

Countering Transnational Criminal Insurgents

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Since the mid-1990s, IDA has assisted international and interagency efforts to understand the connection between insurgencies and transnational crime, especially narcotics. An example is a series of technical conferences that IDA facilitated for the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) in Vienna, Austria. The conferences involved participants spanning both theory and praxis from universities, law enforcement agencies, research institutes, and non-governmental organizations. The initial conferences focused on international narcotics markets, while later technical workshops examined the impact of transnational crime and narcotics markets on insurgencies and regional instability.

Lessons

The connection between transnational crime, trafficking and insurgent groups—first so prominent in Colombia and now a feature of instability across South America, Africa, South Asia, and the Middle East—is a complex problem in search of an international and interagency solution. To advance the understanding of illicit markets and anti-government groups, the UNODC hosted the conference “Countering the Effects of Violent Transnational Crime” in December 2007. The event was sponsored by the U.S. Department of State’s Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement. Seminar topics included histories of the links between transnational crime and anti-government groups, similarities between criminal and terrorist network operations, the underlying organizational principles governing their behavior, and viable strategies for defeating them. The Colombian narco-insurgency and criminal activities in the surrounding regions were examined as the largest case study of successes in countering criminal-based anti-government groups. Colombian efforts to combat the narco-insurgency included establishing a government presence in all provinces and districts, substantially narrowing insurgents’ freedom of

action. Colombia’s successful counternarcotics campaign offers a set of principles that could prove useful in Afghanistan and elsewhere.

Stimulated by developments in Afghanistan, the United Nations sponsored a technical conference in April 2009, called “Building the evidence base for drug control in Afghanistan: Working toward an actionable, collaborative research agenda.” Topics emphasized the complexity of the situation in Afghanistan and the neighboring region and how that complexity affects the potential for success. Workshop participants concluded that coordination, cooperation, and unity of purpose are needed to foster workable regional security arrangements and a viable state. Those attributes remain elusive, arguing for a more granular understanding of the region’s societal and economic complexities.

The UNODC map in Figure 1, which depicts the areas where there are high-risk security conditions and opium poppy cultivation, suggests a close relationship between violence and opium.¹

As a foundation for the April UNODC workshop, IDA developed an integrated, synchronized strategy² that relies both on combat operations derived from analyses of Coalition counterinsurgency data from Iraq, and “economic operations” that undermine the narcotics trade’s “business” viability, thereby reducing the resources available to finance insurgency.³ The strategy consists of three components: 1) engage the opium market to drive the price of opium below cost, 2) subsidize and create an alternative licit market, and 3) provide security and transportation to move licit crops to market. The basic components of this strategy are being implemented in Afghanistan. IDA’s research produced the following findings:

1. A direct relationship exists between the illicit opium industry and the failure of international aid programs and reconstruction efforts. As the drug economy grows, it fuels the reconstitution of anti-government forces; the resulting

¹ Afghanistan Opium Survey 2008, UNODC.

² Crane, et al, *An Integrated, Synchronized Strategy for Afghanistan*, IDA Document D-3586 (Alexandria, VA: Institute for Defense Analyses, August 2008).

³ So called “Deep Battle” operations to remove the Taliban’s illicit “industrial base.”

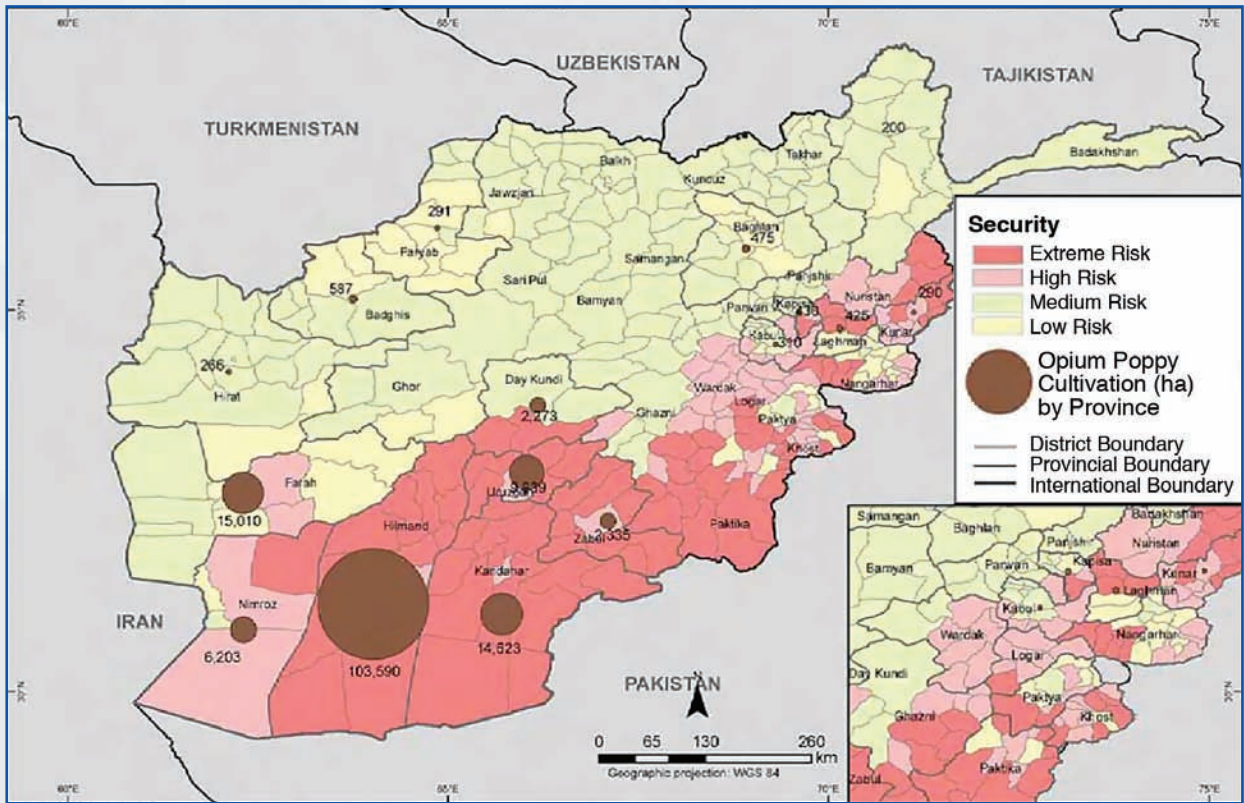


Figure 1: Security map (as of 12 June 2008) and opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan by province, 2008.

environment is one in which stability and rule of law cannot flourish.

2. No single element of government by itself has the capacity to achieve an enduring regional security arrangement and viable Afghan state.

3. The opium industry is increasingly controlled by anti-government groups.

4. While poppy cultivation has been contained in some areas, it has expanded rapidly in those provinces with the lowest security levels.

5. Without a properly executed, integrated, synchronized strategy, pro-government armed forces will likely continue to suffer increasing casualties, while enemy forces regain their strength and sustain their efforts.

6. Synchronized efforts among law enforcement, economic and political development groups, and the armed forces must engage the illicit opium industrial base as a target set. Goals include driving down the price of opium, substantially

reducing the value of stockpiled opium, and eliminating insurgents' ability to reconstitute and recruit.

7. Eradicating poppy crops is a complementary strategy, but should be conducted only after the underlying opium value is reduced to near or below cost.

8. Law enforcement operations are needed to prosecute criminals for corruption, extortion, and drug trafficking in order to publicly identify the criminal nature of the insurgency. However, current law enforcement operations do not have the capacity to ruin either the underlying drug business or to substantially cripple anti-government groups.

9. When the opium industry collapses, key agencies and donors must be prepared to provide economic assistance to the population.

Implementing this approach is not straightforward, because it requires governments, agencies, and inexperienced host nation forces to cooperate extensively. From its analysis

Image courtesy of UNCSS

of Colombian counter-narcotics efforts, IDA developed—in cooperation with UN experts—a set of basic operational principles applicable across many kinds of asymmetric war situations.

1. Intervention thresholds, i.e., minimum operational levels that need to be achieved and sustained to reap huge deterrence benefits, exist.

2. Criminal organizations resist such interventions by fragmenting into smaller, less capable elements. A key variable, dependent on local conditions, is the reconstitution time (adaptability) of militarized criminal organizations. Short reconstitution times are particularly demanding, requiring government units with the latitude to exploit opportunity and that are dispersed widely to restrict opponent's freedom of movement.

3. A potentially fatal flaw of transnational anti-government organizations is their

criminality, which can be used to delegitimize them.

4. There continues to be an urgent need for technical and professional experts to characterize how reconstitution of violent transnational criminal groups occurs, both quantitatively and qualitatively. To date, with limited data, only sustained pressure across more than ten reconstitution cycles has proven effective. It is difficult to keep complex alliances focused on tasks for long periods. Making reconstitution more difficult is a more promising path to success.

Summary

IDA's analyses of Colombia's experience against militarized criminal groups, its work with UNODC, and its on-site insights into challenges posed by the situation in Afghanistan have improved understanding of these complex criminal insurgencies.