

# The Real Dope Pushers in Afghan War Are Still at Large

by Ramtanu Maitra

May 8—Viktor Ivanov, the director of Russia’s anti-drug agency, announced to reporters on May 5, that “Osama [bin Laden] launched the heroin drug trafficking [in Afghanistan]. . . . He is gone; that is to say, he was killed. This is a major success of our U.S. partners. However, the drug problem is not solved,” as quoted in Itar-Tass May 6.

Was Ivanov correct, if quoted correctly? He was right in claiming that the drug problem is not solved, but he was only partially correct, if indeed he had claimed that bin Laden launched the heroin drug trafficking: There were many other international players, whose active collaboration made Osama’s venture a “success.” When it comes to bin Laden, the entire herd of policymakers, administrators, academics, news media, and common people, resorts to wild exaggeration without providing a shred of evidence for holding the man (now, dead) in such “high esteem.”

As Ivanov should know, the only way that the opium trade is going to be stopped is by going after the financial powers who god-fathered it, and sustain it, from the top: the British financier network, which funds and launders the trade for its geopolitical, as well as economic reasons. Within this nexus, bin Laden was just a cog, if a flamboyant one. The main task, of crushing the British international criminal network behind the drug trade, lies ahead.

## Opium in Afghanistan

*I hate this City, seated on the Plain,  
The clang and clamour of the hot Bazaar,  
Knowing, amid the pauses of my pain,  
This month the Almonds bloom in Kandahar.*

—From an unknown Indian poet,  
translated into English by Laurence Hope in 1906

At present, almonds are not the only flowers in bloom; the provinces of Kandahar and Helmand are awash with

opium sap-producing poppies, as well. After two years of steady decline, the United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC) predicts a significant growth in opium production in Afghanistan this year. This means one thing, and one thing only: All the international forces—from the largely British offshore bankers to the dollar-a-trip drug mules—who benefit from the multibillion-dollar opium/heroin business that flourishes under the cover of the ongoing war in Afghanistan are alive and kicking, and the insurgents are assured that their financing will remain undisturbed.

That is, however, not to say that opium production in Afghanistan began only with the arrivals of the “foreign devils.” It existed before, but the production was nowhere near the level it is today, or what we have seen during the last ten years. At the time the Red Army launched its brutal cam-



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*Viktor Ivanov faces a bitter reality: The elimination of Osama bin Laden, who was instrumental in the massive expansion of the Afghan opium trade, has not shut down the traffickers, whose protectors reach into the uppermost inner sanctums in London and its offshore banking havens. There are an estimated 2 million addicts in Russia.*

paign to annex Afghanistan at the end of 1979, the country was producing less than 100 tons a year, as compared to the 8,000 tons it produced in 2007. In that year, the opium-producing fields of southern Afghanistan were not only thick with poppies, but also with foreign troops, particularly those who serve Britain's Royal Majesty.

Following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, history recalls the gearing up of the anti-Soviet machinery by the U.S., in particular, and the West in general, to organize the Afghans to give the Red Army a black eye; the West saw an opportunity to bring down the Bolsheviks. But how to finance this? Afghan opium became the mainspring for generating cash to pay for the war.

A deal was struck between Washington and the late Pakistani President Zia ul-Haq, to build a slate of mujahideen groups to fight the Red Army. They found, in Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, who headed the Hezb-e-Islami group, a reliable and ardent drug handler. Pakistan and the mujahideen needed a lot of cash. So, Hekmatyar, who now operates in the northeastern part of Afghanistan against the American troops, and is projected widely as a potential arbiter in the resolution of the Afghan conflict, became the Washington man on the scene. A Pushtun, Hekmatyar operated during those days in the opium-growing southern part of Afghanistan on behalf of Washington and Islamabad.

Under Hekmatyar's stewardship, Afghan opium production rose from 250 tons in 1982, to 2,000 tons in 1991, coinciding with Washington's support and funding of the mujahideen. Alfred McCoy, a professor of Southeast Asian history at the University of Wisconsin, says that U.S. and Pakistani intelligence officials sanctioned the rebels' drug trafficking because of their fierce opposition to the Soviets: "If their local allies were involved in narcotics trafficking, it didn't trouble [the] CIA. They were willing to keep working with people who were heavily involved in narcotics." For instance, Hekmatyar, the mujahideen leader who received about half of all the CIA's covert weapons, was known to be a major heroin trafficker. Charles Cogan, who directed the CIA's operation in Afghanistan at that time, later claimed he was unaware of the drug trade: "We found out about it later on," he told the *Atlantic Monthly* in May 1996.

The other major drug warlord-mujahid was Yunus Khalis. He headed his own faction of the fundamentalist Hezb-e-Islami party and was operating along the borders of eastern Afghanistan. His objective was to get control of Nangarhar province, where poppy had been grown for centuries. While President George W. Bush

was braying for Osama's blood, it was reportedly Yunus Khalis who had brought bin Laden into hiding in the Tora Bora mountains bordering Pakistan.

Although both Hekmatyar and Khalis relied on opium-generated money to become powerful, they carefully confined their interactions with the local druglords who would pay them cash, and carry the stuff away. In other words, compared to what happened in Osama's time, and the International Security Assistance Forces' (ISAF) sojourn in Afghanistan, Khalis and Hekmatyar were indulging in a penny-ante game.

At the time, the Afghan opium, being converted into heroin in labs operated mostly by U.K.-born and -educated chemists, was finding its way to the outside world through Pakistan, the Indian Ocean, and Iran. In 1996, almost seven years after the defeated Red Army trudged back home through the Salang Tunnel, the Afghan Taliban, aided by Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, came to power under Mullah Omar. Those seven years (1989-96) were a terrible period in Afghanistan, where mujahideen, set up, armed, and trained by the West to draw Russian blood, killed each other in large numbers. The arrival of the Taliban, a laboratory product funded by the Saudis and trained by the Pakistani Army, brought a semblance of "order" in Afghanistan. But, that also brought in Osama bin Laden and the building of the drug-trafficking network.

Bin Laden, a Saudi citizen, who first came to Pakistan in 1984, and formed an organization called Makhtab al-Khidamat (MaK), recruited and trained Muslim volunteers from the Arab world who were willing to fight the Soviet Army. The West had funded MaK in its anti-Soviet phase; after the Soviets left Afghanistan, Mukhtab became al-Qaeda, and began targetting U.S. interests around the world. Riyadh revoked bin Laden's citizenship in 1994 because of his terrorism activities, and under pressure from the United States, Sudan expelled him in 1996. When Saudi Arabia barred his return, bin Laden returned to Afghanistan, where the newly installed Taliban regime, funded by Saudi Arabia and militarily protected by Pakistan, welcomed him.

### **Osama's Heroin Express: Bout, and Dubai**

Hekmatyar, who had opposed the Taliban and fled the country after they took control, was out of the Afghan opium loop in 1996. After his arrival, Osama set about to expand heroin trafficking, most likely with two things in mind. First: to generate enough cash to arm the Taliban against future invaders and protect his



*The Taliban, who were recruited by the West to fight the Soviets in Afghanistan, now oversee the vast production of opium poppy. Shown, an AK-47-toting Taliban militant supervises farmers harvesting opium resin from poppies, in Helmand province.*

own al-Qaeda group; and second, to tap the wide international demand for heroin.

In setting up his network, Osama brought in Dawood Ibrahim, a mafia don from Mumbai, India, in the 1980s and early 1990s. Dawood, with strong links to Mumbai's political and social milieu, was a gold and drug trafficker. He fled India for Dubai following the March 12, 1993 bombings of the Bombay Stock Exchange, which killed hundreds of Indians, and injured over a thousand more. Dawood's syndicate, which was under control of the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), became a part of British MI6, operating hand-in-glove with money-launderers in Dubai and with bin Laden.

Why was the recruitment of Dawood necessary? While in Afghanistan, one of bin Laden's first moves was to link up his jihadi group with the cash-generating and money-laundering international underground. He took control of the Afghan national airlines, Ariana Airlines. As a former U.S. National Security Council official told a reporter, Ariana Airlines became a "key node in al-Qaeda's infrastructure. The network used Ariana to move everything that was useful—money, personnel, and matériel."

Soon, Ariana Airlines shifted from carrying passengers to carrying cargo. "The planes would come back from the UAE loaded with weapons," said Julie Sirrs, an Afghanistan specialist at the U.S. Defense Intelli-

gence Agency during the Clinton Administration. "It was mostly Soviet weapons, small arms—Kalashnikovs and RPG-7s." While the weapons came in from Dubai, and later from Sharjah, the planes carried tons of opium back to Dubai. Agents of al-Qaeda and Dawood's men would take control of the drugs in Dubai, contact the drug-trafficking network, and purchase weapons using some of that money.

A frequent stop was Sharjah, one of the Emirates, whose international airport, former U.S. and Afghan officials said, became a hub for drug and arms smuggling by al-Qaeda. The emirate, 20 miles from Dubai, is run by a fundamentalist Islamic regime. Sharjah's airport is studded with numerous "fly-by-night" cargo operations willing to take on any comers, U.S. analysts point out.

In Sharjah, al-Qaeda's benefactor was the notorious Russian mafioso and gun-runner, Victor Bout. Bout, who was arrested in Thailand, and extradited to the United States in November 2010, had developed contacts with the Taliban in August 1995, when the Taliban was in opposition to then-President Burhanuddin Rabbani's government in Kabul. One of Bout's planes, flying under the banner of the Trans Aviation Network (TAN), from Albania, via Sharjah, and transporting small arms and military equipment to Rabbani, was intercepted by a MiG-21 and forced to land in Taliban-controlled territory, according to the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ) investigation.

According to the UN and various intelligence reports, in March 1995, Bout and a Frenchman, Michel-Victor Thomas, founded TAN. Between 1995 and 1997, TAN's operating base was Ostend, in Belgium, an airport frequently cited by human rights groups for hosting companies and individuals involved in arms trafficking. TAN also opened offices in Sharjah, one of the Gulf Emirates.

The Ilyushin-76 used to deliver weapons to Afghanistan belonged to Aerostan, a company based in Tatarstan, but leased by Transavia, one of Bout's companies operating out of the UAE. Transavia had started making cargo flights to Kabul, Kandahar, and Jalalabad in May 1995, at the behest of Afghani traders in the Emirates, according to Agence France Presse. Intelli-

gence agencies suspect that arms supplies were transported on an airline, Flying Dolphin, run by one of Bout's business associates, which ran scheduled flights from the UAE into Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, between October 2000 and Jan. 21, 2001, according to reports in the UAE media. Flying Dolphin is owned by Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed bin Saqr al-Nayhan, a former UAE ambassador to the United States, and a member of the ruling family in Abu Dhabi, who has been described by the UN as a "close business associate of Bout." According to the Dec. 20, 2000 UN report, Zayed's company is registered in Liberia, but its operations office was in Dubai.

The U.S. Treasury Department's description of Dawood says, in part, that his criminal syndicate "is involved in large-scale shipments of narcotics in the U.K. and Western Europe.... The syndicate's smuggling routes from South Asia, the Middle East and Africa are shared with Osama bin Laden and his terrorist network.... Successful routes established over recent years by Ibrahim's syndicate have been subsequently utilized by bin Laden. A financial arrangement was reportedly brokered to facilitate the latter's usage of these routes.... In the late 1990s, Ibrahim traveled in Afghanistan under the protection of the Taliban.... Information, from as recent[ly] as Fall 2002, indicates that Ibrahim has financially supported Islamic militant groups working against India, such as Lashkar-e-Tayyiba (LeT)."

Following the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, and after the poppy fields were transferred from Osama's watch to the British troops' watch, Dawood Ibrahim became a major transporter of drugs from Afghanistan to Dubai by means of his "mules," protected by the intelligence agencies and his beneficiaries. It is said that the containers that carry large equipment to Dubai, from Kandahar and elsewhere in southern Afghanistan, for "repair," also contain drugs.

The drugs were converted to cash in Dubai. The tax-free island-city, sitting at a strategic crossroads of the Persian Gulf, South Asia, and Africa, is a major offshore banking center. With the development of the Dubai International Financial Centre (DIFC), the latest free-trade zone there, flexible and unrestricted offshore banking has become big business. Many of the world's largest banks already have a significant presence in Dubai—Abbey National Offshore, HSBC Offshore, ABN Amro, ANZ Grindlays, Banque Paribas, Banque de Caire, Barclays, Dresdner, and Merrill Lynch all have offices there.

## The Money-Launderers

Besides Dubai, most of the offshore banks are located in former British colonies, and all are involved in money laundering: Legitimizing cash generated from drug sales and other contraband for the "respectable banks" is the lifeblood of these offshore institutions.

Arguably the most important of the Caribbean offshore financial centers is the Cayman Islands, a British Overseas Territory run by a royal governor appointed by Queen Elizabeth II. The Caymans are mainly a mail drop and regulation-free zone, a place where hot money is welcome, and few questions are asked.

On Oct. 10, 2001, John Henley of the London *Guardian*, reporting from Paris, pointed to a French parliamentary report which said that up to 40 companies, banks, and individuals based in Britain can legitimately be suspected of maintaining direct or indirect relations with Osama bin Laden. "The convergence of financial and terrorist interests, apparent particularly in Great Britain and in Sudan, does not appear to have been an obstacle with regard to the objectives pursued [by bin Laden]," the report concluded. "The conjunction of a terrorist network attached to a vast financing structure is the dominant trait of operations conducted by bin Laden."

The report, titled "The City of London, Gibraltar and the Crown Dependencies: Offshore Centers and Sanctuaries for Dirty Money," said that criminal organizations "have been able to exploit to their profit the reckless financial deregulation of the 1980s," while Britain has failed to accompany with "the security measures demanded for all too long by the battle against money laundering and financial crime."

It is likely that Osama bin Laden died a pauper, holed up in a house for years under the protection of Pakistani security. Once he went into hiding in 2000, his heroin-generated financial network was taken over by others, and he no longer had access to it.

Viktor Ivanov should note that, while Osama was gone already in 2001, the entire heroin-trafficking infrastructure has not only remained intact, but it has been strengthened. The only difference between Osama's days in Afghanistan and the post-2001 Afghanistan, is that a new set of profit-makers has emerged. During the period that the Taliban was running the heroin-for-cash-and-arms, Russia was not much of a target for them. Now, Russia is a victim of Afghan heroin, with more than 2 million addicts, and it is likely that that will not change, unless firm steps are taken to eradicate this evil.

The heroin has too many powerful patrons.