



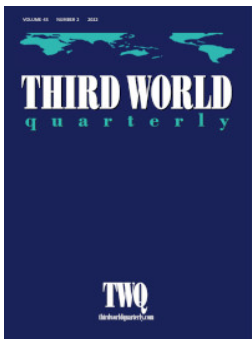
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Modes of governance and the everyday lives of illicit drug producers in Afghanistan

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ABSTRACT

Prevailing studies on illicit drug economies in violent contexts are typically concerned with whether illicit drugs are a driver of insecurity, or vice versa. This paper provides additional nuance to the literature by considering the interaction between different governance arrangements and the everyday life of people involved in the drug economy. Drawing from a systems-lifeworlds approach, we present evidence from interviews and life histories collected in four district case studies in two borderland provinces of Afghanistan. We find that governance in government-controlled areas tends to be more fragmented, negatively affecting the livelihoods of small-scale drug producers and traders. However, we also find exceptions to this trend, where stable governance arrangements emerged under state control. While authority tends to be less fragmented in Taliban-controlled districts, illicit drug producers fared much worse under *Daesh* rule, showing stark variation in the effects of insurgency rule on the drug economy. Contrary to prevailing assumptions that participants in the illicit drug economies thrive in ungoverned environments, our findings show that there is considerable, if selective, demand for predictable rule-based political authority, albeit pragmatic enough to allow an open-access illicit drug economy to operate.

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Introduction

A large number of studies on illicit markets in violent contexts have been concerned with the question of whether the existence of these markets is a driver of violence, or vice versa (eg Björnehed 2004; Durbin 2013). An assumption underpinning much of this work is that illicit economies thrive in ungoverned, lawless environments, and that those working within the shadow economy have an incentive to undermine the statebuilding process, keeping state institutions as weak and distant as possible. In this paper, we present evidence that challenges these assumptions. Drawing from original interviews with and life histories of illicit drug producers and traders located in two borderland provinces of Afghanistan conducted prior to the collapse of the Islamic Republic in August 2021, we explore how dynamic

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and ever-shifting modes of governance interact with the illicit drug economy. Our main research question is: *How do different and evolving modes of governance interact with the everyday life of farmers and traders involved in the illicit drug economy?*

While the illicit drug economy has long roots in Afghanistan, it turned into a major issue of governance only in response to external interventions. Opium was historically used for customary medicinal purposes in many communities in Afghanistan, particularly those without regular access to state health services. Prior to the outbreak of war in 1979, Afghanistan remained a minor player in the international market (Ruttig and Buddenberg 2016; Bradford 2019). With the Soviet invasion, opium poppy cultivation expanded rapidly in the 1980s (Chouvy 2010, 51ff). During the civil war that followed, Afghanistan became the largest producer of illicit opium in the world (UNODCCP 2001). It has retained that position ever since, with the exception of a short-lived but effective ban under Taliban rule immediately before the regime was overthrown in late 2001. During the 20-year lifespan of the Islamic Republic, both the Afghan state and its international backers framed the drug economy in Afghanistan as a critical governance challenge, corrupting state building from within (Shaw 2006) or challenging the state from without by financing the armed insurgency (Schweich 2007).

We explore interactions between governance frameworks and the illicit economy through original fieldwork in two borderland areas of Afghanistan. Our focus on subnational comparisons acknowledges past work by Abraham and Van Schendel (2005), which stresses the importance of moving beyond the nation state as the main level of analysis in understanding international illicit activities. Borderlands are particularly fruitful analytical sites of interest, as they tend to be spaces of layered institutions, legal pluralism and fragmented sovereignty (Goodhand 2018). System-lifeworld interactions in contested borderlands in Afghanistan are characterised not necessarily by the absence of governance in lieu of insulated self-rule, but rather by fluid and adaptive patterns of governance arrangements between local communities involved in the drug economy, amid a plethora of distinct power centres (Marsden and Hopkins 2012). In order to come to grips with such fluid and hybrid arrangements, we use the term 'governance' as a broader analytical concept distinct from government, state rule or authority, referring to institutionalised modes of collectively and intentionally regulating social matters (Mayntz 2005; Draude, Schmelzle, and Risse 2012).

Our study builds on data from two pairs of districts in the provinces of Nimroz and Nangarhar: two nominally under government control, and two in significant part under the control of opposition rebel groups. The case studies show that most low- and mid-level producers and traders in government-controlled areas experienced more fragmented systems of authority, which in turn led to higher levels of unpredictability and economic hardship. While in some cases participants were able to successfully adapt to these hardships, other participants proved less able to adapt and were forced to seek work elsewhere. Authority tended to be less fragmented and unpredictable in Taliban-controlled areas. However, producers and traders fared far worse in *Daesh* (Islamic State)-controlled areas, where drug cultivation and trade was strictly banned as *haram* (forbidden on religious grounds), suggesting that the principal normative positions different insurgency groups take towards illicit drugs is also a significant factor impacting the lives and livelihoods of traders.

From a lifeworld perspective, contrary to assumptions that participants in the illicit drug economy thrive in unregulated or lawless environments, our case studies suggest that there

is a clear, if selective, demand in these borderlands for predictable political authority, albeit one with enough ideological flexibility to permit the production and trading of illicit drugs within their territories.

The first section of this paper places our research in the theoretical framework of how system-level governance interacts with lifeworld-level illicit economies on the contested margins of the state. The second section provides case studies from two provinces in Afghanistan to empirically assess this interaction. We conclude with a discussion of the implications the empirical findings have for governing the drug economy at the margins.

Drug economies and the topos of ungovernability of the margins

Perhaps no recent academic work has been as influential in shaping contemporary images of state peripheries as Scott's *The Art of Not Being Governed* (Scott 2009), a study of rural minority communities in Southeast Asia. In the book, Scott argues that communities situated in these peripheries actively resist the advances of 'conquering administrators' attempting to absorb them into state institutions; 'statelessness' is therefore not a barbaric or passive state of existence, but rather a deliberate and self-interested choice.

This choice of not being governed by central authority is linked to certain kinds of spaces – Scott refers to Zomia (the highlands of Southeast Asia) as an exemplary case – ie geographical and political frontiers and spaces in between, that are (or used to be) marginal and distant from the direct projection of power by centralised states (Scott 2009). These 'shatter zones' between nation states have applied various forms of resistance to and avoidance of state domination, including shifting 'escape agriculture', retreat and rebellions as well as cultural defences like evasive illiteracy, informality and egalitarian community organisation (Scott 2009). In response to the tension between attempts of the state to extend blessings and burdens of formal governance regimes into these liminal zones, and the strategies of avoidance and resistance of the highlanders, those marginal spaces developed a comparative advantage in informal economies, and some turned into hubs for illicit trade in both legal and illegal commodities (Goodhand 2021).

Scott's academic oeuvre suggests a fundamental scepticism regarding the willingness and ability of states to govern in the best interest and 'improve the human condition' of the governed on the one hand (Scott 1998), and a keen interest in the 'arts of resistance' of the governed on the other hand (Scott 1990). In contrast to Scott's intentions, however, the portrayal of (chosen or unchosen) ungovernability has often served as a function justifying coercive state interventions into those social and geographical spaces (Goodhand 2021).

The story of noble (or ignoble) ungovernability has lent itself to widespread national narratives, not least in Afghanistan, where portrayals of the country as an unconquerable *graveyard of empires* underpinned by a *freedom-loving tribal society* has turned to myth, while the formal state has often been reduced to a caricature of remote *rentier elites* detached from their citizens, devoid of any social contract whatsoever.

This view is particularly salient in studies on illicit markets, particularly drugs, which are typically associated with ungoverned and underdeveloped territories (eg Thoumi 2003). One focus is an assumed link between illicit drugs and insecurity, though the direction of causality is a subject of debate (eg Andreas and Wallman 2009; Durbin 2013). The concept of 'narco-terrorism', fuelled by illicit drug markets in weakly governed peripheries, remains

a predominant view, particularly among policymakers engaged in conflict-affected environments.

A number of critical voices have cautioned against what they characterise as a ‘fetishization of drugs’, arguing that the relationship between violence, drugs and underdevelopment is far more nuanced (eg Ghiabi 2019; Goodhand et al. 2021). This body of work finds that the illicit economies can sometimes have a stabilising effect on local political settlements, particularly if joint extraction regimes between rulers and locally embedded elites can be established (Goodhand 2008, drawing on Snyder 2006). Furthermore, incomes from illicit markets can provide vital lifelines for some of the most impoverished and vulnerable communities, which in turn is used to improve the economic prospects and developmental outcomes of these communities (eg Pain 2008; Goodhand 2008, Meehan 2011). Indeed, multiple studies exploring the causes of illicit behaviour have found that many ordinary participants in the informal sector justify their actions as being the only strategy of survival available to them (Polese, Russo, and Strazzari 2019).

A large part of this critical work draws from ethnographic and anthropological studies exploring the everyday lives of those working in illicit economies, including drug producers, traders and various intermediaries (eg Bruns and Miggelbrink 2012; Campbell 2008; Botoeva 2014). These studies have produced insights into the functioning of illicit markets, in particular emphasising the salience of community connections and family ties (Majidi 2018), the importance of transnational networks (Ibañez-Tirado and Marsden 2020), and coping strategies against economic and physical threats (Van Dun 2014). Scholars such as Ballvé (2012) have argued that state formation in these contexts cannot be understood without taking into account multiple everyday interactions beyond the nation state, including local government bodies but also non-governmental institutions, private firms and informal networks. As Titeca and De Herdt (2010) argue in a study in north-western Uganda, while cross-border trade may appear at first blush chaotic or unstructured, it is in fact governed by a number of practical norms negotiated between cross-border traders and state officials.

We build on this tradition by applying a bottom-up conceptual lens to the issue of illicit drug economies in Afghanistan. We do not treat everyday participants in illicit economics as mere recipients of higher-level systemic changes but focus on interaction and possible interdependencies between governing and governed. In critical reference to Habermas’ (1981) differentiation between lifeworld and system, where the former are increasingly ‘colonised’ by capitalist markets and bureaucratic governance, we revisit Scott’s thesis of people at the margins tending to resist or avoid supposed blessings and perceived burdens of being governed. We do not see system-lifeworld dynamics a priori as a one-way road of domination that can only be met by exit (into the hills), voice (rebellion) or (forced) loyalty (paying taxes and providing support) (Hirschman 1970). Besides these options, there may well be lifeworld demands for system-level authoritative governance, particularly to solve problems that local societal institutions fail to solve or that benefit only a select powerful few. Neither oppressive central governments ‘colonising’ their peripheries nor the liberating promise of hierarchically enforced governance to end Hobbesian threats to social order adequately represent everyday dynamics in peripheral borderlands – we must also consider local varieties of governance and investigate how these governance frameworks are applied, and for whom.

For people involved in illicit economies in those borderlands, strong preferences for evading or rejecting being governed seem particularly plausible and are all but assumed. But to what extent is this assumption valid? Research into governance provision in social and

geographical spaces where state authority is patchy and statehood itself is contested suggests that governance may well emerge outside of state rule (Risse 2012), that there are functional equivalents to state authority that protect binding rules that are at the heart of governance (Börzel and Risse 2010), and that collectives may use agency to selectively appropriate or reject governance provision (Draude 2017) or even negotiate new regulations and practical norms (Titeca and De Herdt 2010). Resulting arrangements have been analysed as hybrid forms of governance (Polese and Santini 2018). They take into account the complexity of overlapping hierarchies and legal/political frameworks within marginal spaces (eg Das and Poole 2004; Lund 2006; Marsden and Hopkins 2012) and produce insights into patterns and dynamics of hybrid governance in the fields of law (Benda-Beckmann, Benda-Beckmann, and Eckert 2009), trade relations (Rolandsen 2019) and organised crime (López-Vallejo and del Pilar Fuerte-Celis 2021; Felbab-Brown 2018; Bayart, Ellis, and Hibou 1999).

Building on this broader concept of governance, we explore how the lifeworlds of participants in the illicit economy interact with different modes of hybrid governance that emerged locally between state agents, opposition armed groups and borderland communities of Afghanistan. We find that for the observed variation in the provision of governance there is an unideological preference for predictability and selective order over ungoverned or arbitrarily ruled spaces among those engaged in the drug economy. This demand is elevated when local political economies face unpredictable external pressure or shocks. The findings have specific implications for the debate on conditions that determine selective provision of and conditional demand for governance functions in areas of limited and contested statehood. In more general terms, the findings add empirical evidence to the discussion on how the nexus of governance provision, illicit economies and economic livelihoods plays out in the context of violently contested state formation.

Methodological approach

We investigate the nexus between the lifeworld of people engaged in the drug economy and dynamic local governance regimes in two border regions of Afghanistan. We focus our analysis on three key features: variation and dynamics in the local governance arrangements; strategies of adaptation and accommodation of farmers and traders engaged in the drug economy; and external shocks challenging established local arrangements. We now outline our methodological approach for this investigation, which compares how those key features interact with each other across the two regions.

Our research is based on original fieldwork carried out in the Afghan provinces of Nangarhar (Figure 1) and Nimroz (Figure 2) throughout 2020, the year before the Taliban takeover of the country. The two provinces share some relevant features. Each is home to one major official border crossing (Torkham and Milak, respectively), and a large number of informal crossings along the border. Both provinces have a history of mostly open cross-border exchanges with their 'tribal' or 'ethnic' kin¹ on the Pakistani and Iranian sides (cf Boedeker 2012; Sabawoon 2020). However, over the past 10 to 15 years these open informal flows have been increasingly restricted by stricter and more effective border control regimes implemented by neighbouring states, putting the local political economy under a variety of stresses (Koehler, Rasool, and Ibrahimkhel 2021).

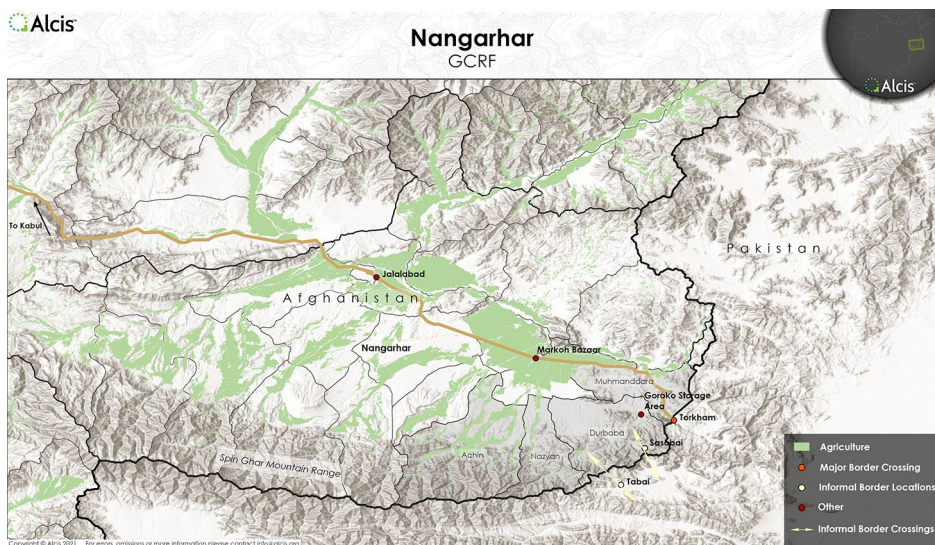


Figure 1. Map of formal and informal research sites in Nangarhar Province (source: ALCIS). (These figures were produced by ALCIS Ltd as part of the Drugs and (Dis)order GCRF project.)



Figure 2. Map of formal and informal research sites in Nimroz Province (source: ALCIS). (These figures were produced by ALCIS Ltd as part of the Drugs and (Dis)order GCRF project.)

The provinces are, however, distinct in terms of their recent governance history and integration into Afghanistan's drug economy. Nangarhar has long been a politically important borderland. Pashtun tribes, whose representatives have often been nationally influential, dominate local politics in Nangarhar (Jackson 2014). Nangarhar has also traditionally been a site of opium cultivation and trade. Nimroz, by contrast, is a physically and politically remote frontier province bordering both Iran and Pakistan, with a marginalised Baluch minority population residing along the border in all three countries (Larson 2010). However, trade

flows to and from Iran have ballooned since 2001, and the province has experienced increasing investment and economic growth, particularly in the capital of Zaranj (Mansfield 2020a). In comparison to other southern provinces Nimroz is not a major site of opium cultivation, due to its widespread deserts and lack of suitable agricultural land; however, it has developed into a main 'highway' for illicit smuggling (Afghan Opiate Trade Project 2020, 19) since the fall of the Taliban government in 2001.

We selected two border districts in each province for comparative analysis, two of which have been largely government controlled, and two of which have been significantly under the influence of insurgent groups in recent years. All four districts include communities with a high degree of participation in the illicit economy, along with a history of complex and often contradictory interventions to regulate these activities.

For each district, we began by constructing district profiles which mapped various variables of interest in each, including geographic features, levels of violence, production levels of illicit crops, the zones of influence of various power brokers, and major pathways of licit and illicit flows. Afterwards, specifically trained field researchers under the direct supervision of one of the authors conducted 14–16 guideline interviews per district with political, social and economic actors, in-depth interviews with political brokers and their socio-professional networks, and three interviews per district with farmers and traders with a history of involvement in the illicit drug economy at some stage in their lives. For the more sensitive drug-specific interviews in each district, we chose three interview partners based on their access to fertile land (high-yield, medium-yield and low-yield agriculture). The field research concluded with a three-day long debriefing with field researchers in December 2020, focussing on key observations and challenges. Additionally, we draw from 10 life histories per province that had been collected during a preceding research phase (2018–2019) to which we added a series of nine follow-up interviews focussing on the drug economy and brokerage. These interviews illuminate major changes in governance and the political economy over the preceding three decades. In total, we collected 128 interviews and life histories in the focal research sites of the two provinces. We supplement our primary data with publicly available data and secondary reports on the illicit economy and major moments of rupture in local governance structures.

Case studies

We now turn to the two sets of districts – one more under state control the other more exposed to insurgency governance – for closer investigation.

Pair one Durbaba and Kang districts: the fragmentation of governance under state control

Durbaba district in Nangarhar and Kang district in Nimroz border exist in close proximity to official border crossings to the south and north, respectively (see Figures 1 and 2). The two districts share a number of defining features with regard to their geographical position along the international border. They are relatively small in terms of geographic size and population and have little public service infrastructure.² Despite their proximity to official border crossings they are relatively disconnected in terms of road infrastructure and formal administration and economic activities. Neither district is conducive to widespread opium cultivation

due to topographical factors: Durbaba is highly mountainous, and Kang is marked by a combination of deserts and seasonal flood lands. However, both districts have a history of established and specialised informal cross-border trade in licit and illicit goods, which provided them with a significant role in the political economy of the wider province as key informal gateways into neighbouring countries. Arbitrage opportunities associated with these gateways has historically been central to the local economy and to the maintenance of cross-border economic and social networks. The management of cross-border flows and the rents they generate has been at the heart of local governance. As shown below, the introduction of more stringent border controls from neighbouring countries has had a profound effect on local governance arrangements and the lives and livelihoods of illicit drug producers and traders, who have adjusted to disruption in different ways.

The impact of border control regimes on illicit flows

Durbaba specialises in smuggling transit goods back into Pakistan in large quantities, with a mule track between the storage facilities of Goroko bazaar and Sasobai crossing to Tirah on the Pakistani side being the most significant route (Mansfield 2020b). At the same time, the district is a major cross-border drug trafficking route within Nangarhar. It is one of only a few government-controlled districts with significant drug trade (and opium cultivation on the little agricultural land available) that experienced hardly any counternarcotics measures, apart from some small-scale eradication in 2018 following a change of district governor (O2-NGR-DUR_SQDE³).

Opium (mostly grown within Nangarhar, and largely from Taliban-controlled areas) and hashish are delivered to storage facilities in more centrally located districts of Nangarhar and from there on in smaller packages via private cars into Durbaba. A farmer with experience in the local drug trade of Durbaba explained the process:

The traders bring hashish from Baghlan and they store it in [designated] areas of Ghani Khail district. The smugglers transport it from there to Durbaba district for 500 Rupees per seer⁴ by private cars. Then the labourers transport one seer for 300 Rupees sewn inside their vests. They can traffic 10–15 seer of drugs in them by feet across the mountains in Tabai Kandaw, Sasobi Kandaw and Machin Naw border areas. From the border Afridis [the dominant Pashtun tribe on the Pakistani side of the border] or Tanzim's [organisations on the Pakistani side] affiliated individuals traffic it with guarantee⁵ to Chora, which is a tribal area in Pakistan, for 1000 Rupees per seer. Alternatively, government officials traffic the traders' goods secretly to the border. They charge 2000 Rupees per seer and they pay 300 Rupees per seer to the Taliban from this. (Paraphrased from O2-NGR-DUR_SQDE)

In 2020, the Pakistan government effectively closed the main semi-official crossing into Pakistan via the mule trail at Sasobai. These closures resulted in the accumulation of transit goods within storage facilities in Goroko; some traders adapted by taking expensive and lengthy detours via Kandahar province to the south instead. The drug routes diversified, moving farther up the mountains, with some 200–300 people involved per night in the trafficking, with another crossing point, Tabai, emerging as the most important informal route.⁶

A similar tightening of border controls has occurred in Kang District in Nimroz. While neither opium poppy nor hashish is grown or produced within Kang district, it has long been an important smuggling route for drugs and people into Iran and diesel from Iran into

Afghanistan. Following the construction of border infrastructure from the Iranian side, the main route for people smuggling has moved south (Koehler, Rasool, and Ibrahimkhel 2021) and the flow of illicit diesel and drugs has similarly diverted to alternative routes. Local diesel smuggling relies on special arrangements made for mostly Baluch settlers in Iran who still hold land titles across the border in Nimroz; the owners use agricultural machinery for small-scale but systematic and widespread fuel smuggling (70–80 tractors daily; Mansfield 2020a). When Iran completely closed its border in reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic in the spring of 2020 this local-level diesel smuggling all but ceased.

Effects on local governance arrangements

In both provinces, changes in border regimes and the resulting disruption of illicit flows destabilised hybrid local governance arrangements. Unlike many other borderland districts in Afghanistan, Kang has no dominant non-state political patron or major active local militias. Instead, the main security providers are government forces (border guards, police and the national intelligence services) and a sporadic Taliban presence in the north of the district. And yet, in the aftermath of the Iranian border closures, connections with these security providers became an increasingly valuable commodity.

Traders with stronger political connections and more financial resources largely carried on with their work, negotiating large deliveries of illicit goods via agreements with border guards on both sides, facilitated by key brokers operating in the provincial capital Zaranj. Guarded informal gates, or *salae*, can be ‘rented for a night’, permitting the delivery of up to two metric tons of opium into Iran per night. Smaller traders were squeezed out or needed to accept higher risks (eg using ladders to climb the border wall when visibility was reduced due to sandstorms or fog). Some invested in improvised but innovative technologies like large mobile catapults shared among traders to fling packages of opium to their business partners on the other side (in 2020 our research team estimated that 100–150 such catapults were in operation along the Kang border; see also Mansfield 2020a). As a farmer residing in the vicinity of the border explained:

There are three to five partners in each catapult and two catapults have the ability of throwing 300–500 kg drugs in four to five hours to the cross-border Iran-side village. Each catapult owner is partner with another transporter on cross-border Iran side. (02_NIZ_KAN_SQDE_17)

On the Afghan side of the border, profits from those arrangements were distributed broadly, in the form of rents to the owner of the land where the catapult was located, as taxes collected via brokers with relevant government officials (usually on a monthly basis) and, separately, with border guards per delivery. Transportation of illicit drugs across the province is also easier for those with better connections, who are able to travel via main roads, while small-time smugglers are relegated to more insecure dirt roads.⁷ Enhanced border controls have thus produced a more inegalitarian distribution of risks, with smaller and less connected traders bearing most of the costs.

While Durbaba’s economy was similarly affected by increased border-control regimes on the Pakistani side (Koehler, Rasool, and Ibrahimkhel 2021), the consequences for local residents involved in the trade and their survival strategies differed between districts. A stark difference is reflected in demographics. Over the past five years, Kang district lost an estimated 50% of its residents to migration,⁸ mostly to Iran and Zaranj City, while Durbaba has

not seen a similar movement of the local population. Between exit and voice strategies (Hirschman 1970) used in confronting these challenges, Durbaba has been more mobilised, pushing the Afghan government to represent their interests more forcefully vis-à-vis Pakistan. This difference in local agency is related to a specific governance constellation that took shape in Durbaba but not in the other case study districts discussed here. Since the fall of the Taliban government in 2001, politics in Durbaba has been dominated by the family of a former Jihadi and later anti-Taliban commander, who then made a career as district governor across districts of Nangarhar and as a cross-border entrepreneur in the transportation business (02_NGR_DUR_Broker L.H 18; 02_NGR_DUR_BROKER_19) (Goodhand, Koehler, Bhatia, forthcoming). His trademark policy as governor and later as a prominent tribal elder was to mobilise tribal leadership to gain control of the district, keeping Taliban and other external contenders at bay. To achieve this, he frequently intervened in intertribal conflict resolution, facilitating the set-up and financing of locally vetted tribal militias. He also made sure that the informal cross-border trade ran smoothly and informal taxes were distributed in a balanced and transparent way among relevant parties (officials, militias, tribal elders). In his own words, referring to the illegal 'transit trade' of licit goods (smuggling commodities imported as transit goods from Pakistan back to Pakistan via informal crossings),

Thousands of people used to be engaged in the transit business. When I was district governor, I arranged these transit commodities very well. This trade was arranged by cross-border communities cooperating with us. When there was a problem, we were jointly solving the trade problems on both sides of the border. Now the transit business is blocked by Pakistan. (02_NGR_DUR_Broker L.H 18)

By keeping the Taliban out and local peace intact, he seems to have managed to keep Durbaba off the radar of forceful eradication and interdiction interventions that haunted neighbouring districts more visible to state power (see Achin below, and in particular the districts along the main Jalalabad-Torkham Highway One).

A series of events started to dismantle this settlement. First, the district governor lost all official positions after he started organising large demonstrations against the border closure by Pakistan and travelling to Kabul in an attempt to lobby for measures countering the unilateral moves by Pakistan. However, despite being cut off from his governmental portfolio, he remained the senior elder and problem fixer in the district, casting a shadow over his successors. Shortly after our fieldwork in summer 2020, tensions escalated and the new district governor was (briefly) arrested in Marko Bazaar for accepting a large payment from drug traffickers, allegedly a set-up instigated by people loyal to the former governor.⁹ At the same time, competitors from other districts with a vested interest in access to the lucrative cross-border trade of Durbaba increased their presence. In early June 2018, storage facilities in Goroko were attacked by insurgents from the Pakistani side; local Alisharkhel tribal elders suspected that a rival militia commander from neighbouring Nazian district was behind the attack. In response to this incursion, as well as pressure from Taliban forces to extract taxes from residents that had been building since 2019, the Alisharkhel set up their own tribal militia and lobbied to register them with the National Directorate of Security (NDS), the Afghan secret service with a powerful paramilitary wing, who paid militia members regular salaries and per diems. These militias are, however, independent from the original tribal militias organised under the former district governor, which still controlled access to main entrances into the district. As a consequence, the governance framework of Durbaba has

turned less predictable and more fragmented, which has had an adverse effect on smugglers operating in the district, according to an experienced local smuggler from Durbaba:

Currently, there is [uncertainty] amongst the smugglers as commanders and the tribal leaders involved in this smuggling have disagreements between themselves. One of them says that 'the drugs should be carried from my area' and the other says that they 'should be carried from my area and I should receive this [and that] amount'. These disputes have increased between the militia commanders [of Durbaba and neighbouring districts]. 02-NGR-DUR_SQDE

In summary, although Durbaba and Kang districts largely remained under state control (until the Taliban takeover of 2021), governance of the districts had become more fragmented and unpredictable. As a result, stable arrangements between traders, local officials and informal influential persons that provided a foundation for a relatively accessible and egalitarian access to local illicit drug economies have been upended by external forces – in Durbaba by a sudden change of district governor, and in both provinces by the imposition of border closures. One consequence of those shocks was that access to the local drug economy – broadly accessible under the former arrangements – became more exclusive, with small-scale traders more vulnerable to insecurity and rent-seeking.

Those shocks to hybrid local governance arrangements have been met by three strategies on the side of traffickers. The better connected and resourced negotiated new rules, paying for exclusive rights to informal border crossings with the complicity of border guards and local authorities. Less influential smugglers have attempted to stay in business by circumventing the new control regimes, moving into more remote or Taliban-controlled territory, and using more clandestine and physically risky methods of smuggling. Finally, traders unable to adapt have lost most of their livelihoods from drug production and smuggling, forcing them to migrate (Kang), protest (Durbaba), or stay put and wait for change. In some cases, communities have opted to create state-funded militias to protect their interests, thereby contributing to the further fragmentation of local security and governance arrangements in these areas.

Pair two Achin and Charburjak districts: governance modes in insurgent-dominated borderlands

The second pair of districts investigated, Achin in Nangarhar and Charburjak in Nimroz, share a history of opium production and trade, Taliban presence and very limited and selective direct state control. However, owing to natural barriers – the vast deserts south and west of Charburjak and the high Spin Ghar mountain range to the south of Achin – neither district has significant cross-border trade, though Charburjak is an important transit route for human and drug smuggling via the neighbouring Desho district in Helmand province. The population of Achin is predominantly Pashtun Shinwari and estimated at 349,000 individuals; Charburjak is tiny in comparison, with 30,000 predominantly Baluch inhabitants.¹⁰

Modes of governance and outmigration of residents

Both districts have experienced outmigration in large numbers since 2015, but for different reasons. In Charburjak, irrigated agricultural land is scarce and a combination of drought and border closures along the formerly accessible border in Zaranj and Kang districts to the

north hit the local economy hard. As an effect of border closures, human and drug smuggling routes diverted via Charburjak into Desho of Helmand. The government's grip on this district has always been minimal, but the transit of high-value extractable commodities (mostly drugs and people) increased banditry, extortion and competition over taxation in that district (NMZ_LH04_01; Koehler, Rasool, and Ibrahimkhel 2021) in the nominally government-controlled areas. For years, Charburjak managed to avoid major drug eradication measures by the state; however, in 2019, interviewees reported the commencement of eradication measures in government-controlled areas and complained about broken promises to compensate producers for losses (03_NIZ_CHA_SQDE_17.1). They also described selective applications of counternarcotics measures in government-controlled areas:

Drug trading is illegal [now] and everyone knows about it that government give severe punishment to the drugs traders. However, if anyone wants to participate and has the capital then they can do this business and they don't need to take permission from anybody because the traders know that taking bribe is common in government and they transport the drugs from one area to another area by giving a bribe. (03_NIZ_CHA_SQDE_17.1)

In contrast, Taliban control over the agricultural lands south of the Helmand River in the eastern part of the district is described as much more predictable and orderly.

Poppy wasn't eradicated in the areas where Taliban have control such as Charburjak district related area Rodbar because the government doesn't have access there and the farmers collected their yields and poppy cultivation is still in progress and they have support of Taliban. [...] Taliban take *ushr*¹¹ from both poppy and wheat lands and also tax the lancing labour. [...] Taliban solve the trader's conflicts with the help of experienced traders. People accept the decision of Taliban because they solve the conflicts within a short period of time and they hand over the right to the one who deserves it. (03_NIZ_CHA_SQDE_17.1)

Interview respondents described cases in which smugglers asked the Taliban for support against bandits operating along their routes. At least in one case, the Taliban intervened following an escalation of clashes between Pashtun and Baluch people smugglers and the deterioration of security along common smuggling routes; after the Taliban intervention, the routes became much more secure (Koehler, Rasool, and Ibrahimkhel 2021). However, a combination of persistent drought and insecurity compelled about 30% of the population to leave Charburjak over a two-year period (between 2018 and 2020). Even the prospect of a very significant increase in irrigated agricultural land thanks to the pending launch of the long-contested Kamalkhan Dam and finalisation of the connected channel – a potential game changer for the agricultural sector – did not deter migration or increase the value of agricultural land in the district.

Relatively stable Taliban rule was experienced over most of Achin district from 2010 to 2014. The local economy of Achin has traditionally been dependent on opium-producing and exporting, and interviewees were strongly opposed to the government's eradication efforts in the early 2000s. Following a devastating series of eradication measures in the district and a widespread perception amongst the population that the government had broken its promises to provide effective alternative development programmes, residents generally welcomed the onset of Taliban rule in 2010. Unlike the government, the Taliban treated opium as an ordinary agricultural commodity, allowing local communities to resume their activities undisturbed. In the words of an experienced landlord and tribal elder in Achin district:

When Taliban government collapsed and Karzai's government came, he didn't tell anything to the people about opium during his first term. He told the people on his second term of government to eradicate the opium and promised compensation in USD per *jerib* [equal to 0.2 hectare or 0.5 acre]. The government under governor Shirzai called the people and elders to the district centre and announced the programme. I was also a tribal elder and people trusted me. We convinced the people from poppy-growing areas to eradicate their opium crops, because the government will pay compensation. They eradicated some of their crops by themselves and for some of them I rented bulls and tractors that I am still indebted for to this day since the government didn't pay any compensation for me or for opium crops eradicated. The district officials and the province governor divided the allocated USDs between themselves. They made me ashamed and I lost trust with my people who accused me to have pocketed the money. Then people started growing drugs in those areas which were remote and the Taliban were ruling them. (Paraphrased from 01-NGR-ACH_SQDE)

From late 2014 to 2018, however, Achin fell under the control of Daesh (Islamic State's Khorasan affiliate, ISKP), a group led by former commanders of the Pakistani Tehrik-e-Taliban and a group of mid-level Afghan Taliban commanders who defected to Daesh (Johnson 2016). After Daesh established a command base in Kharwa village of Achin (now Spin Ghar), major fighting erupted in the district amongst Daesh, Taliban, government forces and, since 2017, privately sponsored US-trained militias. US airstrikes caused further widespread destruction in the area. In 2015, Daesh banned opium cultivation and closed down the opium bazaars at Shadal and Abdul Khail with a two-week notice to the traders (01-NGR-ACH_SQDE), which further devastated the local economy, prompting many residents to flee. Daesh fighters settled their own followers and kin on land abandoned by Achin residents fleeing the conflict.¹²

The Taliban were unsuccessful in defeating Daesh in Achin, despite benefitting from de facto US air support. They were only ousted after Haji Qadir Zahir, a longstanding political power broker from one of the most influential families in Nangarhar (Jackson 2014) established local militias based on his own network from his past job as a border guard commander, funded by US forces. By 2018, his militias, fighting alongside the Afghan army, managed to defeat Daesh in Achin and at the same time push the Taliban back to the Spin Ghar mountain areas bordering Pakistan.

Daesh rule and the subsequent fighting and destruction led the majority of residents to flee the district (our researchers estimated that 80% of villages were affected by the fighting). Despite re-established government rule, many villages were still uninhabited at the time of fieldwork in 2020. There has been no visible reconstruction programme to rehabilitate damaged villages and infrastructure. At the same time, Haji Zahir Qadir's militias fragmented after US financing ceased, and he fell out with the Ghani government after presidential elections in 2019. His militias were replaced by newly formed tribal militias controlled by Afghan intelligence. These militias appear to have enjoyed broad local acceptance, as there was an informal vetting system in place based on recommendations of tribal elders to district authorities. However, tensions remained between these militias and local commanders still loyal to Zahir. At the time the fieldwork was conducted, the government was attempting to undermine Zahir's control of his militias by applying subtle (cutting them off from administrative and reputational resources) and less subtle (arresting them for drug trafficking offenses) methods to convince them to break ties with their patron (NGR_ACH_JIH_12 and debriefing notes).

Areas most devastated by conflict remained depopulated. This included Taliban-controlled areas in the Spin Ghar mountains, despite the group offering an incentive payment of 20,000 Pakistani Rupees and carpets confiscated from Daesh to convince people to return (as one field researcher put it: 'the Taliban do not like to be lonely and depend on the local population'). Before the Taliban takeover in August 2021, opium cultivation did not recover from the Daesh ban and trade had slowed to a trickle, mostly down to households selling off the remainder of their pre-existing stores of opium in order to survive.

In summary, Achin and Charburjak have been exposed to varying forms of state and insurgent rule. The immediate and most dramatic result has been a massive outflow of migrants from both districts since 2015, a clear indication of high levels of insecurity, dysfunctional governance arrangements and a lack of economic opportunities from the point of view of affected communities.

However, the dynamics beforehand reveal a more complex picture, where territorial control by the Taliban offered more predictable and less fragmented and exploitative governance arrangements than nominally government-controlled areas did. In both districts, large-scale displacement was not a consequence of Taliban or government rule or conflict between Taliban and government. Instead, residents were prompted to leave due to escalations of violence and economic declines associated with external forces. In Achin, outmigrations occurred following the short-lived but oppressive reign and violent ousting of Daesh forces; in Charburjak, a combination of natural and external political pressures negatively impacted economic opportunities, as well as persistent but non-political skirmishes along trading routes in the district.

Conclusion

This paper challenges two misconceptions about the nature of governance in Afghanistan: one normative-conceptual, the other empirical. Even when romanticising 'the art of not being governed' (Scott 2009), the point of reference for being governed is typically influenced by Weberian concepts of statehood. However, as has been documented at least since Middleton and Tait's seminal publication of *Tribes without Rulers* (Middleton and Tait 1958), even segmentary societies are not without institutionalised rules and authority that regulate economic and social life. Across the four case studies, respondents, even when engaged in the drug economy, repeatedly expressed a preference for predictable, regulated and accessible forms of authority that could offer protection from insecurity and disruption. They were largely indifferent as to whether this protection was provided by government or insurgent forces, as long as it was applied consistently and fairly. These findings nuance Scott's fundamental assumptions about local preferences for ungoverned spaces.

This leads us to the empirical issues this paper has tried to address regarding interactions between governance patterns and the everyday life of people engaged in the local drug economy. Decisions and actions taken by state and insurgent authorities are highly consequential for borderland communities, forcing them to adapt by accommodation, resistance or exit. Interventions by the Afghan government, insurgents and foreign states produce varied and distinct effects, which we will now discuss in turn.

First, foreign interventions to suppress the drug economy have typically rested on flawed and socially disconnected assumptions, reducing it to a source of funding for a range of 'bad' actors, including mafia groups, insurgents, militias and their political patrons. However, this neglects local realities of the drug economy, where it is understood more as an everyday

crop similar in nature to other agricultural commodities. Under unified and unfragmented modes of governance in either Taliban- or government-controlled areas, the drug economy is not exceptionally violent or destabilising. The unilateral tightening of border control by neighbouring states also had unintended effects on smuggling networks, benefitting better-connected and resource-rich traders and increasing costs and risks for small-scale traders. This has pushed many small-scale traders out of business and led to more vertically integrated, less accessible and less economically redistributive illicit markets.

Second, from the perspective of local farmers and traders,¹³ the Afghan government's ability to provide stable and predictable governance mostly compares unfavourably with the Taliban's. The selective application of counternarcotics measures is widespread in government-controlled areas, often to punish political opponents or traders who do not 'belong'. Hence, in government-controlled areas, traders need money and the trust of relevant officials to enter the trade. In contrast, production and trade in Taliban-governed areas is generally perceived to be more predictable and accessible than in government-controlled areas, where law enforcement is selectively used to squeeze out opponents or those unable or unwilling to pay.

However, this impression comes with important caveats. First, the boundary between insurgent and state governance is often quite blurry in practice. In some areas, there is collusion between local government representatives and the Taliban around taxation, sometimes negotiated by local brokers (Goodhand, Koehler, Bhatia forthcoming; also 02-NGR-DUR_SQDE). Second, and more importantly, not all insurgent governance is preferable to the Afghan government from the perspective of farmers and traders involved in the drug economy, which is most evident in the highly oppressive and socially alienated Daesh rule in Achin. Furthermore, some Taliban interventions have been locally rejected and thus were unable to provide reliable arrangements and rules for producers and traders. The case of Durbaba prior to 2019 also shows that government-controlled areas can produce informally balanced and stable joint extraction arrangements between local communities dependent on smuggling and the state. Until this local hybrid governance arrangement was ended by the central government in Kabul, residents clearly preferred it to Taliban rule. Even after this arrangement broke down, Alisharkhel militias and local smugglers continued to resist Taliban interference. The reason for rejecting Taliban rule in both districts of Nangarhar relate to Durbaba's long-term experience with a functioning local governance arrangement outside of Taliban control and Achin's dramatic experience of Taliban defeat at the hands of another more radical armed insurgency.

However, a balanced arrangement of joint extraction (Snyder 2006) in relation to the drug economy seems very much the exception for government-controlled areas. This may explain why the drug economy has not been integrated into peacebuilding strategies in Afghanistan (cf Goodhand 2008, 414) after the disruptive push of foreign-driven counternarcotics interventions eased following the 2014 transition and the withdrawal of most international forces. In general, the Taliban appear to be better at institution-building around extraction, while the government is more ad hoc, fragmented, exploitative and selective in the application of its rules.

In this sense, it is not the drug economy itself that causes war or prevents peace (a typical justification for harsh counternarcotics measures) – but rather the specific nature of governance arrangements surrounding the drug economy. In the same vein, it is not corruption financed by drug money per se that threatens the emergence of effective and legitimate state rule – as

implied by 'narco-state' narratives – but specific and selectively applied forms of corruption that make the rules-based system less predictable and less trusted by local communities.

Afghan borderlands are neither ungoverned nor ungovernable. There is a demand for predictable, meaningful and fair governance, particularly from the perspective of income-generating people like the farmers and traders addressed in the case studies. They accept rules that work for their daily business, make sense from their normative point of view, and do not fundamentally disrupt or challenge the world they understand. This acceptance – and with it the empirical legitimacy of the rulers – is not absolute but relative; in effect, local communities compare different modes of governance available at any given time and respond accordingly. The manner of their response is influenced by the choices available to them – their resources and social connections determine whether they are able to successfully adapt, resist, or are forced to exit.

What makes borderlands special is not that they are ungoverned but that there tends to be a multitude of hybrid governance modes and options local communities and individuals may take. When the system meets lifeworlds and those lifeworlds have agency – via brokers, via voice or via exit to the other governance providers like the Taliban – the system is well advised to appreciate the interests of those social actors in the political settlements they are trying to stabilise.

Note that this article draws on field research conducted prior to the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021. However, the comparison of governance arrangements in Taliban- and government-controlled areas offers important clues as to why the Taliban takeover appears to have been largely uncontested from the everyday life perspective of a significant part of Afghanistan's predominantly rural population. While many Afghans have widespread reservations about the Taliban, large numbers of ordinary farmers and traders ultimately found Taliban rule safer and more predictable than all other available options. The threat of violent disorder and escalating civil war following the externally induced shock of the departure of foreign forces would have been far more disruptive and harmful to their lives and livelihoods. In this light, the rapid collapse of many districts to the Taliban is more comprehensible.

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Notes

1. For an insightful critical discussion of the political evolution and contemporary meaning of those categories with focus on the Baluch and Pashtun, see Rzehak (2012) and Glatzer (2002), respectively.
2. Interviews with the Mudir Qariajad (village secretariat) in District Administration, 27 August 2020 in Durbaba and 20 October 2020 in Kang district. According to these interviews, Durbaba district has approximately 60,000 inhabitants and four main Pashtun/Shinwari sub-tribes, and Kang district has approximately 14,500 inhabitants of whom 60% are ethnic Baluch, and 20% each Pashtun and Hazara.
3. See the annex ([Appendix](#)) for a list of coded quoted interviews.
4. *Seer* is a crop-specific measurement of quantity – here (for cannabis) 1250 grams. The exchange rate at the time of the interview was roughly 6 USD for every 1000 Rupees.
5. When the transporter guarantees delivery and is responsible for most kinds of losses but charges a higher fee for this.
6. Debriefing notes, Kabul, 10 December 2020.
7. Knowledge about the trade depends on the level of involvement of the interview partner in the trade. Interview 01_NIZ_ZAR_SQDE_17 refers to the drug trade via asphalted roads, 02_NIZ_KAN_SQDE_17 to small-scale dirt road trade.
8. Border closures are not the only factor at play – the four-year drought, ending in 2019, negatively affected the small amounts of agricultural land in the district, forcing farmers to seek work elsewhere.
9. Debriefing notes, December 2020.
10. Interviews with Mudir Qariajad of the district administration, 27 October 2020 in Charburjak and 11 August 2020 in Achin.
11. *Ushr* is an Islamic tax, here on agricultural produce that usually amounts to a tenth of the harvest.
12. Debriefing notes, December 2020.
13. The perspective may be different for upper-level drug producers and traders, who seem to see the increasing Taliban control of the drug market more critically (Giustozzi 2018).

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Appendix A: Quoted Interviews

| Code | Description |
|--------------------------|---|
| 02-NGR-DUR_SQDE | Durbaba district, 19.08.-22.09.2020. Separate confidential interviews with three farmers/traders with a history of involvement in opium poppy cultivation and local trade (farm gate to local bazaars); they were high yield, medium yield and low yield farmers. |
| 02_NIZ_KAN_SQDE_17 | Kang district, 21.10.-02.11.2020. Separate confidential interviews with three farmers/traders with a history of involvement in opium poppy cultivation and local trade (farm gate to local bazaars); they were high yield, medium yield and low yield farmers. |
| 01_NIZ_ZAR_SQDE_17 | Zaranj district, 03.-25.11.2020. Separate confidential interviews with three farmers/traders with a history of involvement in opium poppy cultivation and local trade (farm gate to local bazaars); they were high yield, medium yield and low yield farmers. |
| 02_NGR_DUR_Broker L.H 18 | Life history interview with former district official and apex broker, Durbaba, 31.08.2020 |
| 02_NGR_DUR_BROKER_19 | Backup interviews on life history of broker, Durbaba, with three people linked to him. 24-31.08.2020 |
| NMZ_LH04_01/LH18 | Life history with a former cross-border drug trader and people smuggler in Nimroz (04.04.2019) and follow-up interview 22.11.2020. |
| 01-NGR-ACH_SQDE | Achin district, 09.-11.08.2020. Separate confidential interviews with three farmers/traders with a history of involvement in opium poppy cultivation and local trade (farm gate to local bazaars); they were high yield, medium yield and low yield farmers. |
| NGR_ACH_JIH_12 | Achin, former Jihadi commander, militia leader and facilitator for drug trafficking. 22.07.2020. |