

Iran's War on Drugs

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At a meeting with the Iranian government's Drug Control Headquarters (*Setad-i Mobarez ba Mavad-i Mukhadir, DCHQ*) in early 2000, President Mohammad Khatami expressed his gratitude for all the work that has been done, but he added that 'we are still far from reaching the desirable level'.² During a visit to Hormozgan Province a few days later, Khatami described Iran as the 'most serious country' in the fight with the 'ugly phenomenon' of narcotics smuggling.³

Reports of the official Islamic Republic News Agency support Khatami's claims. Major seizures of opium, semi-refined morphine, heroin, marijuana and hashish are reported from the provinces bordering Afghanistan, which is the world's biggest opium producer. Not only are there seizures in Khorasan Province and Sistan va Baluchistan Province, busts and narcotics-related arrests are reported in all of Iran's 28 provinces. The problem is worse in Iran's cities, which are growing rapidly as people come to them in search of employment.

Iran's war on drugs not only involves the country's Law Enforcement Forces but also its armed forces, too, and has come to resemble a low-intensity conflict. Contributing to Tehran's difficulties are ethnic minorities in Iran's eastern and northwestern provinces that identify more closely with people across the frontiers than with the central government in Tehran. Corruption of government officials in Iran and in regional states makes the war on drugs even more problematic.

A victory in the war on drugs is essential because narcotics are having such an adverse impact on Iranian society. Addiction rates are climbing, and in connection with that, the majority of Iranian HIV/AIDS cases are picked up through intravenous drug use. In all, close to 1,000 people are on death row for drugs offenses, and the prison population is growing rapidly.

For all these reasons, and because it claims most of the drugs are destined for Europe, Iran has demanded western help. Western governments have made sympathetic statements and have made some contributions, and the United Nations Drug Control Program (UNDCP, since October 2002 the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime) has been involved for some time, but Iran still argues that not enough substantive assistance has been forthcoming. As this article will show, the solution to Iran's drug problem rests mainly in Tehran's hands.

Bad Neighbors

For Iran, an important step in dealing with its domestic drug problem is stopping the influx of narcotics. This is particularly difficult because until early 2001, Iran's eastern neighbor - Afghanistan - produced three times more opium than all other areas of the world combined. The US Drug Enforcement Administration's (DEA) imagery-based

sample survey assessment estimated that Afghanistan produced 1,670 metric tons of opium in 1999, while the UNDCP, using a ground-based census survey, estimated that opium production in 1999 was 4,581 tonnes.⁴ The two agencies' estimates of opium production for the next year more closely resembled each other due to methodological changes, and it was estimated that production was around 3,700 tonnes. Despite this numerical reduction, the actual yield of the opium crop was increasing due to improved farming practices. In the mid-1980s each hectare produced about 32 kilograms of opium, whereas by 2000 average yield was 57 kilograms per hectare.

Moreover, Taliban Foreign Minister Wakil Ahmad said that they had an interest in growing opium 'because of the enormous income derived from poppy cultivation. The Taliban have announced their support for poppy farming in the country'.⁵ The trade earned Afghan poppy growers some \$69 million annually and supported an estimated 1.4 million people. Not only was opium a revenue generator for Afghanistan, the ruling Taliban actually collected a ten percent tax from opium growers, and the Taliban also taxed the heroin laboratories.⁶ One Afghan village, Chuttu, was described by a western drug enforcement officer as a 'one-stop shop for heroin traffickers... In a single day they can buy opium, arrange for its refinement into heroin, and set up a 10,000-kilogram convoy to the West'.⁷

Sandro Tucci, spokesman for the UNDCP in Vienna, described the problems Afghans face.⁸

The country has been in a situation of war forever, and one of the consequences is that there is no rural credit available because the infrastructure for rural credit is non-existent. So what does a farmer have to do in order to cultivate his piece of land outside his house? He has to go to somebody who gives him credit to buy fertilizer, to buy seeds, and to sustain his livelihood for the seven months until he gets his harvest. Where does he go? He goes to an opium trader. The opium trader, who is simply a merchant, gives him credit at very tough conditions and buys his harvest once he harvests.

UNDCP efforts to wean Afghan farmers away from opium production in the late 1990s were not very successful. Tensions between Kabul and the UN -particularly after the 1998 murder of a UN official - hindered these efforts.

Fearing for their safety, UN officials rarely visited Afghanistan and then only with security details. UN member states, furthermore, were reluctant to provide funds for a country whose regime had such an objectionable record in gender equality, human rights and drug trafficking. These factors led to a shift in the UN's approach from elimination of poppy cultivation to containment of Afghanistan as a country devoted to exporting drugs. UNDCP spokesman Tucci explained this new approach:⁹

Frustrated with the fact that the Afghans did not seem to respond to our requests and objectively considering that the money which would have been available for a complex, alternative development project in Afghanistan did not seem to be forthcoming, the [UN] organization thought that the next best thing to do was to try to reinforce the borders. That means mainly to reinforce the part of the border which goes from the southern part of Iran up to Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan.

Tucci said that the UNDCP's new approach sought to bring the political weight of the UN to bear on donors to provide funding for strengthened efforts by the states that border Afghanistan to crack down on drug smuggling. Referring to Iran, he said: 'In Iran, we have been actively engaged in supporting the country and in mobilizing intervention from donor countries, particularly the European Union'.¹⁰ Tucci added that discussions on counter-narcotics were underway with Turkmenistan and border-control discussions were underway with Uzbekistan. A drug control agency was being established in Tajikistan. Other measures by the UN were intended to curtail Taliban involvement with the narcotics trade, too. UN Security Council Resolution 1333, which came into force on January 19, 2001, bans the provision of acetic anhydride, which is used in the conversion of opium into morphine and heroin, to anybody in Taliban-controlled areas. An agreement to restrict the availability of acetic anhydride, furthermore, was signed in Antalya, Turkey, in October 2000.¹¹

Corruption and even tolerance seriously hamper drug-control efforts in Central Asia. All factions in Afghanistan - not just the Taliban - profit from the trade and use their earnings to buy weapons. Reports about Ahmad Shah Masud, the commander of an Afghan opposition group based in northeastern Afghanistan and southern Tajikistan, indicate how much the Afghan opposition groups are part of the problem. Narcotics are grown in Afghanistan's Badakhshan Province, which Masud controls, and are refined in laboratories along the border with Tajikistan.¹² About 20-30 percent of Masud's budget comes from the opium trade,¹³ and recent UN sanctions against providing the Taliban with acetic anhydride do not apply to Masud's Northern Alliance (also known as the United Front for the Salvation of Afghanistan or *Jebhe-yi Muttahid-i Islami-yi Milli baray-i Nijat-i Afghanistan*). Islamic militants in Central Asia, furthermore, have links with the Taliban, and much of their funding is derived from the narcotics trade.¹⁴

What had the greatest impact on the flow of drugs from Afghanistan was Taliban leader Mullah Omar's July 2000 announcement banning the cultivation of opium. Spring 2001 surveys by the UNDCP and country visits by US officials found that opium poppies were not planted in Taliban-controlled areas.¹⁵ Yet the stockpiling of opium and opium products in Afghanistan and economic and environmental circumstances led to speculation at the time that Afghan farmers would be forced to resume poppy cultivation. UNDCP spokesman Sandro Tucci said about the stockpiling: 'We can make a reasonable assumption that there are enough stockpiles of [opium], morphine-base, and semi-refined heroin to supply the market probably for the next 12 months'.¹⁶ Moreover, the head of the UN-affiliated International Narcotics Control Board (INCB) said that the stockpiles could be sufficient for European demand for the next three to four years, while the INCB's annual report said that 'because of the opium stocks from previous harvests, the ban, if implemented, will have no immediate impact on the prices or availability of opiates originating in Afghanistan'.¹⁷

Afghan farmers, furthermore, may feel obliged to resume opium cultivation. Wheat requires far more water than opium, which will make growing difficult under the drought conditions affecting the entire region. The war-struck infrastructure of Afghanistan also makes it difficult to get the wheat to market, so farmers will be hard put to earn any

money. So although most of the farmers do not oppose the opium cultivation ban, its suddenness has dislocated the rural economy and left them somewhat in doubt about the future.

Mohammad Amirkhizi, a special advisor on West Asia to the UNDCP's general director, described the farmers' sentiments:¹⁸

The farmers [we talked to] were not against the decision not to cultivate opium. They were, let's say, dissatisfied with the effects on their lives. So, if one can mitigate the consequences and if they can live on licit trade - and I don't mean very comfortably, but at least at the same level they used to, which is not much but is subsistence - then perhaps on the farmers' side there would be no need to go back to cultivating.

The ban on opium cultivation - which is labor-intensive - has left thousands of people who used to help harvest the sap from poppy bulbs without work.

This has led to open unrest in some parts of Afghanistan. UNDCP Afghan project officer Barbara Brueckmeyer said that anger with the ban is widespread in some areas.¹⁹ 'We saw in some areas, especially in the east, that the people were extremely angry about the poppy ban. There was one district in Nangarhar province in the east where there was a demonstration of people who played their musical instruments and shaved their beards and refused to implement the ban.'

Brueckmeyer admitted that this could be an isolated incident, but it happened in an area where many people were angry. She elucidated: 'we spoke to people of many districts in this province and people were very angry. I couldn't predict what will happen next planting season, but the mood of the people in this area was different than the mood of people in the southern areas, where they are more compliant with the ban'.

Nobody can explain the Taliban's opium ban. Hashish production was always banned by the Taliban because Muslims used the narcotic, whereas opium production was deemed permissible 'because it is consumed by [unbelievers] in the West and not by Muslims or Afghans'.²⁰ Mullah Omar's opium ban may have been a reaction to the drought that was afflicting the region. The UN's Food and Agriculture Organization believed the drought affected Afghanistan more than any other regional state causing extensive losses of livestock and crops. The drought came on the heels of the 1999 outbreak of pests in Afghanistan that cut cereal production by some 16 percent. The ban had a significant impact, according to the UN's *Afghanistan Annual Opium Poppy Survey 2001*, with opium production falling by 94 percent (3,276 tons in 2000, 185 tons in 2001), and a 91 percent reduction in the land used to cultivate opium poppy (7,606 hectares in 2001, 82,172 hectares in 2000).

This trend was reversed when the Taliban told Afghan farmers that they could resume opium poppy cultivation if American forces attacked in retaliation for the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks in the US. Afghanistan's current leadership banned opium cultivation in January 2002, but the UN's *Afghanistan Annual Opium Poppy Survey 2002* estimated total opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan to range from 69,000 to 79,000 hectares, with a mean estimate of 74,000 hectares. The UN estimated total yield to be 3,4000 tons of opium.

This unfortunate pattern continued, mainly because farmers lacked alternatives. The Afghanistan Annual Opium Poppy Survey 2003, released on 29 October 2003, stated that Afghanistan produced three-fourths of world opium output; opium production increased to 3,600 tons and the area under poppy cultivation increased to 80,000 hectares. The increase in production was accompanied by a drop in prices; \$350 per kilogram in 2002, compared to \$283 per kilogram in 2003.

Blocking the Flow

Iran has taken a number of practical measures to counter the onslaught of narcotics originating in Afghanistan. Among these measures are the blocking of likely routes with 260 kilometers of static defenses, such as concrete dams to block mountain passes, anti-vehicle berms and trenches, forts and observation towers, and mine-fields. Also, the eastern regions are patrolled and checkpoints have been set up on Iran's major roads. But the terrain in the eastern provinces is rough and the borders are long - Iran shares a 936-kilometer border with Afghanistan and a 909-kilometer border with Pakistan. The smugglers are well-armed and use sophisticated communications equipment to monitor Iranian forces' movements. The rough terrain and the smugglers' use of varied transportation methods - from armed convoys to camels - makes the task even more difficult. About 3,100 Iranian security personnel have died in the war on drugs in the last two decades, according to Iranian government sources.

The lead agency in these drug-interdiction efforts is Iran's Law Enforcement Forces, together with the Islamic Revolution Guards Corp, the paramilitary Basij Resistance Forces and the Islamic Republic of Iran Ground Forces (the regular army). In the latter half of 2000, furthermore, the government announced a plan to arm villagers and form them into village-based Basij units. Initially, the villagers were given weapons and some rudimentary training. Over time, they went from purely defensive duties to participating in offensive operations.²¹

Antonio Mazzitelli, who heads the UNDCP's Tehran office, described the scale of the conflict in terms of a comparison with the situation in Colombia.²²

I am coming from Colombia. Before being posted in Iran, I was in Colombia, where the drug war is a very serious one. And I cannot remember having read similar figures in terms of human losses. [In] Colombia there is a civil war; in Iran there is not. All the officers I have mentioned have been killed during shooting with drug traffickers, not with terrorist groups.

It is impossible to calculate the actual amount of drugs moving from Afghanistan through Iran to the Persian Gulf, Iraq, Turkey, Armenia and Azerbaijan. As a frontline state, Iran intercepts a substantial amount of them. According to Tucci, 'Iran confiscates 85 percent of all the drugs confiscated in this world, except for cocaine. [That means that of] all the morphine, opium, and heroin which is produced in the world and which is confiscated in the world, Iran confiscates more than 85 percent'.²³ Tucci said, however, that Iran stops only about 17 percent of the total traffic. That compares with a ten percent confiscation rate which is considered the norm for drug interdiction efforts worldwide.

The Ethnic Factor

The mix of ethnic groups in Iran and local attitudes towards the central authorities makes the situation more complicated. Locals in southeastern Sistan va Baluchistan Province may identify more closely with people across the border in Pakistan and Afghanistan than with the government in faraway Tehran. The Iranian leadership practices Shia Islam, while the majority of locals are Sunnis Muslims who have tribal and religious ties with Baluchis across the border. There has been anti-Sunni violence in the province, and there also is the sense among locals that there is official discrimination against Sunnis.

At least six people were killed in two bombings and in violent clashes between demonstrators and security forces in Zahedan, capital of Sistan va Baluchistan Province, in February 1994. Six months later, the UN Sub-commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities passed a resolution calling on the Iranian government to improve its human rights record, referring specifically to the 'execution without due process' of people involved in the Zahedan events.²⁴

The 1999 *Human Development Report of Iran* notes that Sistan va Baluchistan is at the bottom of its index.²⁵ A leader of the Sunni Shahbakhsh clan complained that the government ignores local experts on the province's needs.²⁶ This under-development and the higher-than-average unemployment rate leave people with few options other than illegal activities, such as smuggling." In recent interviews, '[s]mugglers complain[ed] that they have few job prospects in Iran's poor southeast.'²⁸

The current drought in the region has made the situation worse, but the government ignored local parliamentarians' request for assistance until an October 2000 car-bombing near a Shia mosque in Zahedan. Local security officials immediately blamed this on 'subservient elements of arrogance' and said the bomb was to distract locals from events in Israel and thus marked an attempt to undermine regional unity. And, at an October 18 rally in Zahedan attended by many local officials, Molavi Abdolhamid had a warning:²⁹

Let the criminals and global arrogance's lackeys know that, as a result of these evil deeds and contrary to their intentions, the unity between the Shia and Sunnis of Sistan va Baluchistan Province will continue to serve as a model for the entire country.

All these problems have been ascribed to 'mischievous moves' in the (unidentified) enemy's cultural offensive. A senior IRGC commander warned Basijis in provincial capital Zahedan that 'the enemy has opened a new front against the Islamic revolution'.³⁰ Iranian government statements about military activities in the eastern provinces, furthermore, suggest that the war on drugs is not the only conflict there. In April 1999, the 77th Samen ol-Aemmeh Division of northeastern Khorasan Province staged 'helicopter operations with artillery support' to rid the area of 'the filthy presence of armed insurgents'.³¹ Ground Forces Commander Brigadier, General Abdol Ali Purshasb, Chief of the Joint Staff of the Army, Brigadier General Mostafa Torabipur, and Commander-in-Chief of the Army, Major General Mohamad Salimi, all commented on their conflict with 'insurgents' in the east.³²

The Taliban gave refuge to Sunni Iranian groups that are in conflict with the government in Tehran. Since 1996, the Taliban have aided the *Ahl-i Sunnah Wal Jamaat*, which recruits Iranian Sunni militants from Turkmen, Baluchi, and Afghan minorities. Its spokesmen claim that they want to overthrow the Shia regime and replace it with a Taliban-style Sunni one." There are also unconfirmed reports that the Mujahedeen Khalq Organization, an anti-Iranian terrorist group, is in contact with the Taliban and has launched operations from Afghanistan. The presence of an estimated 1.5 million Afghan refugees is an additional complication.

In the western area of Iran - West Azerbaijan, Kurdistan, Ham and Kermanshah provinces - problems similar to those in the east exist, although on a lesser scale. According to the 1999 *Human Development Report of Iran*, these provinces are in the lower half of the provincial scale of the human development index.³⁴ The areas bordering Turkey and Iraq, in West Azerbaijan, Kurdistan and Kermanshah provinces, are heavily populated by Kurds, some of whom make their living through smuggling. This can be attributed as much to Iranian government connivance as the Kurds' familiarity with the border regions. Also, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) relocated its main bases to Iran after the February 1999 arrest of its leader, and the PKK operates heroin refineries and taxes other narcotics smugglers.³⁵ Cross-border smuggling of drugs and other goods is tolerated because Iran's Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) gets information about Turkey from the smugglers.³⁶ Smuggling by Kurds further south was handled by deposed Iraqi President Saddam Hussein's General Intelligence.³⁷

Narcotics are smuggled into the Caucasus through northeastern Gilan, Ardabil and East Azerbaijan provinces. The Republic of Azerbaijan's Border Troops commander, Major General Abbasali Novruzov, described his country's poorly guarded borders with Iran as 'the most criminal', adding that this is because locals are involved in smuggling.³⁸ Azerbaijani Prosecutor-General Eldar Hassanov reflected on the impact of this situation in comments at a Baku conference on drug addiction and AIDS. He said that most narcotic substances get to Azerbaijan via Iranian territory, and in fact, the amount is increasing.³⁹ Borders between Iran and Armenia are similarly porous, but so far, Armenia remains a transfer point rather than a final destination.⁴⁰

Iranians living in neighboring states contribute to the problem. Four to six metric tonnes of heroin are either processed in, or transit through, Turkey every month, and Afghan hashish comes in too.⁴¹ Iranians and ethnic Kurds control the trade in Turkey and have done so for several years, and some of these trafficking organizations are extensions of ones in Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan. According to the DEA, 'they use their links to Iran to acquire opiates and refined heroin, and work closely with Turkish traffickers to supply distributors in European and US cities'.⁴² The drugs are transported to Europe via what is called the Balkan Route, and Iranians distribute the drugs along the way, witness a report from Sofia and others from Bucharest regarding arrests of Iranian drug-dealers who brought their supplies in via Turkey.⁴³

Holland is described as 'perhaps the most important country in Europe for the trafficking and transit of drugs', and Kurdish and Turkish gangs there are responsible for distributing Southwest Asian heroin.⁴⁴

Corruption

Complicating Iranian counter-narcotics further is the corruption of public officials, which is almost a given in countries touched by the drug trade. In 1995, the US State Department reported that:

The [US Government] receives intermittent reports that drug-related corruption is endemic among [Government of Iran] law enforcement and security personnel.

According to these reports, there is extensive bribing of border guards to permit drug caravans through the reinforced border crossings. Arrested traffickers are sometimes set free upon payment of a bribe.⁴⁵

Asked in February 2000 if drug-related corruption still exists in Iran, a US official who requested anonymity said that if there were not, Iran would be a striking exception to the general rule. The temptations are obvious. A sergeant's salary is around 6,000,000 rials a month (about \$750), and LEF personnel can earn a discovery fee. A smuggler, however, easily can offer a bribe that exceeds the monthly salary. A Khorasan parliamentarian noted that the security forces do not have adequate financial backing.⁴⁶

Corruption reaches all levels. Seyyed Mahmud Alizadeh-Tabatabai, who served as a presidential representative to the Drug Control Headquarters (DCHQ) for about 12 years, said that from the outset of his involvement with the program (mid-1980s) it became clear that corruption reached the highest levels. 'We came to the conclusion that the profits that accrued from the sale of narcotics went to certain places that were connected with sources of power, and we were unable to deal with them.'⁴⁷

Mohammad Fallah, head of the DCHQ, was tried for misuse of funds, and it was reported that 70 percent of the organization's budget went for other than its intended purpose.⁴⁸ But it is difficult to draw a serious conclusion about the extent of corruption from Fallah's trial. The verdict did not indicate that he took money from traffickers and Fallah continued to head the DCHQ.

A member of the Torbat-i Jam municipal council was arrested for possession of heroin, fined, flogged and given a suspended sentence.⁴⁹ The head of the Sar-i Pol-i Zahab Justice Department was arrested on charges of cooperating with smugglers, press reports indicated in February 1999.⁵⁰ A police commander identified only as Shabani said 'Traffickers sometimes persuade police personnel to take bribes. In the province so far this year [from March 1999 to January 2000] there have been 47 such cases'.⁵¹ The parliamentary deputy from the southeastern town of Minab, Seyyed Ali Mir-Khalili, said the local Law Enforcement Forces 'have put the city's people under heavy pressure, beat them, and kill them in the name of fighting drug trafficking. Further, the LEF are taking bribes, while people who suffer from hunger and poverty are accused of illicit drug trade'.⁵² A Khorasan Province journalist also found it odd that the Afghan smugglers are able to penetrate 300 kilometers into Iranian territory, sell their drugs and commit other crimes. Iran fought and won an eight-year war with Iraq against much greater odds, and the central government succeeded in its campaign in Kurdistan in spite of harsher terrain.⁵³

The involvement of government figures and organizations in smuggling, however, is common knowledge. A documented example of this is the role played by the Islamic Revolution Guard Corps in smuggling Iraqi oil, and by the para-statal Oppressed and Disabled Foundation (*Bonyad-i Mostazafan va Janbazan*) in smuggling Iranian gasoline to Pakistan.⁵⁴ And if these individuals and organizations are willing to profit through smuggling consumer goods, would not they gain much greater profits in the drugs trade? Discussing smuggling, journalist Ahmed Rashid wrote in *Foreign Affairs* that due to Afghanistan's isolation, 'new transport and smuggling mafias' have developed in neighboring states. He continued: 'They are ignored by their governments, due to a web of corruption that benefits everyone from border guards to cabinet ministers. Not surprisingly, all these transport mafias are keen supporters and major funders of the Taliban'.⁵⁵

There were reports of Iranian officials' involvement in drug trafficking even before the Taliban took power in most of Afghanistan, however, so it is somewhat unfair to blame them entirely. A 1997 report by the Observatoire Geopolitiques des Drogues in Paris asserted that Iranian anti-drug officials collaborated with Turkish and Syrian officials in smuggling, and Iranian diplomats in Sudan and Cyprus coordinate the activities of the smuggling rings and the money-laundering'.⁵⁶ An unnamed European specialist said earlier, 'the organization of a trafficking network on the scale of what is happening in Iran cannot be done without a great deal of high-level complicity. Yet the authorities have never announced the arrest or conviction of officials - even local ones - for drug related matters'.⁵⁷

The Iranian government acknowledges some lower-level corruption. The chief of the National Control and Inspection Organization, which combats corruption and supervises proper implementation of laws, announced in January 2000 that the public is complaining about uneven application of laws and bribery of state officials, and the courts have been ordered to investigate such cases on an accelerated basis.⁵⁸ And in late 1999 the chief of the Administrative Tribunal announced its creation to 'investigate the complaints lodged against government organizations and [their] affiliated bodies'.⁵⁹ Most dramatically, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran's Supreme Leader and the most powerful political and religious figure in the country, decreed an eight-point anti-corruption program on April 30, 2001.⁶⁰ Earlier anti-corruption campaigns were politicized, but many high-ranking government officials put their weight behind this one.

Overall, however, there is little reason to be confident about such anti-corruption campaigns. The head of the judiciary said that a 'special team of investigators' is needed to control the Inspectorate's personnel, some of the Inspectorate's methods are ineffective and must be changed and the inspectors must be impartial.⁶¹ Undermining confidence in the judicial system further is the judiciary chief's statement that a vetting system is needed to find 'suitable and capable people'.⁶² Based on earlier precedents, furthermore, it is likely that anybody indicted in this campaign will be a lower- to middle-ranking official.

Nor is it likely that the regime wants to eliminate corruption completely. Individuals who are enriching themselves in the current system are unlikely to act against the system and are more likely to be its most steadfast defenders. 'He who corrupts a system's police officers is more likely to identify with the system than he who storms the system's police stations,' Professor Samuel Huntington noted in his 1968 study entitled *Political Order in Changing Societies*.

Domestic Impact

Narcotics shipments that reach Iran are often broken up into smaller ones, which makes it more difficult to intercept them. Iran is not just a transit point for narcotics: 60 percent of the drugs coming into Iran move on to Turkey, the Persian Gulf and to Europe, but 40 percent of the drugs go to major trading centers in Iran for domestic consumption. An estimated five tonnes of opium is consumed in Iran every day.⁶³ Faced with an estimated 25 percent unemployment rate, an economy that was hard hit by a slump in world oil prices which only reversed in 2000 and stifling social codes, more and more young Iranians use drugs as a means of escape.

An Iranian parliamentarian said that young people turn to drugs because of 'unemployment, depression and neglect', adding that 'no hope for the future or social joy' are contributory factors.⁶⁴ In Ham, where narcotics use increased ten percent in 1999-2000, a young man in the bazaar said: 'There are three reasons for the increase in drug use in this province: poverty, poverty and poverty'.⁶⁵ Mohammad Ali Sadai, secretary of the Anti-Narcotic Drugs Organization in Fars Province, warned the attraction of the younger generation to drugs is one of the biggest problems in his southern province.⁶⁶

A young man living near Tehran explained the situation he and his peers face: 'We're all jobless. We have nothing to do. We try to do a little bit of business here and there and they arrest us as hooligans. That's why there are so many drug addicts here. It's the despair'.⁶⁷ A veteran of the Iran-Iraq War described the frustration that led him to abuse drugs: 'I fought 40 months in the war against Iraq. When I came back the regime abandoned me...The youth are becoming drug addicts. We have no freedom, no jobs, nowhere to go and have fun. So we are all addicts. We are all addicts'.⁶⁸

The resulting problems are seen throughout the country. In the capital, Tehran, 160 people a day were arrested in late 1999 for distributing or selling drugs, and the city is home to between 150,000 and 180,000 drug addicts.⁶⁹ There are 45,000 drug addicts in Tabriz, and two percent of East Azerbaijan Province's population of 3.4 million is addicted.⁷⁰ There are 30,000 known addicts in Hamedan Province, and more than 6,000 local students were charged with drug use.⁷¹ There are an estimated 20,000-30,000 addicts in Qom.⁷² A Mazandaran Province security official said that 1,788 people were arrested for drugs offenses and 179 kilograms of narcotics were seized in 1999, but in the first three months of 2000, 901 people have been arrested and 519 kilograms seized.⁷³ UNDCP official Antonio Mazzitelli said his agency estimates that about 1.5-2.0 percent of the Iranian population of about 68 million is addicted to drugs.⁷⁴

In practical terms, we can say that between 900,000 to 1.2 million people have a serious drug abuse problem, not including consumers [casual users, that is] people

who do not have a drug-related health problem. In 1997 - this is official data that we just gather from Iranian authorities - drug-related deaths in Iran accounted for 788 people, which is quite an impressive number.

Consumption habits changed, too, with heroin abuse coming to surpass opium abuse.⁷⁵ Opium was for many years the drug of choice, but after the Taliban ban on its cultivation, heroin prices dropped to about \$1 a gram. A likely explanation for this was that suppliers were trying to make their stockpiles last by cutting the purity of the refined morphine and heroin. 'Heroin is mixed with aspirin, with fish scales, with talcum powder, with all sorts of rubbish. It could be that the shortfall in supply will be compensated for by the criminal organizations who deal with this by an increase in impurity.'⁷⁶ In May 2001, confiscated heroin was found to be one percent pure. And drugs are readily available, which make the situation worse. An Iranian addiction treatment specialist complained that 'the purchase of heroin has become easier than the purchase of a bottle of milk. To buy bread, we are forced to wait in a line for a long time, but to purchase drugs, no problem exists.'⁷⁷

A related problem is the rise in AIDS. Of Iran's AIDS victims 67 percent are drug addicts who acquired the disease through intravascular injection while only 13 percent of AIDS cases were acquired through sexual relations and 10 percent through blood transfusion.⁷⁸ The number of imprisoned addicts suffering from AIDS is increasing too.⁷⁹ A Health Ministry official said that 56 percent of the prisons' AIDS cases come from sharing syringes.⁸⁰

Treatment Versus Punishment

A comprehensive drug law adopted in 1989 was intended to deal with drug-related problems in the strictest manner. Addicts and traffickers faced the death penalty for possession of more than five kilograms of opium or 30 grams of heroin and, after trials in Revolutionary Courts, executions were carried out swiftly.⁸¹ The DCHQ was established in the same year.

As addiction rates and trafficking continued to increase, it became clear that these laws were not having the desired deterrent effect. In all, 60 percent of the country's convicts were imprisoned for drugs offenses, and new prisons and detention facilities had to be constructed, imposing a tremendous expense on the government.⁸² Seyyed Mahmud Bakhtiari, head of the Prisons, Security and Correction Organization, said in 1999 that facilities in the prisons under construction would permit isolation of drug addicts to improve treatment possibilities.⁸³ But he also admitted that even this is not an ideal solution, because 'we cannot claim that there are no drugs in the prisons. But we are doing our best to stop the leakage of drugs to the prisons all together'.⁸⁴

So although the law-and-order approach continues to be used, other measures have come into play, such as drug-awareness seminars for young people.⁸⁵ In Yazd Province, relevant booklets and posters were distributed, radio and television programs were broadcast, and local newspapers published special editions about addiction.⁸⁶ Mohammad Fallah, head of the DCHQ, said clergymen should ask the religious authorities to issue religious edicts against narcotics.⁸⁷ Fallah added that the government has allocated 100 billion rials (about \$57 million at the official exchange rate) in the March 2000-2001

budget for addiction prevention programs.⁸⁸ Aspects of these government programs include the offer of a temporary amnesty for addicts who seek treatment; and the establishment of special rehabilitation camps with non-corporal punishment regimes, similar to 'boot camps'. Also, the importation of methadone, used for treating addiction, is permitted.

Moreover, Iranian attitudes towards drug addiction have become more sensitive. Revolutionary Court Judge Muhammad Javad Heshmati stated that addicts are no longer regarded as offenders; they are regarded as patients.⁸⁹ Treatment specialists advertise openly in Iranian newspapers, and there are more government treatment centers. Treatment at government facilities often requires forced labor and religious indoctrination. There are about 65 addiction-treatment clinics in Iran.⁹⁰ Narcotics Anonymous, brought over from Los Angeles in the mid-1990s, is growing in importance, too. NA meetings are held in 18 Iranian cities.⁹¹ This is considered especially unusual, because the social taboos against addiction normally discourage the openness associated with NA programs.

Capital punishment for drug smugglers, however, continues to be strictly enforced. Iran has executed over 10,000 narcotics traffickers in the last ten years, usually by hanging, and some 800 people are on death row for narcotics offenses. At just one prison in the last two months of 1999, 22 traffickers were executed.⁹² A massive operation in Tehran's Khak-i Sefid district in February 2001 resulted in the arrest of 1,000 drug traffickers. Five of those people were executed three weeks after their arrests, and 12 more who received death sentences after being arrested in Khak-i Sefid are awaiting approval of the verdict by the Supreme Court.⁹³

The Khak-i Sefid executions were meant to send a message. Drug offenders traditionally are executed behind prison walls, but this time the hangings were public. Fariba Tajiani Imamqoli was one of those sentenced to death.⁹⁴

she is led out in front of a baying crowd, blindfolded and manacled, begging desperately for her life... Fariba is strung up from one of five cranes and spends 10 minutes choking to death before a crowd of 500 people — along with others who had gathered to watch from their rooftops - who shriek 'death to dealers' as her body sways above the streets.

Tehran Asks for Help

Iran has repeatedly called for financial and technical assistance, in light of the narcotics trade's domestic impact and the cost of the anti-smuggling efforts. British Foreign Minister Robin Cook indicated his awareness of the problem when Iranian Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi was in London in January 2000.⁹⁵

Both our countries are affected by the drugs trade and it makes sense for our governments and for our people that we should take all possible practical measures to make sure that we win the fight against the drugs trade.

When 36 Iranian soldiers and policemen were killed in a single ambush by smugglers in early November 1999, Norwegian Ambassador Svein Aass expressed his country's

sympathy in a meeting with Iranian Vice-President Mohammad Hashemi.⁹⁶ On a visit to Tehran later that month, Permanent Undersecretary Sir John Kerr of the British Foreign Office said that Britain had already given £1million as part of a UN plan and £150,000 in bilateral aid. Sir John pledged another £300,000 to provide Iranian counter-narcotics personnel with bulletproof vests.⁹⁷ Shortly after taking over the British drugs portfolio, Cabinet Minister Mo Mowlam indicated the UK's willingness to contribute financially to UN counter-narcotics programs in Iran and also signed a counter-narcotics Memorandum of Understanding during a February 2001 visit to Tehran.⁹⁸

Tehran has also discussed counter-narcotics and signed related agreements and Memoranda of Understanding with other countries. Among these countries are Armenia, Australia, Cyprus, France, Georgia, Great Britain, Greece, Italy, Japan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Norway, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, Spain, Switzerland, Thailand, Turkey and Turkmenistan.

Tehran has taken a multilateral approach to narcotics interdiction, too. Iran is a party to the 1961 UN Single Convention on Narcotics Drugs, and it ratified the 1988 UN Convention Against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances in December 1992. The UNDCP opened an office in Tehran in 1999, and the UN has committed \$13 million to Iran's counter-narcotics campaign.⁹⁹

The Drug Control Coordination Unit of the Economic Cooperation Organization (Iran, Pakistan, Turkey, Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan) met in Tehran in February 2000 to discuss regional narcotics cultivation and drug abuse patterns, and an ECO anti-drug education conference was held in Tehran in May 2000.¹⁰⁰ Counter-narcotics is often discussed at meetings of the Six Plus Two group (Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and China as well as Russia and the USA).¹⁰¹ Counter-narcotics was discussed during the Iran-EU Constructive Dialog in June 2000, and President Khatami discussed counter-narcotics with European Commission head Romano Prodi in September 2000.¹⁰² The Second International Conference of Anti-Drug Liaison Officers was held in Mashhad in September 2000.¹⁰³

Overall, however, Tehran is dissatisfied with western support in what it sees as a fight against a common enemy. President Khatami's representative to the DCHQ said that Europe has been given an 'ultimatum' regarding the lack of financial assistance.¹⁰⁴ He explained that Tehran initially budgeted \$1 billion to counter-narcotics, but because of the country's enfeebled economy, that amount was halved. The complaint was made that Europe is the ultimate destination for drugs, but for political reasons, total foreign counter-narcotics aid to Iran is only \$20 million. When British Foreign Minister Robin Cook called for practical measures against the traffickers, Iranian state radio commented that such sentiments are nice, but something more substantive is needed, such as technical and financial assistance to patrol the eastern borders and to conduct reconnaissance.¹⁰⁵ The point also was made that the principal market for drugs is Europe and the money earned with drugs tends to settle in western banks.

UNDCP official Mazzitelli shared the view that, so far, not much aid has been forthcoming:

They are just starting negotiations, and France has initiated a sniffer-dog program with one trainer and eight dogs. I don't know the numbers, but I guess it would not exceed \$50,000. Bilaterally, there is nothing else. We are working on defining figures, but at this stage, rather than money what Iran needs is political support, exchange of experiences and some opening in terms of the possibility of importing certain equipment that is required for the anti-drug campaign at the border with Afghanistan. Almost everything is subject to embargo right now, so it is very difficult for the Iranians to procure not [even] really sophisticated but [just] efficient military equipment. I was at the border and we had to fly on 20-year old helicopters.¹⁰⁶

When a UNDCP conference was held in Iran in January 2000, there were serious efforts to convince foreign visitors of the problem Iran faces.

Vice-President Hashemi reiterated his call for increased financial assistance in an address to representatives from 15 countries including Australia, Britain, Canada, France, Norway and the United Arab Emirates.¹⁰⁷ The Director-General of the DCHQ, Brigadier-General Ali Shafie, added that an international policy for the destruction of drug-producing centers was necessary.¹⁰⁸ Also, the visitors were taken to the eastern borders to observe the practical measures being taken by Iran to counter the smugglers.¹⁰⁹

Tehran has also turned to Moscow for assistance. Deputy speaker of parliament Hassan Rohani, who also serves as secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council, visited Moscow in January 2000 to discuss, among other subjects, drug interdiction.¹¹⁰ Specifically, he and his Russian counterparts discussed construction of an 'iron curtain' along the Iran-Afghanistan border. Initially, a 100-kilometer stretch of the border would be equipped with Russian structures, and if this were deemed successful after an 18-month experimental period, the entire border would be equipped with Russian security systems.

Moscow's plan is problematic, too. Many Iranians do not trust their northern neighbor's motives, fearing that Russia wants access to the Persian Gulf.¹¹¹ The project would cost 350 billion rials, furthermore, according to the interior minister.¹¹²

The US Position

President Bill Clinton's administration was keen to show its approval of Iranian counter-narcotics efforts, these being one of Tehran's only praiseworthy and less controversial activities. In line with this, Clinton removed Iran from the list of major drug-producing countries in December 1998. Congressman Benjamin Gilman of the House Committee on International Relations and Senator Charles Grassley of the Senate Caucus on International Narcotics Control argued that Iran did not deserve the upgrade. They believed that the White House decision was based not on substantive evidence, but on 'the speculative hope that such a unilateral gesture will win diplomatic points in Iran for some anticipated rapprochement'.¹¹³

Shortly after Clinton certified Iran, the US State Department's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs reported that 'a 1998 [US Government] survey of opium poppy cultivation in Iran and a detailed multi-agency assessment concluded that the amount being grown in Iran is negligible. The survey looked at more than 1.25 million acres in Iran's traditional, main poppy-growing areas, and found no poppy crops growing there, although the survey could not rule out the possibility of some cultivation in remote areas'.¹¹⁴

Curiously, the Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs' 1998 fact sheet on Iran stated that the last (1993) US survey of Iranian production found that Iran produced up to 70 tonnes of heroin annually. Four years earlier, the Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs reported that 'The USG is skeptical of Iranian claims about the extent of its counter-narcotics drive because of the volume of drugs which flow through Iran'.¹¹⁵

There were other indicators of the Clinton administration's eagerness to embrace Iranian counter-narcotics activities. US Assistant Secretary for Near East Asian Affairs Martin Indyk, in an October 14, 1999 speech to the Asia Society in New York, said that the USA and Iran have a joint interest in counter-narcotics efforts. Citing Iran's eradication of its opium crop, Indyk said, 'we fully support the UN Drug Control Program's plans to increase its cooperation with and activities in Iran'.

In a March 2000 speech about the future of Iran-America relations, Secretary of State Madeline Albright addressed drug issues, too. According to Albright:

We also share concerns about instability and illegal narcotics being exported from Afghanistan. Iran is paying a high price for the ongoing conflict there... Thousands of Iranians have been killed in the fight against drug traffickers. Moreover, Iran is now a world leader in the quantity of illegal drugs seized. This is one area where increased US-Iranian cooperation clearly makes sense for both countries.

Nonetheless, US law forbids provision of almost any sort of assistance to Iran, and the wording of relevant laws precludes many sorts of assistance by other countries.¹¹⁶ Section 307.360 of the Foreign Assistance Appropriations Act of 1961 (Public Law 87-195) bans indirect assistance to international organizations that work in Iran.¹¹⁷ Section 620A of this Act prohibits assistance to governments supporting terrorism,¹¹⁸ and Iran is designated 'the most active state sponsor of terrorism' by the State Department.¹¹⁹

The Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act of 1996 (P.L. 104-132) also affects US relations with Iran and other countries on the terrorism list. Sections 325 and 326 of this law require the president to withhold assistance to any country that provides assistance to a country on the terrorism list, although this provision can be waived if it is determined that doing so is in the USA's national interest.¹²⁰ Section 326, furthermore, requires that US assistance be withheld from any country that provides lethal military equipment to a country on the terrorism list.

The Iran-Iraq Arms Non-Proliferation Act, signed by President George Bush in October 1992, prohibits the transfer of dual-use technologies and destabilizing conventional weaponry to Iran (as well as Iraq).¹²¹ Section 1605 of this law calls for secondary sanctions against countries that help Iran acquire 'destabilizing numbers and types of advanced conventional weapons'.¹²² Executive Order 12959 of May 6, 1995, furthermore, effectively bans US exports of civilian goods to Iran.¹²³

These US laws effectively preclude much of the assistance Iran is demanding from other countries. Russia ignores such regulations and it seems indifferent to US complaints. Other countries, such as Britain, are more heedful of US sanctions.

Conclusion

Every year on the International Day Against Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking (June 26), the Iranian government burns a huge quantity of drugs in the presence of the foreign media and diplomatic community. This is a clear message to the international community about Iran's efforts in this regard.

'How Long Can Iran Fight Drugs Alone?' an Iranian daily asked a few days after the drug burning.¹²⁴ But the paper missed the point. In fact, Iran is not alone, and the rest of the world is cognizant of its counter-narcotics efforts. Other aspects of its behavior, however, limit what other countries and even the UNDCP can do.

The main hindrance is Iran's support for international terrorist organizations and the related US laws. As long as Iran targets US citizens and aids terrorist groups like Lebanon's Hizballah, HAMAS and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and as long as government agents are involved in the murder of dissidents abroad, the USA cannot directly assist Iran. If other countries provide the sort of military or dual-use aid Iran is demanding, the US government is obliged to place them under sanctions.

Washington is a contributor to the UNDCP. Under the current legislation (Section 307.360 of the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961), however, whatever the UNDCP or any other international organization contributes to Iran is withheld in a 'proportionate share' by the USA. This means that if the UNDCP contributes \$13 million to Iran, as Director-General Pino Arlacchi promised, Washington will withhold \$13 million from its UNDCP contribution.

Other aspects of the war on drugs are in Tehran's hands, too. Government corruption, which is extensive, must be attacked seriously. Social restrictions must be eased. The young need more rewarding and interesting outlets for their energy and creativity.

Most importantly, more jobs must become available, so the unemployed do not turn to drugs. Furthermore, fewer people in the eastern and northwestern provinces will turn to smuggling and crime if they have decent alternatives for income-generation. Once again, the possibility of US sanctions, as well as the general riskiness of operating in Iran, make countries and businesses somewhat reluctant to invest there.

So when Tehran complains about the lack of international assistance in its war on drugs, it is indicating a misunderstanding of current realities. Until it changes its own behavior in other arenas, it will not get the help it wants and needs.

NOTES

1. The views expressed herein are those of the authors and should not be attributed to any organization.
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16. *RFE/RL Iran Report*, Vol. 4, No. 20 (May 28, 2001).
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21. Khorasan Governor-General Mehralizadeh said that 600-700 Village Basij bases would be ready by March 2001; Vision of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Network 1, June 24, 2000. Torbat-i Jam security forces commander Colonel Mowlananejad said that the IRGC had mobilized the locals, and Tayyebad Basij commander Colonel Kolahbakhshi added that 54 villages were armed and the locals were responsible for mounting patrols; Vision of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Network 2, Aug. 18, 2000.
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