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# The Devil is in the Details: Nangarhar’s Continued Decline into Insurgency, Violence and Widespread Drug Production<sup>1,2</sup>

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## 1. Introduction

Nangarhar - a province that historically has been one of the major entry points for the capture of Kabul - is in complete disarray. It lies in chaos, riven by a process of political fragmentation that has increased in both pace and severity since the presidential elections and the formation of the National Unity Government (NUG). In fact, there seems little to currently bind the province together given the faltering economy, a reduction in aid flows and the continued disassembling of the political alliances that maintained stability during the early years of Gul Aga Sherzai’s governorship. Further catalysing this are the drawdown and subsequent closure of the US-led Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) - an institution that was, for a period of time, a guarantor for the Afghan state in the province. Indeed, without US military support, and with little direction from Kabul, the Afghan National Defence Security Forces (ANDSF) appear reluctant to leave the sanctuary of their fortified bases. This has led to further losses in government-held territory, particularly in the districts south of the main highway, which runs east to west linking Kabul to the Pakistan border at Torkham.

These centrifugal forces are apparent in the province, as it becomes a setting for multiple armed groups and their activities, which are hostile to the government and each other, including Islami Emirati, Daesh, and Lashkar-e Islami. A dramatic uptick in levels of violence over the last twenty-four months is evident, in which the rural population has been subject to acts of extreme brutality - even in the context of the country’s three decade

1 This research would not have been possible without the fieldwork support of the Organisation of Sustainable Development and Research (OSDR) and the GIS analysis and imagery of Alcis Ltd.

2 This paper is based on the latest round of fieldwork in Nangarhar, which was conducted between 18 December and 2 January by a team of five local researchers. It consisted of 75 in-depth interviews with farmers in the districts of Achin, Kama, Khogiani, Shinwar and Surkhrud, and builds on a large body of fieldwork undertaken in the province for more than a decade. Much of this previous work has been funded by the EU and AREU, but also by other donors such as the UK government and Development Alternatives Inc. Fieldwork has often been combined with high-resolution geospatial imagery and analysis; for example, see Mansfield, David, “Examining the Impact of IDEA-NEW on opium production- Nangarhar: A Case Study,” January 2015. [http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf\\_docs/pa00kcpt.pdf](http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/pa00kcpt.pdf). For access to EU/AREU supported fieldwork in Nangarhar see <http://www.areu.org.af/Publications.aspx?ContentId=7&ParentId=7&FirstAuthor=30>.



Figure 1: Widespread marijuana cultivation in Hisarak, Nangarhar

long conflict<sup>3</sup>. These have largely followed incursions by militants fighting under the banner of Islamic State (IS), known locally as Daesh. The Taliban and Daesh are now engaged in a fight over territory in the southern districts bordering Pakistan; a fight that has also led to the formation of an armed militia that, until recently, completely bypassed the central government and linked rural elites from the upper valleys of Achin<sup>4</sup> with the parliamentarian and deputy speaker of the Wolesi Jirga, Hajji Zahir Qadir.<sup>5</sup> This same militia stands accused of beheading Daesh fighters and mounting their heads by the roadside in Achin in revenge for the execution of their comrades.<sup>6</sup>

An indicator of the extent to which the government has lost its writ in the rural areas of Nangarhar is the scale of the opium crop. Planted in plain sight of the

Jalalabad to Torkham road during the fall of 2015 in districts like Shinwar and Bati Kot, and even Rodat, where there are significant land holdings and good irrigation, 2016 is expected to be a good year for opium production. The marijuana crop is also likely to be extended further into the southern districts of Achin, Khogiani and Hisarak, supported by high prices, vibrant farmgate trading, and a growing division of labour in harvesting and processing. Reports of the return of heroin laboratories to the southern districts of Khogiani and Pachir wa Agam - no longer just hidden in the most remote mountainous parts of the upper valleys - also indicate there has been a reduction in both the risks and transaction costs associated with the production and trade of illegal drugs. The government appears powerless to do anything about it. Daesh now present themselves as the new champions of drug control in the province with their decision to announce a ban on the cultivation of opium and marijuana, as well as the prohibition of trading, in July 2015.

Yet the political and security situation in Nangarhar did not always appear so bleak. On the contrary: celebrated for its success in counter narcotics and counterinsurgency, Nangarhar was once seen as a “model” province, a place where western nations would send their military and civilian advisers to learn from the US-led PRT. This was under the impression that, following such visits, advisers might be able to set a course to replicate Nangarhar’s achievements in the more troubled provinces of the south. After all,

<sup>3</sup> According to International NGO Safety Organisation (INSO) data, Nangarhar experienced a downturn in levels of violence in 2015 compared to 2014. 2015 was still the provinces second most violent year on record.

<sup>4</sup> GIRoA divided Achin into two districts, Achin and Spinghar. Both have their district centres in Kahi. Fieldwork was conducted in both Achin and Spinghar. As few analysts and policy makers differentiate between these two districts, this paper will refer to Achin by referring to upper or lower Achin where necessary.

<sup>5</sup> See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bBpUpper4SU0>

<sup>6</sup> Fahim, Zeerak, ‘Daesh, Qadir loyalists behead each other’s fighters,’ Pajhwok, 27 December 2015; Rojas, Nicole, ‘ISIS: Four Daesh fighters beheaded by Afghan militants in retaliation for executions,’ *International Business Times*, 28 December 2015. <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/isis-four-daesh-fighters-beheaded-by-afghani-militants-retaliation-executions-1535060>. <http://www.pajhwok.com/en/2015/12/27/daesh-qadir-loyalists-behead-each-other%E2%80%99s-fighters>.

Nangarhar had witnessed significant economic growth between 2009 and 2011, experiencing dramatic increases in job opportunities and wage labour rates, despite the imposition of an opium ban which resulted in negligible levels of cultivation. Development monies were also abundant in the province at this time, with significant resources available from the central government's National Priority Programs (NPPs), as well as bilateral funds from the US-led PRT and the different funding mechanisms it had at its disposal (including the Commander's Emergency Response Program (CERP) and a variety of United States Agency for International Development (USAID) investments).<sup>7</sup>

While, on the face of it, all looked well, underneath ran a multiplicity of fracture lines that pervaded the political landscape and linked villages in the valleys on the border with Pakistan to the political elite in both Jalalabad and Kabul. These fracture lines deepened as the international community and Afghan state became more and more closely associated with policies that had a detrimental impact on the day-to-day affairs of rural communities, particularly the population in what is seen as the more unruly southern districts who have a long history of challenging the central state's authority. Indeed, the most contentious issues - that of civilian casualties, government corruption and the enactment of a continued opium ban in the absence of viable economic alternatives - ultimately undermined the fragile coalescence of interests that had allowed the state to gain a foothold in these areas.

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<sup>7</sup> For details of the various programs see SIGAR, "Weakness in reporting and coordination of development assistance and lack of provincial capacity pose risk to US strategy in Nangarhar province," SIGAR Audit-11-1 Anti Corruption/Sub National Governance, 26 October 2010, pages 21- 33. <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/audits/2010-10-26audit-11-01.pdf>.

## 2. Slipping further from the centre

By late 2011 the signs of a decline in the political situation in Nangarhar were apparent. By then, Gul Aga Sherzai's governorship had all but run its course - even if he did not actually leave his post until two years later.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the political alliance between the Nangarhari political elite and Sherzai was over: there were an increasing number of public disputes over the distribution of rent from reconstruction and customs revenues, and intense rivalries between powerful factions within the provincial council. The rural population of the Spinghar piedmont was also aware of the frailties of the Afghan state. This decline soon accelerated following a series of events, including a botched eradication campaign in Sherzad in the spring of 2010 and a land conflict in Achin that spiraled out of control. The latter culminated in the provincial authorities calling in air support from NATO forces in October 2011. The cumulative effect of an opium ban imposed across much of the province since the fall of 2007 led to growing divisions between the rural elite and their constituencies in the southern districts that fractured the political order.

As of the spring of 2012, it was clear that the government in Kabul no longer had Sherzai's back. By raising the possibility that he might run for president in 2009, and subsequently withdrawing his candidature, Sherzai had lost all leverage with Karzai and found himself increasingly isolated from Kabul once the presidency was secured. It was clear that the US PRT had also tired of the catalogue of complaints about corruption in Sherzai's administration, and no longer championed his governorship.

From late 2013 the rate of decline picked up apace. Gul Aga Sherzai's replacement, Governor Attaullah Ludin, did nothing to stop the rot. As a compromise candidate acceptable to the provincial political elite, he had little room for manoeuvre; a frustration that eventually led to his resignation.<sup>9</sup> The ANDSF also found itself on the back foot as insurgent groups such as "Islamic Emirati," the "Mahaz Taliban,"<sup>10</sup> the "Tora Bora Front,"<sup>11</sup> Hezb-i Islami Hekmatyar, as well as Lashkar-e Islami,<sup>12</sup> had all gained a foothold in the southern districts of Nangarhar. As time went

on, the Afghan military were increasingly forced to accommodate the rural population in their attempts to manage the risk of widespread bloodshed during annual eradication campaigns. There was also a need for them to create the impression that sufficient numbers of polling stations would be open and accessible for the first round of the presidential election, timed for April 2014, for the vote to be considered credible.<sup>13</sup>

By mid-2015 Nangarhar's decline had become precipitous. Since then, there has been a further recalibration of political power in Nangarhar, as in many provinces across Afghanistan, with the political elite that had once graduated to government institutions in Kabul looking to strengthen their constituencies "back home" in the provinces, in response to dwindling political and financial patronage from both Kabul and the western powers. The opportunities for parliamentarians to lever resources to their districts is just not what it once was, particularly given the challenges of delivering centrally funded programs in what has become deeply insecure rural space. Government positions are perhaps one of the only ways to deliver favour to allies in the provinces, in the hope that this can in turn secure opportunities for further patronage and graft. The result is a high turnover of officials, intense rivalries within the provincial council and a growing sense of instability within the administration.

The presidential election in 2014, and the subsequent formation of the NUG, further pitted old adversaries against each other in Nangarhar, as they looked to gain political influence and secure positions for their family members and supporters in return for their efforts to secure the vote for Ashraf Ghani or Abdullah Abdullah. Current and former Wolesi Jirga members such as Hazrat Ali, Fraidoon Mohmand and Engineer Ghaffar lined up in support for Abdullah, alongside other members of the Nangarhari political elite such as Aman Khairi and Jawad Zaman,<sup>14</sup> and Hajji Nasrullah Arsala (known as Baryalai).<sup>15</sup> Meanwhile, Nangarhari parliamentarians Mirwais Yasini, Hajji Amir Khan Yar,<sup>16</sup> and Hajji Zahir Qadir

8 Kakar, Javed Hamim, "Attaullah Ludin New Nangarhar Governor," Pahjwok, 14 November, 2013. <http://www.pahjwok.com/en/2013/11/14/attaullah-ludin-new-nangarhar-governor>.

9 Mossakhail, Zabiullah, "Nangarhar acting governor resigns," Khaama, 21 March 2015. <http://www.khaama.com/nangarhar-acting-governor-resigned-3035>.

10 Mahaz Fedayi Tehrik-e-Islami led by Haji Najibullah.

11 Tora Bora Nizami Mahaz led by Anwar Haq Mujahid.

12 After some initial successes and incursions into upper Shinwar, Lashkar-e Islami, led by Mangal Bagh, is largely restricted to the upper parts of Nazian on the Pakistan border.

13 For more details, see Mansfield, David, "Clutching at straws? The Afghan state's attempts at re-asserting territorial control in Nangarhar in the run up to transition," unpublished paper for the UK Embassy Kabul, 21 March 2014.

14 The brother and son of Hajji Zaman Ghamsherak, a prominent Nangarhari mujahaddin killed in February 2010 in Khogiani.

15 Uncle of parliamentarian Hajji Zahir and brother of former vice president (2001-2002) and governor of Nangarhar (1992-1996 and 2001-2002), Abdul Qadir.

16 Amin Khan Yar is cousin of Sharifullah Kamawal, member of the Wolesi Jirga for Kabul province and born in Kama district, Nangarhar. Sharifullah's brother is Ehsanullah Kamawal who

supported Ashraf Ghani along with the Nangarhari senator and chair of the senate Fazl Hadi Muslimyar, and former governor (2002-2004), uncle of Hajji Zahir and brother of Baryalai, Hajji Din Mohammed (2002-2005). Each has looked for their rewards for supporting the candidature of the presidential hopefuls.

However, with the formation of the NUG there were too many people for too few jobs. Some of those that backed Ashraf Ghani felt particularly aggrieved. For instance, Hajji Zahir Qadir, and his brother Hajji Jamal, believed the governorship of Nangarhar should have been theirs - or at least the job should have been given to one of their supporters, following Ghani's appointment as president. Instead, the position went to Saleem Khan Kunduzi, a technocrat and former deputy minister in the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock (MAIL). As nephew of Mohammed Moeen

Marastyal,<sup>17</sup> former Wolesi Jirga member for Kunduz (2005-2009) and deputy head of the Rights and Justice Party, the appointment of Kunduzi as governor was seen by Zahir as an affront; a signal that National Security Adviser Hanif Atmar was in ascendance, and a further impetus to bypass government institutions, exemplified by his establishment of a private militia. The provincial council - dominated by the sons and brothers of prominent provincial politicians<sup>18</sup> - remains a focal point for the intense competition between the ruling families of Nangarhar. It is regarded by the rural population as further evidence of a government that is too busy fighting itself rather than combating the insurgent groups that have succeeded in taking large swathes of rural terrain within the province's southern districts.

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was the director of the customs department in Nangarhar and is now thought to be the head of the provincial Mustofiat. During the presidential election he was a senior member of Ghani's campaign team in Nangarhar.

17 AfghanBios, "Who is who in Afghanistan? Biographies of important people" [http://www.afghan-bios.info/index.php?option=com\\_afghanbios&id=1020&task=view&total=1&start=0&Itemid=2](http://www.afghan-bios.info/index.php?option=com_afghanbios&id=1020&task=view&total=1&start=0&Itemid=2).

18 The head of the provincial council is Ahmed Ali, son of Hazrat Ali. Other members include Shamsul Rahman, the brother of Fazl Hadi Muslimyar; Jawad Zaman, son of the late Haji Zaman; Abdul Qahar Qadir, brother of Haji Qadir; Iftikar Mohamand, the brother of Fraidoon Mohmand; and Obaidullah Shinwari son of Malik Usman Shinwari from Mahmand valley. For full details of the council membership and their various affiliations see Mahboob, M., "In Nangarhar, the return of the old guard," *Pahjwok*, 29 October, 2014. <http://www.elections.pahjwok.com/en/2014/10/29/nangarhar-return-old-guard>; and *Pahjwok*, "Nangarhar: New PC members biographies 2014," <http://www.elections.pahjwok.com/en/content/nangarhar-provincial-council-member%E2%80%99s-biography>.

### 3. Holding the district centres but not much else

Amidst all the government infighting, in districts like Achin, Khogiani, Shinwar and even in Surkhrud, the rural population talk of an administration that is increasingly irrelevant. Kunduzi is perceived as weak and unsuitable for the arduous task of governorship.<sup>19</sup> In the districts south of the main highway, the rural population talks of government security forces that rarely stray from their forward operating bases. In some cases, such as Fatehabad in upper Surkhrud, they even turn a blind eye to Taliban soldiers standing on the road in open sight of an Afghan National Police (ANP) checkpoint, as they stop motor vehicles and search for government employees and members of the ANDSF.<sup>20</sup> This is not at night or dusk but in broad daylight and only 21 kilometers from the provincial centre of Jalalabad.<sup>21</sup> When confronted by local farmers as to why ANP officers remain firmly rooted in their bases, even when violent crimes are committed against their colleagues, the response is one that typically suggests they are neither paid enough to take on the insurgents nor instructed to do so.

As such, the population talks of a government that controls only the district centres or the “waliswal’s office” across much of southern Nangarhar, and of an ANP and Afghan Local Police (ALP) that “secures only its checkpoint.” Even in upper Surkhrud, in Sultunpur, there are reports of a growing Taliban presence and an ANDSF that is reluctant to engage. In Shinwar, there are Taliban military bases in the canal command area no great distance from the main highway. The limited control government forces have over these rural areas is also reflected in the Taliban’s capacity to raise funds in villages in close proximity to the district centres of Kahi (Achin), Ghani Khel (Shinwar) and Kargah (Khogiani) as well as the villages across Surkhrud.<sup>22</sup> The shifting patterns of illicit drug crop cultivation further highlight the loss of government control with opium poppy and marijuana now grown unimpeded in close proximity to both district centres and many ANDSF bases. Figure 2, for example, shows the proliferation of opium poppy cultivation adjacent to

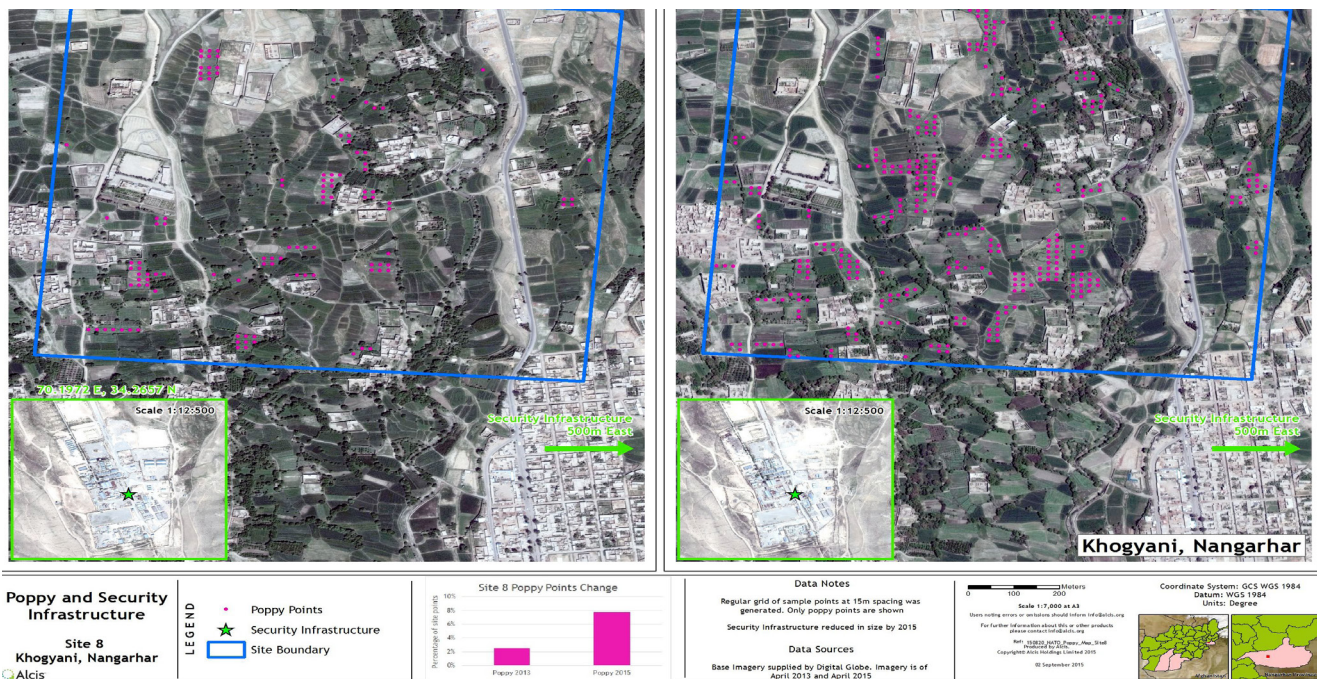


Figure 2: Comparison of incidence and location of opium poppy cultivation near ANDSF bases, Kargha, Khogiani 2013 and 2015

19 “This governor is not a good person. This is not the position for this person, he is very weak” (Achin #2); “the governor can’t bring security for the people. [Government employees] only keep their position” (Shinwar#8); “Even Gul Aga is better than Kunduzi” (Shinwar #15).

20 This happens each day but is particularly the case on a Thursday when employees and those serving in the ANDSF often look to return home to visit their families.

21 In September 2014, Taliban soldiers were found to only stop cars at this particular checkpoint at dusk.

22 For example, in Surkhrud district respondents in Fatehabad, Kushkak, Baghwanay and in Sultunpur reported paying “tax” to the Taliban. In Shinwar, tax was paid to the Taliban by all those interviewed, including those in Wiala 28, Wiala 27, Wiala 25, Markoh, Gulahi, and Syachob. In Achin, those in Marouf China, Maidanak, Batan, Asadkhel, Pakhel, and even in Ghani Kalay (less than two kilometres from the district centre) paid tax to the Taliban. It was only in Sra Kala that farmers reported they did not pay. In Khogiani, farmers in Khelago, Khalakhel, Khwazakhel, Ahmedkhel, Hakimabad and Kharmana all reported paying *ushr*, an agricultural tithe, to the Taliban, six of whom also had relatives in the ANDSF.

the district centre of Kargha in Khogiani and close to both the main asphalt road and a major ANDSF base. This is not to say that government services have ceased in these Taliban-controlled areas - far from it. It is claimed that education for boys continues throughout and in some areas, such as Khogiani, lower Achin, and Shinwar,<sup>23</sup> the local population will even argue that the Taliban's education commission has improved the attendance of both teachers and pupils alike. It is not difficult to imagine how those whose appearance at school might have been rather irregular in the past might reconsider their position after receiving a telephone call from a Taliban commander informing them of their responsibilities to attend.<sup>24</sup> Clinics and hospitals also remain open and those who have family members who are teachers or involved in health care provision go about their work and allegedly receive their salaries unhindered.

In fact, the situation seems somewhat reminiscent of the Taliban's rule in Afghanistan in the late 1990s, where United Nations agencies and nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) were often treated by the regime as *de facto* ministries. Responsible for the provision of physical and social infrastructure, the Taliban leadership in the provinces would often rely on edicts to shape how these services were delivered to the population while exerting considerable pressure on international development agencies to deliver in areas that were considered a priority by members of the regime.<sup>25</sup> Today, it is the Afghan government that provides these public services while the Taliban, much like they did in the 1990s, focus on security and establish the policy framework under which healthcare and education can be delivered.

There are even reports that, pressed by the presence of Daesh in the border areas of the southern districts of Nangarhar, Taliban fighters have looked to be more accommodating to the needs of the local population, helping further improve services and resource flows. For example, there are reports of the Taliban building roads across upper Khogiani.<sup>26</sup> These are minor roads within villages in places like Khelago, Hakimabad, Ahmedkhel, Kozakhel, Pirakhel and Jawarah. Locals recognise that, rather like ISAF's

road building program, these projects serve a dual purpose; providing better access for both the rural population and for Taliban soldiers that fear Daesh incursions. While villagers are expected to pay for the cost of road construction - and there is little patience for the complaints of farmers on whose property the road is built, and certainly no compensation - these initiatives have proven popular with the local population.

The threat that Daesh poses is also thought to underpin the local Taliban commander's decision to be more pragmatic regarding membership of the ANDSF; no longer compelling families to withdraw family members from the ANA and ANP. This is in stark contrast to the previous twelve months when those with family members remaining in the ANDSF were forced to leave their villages and relocate, often to the district centre in Kargah or Jalalabad. However, since Daesh's incursion into Khogiani from Chapahar in September 2015, farmers report that there is much less overt intimidation on households *in situ* - so long as the sons, brothers or fathers that serve in the ANA do not return to their homes.<sup>27</sup>

23 It is claimed that following a discussion between the head of the Taliban education commission in Shinwar and the head of the district education department in late 2015, the girls' high school in Ghani Khel was allowed to remain open.

24 In Khogiani it is claimed that members of the education commission announced "we are the government, please send your children to school" (Khogiani #1).

25 Tom Barfield refers to a "co-dependency" between the Taliban and the UN in the late 1990s: a situation in which they tolerated each other in order to ensure the flow of humanitarian assistance into the country. *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 256.

26 This road-building campaign is alleged to have begun in December 2015.

27 It is reported that while family members remain in the ANA, ANP and ALP they cannot visit their homes other than in secret. Of the fifteen respondents in Khogiani, six reported that members of their household were in the ANDSF, five in the ANA serving in Kabul, Zabol, Badghis, Kunduz, and Ghazni and one in the ALP.

## 4. Winning support and an indicator of dwindling state territory

The toleration of cultivation of opium poppy and marijuana is also a policy that gains support for the Taliban.<sup>28</sup> This is particularly the case in Nangarhar, where many rural communities have vivid negative memories of the almost total ban imposed on opium production between 2008 and 2011, during the tenure of Governor Gul Aga Sherzai; the period when government control was at its height. This ban was imposed with the cooperation of members of the rural elite, as well as the support of the US military and western donor nations.<sup>29</sup>

Opium prices are currently high, reaching as much as 25,000 Pakistani Rupee (PKR) to 27,000 PKR<sup>30</sup> per *seer*<sup>31</sup> for opium, up from 10,000 to 16,000<sup>32</sup> during the harvest of 2015 and 12,000 PKR to 14,000<sup>33</sup> PKR during the planting season in December 2014. There were also good yields in 2015, typically ranging from 8 to 2 *seer* of fresh opium per *jerib*.<sup>34</sup> Cultivation is widespread in 2016, and many farmers are choosing to cultivate more land with opium poppy than in 2015<sup>35</sup> and in some cases - such as in Wialas 25,27 and 28 in lower Shinwar, as well as in Fatehabad, Kheyabad and Kushkak in upper Surkhrud<sup>36</sup> - they are planting the crop for the first time in almost a decade.<sup>37</sup>

28 There were also reports that a ban imposed on marijuana imposed in Khogiani in the summer of 2015 has been rescinded by the Taliban for the summer of 2016. Most believe this reversal is a function of concerns over Daesh and the need to develop a cordial relationship with the rural population.

29 For a detailed account of the coalescence of interests and institutions that underpinned this ban and the process that led to its subsequent collapse see Mansfield, David, *A State Built on Sand: How opium undermined Afghanistan*, Hurst: London, 2016.

30 The equivalent of between US\$198 and US\$214 per kilogramme.

31 In Nangarhar a *seer* of opium is the equivalent of 1.2 kilogrammes.

32 The equivalent of between US\$82 and US\$132 per kilogramme.

33 The equivalent of between US\$98 and US\$114 per kilogramme.

34 The equivalent of 48 to 72 kilogrammes of fresh opium per hectare.

35 Of the 52 farmers interviewed in Achin, Khogiani, Shinwar and upper Surkhrud, 46 cultivated opium poppy in the 2015/16 growing season. Of these, six - all of them located in lower Shinwar and upper Surkhrud - had cultivated opium poppy in 2015/16 for the first time; 31 increased the amount of land they allocated to opium poppy in the 2015/16 growing season compared to the previous year; while eight farmers cultivated as much poppy in 2015/16 as they had in the 2014/15 growing season. This latter group was largely in Khogiani where many farmers had already cultivated the vast majority of their land with opium poppy - bar a small amount for clover or wheat - the previous year and had little scope for increasing levels of cultivation. Finally, seven farmers - all of them in upper Achin - had abandoned opium poppy in 2015/16 after cultivating it in the 2014/15 growing season due to the ban imposed by Daesh.

36 Four of the seven respondents interviewed in upper Surkhrud cultivated opium poppy in 2015/16; two of whom had not grown any opium poppy in 2015.

37 In Shinwar 14 of the 15 respondents reported that they

Cultivating opium is not something farmers argue that they are compelled to do by coercion or taxation, but something they are willing to do and supportive of those who help to establish the conditions for it. As one farmer expressed it: “*Taliban Zindebad*” or “Long live the Taliban”; while another stated that he “prayed for the Taliban to remain” so that his family could cultivate more opium poppy and marijuana in the future. These were not uncommon responses in the areas where the Taliban had become dominant on the ground.<sup>38</sup>

The benefits of returning to opium production are apparent from the shift in household consumption patterns that are seen across the southern districts following the widespread return to cultivation. This is not what might be termed “conspicuous consumption.” In the southern districts of Nangarhar, land holdings are typically too small (between 2 to 6 *jerib*), households too large (8 to 12 people) and have too few working members (less than 25 percent) for the purchase of luxuries. The benefits are, however, enough to make a difference, allowing many of those who return to opium production to consume meat and fruit on a more regular basis, pay for family members to attend private doctors in Jalalabad, or even in Pakistan, rather than rely on what are seen as lower-quality government clinics, and support investments in education such as private courses in English, computing or even attendance at a school or university in Jalalabad. It can support the meeting of family obligations such as weddings and funerals without sinking too far into debt. For those farmers with larger landholdings and other sources of income, particularly a family member in the ANDSF or a teacher, the return to opium poppy cultivation has

cultivated opium in the 2015/16 growing season. All of those in upper Shinwar had increased the amount of land they cultivated with opium poppy over the last 12 months and one farmer in Gulahi, with land near the roadside, was producing opium in 2015/2016 whereas he had not grown it in 2014/15. Only one respondent in lower Shinwar had not grown opium poppy in the 2015/16 growing season. All the others had increased the amount of land they cultivated with opium poppy, with three farmers growing opium poppy for the first time since 2008. In lower Shinwar the amount of land dedicated to opium poppy rarely exceeded 15 percent of landholdings; in upper Shinwar, where landholdings are typically smaller, between one-third and one-half of respondents’ land was grown with opium poppy in 2015/2016.

38 For example, in Maidanak in lower Achin one farmer argued that “If the Taliban is here life is better,” (Achin #10) as now that the government could no longer impose a ban he could grow both opium poppy and marijuana. A further respondent in Asadkhel, who had abandoned opium poppy in the 2015/16 growing season due to the Daesh incursion said “If Daesh leave this area and the Taliban return, we will cultivate poppy” (Achin #7).



led to the purchase of a car (300,000 to 500,000 PKR), which in turn has translated into a further legal income stream, earning the household 400 PKR to 600 PKR per day when used as a taxi.

As opium poppy returns to areas where the government had been able to maintain prohibition in the past, there is the same story of a government that lacks the coercive capacity to prevent further resurgence.<sup>39</sup> For instance, in December 2015, farmers in lower Shinwar reflected on past campaigns aimed at deterring cultivation: how the district administrator would convene meetings with elders prior to the planting season, and then how elders subsequently conveyed the message to farmers at the local mosque that the government would not tolerate opium production. They commented on how only two years prior the district police commander and his men would walk the land in search of the opium crop and arrest those farmers guilty of growing it, and ultimately they remembered the eradication campaign and how tractors were used in the spring season to destroy the opium poppy of those who refused to abandon their crop earlier in the season.

Counternarcotics efforts in Shinwar in 2015 and 2016 could not be more different. Yes, farmers had heard the radio messages informing them not to plant opium, but these were not followed up with anything in situ. And even when the elders were called to see the district governor to be told that their communities should refrain from growing poppy, these representatives were too fearful of the Taliban to pass any messages on to the farmers in the village. So, too, were the ANP, who in the 2014/15 and 2015/16 growing seasons could see opium poppy grown in fields next to the checkpoints that they appear so unwilling to leave. As for eradication; locally, it is considered a farce. Last year's campaign in Gulahi was "only for the cameras" and entailed little actual crop destruction, despite the reports on the radio, and provided compensation for those that did lose their crop. Farmers expect even less in the spring of 2016 now that the Taliban has consolidated its position across the southern districts. These are the very same processes that farmers in the Spinghar piedmont have described over the last few years; the very same processes that have seen the state retreat to the district centres of Kahi in Achin, Kargah in Khogiani and now Ghani Khel in Shinwar.

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39 "In previous years the ANP patrolled the village and our land. They only look to their checkpoint now" (Khogiani #2); "In the past the government was powerful, now it is nothing" (Khogiani #9).

## 5. Consolidation of funding and support in the countryside

While it is said that Taliban fighters actively encourage opium poppy cultivation,<sup>40</sup> this appears to be an act of government defiance - a visual display of the government's lack of control in the countryside and provocation towards those who look to destroy the crop and alienate the rural population. It is not for revenue generation per se. In fact, the Taliban would appear to have a range of different revenue streams across the areas where they are present, some particular to local circumstances. For example, in Khogiani along with the road building campaign that raises 1,000 PKR per household, there is also a "front line tax" of 500 PKR imposed on each family<sup>41</sup> and used to support those fighting Daesh in Chapahar to the east and Pachir to the south. In upper Surkhrud, the local Taliban commander closed the canal intake in Barinah, near Kakrak, in August 2015, demanding payments of 1,000 PKR for each *jerib* of land under cultivation. Timed just after the summer crop had been planted and facing the risk of widespread crop failure, rural communities such as Baghwanay, Kheyrad and even parts of upper Sultunpur relented and paid.

Alongside these locally specific sources of finance there are funding mechanisms that are common to each of the areas where the Taliban have consolidated their position. These include the agricultural tithe, known as *ushr*, and the collection of animal skins during Eid al Adha and payments by wealthy individuals, as well as extortion targeted at those accused of having links with the government.

In terms of individual payments, extortion would appear to generate the largest sums, with requests for amounts of up to 300,000 PKR made of families whose members are "arrested" or under threat of arrest if they do not leave their government post.<sup>42</sup>

40 For example, a farmer in Khogiani reported that a local Taliban had pronounced at the local mosque "In five *jerib* of land, three should be poppy and two belong to you" (Khogiani #15). Another said that the Taliban had said "you are poor people, please cultivate poppy" (Khogiani #1). In lower Shinwar a farmer referred to a local Taliban member who announced "please grow poppy and we will protect you from the government; and when you collect the crop, please give *ushr* to the Taliban." None of these farmers, or others who commented on the support given to farmers for poppy cultivation, interpreted these announcements as orders or instructions.

41 There may be more than one family within each household. Therefore, a household consisting of three married couples will pay a frontline tax of 1,500 PKR.

42 For example, in late December 2015 a respondent in lower Shinwar was informed that his son, who was serving in the ANA in Uruzgan, should report to the village in the next 15 days. If he did not report, the respondent was told he would have to pay a fine of 300,000 PKR or leave the village entirely. Another respondent in upper Shinwar paid an undisclosed amount

The actual sum paid is typically less depending on the particular circumstances of the family - after all, everything is negotiable - but payments will rarely be less than 150,000 PKR for a family member accused of "collaboration."<sup>43</sup> The second-largest payments are from wealthy individuals within the community. Typically, these individuals are identified through local knowledge and contacts and receive a request for a donation from the local Taliban commander. This request might be in the form of a letter or made via a telephone call asking for support. Payments can be in the form of cash or equipment, such as motorbikes, or in the form of food. Cash payments will often be tens of thousands of Pakistani Rupees.

A further source of local revenue for the Taliban in Nangarhar is from the collection and subsequent sale of animal hides after Eid al Adha. These are the animals slaughtered as part of *qurbanee*.<sup>44</sup> Traditionally, the hides of these animals are donated to the mosque and the funds that are raised are distributed to the mullah and the poor. An individual mosque serving a hundred households might raise 5,000 to 8,000 PKR. In the southern districts of Nangarhar, even in Markoh on the main highway in lower Shinwar, reports suggests that these hides are collected by a representative of the Taliban, and sold to cover their costs.

Finally, with regards to agricultural tithe, known as *ushr*, the individual payments are relatively small; often between 1,000 and 3,000 PKR per household during the winter cropping season.<sup>45</sup> Methods of collection differ slightly from area to area. For example, in lower Shinwar, individuals might receive a written note referencing their name, the amount of land they have and a request for *ushr*. This note will be authorised with a stamp of the Islamic Emirate. In Achin, Khogiani and upper Surkhrud there are no individual requests. Instead, notes are posted at the mosque or announced at Friday prayer during the winter and summer harvest season. Payments are made to a nominated representative

(although sold a number of assets, including 4 *seer* of opium, to the value of 180,000 PKR) in July 2015 for the release of his son. Finally, a respondent in Gulahi paid 300,000 PKR for the release of his father. In this case it is unclear if those that kidnapped him were criminals or Taliban.

43 Ironically, there is evidence that this kind of extortion is also conducted by those working for the government. One respondent in Syachob, upper Shinwar, reported making a payment of 400,000 PKR to secure the release of a family member accused of being a member of the Taliban.

44 This is the practice of slaughtering an animal as an offering to Allah during Eid al Adha.

45 Payments are also made after the summer season. Fieldwork suggests that this payment is typically from one-third to two-thirds of the amount paid in *ushr* on the winter crop.

announced by the Taliban. This individual may not be a member of the Taliban but is trusted by them.

Payments are typically in cash but sometimes consist of both cash and an amount of wheat or maize. Where payments are in-kind, the representative sells the crop and substitutes it for the equivalent in cash. It is said that the Taliban don't want to receive crops, not even opium. In each area, even in lower Shinwar where the land holdings are documented on written requests, farmers are not approached for a specific amount to be paid. Rather, the emphasis is on *ushr* - 10 percent of the season's crop. In reality, the negotiated amounts paid are nearer 1 to 3 percent of the value of the winter crop. For example, one farmer in lower Shinwar with three *jerib* of land - all of it cultivated with wheat in 2015 and a total yield of 300 *seer* - gave only 10 *seer* to the Taliban as *ushr*, a cash equivalent of 2,000 PKR. On the whole those cultivating opium poppy and marijuana might pay a

bit more but not excessively so - no more than an additional 1,000 to 1,500 PKR per season despite yields of 8 to 12 *seer* of opium per *jerib* with a harvest value of between 80,000 PKR and 192,000 PKR.<sup>46</sup>

It is a common view amongst locals that Taliban commanders care little about how much is paid by each farmer and are more concerned about those that do not pay at all. The failure to pay is followed up by a visit to the farmer's house. It is widely believed that such a stance will result in a higher payment being extracted by the Taliban, and it is far better to pay on first request.<sup>47</sup>

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46 This would be the gross returns on one *jerib* of land. Therefore, a payment of 3,500 PKR would represent between 1.8 and 4.3 percent of the gross value of one *jerib* of opium poppy at harvest time. However, the mean amount of land grown with opium poppy amongst the 39 respondents that produced opium in the 2014/15 growing season was 1.8 *jerib*. On this basis a payment of 3,500 PKR represents only 1 to 2.5 percent of the gross value at harvest time.

47 Farmers typically get 20 days to pay following the request for *ushr*.

## 6. The threat that lies further to the south

In contrast to the Taliban's attempts to be more accommodating to the needs of the rural population, Daesh have mounted a campaign of protracted violence against farming households in parts of the southern districts of Nangarhar. The local population remain confounded and question how Daesh managed to make such territorial gains in such a short period of time. The large number of Pakistanis amongst the Daesh leadership and fighters, as well as the heavy weaponry that is alleged to be in their possession, has raised local suspicions that the security forces in Pakistan are a key actor in the drama that is unfolding in the south of the province. The creation of a private militia to fight Daesh under the leadership of Hajji Zahir, drawing on the support of prominent Shinwari elders from upper Achin, also led to rumours of other regional powers, such as Iran and Russia, being directly involved in the fight for these upper valleys bordering Pakistan.

The pace by which Daesh gained a foothold in Achin has surprised many. Reportedly, a group of around 100 Pakistani Orakzai families initially settled in the upper parts of the Mahmand valley near Tangi following the government of Pakistan's operations in Orakzai agency in March 2015. At first this group lived in the area as "guests" under Taliban rule before they were joined by additional Orakzai families from Tirah, and later by others from Bajaur. In the Mahmand valley in upper Achin, locals report that they were totally unaware of their guest's Islamic State affiliations until they drove Taliban fighters out of the valley and subsequently raised a black flag in Shadal bazaar in July 2015.

Allegedly, the fighting between the groups was provoked by the kidnapping of Malik Usman's son Samiullah in July 2015. Usman had been a major powerbroker in the Mahmand valley, and influential across the five districts that make up Loya, or Greater, Shinwar. An ally of Sherzai during his governorship, as well as of Hajji Zahir, and instrumental in the prohibition of opium in 2008, Malik Usman was also one of the key signatories of "the Shinwari Pact" in 2010 - an agreement reached between the Shinwari tribe and the US military with the intent of keeping both poppy and the Taliban out of the Spinghar piedmont. His influence, however, waned following a land conflict with the neighbouring Alisherkhel and the death of as many as 18 Mahmandi tribesmen when the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) was called in to provide air support to the provincial authorities. The result of which was that Usman found himself ostracised and unwelcome in his own valley. It would appear that the emergence of Daesh in Nangarhar has presented a new opportunity for both Malik Usman and Hajji Zahir.

Following the kidnapping of Samiullah, Malik Usman is said to have gone to the local Taliban commander to ask for his son's release. The Taliban denied holding Samiullah and traced him to what most believe was a criminal group originally from Lalpur. On being discovered, members of this group escaped up the Mahmand valley to Tangi, where the fighting began. Whether the kidnappers were aligned with the Orakzai families, or the incursion of armed Taliban soldiers was seen as a threat, the guests turned on their hosts. Armed with heavy weapons, the Orakzai pushed the Taliban down the valley, subsequently taking Shadal bazaar and pronouncing their allegiance to Daesh.

The Taliban's subsequent efforts to regroup and force these Daesh fighters from upper Achin ultimately failed. Taliban soldiers from Achin, with help from fighters from Bati Kot, Kot and Shinwar, along with Mahmand supporters from the local population still residing in the Mahmand valley, managed to rout Daesh and push them up the valley. The Daesh counter attack was said to be brutal; the houses of what were seen as local Taliban supporters were burned to the ground, families forced to flee and those local elders viewed as collaborators were captured and executed. The result was an exodus of families relocating to the safety of their relatives' houses in Taliban- or government-controlled areas to escape Daesh's rule. In their stead, Orakzai and Bajauri families moved into their homes - the most prestigious going to senior Orakzai commanders.

One of the first proclamations by Daesh in upper Achin was to ban the production and trade of opium and marijuana. Both farmers and traders were given one month to get rid of their inventories or face punishment. In Abdulkhel, bazaar traders were fined; one shopkeeper was required to pay 1,000,000 PKR for failing to sell his stocks within the time period, and another trader paid 700,000 PKR. Many traders left the area with what was left of their supplies and Shadal bazaar now stands empty, absent the shopkeepers selling the area's most valuable commodity and with the local population fearful of being caught in the frontline between Taliban, Daesh and the ANDSF.

The summer's marijuana crop in Mahmand and Pekhah was also lost to the Daesh prohibition. Farmers were compelled to destroy their own crops or face punishment. In Trealay, elders were arrested and only released after villagers had cleared their land. Many of the farmers in these upper valleys claimed to have cultivated between 1 to 2 *jerib* of marijuana in 2015 and were particularly annoyed to have lost



Figure 3: Magnesium Silicate Mines, Mahmand valley, 2014

the associated income.<sup>48</sup> Later, in November 2015, the schools and health clinics in the area were closed and teachers and healthcare professionals were told that, while they could work privately, they would be punished if they accepted a government salary. Finally, the magnesite mines in upper Achin have also closed, imposing a further cost on the local population.<sup>49</sup>

Now those that are left in the area face further economic problems with Daesh's imposition of an opium ban for the 2015/16 growing season. Some farmers have crossed the front line at Shadal to farm their land in Batan, Asadkhel and Trealay. These are individuals who are willing to take the risk of farming in Daesh areas while living with family in Taliban-controlled territory to the north. However, they are not willing to take the risk of growing opium poppy; all of them reported monocropping wheat in the 2015/16 growing season, whereas not one of them had allocated less than two-thirds of their land to opium poppy the year before.

Further up the Mahmand valley, beyond the bridge at Asadkhel, it is not completely clear what is being cultivated.<sup>50</sup> However, those who still have contacts in the area report that the interlopers from Orakzai and Bajauri do not depend on agriculture for their funding. This is a point that is reinforced by the prohibition of opium poppy and marijuana crops. After all, contemporary history has shown - as well as an understanding of rural livelihoods - (from the Taliban ban on opium poppy in the 2000/01 growing season to the prohibitions under the governorships of Hajji Din Mohammed (2002-2005) and Gul Aga Sherzai (2005-2013)) that the population of these valleys, with their small landholdings and large families, simply cannot subsist without recourse to drug crop cultivation. Moreover, when pressed to do so for more than a few seasons they soon turn to resistance if not outright rebellion, a phenomenon that helped bring the Taliban to these upper valleys in late 2011. One can only wonder whether the same might happen to Daesh, or whether indeed the exodus of the local population is so complete, and sources of external funding generous enough, that drug crop cultivation is no longer needed for sustenance in these upper valleys.

48 In Maidanak to the north where the Taliban hold sway, marijuana yields in 2015 were between 8 and 13 *seer* per *jerib*. Prices varied from 18,000 to 21,000 PKR for the first grade of hashish and 8,000 to 12,000 PKR for second grade. In Khogiani, marijuana was sold in the field to traders from Sherzad and Hisarak for between 85,000 to 200,000 PKR per *jerib*.

49 In previous years, those from these valleys worked in these mines for 750 PKR to 900 PKR per day. See Mansfield, David, "Examining the Impact of IDEA-NEW on opium production-Nangarhar: A Case Study," January 2015, page 60-61. [http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf\\_docs/pa00kcpt.pdf](http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/pa00kcpt.pdf).

50 It was not possible to get fieldwork completed beyond the Asadkhel bridge in December 2015. It was also too early in the growing season for both wheat and opium poppy to be able to use high-resolution imagery to identify the different crops that might be grown.

## 7. Conclusion

Daesh's foothold in the upper valleys of Achin has had a significant impact on the province of Nangarhar over last 12 months. These valleys became a staging post for further incursions north into Kot, Bati Kot, Chapahar, and on to Shinwar and Khogiani. While their initial successes in the summer and fall of 2015 appear to have faltered and both the Taliban and the government have regrouped to push Daesh back into upper Achin, Deh Bala, Pachir and parts of Chapahar, Kot, and Bati Kot, the repercussions are still being felt across the province.

Hajji Zahir's creation of a private militia in response to the threat, drawing on the support of Hajji Usman, a prominent elder from Batan in the Mahmand valley, highlights just how events in what appears to be the periphery of Afghanistan can quickly create the equivalent to the "butterfly effect"; where small variations in the political fabric on the borders gather enough pace to send reverberations throughout the country and destabilise the subnational, national and even the regional political order.

Reports of the provision of equipment, including cars and weaponry, to militia leaders have led to local rumours of generous funding from foreign powers, including Russia and Iran. The execution and beheading of Daesh fighters by the militia, with their heads mounted on the asphalt road in Deh Sahrak,<sup>51</sup> led to protests from the central government, who not only challenged the legitimacy of this extra-judicial force but also called for it to be disbanded, or absorbed into the Ministry of Interior. There has also been a direct attack on Malik Usman and his family in Jalalabad, killing 13, as they celebrated the release of the very son whose kidnapping is alleged to have been the catalyst for the outbreak in hostilities between the Taliban and the Orakzai settlers in Mahmand. The latter is the same group that subsequently proclaimed themselves affiliated with Daesh.

Locally there are doubts as to whether those groups currently flying the banner of IS in these valleys have direct links to Syria and Iraq. The prevailing view amongst those that have been forced to leave these upper valleys and the neighbouring villages and districts is less one of Taliban dissidents unhappy with the new leadership rebranding themselves as Daesh. Rather, the narrative that gains greater resonance is one where Pakistan's forces have rebranded their funding, supporting a new group of militants that will serve the ambition of maintaining instability on the borders and maintaining leverage over the Taliban leadership; a reminder to the Taliban that they are not the only show in town.

### The Best of Both Worlds?

Elements of the rural population in the southern districts of Nangarhar have advantages from both the services provided by the government, as well as the security regime established by the insurgency. For example, a household in Ahmedkhel, Khogiani owned 4 *jerib* of land and had 12 members, seven of which were under 12 years of age. Three household members worked full time, one on the farm, while two earned government salaries. Despite the Taliban's presence in the area (and paying them 2,000 PKR in *ushr* for the winter crop) one of the brothers worked as a government teacher, earning 6,000 Afs per month (9,000 PKR) - a job he had done for two years - and the other brother had joined the ALP six months before, receiving 10,000 Afs per month (15,000 PKR). The eldest brother, who worked on the farm, cultivated 1.5 *jerib* of opium poppy (315,000 PKR) in the 2014/15 growing season, alongside 2 *jerib* of wheat (90 seer/*jerib*) for household consumption and 0.5 *jerib* of clover for his livestock. During the summer of 2015 he had grown 2 *jerib* of marijuana (only 23,000 PKR due to a poor crop), 1 *jerib* of peanut (37,800 PKR) and 1 *jerib* of cabbage (33,000 PKR). That year he had sold some of his livestock (two sheep and one cow) for 46,000 PKR but kept his two dairy cows so that the family would have enough yoghurt and milk. This sale, along with his brothers' salaries and his opium, had paid the bride price (*walwar*) of 500,000 PKR for his younger brother's wife. The farmer had also paid for his two sons to attend a private course in computing, at a cost of 300 PKR each per month, which they attended after going to the local government school. In the fall of 2015 he had increased the amount of land that he had cultivated with opium poppy to 2.5 *jerib*, growing with it one *jerib* of wheat and the ever-present 0.5 *jerib* of clover. In the summer of 2016 he hoped to allocate more land to marijuana (2.5 *jerib*) and get a better yield, in the hope that he could pay for the wedding ceremony of his brother.

51 Khaleej Times, "Afghan militia beheads four daesh fighters," 28 December 2015 <http://khaleejtimes.com/international/rest-of-asia/20151228/afghan-militia-beheads-four-daesh-fighters>.

As is ever the case in rural Afghanistan, the truth is defined not by the facts but by what the population believes to be true. And for those living in the southern districts of Nangarhar, neither the government nor those proclaiming to be fighting for Islamic State are what they say they are. On one hand, those in the government, whose mobility has become restricted to the district centres and main roads, are seen as self-serving. They are viewed by large swathes of the rural population as being unable to provide the requisite leadership, security and economic support; they are “a government in name only.” On the other hand, those in Daesh are seen as interlopers: largely Pakistani militants reliant on foreign funding and weapons.<sup>52</sup> The few Afghans that are believed to be amongst their ranks are seen as opportunists - those who have seen their power and influence wane under the government or Taliban and see a chance to reposition themselves with this influx of Pakistani fighters into the upper valleys. Most importantly, Daesh are understood to have broken local mores with their brutality and their failure to recognise the needs of the local population, including with the closure of schools and clinics, and their prohibition of the production and trade of opium and marijuana.

It is in this environment that the Taliban appears to prosper. The pragmatism of the local Taliban commanders and their need to accommodate the local population allows rural households to take advantage of education and health services that are paid for from the government's coffers. These same households collect government salaries from teaching, and working in healthcare, even from family members enlisted in the ANDSF, as long as it is done discreetly. The provision of supplementary services by the Taliban, such as improving teacher and male pupil attendance, as well as building local roads in districts like Khogiani, further supports the needs of the rural population. Most importantly - particularly with the curtailment of much of the development assistance to these areas - the Taliban are seen to provide a “secure” belt across

the southern districts of Nangarhar where farmers can return to drug crop cultivation, which stands in stark contrast to those areas nearer Jalalabad and to the north of the main highway where the government still holds sway, as well as to the south bordering Pakistan, where Daesh has succeeded in imposing a ban on both marijuana and opium poppy cultivation.<sup>53</sup>

Ultimately, it is hard to look on Nangarhar without regret. Its decline from what some considered to be a “model province” to what it has become today has been largely foreseeable: a function of ill-conceived policies and interventions driven by the short-term interests of the Nangarhari political elite, politicians in Kabul and western donors alike. Nangarhar could never have been caricatured in the same way that the southern provinces of Kandahar and Helmand have been with descriptors, such as “the Taliban heartlands,” but it seems it is fast becoming so.

Now, as the international community once again focuses on its own preoccupations and indicators of success, this time suppressing those groups that claim affiliation with IS and preventing the government's loss of district centres in places like Sangin, the Taliban encroaches further into the rural territories of Nangarhar, consolidating its position in villages and districts where it has had little support since late 2001.

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52 Local rumours include a claim that Daesh fighters escaped across the mountains into Pakistan following a battle between Daesh and Taliban in the Mahmand valley in October 2015. It is claimed that many Daesh militants were killed and that when the surviving fighters fled they took a number of villagers hostage. When the tribal elders approached the commanders of Daesh to ask for the release of the villagers, it is claimed that the commanders agreed but on the understanding that the elders would arrange for the bodies of those militants that were killed in the fighting in Mahmand to be returned. It is said that the elders protested, saying that there were too many Daesh fighters killed and that it would be impossible to retrieve all the bodies and transport them across the mountains. It is claimed that at this point the Daesh commanders requested that they return only the bodies of those with a “stamp” on their shoulder. It is said that two such bodies were found and once returned, all seven of the villagers held hostage by Daesh were released.

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53 One respondent commented, “I am unhappy with the governor and Daesh. I pray to Allah to destroy them both” (Achin #3). A further respondent in Asadkhel, who had abandoned opium poppy in the 2015/16 growing season due to the Daesh incursion said “If Daesh leave this area and the Taliban return, we will cultivate poppy” (Achin #7).

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