



# GOING DUTCH

## Counternarcotics Activities in the Afghan Province of Uruzgan

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*In fact, there has been only one society that has not engaged in the cultivation or development of intoxicants: the Eskimo.*

—David MacDonald, *Drugs in Afghanistan*

*This article is based on the master's degree research of Erik Donkersloot under supervision of both co-authors.*

*A major European producer of synthetic drugs, including ecstasy, and cannabis cultivator; important gateway for cocaine, heroin, and hashish entering Europe; major source of US-bound ecstasy; large financial sector vulnerable to money laundering; significant consumer of ecstasy.*<sup>1</sup>

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PHOTO: A U.S. Marine patrols through a poppy field in the Gamsir District, Afghanistan, 1 April 2010. (U.S. Navy, PO1 Mark O'Donald)

IN ITS RENOWNED FACTBOOK the CIA paints a grave picture of the Netherlands as almost a semi-narco state.<sup>2</sup> In fact, drugs are the first thing that comes to the minds of many Americans when they think of the Netherlands. In an ironic twist of history, both countries found themselves fighting drugs and criminal drug networks as contributors to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission in Afghanistan. This leads to an interesting question: how did the Dutch perceive the war against drugs in this Central Asian country? Could a specific “Dutch Approach” be discerned here?

Poppy production in Afghanistan creates an awkward dilemma. On one hand, it offers a stable income to Afghan farmers. Sociologist David MacDonald writes that it is “a cash crop with a hard currency value and easy to transport and sell [and] relatively drought resistant.”<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, Afghanistan is responsible for 90 percent of worldwide poppy production and is the biggest exporter of this raw material for heroin and morphine.

The drug network is complex. Afghan farmers sell their poppy or opium through intermediates. Drugs are smuggled out of Afghanistan through bazaars, with the help of corrupt government officials and armed militia. Not until the year 2000 did the Taliban ban the growth of poppy, but the production has simply moved to areas that were outside Taliban control. Moreover, the resulting limited supply of poppy caused the farm-gate price to increase even further. More than ever, Afghanistan can be characterized as a mafia-like narco state, operated by domestic and international drug cartels.

The drug problem is one of the most important issues that the United States, UN, ISAF, Afghan government, and nongovernmental organizations have had to address to make their comprehensive approach succeed.<sup>4</sup> In 2002, the United Kingdom was formally appointed as lead nation for the counternarcotics policy in Afghanistan. Yet, in 2007 opium production reached a high of 8,200 tons.<sup>5</sup> In the last two years the total number of acres planted in poppy decreased. However, this was not the case in the unstable southern provinces, and it is precisely there that the insurgency is at its most severe. In fact, there is a surplus of opium in Afghanistan's south.

The negative effects are evident: social, economic, and political destruction, partly because the opposing militant forces gain up to 50 percent of their revenues from the drug trade.<sup>6</sup> Corruption of government officials is endemic, and fueled by this drug trade. Politicians fear loss of popular support if they take strong measures against poppy production.

A very dedicated and robust counternarcotics strategy is needed to tackle this fundamental problem. In the past, many different strategies were developed to fight drugs in countries such as Colombia (cocaine) and Myanmar (opium). The number of international drug enforcement organizations, conventions, and treaties is steadily increasing, and many different methods have been investigated. For example, the think tank Senlis Council argues that Afghan drugs could be used for medical purposes.<sup>7</sup>

### The Afghan Anti-Drug Policy

The official Afghan anti-drug policy is laid down in the 2006 National Drug Control Strategy (NDCS).<sup>8</sup> Although the Ministry of Counter Narcotics is responsible for executing this strategy, the ministry depends on the Ministries of the Interior and Defense, as these run the Afghan Army; police, including the Counter Narcotics Police of Afghanistan; and the Afghan Eradication Force, which is responsible for the destruction of poppy fields.



(U.S. Marine Corps, Sgt. Jesse Stence)

**An Afghan National Security Force member eradicates poppy in northern Marjah, Helmand Province, Afghanistan, 26 March 2011.**

Afghan anti-drug policy has not yet led to satisfying results. The question arises as to where the bottlenecks are and what approach can lead to success. This article focuses on two important pillars of the NDCS—eradication and interdiction.<sup>9</sup> Eradication includes the actual destruction of poppy fields, while interdiction focuses on eliminating drug traders and finding drug laboratories and the raw materials used in the production of heroin. Interdiction further includes anti-corruption activities and the establishment of special police units.

A comparison of both pillars is even more interesting if we take into account that since 2008, NATO has shifted its focus in Afghanistan from eradication to interdiction. The reasons for this become apparent when you look at the example of Uruzgan Province, where the Dutch had responsibility from the summer of 2006 to the summer of 2010.

Uruzgan Province remains a problematic province, despite a seven percent decrease in poppy production in 2009.<sup>10</sup> The most important crop in Uruzgan is still poppy, which, according to the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, overshadows all other crops in the province.<sup>11</sup> Almost two-thirds of the population earns part of its income from growing poppy. Dutch Task Force Uruzgan was not actively involved in the eradication of poppy fields, but the drug-related problems did have serious negative consequences for the Dutch mission.<sup>12</sup>

## Eradication

*“Why don’t you shoot us now? If you cut down my fields, we will all die anyway!”<sup>13</sup>*

Most Afghan farmers do not want to depend on the central Afghan government for their means of existence. In their eyes, the government is corrupt and inefficient, while poppy provides a more or less stable revenue. Tradition and social status often strengthen this choice: poppy is not seen as

***The most important crop in Uruzgan is still poppy, which... overshadows all other crops in the province.***

something immoral. It is a hardy crop and easy to transport and store. Local tradesmen collect the poppy after the harvest, freeing the farmers from any further obligations.

Eradication is a so-called *drug-supply reduction tool* within the Afghan NDCS strategy and is effective because the threat of eradication stimulates farmers to choose legal crops. Aerial spraying with pesticides is the most cost efficient method for eradication. However, most ISAF countries refrain from using this method because of its negative propaganda effect and because it can decrease the fertility of the soil. Eradication on the spot is emphasized, either using bare hands and heavy tools, or simply through burning. As a rule, farmers do not receive any compensation (or in exceptional cases a small onetime payment) for their eradicated poppy: legal behavior is not rewarded. The NDCS also states that eradication should take place early in the season, before the poppy flowers, to enable farmers to plant other crops.

Most experts believe that eradication is inefficient and rather counterproductive.<sup>14</sup> Farmers are simply too dependent on growing poppy. Only in a few cases do farmers allow their fields to be destroyed voluntarily. Almost all eradication is forced, an approach through which NDCS policy—urged on by ISAF—tries to give this instrument an “Afghan face.”<sup>15</sup>

It is therefore difficult to illustrate the “success” of the eradication approach in unambiguous numbers. The Afghan government and international community realize this. A sharp decrease in the number of acres planted in poppies, for example, may not be a true indicator of success. It is easy to relocate poppy to areas controlled by opposing militant forces. As expressed by leading Afghanistan experts Barnett Rubin and Jake Sherman, “Eradication promotes the geographical spread of cultivation.”<sup>16</sup> Moreover, the amount of harvested poppy per acre may differ per season based on growing conditions. And then there is the problem that opium can easily be stored for long periods in time of overproduction. In seasons with a production shortage, the prices increase again. The crop is too dynamic to draw clear conclusions with regard to the “success” or “failure” of eradication.

The negative consequences of eradication are even more apparent. First, poppy prices increase





(U.S. Marine Corps CPL Aaron Rooks)

**U.S. Marines assigned to Alpha Company, 2nd Reconnaissance Battalion, Marine Expeditionary Brigade-Afghanistan, pour gasoline on bags of poppy seed before destroying them during Operation Butler at Salaam Bazaar, Helmand Province, Afghanistan, 6 October 2009.**

rather than decrease—scarcity leads to increased market value. This attracts new drug networks and creates conflicts between farmers, who can profit from eradicating the fields of rival farmers. Second, eradication further increases the debt burden of poppy farmers. They often contract considerable loans from drug lords that partly have to be paid off in poppy. Third, eradication strengthens opposing militant forces, not only financially, but also militarily and politically: they are the ones transporting and selling the drugs. As the U.S. special representative for Pakistan and Afghanistan Richard Holbrooke observed, “Eradication might destroy some acreage, but it didn’t reduce the amount of money the Taliban got by one dollar.”<sup>17</sup> Moreover, eradication stimulates farmers to join militant forces, simply because they do not have an alternative. Fourth, eradication fuels social unrest and tribal tensions. Farmers oppose the authorities and eradication teams, sometimes with deadly results. Some provincial governors profit from eradicating certain areas, while others, out of self-interest, do not do anything. The fields of strong local powerbrokers are often left alone. To “score,” local authorities eradicate poppy fields of smaller farmers, who can hardly defend themselves.

To what extent did these concerns apply to the “Dutch province” of Uruzgan? To begin with, the

Dutch government has never been very supportive of this short-term and unpopular instrument: eradication cannot, on its own and without alternatives, offer a long-term solution, and it clashes heavily with the hearts-and-minds approach and Afghan reconstruction.<sup>18</sup> The Dutch government argues that ISAF troops are not tasked to destroy drugs. Therefore, Task Force Uruzgan did not want to dedicate scarce military resources to it. Taking this position, the Dutch contradicted American and British policies that were in favor of eradication.

Task Force Uruzgan could not avoid the problem entirely: eradication was an important pillar of the NDCS strategy, and the task force was ultimately there to support the Afghan government. The task force dealt very little with the eradication teams, which mainly consisted of Afghans and employees of the American firm DynCorp. In April 2007, the Dutch supported and protected an eradication team, but this was more or less it. The bulk of the eradication actions were assigned by provincial governor Asadullah Hamdam. Through its political advisors, Task Force Uruzgan consulted almost daily with the governor.

The Netherlands and Task Force Uruzgan conducted eradication as effectively and neutrally as possible to minimize damage to the small farmers. However, this did not always work out, and several incidents occurred. For example, while Chief of Police Juma Gul eradicated several poppy fields on a random basis, some eradication activities were not tribe-neutral. Task Force Uruzgan feared that the fields of the Popolzai tribe would not be touched because president Karzai was a member of this tribe. Indeed, only a fraction of the 2,000 acres of poppy fields intended for destruction was eradicated in the end.

The case of Uruzgan shows us that eradication is a drug-supply reduction tool that can cause far-reaching tribal and social problems, disturbing the fragile balance of power in the province. It is a means for power politics rather than to reduce the growth of poppy.

## Interdiction

*“It’s time to switch focus. We are looking too much at cultivation and not enough at the top of the drug networks.”<sup>19</sup>*

From late 2008, the Afghan government and international community acknowledged that the

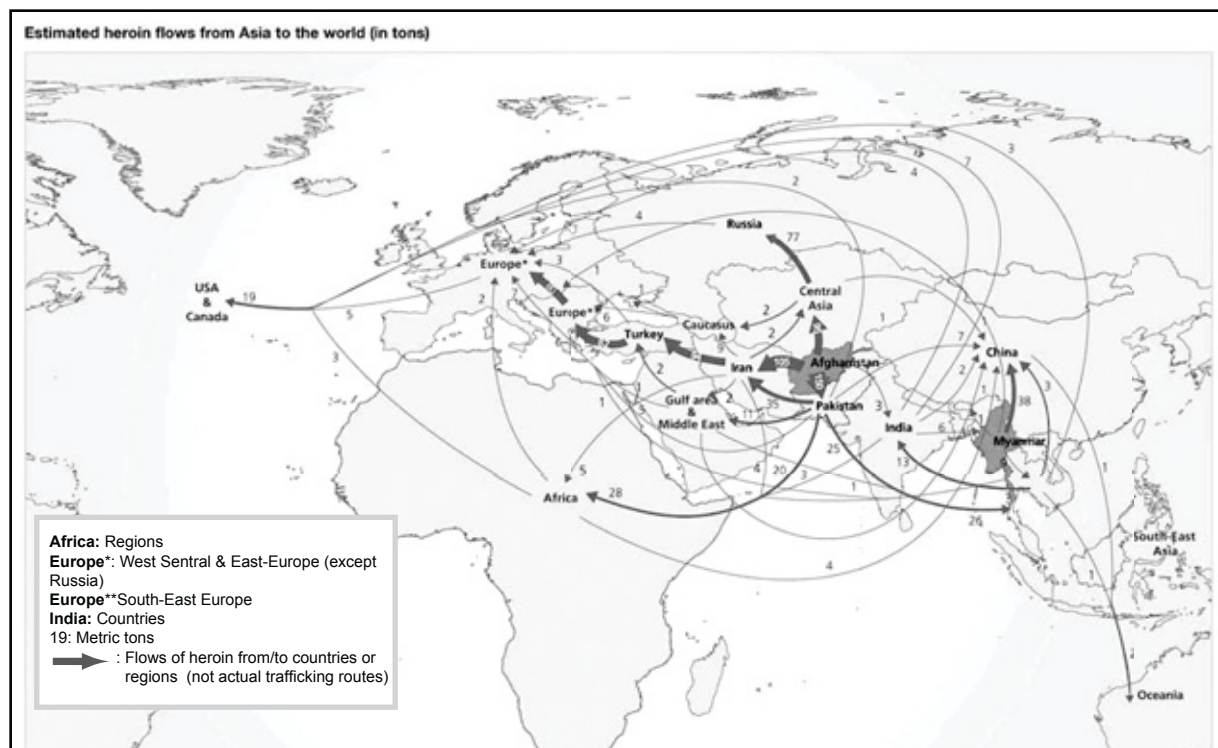
alternative strategy of a focus on interdiction could lead to faster results. This approach is not directly aimed at fighting the production of poppy itself, but focuses on paralyzing the trade in opium, heroin, and other drugs through localizing and destroying opium bazaars, warehouses, laboratories, and chemicals. Other means include the arrest of drug traders and enforcement of drug related corruption at all levels.

ISAF's role is mainly one of military support such as protection, intelligence, training, and logistics rather than combating drug-related corruption or proactively carrying out interdiction operations.

The trade networks at which interdiction is aimed are often complex and multilayered. Opium traders (often local warlords) loan money to farmers to make them financially dependent. So-called farm-gate traders (*kamishankars*)—often two to four per village—collect the poppy from the farmers. Usually they live in the same village and are well known to one another. The village traders sell their product at opium bazaars to local traders (area traders), who in turn sell it to provincial traders. These have close connections to international drug networks that process poppy extracts into

opiates (almost two thirds of the poppy is processed domestically into the much higher-valued heroin) and smuggle it to Pakistan, Iran, or the Central Asian republics (see figure). There are an estimated 1,000 traders active at the middle and higher levels of government and approximately 30 at Afghanistan's top level.<sup>20</sup> At all levels corrupt officials and militant forces facilitate the transport. The number of drug laboratories is estimated to be in the hundreds. They are often mobile, hard to pinpoint, and protected by hired insurgents. Processing is relatively simple, despite the need for an experienced "chef" to mix the so-called precursor chemicals.

Compared to eradication, interdiction is—at least on paper—less aggressive towards the Afghan population. It hardly touches Afghan farmers, and therefore creates less hostility among ordinary Afghans. The NDCS states that interdiction "will help to decrease pressure on poor farmers who may have no option but to grow poppy in order to feed their families."<sup>22</sup> To support this, special police units and a counternarcotics tribunal are being set up, as well as several prisons.



Estimated heroin flows from Afghanistan<sup>21</sup>

Unfortunately, very little effort is put into fighting the often drug-related corruption in Afghanistan. Despite all promises made by the government of President Karzai and the NDCS policy, the speedy creation of an Afghan state framework is still more important than forceful control of corruption. At the time of this writing, the latter is still being postponed. In particular “functional corruption” at the lowest levels—such as bribing eradication teams to spare certain fields or underpaid local police to look the other way at their checkpoints—is endemic. Confiscated drugs still often make their way into the networks. At the highest level there is also a great deal of corruption. One of the most infamous corrupt politicians was Ahmed Wali Karzai (who was killed in July 2011), half brother of the president and head of the Kandahar Provincial Council.<sup>23</sup> Rubin and Sherman describe the complex corruption network as follows:

The small traders who come to the village have to pay the police (or bandits) whom they pass on the road, who pass a share up to their superiors. The police chief of the district may have to pay a large bribe to the Ministry of the Interior in Kabul to be appointed to a poppy production district; he may also have paid a member of parliament or another influential person to introduce him to the right official in Kabul. These officials may also have paid bribes (“political contributions”) to obtain a position where they can make such money.<sup>24</sup>

Hardly any offender appearing before the counternarcotics tribunal is a truly important link in the drug chain. Many experts believe that one should not judge Afghan corruption by Western standards: it is “a way of life.” Despite this, eradication, more than interdiction, proves to be an instrument with potentially far reaching political and social consequences. It directly affects the gigantic financial flows and major political authorities. The Afghan government believes that at the moment the country is not safe enough to address the interconnected problems of drugs and corruption thoroughly.

Interdiction faces further bottlenecks, some of which also apply to eradication. First, the production of poppy itself is not reduced substantially. This is because the interception of drugs or the arrest of traders does not decrease the demand for poppy or

opium. Second, interdiction also facilitates power politics by powerbrokers: it is easily used to eliminate personal, tribal, or political enemies. Third, interdiction will most probably only strengthen opposing militant forces. The inconsequential and corrupt execution of interdiction produces a lot of propaganda that Taliban and other militant forces can use. A no-nonsense approach by the authorities would take away the incomes of many Afghans, thereby making them easy recruits for these forces. In addition, as the risk of poppy production and trade increases, it is easier for these forces to demand more money to protect smuggling routes and laboratories. A fourth bottleneck is that a repressive interdiction policy will evoke fundamental political resistance. Corrupt politicians are affected financially and could start aligning with opposing militant forces. Fifth, and closely connected to the previous bottlenecks, interdiction may have negative consequences for popular support of the counterinsurgency strategy. The local population will be less willing to share information with ISAF troops. A last bottleneck is the lack of military capacity to carry out interdiction operations fully. The sad truth is that in 2009 only one percent of the 1,300 tons of the precursor chemical anhydride acid was intercepted.<sup>25</sup>

The interplay of bottlenecks—ranging from practical problems to fundamental resistance to engaging top officials—is also the case in Uruzgan Province. Little by little, Task Force Uruzgan increased its involvement in interdiction operations. However, the Netherlands has consistently emphasized that drug enforcement is primarily an Afghan responsibility and that interdiction can only succeed as part of a comprehensive drug strategy. From 2008 onward, cooperation between the task force and the other drugs enforcers such as the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration intensified. Also, starting in the summer of 2008, a Dutch civilian counternarcotics expert has been permanently deployed to the task force. A Dutch commander

***...a repressive interdiction policy will evoke fundamental political resistance.***



**An OH-58D Kiowa Warrior helicopter soars overhead near a poppy field during a mission, Kandahar Province, Afghanistan, 24 April 2011.**

remarked, “Interdiction is closely connected to intelligence activities. We did have good intelligence, but most information was not approached from a counter-narcotics perspective. Having this expert enabled us to do this.”<sup>26</sup> Although the Dutch government continued to support stronger interdiction, this hardly materialized in Uruzgan. Despite an intensified approach, the Afghan authorities and Task Force Uruzgan intercepted less than 1,000 kilos of opium in 2009. There were hardly any results from tracing and destroying opium bazaars (such as in the main population centers of Tarin Kowt and Deh Rawood), laboratories, and chemicals. Occasionally the task force discovered small amounts of poppy during combat operations, but this appeared to be mostly a matter of luck. A Dutch officer stated, “While searching for contraband, you also find poppy. We discovered a significant amount of kilograms, but this was only a fraction of the total amount.”<sup>27</sup> The policy is to destroy the found poppy on the spot. The population could otherwise start speculating that the poppy was to be resold again. Despite Dutch efforts, Uruzgan remained an important transit province to Helmand and Iran. The most important drug routes around Tarin Kowt, Deh Rawood and Shahidi Hassas were not touched. Laboratories were mostly located in areas that were outside the control of the task force,

i.e., outside the so-called “inkspots” or Afghan development zones. This makes them difficult to trace. As international affairs expert Fabrice Pothier writes,

The idea that some ISAF troops—mostly American, British, Canadian and Dutch—could engage only in “surgical interdiction strikes” against heroin labs and trafficking networks is more rhetorical than realistic. These facilities are embedded in a complex local environment, and any attacks will likely involve collateral damage.”<sup>28</sup>

It is difficult to assess and predict the effectiveness of interdiction as a tool, as it is still only in the start-up phase. The Netherlands and Task Force Uruzgan have at least been aware of the bottlenecks. Arresting suspected key leaders, such as warlord Matiullah Khan, might well have created large-scale instability in the province. The political will to take these risks has been (and still is) lacking. This is understandable.

“The situation in Uruzgan is still not safe,” stated a Dutch officer in 2009, a year before the Dutch task force left. “To establish a safe environment we badly need the battle group [i.e., the infantry battalion within the task force]. This battle group has other priorities and cannot permit itself to actively deal with the drug problem.”<sup>29</sup>



## Eradication and Interdiction: A Comparison

The conclusion is obvious: eradication and interdiction are both drug-supply reduction tools with (potentially) major and unpredictable economic, political, social, tribal, and military consequences. Before 2008, the NDCS emphasized eradication. From 2008 onwards, the emphasis was mainly on interdiction. The Dutch government and Task Force Uruzgan also preferred the latter as the main drug enforcement instrument. At the same time, they were aware that interdiction launched too early would have negative results.

It makes sense to prefer interdiction to eradication, as the former touches upon the heart of the matter. To begin with, the interdiction instrument has a far smaller number of targets than eradication. Within the latter, all poppy farmers and fields are a target. Interdiction offers more possibilities for quick results through engaging traders and intermediaries, who benefit from instability.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, it is less advantageous to opposing militant forces as it ultimately alienates the population less. Interdiction is cheaper than the often-extensive eradication campaigns. This does not require a well-functioning intelligence apparatus. Third, the traders and intermediaries collect over 75 percent of the drug revenues, while eradication mainly victimizes poor

farmers and forces up the prices. As a result, interdiction will lead to a quicker financial breakdown of the Afghan drug networks. Fourth, interdiction broadcasts a more positive signal than eradication: it opens the hunt for drug traders and corrupt politicians rather than for poor farmers. This again enhances the legitimacy of the Afghan government. In the long term the demand for poppy will decrease more quickly through interdiction than it would through eradication, simply because, ideally, drug trafficking becomes too risky in relation to the revenues.

In conclusion, interdiction suits winning the hearts and minds of the local population much better than eradication. However, Task Force Uruzgan could only play second fiddle and assist the “owner” of the problem—the Afghan government—with intelligence, materiel, and practical support. Alignment of intelligence capacity, combined with greater attention in pre-deployment training to the role and structures of drug networks, can support this. In any event, interdiction will only be effective in the long run if it is combined with other drug enforcement pillars, such as the creation of an effective judicial apparatus and credible economic development, including the development of alternative crops. In this process, patience is key. **MR**

### NOTES

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2. CIA, “Field listing: illicit drugs,” *The World Factbook*, <<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/fields/2086.html>>.

3. Macdonald, 61-62.

4. See, for example, Stanley A. McChrystal, “COMISAF’s Initial Assessment,” HQ ISAF (Kabul, August 30, 2009); Craig C. Colluci, “Committing to Afghanistan: The Case for Increasing U.S. Reconstruction and Stabilization Aid,” *Military Review* (May-June 2007): 90-97; Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, “Afghan National Development Strategy,” Afghanistan National Development Strategy Secretariat (Kabul, 2008).

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7. Senlis Council, *Poppy for Medicine* (June 2007), <[http://www.poppyformedicine.net/documents/Poppy\\_for\\_medicine\\_in\\_Afghanistan](http://www.poppyformedicine.net/documents/Poppy_for_medicine_in_Afghanistan)>.

8. Afghanistan Ministry of Counter-Narcotics, *National Drug Control Strategy: An updated five-year strategy for tackling the illicit drug problem* (Kabul, January 2006). The strategy includes four priorities (disrupting, strengthening rural livelihoods, demand reduction, and strengthening state institutions) and eight pillars (public awareness, international & regional cooperation, alternative livelihoods, demand reduction, law enforcement, criminal justice, eradication, and institution building).

9. For a similar choice, see for example Barnett Rubin and Jake Sherman, *Counter-narcotics to Stabilize Afghanistan: the False Promise of Crop Eradication* (New York: Center for International Cooperation, February 2008), 24-25.

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11. Afghanistan Investment Support Agency, Regional Rural Economic Regeneration Strategies, “Provincial Profile for Uruzgan Province,” <<http://www.aisa.org.af/downloads/provincialprofiles/uruzgan.pdf>>.

12. For the Dutch policy see the note of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Defense, and Development Cooperation containing the state of affairs on Afghanistan, 28 October 2008, *Tweede Kamer* 2008-2009, 27925, nr. 325.

13. Statement from an Afghan farmer in Helmand Province, cited in Gretchen Peters, *Seeds of Terror: How Heroin is Bankrolling the Taliban and Al Qaeda* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2009).

14. For example, Pierre-Arnaud Chouvy, *Opium, Uncovering the Politics of the Poppy* (New York: Harvard University Press, 2009), 165.

15. The most important governmental stakeholders and programs are the Afghan Eradication Force, Governor Led Eradication, Poppy Elimination Programme, and Central Eradication Planning Cell.

16. Rubin and Sherman, 27.

17. Rahim Faiez, “Afghan Minister Says Drug Strategy is Perfect,” Associated Press, 29 June 2009.

18. Although the Dutch Minister of Defense at first pleaded for an aggressive eradication approach, the Minister of Development Cooperation heavily resisted against this. This latter vision still dominates during the contacts with Afghan authorities.

19. Christina Oguz, head of UNODC in Kabul.

20. UNODC, “Addiction, Crime and Insurgency: the Transnational Threat of Afghan Opium” (Vienna, October 2009), 104-105, <[http://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/afghanistan/Afghan\\_Opium\\_Trade\\_2009\\_web.pdf](http://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/afghanistan/Afghan_Opium_Trade_2009_web.pdf)>.

21. UNODC, “Addiction, Crime and Insurgency,” 60.

22. “National Drug Control Strategy,” 18.

23. For example, James Risen, “Reports Link Karzai’s Brother to Afghanistan Heroin Trade,” *The New York Times*, 4 October 2008.

24. Rubin and Sherman, 22-23.

25. UNODC, “Addiction, Crime and Insurgency,” 69.

26. Interview with a Dutch officer, July 2009.

27. Interview with a Dutch officer, June 2009.

28. Fabrice Pothier, “NATO’s Drug Problem,” 15 October 2008, <<http://www.nationalinterest.org/Article.aspx?id=20018>>.

29. Interview with a Dutch officer, June 2009.

30. This is in line with Amitai Etzioni, who states that one should go for an easy win in his article “Reconstruction: A Damaging Fantasy?” *Military Review* (November-December 2008), 111-117.