

# POLICY BRIEF



## Local Drivers of War in Afghanistan's Helmand Province

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## Key points

- Violence and war in Afghanistan's Helmand province have turned to a strategic and long-term policy by stakeholders, as a result of which there have not been a comprehensive program for improving public services and reforming local institutions to benefit the population;
- Available indicators point to overall popularity of the Taliban insurgents in Helmand. In contrast to what has commonly been believed, however, it is not the Taliban's political message and their narrative of Islamic Sharia that attracts local communities to their rule, but the self-interest and economic benefits that entices the majority agrarian local population to support them;
- There are three important drivers of the conflict in Helmand—the strength and influence of local warlords, the factor of agricultural land rights, and the drug trade—together which they continue to keep the province as one of the most violent and insubordinate to central government authority in Afghanistan;
- The local population of Helmand both the elites and ordinary communities have reached an informal or undeclared alliance with the insurgent groups to maximize their interests. They use the alliance with insurgents as an instrument (a) to lobby for political power, and (b) to earn incomes and gain financial benefits from the drug trade and illicit economy.

## Introduction

In contrast to what has commonly been believed, it is not the Taliban's political message and their narrative of Islamic Sharia that attracts local communities to their rule, but the self-interest and economic benefit that entices the majority agrarian local population to support the Taliban. This policy brief will demonstrate this hypothesis with the case study of Afghanistan's Helmand province.

Helmand province is an example of few areas in Afghanistan where the Taliban is more popular than the Afghan government. It is thus not surprising that Helmand is where the Afghan National Security Forces can hardly hold their bases, with the Taliban insurgents controlling nearly all the rest of the province. While there could be many possible explanations for the unpopularity of the central government, an important and still missing perspective is to look at how local politics and economic incentives dictate grouping with the insurgents. This Policy Brief argues that there are three important drivers of the conflict in the pro-Taliban regions of Helmand, which continue to keep the province as one of the most violent in the country. The Brief demonstrates that rivalry of local warlords and their competition over power and resources have played major roles in worsening the security condition in the province.

Furthermore, the Policy Brief stresses that the undocumented and illegal distribution of land in Helmand during the past 30 years to local commanders and elites has served as another major factor in pushing the local communities into the Taliban controlled areas. Finally, this Brief illustrates that given the large premium paid for the poppy crop as opposed to other agricultural crops, in addition to the international community and the Afghan government's failure to provide reasonable alternatives to poppy cultivation, the local population still prefer to cultivate poppy. And since the Afghan central government has attempted to enact strict counternarcotic policies, the local communities, which are primarily farmers, prefer to be governed by the Taliban and to freely cultivate poppy as means of earning their income.

## Main drivers of conflict

Helmand is an agrarian province located in southern Afghanistan with over 90 percent of its income generated from agriculture and animal husbandry.<sup>1</sup> Helmand's cultivated lands devoted to poppy production are thought to have risen astronomically from 834 hectares in 1999 to over 144,000 hectares in 2017—a whopping 173 times increase. Helmand has a population of around 950,000 (est. 2012) with nearly 95 percent living in rural areas.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, according to UNICEF estimates, while as much as 25 percent of the male population of Helmand are literate, the literacy rate among women in the province is no more than 1 percent.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> David Mansfield, "Between A Rock and Hard Place," Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, October 2011, <http://bit.ly/2GgRBSp> (accessed 1 January 2018).

<sup>2</sup> Government of Afghanistan, "Afghanistan Statistic Yearbook 2011/2012," Central Statistic Organization, <http://bit.ly/2oaMgV4> (accessed 3 January 2018).

<sup>3</sup> Anne Bernard, "Forward-looking Strategic Evaluation of the UNICEF-supported Female Literacy Programme." UNICEF, <http://uni.cf/2ogpz2H> (accessed 25 January 2018)

Helmand has been the bloodiest province for the international troops, Afghan security forces and likely the civilian population since 2001.<sup>4</sup> From the local perspective, there have been three important factors that have contributed to violence and conflict in this province. They are: local warlords, undocumented lands and the drug economy. I will address each of them, below.

## 1. Local Warlords

As with much of the rest of Afghanistan, Helmand's recent (post-2001) history can be divided into three phases, with the first being between late-2001 to 2005. During this period, the international community and the newly formed Afghan government largely relied on local anti-Taliban strongmen (aka former "warlords") to end or at least control the violence in the province. This was a change in perception of the West of the role of the Afghan warlords, from militant to civilian.<sup>5</sup> Relying on the warlords was the only feasible option at this time as three decades of civil war had weakened the traditional clan and tribal power structure and created a new one in its place. "This new power structure is distinguished from the clan and tribal structures and code by not being founded on the traditional divisions of tribe or clan, but mostly on economic incentives, [S]haria law and the rule of the gun."<sup>6</sup>

In Helmand, local warlords formed a coalition and divided the official positions among themselves: Sher Mohammad Akhundzada was appointed as the governor of Helmand, Dad Mohammad as head of the provincial National Directorate of Security, Malem Mir Wali as head of Helmand's army corps, and Abdulrahman Khan appointed as the Police Chief. With this division of political power, all of Helmand's major anti-Taliban commanders received a position and were expected to cooperate with each other against their common enemy, the Taliban.

This alliance, however, did not last long and the local warlords went back to fighting each other. Governor Akhundzada, whose family had governed Helmand since the fall of Hafizullah Amin's communist regime of 1979, was in turn trying to dominate power and marginalizing other commanders. Akhundzada had also built a relationship with then-President Hamid Karzai when their families were in Pakistan and, thus, could rely on the strong support of Kabul. Politically, Akhundzada belongs to Hezb-e Harakat-e Inqilab-e Islami (Islamic Revolutionary Movement Party), the same party which the Taliban's late supreme leader—Mullah Mohammad Omar—was also a member of. Akhundzada's father, Mullah Nasim, also a former Helmand governor and a commander who fought against the communist regime, had been key in expanding cultivation of poppy across the province. Akhundzada's family

<sup>4</sup> According to iCasualties.org, with 957 international troops' casualties since 2001, Helmand is the deadliest province for international security forces in Afghanistan (Casualties.org, "Fatalities by Province of Operation Enduring Freedom," <http://bit.ly/2GvzgRM>) (accessed 26 December 2017)

<sup>5</sup> Vishal Chandra, "Warlords, Drugs and the 'War on Terror' in Afghanistan: The Paradoxes," *Strategic Analysis* 30, no. 1 (2016), <http://bit.ly/2F4X1AA> (accessed 25 December 2017).

<sup>6</sup> Peter Dahl Thruelsen, "The Taliban in Southern Afghanistan: A Localized Insurgency With A Local Objective," *Small Wars and Insurgency* 21 (2): 262.

and their associated political party have thus been traditionally controlling poppy cultivation in the province.<sup>7</sup>

Governor Sher Mohammad Akhundzada thus tried to bring the drug trafficking fully under his control which prior to him was under control of another Helmand commander, Abdulrahman Khan and his associated political party, the Islamic Party of Afghanistan.<sup>8</sup> As such, Akhundzada and Abdulrahman supporters clashed several times, while both commanders' supporters, in turn, also clashed with Malem Mir Wali who belongs to the Barakzai tribe and still largely controls his home district of Gereshk.<sup>9</sup>

Akhundzada also started grabbing and distributing state lands among his supporters, what further outraged other warlords, whose gunmen began harassing the local populations and accusing them, rightly or wrongly, of being Taliban supporters.<sup>10</sup> This forced the locals either to bribe the commanders or to join the Taliban, many opting for the latter. Between 2004 and 2006, while these commanders were busy fighting each other and harassing locals, the Taliban insurgents gradually returned to the province.

The second phase of the Helmand conflict started with the arrival of additional international troops to Afghanistan. By 2006, the U.S.-led International Security Assistance Forces deployed more troops to Afghanistan with the hope of countering the rising insurgency.<sup>11</sup> The British forces were assigned for fighting the insurgents and securing Helmand province. As part of their assessment of Helmand, the British had already pressed Kabul to remove certain high officials in Helmand whom they believed were corrupt and involved in the drug economy. Consequently, the provincial head of the National Directorate for Security, the police chief and the governor were dismissed from their positions, respectively, in March, July and December of 2005. In addition, Helmand's army corps, headed by Mir Wali, was dismissed.

This phase of the war in Helmand can also be differentiated with deploying of thousands of additional American troops in 2006 in Afghanistan.<sup>12</sup> Soon, the American military had taken the lead and through counter-insurgency strategy (COIN), based on four supposed elements of "shape, clear, hold and build," tried to first defeat the Taliban with military means and then "win hearts and minds" through holding captured areas secure and implementing small socioeconomic development projects.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Antonio Giustozzi, "Tribes and Warlords in Southern Afghanistan, 1980–2005," Crisis State Research Centre, September 2006, p. 10.

<sup>8</sup> Though Abdulrahman and Akhundzada families belong to the same tribe ("Alizai," but different branches), they fought against each other several times during the era of the Mujahedeen government in the 1990s to gain more political power and control over territory.

<sup>9</sup> Giustozzi, "Tribes and Warlords in Southern Afghanistan ...," *op. cit.*, p. 9.

<sup>10</sup> Mansfield, "Between A Rock and Hard Place," *op. cit.*

<sup>11</sup> The number of NATO-led international troops in Afghanistan peaked at 140,000 in 2011 (BBC, "How Many Foreign Troops Are in Afghanistan?" 15 October 2015, <http://bbc.in/1rkyPwy> (accessed 28 December 2017)).

<sup>12</sup> The United Kingdom had around 9,500 troops in Helmand in 2006 (BBC, "UK Troops in Afghanistan: Timeline of Key event," 22 December 2015 <http://bbc.in/2BDED21> (accessed 20 December 2017)). Moreover, the U.S. began deploying troops to Helmand in December 2008, and during 2009, there were 10,000 American troops and military personnel in the province (Richard Norton-Taylor, "Pentagon Sending Thousands More Soldiers to Bolster UK Forces in Afghanistan," *The Guardian*, 11 December 2008, <http://bit.ly/2BGaK16> (accessed 20 December 2017)).

<sup>13</sup> Dahl Thruelsen, "The Taliban in Southern Afghanistan ...," *op. cit.*

In the long run, the strategy of removal of Helmand's strongmen from their high official positions did not only not help secure the province, but also provoked locals to join the insurgents.<sup>14</sup> The same can be said of the American COIN strategy, which led to both increased civilian and troop fatalities and outraged the central government and local communities with its indiscriminate night raids, which were not only a gross failure and culturally unacceptable for a conservative society, but also raised sympathy for the Taliban among the local population.<sup>15</sup> A key reason for the failure of COIN strategy was the decision of many among the local warlords' gunmen to join the Taliban as they believed that if the central government became strong enough to control all districts, they will lose their jobs and mainstay of drug and illicit economy shares. Akhundzada, the former governor, had acknowledged that around 3,000 of his armed men joined the Taliban once he was removed from power adding that he could no longer pay their salaries.<sup>16</sup>

The third phase of the Helmand conflict started with the withdrawal of the international troops and transition of security responsibilities to the Afghan National Security Forces in 2014. Since then, the ANSF strategy has been based on three elements of holding strategic and crucial territories, fighting for important areas and disrupting the enemies' strongholds that ANSF could not control. During the implementation of this strategy, however, more districts of Helmand collapsed into the hands of the Taliban who are now possibly controlling the largest territories ever since their collapse in 2001. One study tells that by end-2017, an estimated 4 percent of Afghanistan (made up of 14 districts) was under full control of the Taliban with the insurgents having "open physical presence" in another 66 percent of the country.<sup>17</sup>

For three years, as of end-2017, the Afghan government has deployed (at least on paper) around 30,000 troops in Helmand to fight the pro-Taliban insurgents.<sup>18</sup> This is the largest troops ever arrayed in an Afghan province, with the troops including among their ranks individuals from the Afghan National Police, Afghan National Army, and Afghan Local Police. Additionally, there are around 200 American and NATO Special Forces for conducting special operations across the province and providing air support for the Afghan National Security Forces.<sup>19</sup> There has been an counterintuitive result of all these efforts, however, as with increased presence of troops in Helmand, more territory has been lost to, not gained from, the Taliban insurgents which, according to the official accounts in Kabul, have not exceeded 10,000 armed men in the province.<sup>20</sup> And yet, also according to official data, in 2014 and 2015, alone, over 10,000 insurgents have supposedly been killed and wounded in the province which mathematically would mean the Afghan government has eliminated nearly all insurgents in Helmand

<sup>14</sup> Theo Farrell and Antonio Giustozzi, "The Taliban at War: Inside the Helmand Insurgency, 2004–2012," Royal Institution of International Affairs, 2013.

<sup>15</sup> Rangin Dadfar Spanta, *روایتی از دوران سیاست افغانستان: {Afghanistan's Politics: A Reading from Inside}* (Kabul: Azem Publishing House, 2017, vol. 1), pp. 215–515.

<sup>16</sup> Damien McElroy, "Afghan Governor Turned 3,000 Men Over to the Taliban," *The Telegraph*, November 20, 2009 <http://bit.ly/2EqMnTG> (accessed 20 December 2017).

<sup>17</sup> Shoaib Sharifi and Louise Adamou, "Taliban Threaten 70% of Afghanistan, BBC Finds," BBC, 31 January 2018, <http://bbc.in/2Gxz4IU> (accessed 20 February 2018).

<sup>18</sup> Author interview with high ranking security official, Kabul, 15 October 2017.

<sup>19</sup> *Khama Press*, "200 US Troops deployed in Helmand Province," 11 April, 2017, <http://bit.ly/2CmDMj7> (accessed 20 December 2017).

<sup>20</sup> Author interview with a high ranking security official, *op. cit.*



and is now fighting, as security officials put it, “the ghost enemy with ghost soldiers.”<sup>21</sup> The reality on the ground is that by end-2017, 10 out of 14 districts in Helmand had fallen in the hands of pro-Taliban insurgents, while only two other districts were highly contested and in mere two further districts the Kabul-imposed government had full control.<sup>22</sup>

The National Unity Government of President Ashraf Ghani<sup>23</sup> has tried to solve Helmand’s security issues by appointing in early 2016 Jabbar Qahraman, a Helmand Member of Parliament and a former communist commander, as the presidential special envoy for the province. Qahraman, in turn, promised that he would solve the Helmand conflict within three months.<sup>24</sup> However, two years later into the ongoing war, not only has not the violent conflict in Helmand been over, it rather has escalated to all over the province, with the insurgents being at the Helmand capital’s doorstep. Reportedly, when Qahraman asked the local warlords and elites to cooperate with the government, they first accepted the idea (and that is when Qahraman with excitement had announced the imminent end of hostilities in the province). But later, the local strongmen asked for two things: The authority for appointing all provincial positions and control of drug cultivation and trafficking.<sup>25</sup> Since satisfying these conditions was impossible for the central government, the pledged cooperation to end the war never materialized and the Helmand conflict and drug production has continued to escalate.

## 2. Undocumented Lands

As mentioned before, agricultural lands are the most important source of income in much of Afghanistan, including Helmand. This is true about the lands located on two sides of Helmand River which famously known as “Helmand Food Zone.” However, the majority of Helmand territories had traditionally been uninhabitable due to their extreme arid nature. Thanks to the building of Kajaki Dam in 1953, however, eventually large territories of Helmand had access to fresh water.<sup>26</sup> The Afghan government used the distribution of the newly irrigated lands as means for arriving at its political goals. While the Kajaki Dam was in Alizai tribe areas, they were not benefiting from it as the main areas which came under irrigation were in Nad Ali and Marjah districts which till then were practically uninhabited. The central government having been fearful of Helmand tribes, distributed these lands to Ghilzai tribes to balance their power and gain support in the province.<sup>27</sup> Since then, all other govern-

<sup>21</sup> Author interview with high ranking security official, Kabul, 15 October 2017.

<sup>22</sup> Author interviews with local communities and local officials and Abdullah Hamim, “Residents Ask Government Clear Helmand of Taliban,” Tolonews, 6 December 2017, <http://bit.ly/2oIPfKL> (accessed 28 December 2017).

<sup>23</sup> Afghanistan’s National Unity Government was created as an aftermath of the 2014 disputed presidential election where both Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah had claimed victory. After months of dispute, the then U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry mediated an agreement between the two leading candidates. Subsequently, the National Unity Government agreement was signed on 21 September 2014 based on which Ashraf Ghani was announced as the president and Abdullah Abdullah as the country’s Chief Executive Officer (CEO).

<sup>24</sup> Javid Naemi “جبار قهرمان: تا سه ماه آینده جنگ در هلمند کاملاً پایان می یابد” [Jabbar Qahraman: Within the Next Three Months, War in Helmand Will Be Over],” Radio Free Europe, 16 February 2016, <http://bit.ly/2BvKlXR> (accessed 20 January 2018).

<sup>25</sup> Author interview with high ranking security official, *op. cit.*

<sup>26</sup> Nick Cullather, “Damming Afghanistan: Modernization in Buffer State,” *Journal of American History* 89, no.2 (September 2002): 225.

<sup>27</sup> Mike Martin, *A Brief History of Helmand* (London: Afghan COIN Centre, 2011), p.23.

ments of Afghanistan have used this policy and have distributed lands with political benefits in mind.

Land distributions as an incentive for local elites or a political means to balance tribal political power in Helmand continued during Mohmand Dawood Khan's regime (1973–1978), the subsequent communist regimes, the Mujahedeen's rule (1992–1996) and the Taliban regime (1996–2001). Since the current central government does not recognize the deeds of the lands issued after 1975, however, a huge amount of lands distributed in Helmand are officially considered as seized land.<sup>28</sup> Among other things, for example, the Ishaqzai tribe received considerable amounts of Helmand lands in Sangin district during the Taliban period and it should not be a surprise that they are well-known for being strong supporters of the Taliban. Not only the Ishaqzai, but most who received land during past four decades and do not have official deeds to their plots are afraid of losing their lands if the central government gains control over the district. As such, many support the Taliban insurgents who not only recognize their ownership but also allow them to profit handsomely from illegal poppy cultivation.<sup>29</sup>

The Taliban, local officials and other strongmen in Helmand have continued to seize and distribute lands and issue their own deeds in Helmand.<sup>30</sup> Apparently, the National Unity Government has stopped all land related documentation in Helmand but such an approach has created more fears among the locals and will likely lead to more conflict and bloodshed until a reasonable solution to the land dispute and war can be found.

### 3. The Booming Drug Economy

Despite all the international community and the Afghan government's presumed counter-narcotic efforts during past 17 years, Afghanistan's illicit drug production has not only not weakened, but ironically strengthened. For long now, Afghanistan has been the leading supplier of opiates, accounting for an estimated 85 percent of the world's supply.<sup>31</sup> The U.S. alone has spent a reported US\$8.6 billion for counternarcotics programs in Afghanistan since 2001.<sup>32</sup> According to the United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the "farm-gate value" of Afghanistan's opium production increased by 55 percent year-on-year in 2017 and was estimated at US\$1.4 billion, equivalent to around 7 percent of the country's gross domestic product.<sup>33</sup>

The UNODC also states that poppy cultivation boomed from 201,000 hectares of agricultural lands in 2016 to 328,000 hectares in 2017—a geometric growth of 63 percent year-on-year. Helmand province has traditionally been the leading poppy production region in Af-

<sup>28</sup> Ryan Evans, "The Micro-level of Civil War: The Case of Central Helmand Province," September 26, 2012, Combat Terrorism Center at West Point, <http://bit.ly/2EsGvci> (accessed 18 December 2017).

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> For example, Tolonews, "Reports Claim Land Grabbing Rampant in Helmand," 18 March 2017, <http://bit.ly/2BtzWHQ> (accessed 20 January 2018).

<sup>31</sup> Mujib Mushal, "Afghan Taliban Awash in Heroin Cash, A Troubling Turn for War," *New York Times*, 29 October 2017, <http://nyti.ms/2zYat6l> (accessed 20 December 2017)

<sup>32</sup> U.S. Government, "Quarterly Report to the United States Congress," SIGAR: Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 30 October 2017, <http://bit.ly/2A6pfb4> (accessed 20 December 2017)

<sup>33</sup> UNODC and Islamic Republic of Afghanistan Ministry of Counter Narcotics, "Afghanistan Opium Survey 2017: Cultivation and Production," November 2017, <http://bit.ly/2C2TBQ8> (accessed 23 December 2017).

ghanistan, with its 2017 poppy cultivated fields having been estimated at just over 144,000 hectares (44 percent of country's total poppy area), while on the second place stood Qandahar with poppy cultivated area accounting for around 28,000 hectares (9 percent of country's total) (see Table 1).<sup>34</sup>

A vivid example of failure of counternarcotic policies is that of the Helmand Food Zone project which between 2009 and 2011 had reportedly spent US\$259 million countering drug cultivation in the province. Not only was the project not able to decrease opium cultivation, there is ample evidence that its tactics pushed the population and new areas under the control of the Taliban. David Mansfield demonstrates that with

**Table 1. Main opium-poppy-cultivating provinces in Afghanistan, 2012-2017 (Hectares)**

Province	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	Change 2016-2017	2017(ha) as % of total
Hilmand	75,176	100,693	103,240	86,443	80,273	144,018	79%	44%
Kandahar	24,341	28,335	33,713	21,020	20,475	28,010	37%	9%
Badghis*	2,363	3,596	5,721	12,391	35,234	24,723	NA	8%
Faryab*	PF	158	211	1,160	2,923	22,797	NA	7%
Uruzgan	10,508	9,880	9,277	11,277	15,503	21,541	39%	7%
Nangarhar	3,151	15,719	18,227	10,016	14,344	18,976	32%	6%
Farah	27,733	24,492	27,513	21,106	9,101	12,846	41%	4%
Balkh	PF	410	PF	204	2,085	12,116	481%	4%
Nimroz	3,808	16,252	14,584	8,805	5,303	11,466	116%	3%
Badakhshan	1,927	2,374	4,204	4,056	6,298	8,311	32%	3%
Rest of the country	5,475	7,553	7,647	6,089	9,771	23,499	140%	7%
<b>Rounded Total</b>	<b>154,000</b>	<b>209,000</b>	<b>224,000</b>	<b>183,000</b>	<b>201,000</b>	<b>328,000</b>	<b>63%</b>	<b>100%</b>

In 2017, the provincial boundaries of Badghis (Western region) and Faryab (Northern region) were changed. Ghormach district formerly part of Badghis province and a major opium poppy cultivating district, came in 2017 under the administration of the Governor of Faryab province.

The changes in opium poppy cultivation in these two regions are affected by this change.

Source: UNODC Afghanistan Report for 2017

Kabul's new eradication policies on poppy cultivation, many farmers have moved their production to areas where the government does not have control and where they can easily cultivate poppy under the cooperative oversight of the Taliban. The counternarcotic policies are thought to have led to the cultivated lands in the former desert in north Boghra canal in Helmand to have increased by over 100 times, from 400 hectares in 2003 to 44,500 hectares in 2016, with around 250,000 people or over a-quarter of the province's population having moved to this previously uninhabited part of Helmand.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> David Mansfield, "Truly Unprecedented: How the Helmand Food Zone Supported An Increase In The Province's Capacity To Produce Opium," Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, October 2017, <http://bit.ly/2yjK8Cz> (accessed 10 January 2018).

Considering the above mentioned circumstances, it is thus not surprising that available data including this author's interviews reveal that likely majority of people under the Taliban controlled areas of Helmand are content with the insurgents' governance and prefer the local Taliban administration to the Afghan government. The Asia Foundation's annual Afghanistan Survey for 2017 shows, for example, that Helmand province is among the top five provinces which the majority of its residents (more than 50 percent) think the country is in the right direction.<sup>36</sup> (see Figure 1).

The local communities' support for and trust in the Taliban in Helmand means that the Taliban will protect them. Based on UNODC-provided data, farmers in Helmand

Figure 1. National Mood, by Province



Overall, based on your own experience, do you think things in Afghanistan today are going in the right direction, or do you think they are going in the wrong direction? (Percent who say "right direction")

Source: Asia Foundation Survey of Afghan 2017

earned nearly US\$600 million from opium production in 2017.<sup>37</sup> In contrast to the Afghan government officials, the Taliban are not perceived as being engaged in widespread corruption nor complicit with invading armies. They also have "not banned opium at the behest of their foreign patrons".<sup>38</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Asia Foundation, "Afghanistan in 2017: A Survey of Afghan People," 14 November 2017, <http://bit.ly/2GbULqV> (accessed 26 December 2017).

<sup>37</sup> The Taliban are known to receive ten percent taxes on opium cultivation under the territories they control and are known to be involved in drug trafficking, as well. Estimated profits from the drug trade by the Taliban is thought to be around US\$200 million per year (Mohammad Asif Ahmadzai, "Taliban Annually Earn \$200 Million from Drug Trade: Nicholson," *Pajhwok*, 20 November 2017, <http://bit.ly/2CCLW0w> (accessed 28 December 2017)).

<sup>38</sup> Mansfield, "Truly Unprecedented ...," *op. cit.*

## Conclusion

In Afghanistan's Helmand province, violence and war have turned to a strategic and long-term policy, while there have also not been comprehensive programs for improving public services and reforming local institutions to assist in the wellbeing of the local populations. Helmand is an example of the so-called “ungovernable areas” in the country where the Taliban are more popular than the Afghan government. This Policy Brief attempted to demonstrate a largely missing perspective that it is a combination of weak central government, economic incentives and rational self-interests, rather than ideology and religion, serving as local drivers of support for the Taliban and grouping with the insurgents.

I have argued that there are three important drivers of the conflict in Helmand—the influence of warlords, the factor of agricultural land rights, and the drug trade—together which continue to keep the province as one of the most violent and insubordinate to the central government authority in Afghanistan. The Brief demonstrated how local warlords rivalry and competition over power and resources have played a key role in worsening the security condition in the province, while it also talked about how undocumented lands distributed during the last three decades in Helmand among local commanders, elites and the communities also plays a factor in pushing the population into the Taliban controlled areas. Finally, this Policy Brief illustrated that given the dire economic conditions and the international community and the Afghan government's failure to provide a reasonable alternative to poppy cultivation, local communities still prefer to cultivate poppy and that the same communities prefer to be governed by the Taliban who allow them to freely cultivate poppy as opposed to the central government who wishes to eradicate the practice.

It is not only in Helmand that the local politics and economic interests of the elites drive the conflict, it is also the case in many other conflict hotspots in the country. Badakhshan and its minerals or Faryab and its Junbish and Jamet Political Party rivalry are two other examples among many more. It seems that local elites have reached an informal or undeclared alliance with the Taliban and other extremist Islamist insurgent groups to maximize their self-interests. I concur with Fotini Christa on alliance formation in Afghanistan's civil war, where local communities use alliances with insurgents as an instrument (a) to lobby for more political power (b) to benefit from the drug and illicit economy and (c) for local elites to use identity narratives to justifying their strategy.<sup>39</sup>

## Policy recommendations

1. A purely military approach and arraying more troops will neither stabilize the Helmand province nor Afghanistan as a whole. Expanded bombings and airstrikes on drug production facilities at best will only hamper the drug production but will not solve the reliance on the drug economy by local communities; if anything, such tactics will increase the popularity of the Taliban. The central government should work far more on its policies with civilians and improve its public services and governance, to begin with.
2. Understanding local social, political, economic and cultural contexts is key to any successful policy making for the Helmand province and other parts of Afghanistan. The lack of such understanding—which is prevalent among both local and particularly international “experts”—will push more among the communities to the side of the Taliban. The

<sup>39</sup> Fotini Christa, *Alliance Formation in Civil War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 32–55.

Afghan government should base its policies on solid research and avoid short-term gain which can lead to long-term losses.

3. The Afghan government should also find a reasonable solution for the undocumented lands. Apparently, the National Unity Government has stopped all land related documentation in Helmand but such an approach will create more fear, alienation and weakening trust towards Kabul among the locals. An alternative approach could be categorizing the land deeds and recognizing the less problematic ones and giving official deeds to more problematic ones for certain period of time (such as a policy of renting lands). Other approaches that can neutralize the land issue from the current conflict in Helmand should be welcomed.
4. The central government and the international community should invest more on institution building rather than lobbying to gain local strongmen supports. Seventeen years after the fall of the Taliban, it is unfortunate that the central government still relies on clients and elites for gaining legitimacy and influence in provinces.
5. Considering the local nature of the Helmand conflict, and generally Afghanistan's war, peace only can be obtained through addressing and bearing the local drivers of the conflict. This also means that the Afghan government has to develop peace and integration policies based on realities of each conflict zone and, as 17 years experiences have shown, a unified and elite-centric national policy will not cultivate peace.

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