

***A State built on Sand: How opium undermined Afghanistan*, by David Mansfield.  
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There are few issues in which the gulf between the dogma of policy narratives and the evidence upon which they are purportedly based is as stark as that of how to address illicit drug economies. The challenges of researching illegal activities in highly insecure environments, the reliance upon drug control institutions for data and the highly politicised nature of debates surrounding drugs has often resulted in “policy-based evidence”, rather than evidence-based policy (Cramer and Goodhand 2011). Despite the vast sums of money that have been spent on establishing a global drug prohibition regime since President Nixon first launched the ‘War on Drugs’ more than four decades ago, the international drug control regime is failing. Cultivation, production and consumption of illegal drugs have continued to rise and counter-narcotics strategies have had serious adverse impact on drug-producing countries.

In spite of the failures of the international drug control regime, its fundamental tenets – prohibition, strict law enforcement and supply reduction – not only remain in place but have been justified by an increasingly sophisticated rationale. Alongside the continued emphasis upon the morality and social imperative of drug control, the prioritisation given to reducing production in source countries has been strengthened by two inter-related arguments which gained prominence in the 1990s: firstly that illicit drug economies have become embedded in the so-called ‘new wars’ of the post-Cold War era; and secondly that drugs are therefore a clear indicator of political disorder and state fragility. In doing so, proponents of the drug control regime have sought to insulate the war on drugs from its critics by embedding counter-narcotics within broader foreign policy and development strategies focused on stabilisation, counter-insurgency, peacebuilding and state-building.

Nowhere has this rationale been deployed more clearly than in Afghanistan. Tackling drug production became a central pillar of the west’s state-building mission in Afghanistan and counter-insurgency efforts against the Taliban. However, despite the vast sums of money spent – the US is estimated to have spent \$7.5 billion on counter-narcotics activities between 2002 and 2014 (SIGAR 2014, 71) – the drawing down of the NATO mission in Afghanistan was greeted with unprecedented levels of opium poppy cultivation.

Against this backdrop David Mansfield’s book, *A State built on Sand: How opium undermined Afghanistan*, offers an invaluable analysis of the complex socio-economic and political dynamics surrounding the opium economy in Afghanistan in order to explain why counter-narcotics efforts have so often failed. In contrast to the ‘theatre of drugs policy’ (p.10), in which many of those responsible for devising policy have never engaged with those that cultivate poppy, Mansfield’s work is based on more than two decades of fieldwork amongst farming communities in Afghanistan as well as immersion in the drug policy community in Afghanistan. In the context of the sensitivities of conducting research on drugs in Afghanistan, and the challenging and deteriorating security situation in the country, the sheer depth and nuance of Mansfield’s empirical research marks him out as the leading voice on the opium economy in Afghanistan.

The overarching aim of the book is to analyse why opium bans have been implemented in Afghanistan, their differential impact on livelihoods and political (dis)order, and the effects of opium bans on broader state-building efforts. The book analyses four different opium bans implemented over a thirteen year period: The nationwide Taliban ban in 2000/1, two

successive bans implemented in Nangahar in 2004/5 and 2007/8, and the UK-led ban launched in Helmand between 2008 and 2013 as part of what became known as the Helmand Food Zone Program. By placing these bans at the centre of the complex interaction between externally-led counter-narcotics interventions, domestic political economy and local livelihoods, David Mansfield weaves a compelling narrative as to why opium bans endured in some areas but why, in the majority of cases, they had serious deleterious consequences by undermining rural livelihoods, destabilising fragile political structures and ultimately fostering protest, violence and rural rebellion.

As Mansfield clearly shows, the opium bans launched in Afghanistan must be understood in the context of state-building efforts in the country. The Taliban ban launched in 2000/1 was a “political gamble” (p.135) aimed at improving relations with the west in order to secure development funding, an aspiration that was destroyed by 9/11. Attempts to ban opium became even more important after the US-led invasion of Afghanistan with levels of drug crop cultivation becoming a “litmus test for the overall state-building project” (p.139). Yet, as Mansfield compellingly argues, the assumption that counter-narcotics, counter-insurgency and state-building are necessarily complementary strategies is deeply problematic. The history of state-building in Afghanistan has been shaped on the one hand by perpetual power struggles between those at the political centre and alternative sources of authority in the rural periphery, and on the other by the state’s weak economic base and reliance upon foreign patronage for survival (pp.101-2). Opium bans strike at the very heart of these tensions: “by failing to pursue a ban, the state risks a loss of legitimacy on the international stage, thereby jeopardising the funding that it so desperately needs for its political survival. However, by banning opium it also risks the opprobrium of the population at the periphery; a population that has proved to be adept at challenging the authority of the state and even deposing of the existing political order” (p.102).

In this context, it has only been possible to implement opium bans following a constellation of international, national, provincial and local factors. In both Nangahar and Helmand the headline-grabbing escalation of opium production threatened to invalidate the state-building mission and increased the prioritisation given to counter-narcotics by international actors, while both the Karzai government in Kabul and provincial governors sought to instrumentalise opium bans as a means to secure international backing and to extract greater volumes of development assistance. Importantly, these efforts coincided with temporarily conducive conditions in rural areas. Rapid rises in the price of wheat increased fears over food security and encouraged farmers to shift from opium to food production to mitigate risk, while the heightened presence of foreign troops and Afghan National Security Forces increased the perception that the state had the capacity to impose a ban. Furthermore, the specific ways in which the bans were negotiated at the local level – through patronage of local elites, pledges of rural development assistance, efforts to persuade farmers not to grow opium rather than resort to coercion, and limited eradication early in the season which allowed farmers to use the same land to cultivate other crops – all enabled the operationalization of opium bans in the short-term.

However, across much of Afghanistan bans proved unsustainable due to the centrality of opium to rural livelihoods. One of the greatest strengths of Mansfield’s work is his critique of the way that neoclassical economics has been deployed to understand why farmers grow poppy. This approach has portrayed cultivators simplistically as rational utility maximisers, readily responsive to price signals, who grow opium poppy only because it is more profitable than other crops. In doing so it ignores the complex and multi-functional socio-economic,

ecological and political roles that opium plays in rural economies. As a high value and heavily labour-intensive crop, poppy generates far greater demand for wage labour than other crops, ensuring the benefits of the opium economy extend beyond merely those farmers who cultivate it on their own land. These qualities have also facilitated local land markets by encouraging large landowners to lease land to sharecroppers (invariably the land poor) who then grow poppy in order to afford the land rental costs. These sharecropping agreements enable landless households to access land upon which they are then able to grow food crops alongside opium poppy, thus providing an insurance mechanism against food insecurity.

Opium is also one of the only crops for which farmers are able to secure advance payments, thus making opium central to local credit systems that help to mitigate against sudden shocks, such as rising food prices or family illness. These sharecropping and credit systems create a “symbiotic relationship” between the landed and the land-poor (p.105). Although in the long term these processes have fuelled processes of “socio-economic differentiation” and class formation, in the short-term struggle for survival the role that opium plays in enabling the poor to access land and credit remains an important advantage in the eyes of those who grow it. Consequently, it should hardly be surprising that the opium economy has become central to structures of rural patronage and a key mechanism around which power is brokered; especially through the role that opium plays in facilitating the purchase of land and weapons and by providing a means to bribe officials.

Central to Mansfield’s argument is the need for greater sensitivity to the spatial variation regarding how opium bans were imposed, the impact they had and the responses they evoked. Indeed, despite the importance of opium to rural economies, Mansfield shows that in some regions of Afghanistan where there are agricultural surpluses, hierarchical social structures and a history of state encapsulation, opium bans have proved sustainable (p.xvii). In these areas of “consolidated statehood”, such as irrigated regions of Helmand close to urban centres, bans have endured thanks to a combination of higher wheat prices, regional integration into national and international economies (which has made other cash crops more viable), better security, and increasing non-farm employment opportunities in towns, for which revenue accumulated from opium often provided the start-up capital allowing households to “graduate” out of the illicit economy (see also: Goodhand and Mansfield 2010: 26).

However, across most of Helmand and Nangahar opium bans inflicted great hardship on a peasant population with “strong communal traditions” and a history of challenging state authority, and as a result proved unsustainable. In these areas of “limited statehood”, where there are few viable alternatives to opium production, opium bans necessitated brokerage agreements between the provincial governor and a fractured local rural elite whose authority was constantly challenged by disgruntled rural populations. Imposing opium bans required a significant expenditure of political capital from provincial and local elites, whose ability to deliver results remained dependent on fragile political coalitions and negotiations with local communities. And, as the deleterious impact of the bans took hold, these counter-narcotics efforts “exacted a toll”, undermining the very structures of authority that the government was reliant upon to extend its writ into the countryside (p.203). Thus it became “almost inevitable that sub-national and local leaders who had been active in supporting the ban would find themselves increasingly marginalised once market conditions changed, particularly when international priorities shifted away from counter-narcotics, the US military forces announced their withdrawal from the province, and the political leadership sensed reduced opportunities for patronage from development budgets” (p.207).

Most dramatically, as Mansfield shows in the penultimate chapter of the book, the opium ban in Helmand resulted in the spread of poppy onto former desert land north of the Boghra Canal. By cultivating opium, farmers have been able to cover the extra costs required to farm desert land (water pumps, tubewells and the fuel for the generators that power them). Opium has thus emerged at the forefront of new agricultural frontiers in Afghanistan, opening up new “political and physical” spaces for the rural poor. Stretching across more than 35,000 hectares and with a burgeoning population of more than 160,000 “that had experienced life in state space and had no wish to return” (p.273), this new frontier region, which has become a stronghold for the Taliban, epitomises the failure of state-building, counter-insurgency and counter-narcotics programmes in Afghanistan.

Whereas the international community initially lauded the various opium bans implemented under the Karzai administration as proof of the success of its state-building mission, Mansfield’s work clearly shows that for many on the ground the bans merely created “patterns of collective insecurity” (Scott 1976: 205), which folded into a wider narrative of the state’s failure to improve the lives of its people and the country’s loss of sovereignty. As Mansfield concludes, there is thus a paradox in efforts to reduce drug production in supply countries: “a sustainable shift out of drug cultivation requires a reasonably high-capacity, legitimate and developmental state; yet...prohibition can undermine the possibility of the emergence of such a state” (p.285).

Mansfield’s book is a hugely valuable addition to our understanding both of what went wrong in Afghanistan and of the failures of the current drug control regime. It provides a powerful corrective to prevailing policy narratives that assume state-building, peacebuilding and counter-narcotics interventions are necessarily mutually reinforcing, and instead reveals the complex policy trade-offs that surround interventions in drug-affected environments. In doing so the book provides a further powerful voice on the importance of agrarian political economy to the study of violent conflict, peacebuilding and state-building.

### **References**

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