



Press Release

Saffron gives farmers in war-torn Afghanistan a taste of the good life



Ghaffar Hamidzay, founder of Afghan Saffron, stands in a field of the plant before harvest.

By Mel Preen, NBC News

Published at 11:50 a.m. ET: Afghan exports of pricey saffron jumped by 14 percent in 2012, with the crops squeezing out opium poppy production in parts of the war-torn country, according to government statistics.

In the Western province of Herat, 90 percent of the former poppy farmers have switched to growing the pungent and yellow spice, according to the Afghan Ministry of Counter Narcotics.

Saffron has helped turned Ghaffar Hamidzay, 28, into a successful businessman, with his exports ballooning since he set up Afghan Saffron in 2001 after the fall of the Taliban.

“In the beginning, we exported 50 to 60 kilos (110 to 132 pounds) a year. Now we export 1.5 to 2 tons,” said the owner of Afghan Saffron, which now employs 5,000 people. “When we first started the business, saffron sold for \$200 to \$250 per kilo. Today it is worth \$1,500 to \$1,600 per kilo.”

The jump in saffron cultivation comes amid a concerted effort on the part of the government to cajole and force farmers to replace their opium crops. Still, Afghanistan produces more than 90 percent of the world’s opium, and much of

the revenue from that goes to fund the Taliban. Saffron has also proved a boost for smaller farmers such as Abdul Hassib, 35, who until recently planted poppy in his farm in Gozara, Herat. "I used to sell [my saffron crop] for 70,000 Afghanis (\$1,400) per kilo," said the father of nine. "Now I sell it for 100,000 Afghanis (\$2,000)."

One reason for the switch was that poppy is a lot harder to grow, Hassib said. Besides, he makes more money from saffron, he added.

As a comparison, a policeman in Afghanistan earns around \$150 a month. While saffron production is booming, problems still dog the nascent industry. "We are trying our best to make Herat poppy-free, but we have a lot of problems with neighboring countries," said Zabullah Dayen, an adviser at the Ministry of Counter Narcotics, referring to neighboring Iran, which is the world's leading saffron exporter.

Many of Afghanistan's saffron producers believe neighboring Iran -- one of the world's leading producers of the spice -- is trying to destabilize their market to crush competition. Farmers switching to saffron from poppy are also not very popular with the Taliban. According to [local reports](#) saffron farmers have been threatened and told to switch back.

However in Herat, Hamidzay said he's had no complaints of harassment. The province is relatively stable compared with Helmand and Uruzgan in the south, where much of the country's poppy is grown.

"I'd like to request the Ministry of Counter Narcotics to do more work to convince farmers in those provinces to cultivate saffron instead," he said. Afghanistan could be well on its way to fulfilling the wishes of Hamidzay and other saffron farmers. In 2011, the United States spent \$1.4 million buying Afghan saffron, more than any other Afghan export, according to the [Afghanistan Chamber of Commerce and Industries](#).

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