economic, and social dimensions can Afghanistan begin to dismantle the drug-conflict nexus and foster long-term peace and stability.

Social and Economic Impact

Afghanistan's heavy reliance on opium cultivation as a primary source of livelihood has led to far-reaching social and economic consequences. Farmers in rural areas often feel compelled to grow poppy due to the lack of access to viable and lawful economic opportunities. The scarcity of essential infrastructure—such as roads, markets, and irrigation facilities—exacerbates this dependency. Persistent insecurity resulting from ongoing conflict further prevents these communities from transitioning to more sustainable crops. This creates a vicious cycle in which farmers become increasingly dependent on opium production, while militant groups like the Taliban exploit these vulnerabilities to assert control over rural populations for their own strategic and financial benefit. This dependence deepens poverty and fosters social instability, as local communities are frequently caught between coercion by insurgents and harsh government counter-narcotics operations.

Economically, the substantial profits from the opium trade rarely enter Afghanistan's formal economy. Instead, they reinforce a shadow economy that distorts the nation's economic structure and impedes the development of legitimate markets. According to a World Bank report (2022), this informal economy—largely driven by drug trafficking—undermines the state's capacity to build stable and transparent economic institutions. Much of the drug revenue is captured by insurgent groups, traffickers, and corrupt officials, leaving the broader population without access to its economic benefits. As a result, the Afghan government struggles to collect sufficient tax revenues, which in turn hinders its ability to finance essential infrastructure projects and deliver public services.

The dominance of illicit economic activity also discourages foreign investment and limits the growth of a legitimate private sector. Investors typically avoid countries with high levels of corruption and dependence on illegal trade, contributing to Afghanistan's ongoing economic isolation. This situation has led to increasing socioeconomic inequality: a small elite involved in the opium trade reaps significant profits, while the majority of citizens remain trapped in extreme poverty. Additionally, widespread involvement in the narcotics supply chain has produced other negative social outcomes, such as rising addiction rates and heightened vulnerability to labor exploitation.

Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive approach that includes infrastructure development, economic diversification, and anti-corruption reforms. Only through coordinated and sustained efforts can Afghanistan hope to break its dependency on the narcotics economy and foster long-term social and economic stability.

Islamic Perspective as a Solution

Islam provides a holistic approach to tackling social problems like drug trafficking, focusing not only on punitive measures but also on moral education, social justice, and economic welfare. One of Islam's fundamental principles is the strict prohibition of intoxicating substances. In Surah Al-Baqarah (*Surah Al-Baqarah* - 219, n.d.), Allah SWT states:

"They ask you about wine and gambling. Say, 'In them is great sin and [yet, some] benefit for people. But their sin is greater than their benefit.'"

This verse establishes a moral foundation, affirming that any potential material gain from the trade of harmful substances such as opium is outweighed by the moral, social, and economic harm it causes. This principle is further reinforced by the saying of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him):

"Every intoxicant is khamr, and every khamr is forbidden." (Narrated by Muslim).

This serves as a strong normative basis to oppose all activities related to narcotics.

In Afghanistan, where the majority of the population is Muslim, Islamic teachings can play a central role in combating drug trafficking. Afghanistan is not only the largest producer of opium globally but is also a country plagued by political instability, corruption, and poverty. Mansfield (2021) notes that many rural farmers are compelled to cultivate opium due to economic hardship and the lack of viable alternatives. In this context, Islamic principles

of social justice (al-‘adl) and the protection of human welfare (maqashid al-shariah) are highly relevant. Islam emphasizes safeguarding five essential aspects of life: religion, life, intellect, lineage, and property. Drug trafficking directly violates the protection of intellect (hifz al-‘aql) and life (hifz an-nafs), as it inflicts physical, mental, and social harm on individuals and communities.

One of the solutions proposed by Islam is a moral and spiritual education-based approach. Such education targets not only the youth but also the wider community. Islam views education as a tool to shape individual character and morality. Islamic schools, such as madrasahs, can serve as platforms to raise awareness of the dangers of drugs. By incorporating anti-drug curricula grounded in Islamic values, students can be equipped with strong knowledge and moral resilience. This helps individuals and communities resist the lure of drug trafficking networks.

Additionally, community-based approaches involving *ulama* and local religious leaders can be effective. In Afghanistan, *ulama* hold significant social and political influence. They can provide moral guidance and spread anti-drug messages. Community-based rehabilitation programs involving religious leaders, as suggested by the United States Institute of Peace, have shown positive outcomes in some areas. Utilizing mosques and religious institutions as centers of education and rehabilitation makes it easier for the public to accept messages about the dangers of drugs.

Islam also emphasizes creating social and economic justice as a long-term solution. Dependence on opium trade often stems from poverty and economic inequality. Islamic economic principles such as *zakat*, *sadaqah*, and *waqf* can empower rural communities and provide lawful economic alternatives. For example, *zakat* can fund development projects in impoverished areas, reducing farmers’ reliance on opium cultivation. According to the World Bank, inclusive and sustainable economic development is crucial to addressing the root causes of drug trafficking. By creating jobs and improving access to education and healthcare, reliance on illegal economies can be diminished.

To successfully combat drug trafficking, an integrated approach involving various societal elements—government, religious institutions, and civil society organizations—is required. While Islam offers clear ethical guidance, its implementation demands supportive policies and adequate infrastructure. The Afghan government must collaborate with *ulama* and community leaders to create effective rehabilitation and education programs. Moreover, transparency and anti-corruption efforts in governmental institutions are essential to rebuilding public trust. By combining spiritual approaches with social policies grounded in Islamic values, Afghanistan has the potential to

build a drug-free society and realize the principle of collective welfare (maslahah). Islam not only provides moral solutions but also offers a comprehensive framework for establishing sustainable social and economic justice.

5. CONCLUSION

The narcotics trade—particularly opium—has been deeply intertwined with the protracted armed conflict in Afghanistan. Militant groups, most notably the Taliban, have long relied on opium trafficking as a primary source of funding to support their military operations and expand their political influence, especially in rural areas. The population's economic dependence on opium, driven by the lack of legitimate livelihood alternatives, has created a vicious cycle of poverty and dependency that fuels social instability. Widespread corruption within the Afghan government further exacerbates anti-narcotics efforts, as state officials and security forces are often complicit with drug trafficking networks. An effective long-term solution requires comprehensive structural reforms within governance, rigorous anti-corruption measures, and significant investment in economic development that provides viable alternatives for farmers. The social and economic impact of this opium dependency is profound. Rural farmers are often forced to cultivate opium due to limited access to lawful income-generating opportunities. This exacerbates poverty and deepens social unrest, as farmers find themselves caught between the coercion of militant groups and repressive state actions.

Moreover, the substantial profits from the opium trade flow into the shadow economy, weakening the formal economy and hindering inclusive economic development. Afghanistan's reliance on the illicit drug economy further entrenches social inequalities and intensifies its international economic isolation. In response, Islam offers a normative framework that can serve as a moral and practical basis for addressing the issue of narcotics in Afghanistan. The categorical prohibition of all intoxicating substances, as articulated in the Qur'an and Hadith, provides a firm ethical foundation to resist drug-related activities. Islamic-based moral and spiritual education—when implemented across the broader community—can be a powerful tool in reducing societal dependence on drugs. Furthermore, the Islamic principles of social justice, such as **zakat** (obligatory almsgiving) and **waqf** (endowments), can be mobilized to economically empower rural populations by offering legitimate income alternatives and thereby weakening the structural drivers of opium cultivation. When such religiously grounded approaches are integrated with transparent governance and robust anti-

corruption policies, Afghanistan stands a stronger chance of building a drug-free society and achieving sustainable socioeconomic welfare.

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