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CHAPTER 11

The role of natural resources in financing terrorism and organised crime: a case study of the Taliban in Afghanistan

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Abstract: This study explores the critical role of natural resources in financing terrorism and organised crime, focusing on the Taliban during two key periods: the war against the Afghan state and people (2001–2021) and the regime established by the group following its 2021 takeover. Using the theoretical frameworks of war economy and informal economy, the chapter analyses how natural resources especially minerals, narcotics and timber have shaped illicit financial networks and strengthened the Taliban's grip on power. During the war, these resources funded logistics, recruitment and arms purchases; after the takeover, resource exploitation has reinforced the regime's political and economic control. The research methodology combines qualitative analysis of reports, financial documents and secondary sources with quantitative data from expert interviews. Findings show that the Taliban institutionalised informal economic structures and incorporated illegal mining, narcotics trafficking and cross-border trade into its model of governance. This process has contributed to regional instability, strengthened transnational criminal networks and increased collaboration with extremist groups such as al-Qaeda and ISIS-Khorasan. The study offers new insight into how natural resources sustain terrorism and authoritarianism in Afghanistan and beyond, highlighting the long-term implications of illicit resource exploitation for regional and international security.

Keywords: Terrorism, organised crime, Taliban, natural resources, illicit financing.

INTRODUCTION

One of the key factors behind the continuation of the Taliban's war against the people and government of Afghanistan (2001–2021) and the consolidation of their power after the collapse of the Islamic Republic in August 2021 has been their extensive access to financial resources derived from illegal economies and the exploitation of natural resources. Contrary to the belief that the Taliban were mainly funded by foreign aid or specific governments or terrorist networks, evidence shows the group secured much of its finances for warfare, survival and expansion through drug trafficking networks, illegal resource extraction, farmer extortion and forced taxation.

During the conflict, the Taliban built a self-sustaining financial structure by controlling opium and heroin production, trafficking, deforestation and illegal mining. This structure supported military operations, paid fighters, financed weapons and expanded their influence. Their collaboration with transnational human trafficking, money laundering and drug networks has also posed broader regional and global security threats.

After their return to power in 2021 and the establishment of the "Islamic Emirate", the Taliban secured economic and political ties with China, Russia, Iran and some Central Asian nations, despite lacking international recognition. Without a transparent legal system, they handed Afghanistan's natural resources to foreign (mainly Chinese) and local companies, many lacking operational standards. Reports of widespread deforestation, unchecked coal extraction and ongoing drug trade despite a declared ban on poppy cultivation demonstrate how this illicit economy underpins the regime's survival.

This chapter is based on secondary data, including investigative reports, case studies, reputable sources and documents from organisations such as the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). It also draws from the author's field experience as a senior law enforcement officer with over two decades of service, offering analysis of the Taliban's economy and its security and humanitarian consequences.

BACKGROUND

Afghanistan holds geopolitical importance as a link between Central and South Asia, close to the Middle East. It is rich in gold, copper, lithium and rare earth elements, with estimated values between one and three trillion dollars. However, conflict and corruption have obstructed legal exploitation, enabling illicit activity.

The Taliban's rise in the 1990s followed the collapse of the Soviet-backed government. During this time, jihadist groups, some backed by Western powers, operated in Afghanistan. The post-Soviet collapse created opportunities for the Taliban to seize territory.This study centres on the Taliban, which evolved from a militant group to a de facto regime. Their interest lies in controlling resources to fund operations, consolidate authority and expand influence. With a background in extremist terrorism, the Taliban has turned natural resources into a major income source.

The group has also harboured jihadist organisations such as al-Qaeda, Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP), the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, Jaish al-Adl and ISIS-Khorasan. These groups have used Taliban-held territories and resources to support their activities.

Criminal networks connect insurgents with global markets. They provide income and help the Taliban avoid oversight. A key activity is drug trafficking. Afghanistan remains the world's top opium producer, with Taliban-controlled farms supplying the trade. UN reports estimate the Taliban earns hundreds of millions annually from opium.

Beyond drugs, these networks smuggle minerals such as gold, gems and rare metals. Due to poor oversight and corruption, extraction is often illegal. The Taliban controls many mines and exports minerals through black markets in Pakistan, Iran and China. Over the past two decades, these networks have enabled the Taliban to generate revenue and procure arms and supplies via regional black markets, including advanced weapons such as night-vision devices.

These operations have funded terrorism and organised crime, fuelling regional instability and harming the global economy through smuggling and corruption. Since 2021, the Taliban has intensified resource exploitation. Illegal mineral extraction, deforestation, the drug trade and efforts to gain legitimacy via regional ties especially with China are central to its regime.

The literature review addresses three areas: (1) natural resources and terrorism financing; (2) informal economy and organised crime; and (3) the Taliban's resource exploitation.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

1. THE TALIBAN'S ILLEGAL FINANCIAL NETWORKS (2002–2021)

The Taliban's illegal financial networks are among the most complex and effective systems for insurgent financing globally. These networks generate significant income through activities such as illegal mining (especially gold and precious stones), deforestation, and drug production and trafficking. These operations have continued both during the insurgency period (2001–2021) and after the Taliban's takeover in 2021. This section explores these networks in detail.

ILLEGAL MINING

Afghanistan is rich in mineral, oil and gas resources spread across many of its provinces. The country possesses vast deposits of mineral-rich stones, including veins of iron, copper, gold, rare earth elements and other globally significant natural resources. According to various reports, including data published by the former Afghan government, the total value of these natural resources is estimated to exceed one trillion US dollars. However, these resources have not been effectively developed throughout the 20th and 21st centuries (MoMP, 2019, p. 7).

Afghanistan's natural wealth includes oil, gas, gold, copper, iron, lithium and precious stones such as emeralds and lapis lazuli, with detailed assessments previously released by the former Afghan authorities (MoMP, 2021).

MAP 1: HUSSEIN & HADDAD. (2021 SEP 24). MAPPING AFGHANISTAN'S UNTAPPED NATURAL RESOURCES.

Terrorist groups such as the Taliban, along with organised crime networks, have illegally exploited these resources, using them to finance their operations and activities.

Provinces such as Badakhshan, Ghazni and Helmand, rich in mineral deposits, have become major centres for illegal mining activities. For

instance, gold mines in Ghazni and Badakhshan have been extensively exploited by the Taliban in recent years. These operations typically rely on cheap labour and disregard for environmental standards, leading to the destruction of farmland and contamination of water sources.

A member of the Badakhshan Provincial Council stated in an interview in 2020 that the Taliban had been operating in most districts, including Raghistan, where a gold mine is located. They extracted gold from this area with their forces and smuggled it into neighbouring countries (Hosseini, 2020).

Mohammad Ali (a pseudonym), a private investor in a Ghazni stone mine, told me he paid the Taliban 5,000 Afghanis (around $90) per truckload between 2014–2018 due to insecurity that the Taliban deliberately created (Author, personal communication, March 23, 2025). This pattern was repeated across Afghanistan in Taliban-controlled mining zones.

Based on my field experience and information gathered during my professional duties, the extracted minerals are smuggled through complex transnational networks involving local traders, corrupt officials and international criminal groups, particularly to Pakistan and Iran.

According to an official report from the Ministry of Mines and Petroleum of the former Afghan government, the Taliban was extracting resources from 280 small and large mines. In addition, 184 other mines were being exploited by criminal groups and local powerbrokers. The report indicated that the Taliban employed traditional and primitive mining techniques without proper safety measures, leading to low productivity and placing local workers' lives at risk (MoMP, 2020).

During the conflict years, illegal mining activities in at least 14 of Afghanistan's 34 provinces remained beyond the control of the central government. These operations now generate an estimated $200–300 million annually for the Taliban, making it the group's second-largest income source after narcotics (Dupee, 2017, p. 31). Afghanistan's abundant mineral resources, particularly gold and precious stones, have been a major factor behind the Taliban's efforts to seize and maintain control over resource-rich areas.

DRUG PRODUCTION AND TRAFFICKING

Afghanistan is the world's largest producer of opium. The Taliban controls a significant portion of opium cultivation, production and trafficking, making it one of the group's primary sources of income. The provinces of Helmand and Kandahar have simultaneously served as epicentres of both drug production and Taliban insurgency (Fazli, 2022, p. 15). Farmers, often under pressure from the Taliban, resort to cultivating poppy. The group imposes taxes on them and maintains control over trafficking routes.

The opium produced is trafficked through extensive smuggling networks to countries such as Pakistan, Iran, Central Asian states and Turkey, eventually reaching Europe, Australia, other parts of Asia, Africa and North America (UNODC, 2015, p. 13). These operations rely on complex transnational networks involving local actors, corrupt officials and international criminal organisations.

Experts and officials disagree on the magnitude of the Taliban's drug-trade profits, their estimates ranging widely between $40 million to $400 million annually. US officials have estimated that the drug economy generated $200 million annually for the Taliban in the years leading up to 2021 (Fazli, 2022, p. 16). These financial resources have significantly strengthened the group's military and economic capabilities.

THE ROLE OF DRUGS IN FINANCING

Drug trafficking is a multibillion-dollar business, constituting a significant portion of organised crime revenues. A large part of the income from drug trafficking is funnelled into the treasuries of terrorist groups. Over the years, major transnational terrorist groups have emerged as key players in controlling the illicit drug trade networks. With increasing surveillance on traditional financial routes, terrorist organisations regularly seek alternative resources to fund their activities.

The Taliban have made the production and trafficking of drugs (mainly opium) their primary source of income, and this was already the case after the formal overthrow of their rule in Afghanistan (Karolczak, 2022, p 326). Estimates of the Taliban's annual share of the illicit drug economy range from $100 million to $400 million (BBC, 2021). Among these, drugs, particularly opium and heroin, played a central role in financing the Taliban during the insurgency. As the world's largest producer of opium, Afghanistan became the primary source of the Taliban's income.

According to numerous reports from international organisations such as Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), Afghanistan is the world's largest producer of opium, and opium poppy is the country's largest cash crop, with an estimated annual export value ranging from $1.5 billion to $3 billion in recent years (SIGAR, 2017, P,iv). and Afghan Taliban earned around $155 million in 2009 (UNODC, 2011). This massive production enabled the Taliban to generate substantial income through the taxation of farmers and control of trafficking networks.

TAXATION ON FARMERS

Between 2007 and 2021, the Taliban imposed significant taxes on farmers in areas under its control, especially on opium poppy cultivation. These taxes, often presented as *zakat*[1] زکات (alms) or *ushr*[2] عشر (tithe), amounted to 10–15% of opium output. Collected revenues funded weapons, equipment and fighter salaries.

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1 *Zakat* is one of the five pillars of Islam that are obligatory for every capable Muslim. It is an act of charity that is given to the eligible people of *zakat* as discussed in the holy Quran. https://ulumalazhar.com/what-is-zakat-in-islam-a-guide-to-obligatory/#What_is_Zakat_in_Islam

2 *Ushr* is a tax on the agricultural produce of land levied on the Muslims at the rate of 10% if the land is irrigated by rainfall and at the rate of 5% if the land is irrigated artificially. https://islamicmarkets.com/dictionary/a/al-ushr#:~:text=Definition%20of%20%22Al%2D'ushr,See%20also%20al%2Dzakah.

Although lacking a centralised tax system, local commanders enforced collections by force. These funds were mainly used for military and terrorist activities against Afghan civilians and international forces.

A 2012 UN report noted: "Where they can, the Taliban raise two forms of traditional taxation, namely, *ushr*, a 10% tax on harvest, and *zakat*, a 2.5% tax on wealth. As the main economic activity in areas under Taliban control is farming, much of its poppy cultivation, *ushr* is the main source of their income; but the Taliban will also tax services, such as water or electricity, although they have no influence over their supply" (Domínguez, 2016)

CONTROL OF SMUGGLING NETWORKS

The Taliban did not merely supervise opium poppy cultivation but also controlled key drug trafficking networks comprising local traders, corrupt officials and international criminal groups. These networks enabled opium smuggling to Pakistan, Iran and Turkey. Revenues from trafficking amounted to hundreds of millions of dollars annually, fuelling Taliban military operations.

Three major smuggling routes run from Afghanistan: westward through Iran and Turkey toward the Balkans, northward through Central Asia to Russia and Eastern Europe, and southward via Pakistan and the Indian Ocean to the Gulf of Oman and Africa. The Taliban, cooperating with groups such as Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Jaish ul-Adl, Ansarullah (Tajikistan) and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, as well as transnational criminal groups, co-managed much of these routes, also facilitating trafficking in migrants, humans, goods and US dollars.

Their involvement was multilayered. Many smugglers were Taliban members who viewed trafficking as a core source of income. Others were taxed by the Taliban through *zakat* and *ushr* systems, collecting portions of the drug value from producers. Those who resisted these taxes faced harsh punishments, including death (Domínguez, 2016). Numerous reports confirm that the Taliban maintained systematic control over these networks.

A former Afghan National Police officer in Nimroz told me: "Where no government forces existed, the Taliban created insecurity to ease the path for traffickers." He added that the Taliban not only trafficked themselves but also helped recruit individuals into networks managed by others (Author, personal communication, March 24, 2025).

The map of poppy fields and drug labs over the past two decades shows a direct link between insecurity and narcotics. Southern provinces such as Helmand, Kandahar, Urozgan and Zabul, which were highly insecure after 2007, also hosted the highest poppy cultivation and lab concentrations.

A US House Foreign Relations Committee report confirms this link, calling narcotics in Helmand the Taliban's primary source of income: "If the operation in Helmand Province displaces the Taliban and disconnects the insurgency from one of its prime sources of drugs, it will represent a critical step... But it is only a start..." (United States Senate, 2010, p. 13).

During my role as Head of Criminal Investigations in 2021, we documented Taliban groups collecting up to 10% protection fees from traffickers and farmers in Helmand, Urozgan, Zabul, Nimroz and Nangarhar. Taliban fighters protected shipments and stored drugs in exchange for cash. They also coordinated transport with smuggling groups.

Domínguez (2016) confirms this strategy: "The Taliban receive large sums from traffickers because they protect drug markets, escort convoys, and facilitate transportation," said a Helmand resident.

Another Taliban tactic was eliminating competitors to secure control over the drug economy. In various provinces, they partnered with networks and used violence to remove rivals, further consolidating their grip.

DEFORESTATION AND TIMBER SMUGGLING

Afghanistan's forests, especially in the east and south, were extensively cut down by the Taliban and smuggled to countries such as Pakistan. These activities not only harmed the environment but also served as a key income source for the Taliban.

Regions such as Nangarhar, Kunar, Khost, Nuristan and Paktia became hubs for deforestation. The Taliban used local labour and simple equipment to cut trees and smuggle timber. Felled timber was moved across unofficial crossings into Pakistan. The Taliban used extensive smuggling networks, including local traders, corrupt officials and international criminal groups. The timber was sold in markets in Pakistan and beyond, generating large revenues.

A member of the Afghan Senate claimed in an interview with the media in 2017 that approximately 3,000 trees from the forests of Kunar province were being cut down and smuggled every day by anti-government forces (Nida, 2017). At that time, the Taliban was the only armed group operating in remote areas of Kunar province. Later reports suggested that the forests of this province had also become a key financial source for ISIS-Khorasan (Glinski, 2019), which used the same methods and networks for timber smuggling that the Taliban had initiated.

REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL CONSEQUENCES

The Taliban's illicit financial activities have had far-reaching consequences beyond Afghanistan, affecting both regional stability and global security. These include the strengthening of transnational criminal networks, rising drug and arms trafficking and the Taliban's expanded ties with international terrorist organisation. This section examines these impacts and their broader implications for regional and global security.

Strengthening of transnational criminal networks

The Taliban's illegal financial activities helped strengthen transnational criminal networks. These networks included groups involved in the trafficking of drugs, weapons and humans, operating at both a regional and international level.

According to multiple reports, migrant smuggling networks had close ties with drug trafficking networks, particularly in western Afghanistan, which was under Taliban control. These networks cooperated to protect

shipments of narcotics and migrants as they were smuggled through Iran, resulting in substantial profits for the Taliban.

Given the widespread and ongoing illegal migration of Afghan citizens to neighbouring countries, especially Iran, and from there to Turkey in the hope of reaching European countries, this process presented a major opportunity for the Taliban and the drug trafficking networks under its control or alignment. Mohammad Asif (a pseudonym), an Afghan migrant who crossed into Iran illegally from the border region of Nimroz province in western Afghanistan in 2019, recalled that among the group of migrants, some individuals who could not afford to pay the smugglers' fees were asked to carry small amounts of narcotics, which they later discovered upon reaching Esfahan in Iran. (Author, personal communication, March 21, 2025)

Increased interaction with international terrorist groups

Illegal resource exploitation has increased cooperation among terrorist groups inside and near Afghanistan. Each group controlled certain territories and needed mutual support for mining, drug processing, timber smuggling and financial flows. The Taliban has acted as an umbrella for groups like al-Qaeda and TTP, who received funds via resource smuggling. Informal systems such as *hawala*[3] remain widely used to transfer these funds.

These partnerships have heightened regional and global insecurity, leading to increased violence and a stronger presence of terrorist organisations. Moreover, illicit revenues have allowed the Taliban to acquire and traffic advanced weapons used both inside Afghanistan and in neighbouring countries, intensifying regional violence.

Additionally, the Taliban's illegal trade practices have damaged the legal economy, especially in mining. Illicitly extracted resources are sold far below market value, making legal operators uncompetitive.

[3] *Hawala* – حواله – the remittance system is an informal mechanism for transferring money, where cash is delivered at one point in the world and received at another with a code, typically for a low fee. This process is commonly used in Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan, even in the daily transactions of people.

2. THE TALIBAN AFTER 2021

In August 2021, following political agreements between the United States and the Taliban, and the cessation of NATO's military aid, particularly from the United States, the government of Afghanistan collapsed. The Taliban declared the re-establishment of their regime under the name "Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan". Despite the fact that no country officially recognises this regime, and the group is accused of committing extensive international crimes, including genocide and gross human rights violations, especially against women, the Taliban has managed to secure political and economic relations with several countries, including China, Russia, Iran and some Central Asian nations, by leveraging Afghanistan's natural resources.

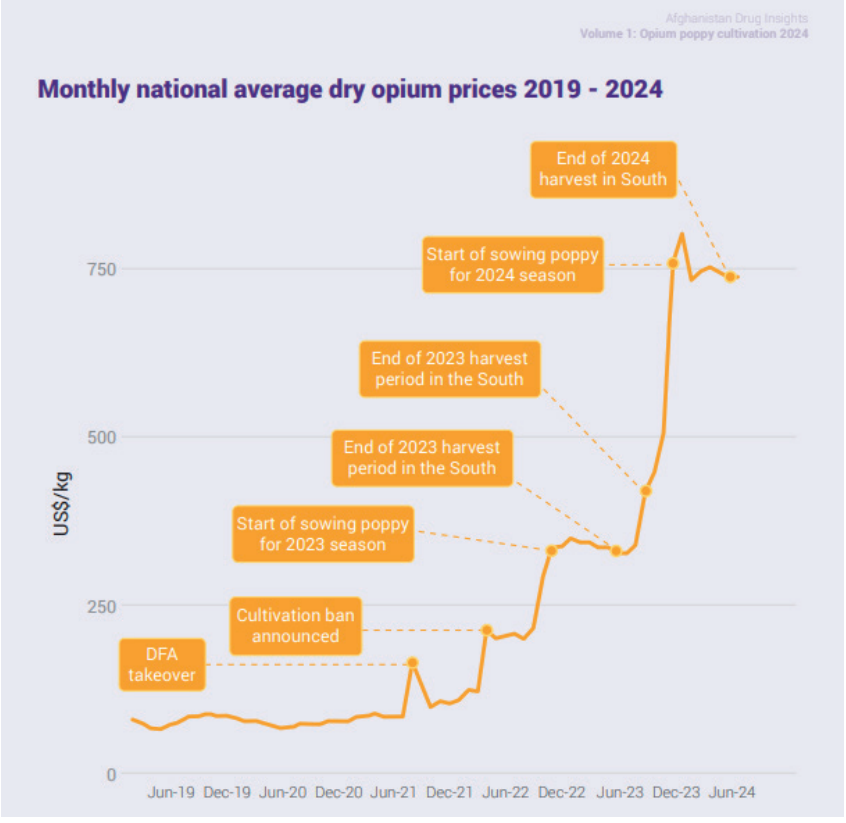
The Taliban regime operates in an absolute legal vacuum, without any transparent financial mechanisms. They have handed over Afghanistan's natural resources to foreign companies, primarily from China, and some local companies, for extraction, leading to enormous financial gains. Former Vice Chancellor of Kabul University Reza Farzam (2024), in a research article, describes the current situation as the plundering of Afghanistan's natural resources by the Taliban. He documents several instances of illegal actions by the Taliban and their signing of contracts with companies that are not even operational, highlighting the unregulated extraction of Afghanistan's natural resources.

At the same time, studies show that the Taliban in many provinces, especially in winter, have been recklessly cutting down forests to use as fuel, which has opened the door for further exploitation by others (Etilaatroz Newspaper, 2023). Additionally, during the first two years (2022–2023), coal extraction increased dramatically beyond necessity, becoming an unprecedented source of financial income (Langar, 2022).

Although the Taliban announced a ban on the cultivation of opium poppy, multiple reports from neighbouring countries' police officials, especially from Iran, suggest that there has been no change in the volume

of drug trafficking originating from Afghanistan. Some analysts believe that the ban on poppy cultivation is a tactic used by the Taliban to monopolise the drug trade. This has allowed the group to increase its control over drug reserves and trafficking, while pressuring farmers who previously cultivated opium to cease and take control of the reserves for themselves. In response to market demand, the Taliban has shifted towards the production of synthetic drugs (Taban, 2024, p 125).

According to a report by the UNODC, the price of opium in Afghanistan has increased significantly since the Taliban took power (UNODC, 2024). Furthermore, some experts assert that the Taliban has shifted its focus from heroin production to methamphetamine production (O'Donnell, 2024).



GRAPH 1: MONTHLY NATIONAL AVERAGE DRY OPIUM PRICES 2019–2024 (UNODC, 2024).

CONCLUSIONS

Natural resources are a fundamental part of national wealth and human development, and their effective management can have a significant impact on improving a country's economic and social conditions. However, in fragile or conflict-ridden countries, illegal exploitation of these resources often strengthens non-state actors, including terrorist groups, and leads to disastrous consequences at both a regional and global level.

In Afghanistan, the Taliban's illegal exploitation of resources such as gold, lapis lazuli, oil, gas and forests has not only increased the group's income but also had negative effects on regional and global security. These resources have contributed to the growth of transnational criminal networks, the spread of religious extremism, drug trafficking and cooperation with international terrorist groups. The income derived from these resources has enhanced the Taliban's ability to purchase weapons, recruit fighters and expand territorial control.

The corruption cycle in Afghanistan has been facilitated by the involvement of regional terrorist networks, cross-border criminal groups and high-demand markets. The Taliban has also benefited from sharing profits with corrupt officials in the former Afghan government and neighbouring countries and exploited legal gaps in the West to increase drug production, further strengthening their financial resources.

From 2001 to 2021, the Taliban's reliance on illegal income sources to sustain its war against the Afghan government and NATO forces was evident. This pattern continued after the Taliban regained power and was even reinforced, as the group openly disregarded international laws and standards, transitioning from traditional drugs to industrial substances such as methamphetamines.

Addressing this issue requires urgent, coordinated and multilateral action at both the regional and global level. Governments must adopt a pragmatic approach in dealing with the Taliban and refrain from signing illegal contracts. The development and implementation of a coordinated

international strategy to combat drug trafficking and illegal trade, independent of individual countries' political interests, is essential.

Any negligence by the involved countries could undermine collective efforts. Strengthening laws, increasing penalties for those involved in the trafficking of natural resources and cultural heritage, and dismantling financial networks linked to the Taliban are immediate and necessary actions. Long-term solutions must address the structural roots of the problem, including weak governance, systemic corruption and the informal economy.

International cooperation is vital for the sustainable control of this phenomenon. Future policies should focus on promoting transparency in natural resource management, reducing local communities' reliance on illegal markets, and monitoring the role of multinational companies and financial intermediaries in this cycle. Only through such comprehensive strategies can effective counterterrorism financing be achieved.

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