



Economy, Development, Environment

# Migrating Poppy Cultivation: Afghan poppy farmers in Balochistan

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After the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA) banned opium poppy cultivation in April 2022, there was a movement of some farmers from southern Afghanistan into neighbouring regions of Pakistan to grow poppy there. The same migration to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan provinces followed the first Taliban ban on opium in 2000-01. AAN’s Jelena Bjelica, together with Nur Khan Himmat, have been hearing from Afghans currently living in Duki, Kila Saifullah and Kila Abdullah districts of Balochistan about their decision to take their expertise in opium cultivation to Pakistan. In candid conversations, the farmers spoke of dangerous journeys, bribes and spiralling land prices, as well as discovering that the soil in Balochistan was of variable quality and water scarce. They also spoke of their hopes that the harvest in late April would be good and they can send much needed money back to their families in Afghanistan.

### Thematic Categories

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The poppy harvest in Nad Ali district in Helmand province, southern Afghanistan. Photo: Andrew Quilty, April 2015

*Thousands of Afghans have moved to Balochistan to grow poppy. From our district alone, one in every two men from each household has come here to grow poppy, either as sharecroppers or after renting land themselves.*

For farmers, it is clear that no crop can rival the financial returns of opium. So when in April 2022, the Islamic Emirate banned opium poppy cultivation, the migration of many southern farmers to Pakistan was, perhaps, no surprise. A quarter of a century ago, following the Emirate’s ban on growing poppy in 2000, Afghan farmers also moved to Pakistani Balochistan and what is now called Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province.

This time, the Emirate did give farmers a grace period after announcing the ban: it allowed them to harvest the crop already in the ground. After that, though, the ban has been strictly enforced and cultivation has been virtually eliminated across most of the country (AAN). According to UNODC's 2023 [Opium Survey](#), the national harvest fell from 6,200 tons of fresh opium in 2022 to just 33 tons in 2023. UNODC also reported that Helmand province – responsible for over half of the total national area under poppy in 2022 – and Kandahar province – responsible for a third – recorded drops of 99.99 per cent and 88.84 per cent respectively in the area of land under poppy in 2023. Helmand is particularly important, not just as the epicentre of Afghanistan's opium cultivation, but also of its trade; it borders Balochistan, through which part of Afghan opiates are smuggled out to Africa and Europe (AAN).

This report focuses on three farmers, two from Helmand and one from Kandahar, who have relocated to Balochistan since the ban, but first gives a little background to poppy cultivation across the Durand Line.

### *A brief overview of poppy cultivation in Balochistan*

Opium cultivation in Pakistan was on the decline throughout the 1990s – from approximately 9,441 hectares in 1992 to just 213 hectares in 2001, according to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime's (UNODC) [2008 report](#) on illicit drug trends in Pakistan. However, UNODC also found that the high opium prices resulting from the Taliban's 2000/01 opium ban in Afghanistan triggered a re-emergence of poppy cultivation in Pakistan. In 2003, the land under poppy in Pakistan expanded to 6,703 hectares and, for the first time, poppy was grown in Balochistan.<sup>[1]</sup> For a few years, the province expanded its drug-related activities from traditional smuggling to poppy cultivation as well, before again declining (from 3,067 ha in 2004 to only 424 ha in 2007).<sup>[2]</sup>

In the years that followed, sporadic media reports – for example, in 2014, from [Voice of America](#) (VoA), – suggested that some opium poppy cultivation had returned to Balochistan province, enabled by the lawlessness associated with years of separatist insurgency and brutal counter-insurgency.<sup>[3]</sup> However, nothing more substantive ensued, until that is, the IEA banned opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan in 2022.

As it did in the early 2000s, the 2022 opium ban left all but the largest farmers, who had stocks of opium paste to sell, very much the poorer and with few prospects of earning a living, while at the same time, causing an unprecedented hike in opium prices<sup>[4]</sup> (see AAN reports [here](#) and [here](#)). These have been the push factors driving some farmers to move to Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa provinces, where the state, should it wish, has little control over the vast lands, and landowners are willing to rent out land for opium cultivation.

UNDOC, in its most recent report from November 2024,<sup>[5]</sup> recorded that “member states in the region have noted rising poppy cultivation.” It gave the example of Pakistan where the government reported that opium poppy cultivation had risen from 27 hectares in 2020 to 380 in 2023.<sup>[6]</sup> The authors' contacts in Balochistan also said opium poppy had re-emerged in several districts, but also that the Pakistani government had not, so far, put any effort into stopping the cultivation.

In this report, the authors present information gathered from interviews with three farmers currently living in three different districts of Balochistan province

(see the map below). The questionnaire contained four sets of questions. The first dealt with why, how and when farmers decided to shift their expertise to the Balochistan province. The second dealt with soil quality and availability of water in Balochistan, as compared to southern Afghanistan, and to the cost of renting land. The third set of questions was about the market for opium in Balochistan and the final set concerned the farmers' encounters with the Pakistani authorities.



An edited Wikicommons map showing the districts that Afghan farmers told AAN they were growing poppy in.  
Map edit: Zolt Kovac for AAN

#### ***Why, when and how did the Afghan opium farmers move to Balochistan?***

All three of our interviewees said they went to Pakistan alone, leaving their families behind in Afghanistan. They said this had made it easier to cross the border illegally. Two of our interviewees were sharecroppers – they get a share of the harvest or a portion of the land to farm in return for their labour on the whole. The third was a manager with opium-growing expertise: he was renting land and managing a project with three other men who were its financial backers and who also organised the dispatch of poppy farmers to work the land as sharecroppers.

One of the interviewees from Helmand who is currently living in the Kila Abdullah district of Balochistan, having moved to Pakistan a year and a half ago, is one of the two sharecroppers. His share is one quarter of the harvest. The rest goes to the man who rents the land, who is also covering all our interviewee's expenses in Pakistan, including food. However, the interviewee will have to pay him back out of his share of the harvest. As to the interviewee's reason for migrating and how he manages the back and forth between Afghanistan and Pakistan, he said:

*There were no jobs in Helmand, so I decided to come to Balochistan and grow poppy here. I came with three friends. We go back home one at a time – sometimes one of us goes for a few days and the other two stay and await their turn. All of us are here without our families. ... There are many Afghans who came to Balochistan. Just in Gulistan [an area of Kila Abdullah district], there are hundreds of Afghans who grow poppy, but none of them have brought their families with them.*

The other sharecropper, who is also from Helmand, is now based in Duki district in Balochistan.

*I came here around six months ago because there were no jobs in Helmand. I came without my family. There was no chance of bringing them along because the official ways of travel are blocked by the Pakistani government and the smuggling routes are very risky and very expensive.*

All official border crossings between Afghanistan and Pakistan in the south were closed to travellers without documents almost immediately after the Taliban takeover in 2021. However, Afghans have continued crossing the border illegally, using smuggling routes. This always comes with some level of risk. Many use the illegal crossings between Baramcha district in Helmand and Nushki district in Balochistan for which smugglers, who drive them over the border, charge 30,000-35,000 Pakistani rupees (110-125 US dollars) per person. Onwards from Nushki district, our interviewees said, until you reach your destination, you must pay bribes to Pakistani police at check posts along the road. The size of the bribe depends on the sympathy of the policeman, as well as the guile of the traveller. As these routes are hard, risky, and expensive to use, the farmers typically travel in groups with their compatriots. "We are thirteen Afghans, including me" said our interviewee in Duki district, "all here to grow poppy. We're all from the same village and came without our families. There are hundreds of people [Afghans] here, all from the south." He farms land that was leased to a middle man who comes his district:

*[The middle man] brought us all here to grow poppies as sharecroppers. ... Our share is one fifth of the harvest. He pays our living expenses in Pakistan, but we'll have to pay him back after the harvest. He also paid for the rent of a vehicle [ie the smuggler] from Helmand to here. But we don't have to pay him back for that.*

After the opium ban was imposed, many farmers did try to switch to licit crops, such as wheat, cotton, barley and maize. However, as AAN [reported](#) in March 2024, many who did so fell into poverty. That had been the case for our Kandahari (non-sharecropping) interviewee:

*When the ban was imposed, I switched to growing wheat and other crops but didn't get a good harvest. That's why I decided to come to Balochistan. I moved my opium cultivation here around seven months ago. I came alone because travelling with the whole family on illegal routes is very risky.*

He explained how his management of land in Kila Saifullah was working out.

*I have three partners. They gave me money and told me to go and rent the land and I organised that myself. They then sent me farmers from Kandahar to grow poppy here. I'm an equal partner with the ones who put money in. They also pay [the smugglers] for transport from Kandahar to where we grow the poppy. They pay the expenses for all the farmers who work on our fields... until the last day of farming. These farmers will then have to repay all the money we've given them once the opium is sold.*

He said that most of the men who rent out large tracts of land are "those who were opium smugglers and traders in the south in the past." They have a lot of money, he said, and it is they who "arrange for the farmers to move to Balochistan and grow poppy." Opium trade and smuggling was such a lucrative business, especially in the south, that it is not surprising that those who made

their fortunes from it have found ways to keep it alive by relocating it to Pakistan. It is also not surprising that those who have capital have found ways to take the lion's share of any profits while others labour.

#### ***About the people, land and climate in Balochistan***

There is a similarity in the traditions and languages in Balochistan that help southern farmers integrate easily into local communities. Climate and land-wise, there are also many similarities. The weather in two of the districts that our three interviewees migrated to, Kila Saifullah and Kila Abdullah, is a little cooler than that of Helmand and Kandahar. Both are in the far north of Balochistan. Duki, the third district, is slightly to the south and is said to be a little hotter than Kandahar and Helmand.

Our interviewee in Duki, who is awaiting to see what yield he gets from his first harvest, due in April, is anxious, worried that it will not be that great, despite having been told that poppy would yield more there than in Helmand and Kandahar.

*This land isn't very good; it doesn't grow poppy very well, although people say there's more sap here than in Helmand. I heard that some people's land grew bad poppies and they abandoned the land and went back to Afghanistan. Also, some people rented out land which didn't have water. They dug wells but the wells didn't have water in them. Unfortunately, they spent a lot of money and, in the end, got nothing back. However, I also know many people who got good returns from what they sowed.*

According to our interviewees, the poppy yields in the two other districts are better. The manager from Kandahar who is renting out land in Kila Saifullah is hopeful. "This is our first year growing poppy in this district," he said. "So far, we haven't had a harvest, but the crop's looking very good, so we hope to get a good yield. I'm satisfied with the quality. In terms of poppy production, the land is even better than our land in Kandahar."

The sharecropper in Kila Abdullah district is cultivating poppies for the second year. He was very proud of his first harvest which yielded 56 kilograms of opium from 5 hectares of land. The harvest was so good he decided to sow poppy on 15 hectares this year: "We're satisfied with the product. The land yields good poppies. Dew falls at night. The poppies from land where dew falls are more expensive than those from where it doesn't. But, the land isn't the same quality as Helmand's. It's more fertile there."

Like Helmand and Kandahar, Balochistan suffers from a lack of water. Our interviewee in the Duki district told us about where he cultivates:

*The land came with water, but it didn't have solar panels or city power to draw the water up. [The middle man who leased the land] bought solar panels and now we can pump the water up and into the fields using solar power. It's a six-month contract and when the contract ends, the land leaser will have to leave the solar panels for the landowner. The land was leased for 4,000,000 Pakistani rupees (14,300 USD).*

Our Kandahari interviewee first had to get wells dug on the 150 jeribs (30 hectares) of land in Kila Saifullah that he had rented for 2,000,000 Pakistani rupees (7,200 USD):

*The water table's very high. I dug the wells around three to five metres deep. Because we're next to the river, sometimes we can irrigate our crops with river water. Previously, the owners of the land did that, but the river only flows sometimes, in spring or summer, but in winter, it runs dry. So, I dug wells and installed solar panels on the land. When I go, I'll leave the solar panels to the landowner. It's in the contract with him.*

The interviewee in Kila Abdullah said his 18 hectares of rented land had come with wells:

*There are two tube wells on this land and from each, we can pump three inches of water a day. We use city power for the three hours a day it's on, and otherwise the solar panels installed on the well. The city power and solar panels belong to the landowner. ... We're four farmers and, together, we sowed 15 hectares of land. The total land rented out is 18 hectares. There isn't much water in this area.*

Rents have soared since the Emirate ban drew Afghan farmers to Balochistan. For example, the sharecropping farmer who has grown poppy in Kila Abdullah district for the last two years told AAN the rent had increased by almost twentyfold: "Last year, the leaser paid 70,000 Pakistani rupees (250 USD) for this land, but this year, he rented the same land for 1,300,000 Pakistani rupees (4,650 USD)." Our interviewee in Duki district also said land that used to rent out for 100,000 Pakistani rupees (360 USD) now costs 800,000 Pakistani rupees (2,860 USD). This meant, he said, that farmers were resorting to renting less fertile, more marginal lands:

*In this area, prices have skyrocketed. Now, people are renting land that needs more work to make it ready for cultivation. Land that comes with water and is ready for sowing is too expensive for most people. The rent for unprepared land has also increased, but not by as much. Farmers renting it have to plough it, dig boreholes and install solar panels to make it ready to grow poppy.*

The interviewee in Kila Saifullah district, who had planted 30 hectares with poppy, said land was in such high demand that it was impossible to find these days.

### ***Poppy markets in Balochistan***

Opium is openly bought and sold in a market in Gulistan town, located in Kila Abdullah district. Gulistan is near the border with the Spin Boldak district of Kandahar, approximately 70 kilometres northwest of Quetta. Although Afghan farmers cannot use banks to transfer their earnings, they can easily send money back home through the hawala system after selling their harvest. The poppy farmer in the Kila Abdullah district remarked that selling opium paste was very straightforward: "I sold my opium here in the town last year and will sell this year's harvest here when it comes again."

Balochistan is at the intersection of smuggling routes between Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan. Our interviewees did not know which smuggling route the traders use, but expect they will come to their fields to purchase opium directly from them, as they do in Afghanistan. The Kandahari manager currently in Kila Saifullah said:

*So far, we haven't harvested. This is my first year cultivating poppies here. I still don't know whether I'll sell it here or take it to Gulistan. It's sold freely in the*

*market there. When I get the harvest in, my partners and I will decide how to manage it. But I think that some smugglers and traders will come by our fields and buy the opium directly from us.*

The farmer in Duki district, which is further away from Gulistan town, said the same: “People say that at harvest season, traders will come by our fields and buy the opium. Nobody takes it back home. We also plan to sell it here. There’s no difference in opium prices between here and Helmand.”

Following a major hike in prices in 2022 and 2023, opium prices stabilised at around 730 US dollars in the first half of 2024, UNODC has reported.<sup>[7]</sup> These prices are still several times higher than the long-running, pre-ban average of 100 US dollars per kilogram of opium (see this [AAN report](#)). That suggests that the opening up of cultivation in Balochistan has not yet made a substantial impact on the amounts of opium available at the markets to affect the price.

#### ***How do the Pakistani authorities deal with poppy farmers?***

Our interviewees said that Pakistani government officials do not interfere with poppy cultivation, but instead, try to extract bribes from the farmers. “So far, we’ve not received any threats from the government,” said the manager in Kila Saifullah district. “Sometimes [officials] go to [look at] the crops of some people and ask for money, but I don’t know how much they want. I heard they took bribes from people last year as well.” The same interviewee painted a picture of an overt system of bribery:

*The local government recently asked the big land leasers and the [Pakistani] community elders to meet government officials and made it clear how much money they [government officials] expect from them. The community elder informed us of this. Now they’ll be sitting with the government officials and will pay the bribe and then we’ll have to pay our share as well.*

The farmer in Duki district, who was growing poppy there for the first year, relayed what he had heard from local people:

*According to people from this area or the people who’ve been cultivating poppy here, the government takes bribes from people every year. They say the government usually comes and ask for bribes before the harvest. The bribe is negotiated. They take between 200,000 and 500,000 Pakistani rupees [720-1,790 USD for each tube well, depending on the size of area of land on which the poppy has been cultivated.*

AAN’s interviewee in Kila Abdullah said he was not troubled by the bribery, which is dealt with by the leaseholders and landowners:

*It’s not a threat. Last year, the government didn’t ask us. The leasers and the landowners talked to them and paid some bribes, I don’t know how much. It seems that in Kila Abdullah district, the government allows the farmers to cultivate poppy. However, during the harvest, they ask for some bribes and that would be negotiable and won’t be very much.*



A quarter of a century ago, following the Emirate's ban on poppy cultivation in 2000, poppy fields emerged in Balochistan. In this archival photo from 2004, Pakistani paramilitary personnel use batons to destroy a poppy field in Killa Abdullah district in Balochistan province. Photo: Naimatullah/AFP, April 2004

### *Farming poppy in Balochistan – at any cost*

For those concerned about illegal opiates, the shift in cultivation to Balochistan undermines whatever gains have been made in Afghanistan. Moreover, it seems that production is still ultimately controlled by the big traders who, up to now, have been little affected by the ban on cultivation, given that reports indicate that the ban on trading and export has been only lightly enforced.<sup>[8]</sup> For poor farmers and the landless, who used to get cash work in the opium fields, the ban has been a calamity. Those with power and capital are often actually better off because of it and have been able to pivot opium production and their control of it from southern Afghanistan to Pakistan.

As to those poor farmers, the last three years have been devastating. After the Taliban takeover, the Afghan economy shrank by about a fifth ([World Bank](#)), as civilian aid and foreign military spending and support vanished overnight, although aid was to return. It is estimated to have recovered only about ten percent of what it lost.<sup>[9]</sup> A similar shock to the economy is likely to be felt in the wake of the 20 January executive order by United States president Donald Trump to halt US aid. For an analysis of the likely shockwaves to the economy, see AAN's Kate Clark's excellent report '[Stop Work! Aid and the Afghan economy after the halt to US aid.](#)<sup>[10]</sup> For men like our interviewees, the Emirate's ban on growing poppy was catastrophic, given the lack of alternative sources of income in Afghanistan, given its stagnant economy. Balochistan has been an alternative. Like many Afghans, they were ready to face perilous journeys, bribery and the upheaval of migration in order to support their families back home. The terms of their deals with those renting the land are poor, but, without capital, they have few choices and no bargaining power.

Their stories also reveal, once again, the irresistible allure of opium poppy cultivation. Given the spiralling prices of renting even marginal land in Balochistan, which makes for uncertain yields, they have no guarantee that their sacrifices will be worth the cost. However, they seem to believe that all the risks associated with migration to Balochistan are still preferable to all other options now available in their home country.

*Edited by Rachel Reid and Kate Clark*

## References

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↑1 UNODC said in its 2008 report:

*Of the 6,703 ha cultivated in Pakistan in 2003, 38 percent (2,521 ha) was harvested. In 2004 with a similar level of cultivation (6,694 ha), only 22 percent (1,481 ha) was harvested. Although total reported cultivation in 2005 dropped by 47 percent (to 3,145 ha), 75 percent (2,359 ha) was harvested – mostly in the Khyber Agency. In 2006, cultivation dropped by 61 percent (to 1,909 ha), most of which was in NWFP and FATA [Northwestern Frontier Province and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas, renamed as Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in 2010].*

See: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), [Illicit Drug Trends in Pakistan](#), April 2008.

↑2 In Balochistan, “the entire 2005 poppy crop and almost the entire poppy crop in 2007 were destroyed,” UNODC said. According to [The New Humanitarian](#) from 2003, “the Pakistani authorities have destroyed some 500 acres of poppy fields in the southwestern province of Balochistan, on the border with Afghanistan, following a tip-off that there were some 1,500 acres under the crop.”

↑3 The unrest in Balochistan is between armed groups like the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA) and the Pakistan state and is seen, especially, in the provincial capital, Quetta, and in Baloch-populated areas. Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) also carries out sporadic attacks in the area.

↑4 After the first ban in 2001, opium prices increased from an average of 30 US dollars per kilogramme during the period 1997-2000 to an average of 300 US dollars per kilo in the period 2001-03. In 2003, prices peaked at 383 US dollars per kilo, stabilising at around 100 US dollars per kilo in following years.

Following the second ban in 2022, prices surged from an average of 100 US dollars per kilo in June 2021 to 1,112 USD per kilo in the south and 1,088 USD in the north by December 2023, after which they stabilised at 730 US dollars per kilo.

The prices via UNODC reports.

↑5 See UNODC, [Afghanistan Drug Insights Volume 2, 2024 Opium Production and Rural Development](#), November 2024

↑6 In 2023, reported UNODC, according to the Pakistani government, about 340 hectares were eradicated.

↑7 In December 2023, Afghan opiates expert David Mansfield reported they had reached as high as 1,112 USD per kilogramme in the south and 1,088 USD per kilogramme in Nangrahar (see [this tweet](#)).

↑8 For a discussion of this and sources on the trade ban not being implemented see AAN's 2024 report, [Opium Cultivation in Badakhshan: The new national leader, according to UNDOC](#)

↑9 The calculation that Afghanistan has made up only ten per cent of what it lost in 2021 was made in the World Bank's [December 2024 Afghanistan Development Update](#). It also estimated that it could take more than ten years for GDP to recover from the severe contraction suffered in 2021. That calculation was made before the Trump order to halt US aid and the outlook is now, undoubtedly worse.

↑10 According to the [UN's Financial Tracking Service](#), US funding had accounted for 43.9 per cent of total aid to Afghanistan in 2024. For 2025, the amount pledged by the US had been dwarfing contributions from other countries, making up 65 per cent of the total. The sums are so large that cutting them will have an effect on GDP, the value of the afghani (and so also of imports, including food, fuel and medicine), Afghanistan's trade imbalance as well as on beneficiaries and those who have lost their jobs in the aid sector.

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