

# **A Focused and Targeted Expansion of NATO and ISAF Involvement in Afghanistan Counternarcotics Operations**

**An essay for the Atlantic Council of Canada**

**Hillson Tse**

**Bachelor of Arts Candidate, Political Science and Economics**

**University of British Columbia, Vancouver BC**

**August 21, 2009**

## Introduction

Two thousand eight hundred and seventy six days. Days spent fighting the Taliban, days used in reconstructing crippled infrastructure, days spent training police, and days where NATO casualties in Afghanistan increased once again. With the Taliban regime overthrown and scattered in 2001, the major hurdle that faced Afghanistan and its international backers was restoring effective self-governance to the country and ensuring stability in both security and economy. Two thousand eight hundred and seventy six days later, such a hurdle has yet to have been cleared. The Taliban have been able to recover and regroup as an insurgency movement capable of carrying out deadly attacks on the Afghan government and NATO personnel, the Afghanistan economy is still severely underdeveloped and there is widespread corruption across all levels of government, police and military. Aside from all these serious challenges to Afghanistan's security and future development, there is one extremely critical issue that may ultimately determine the success or failure of the NATO mission in Afghanistan- opium. Since the collapse of the Taliban, opium poppy production in Afghanistan has exploded from 8,000 hectares in 2001 to 193,000 hectares in 2007.<sup>1</sup> The production, processing and sale of poppies into the narcotic drugs opium and heroin have provided funding for the Taliban insurgency, contributed to "warlordism", encouraged governmental corruption and weakened the rule of law. The Afghanistan opiate problem goes beyond simple eradication or interdiction as the opiate industry has become central to the livelihoods of a large proportion of Afghan farmers. In this essay, I would like to suggest that NATO's current involvement in counternarcotics operations is insufficient given the opiate industry's central contributory role to continued destabilization and violence in Afghanistan. Ideally, NATO counternarcotics operations should focus on public information campaigns, interdiction of narcotics, the destruction of processing facilities and caches, rooting out corruption and maintaining stability in the region. However, any NATO expansion in counternarcotics operations must take into account NATO's current operational limitations, whether the operations further the doctrine of "winning hearts and minds" and whether or not such an approach would be feasible given Afghanistan's present security and developmental state. As President Karzai duly notes, "The question of drugs . . . is one that will determine Afghanistan's future. . . . If we fail, we will fail as a state eventually, and we will fall back in the hands of terrorism."<sup>2</sup>

## Historical Perspective and Current Trends

The growth of poppies and sale of opium goes back to the USSR invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. With the destruction of the licit economy by the Soviets, the Mujahedeen turned to opium as the primary means of raising revenue to fight the war.<sup>3</sup> Even as the USSR invasion ended, the new Taliban government continued to utilize opiate sales as a means to generate tax revenue and evidence suggests that they actively encouraged production and trafficking.<sup>4</sup> In that sense, the opiate industry has had thirty years to deeply integrate itself into the Afghanistan economy and many Afghans have a vested interest in the status quo. With the ousting of the Taliban, opium production has risen 657% from 2001

---

<sup>1</sup> (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime 2009, 188)

<sup>2</sup> (Glaze 2007, 7)

<sup>3</sup> (Duncan 2007, 8)

<sup>4</sup> (Duncan 2007, 9)

levels which indicates that even without a central government that actively promotes the opiate industry, farmers are still readily motivated to produce and sell opium poppies. The economic incentives for poppy cultivation are obvious; the average income of a hectare of poppies can reach US \$4,600 per year while average income for a hectare of wheat reaches only \$390 per year and it is estimated that the average poppy farmer earns ten times more than a cereal or wheat farmer.<sup>5 6</sup> In a country where 70% of the people participate in agriculture as a primary source of income, the allure of poppies over other traditional crops is quite understandably overwhelming.<sup>7</sup> To put the scope of the opiate industry into perspective, it is estimated that the export value of the 2007-2008 opium harvest was \$3.4 billion or equal to 33% of the total licit GDP and that 10% of Afghans are involved in some manner with opium cultivation.<sup>8 9</sup> Of even more concern is the development of a domestic opium and heroin processing industry which threatens to turn Afghanistan from a cultivation state into a full capacity opiate processing state.<sup>10</sup>

### **NATO's Engagement in Afghanistan and Current Role in Counter-Narcotic Operations**

In the wake of the ousting of the Taliban by Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) led by the United States and the United Kingdom, the United Nations created the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) with a mandate to act in a peace support and nation building role alongside the continued combat operations of OEF.<sup>11</sup> The main strategic objectives of the ISAF were to maintain security and rule of law, aid in reconstruction efforts and provide training and support for Afghan police and military forces.<sup>12</sup> In 2003, NATO took command of the ISAF and later in 2005, took over all operations in Afghanistan.<sup>13</sup> As of December 2008, the total strength of the ISAF was 51,000 troops from 40 different countries with a majority of the troops from NATO member states.<sup>14</sup> Along with command over the ISAF, NATO also received command of the Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRT) that had been sent into provinces to assist in rebuilding and security efforts. NATO's mission in Afghanistan was its first mission outside of Europe alongside it having no previous experience with counter-insurgency operations.

NATO's mandate in regards to counternarcotics operations can be found in ISAF Operation Plan 10302 which notes that the ISAF can support the Afghan government counternarcotics effort because "facilitating Afghan institutions and security forces in a long-term national counter-narcotics strategy is consistent with ISAF's role to support the Afghan government extend its authority across the country."<sup>15</sup> The ISAF however, has no authorization to directly participate in counter-narcotic operations and its involvement with counter-narcotics is limited to logistical support, intelligence sharing, and training of

---

<sup>5</sup> (Belkin and Morelli 2009, 10)

<sup>6</sup> (Staff 2006, 1)

<sup>7</sup> (Glaze 2007, 2)

<sup>8</sup> (Blanchard 2009, 3)

<sup>9</sup> (Glaze 2007, 5)

<sup>10</sup> (Staff 2006, 2-3)

<sup>11</sup> (Kay and Khan 2007, 168)

<sup>12</sup> (Kay and Khan 2007, 168)

<sup>13</sup> (Kay and Khan 2007, 168)

<sup>14</sup> (Belkin and Morelli 2009, 11)

<sup>15</sup> (Thruelsen 2007, 27)

Afghan police forces.<sup>16</sup> It was not until October 2008 was the ISAF authorized to take direct military action against insurgency linked narcotic targets such as traffickers and processing facilities.<sup>17</sup> Domestically, the Afghanistan government has attempted to combat the narcotic industry with the establishment of the Ministry of Counternarcotics (MCD) which has coordinated direct eradication and interdiction campaigns which are enforced by the Ministry of the Interior.<sup>18</sup> However, the effectiveness of such campaigns has been criticized alongside corruption of counternarcotics officials.<sup>19</sup>

### **Problems Arising From the Opiate Industry**

There are two main challenges to the NATO mission that arise from the Afghan opiate industry. First, the Taliban collects a significant amount of its revenues from the opiate industry with some suggesting that 70% of current Taliban revenues come from opiate protection money and sales.<sup>20</sup> It is highly probable that the renewed Taliban insurgency is being fuelled by this profitable source of funding and the group can use opiate revenues to buy weapons, ammunition and hire fighters. 2008 saw a 30% increase in violence over 2007 which was previously the deadliest year for Western troops since the 2001 invasion.<sup>21</sup> How an eight year old insurgency could continue to escalate the level and scale of its attacks without increases in funding is questionable. It is the hard truth that as the Taliban becomes more well equipped and funded through the opiate industry that stabilization will become increasingly difficult and casualties will rise for NATO troops, Afghan civilians, police and military.

The second problem is that the opiate industry inhibits the development of a strong central government in Kabul by contributing to accumulations of political power with regional warlords, encouraging corruption and disruptions of legitimate political processes. With many areas of Afghanistan still under the auspices of regional warlords, warlords can also benefit financially through opiate cultivation and trafficking.<sup>22</sup> With the revenues from their participation in the opiate industry, warlords can use the money to raise militias which undermine the ability of the central government to exercise control over the area, use the money to bribe local government officials or even use the funds to attain political power through vote buying.<sup>23</sup> Narcotic induced corruption is particularly prevalent at provincial and district levels of government where the central government is weak and it has been noted that, “high government officials, police commanders, governors are involved” in the drug trade with, “former commanders and warlords who are still in power serving as district chiefs and local police”.<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> (Kay and Khan 2007, 174)

<sup>17</sup> (Blanchard 2009, 43)

<sup>18</sup> (Blanchard 2009, 37)

<sup>19</sup> (Blanchard 2009, 37)

<sup>20</sup> (Glaze 2007, 7)

<sup>21</sup> (Belkin and Morelli 2009, 2)

<sup>22</sup> (Belkin and Morelli 2009, 10)

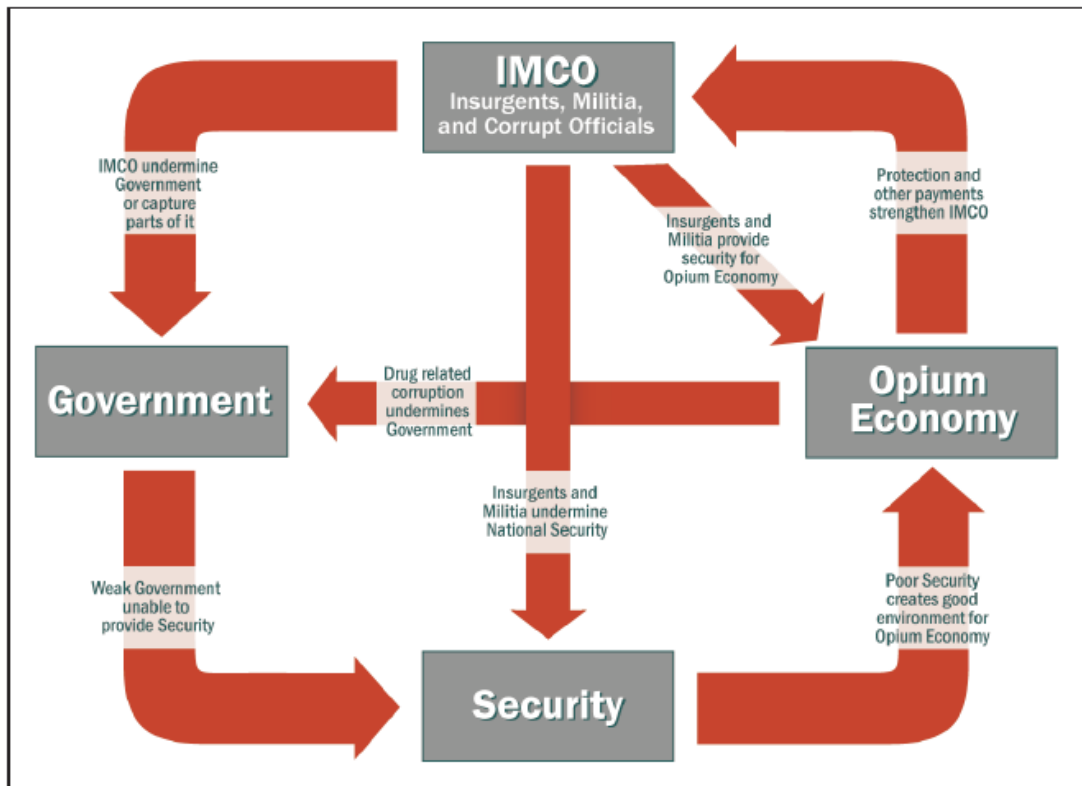
<sup>23</sup> (Brown-Felbab 2007, 2)

<sup>24</sup> (Blanchard 2009, 24-25)

## Enlarging NATO's Role

In considering an expansion of NATO involvement in counternarcotics operations, one must realize that the opiate problem is not an issue separate from other obstacles toward peace and stability in Afghanistan. The mandate of the NATO led ISAF is peace support and nation building; two tasks that would be impossible to accomplish with the sustained violence caused by the opium funded Taliban insurgency and opium induced corruption. In an economic study, it was discovered that narcotics production in Afghanistan is conflict induced which suggests a vicious cycle in which the opiate industry increases the power of the Taliban and warlords which in turn weakens the central government and NATO's ability to stabilize and secure the country thus increasing the level of conflict which stimulates an expansion of the opiate industry- continuing the cycle.<sup>25</sup> The linkages of the opiate industry to the Taliban, corruption, Afghan government and security are further illustrated in the following diagram.<sup>26</sup> If NATO and the ISAF wish to succeed in Afghanistan, it must take a central role in providing substantive support to ongoing counternarcotics operations and to formulate counternarcotics strategy that work towards the ISAF mandate of winning "hearts and minds".

**Figure 4. Narcotics, Corruption, and Security in Afghanistan**



**Source:** Adapted and updated by CRS from World Bank, Afghanistan: State Building, Sustaining Growth, and Reducing Poverty, Country Economic Report No. 29551-AF September 9, 2004, p. 87.

<sup>25</sup> (Lind, Moene and Willumsen 2009, 27)

<sup>26</sup> (Blanchard 2009, 12)

## Five Pillars: Costs and Benefits

With the need for NATO expansion in counternarcotics operations established, the question that follows is what strategies NATO should pursue to ensure that said expansion will have its desired effects on security and stability. In evaluating possible NATO approaches to the opiate problem, I turn to the current Five Pillars US counternarcotics policy that has been adopted by the Afghanistan government as part of its National Drug Control Strategy.<sup>27</sup> The Five Pillars consists of eradication, alternative development, interdiction, public information, and judicial reform.<sup>28</sup> With a fuller understanding of the effectiveness of current strategies employed in the area, we can then see if such policies can be implemented by NATO given its own operational constraints.

Eradication has been at the focus of Afghan counternarcotics operations which essentially entails the forced destruction of opium poppy crops by Afghan security forces. As the primary strategy in combating the opiate problem however, evidence indicates that it has failed to reduce opiate production levels and has had backlash effects on the ISAF mission. Even as eradication reached a peak of 19,407 hectares in 2007, total cultivation in the country was at its highest point ever at 193,000 hectares.<sup>29</sup> Due to the local and regional nature of eradication campaigns and government corruption, eradication campaigns fail to destroy a majority of their targets with one survey indicating that 63% of poppies were left standing.<sup>30</sup> Operational effectiveness aside, eradication also serves to seriously undermine public support in the ISAF and Afghan government given the heavy reliance on opium poppies as a source of revenue for Afghan farmers. Due to corruption or political considerations, large scale influential producers are usually not targeted in eradication campaigns and it is usually the most vulnerable segments of Afghan society with little links to the Taliban insurgency that have their crops destroyed.<sup>31</sup> With the destruction of their only means of sustenance, farmers are then highly susceptible to Taliban recruitment and support. Eradication also weakens support for the Afghan government and transfers legitimacy to the Taliban as the latter protects local crops from eradication campaigns.<sup>32</sup> While eradication should in theory be an effective means of controlling opiate production, it has various prerequisites for success which have not yet been met.

The primary goal of alternative development is to provide economic alternatives to opium production. The key components of alternative development have been labor intensive projects designed to rebuild agricultural infrastructure and “comprehensive development” programs which aim to diversify the agricultural economy, provide credit markets for farmers, raise investment in rural and urban areas and develop agricultural initiatives.<sup>33</sup> Alternative development was a strategy that saw a high degree of success in US counternarcotics operations in Central America during its “War on Drugs”. However, there are unresolved issues involving farmer accountability, policing of participating farmers, cost

---

<sup>27</sup> (Blanchard 2009, 39)

<sup>28</sup> (Blanchard 2009, 39)

<sup>29</sup> (Blanchard 2009, 44)

<sup>30</sup> (Redden 2008, 9)

<sup>31</sup> (Blanchard 2009, 45)

<sup>32</sup> (Blanchard 2009, 28)

<sup>33</sup> (Blanchard 2009, 41-42)

effectiveness of alternative development campaigns and corruption throughout the process. The extent to which alternative development would be successful is also suspect given the wide disparities between the values of opium poppies and its alternative crops. It is questionable if agricultural support and funding for wheat crops would provide sufficient economic incentive for substitution when a poppy farmer stands to make ten times the revenue of a wheat farmer. In order for alternative development to have widespread success, it has been suggested that Afghanistan would require an entirely new business model with billions in investment.<sup>34</sup> Alternative development requires both stability and security for its long term success; both of which have yet to be achieved.

Interdiction focuses on capturing drug traffickers and drug barons, interception of narcotic shipments and destruction of drug processing and storage facilities. The results of Afghan interdiction campaigns have been mixed. Evidence suggests that it has had minimal effects on opium exports and government corruption has resulted in the prosecution of small and less influential individuals.<sup>35</sup> Interdiction has also created closer ties between criminal groups and the Taliban in order to gain protection from authorities.<sup>36</sup>

Public information campaigns seek to inform Afghans of the ISAF and NATO's role in counternarcotics operations and to raise public awareness of the negative nature of poppy cultivation. Appeals are made regarding how poppy cultivation is "un-Islamic", the illegality of poppy cultivation, how the opiate industry contributes to the Taliban, and the health effects that opiates have on its users.<sup>37</sup> Such information operations (IO) are targeted at local authorities or religious leaders who then distribute the information to their communities. IO are also complemented by Psychological Operations (PSYOPS) which seeks to influence Afghan public values surrounding narcotics and counter anti-ISAF Taliban propaganda.<sup>38</sup> Public information has proved to be successful in its implementation with a UNODC/MDC survey noting that,

"Farmers across Afghanistan are well aware of the government's ban on opium poppy cultivation and that in some areas farmers who have declined to cultivate opium poppy have done so because they fear incarceration or government eradication of their crops. UNODC/MCN surveys reported that Islamic prohibitions on involvement with narcotics also was influential among Afghans, particularly those that had not yet been involved with cultivation or trafficking."<sup>39</sup>

There are still challenges to a successful public information campaign such as misinformation spread by the Taliban regarding NATO and ISAF involvement in eradication campaigns, difficulties in communicating with the Afghan population given high rates of illiteracy, and Taliban control of media sources in local areas.<sup>40</sup>

---

<sup>34</sup> (Kay and Khan 2007, 174)

<sup>35</sup> (Brown-Felbab 2007, 4)

<sup>36</sup> (Brown-Felbab 2007, 5)

<sup>37</sup> (Blanchard 2009, 40)

<sup>38</sup> (Thruelsen 2007, 28)

<sup>39</sup> (Blanchard 2009, 40)

<sup>40</sup> (Thruelsen 2007, 28)

The final pillar is judicial reform which is targeted at reducing corruption and creating the legal framework necessary for drug enforcement and prosecution. As corruption directly undermines any form of Afghan directed counternarcotics operations, judicial reform is a crucial component for long term success in narcotics control. Success in judicial reform has been mixed. Political considerations and corruption still determine which individuals are prosecuted and high profile arrests have been executed by direct US assistance or a transfer of subjects to the United States.<sup>41</sup> On combating corruption, the appointment of Hanif Atmar as Interior Minister in 2008 provides strong indications that “corruption within Afghanistan’s police and counternarcotics enforcement services will no longer be tolerated.”<sup>42</sup>

### **NATO’s Expanded Role: A Case for Targeted and Focused Efforts**

An expansion of NATO and ISAF counternarcotics activities must ensure that the strategies adopted further the doctrine of “winning hearts and minds” and actually work to reduce Taliban’s capacity to destabilize the country. Thus, a coherent NATO counternarcotics expansion should focus heavily on IO and PSYOPS, increase the scale of current support provided to Afghan security forces, end eradication as an Afghan counternarcotics policy and ultimately fulfil the ISAF mandate of political and economic stability. IO and PSYOPS is by far the most critical component of any NATO expansion as maintaining the confidence and support of the Afghan people is the key to victory in Afghanistan. The importance is not so much as to what NATO is doing but what NATO is perceived to be doing in counternarcotics. If the Afghan people fear the Afghan government and ISAF for their perceived involvement in counternarcotics activities, they will be more inclined to support the Taliban insurgency and public support wanes. Coherent and intense IO and PSYOPS campaigns are necessary to maintain public confidence in the ISAF, clarify ISAF’s role in counternarcotics and also to discourage narcotic activities.

The current extent of NATO support for Afghan counternarcotics operations should be increased. NATO member states should contribute more effective intelligence and surveillance support (UAV, satellite imaging) to raise the effectiveness of Afghan interdiction missions, increase the salaries of security forces to reduce corruption, and increase training and logistical support which would lead to an overall improvement in Afghan security force capacities.

There should be a heavy emphasis and pressure placed on the Afghan government to end eradication as a primary counternarcotics strategy. In Afghanistan’s current economic and political state, eradication is doomed to fail and the ISAF must be compartmentalized from Afghan led eradication campaigns in order to maintain the support of the Afghan people. NATO should rather support interdiction of traffickers, the destruction of drug labs and the arrest of high profile drug barons or warlords; operations that do not undermine the support of the common Afghan people.

Finally, the one greatest thing the ISAF and NATO can do to address the opiate problem is to counteract its root causes; political instability and economic necessity. As the mandate of the ISAF is primarily that of peace support and nation building, those tasks must be prioritized over counternarcotics efforts. ISAF funding and resources should be directed towards increasing the scope and effectiveness of PRT’s which

---

<sup>41</sup> (Blanchard 2009, 41)

<sup>42</sup> (Blanchard 2009, 41)

have shown potential in providing stabilization, building infrastructure and communicating with local communities.<sup>43</sup> Once Afghanistan has been stabilized and its economy properly developed, then strategies such as eradication coupled with alternative development can be utilized to wean the country off its opium dependency. The key to NATO counternarcotics operations is to maintain the common Afghan status quo while gradually tackling the key factors of narcotics production.

### **Addressing Operational Limitations**

The expansion of NATO responsibilities in counternarcotics must be focused and concise as a result of the organization's operational limitations. It has been suggested that even at its current strength of 51,000 troops, the ISAF still lacks sufficient manpower to secure its primary objectives of stabilization and development.<sup>44</sup> As NATO OPLAN 10302 notes, "NATO forces must avoid becoming so entangled in CN [counternarcotics] activities that their ability to implement tasks are undermined."<sup>45</sup> A NATO expansion into counternarcotics may stretch current resources too thin and would require an increased financial and political commitment from member states. In drafting NATO strategies, there are also political constraints in the form of national caveats placed on troops by their sending states. Many states are hesitant at authorizing their troops to conduct direct counternarcotics operations and thus, NATO's counternarcotics operational capacity is reduced. By focusing the NATO expansion into the several key areas noted above, we can avoid member state disagreements, more readily secure support and draw from existing member state resources. As the suggested areas of focus do not include direct NATO engagement in counternarcotics operations but rather an increase in logistical, intelligence and training for Afghan security forces, member states would be more willing to approve increases in support and funding for such efforts. The focus on IO and PSYOPS is also a motivator for member states as they can contribute troops to work on counternarcotics operations that are relatively low-intensity in comparison to other reconstruction activities. Additionally, many NATO member states already have established PSYOPS units which would be welcome additions to an IO and PSYOPS expansion in Afghanistan.

### **Conclusion**

Ultimately, the ability of NATO to successfully complete its mission in Afghanistan hinges not on the destruction of the Taliban but on Afghan public support of the ISAF and government. As the NATO Supreme Allied Commander General James L. Jones notes, "we are fighting an insurgency . . . We are fighting against different factions who have some military capability to psychologically demoralize us, but it will not prevent us militarily from being successful."<sup>46</sup> Keeping that in mind, an expansion of NATO counternarcotics activities is warranted given the cycle of violence of violence and instability that the opiate industry generates. However, NATO strategies should not alienate the Afghan population, work to weaken Taliban support and move the country gradually away from its opiate addiction. Many observers have noted that Afghanistan will be a test of NATO's resolve and future viability. Should NATO fail in its mission, deeper reflection into its international role would be warranted.

---

<sup>43</sup> (Belkin and Morelli 2009, 27-28)

<sup>44</sup> (Belkin and Morelli 2009, 13)

<sup>45</sup> (Duncan 2007, 34)

<sup>46</sup> (Belkin and Morelli 2009, 174)

## Bibliography

- Bagley, Hubert E. Jr. *Afghanistan: Opium Cultivation and its Impact on Reconstruction*. USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT, U.S. Army War College, 2004.
- Belkin, Paul, and Vincent Morelli. *NATO in Afghanistan: A Test of the Transatlantic Alliance*. Foreign Affairs and National Defense Division, Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, 2009.
- Blanchard, Christopher M. *Afghanistan: Narcotics and US Policy*. Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, 2009.
- Brown-Felbab, Vanda. *Opium Licensing in Afghanistan and its Desirability and Feasibility*. Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 2007.
- Duncan, Thomas A. *Opium- The Fuel of Instability in Afghanistan*. Fort Leavenworth: United States Army Command and General Staff College, 2007.
- Glaze, John A. *Opium and Afghanistan: Reassessing US Narcotics Policy*. Carlisle: U.S. Army War College, 2007.
- Kay, Sean, and Sahar Khan. "NATO and Counter-insurgency: Strategic Liability or Tactical Asset?" *Contemporary Security Policy*, 2007.
- Lind, Jo Thori, Karl Ove Moene, and Fredrik Willumsen. *Opium for the Masses? Conflict-Induced Narcotics Production in Afghanistan*. Working Paper, Oslo: CESIFO, 2009.
- Redden, Joshua C. *Popping the Afghan Opium Balloon*. Maxwell Air Force Base: Air Command and Staff College, 2008.
- Reinert, Emmanuel. "The Rising Need for Opium Licensing: The Only Weapon to Fight the Taliban in Afghanistan." *Drugs and Alcohol Today*, 2006.
- Staff, CADS. *Opium in Afghanistan: Lawlessness Thrives on Narcotic Trade*. Washington, D.C.: Center for Advanced Defense Studies, 2006.
- Thruelsen, Peter Dahl. *NATO in Afghanistan- What lessons are we learning and are we willing to adjust?* Copenhagen: Danish Institute for International Studies, 2007.
- United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. *UN World Drug Report 2009*. Vienna: UNODC, 2009.