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U.S. Targets Afghan Drug Lords Tied to Taliban

The United States has placed 50 suspected Afghan drug traffickers with ties to the Taliban on a Pentagon target list of 367 insurgents to be captured or killed, the *New York Times* reported on August 10, citing a Senate Foreign Relations Committee report to be released this week.



In interviews with the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, which is releasing the report, two unnamed U.S. generals serving in Afghanistan said that major traffickers with proven links to the insurgency have been put on the "joint integrated prioritized target list." Those named on the list, which previously identified insurgent leaders, are subject to being captured or killed at any time.

"We have a list of 367 'kill or capture' targets, including 50 nexus targets who link drugs and the insurgency," one of the generals reportedly told the committee staff.

The *Times* cited the generals' statements to Senate staff members that two credible sources and substantial additional evidence were required before a trafficker was placed on the list, and only those providing support to the militant insurgency will be placed on it.

Though quotes from statements made by the generals and references to the subsequent committee report were carried by most major news outlets (including *Fox News*, Reuters, AFP, the *British Guardian*, etc.), most early reports cited the *New York Times* as the primary source, indicating that the prestigious establishment newspaper initially had sole access to an advance copy of the report.

However, a later AP report cited additional details from the report, noting that U.S. commanders have placed no restrictions on the use of force against the targets, "which means they can be killed or captured on the battlefield."

AP observed that the pros and cons of linking the fight against Taliban or al-Qaeda insurgents to stopping illegal drug traffickers has long stirred debate within NATO, quoting two opposing opinions. The first was from Daniel Twining of the German Marshall Fund of the United States, who asserted that the U.S. plan to put drug traffickers on a wanted list of Afghan militants will significantly hurt the insurgents. Said Twining: the Taliban insurgency "is only sustainable thanks to the roughly \$300-400 million in drug revenues it earns annually from controlling or taxing the narcotics trade, and from the failures of the Afghan state to connect with the Afghan people, leaving vast and ungoverned swathes of the country subject to parallel administration by the Taliban."

However, a contrary point of view was stated by Fabrice Pothier, head of Brussels-based Carnegie Europe. Pothier said the effectiveness of NATO's policy to join the battle against the Taliban with a war against the Afghan drug traffickers is "highly disputable." "How can restricted NATO interdiction



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operations put a dent in a \$3.5 billion industry? There is no clear evidence to date that proves that targeting the drugs business will weaken the Taliban insurgency," said Pothier.

Whether the plan proposed by the generals in the report produces tangible results in cutting off an essential revenue stream for the Taliban remains to be seen. Overlooked in current reporting on this development, however, is historical background information indicating that Taliban's enemies — as well as its allies — have reaped rewards from the Afghan drug trade.

Following the 9/11 terrorist attacks orchestrated by members of Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda network in 2001, the United States launched a military operation to remove the Taliban regime — which had provided a safe base of operations for bin Laden — from power in Afghanistan. Later that year, the United States sent teams of CIA Paramilitary Officers and U.S. Army Special Forces to invade Afghanistan and aid anti-Taliban militias, the most prominent of which was known as the Northern Alliance (officially: The United Islamic Front for the Salvation of Afghanistan). The U.S-backed Northern Alliance managed to seize Kabul and drive the Taliban from power, though the militants retained control over much of the outlying areas of the mountainous nation.

A coalition of Afghan leaders who had been in exile during Taliban rule met in Bonn, Germany in December 2001 and adopted the Bonn Agreement, which led to the installation of Afghanistan's current president, Hamid Karzai, whose position was confirmed by a presidential election in 2004. Former members of the Northern Alliance held key positions under Karzai, most notably Vice President Mohammed Fahim, who also served as defense minister.

To presume that the "good-guy," former Northern Alliance Afghani leaders, and their allies in Kabul are squeaky clean and that only the evil Taliban have benefited from the lucrative Afghan drug trade would be an oversimplification, however. Much insight into the true nature of these liberators was revealed by Dr. Steve Bonta in an article in *The New American* magazine for December 17, 2001, "Meet the Real Northern Alliance."

In his exposé, Dr. Bonta profiled such Northern Alliance leaders as the brutal Rashid Dostum, an ethnic Uzbek and ex-Army general for Afghanistan's communist government; and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, a one-time vassal of the CIA when the mujahedeen were fighting the Soviet occupiers (as was Osama bin Laden), who allied himself with the defense minister of Afghanistan's communist President Najibullah in an unsuccessful coup attempt, and who later forged an alliance with communist warlord Dostum. Yet another Northern Alliance leader, Yunus Khalis, a radical Muslim, once struck a bargain with the Taliban: the Taliban handed control of the city of Jalalabad to him, and in return he allowed them to keep all their weapons. Khalis, notes Bonta, shared with the Taliban his strong anti-Western sentiments and his strong support for Osama bin Laden.

With a power structure like that in control of key areas of Afghanistan, is it a wonder that bin Laden is still at large?

Bonta observed:

All of Afghanistan's rival factions do have one interest in common, though: sustaining that nation's massive drug trade. When Secretary of State Colin Powell announced a new \$43 million package of U.S. aid to the Taliban last May [2001], he referred specifically to the radical Islamic regime's ban on opium cultivation as "a decision ... that we welcome." But in fact the Taliban, as well as bin Laden's al-Qaeda and our Northern Alliance allies, rely heavily on the income from heroin and hashish production to finance their respective militaries.



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Though written almost eight years ago, Bonta's article shatters any illusions we might have that putting 50 Afghani drug lords on a hit list will bring the Taliban to financial ruin and put a major dent in their operations. The drug trade is so big and so well entrenched in Afghanistan that there is plenty of largesse to go around, corrupting not only the Taliban, but their rivals, as well.

Despite the ongoing war that is consuming billions of U.S. taxpayer dollars and sending an ever-larger number of U.S. servicemen home in body bags, we think that Bonta's prediction, written in 2001, is still likely to manifest itself:

In reality Afghanistan will become, like Kosovo before it, a poster child for the new world order, a perpetual sinkhole of warfare, terrorism, and drug trafficking under the permanent supervision of the United Nations.

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