

Kandahar & Southern Afghanistan

کندهار و جنوب افغانستان



The occasional black turban of a Talib, the white turban of the returning Haj pilgrim, the dirty boys in ragged *shalwar kameez* playing in the street, the fleeting pair of burqas billowing in the wind, the pick-up trucks brimming with rugged fighters, the henna-haired old man with his bird cages, the Pashtuns. Southern Afghanistan and Kandahar, its gateway city, is the crown of Pashtunwali and the Pashtun way of life – a culture that is questionably stronger than the religion many mistake it for.

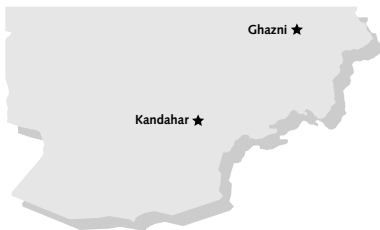
Mullah Omar commanded the Taliban from here, he welcomed Osama Bin Laden here and the first ever democratically elected President of Afghanistan came from here. Politically and historically the south is the most significant region in Afghanistan.

Kandahar city at dusk from a roof top is Asia at its most beguiling – kites swinging in the air, pigeons tinkling back to perch, few buildings higher than two stories, mud roofs, and the desert mountains beyond – this could lull you into believing this was a peaceful, middling city, the hub of a wheel whose spokes lead to Oruzgan in the north, Helmand and Nimroz beyond to the west, Pakistan to the south and a climb to Kabul through Zabul and Ghazni in the east. But its charms remain locked securely behind high-walled compounds and few know the region for more than the draconian regime of the Taliban.

The tragedy of the south is that it has so much to offer in terms of the warm Pashtun culture of welcoming strangers and feeding them the finest fare of the household, world-class fruit and vegetables, and eerie landscapes where you can see a river bed, desert mountains and the curve of the earth in a single vista, but the extreme politics and violence that have and continue to consume the area mean that very few get to see it.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Sunrise over Kandahar and beyond from the **Forty Steps** (p193)
- Climb to the top of **Baba Wali Shrine** (p193) in Kandahar and look out over Arghandab Valley, followed by fresh juices and ice cream
- Explore the **Towers of Victory** (p196) and other remnants of the empire in Ghazni



KANDAHAR & SOUTHERN AFGHANISTAN



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RISK ASSESSMENT

Currently we do not recommend independent travel to the south; however numerous NGOs and contractors continue work in the region implementing onerous security mitigating measures. They remain only targets of opportunity and their greatest risk is of being in the 'wrong place at the wrong time'. All road travel outside Kandahar city and the Kandahar–Spin Boldak Route is also not recommended.

Those who are planning to travel to the south for work reasons and whose organisation does not have a permanent footprint in the area are strongly advised to partner with another organisation to host you, or arrange a guide and vehicle for the duration of your visit.

CLIMATE

Generally Southern Afghanistan is the roasting oven of the country with its expansive deserts and dry cities reaching to and beyond 50°C every summer. The northern reaches of the south including Oruzgan and Ghazni are the exception where the climate is much cooler with heavy snows from December to March. The best time to visit is April to June or September to November, when the large skies are sunny and clear and there is colour in the few trees but the temperatures are neither of the extremes felt in winter or summer.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Due to security concerns the only feasible way of accessing the south is by air to Kandahar or by road from Quetta, Pakistan.

KANDAHAR

کندهار

☎ 030 / pop 1 million (estimated)

The mention of Afghanistan's second-largest city conjures up a collage of terrorist training camps, rugged terrain, warlords, narcotics, fierce tribes and the War on Terror. Its strategic and political importance is understood by the Pashtun proverb: 'Control Kandahar and you'll control Afghanistan'. This was a lesson that Alexander the Great, Genghis Khan and even the Russians failed to learn. Unfortunately since the fall of

the Taliban in 2001, the security situation in the city and surrounding areas has deteriorated significantly to the point where there was an average of one suicide bombing a week in 2006. Although the current players, Afghan and international, understand the significance of controlling Kandahar this Holy Grail continues to elude them.

Despite the violence surrounding them the Kandaharis continue their daily lives, albeit lived with restrictions and a level of fear. Women continue to be the most affected – few women are seen in public on the streets of Kandahar and if ever you do see one the majority will be wearing the nylon burqa. Life for the women of Kandahar is invariably lived behind the high walls of their family compounds with few girls being given permission to attend school still, despite reports in the media extolling the liberation of girls since the arrival of democracy.

Older Kandaharis will tell you about the times before the Russian invasion, when they hosted hippies taking the overland trail in the guesthouses that lined the streets around Chowk-e Shaheedan. Although it may be some time before Kandahar is ready for independent travellers again, it is clear that the NGO, international organisation and contractor communities are desperately needed to improve the lives of Kandaharis. Although millions of aid dollars have been spent in the area, insecurity and corruption have prevented it reaching many people.

In years to come there is no doubt that travellers will enjoy views over Kandahar from the Forty Steps, Pashtun hospitality at picnics in the Arghandab Valley and visits to the Mosque of the Sacred Cloak.

HISTORY

Alexander the Great founded Kandahar city in the 4th century BC, around the ancient city of Mundigak, which was settled in about 3000 BC. The city changed hands numerous times following its founding, being fought over by the Arabs, Persians, Indians and Mongols.

In 1743 Ahmad Shah Durrani, a Pashtun and the founder of Afghanistan, took control of Kandahar and made it the capital until the 1780s. The city was occupied by the British in the 19th century during the Anglo-Afghan Wars, and once again by the Soviets throughout the 1980s.

Following the Russian withdrawal warlords jostled for control of the city in the ensuing bloody Civil War. The Taliban seized Kandahar in 1994 without a single shot fired, self-proclaimed saviours from the rampant banditry and rape that was gripping the country. Although Kabul remained the capital, the Taliban leader, Mullah Omar, ruled the country from Kandahar.

Shortly after the start of the War on Terror, the regime officially fell in a final clash with US Special Forces at the Kandahar Airfield in December 2001. Over 10,000 International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) troops remain at the airfield and across the south, having suffered significant losses while fighting the insurgency. The warlords and the drug trade also erode their efforts. Whichever way you look at it, Kandahar's chequered past is likely to continue well into the future.

ORIENTATION

Kandahar city sits on a desert plain surrounded by rocky outcrops. The city's laid out in two parts: the once walled Old City, a labyrinth of lanes between mud houses and bazaars; and the New City (Shah-e-Nau), which is along three parallel, Pakistani-style boulevards leading to the west of the Old City. Several *chowks* (crossroads or town squares) make navigating about relatively easy.

To the north of Kandahar is the massive Eid Gah mosque, adjacent to Kandahar University and the Arghandab Valley (15km), known for its delicious grapes and pomegranates. The road to Kabul heads out of the city to the northeast, while Kandahar Airport

(35km) and the Pakistan border (136km) are to the southeast. South of the city trails off to the sandy deserts of Registan.

INFORMATION

Emergency

Ambulance (☎ 070 308739)

ANSO South (☎ 070 405697)

Fire Brigade (☎ 070 302008; Eid Gah Darwarza)

Police (☎ 070 304018; Chowk-e Shaheedan)

Internet Access

New internet cafés are opening all the time.

Most charge 50Afg hour.

Kandahar Internet Café (Chowk-e Kiptan Madad)

Samad Internet Café (Chowk-e Shaheedan)

Wardad Internet Café (Kariz Bazaar)

Medical Services

Al Hadi Farad Private Hospital (☎ 070

301705; Shaheedan Chowk) Has a 24-hour emergency department and two well-stocked pharmacies at the entrance.

Mirwais Hospital (☎ 070308739; Shafakhana Sarak, Shah-e Nau; ☎ 8am-5pm) No 24-hour emergency department but it does have a well-stocked pharmacy and is supported by international NGOs.

Money

Afghanistan International Bank (Herat Sarak) Has an ATM that dispenses US dollars.

Azizi Bank (Chowk-e Shaheedan)

Da Afghanistan Bank (Chowk-e Shaheedan)

Kabul Bank (Chowk-e Shaheedan)

Moneychangers (Chowk-e Shaheedan & Chowk-e Charso)

The best rates for afghanis, US dollars and Pakistani rupees.

PISTOL, BATON, POLICE BADGE & BURQA *Nick Walker*

'I am the only woman in Kandahar with a pistol. I also keep a Kalashnikov at home,' Captain Malalai Kakar, the only policewoman in the city, tells me over a cup of chai. While barking orders in Pashto into her mobile phone, Malalai stands tall in her khaki uniform and utility belt with holster, cuffs and baton, just like her male counterparts – however she does don the burqa when she is on the beat outside the HQ. The mother of six fled to Pakistan as a refugee during the Taliban regime after she learned of her imminent arrest for the 'crime' of being a former policewoman. Now back in Kandahar she is not only a role model for women in a patriarchal, tribal society but also an invaluable asset to the Afghan National Police (ANP). She is involved in all women's issues coming to the attention of police and is on the front line during ANP raids of insurgent hideouts. As a woman in a high profile position in the ANP, not only does she accept the risks her brother officers also shoulder, but is she is acutely aware of the fate that has befallen numerous other high profile women in their very public assassinations. But she will not be deterred, telling me 'I am a strong woman and want to serve my country...I'm careful, but not afraid.'



Post & Telephone

Public Call Offices (PCOs) are scattered throughout the city.

Post Office (Chowk-e Kiptan Madad) Located within the Government Communications Centre (Mukhabarat).

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Security remains a primary concern of all internationals in Kandahar city and before you travel, be sure to read the Safety in Afghanistan chapter (p68), particularly the sections on moving around (p73) and emergencies (p74).

Kandahar and its Pashtuns are the most Islamically strict in Afghanistan, if not the world; here, adherence to cultural and Islamic customs is paramount. Visitors need to respect local traditions, both men and women dressing conservatively at the very least.

SIGHTS

Eid Gah Mosque

One of the largest mosques in Afghanistan, Kandahar's **Eid Gah Mosque** (closed to non-Muslims during Friday & Eid prayers) stands 25m adjacent to the dilapidated Kandahar University. The mosque and the surrounding grounds can accommodate thousands of worshippers, with its construction having taken years at a cost of millions – all funded by Mullah Omar. Apart from Eid times, local youths use the mosque's grounds as cricket pitches, as many of them learned the game whilst growing up in refugee camps in Pakistan. The mullah will show you around and, as a courtesy, a small donation is customary.

Mosque of the Sacred Cloak

A cloak worn by the Prophet Mohammed is housed in the **Mosque of the Sacred Cloak** (Da Kherqa Sharif Ziarat; 8am-5pm), by far the city's most valued treasure. The mosque is situated opposite the governor's palace. Ahmed Shah Durrani acquired the cloak along with a hair of the beard of the Prophet from the Amir of Bukhara in 1768. When the Taliban took Kandahar in 1994, Mullah Omar wrapped himself in the cloak in front of thousands of loyal Talibs, giving himself god-like status as Amir Al-Momineen (Commander of the Faithful). As a visitor you will be unable to see the cloak but the building is impressive in itself – ornately decorated with green Helmandi marble,

mirrored tile work and gilded archways. Like the Eid Gah Mosque, a small donation is always appreciated.

Ahmed Shah Durrani Mausoleum

The **mausoleum** (Da Kherqa Sharif Ziarat; 8am-5pm) of the founder of modern-day Afghanistan, Ahmed Shah Durrani, is at the rear of the Mosque of the Sacred Cloak. The octagonal shaped, richly decorated mausoleum is somewhat overshadowed by the mosque.

Mosque of the Hair of the Prophet

Although a little harder to find than the cloak, make sure you make the trip to **Mosque of the Hair of the Prophet** (Jame Mui Mobarak; 8am-5pm) near Chowk-e Charso in the Old City to see where this unique Islamic relic lies. The hair from the Prophet's beard is encased by a golden sheath in a casket. Like the cloak you will be unable to see the hair; however the Mosque itself is a peaceful haven from the chaos of the Old City bazaars.

Baba Wali Shrine

Sitting on the banks of the Arghandab River is the **Baba Wali Shrine** (Arghandab District Pass), also known as Baba Sahib by Kandaharis. Gul Agha Sherzai, the twice-former Governor of Kandahar, fierce warlord and former mujahideen commander constructed the shrine at a cost of millions of dollars to honour one of his revered tribesmen. It provides a great view to the verdant Arghandab Valley, which is in stark contrast to the rest of the dusty province. The multi-level shrine, marble and mirror-clad, set into a hillside is a popular picnic place for the Kandaharis, with kebabs, hand-made ice cream and local fruit juices available from cart vendors.

Forty Steps

One kilometre west of Chowk-e Dand nestled in a rocky outcrop above the city are the **Forty Steps** (Chihil Zina), which are visible from most of Shah-e-Nau. The steps will take you to a small enclave in the mountain guarded by two stone lions. The statues were carved by Babur, founder of the Mughal empire of India, who took Kandahar in the 16th century. Inside the enclave there is a Persian inscription paying tribute to the conquests of Babur. It's a great place to take the ubiquitous Afghan thermos and drink a cup of green chai while watching the sunrise, but

it won't be serene for long as your presence will probably attract an army of kids from the surrounding village.

SLEEPING

Sleeping options in Kandahar are relatively limited, expensive and low quality due to the lack of travellers that make it to the city, with most Afghans staying with friends or family and most internationals staying in their organisations' private guesthouses. The hotels listed all have armed guards, are centrally located and regularly accommodate visiting NGO workers and journalists.

Noor Jahan Hotel (☎ 070 335427; Herat Sarak, Chowk-e Shaheedan; s/d with bathroom 800/1200Afg) The best budget option in Kandahar. It has a small restaurant for guests only, hot water most of the time and all the Bollywood you can watch on Indian satellite TV. Most of the rooms are pretty dilapidated, but compared with the budget alternatives, they're not bad value. The hotel is surrounded by wedding shops that decorate cars for the big day with streamers and gaudy plastic flowers.

Continental Guesthouse (☎ 070 302613; Herat Sarak, Chowk-e Shaheedan; s/d US\$40/60) This guesthouse is very popular with journalists, as there is a computer with internet access in every room, and laundry and breakfast are included. It's comfortable and secure, although some of the rooms are pretty tired for the money and few come with private bathroom.

Yasin International Guesthouse (☎ 070 301042, Herat Sarak, Chowk-e Shaheedan; s/d US\$40/60) This guesthouse is attached to the Yasin BBQ Restaurant and has six rooms with bathrooms. They have plans for expansion in the near future. Like the Continental, it is comfortable and secure but somewhat overpriced.

EATING & DRINKING

The Pakistani and Baloch influence on Kandahari Pashtun culture is most evident in the food. There is little variance between restaurants in the local cuisine; however, the saving grace of the Kandahar fare is the magnificent seasonal fruits and fresh vegetables.

Mirwais Shandaiz Restaurant (☎ 079 9022 338; Kariz Bazaar; meals from 150Afg; ☎ 8am-10pm) Not surprisingly this is the only restaurant in Kandahar to sport a spinning disco light; don't let the waiters in matching grotty

England soccer shirts put you off, as they serve great Afghan food all day. Offerings include kebab, *pulao* (rice dish), mutton *karai* (diced mutton fried with chilli, tomato and spices and served with bread), *mantu* (steamed meat dumplings) and beef *kufta* (meatballs with different sauces served with rice). The food is fresh, portions are generous and the local seasonal juices and milkshakes are delicious. To finish off, try the home-made ice cream followed by a cup of chai and a *sheesha* pipe on the elevated *takht* area.

The Coffee Shop (☎ 070 300169; Chowk-e Kiptan Madad; meals from 200Afg; ☎ 10am-10pm) The Coffee Shop serves up a wide selection of Western café-style food, Pashtun and English literature and pretty good espresso coffee. It has been dubbed 'the Starbucks of Kandahar' in many Western broadsheets and magazines and has just installed four pool tables. It is the first of its kind in the city and a great place to take a break from kebabs and *pulao*. Here you will find groups of hip, male 20-something Pashtuns sipping lattes and speaking about the latest pirated Hollywood DVDs.

Madina Restaurant (☎ 070 302652; Chowk-e Shah-e Nau; meals from 200Afg; ☎ 8am-10pm) The recently opened Madina Restaurant serves the usual mix of Afghan staples and proudly displays its Western options of burgers and club sandwiches at the top of the menu. Their massive juice bar churns out concoctions of the fruit of the season.

Yasin BBQ Restaurant (☎ 070 301042; Herat Sarak, Chowk-e Shaheedan; BBQ dishes from 350Afg; ☎ 8am-10pm) By far the best Pashtun BBQ restaurant in town, the Yasin serves up tasty lamb kebab, beef shaslik and BBQ whole chicken in a twinkling, plus it will do meals on request. Cleanliness doesn't seem to be too much of a priority, with the occasional cigarette butt kicking around on the greasy floors, but diners shouldn't be overly concerned as the fare is fresh and comes straight off the scorching-hot charcoal grill.

SHOPPING

The main shopping areas are located around the three Old City Chowks. **Chowk-e Shaheedan** is good for mobile phone cards, moneychangers, toiletries and food. Several good antique stores can be found in **Kabul Darwaza**, selling all sorts of trash and

treasure from the British and Soviet occupations. The tool stores here sell the favoured souvenir of Western journalists in the south – opium poppy cutters and scrapers. In **Chowk-e Charso** rugs can be found at much cheaper prices than in Kabul. Traditional Pashtun turbans and the quintessential Kandahari prayer hat, the *balotchi*, encrusted with a rainbow of plastic gems, can also be found here.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Although road travel options exist and the condition of the roads has improved greatly in recent years, the Kandahar–Kabul route (bus/taxi 500/2000Afg, six hours) and the Kandahar–Herat route (bus/taxi 1000/4000Afg, 12 hours) aren't recommended due to the prevailing security situation.

Air remains the best option for accessing Kandahar. Several commercial carriers provide regular services into the recently refurbished civilian terminal building, featured on the 500 Afghani note. **Ariana Afghan Airlines** (☎ 070 300847; Spin Boldak Sarak) has just commenced two regular services; a weekly Kabul–Kandahar–Herat service (one-way 1790Afg) and a weekly Kabul–Kandahar–Dubai service (one-way 8600Afg). Although pricey, the Dubai-based **DFS** (☎ 971-42997556; www.dfsmiddleeast.com; one-way US\$600) also take passengers on their weekly cargo run from Dubai–Kandahar.

Several options exist for Kabul–Kandahar flight – exclusively for NGOs registered with the humanitarian air carriers. The ICRC operates a free space-available weekly service, UNHAS have a twice weekly service and PACTEC operates a weekly service.

Kandahar can be reached by road from Quetta in Pakistan. You will need to take a bus or taxi to the Pakistani border town of Chaman, then cross into Spin Boldak in Afghanistan and take a taxi to Kandahar (800Afg, two hours). There is no reason to spend any time in the border towns, which in summer resemble something out of a *Mad Max* movie: full of dust and dirt, with the locals engaged in trading auto parts and smuggling goods. The border generally opens at 8am and can close anytime up until 5pm, or without notice by the security forces on either side. This is the only section of road in the south that is currently being used by NGOs. However, as with all information in this chapter, ensure you have the latest security information before planning a trip.

GETTING AROUND

The Millie buses and minibuses (5Afg) run in a general east–west and north–south direction throughout the day. Taxis will take you anywhere in the city for 50Afg; auto rickshaws cost 25Afg. Movement on foot or by bicycle is not recommended.

THE SOUTH

Due to the security situation outside of Kandahar there are few foreigners here who are not wearing military uniform. The Pakistani influences, more so than Central Asian ones, can be seen in the provinces to the east of Kandahar, such as Zabul and Paktika – in the food, clothing, currency and the insurgency. While in the provinces

OPRAH WINFREY AND HANDMADE POMEGRANATE SOAP

Bostonian, Harvard educated, former National Public Radio journalist-turned-humanitarian, Sarah Chayes first came to Afghanistan in 2002. Having first arrived in the country as a journalist, this failed to satisfy her desire to contribute to the needs of the people. Returning to Kandahar to create her own small cooperative Sarah looked to the produce of the south to create products for the export market, and founded Arghand.

The initial capital was provided by numerous benefactors, including Oprah Winfrey. The products of Arghand are soaps, oils and skin care products; the Desert Fields soap with palm and coconut oils and steeped *Artemisia persica* leaves claims to be Arghand's best cleanser.

Along with the products marketed by Arghand, is a collection of organically produced chutneys and jams made almost entirely of pomegranates, plums and apricots – nothing is wasted. Sadly these are yet to be ready for export but can be found in the bazaars of Kandahar.

To learn more about Arghand, visit www.arghand.org.

to the west, particularly Nimroz and parts of Helmand, Iranian influences are evident. Coming down from the mountain ranges in Oruzgan and Ghazni, the desert plains of the south play host to baking heat, sand storms, flash floods, one of the biggest narcotics operations in the world and an active insurgency.

Even with the splendour of the Ghaznavid empire to be explored, independent travel to these areas is not recommended.

GHAZNI

غزنی

The capital of the like-named province of Ghazni is a two-hour drive southwest from Kabul and is now a commercial centre specialising in transport contractors, truck sales and sheepskin coats. It is a shadow of its former glory as the centre of the Ghaznavid empire in the 11th century and one of the most important cities in the Islamic world at the time. Sultan Mahmud's control extended over modern-day Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan and Northwest India. He also took Islam to India and returned

with plundered riches to keep the empire running, elephants for his stables and priceless artefacts to display in his court, which was filled with poets, artists and scholars.

However Mahmud's reign was overwhelmed in the 12th century by the Ghorid dynasty. The attacks led by Alauddin, also known as the 'World Burner', gutted the elaborate city. What remained was later decimated by Genghis Khan and his Mongol hoards in 1221. The ruins were reoccupied until once again the city fell, this time in 1839 to the British Army during the first Anglo-Afghan War and has not changed much since that time.

Amongst the feverish paced modern-day trade in Ghazni there are two monuments to the Ghaznavid empire that sit on the side of the road to Kabul. The most visible are two ornate star-shaped **Towers of Victory** or minarets, built in the 11th century by Mahmud's successors. Both are shorter than they originally were thanks to an earthquake in 1902, and are capped with gaudy corrugated iron roofs. They are

richly decorated in raised brick and terracotta, with each of the panel recesses between the start points displaying ornate patterns and Kufic inscriptions from the Quran. They are thought to be the inspiration for the Minaret of Jam (pp126-8).

Mahmud's elaborately carved marble **tomb** sits nearby the minarets in a simple brick mausoleum.

LASHKAR GAH

لشکرگاه

Lashkar Gah, the capital of Helmand Province and the site of the ancient city of Bost, is a two-hour drive to the west of Kandahar. Bost was the winter palace of Sultan Mahmud and his Ghaznavid empire and its fate was the same as Ghazni.

Centuries later it would become a key US development project during the Cold War in the 1960s, so much so that Lashkar Gah was labelled 'Little America'. US engineers and agriculture specialists worked for over a decade and laid out the New City in Lashkar Gah and constructed an extensive network of irrigation canals and the massive Kajaki hydroelectric dam. As the Red

Army invaded in 1979, the programme was abandoned.

Ironically the canal system, designed to irrigate food crops, is now used to cultivate opium poppies with Helmand now receiving the infamous accolade of being the largest opium-producing province in Afghanistan.

Helmand is one of the most volatile provinces in the country, with the UK ISAF forces experiencing unprecedented violent clashes with the insurgency throughout the province. The opium trade serves to further destabilise the situation.

Little is left of the splendour of the Ghaznavids; parts of the ruins of the Old City can be found on the far side of the Lashkar Gah airfield on the Helmand River – in worse condition than the Ghazni ruins. The expansive **Bost Arch** (featured on the 100 Afghani note) gives you a glimpse of the ancient city of Bost. It once served as the entrance to the city. However, it doesn't look as grand as the currency depicts; the arch has been filled with mud brick to prevent it from collapsing, pending assistance from the international community for its restoration.

A \$60 BILLION BUSINESS

Western drug cops talk of busts in grams and kilograms, whereas their relatively ineffective counterparts in Helmand talk in tons. Afghanistan, in terms of volume and quality, is the world leader in opium production – producing 92% of the world crop, or a staggering 6100 metric tons as reported by the UN in 2006, much of it bound for Europe and Russia as heroin. The estimated value of the 2006 crop is nearly \$3.5 billion, equating to a street value in excess of US\$60 billion. Helmand contributed 42% of the 2006 crop, Badakhshan in the northeast a long second at 8%. Lashkar Gah sports many 'Poppy Palaces' amongst the mud houses – massive, gaudy houses all built with drug money.

A UN survey unsurprisingly lists 'easy cash' as the reason for growing poppies by over 41% of farmers, although 12% cite the high cost of Afghan weddings. However, Afghanistan has not always haemorrhaged opium, in 2001 the Taliban outlawed its cultivation and overnight it stopped; however, the upper Talib echelons still continued the trade. Since the fall of the regime, the poppy fields and the trade has blossomed. President Karzai declared a Jihad on Poppy, which has had little impact. Many of his government officials and security forces are actively involved in the business, cooperating with the narcolors, warlords and criminal gangs who run the trade. This further undermines the international community's efforts of eradication and finding alternative livelihoods for poppy growers; both are failing dismally. Although the level of eradication increased by 210% between 2005 and 2006, the national crop grew by 59%; in Helmand it increased exponentially by 162%.

At 100Afg a hit on the streets, heroin's cheap price has also seen the increase of Afghanistan's intravenous user population, bringing with it the related criminal and health issues such as HIV and AIDS. Having porous international borders with most of its neighbours, making it easy for the heavily armed opium convoys, the Afghan experience is similar in neighbouring countries. The Afghan opium cultivation habit is going to be a hard one to crack, and it is clear that the ancient Silk Road, with its camel caravans of silks and spice, has indeed been replaced by the opium highway, replete with Toyota Hiluxes packed with opium and heavily armed men.

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