What Will Taliban Drug Policy Look Like?

In an attempt to showcase humane foundations of its policies with the purpose to convince the international community to promptly recognize new Afghan authorities, the Taliban (banned in Russia) has been recently showcasing its alleged intentions to join the “merciless fight against drugs.”

It is common knowledge that this problem has been plaguing the country for many years, since most of the Afghan farmers earn their living by cultivating opium poppy used in manufacturing of psychotropic substances as a significant part of the opiates distributed by drug traffickers around the globe is produced on the Afghan territory. As a result, Afghanistan’s vast poppy fields are used to produce much of world’s heroin while the country has also become a major methamphetamine producer. All this contributes to drug addiction which is quite widespread throughout the country. It should be also borne in mind that illegal opium trade is an integral part of Afghan economy. Poppy production is a backbone of the Taliban’s economy, and most militants rely on the crops to make both ends meet. In public, however, the Taliban have always denied that they are in any way involved in drug trafficking.

In the wake of the Taliban takeover in August 2021, the radical movement urgently issued a number of decrees. One of them concerned the public health sector — the fight against drug addiction. Even when the Taliban was in power last time it sought to demonstrate that it was waging a large-scale campaign against drug addiction among the population with a heavy emphasis on, in particular, “traditional” methods: drug addicts were dipped into cold mountain rivers so that they would “sober up”; corporal punishment was also practiced. The Taliban never abandoned those methods as the country’s new authorities began to conduct regular mass raids at night time. One of those raids has recently got a detailed photo coverage from Al Jazeera. After being caught, drug addicts are either
sent to rehab, or they would face severe corporal punishment and prison. Some of these rehabilitation medical centers are located on the territory of former military facilities. Thus, former US military base Camp Phoenix, founded in 2003, is now a home to Avicenna, the largest Medical Hospital for Drug Treatment in Kabul. It can accommodate up to 1,000 patients. In such treatment facilities the Ministry of Public Health conducts a 45-day program designed to help patients to withdraw from harmful drug addiction.

According to the Afghan Ministry of Interior Affairs, after reducing the number of drug addicts on the streets, they would crackdown directly on the producers of psychotropic substances, with the local farmers being the first ones to be punished if they deserve it.

However, since the world community is reluctant to recognize the legitimacy of the radical government, drug trafficking remains almost the only source of income for this country. Therefore, it is unlikely that the Taliban will use legal means not only to enrich themselves, but also to create some kind of national budget anytime soon. Moreover, the ban imposed on the opium poppy cultivation is set to deprive about 3 million Afghan farmers of income crucial for their survival. Meanwhile it does not seem that the new authorities can provide them with the means to earn their living honestly. Therefore, the fight against drug addiction on the country’s territory touted by the Taliban in recent days means, in fact, that drugs should not be used on the domestic market but there are no signs signaling a possible exports ban. That is why the Taliban’s expected crackdown on Afghans experiencing psychological difficulties testify rather not to the efforts to attenuate their problems but to an ambition to preserve the Taliban’s funding by selling drugs abroad.

At the same time, it is necessary to recall that there is no direct prohibition on drug use in the Quran, but such taboo can be found in the hadith (sayings of the Prophet collected in the Sunnah). It says that prohibited (haraam) items include everything that “infects the mind” [Abu Dawud 3669]. Every intoxicant and everything which produces languidness (muffatir) is also prohibited [Abu Dawud 3686]. Thus, drugs fall under this description quite well. After all, everything harmful is forbidden (mudarr).

But it should not be forgotten that “faithful Muslims” still frequently take drugs. And this point can be proven by not just radical militants of terrorist organizations Al-Qaeda an DAESH (banned in Russia). In a rather religious Muslim community of Yemen, the “kat” abuse is quite widespread, with this substance becoming an integral part of the daily national routine.

Meanwhile the Taliban itself, truth to be told, never put much effort in combatting drug abuse. Back in the previous century during the insurgency agricultural land became a strategic asset for radical Islamists. For this reason the Taliban dramatically increased drug crops in the 1990s. Not only were they selling opiates on their own but they also imposed an additional tax on drug traffickers who established export channels to other countries. Taliban also forged ties with Central Asian, Caucasian and even some European criminal groups competing with the Turkish and Italian drug mafia. The Taliban radical movement has been using those illegal sources of income up until now.

In 2000, however, a significant decline in this industry was documented. The explanation is simple: Afghanistan was plagued by a horrendous drought at the time; it resulted in a poor yield, and there were much more important matters to take care of than poppy fields. When physical survival itself was on the agenda and the Taliban was in desperate need of international aid (above all, from the US), the latter insisted on one condition — no more opium poppy production. It may come as a surprise, but the Taliban complied, and the US provided them with financial assistance even compensating the farmers for lost profits due to eradication of poppy cultivation. At that time the aid amounted to a whopping $43 million, The New York Times reported back in the day.

After that, many were thrilled by the fact that the Taliban allegedly stopped opium production. But few noticed that even under those circumstances drug exports decreased just barely. In 2009, the US Congressional Research Service published a report “Afghanistan: Narcotics and US Policy” making a case that while banning opium poppy cultivation in the areas under their control in 2001, the Taliban continued the illicit trafficking of opium. Such a situation stemmed from the fact that by that time the Taliban had accumulated an enormous unrealized drug stockpile. For that reason this ban only helped the Taliban to sell off these stockpile at a more lucrative price since due to a decrease in production drug prices skyrocketed. But with the drought over and drug stockpiles sold out, the Taliban could not care less about all their previous bans and agreements with the US embracing their old ways once more. Therefore, the Taliban’s widely touted ban on opium poppy cultivation turned out to be nothing more than an illusion, while the US and the UN bragging about the Taliban destroying all its poppy crops in 2000-2001 proved to be just a fake. This was, in fact, confirmed by the authorities in neighboring Tajikistan, saying that the amount of drugs passing through the border is actually on the rise.
In this context it is very much possible that the “uncompromising fight against drugs” declared by the Kabul authorities is nothing more than a populist move by the Taliban to facilitate international recognition and external financing from international institutions, which, in particular, used to cover up to 75% of government spending.

That is why all the statements by the Taliban about fighting drugs should be followed by specific steps to divert Afghan farmers away from poppy production to other activities. But there are no signs of such concrete steps from the Taliban side so far...

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