

American Thinker

March 16, 2021

A bit more about that Afghanistan population problem...

By [Michael von der Schulenburg](#)

David Archibald, [writing in American Thinker last week](#), has an interesting analysis of population growth and the dependence on wheat imports in Afghanistan. I thank him for this analysis.

Let me add an observation I made when I accompanied Ambassador [Lakhdar Brahimi](#) to Afghanistan to open the U.N. office — later called UNAMI — in Kabul in December 2001. I did not stay long, as I felt that the invasion of Afghanistan and plans to turn the country into some kind of democracy were going wrong. I particularly was opposed to the formation of ISAF and the support to former warlords, alias Mujahedeen leaders, but in secret service to the U.S.

I had then written an internal paper that I titled "Afghanistan, Peace in a Glass House." It argued against the hubris that reigned among Westerners in Kabul, and at the time, it was not appreciated.

But here is an interesting observation (observation because I base this on reports from U.N. colleagues and not any scientific research) in respect to wheat production.

When the U.S., plus its allies, invaded Afghanistan in 2001, the country was almost entirely free of all opium production.

The Taliban considered opium anti-Islamic and enforced a ban on its production. Only in some parts of northern Afghanistan that were not controlled by the Taliban was opium continuing to be produced.

In most places, opium production was replaced by wheat production. This was especially the case in the Helmand area, an area with irrigated agriculture.

Only months after we invaded Afghanistan and removed all Taliban controls, this changed quickly, and Afghanistan was back as the world producer of opium.

A decisive factor for this change was that we began to import wheat in great quantities almost immediately. It was still winter, and as always, many Afghans were short on food. It was hoped that by distributing large quantities of wheat, we would win over the population.

However, this had the effect that by end of January 2002, the price for local wheat had dropped to about 30%–35% of what it had been before.

For local farmers, who were mostly heavily indebted to their distributors, this was a disaster, and they began turning back to opium.

Opium not only guaranteed them a higher price, but was also a product that could be stored and kept for a time when it was needed or sold in smaller quantities.

Unlike wheat flour, opium cakes would not be attacked by rodents or fungus. It was hence an ideal crop in a time of war and increased insecurity.

As a result of our military invasion, we not only made Afghans more dependent on imported wheat, but also ensured that Afghanistan returned to become again the world's largest opium-producer. With the withdrawal of all foreign troops and dwindling foreign aid, many Afghans ended up hungrier than they were before the invasion. It remains a cautionary tale.

*Michael von der Schulenburg, former U.N. assistant secretary-general, escaped East Germany in 1969; studied in Berlin, London, and Paris; and worked for over 34 years for the United Nations, and shortly the OSCE, in many countries in war or internal armed conflicts often involving fragile governments and armed non-state actors. These included long-term assignments in Haiti, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, and Sierra Leone and shorter assignments in Syria, the Balkans, Somalia, the Sahel, and Central Asia. In 2017, he published the book *On Building Peace: Rescuing the Nation-State and Saving the United Nations*, AUP. His website is www.michael-von-der-schulenburg.com.*

Image: [Pixabay](#). Pixabay License.

If you would like to comment on this or any other *American Thinker* article or post, we invite you to visit [the American Thinker Forum at MeWe](#). There, you can converse with other *American Thinker* readers and comment freely (subject to [MeWe's terms of use](#)). The Forum will be fully populated and ready for comments by midday (Eastern time) each day.