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# The Impact of Afghanistan's Drug Trade on its Neighbours

The case of Pakistan, Iran and Tajikistan

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# Acronyms and abbreviations

<b>ASM</b>	Artisanal and Small-Scale Mining
<b>BRI</b>	Belt and Road Initiative
<b>GI-TOC</b>	Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime
<b>ISKP</b>	Islamic State Khorasan Province
<b>MoMP</b>	Ministry of Mines and Petroleum
<b>NATO</b>	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
<b>UN</b>	United Nations
<b>US</b>	United States

## Summary

Drug production in Afghanistan has had a severe impact on the country's neighbours, several of which are critical nodes in a global narcotics trade that has flourished since the U.S. and its NATO allies ousted the Taliban in late 2001. Despite a radically different context since the Taliban's August 2021 return to power, and in particular the interim regime's April 2022 edict prohibiting poppy cultivation and the use and trade of all types of narcotics across the country, drug trafficking from Afghanistan will probably remain a major regional and global concern.

Initially, the Taliban's ban on poppy cultivation and the narcotics trade yielded no significant reduction in drug trafficking from Afghanistan. The Taliban itself allowed a two-month grace period after its edict that, in effect, exempted the harvest that concluded that July. Production soared in 2022: according to UNODC, opium cultivation rose by 32% between 2021 and 2022 (UNODC, 2022b). Most of the increase came in the Taliban strongholds of Helmand and Kandahar and the north-western Badghis province. Later in 2022, however, the Taliban began its crackdown. By April 2023, one year after the ban was imposed, there was a dramatic reduction in poppy cultivation in Helmand and Nangarhar, two major poppy-producing provinces.

Poppy remains vital to Afghanistan's rural economy. Questions remain, therefore, about what if any support the interim regime will provide for a transition to other crops and, relatedly, how sustainable the ban is through subsequent cultivation seasons if a collapsing Afghan economy doesn't recover. Large-scale efforts to stop cultivation, without adequate alternatives for farmers, would also be hazardous politically. For now, given the 2022 bumper crop, the flow from Afghanistan into the neighbourhood and beyond is likely to continue.

To Afghanistan's south, where Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran converge, is the so-called Golden Crescent that, along with Southeast Asia's Golden Triangle, is Asia's most notorious drug smuggling hub. Pakistan and Iran are on the southern drug trafficking route from Afghanistan to Asian, African, and western and central European markets, while Iran also is part of the Balkan route that passes through Türkiye. Both share long borders and deep cultural ties with Afghanistan, and see high volumes of licit and illicit cross-border movement of people and goods – with border communities dependent on smuggling to sustain themselves. Since 2002, these two countries have consistently accounted for more than 90% of global opium seizures. Central Asia, too, remains a major route for drugs from Afghanistan to Russia and Europe. Tajikistan is the most critical country in this northern route and reflects key counter-narcotics challenges in Central Asia.

Counter-narcotics is not only, or even primarily, a question of state capacity in South and Central Asia. Nor would greater cross-border cooperation be a silver bullet to stem the flow of illicit drugs from Afghanistan. Pakistan, Iran and Tajikistan certainly evince an interest in curtailing the drug trade, and could find willing partners in the U.S., Europe and China to enhance international counter-narcotics cooperation after the fall of Kabul. Yet, all three have adopted highly punitive regimes, supported by militarised

law enforcement, with limited investigative capacity or political will to tackle resourceful criminal organisations. Combined with high levels of corruption, this approach targets those at the lowest rungs of the criminal ladder. The impression thus created may be of states that are tough on drugs, regularly seizing large quantities intended for international markets; in fact, these are highly permissive legal regimes which effectively protect the most resourceful traffickers.

In Afghanistan, the question around international engagement is not whether neighbouring or Western governments are willing to support the Taliban's counter-narcotics capacity, but whether they are willing to end Kabul's international isolation and provide the high level of economic assistance that the country requires to make poppy cultivation less essential to people's survival. The prospects are limited, given regressive Taliban policies on women's and girls' rights.

Western policymakers should consider expanding their counter-narcotics toolkits in this region well beyond law enforcement and coercive force. Building domestic/bottom-up public pressure for an accountable counter-narcotics regime, entailing partnerships with local organisations – rehabilitation centres with proven track records, health and education NGOs, human rights groups – may help shore up domestic political ownership and broader public demand for humane and accountable national counter-narcotics policies. International counter-narcotics assistance that supports coercive state organs risks rewarding repressive regimes and reinforcing kinetic action as the main policy response to drug trafficking. Not only does this fail to tackle arguably the core challenge to a robust government response – official corruption and collusion – it could also feed that very problem.

# 1. Introduction

The region where Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran converge is known as the Golden Crescent, which along with Southeast Asia's Golden Triangle, is Asia's most notorious drug smuggling hub. Pakistan and Iran are on the southern drug trafficking route from Afghanistan to Asian, African, and western and central European markets, while Iran also is a critical node in the Balkan route that passes through Türkiye (UNODC, 2015). Since 2002, Iran and Pakistan have consistently accounted for more than 90% of global opium seizures (Soderholm, 2020). Yet Central Asia, too, remains a major route for drugs from Afghanistan to Russia and Europe (Marat & Botoeva, 2022). Tajikistan is the most critical country in this northern route and is representative of counter-narcotics challenges in Central Asia (UNODC, 2018).

Pakistan, Iran and Tajikistan's internal political and economic dynamics vary widely, as do their relations with Afghanistan. Yet, similar factors undermine their – and indeed the international community's – counter-narcotics efforts: corruption and collusion, ranging from local officials charging rents to political elites directly involved in drug trafficking; poor and/or deteriorating economic conditions and large informal economies; challenges in governing volatile borderlands and monitoring crossing points along long and often difficult terrain; and significant migration and cross-border communal ties. For border communities in particular, smuggling is a way of life and a financial lifeline.

The Golden Crescent is, furthermore, near sites of insurgency run by separatist/nationalist Baloch militant groups in Pakistan and Iran, and Taliban-affiliated criminal networks in southern Afghanistan. While drug seizures are common here, geographic, demographic and security dynamics, and insufficient coordination between Iranian, Afghan and Pakistani border security agencies, make this tri-state area a haven of drugs, weapons, currency, gold, and other illicit goods smuggling.

This paper examines the impact of Afghanistan's drug trade on the country's neighbours, with a particular focus on the three countries, Pakistan, Iran, and Tajikistan, which account for the highest volumes of narcotics that transit from Afghanistan. It will explore policy options in the post-August 2021 context, and in doing so consider the prospects of and challenges to greater regional cooperation, as well as alternatives to traditional counter-narcotics efforts.

Pakistan merits special attention, sharing the longest border with Afghanistan and as the country that receives the largest volumes of narcotics from Afghanistan. Despite being a highly flawed democracy since the restoration of elected civilian government in 2008, it remains the most accessible of Afghanistan's immediate neighbours, about which information flows more freely in the press and other literature than more autocratic regimes in Iran and Tajikistan. For reasons discussed in the paper, some remote border areas in Pakistan's north and south-west are also more accessible today than ten years ago. This has allowed for a considerably more detailed discussion about the country.



The analysis is based primarily on a qualitative review of open source literature and credible international and local media reports. Field research was limited, given the sensitive nature of the subject and the security conditions in the region. The author did, however, conduct several remote interviews with security personnel in Pakistan to verify some of the findings from media and other reports. He also interviewed other officials and experts with experience in counter-narcotics and security policy in the region, including drug and social workers and other grassroots activists with direct experience in helping treat addiction in Pakistan's tribal districts that border Afghanistan. Additionally, he interviewed Afghanistan-based journalists and foreign correspondents covering Afghanistan, during their visits to the country. Given the sensitive nature of the information, these sources chose to remain anonymous. The author has also spent extensive time in the region, in particular Pakistan's border areas with Afghanistan and Iran, and on the Makran and Sindh coasts, during twenty years as a South Asia senior analyst and researcher. Some of the findings draw from his published and unpublished research on the drug trade, and his experience informs some of the policy discussion.

## 2. Backdrop

### 2.1. The supply question

The Taliban's edict of 3 April 2022 banning poppy cultivation, and the 'usage, transportation, trade, export and import of all types of narcotics across Afghanistan' (Gul, 2023) raised two key questions. Would the movement be able to repeat its earlier, albeit brief success from July 2000 to October 2001 in restricting poppy cultivation? And what would this mean for a collapsing economy, where poppy was one of the few resilient crops amid one of the worst droughts and humanitarian crises in decades?

Notwithstanding questions around the Taliban's motivations, explored in more detail later in this report, abundant opium supply continues. Initially, the Taliban's ban on poppy cultivation and the narcotics trade yielded no significant reduction in drug trafficking from Afghanistan (Denton et al., 2022; Gibbons-Neff & Shah, 2021; Hamim, 2021). The Taliban itself allowed a two-month grace period after its edict that, in effect, exempted the harvest that concluded in July 2022 (UNODC, 2022b). Production soared in 2022: according to UNODC, opium cultivation rose by 32% between 2021 and 2022, to some 233,000 hectares – 56,000 hectares more than in the previous year – amounting to the third largest area under cultivation in the country since monitoring began in 1994 (UNODC, 2022b). Most of the increase came in the Taliban strongholds of Helmand and Kandahar (over 12,300 hectares) and the north-western Badghis province (over 9,200 hectares) (UNODC, 2022a).

The most consequential effect of the narcotics ban was to inflate prices, apparently in anticipation of eventual enforcement, displacing straightforward demand/supply market dynamics that have determined prices in the past. UNODC's 2021 Afghanistan Opium Survey, prior to the Taliban takeover, found opium prices at harvest time at their lowest since monitoring began, due to overproduction and market saturation (UNODC, 2022a). The sharp increase in price in 2022 occurred exactly at the time of the April edict, and did not track a fall in production, which remained constant (UNODC, 2022a). As prices soared, farmers' incomes from opium sales tripled from US\$425 million in 2021 to US\$1.4 billion in 2022, representing almost 30% of all agricultural output in 2021 (UNODC, 2022a). These gains were all the more significant for an internationally isolated economy where food and medicine prices have risen sharply.

Later in 2022, however, the Taliban began its crackdown. By September, local and Western journalists in Kabul said that Taliban commanders prevented many southern farmers from sowing new poppy crops in late 2022 and were taking firmer action than before on narcotics traders. The Taliban's purported message to these farmers and traders is that their large 2022 windfall from poppy and opium should provide enough of a financial buffer for them to transition to alternative livelihoods over the next two or three years (personal communications, Kabul-based journalist; Kandahar-based journalist; and two Western journalists visiting Afghanistan). By April 2023, one year after the ban was imposed, there was a dramatic reduction in poppy cultivation in Helmand and Nangarhar, two major poppy-producing provinces, according to high-resolution

satellite imagery analysed by the geographic information services company, Alcis, and associated research by author David Mansfield (Mansfield, 2023). Some observers pointed to the possibility of the Taliban repeating its earlier success of a 90% reduction in cultivation (Byrd, 2023). The ban, however, is not observed uniformly across regions, with some Taliban commanders apparently reluctant to impose a measure with grave economic and political implications (Mansfield, 2023). Furthermore, small farmers will be the most affected, while large farms retain significant opium stocks that will help those producers withstand the prohibition for a period.

Several questions, therefore, remain, about what if any support the interim regime will provide for a transition to other crops and, relatedly, how sustainable the ban is through subsequent cultivation seasons if the Afghan economy doesn't recover. Large-scale efforts to stop cultivation, without adequate alternatives for farmers, would be hazardous politically. For now, given the 2022 bumper crop, the flow from Afghanistan into the neighbourhood and beyond is likely to continue.

## 2.2. Surging cross-border movement

A short overview of the massive exodus of Afghans around the time of the Taliban's August 2021 victory is also worthwhile, given how drug traffickers as well as people smugglers reportedly exploited it (Takva, 2022). Afghans' desperation to leave their country before and after the U.S./NATO withdrawal was evident in the number of refugees: by UNHCR's count, in June 2021, there were 2.6 million registered Afghan refugees, comprising 11% of the world's refugee population, the highest number after Syria (6.7 million) and Venezuela (4 million) (UNHCR, undated). By August 2021, more than 570,000 Afghan refugees had sought asylum in Europe, the second highest number after Syrians (Morris & Hruby, 2021). Amid Afghanistan's international isolation, a constant risk of economic collapse, and the increasingly harsh Taliban regime, especially for women, demand for legal and illegal migration is likely to remain high.

That demand had already spiked as the beginning of the NATO drawdown in 2014 shrank Afghanistan's economy and labour market, adding numbers to those who were fleeing conflict, warlords, or areas of Taliban control. The COVID-19 pandemic triggered a similar increase. At first, job losses during the pandemic forced many Afghans abroad to return, but with few prospects, amid lockdowns, restrictions, and an already failing economy at home. As restrictions eased in neighbouring countries, reviving their formal and informal sectors, returning migrants looked to move again. Facing border closures, travel restrictions, and pauses in visa services, they relied on smugglers to get them to neighbouring countries like Iran (Fazli, 2022). But border closures and enhanced controls necessitated riskier routes, pushing fees up significantly. One survey found that smugglers' fees for a journey from Zaranj to Tehran 'were on average 29% higher in July and August 2020 than in the third quarter of 2019. For the same time period smuggling fees were 25% higher for the journey from Spin Boldak to Quetta in Pakistan, and 7% higher from Zaranj to Istanbul in Turkey' (Mixed Migration Centre, 2020).

The south-western province of Nimruz – which shares a border with both Iran and Pakistan and has large ethnic Baloch populations – and its border town of Zaranj, is the epicentre of the people-smuggling business. According to Goodhand and Koehler (2021),

before the Taliban takeover vehicles taking migrants illegally across the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, and then to Iran, numbered around 400 a day. This rose threefold in the first two months after the fall of the Republic. Smugglers' fees along some routes rose four- to six-fold. The daily average number of vehicles transporting Afghan migrants from Nimruz into Balochistan rose from around 50 to 150 immediately after the Taliban victory (Agence France Press, 2022; Peterson et al., 2021).

Iran's fortified eastern border, discussed later, has diverted much of the people-smuggling traffic to a crossing point in the Duk desert area in Pakistan's Chaghai district, from where convoys drive migrants on dirt roads into the border towns of Taftan, Mashkel or Rajay, gateways into Iran and onwards to Türkiye and Europe. Baloch groups, reinforced by ethnicity-based solidarity networks that straddle the three countries' borders, run the people-smuggling trade in Nimruz, Balochistan, and Iran's Sistan-Balochistan province (Notezai & Butt, 2018).

Drug and human traffickers/smugglers are reportedly working together, the former eliciting the cooperation of people smugglers to move narcotics through refugees and migrants. Law enforcement reports of narcotics being seized from migrants' backpacks, or in vehicles transporting Afghans, Iranians, Pakistanis and others across the Iran-Türkiye border illegally, align with this assessment (Takva, 2022). Using refugees as cover is reportedly viewed as less risky for drug traffickers, given the strength in numbers: the more refugees who cross, the more likely that many will evade detection. The smugglers allegedly threaten to leave behind those who refuse, while offering perks to those who agree, such as extra food and water and transport on horseback rather than on foot (Takva, 2022). A harsh legal regime in these transit countries, including the death penalty for drug trafficking in Iran and, to a more limited extent, Pakistan, is unlikely to be an effective deterrent, especially for those who see fleeing Afghanistan as a life-or-death matter, or who face other threats if they fail to comply with traffickers' instructions.

## 3. Pakistan

### 3.1. Mapping the drug trade, past and present

Pakistan shares the longest border with Afghanistan, at roughly 2,640 kilometres, and is the main destination for the country's exports (Rocha, 2017). More than any other country, Pakistan's fate is intertwined with Afghanistan's – and vice versa – due both to shared culture and policy choices. Even when Afghanistan is at its most politically and economically isolated, its geographic and community links with Pakistan serve to a limited extent to mitigate some of the attendant hardships. This applies to legitimate and illegitimate activities alike (Fazli, 2022; International Crisis Group, 2014).

Pakistan's side of the border is divided between Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) to Afghanistan's east, and Balochistan to its south-west. Part of Gilgit Baltistan (not formally a province) also borders Afghanistan in the north. Border areas in KP and Balochistan are tenuously governed and, in some parts, inaccessible to civilian institutions and civil society. However, military and paramilitary units retain the capacity if not to govern or police effectively, at least to bring significant force to bear on groups that challenge state writ. This capacity has been tested several times since 2003 against Islamist militants, where military operations succeeded in depriving jihadist networks of control over large swathes of territory – albeit at enormous cost to local infrastructure and communities. Jihadist pockets continue to operate and seem to have been revived following the Afghan Taliban's August 2021 victory across the border, but their ability to hold territory is now limited (International Crisis Group, 2018; International Crisis Group, 2022).

Organised crime in Pakistan was built around the wars in Afghanistan, starting with the anti-Soviet jihad of the 1980s, in which Pakistan played a central role, and the disruptions and mass movement of people and goods that resulted from them. The jihad reconfigured not just organised crime in Pakistan, but also the relationship between state and society. Opium and heroin provided the foundations, but the infrastructure that developed of transporters on land and sea, corrupt officials at entry and exit points, recruiters and middlemen connecting suppliers with clients, could now be used to move any kind of resource across porous borders with Afghanistan and Iran, the eastern border with India, and the Makran coast (Fazli, 2022; Rubin, 2002; Haq, 1996). Heroin processing plants, using raw opium from Afghanistan, proliferated across the erstwhile Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). Many of these were overseen by top Afghan mujahideen commanders, but also with involvement of close allies of military dictator Zia ul Haq (Haq, 1996; Beaty & Gwynne, 1993). Large private and publicly owned banks channelled the profits (Beaty & Gwynne, 1993).

Assuming office in 1988 following Zia's death in a plane explosion, Benazir Bhutto's civilian government tried to curtail the metastasising drug trade but 'was attacked politically by the opposition and there was danger of instigated violence from drug barons. [Bhutto's] worst enemies in this battle were powerful friends of the mafia in the Pakistani establishment, law enforcement agencies, and even her own political camp'

(Haq, 1996). Prominent alleged drug barons were even elected to parliament, until an ordinance barred known traffickers from contesting polls (Burns, 1995).

By the early 2000s, Pakistan had eradicated poppy cultivation in large swathes of territory. Some poppy cultivation continues in remote parts of Balochistan and what used to be FATA, but heroin traffickers mostly rely on raw ingredients from Afghanistan and Iran. The drug trade's centre of gravity remains Afghanistan, and the networks that transport opium, heroin, methamphetamines and other illicit substances across Pakistan's land and maritime borders for Western, African, and Eastern markets. Some heroin is also reportedly going to China, where demand for an alternative to drugs coming from Myanmar and the Golden Triangle has reportedly been rising since the early 2000s (UNODC, 2007; UNODC, 2008). Xinjiang's long, winding border with Russia, Mongolia, several Central Asian countries, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India, busy trade routes, and cross-border ethnic links, make it vulnerable to smuggling.

Initially, a handful of large, politically connected families with other legitimate enterprises such as transport and logistics, dominated Pakistan's drug trade. The emergence of new, medium-sized enterprises, including some that might be turning to dealing methamphetamines, with lower barriers of entry than opium and heroin, has eroded that control, while also complicating counter-narcotics operations (Fazli, 2022). While it is relatively easy for people to deal small quantities, the barriers to entry for large dealers are considerably higher. One factor is that the onward transport of narcotics, first across provincial lines and then land and maritime boundaries, and via air, is more complex (as well as lucrative), involving payoffs to and collusion with various security and law enforcement personnel. Unsurprisingly, those in or with links to transportation and logistics businesses, with both means and relevant relationships, often become involved in high-level trafficking, dating from the anti-Soviet jihad.<sup>1</sup>

Some shipments end up in Karachi in the south, where they are loaded onto vessels at Karachi Port or transported onwards to Balochistan along the Makran Coast. Given large cargo traffic, state capacity at seaports to assiduously inspect all consignments is questionable. Some consignments are loaded onto dhows off the Makran Coast, close to the Iran border, which reach Iran often through its southern islands, before onward transportation to the mainland. From there the shipments may end up in Europe or Central Asia. Others are loaded onto larger vessels destined for East Africa, or east towards Southeast Asia (Karachi-based Federal Investigation Agency official; Lahore-based Federal Investigation Agency official; Quetta-based intelligence official, personal communications, December 2022).

Travel agents and agencies are another key link in Pakistan's trafficking and smuggling chain, whether of people, drugs, or other commodities. They connect dealers to travellers, often without the latter's knowledge. Annual pilgrimages to Saudi Arabia, for which using a travel agent is mandatory, are a major opportunity. One widely reported article said, 'the cover of a holy journey [is] used to transport ice [meth]' (Firdous &

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<sup>1</sup> These findings draw on the author's extensive unpublished research on Pakistan's drug trade between 2019–20, including interviews with police and intelligence officials, and two people with logistics businesses who had formerly been involved in the drug trade – one of whom was a well-known trafficker.



Mehboob, 2019). Travel agents often provide the bags and accessories that pilgrims take with them, and fit narcotics into those bags. Someone else will typically accompany the pilgrim to Saudi Arabia and arrange for the drugs' transfer to Saudi-based Pakistani handlers. These facilitators are often not part of, or aware of their role in, organised criminal networks. Instead, they are unemployed, under-employed or facing debt and other financial pressures, and therefore responsive to such opportunities (Firdous & Mehboob, 2019). In human and drug trafficking cases alike, travel agents and agencies are often identified and charged, as are drug mules. Yet an intricate layer of middlemen, typically using false names, protect suppliers (Karachi-based Federal Investigation Agency official, personal communication, December 2022).

## 3.2. Geographic hubs

Three regions are particularly relevant to Pakistan's drug trade: the north-western Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) province, especially the tribal districts that used to comprise FATA until a 2018 constitutional amendment merged the two regions; the south-western Balochistan province; and Pakistan's commercial hub, Karachi, which lies on the southern coast.

### 3.2.1. *Khyber Pakhtunkhwa*

Pakistan's efforts to assert influence in Afghanistan date back to the 1970s, when it started supporting Afghan Islamists and its own Islamist proxies to subvert a Kabul-backed 'Pashtunistan' movement that sought to unite Pashtun areas of the two countries (Rubin, 2002; International Crisis Group, 2014). This Afghanistan policy was a key factor in retaining FATA, even after the democratic 1973 constitution, as an informally governed territory under a draconian colonial-era framework, the 1901 Frontier Crimes Regulation (FCR), which was meant to create a strategic buffer between British India and Afghanistan. Retaining this system denied jurisdiction of democratic institutions and formal policing and courts and allowed tribal militias and other non-state armed groups to benefit from smuggling networks across a contested and porous border. Drugs became central to these networks during the anti-Soviet jihad, with involvement from military and intelligence personnel (Rubin, 2002; Rashid, 2008).

Pakistan jihadist groups with links to the Taliban and Al Qaeda began challenging rather than co-existing with the state in the years after the U.S. October 2001 invasion of Afghanistan, which Islamabad officially supported. The military conducted several heavy operations from 2004, culminating in the 2014 *Zarb-e-Azb* ('quick strike'), which destroyed infrastructure, agriculture, and livelihoods, and provoked several cycles of massive internal displacement. These events also helped consolidate military control over parts of FATA previously untouched by the state. The 25<sup>th</sup> constitutional amendment in 2018 abolished the FCR and merged FATA into KP, in theory extending the reach of the formal justice system and full constitutional and political rights to the region. The reform, along with improved security, has allowed significantly more civilian access to many parts of the tribal belt. Nevertheless, the military remains the most powerful institution on the ground by far and continues to restrict civilian access to perceived sensitive areas (International Crisis Group, 2018; International Crisis Group 2022).

The presence of a powerful military in KP's tribal districts that, for perceived strategic interests, has allowed non-state actors to operate within limits but deployed heavy force when those limits have been breached, has created an environment more conducive to fluid criminal networks than hierarchical mafia-like structures.<sup>2</sup> Collusion with local security personnel is vital to those networks' operations.<sup>3</sup> Top-down criminal involvement at the highest levels of the state, beyond individual officers, is less clear today than it was in the 1980s – when, for example, people in General Zia's inner circle, including one who handled Zia's and other senior military officers' finances, were implicated in the drug trade; and in the case of Zia's banker, who was convicted for related offences (Beaty & Gwynne, 1993, p. 297). In the mid-1990s a former prime minister, Nawaz Sharif, alleged that the military leadership had proposed funding his government's covert military/intelligence operations through proceeds from the drug trade (Anderson & Khan, 1994). At the time, unlike today, there was significant poppy cultivation inside Pakistan, including in areas with adequate formal state control. While there has been extensive reporting on the military's corruption and outsize role in various sectors of Pakistan's formal and informal economy, particularly since the end of General Pervez Musharraf's military regime (1999–2008), reports about an institutional role in drug trafficking are few.<sup>4</sup>

Like people smugglers and human traffickers, KP's drug rings exploit people's economic need, the large volume of cross-border formal and informal trade and movement, and the vulnerabilities of marginalised communities such as Afghan refugees. Their networks at the lowest rungs include so-called 'mules' who typically cross the Afghanistan-Pakistan border on foot or on donkeys or horses; truckers who conceal illegal substances in their vehicles across official border crossings, like Torkham (near the Khyber Pass), with or without the drivers' knowledge; dealers who reportedly use women in the garments business on both sides of the border, concealing drugs in their fabrics or saturating those fabrics with methamphetamine; and peddlers who exploit out-of-school children in the tribal districts, many of them Afghan refugees, by dressing them in school uniforms, packing their school bags with narcotics and sending them hitchhiking to Peshawar and other cities, where their cargo is unloaded and distributed by partners in the trade (Fazli, 2022).

Pakistan's fencing of its border with Afghanistan, particularly the KP side, and tighter controls at Torkham, have impeded smuggling – and even legitimate movement and trade – along parts of this border. This fencing, however, is a major point of contention between Islamabad and Kabul, which does not officially recognise the Durand Line that divides the Pashtun heartland. These conflicting positions on the Durand Line have limited cross-border security cooperation, and tensions have continued since the Taliban's return to power – both around Pakistan's fencing and Afghanistan's alleged

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2 For a discussion about the difference between criminal networks and mafia-like structures, and the respective environments in which they thrive, see Marat, E. & Botoeva, G. (2022). *Drug Trafficking, Violence and Corruption in Central Asia*. SOC ACE Research Paper No. 7. University of Birmingham.

3 These findings draw on the author's extensive unpublished research on Pakistan's drug trade between 2019–20, including interviews with police and intelligence officials, and activists, social workers and traders in Khyber district, formerly a part of FATA.

4 For a detailed examination of the military's economic role, see Siddiq, A. (2007). *Military Inc.: Inside Pakistan's Military Economy*. Pluto Press.



sanctuaries for Pakistan Taliban groups who have conducted regular cross-border attacks since August 2021 (Mir, 2022).

Senior Pakistani officials contend that Afghan drug traffickers comprise a powerful lobby against the border fence and have dictated the Taliban's protests against it (Fazli, 2022). While it is difficult to verify these claims, the perceptions themselves reflect what Pakistani stakeholders believe is at stake in managing this border. Yet, these officials also admitted that while the border fence has significantly curtailed illicit cross-border movement, the large volumes of narcotics produced in Afghanistan meant that traffickers would be willing and able to pay large sums to counter-narcotics, paramilitary, customs, and other border security personnel. Also factoring in mountainous terrain that is difficult to police, they expected the usual quantities of raw and processed substances from the most recent harvest to enter Pakistan (Fazli, 2022).

There are, furthermore, gaps in the fence in critical places, which analysts with deep knowledge of border dynamics between Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran attribute to strategic choices, as well as difficult terrain. The result is that those who control routes further south along KP's border with Afghanistan have more control over smuggling, whereas they previously competed with those active in northern routes (now properly fenced) (Fazli, 2022). Hence, while the Afghanistan-Pakistan border has often been described as porous, a combination of perilous terrain and new infrastructure to control cross-border movement has effectively reserved illegal crossing, especially of large cargo, for those with sufficient financial and logistical resources, and connections to officials and other power brokers. Control over chokepoints remains highly lucrative (Fazli, 2022).

### **3.2.2. Balochistan**

The relationship between organised crime groups and the state is more confrontational in Balochistan, the site of a low-level, decades-long insurgency by ethnic Baloch militants seeking greater provincial autonomy or secession. Most of the drug trafficking routes that originate in Afghanistan pass through Balochistan (Jain, 2018), which shares a 1460-kilometre border with Afghanistan and a 960-kilometre border with Iran; it also has a 770-kilometre coast on the Arabian Sea. These land and maritime boundaries have numerous entry and exit points for smuggled goods, which are central to Balochistan's informal economy.

This province, too, confronts the legacy of the anti-Soviet jihad. As in FATA, heroin processing laboratories proliferated in the 1980s, particularly in Chaghai which, along with Afghanistan's Nimroz province, and Zahedan in Iran's Sistan Balochistan province, forms the Golden Crescent (Rasmussen, 2017). While it is difficult to verify how many of these plants still operate, it is clear that Balochistan remains a major source of and transit point for narcotics (Fazli, 2022).

The Baloch insurgency persists, despite a heavy security presence in the province and repeated government claims that separatists have been neutralised. The most prominent militant groups today operate near the Makran Coast, and reportedly find sanctuary in Iran. Cross-border militant movement and violence are believed to reinforce the drug trade, even if explicit evidence of trafficking by Baloch insurgents is

limited. Because organised crime groups deal in weapons as well as narcotics, separatist insurgents, who are clients for the weapons, give these groups safe passage and thus enhance their ability to operate in some of the province's most volatile regions (Fazli, 2022).

Just as FATA lacked a formal police force and courts, formal policing in Balochistan is limited to the province's 'A' (urban) areas, while tribal militias answerable to tribal chieftains police its rural 'B' areas – over 90% of the province – including key border districts. Smuggling is a parallel economy, run by organised crime barons, tribal chiefs, public representatives, and local elites. Human trafficking, gun running, drug smuggling and trade in contrabands are rampant (Notezai, 2021; UNODC, 2011). Organised crime groups that travel in large, heavily armed convoys and caravans often clash violently with law enforcement agencies (Fazli, 2022).

### **3.2.3. Karachi**

Karachi, Sindh's provincial capital, is a commercial powerhouse and 'megacity' regularly declared one of the world's most dangerous cities (Gayer, 2014). Abutting Balochistan on the Makran Coast, and with Pakistan's busiest port, Karachi is also a key transit point for human, drug, and other trafficking to Gulf states and beyond. Organised crime is intertwined with the city's economy, and violent competition for the city's revenues and resources fuel its politics (Gayer, 2014; Karachi-based law enforcement officials, personal communications, December 2022).

The city attracts migration from every major ethnic and linguistic group across the country: Pashtuns (including from erstwhile FATA, and Afghan refugees and their descendants), Punjabis, Seraikis from southern Punjab, Baloch, Sindhis, and illegal migrants from around South Asia. Many of those displaced by natural disasters and conflict also migrate to Karachi and end up staying permanently. Rather than a melting pot, however, the city is highly segregated along both class and ethnic lines. Political parties – alongside allied armed groups – have appealed to ethnicity as the basis of their patronage, and ethnicity is intrinsic to political and criminal contestation and violence in the city (Gayer, 2014; International Crisis Group, 2017).

While Karachi sees explosive population growth, a state that once provided public housing, transport, health and other services for low-income groups, is now at best an absentee, and highly corrupt, regulator. This has opened space for organised criminal groups to dominate key sectors of the economy, including transport, real estate, and even water provision. For basic services, low-income groups are dependent on 'various kinds of middlemen...who navigate the murky waters between the official and the unofficial economy' (Gayer, 2014, p. 40). One example is housing: low-income groups often opt to live close to work in the city centre, rather than commute over long distances from its outskirts, and end up in irregular settlements, in many cases high-rises run on informal rental agreements by slumlords and criminal groups. These have become havens of recruitment into gangs, a pathway towards more serious criminal involvement (International Crisis Group, 2017).

Prominent armed groups run protection, kidnapping, drugs, and other rackets across the city, as do sectarian extremist organisations. As elsewhere, Karachi's drug trade

grew out of the surge in Afghanistan's opium production in the 1980s. As Karachi Port became a critical node in the trans-shipment of narcotics, the city's criminal gangs assumed prominent roles in the international drug trade (Hussain & Shelley, 2016).

Conflict between these criminal gangs, each with connections to one of the major political parties vying for control over Karachi, made the city virtually ungovernable by 2013. A deeply politicised Sindh police force proved unable or unwilling to tackle metastasising criminal rackets and the violence they instigated. In September 2013, the central government empowered the federal paramilitary Rangers to take action against politically linked criminal networks (International Crisis Group, 2017). While political violence has subsided since then, the impact on less public and less lethal organised criminal activity, including narcotics, is unclear. Karachi-based law enforcement officials, representing both provincial and federal agencies, contend that Karachi Port and the city's southern fishing islands remain departure points for smuggled goods, including drugs (Karachi-based Federal Investigation Agency official; two senior Sindh police officials, personal communication, December 2022).

### 3.3. Policy responses

Pakistan's harsh counter-narcotics regime, based on the 1997 Control of Narcotics Substances Act and its 2019 Amendment, is oriented towards punishing possession, and its law enforcement is characterised by coercion rather than investigation and intelligence-led policing (International Crisis Group, 2017). An overemphasis on arrests and seizures as measures of success, and a preference for quick results rather than months and years-long investigations where outcomes are uncertain, results in 'mules', peddlers and users being caught in the counter-narcotics dragnet rather than suppliers and their bosses. Corruption and collusion also protect the latter.<sup>5</sup>

Since the 1990s, the most high-profile arrests of Pakistani drug barons were either overseas or, less frequently, by Pakistan law enforcement under intense international pressure, followed by extradition. A prominent recent example is the 2019 conviction in New York's Southern District of Shahbaz Khan, a Pakistani national who divided his time between Afghanistan and Pakistan and was 'an international drug kingpin who distributed staggering quantities of narcotics from southwest Asia to countries throughout the world', according to a U.S. Attorney (U.S. Attorney's Office, 2019). Khan was apprehended in Liberia in December 2016. When known drug barons are convicted in Pakistan, it is often for non-drug offences. The April 2020 conviction in a military court of Uzair Baloch, a major Karachi gang leader and drug dealer with links to opposition parties, on charges of spying for India, is one such case (Sahoutara, 2020).

Although counter-narcotics became a provincial responsibility in 2010, after the 18<sup>th</sup> constitutional amendment devolved significant authority from the federal to provincial governments, Pakistan's counter-narcotics strategy still revolves around the Anti-Narcotics Force (ANF), a militarised federal institution headed by an army major-general. The ANF has limited investigation capacity and is oriented towards large

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<sup>5</sup> These findings draw on the author's extensive unpublished research on Pakistan's drug trade between 2019–20.

seizures rather than building intelligence about trafficking networks. Other federal institutions, the navy and coastguard, police the Arabian Sea. Policing maritime routes, the responsibility of the navy's Pakistan Maritime Security Agency (PMSA), is the most resource-intensive activity and an especially weak link in the counter-narcotics chain.<sup>6</sup> Provincial police officials complain that an excessive focus on coercive measures against low-level offenders, and measuring success by numbers of arrests and seizures, comes at the cost of building intelligence about, and profiles of, organisations and their leadership, including producers and importers of drugs and precursor chemicals from Afghanistan (KP, Punjab and Sindh police officials, personal communications, December 2022).

The federal and provincial governments have not completely ignored drug addiction as a social rather than a purely law enforcement problem. Demand reduction is one of four components of a 2019 National Anti-Narcotics Policy, but with the ANF playing a prominent role in developing better treatment, rehabilitation and other soft measures for people who use drugs (Ministry of Narcotics Control, 2019). Whether an essentially military institution is well placed to lead such initiatives is debatable. In turn, the KP government and police have conducted seminars in schools and colleges to raise awareness about the dangers of drug abuse and also engaged clerics to discuss methamphetamines in their Friday sermons (Ahmad, 2019).

Generally, however, Pakistani law is notably intrusive on treating addiction, for example requiring provincial governments to 'register all addicts within their respective jurisdiction for the purpose of treatment and rehabilitation', and for confirmed addicts to 'carry a registration card in such form as may be prescribed and produce it to any public authority on demand' (Gazette of Pakistan, 1997; Gazette of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, 2019). Some counter-narcotics reforms, such as KP's 2019 Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Control of Narcotics Substance Act, have created an even more punitive regime, lowering possession thresholds (mostly a bid to address the spread of methamphetamines, which are consumed in lower quantities) (Gazette of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, 2019).

A more positive recent development is a November 2022 federal law that abolished the death penalty for most drug dealing offences – converting the punishment into life imprisonment – with some exceptions including for possessing 6kg or more of heroin, 5kg or more of cocaine, and for kilograms of methamphetamine, still punishable by death (Gazette of Pakistan, 2022). Avowedly, concerns about human rights and misuse of the death penalty spurred political support for the bill (Express Tribune, 2022). Political awareness of and willingness to address an overly punitive counter-narcotics regime provide opportunities to rethink international counter-narcotics support to the country, to be discussed below.

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<sup>6</sup> These findings draw on the author's extensive unpublished research on Pakistan's drug trade between 2019–20.

## 4. Iran

### 4.1. Mapping the drug trade

The other Golden Crescent constituent, Iran, confronts many of the same challenges as Pakistan. It hosts almost as many Afghan refugees as Pakistan; shares long cultural ties to Afghanistan's south-western provinces, such as Herat, and beyond; and sees high volumes of legal and illicit cross-border movement of people and goods. As in Pakistan, many Iranian border communities depend on smuggling to sustain themselves (Anees, 2023; Kundi, 2009).

Refugees and illegal migrants from Afghanistan, Pakistan, and elsewhere enter Iran and then cross into Türkiye through the latter's eastern border, aided by people smugglers and human traffickers. According to a November 2021 report, between 4,000 and 5,000 Afghans were entering Iran daily through informal crossings, with around 300,000 Afghans having crossed in the two-and-a-half months after the Taliban takeover (Norwegian Refugee Council, 2021). The same routes are reportedly a major historic smuggling route for heroin originating in Afghanistan and destined for Western Europe through Türkiye and the Balkans. The maritime route is also widely used – by some accounts, increasingly (UNODC, undated.a) – with the key ports of Bandar Abbas and Chabahar being a major conduit (Soderholm, 2020).

Decades of international sanctions and economic isolation, and internal political repression, have enhanced demand for illicit movement of people and goods. The Trump administration's 2018 withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action and re-imposition of sanctions triggered a significant decline in the value of Iran's currency and aggravated economic hardships; the upshot was a reportedly heavier dependence on revenues from informal and illicit trade and trafficking (Wescott & Ismaeli, 2019).

Dougharun-Islam Qala is the busiest official Iran-Afghanistan border crossing, between Iran's north-eastern Razavi Khorasan province and Afghanistan's south-western Herat province, connecting the urban hubs of Mashad and Herat city. Large volumes of goods and over 1,000 trucks pass through it daily (European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction, 2021). Notwithstanding regular drug seizures at this crossing, Iranian law enforcement agencies' capacity to monitor the flow of goods here is reportedly limited, as is the ability to monitor informal crossings.

Further south is the volatile Sistan and Balochistan province, with its capital in Zahedan, near the borders of both Afghanistan and Pakistan. Like Pakistan's Balochistan, this region has been the site of a low-level insurgency by Baloch groups disgruntled by political and economic marginalisation, and by Tehran's heavy-handed policies towards ethnic and sectarian minorities (the Baloch are predominantly Sunni). Here, too, cross-border smuggling networks built on ethnic Baloch ties across the eastern borders with Pakistan and Afghanistan drive a regular flow of illicit goods and migration. Historically, however, Baloch and Afghans have reportedly smuggled relatively small quantities into Iran, mostly on their person, among other items. The larger volumes are moved by



organised crime groups through more sophisticated logistical arrangements, who maintain what are effectively private armies and hold sway over territory (UNODC, undated.b).

More research is needed on the key players in Iran's illicit drug industry, but there are indications of high-level political involvement, including within the powerful Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps' (IRGC's) Quds force (GI-TOC, 2020). Some top Iranian drug barons allegedly have close IRGC ties and use their networks to target Iranian dissidents in neighbouring countries at the regime's behest (Fahim & Cunningham, 2020; Reuters, 2020). The IRGC's reported control of scores of illegal or 'invisible' jetties, with minimal government oversight, allegedly allows for command over black market import and export of licit as well as contraband goods, from petroleum products to narcotics (Soderholm, 2020; Wehrey et al., 2009). At the same time, the IRGC has waged high-profile counter-narcotics operations. Whether these have merely targeted competitors is difficult to substantiate, but self-serving and highly selective counter-narcotics action is a serious possibility.

Some pro-Iran militias in the region, the main tools of Iran's regional influence, which include Hezbollah in Lebanon and militant proxies in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, are also allegedly involved in drug trafficking. Iran-backed militias in Iraq, for example, have reportedly 'turned the Shalamcheh border crossing in Basra – which connects southern Iraq to Iran – into a transit point for drug trafficking' (Rahim, 2022). High-level complicity or direct involvement in the drug trade contrasts sharply with a harsh official drugs policy and consistently high volumes of seizures, mirroring Pakistan's pattern of punishment at the bottom and impunity at the top.

## 4.2. Domestic impact

As well as being a transit point for narcotics from Afghanistan to Türkiye and onward, Iran has consistently faced some of the highest addiction rates in the world. In 2019, the Iranian Drug Control Headquarters estimated that 2.8 million Iranians (5.4% of the adult population aged 15-65) had substance use problems, including rising use of cheap methamphetamines from Afghanistan (European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction, 2021). Iran also reportedly has had the highest opiate use prevalence in the world, with women being particularly vulnerable (Dolan et al., 2011).

Drugs have left a mark on the criminal justice system: according to some estimates, almost 40% of all prisoners (about 80,180 out of 211,000) were charged with drug-related offences as of early 2021 (European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction, 2021). Iran applies the death penalty for drug trafficking, which in turn accounts for a significant majority of overall death sentences – mostly for trafficking from Pakistan and Afghanistan (Ghiabi, 2019). Anti-narcotics action has targeted border communities in particular and by extension Afghan refugees and ethnic Baloch. As in Pakistan, while poorer and marginalised communities bear the brunt, the higher echelons of criminal organisations go unpunished (Ghiabi, 2019).

Tehran is clearly concerned about narcotics and has deployed measures to stem the flow from Afghanistan and Pakistan, in particular fortifying its eastern border with some

2,000 kilometres of embankments, barbed wire and canals, mostly constructed between 2007 and 2017 (European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction, 2021). Some 3,700 national law enforcement officials have been killed and over 12,000 have been maimed in counter-narcotics operations over the last three decades, according to UNODC (UNODC, undated.b). Iran consistently tops the world's drug seizures: for instance, the country represented roughly 91% of global opium seizures and 33% of global morphine and heroin seizures in 2018 (EMCDDA, 2021), with most drug seizures intercepting cargoes moving across the eastern border.

So far, neither the Taliban's counter-narcotics policy, nor a more fortified eastern front, have helped Iran curtail cross-border drug trafficking. According to an August 2022 *Vice* report, 'Experts note that, while opium and heroin prices in Afghanistan have risen, there has been little impact on heroin supplied to Europe via the Balkan route, both in relation to the amounts of the drug in circulation and the wholesale kilo prices, as well as the drug's purity' (Daly, 2022). Given that Iran is the entry point on that route, it is reasonable to deduce that those supplies are passing through it.

Faced with rising addiction and associated health risks, Tehran has also developed what one scholar described as an 'approach based on limited tolerance of public drug use and the tacit acceptance of street hustling', which coincides with an otherwise harsh legal regime (Ghiabi, 2019 p. 217). This has included alternatives to incarceration. At least one municipality, for example, designated public spaces like parks as congregation areas for people who use drugs, enabling access to social and health workers for harm reduction measures (Ghiabi, 2019). Crucially, according to this same source, this softer approach resulted not from international but domestic pressure, including concerns among officials about 'skyrocketing' executions for drug offences (Ghiabi, 2019). Such examples are instructive for international policymaking, which will be discussed in more detail in the concluding section.

## 5. Tajikistan

### 5.1. Tajikistan and the northern route

While the southern and Balkan routes see the largest volumes of narcotics from Afghanistan, the northern route and its offshoots remain a concern, even if the volumes transported through it have declined in the last 10 years and their primary destination is Russia. According to UNODC, about 90 tons of heroin transit Central Asia annually (UNODC, 2018). On this northern route, the border areas between Afghanistan and Tajikistan are reportedly the most active, and sites of the most seizures (UNODC, 2018; Gaynor, 2011). Tajikistan, described in 2010 by the then UNODC executive director as 'the first line of defense' against the flow of drugs through Central Asia (UNODC, 2010), is the main northern entry point for Afghan opiates. From here the drugs move to Russia via Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, or on a secondary route via Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan (Marat & Botoeva, 2022; UNODC, 2018).

Tajikistan shares the longest border with Afghanistan in Central Asia: almost 1,400 kilometres, along the Panj river, a tributary of the Amu Darya, and through mountainous terrain in the east that is difficult to police. As in the Golden Crescent, networks based on shared ethnicity, straddling a long and busy border, drive smuggling. Most drugs are probably trafficked from Afghanistan's Badakhshan province, largely through traditional/formal border crossings. Significant volumes of drugs were reportedly smuggled across this border in the six months after the Taliban takeover, with state authorities claiming that illegal narcotics interdicted in 2021 had increased by almost 70% from the previous year (Eurasianet, 2022). In October 2021, Tajikistan reportedly intercepted 500kg of heroin, opium, and hashish from Afghanistan, one of the largest seizures in several years (Qatar Tribune, 2021). This follows a recent trend: the 2.43 tons of narcotics reportedly interdicted in 2020 marked a sharp rise on the 1.6 tons seized the year before (Eurasianet, 2022).

During the insurgency that ended in August 2021, drug traffickers in Afghanistan's north, where Taliban support was significantly less than in the south, reportedly allied with local warlords and militias to help move their shipments into Central Asia (Elliot et al., 2021). How much influence those warlords and militias retain after the Taliban's victory and consolidation of power across the country is unclear. One especially significant militant force in the north was the Al Qaeda-linked Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). With strong ties also to the Taliban, the IMU was reportedly similarly intertwined with the drug trade and controlled key trafficking routes into Central Asia. It was believed to control most of the opiates entering Kyrgyzstan (Björnehed, 2004). Like its Taliban ally, the IMU tapped the proceeds from the drug trade to finance its militant operations in Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and elsewhere in the region (Gaynor, 2011).

### 5.2. The political economy of the drug trade

If the anti-Soviet jihad was the defining moment for Pakistan and Iran's drug trade, the Soviet Union's 1991 implosion was the same for Tajikistan. The subsequent civil war



and a major economic crisis impelled many towards narcotics. From the late 1990s, Tajikistan started exporting heroin originating in Afghanistan in high volumes to eastern Europe, other Central Asian countries, and Russia (Paoli et al., 2007). State collapse allowed the business to flourish. In his thirty-year rule, President Emomali Rahmon has restored central authority to a considerable extent, but still presides over a highly corrupt state with major stakes in the cross-border drug trade (Göransson, 2016).

Arrest statistics in Tajikistan show an increasing number of individuals who have been willing to transport drugs to meet their basic needs. A 2018 research paper contended that drug trafficking 'has developed in Tajikistan partly through the efforts of small traffickers, for whom it provides a means of daily survival'. It listed as a factor 'the economic crisis in Russia, a country which has been a major destination for at least 1.15 million Tajik migrant workers. Their remittances, making up approximately 49% of Tajikistan's GDP, have declined considerably in the last three years' (Peyrouse, 2018). Russia's war in Ukraine will probably enhance that trend.

High-volume trafficking, however, is done by organised crime groups, who in some border areas enjoy local support as social welfare providers. The 2018 report quoted above found:

These groups step in where the government has failed, providing social welfare in poor regions of the country. Furthermore, some government officials allow local drug barons or local administrative officials – who are sometimes one and the same – to develop illicit drug rings that permit them to get rich in exchange for political allegiance and assistance in maintaining social stability (Peyrouse, 2018).

It added that 'wealthy traffickers have become objects of admiration for an increasing number of idle youths' (Peyrouse, 2018). Domestic drug use has increased steadily in the process (Otiashvili et al., 2016).

Tajikistan has seen even more collusion than its neighbours between drug traffickers and high-level state officials, to an extent that it has often been described as a 'narco-state'.<sup>7</sup> Some observers point to the significant volumes of drugs that move through legal border crossings as a reflection of this dynamic. A 2007 research paper argued, 'In no other country of the world, except perhaps contemporary Afghanistan, can such a superimposition between drug traffickers and government officials be found' (Paoli et al., 2007). According to another, 'State protection from corrupt border guards allowed criminal syndicates to establish stable connections with counterparts in Afghanistan' (Marat & Botoeva, 2022). These high-level connections straddle the region, including Russia, enabling traffickers to smuggle Afghan heroin even through aviation operators and railways (Marat & Botoeva, 2022).

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<sup>7</sup> According to one report, 'The man thought to be founder of Tajikistan's first major drug-trafficking group, for instance, was the lieutenant to the founder of the political party that brought President Emomali Rahmon to power in 1992.' Kucera, J. (2014). The narcostate. *Politico Magazine*, March/April 2014.

It is not difficult to reconcile such descriptions with Dushanbe's robust record of counter-narcotic arrests and seizures, where in 2020, for example, it ranked eleventh among countries with the largest quantities of opiate seizures (UNODC, 2022c). Researchers have found that arrests often either target minor dealers or, when higher profile, the competitors of politically connected traffickers (Peyrouse, 2018). This may inflate arrest and seizure statistics, but doesn't amount to a credible strategy against the drug trade:

Since the creation of specialised counter-trafficking agencies with the help of Western donors in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the states developed capabilities for interdicting trafficking routes. Numerous small interdictions distracted attention away from large shipments protected by criminal groups and corrupt political actors and created an image of a state-led fight against drugs. As a result, drug trafficking shifted from rural areas and small-scale groups to major highways and rail routes, with the involvement of larger and better-organised actors (Marat & Botoeva, 2022).

### **5.2.1. Post-August 2021 dynamics**

Of all of Afghanistan's Central Asian neighbours, Tajikistan has adopted an explicitly anti-Taliban stance, and supports – politically if not yet militarily – the Taliban's most prominent political rival, the ethnic Tajik Ahmed Massoud, who along with other ethnic Tajik Northern Alliance leaders, reportedly enjoys sanctuary in the country (Astrasheuskaya, 2021). Western diplomats in the region believe that President Rahmon could leverage his government's anti-Taliban posture for greater Western political and security support (Astrasheuskaya, 2021). One Tajik official said that with 'the Taliban's ascent to power, we must strengthen our borders in every way, not only against drug smuggling, but also weapons and other prohibited material. And so, in our meetings with donors ... one of the issues that has been discussed is support for the organization of new [Drug Control Agency] outposts along the border' (Eurasianet, 2022).

Dushanbe's explicit opposition to the Taliban might indeed make it an attractive geopolitical partner for the U.S. and other western governments. Since 2001 the U.S. has spent nearly \$200 million on security assistance for Tajikistan, increasingly focused on training and arming special military and police units (Center for International Policy, undated). As in Pakistan, the country's law enforcement is heavily militarised, including agencies responsible for counter-narcotics and fighting organised crime. By supporting coercive organs of the state, such assistance risks rewarding a repressive regime and reinforcing kinetic action as the main policy response to drug trafficking. Not only does it fail to tackle arguably the core challenge to a robust government response – official corruption and collusion – it could also feed that very problem.

## 6. Policy considerations

Counter-narcotics is not only, or even primarily, a question of state capacity in South and Central Asia. Nor would greater cross-border cooperation be a silver bullet to stem the flow of illicit drugs from Afghanistan. Pakistan, Iran and Tajikistan certainly evince an interest in curtailing the drug trade, and could find willing partners in the U.S., Europe and China to enhance international counter-narcotics cooperation after the fall of Kabul. Yet, all three have adopted highly punitive regimes, supported by militarised law enforcement, with limited investigative capacity or political will to tackle resourceful criminal organisations. Combined with high levels of corruption, this approach targets those at the lowest rungs of the criminal ladder. The impression thus created may be of states that are tough on drugs, regularly seizing large quantities intended for international markets; in fact, these are highly permissive legal regimes which effectively protect the most resourceful traffickers.

Confining the metrics to arrests and seizures limits understanding of who is being arrested – small-time peddlers and traffickers or influential drug barons? In a competitive and corrupt marketplace, where law enforcement agencies often act on information provided by organised crime groups against rivals, large seizures are proxy indicators of market trends and volumes being trafficked, not of progress against trafficking.

Law enforcement cooperation, for example with Pakistan's ANF and Tajikistan's counter-trafficking agencies, will undoubtedly continue. Policymakers around the world, including across the global south, have repeatedly stressed the importance of demand reduction and public health approaches to tackle the drug scourge, beyond policing (United Nations, 2009). Furthermore, western drug policy officials have identified host-government ownership, alternatives to incarceration, and engaging and expanding opportunities for vulnerable communities, as top priorities in countering narcotics (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2017). They have also emphasised rule of law and access to justice as important for lasting security (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2017).

Building domestic/bottom-up public pressure for an accountable counter-narcotics regime may help shore up domestic political ownership, which is as vital here as elsewhere.<sup>8</sup> As a February 2022 Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime analysis argued, 'Public awareness of how the illicit economy works and the main actors involved will further increase the quality of political processes in the region' (Marat, 2022). This applies not only to an albeit fragile democracy like Pakistan, but also Iran and Afghanistan where, as discussed earlier, opinion within specific constituencies has reportedly informed drug policies. There is, therefore, a compelling logic to international partners and donors seeking partnerships with local organisations –

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<sup>8</sup> As Cheeseman & Peiffer (2022) have found, however, any public awareness and messaging activities should first be piloted to test effectiveness and to avoid potential negative unintended consequences. See Peiffer & Cheeseman (2023) for more on this.

rehabilitation centres with proven track records, health and education NGOs, human rights groups – towards broader public demand and buy-in for accountable national counter-narcotics policies, and civil society oversight of their implementation.

If Iran's ayatollahs and Afghanistan's Taliban regime both developed their stance (in different ways) towards the drug trade due to some level of local public concern, as has been suggested in some of the research discussed earlier, a corollary to this could be enhancing public awareness of the extent of drug addiction in these societies, and its impact on individuals and marginalised communities. The goal could be to encourage more investment in demand reduction, treatment, and prevention campaigns; and to more seriously examine the factors that ensure that Afghanistan's drug production will not only continue but will also find a range of actors across the socio-economic spectrum to move those drugs across borders. The high demand and addiction in countries like Pakistan and Iran give drug rings the opportunity to turn a quick profit before assuming the risks and uncertainties of moving illicit goods to distant, if more lucrative, markets.

The challenges to such a shift are considerable, including resistance among governments in the region to perceived foreign interference in their domestic affairs.<sup>9</sup> Domestic drug use and addiction is indeed wrapped up in the debate about national sovereignty. Greater public discussion about the impact of the drug trade on local communities could help overcome this limitation, generating public pressure on governments to address the addiction scourge. Faced with such pressure, states could agree to some level of international engagement on domestic drug use and, by extension, the drug trade. Both Iran and Pakistan's partial reforms to a highly punitive drug regime, discussed earlier, indicate the potential of a robust domestic drug policy debate – for even a highly repressive state, in the case of Tehran.

The potential of bottom-up pressure may also be apparent in the Taliban's April 2022 edict. There have been various theories about the motivations behind the Taliban's decision, with some saying it was a cynical bid for international legitimacy (see Watkins, 2022). A plausible alternative explanation, however, coming from local researchers, is that on returning to Afghanistan after their August 2021 victory, the Taliban's Kandahar leadership responded to concerns from communities in their southern home regions about exploding drug use among their young (local researchers cited in Watkins, 2022). The Taliban's measures to clear Kabul's streets of drug users, a major presence during the Republic, have been popular with large sections of the public, according to Kabul and Kandahar-based journalists and researchers – even as concerns persist about the harsh treatment of those users in supposed rehabilitation centres (personal communications, February 2023).

Undoubtedly, there are limits to public pressure in Afghanistan and among its neighbours. As discussed, economic desperation makes poppy cultivation all the more critical to meeting basic needs, something that the Taliban leadership would balance against concerns in their communities about addiction. In Tajikistan, drug barons who

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<sup>9</sup> Afghanistan Illicit Economy Dialogue Platform (IEDP), Expert Meeting attended by the author, Gilon, Switzerland, 25-26 October 2023.

enjoy community support as service providers can deploy local as well as financial and political clout to resist action against them. More importantly, an authoritarian state in Dushanbe that is itself enmeshed in the drug trade would see few incentives in responding to any public anger about drug trafficking – especially if high levels of international security and counter-narcotics support were sustained, with few meaningful conditions.

## 6.1. The Kabul dilemma

In Afghanistan, the question around international engagement is not whether neighbouring or Western governments are willing to support the Taliban's counter-narcotics capacity, but whether they are willing to end Kabul's international isolation and provide the high level of economic assistance that the country requires to make poppy cultivation less essential to people's survival. The prospects are limited. Several Taliban measures in 2022 have enhanced concerns about the Taliban's human rights record, particularly women's rights: a March 2022 reversal of the Kabul government's decision to lift a ban on girls' secondary schooling, effectively extending the ban indefinitely, followed by a December 2022 decision to close public and private universities to women; restrictions on women's movement, including international travel, without a male chaperone; a May 2022 decree for women to wear hijab, or face covering, in public, among other provisions; banning women from working with national and international NGOs; and reviving the harshest Islamic punishments for several offences, public executions, and public flogging (Ahmadi & Worden, 2022). Many aid organisations suspended their work in the country, and some donors threatened to cut aid entirely, prompting concern about deeper suffering among Afghans and isolation of the regime (International Crisis Group, 2023).

The decisions on girls' schooling and women working for NGOs has brought into sharper relief internal differences between members of the interim government in Kabul and the Kandahar leadership, which includes Supreme Leader Haibatullah Akhunzada. The former are reportedly more inclined to repeal these restrictions and pursue a level of international legitimacy than their Kandahar-based leaders and are becoming increasingly vocal – in private meetings with journalists – about their disagreements with regime policy (personal communications, Kabul-based journalist, Kandahar-based journalist, and two foreign correspondents during visits to Afghanistan; International Crisis Group, 2023). Any internal challenge to Akhunzada's decision-making is, however, unlikely in the near term, and tensions between key interim government members in Kabul undercut the prospect of a united 'moderate' bloc emerging that could persuade the Supreme Leader to more leniency (personal communications, Afghan researchers and journalists inside and outside Afghanistan).

The Taliban's self-inflicted wounds extend beyond the treatment of women. On 25 February 2022, the U.S. Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) issued General License 20, which allows for most transactions in Afghanistan that do not involve direct transfers to Taliban, Haqqani Network or other listed individuals, or entities they own (U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2022). This removed many of the legal impediments to reintegrating Afghanistan's banking into the global banking system. But for that reintegration to happen, a functioning central bank – Da Afghanistan

Bank (DAB) – would be vital. The Taliban's appointment of an individual to the DAB's leadership whom the UN Security Council has sanctioned for terrorist financing and money laundering (Talley et al., 2022) has hindered any possible U.S. or European engagement to help professionalise the DAB.<sup>10</sup>

## 6.2. Regional appetite

Geopolitics shape policy considerations in Asia, too. Although regional players remain concerned about the security implications of an Afghanistan economic collapse, including terrorism and narcotics spreading even more freely, some, in particular those with more antagonistic relations with the U.S., are not inclined to solve a problem of Washington's making. Some Iranian officials, for example, ascribe Afghanistan's poppy explosion to U.S. actions after ousting the Taliban in 2001, pointing to the difference between pre- and post-December 2001 levels of poppy cultivation. They also blame NATO for the state of Afghanistan's local economies that, they argue, now need to be rebuilt to displace poppy cultivation.<sup>11</sup>

Similarly, a Chinese scholar based in Beijing, who specialises in Sino-U.S. relations, said that while Beijing considered insecurity in Afghanistan and destabilisation in Central Asia, including narcotics, as threats to its interests in Xinjiang and beyond, Chinese policymakers believed that the burden of addressing Afghanistan's economic and humanitarian crises should be shouldered by those most responsible for them: the U.S. and western governments. He added that Chinese financial institutions and businesses would also not risk falling foul of international sanctions, and that some of these policymakers harboured suspicions that the U.S. would find ways to punish Chinese institutions if they engaged in Afghanistan (personal communications, January 2022). Whether these concerns are justified or not, the perception of Afghanistan being a 'trap' that drains resources and exposes China to security risks and sanctions means that Beijing's focus would probably remain on containing cross-border threats. The war in Ukraine, meanwhile, is likely to continue to consume Moscow's attention.

In summary, regional and international appetite to engage deeply with Afghanistan's economy and internal security is the most limited it has been since late 2001. Among some neighbours, the drug trade that originates in Afghanistan benefits too many influential actors. For western governments and China, a containment strategy – in other words, finding ways to confine Afghan narcotics to South and Central Asia – may be attractive but is unlikely to yield success. If traffickers find more demand and larger markets in the neighbourhood, their resourcefulness and influence in the region will continue to grow, as will their ability to chart routes into global markets.

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10 In August 2021, the U.S. froze around US\$7 billion in DAB assets held in the U.S. Subsequently, it reserved half the amount to be made available to meeting Afghans' needs, and the other half to be made available to the families of victims killed in the 9/11 attacks who sued the Taliban for its role in those attacks, subject to litigation. In August 2022, a federal magistrate judge in New York issued a recommendation that the \$3.5 billion could not be turned over to 9/11 plaintiffs under U.S. laws. In September 2022, the U.S. and Swiss governments established a fund for the Afghan people to preserve and selectively disburse the other \$3.5 billion (Netburn, 2022).

11 Afghanistan Illicit Economy Dialogue Platform (IEDP), Expert Meeting attended by the author, Gilon, Switzerland, 25-26 October 2022.



Investigations in countries like Pakistan, Iran and Tajikistan remain a critical source of information about Asian drug trafficking rings. Helping these states build investigative capacity is a better alternative than supporting militarised institutions; however, governments may be more willing to consider deploying that capacity against organised crime groups if their citizens, not just international partners, demand it.

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