
Drug Abuse: Iran's "Thorniest Problem"

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According to the Supreme Leader's representative in Gilan Province, drug abuse and trafficking is Iranian society's "thorniest problem," and contribute to theft, murder, suicide, violence, and divorce.¹ Widespread availability of drugs may be one reason for drug abuse among Iranians. After all, Afghanistan—Iran's eastern neighbor—is the world's biggest producer of opium, and Europe is the main market for Afghan narcotics. Supply, however, is not the only thing driving demand; the availability of cocaine and synthetic drugs is increasing too. This article will describe the state of opium cultivation in Afghanistan. Then it will examine, from the perspective of drug users and from the perspective of the people trying to end this scourge, why drug abuse has become so prevalent in Iran. It also addresses the response to the problem and how victims are being helped. Finally, this article describes the main factors hindering Iran's war on drugs: bureaucratic disputes over funding and strategy, corruption, and ethnic and regional cleavages.

As the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) warns, "Reports about cultivation, production, smuggling, consumption of drugs, and government anti-drug efforts come primarily from Iranian officials and it is difficult to independently corroborate Iranian reports."² I have tried to overcome this problem with multi-sourcing. The sources for this article include interviews with U.S. counter-narcotics officials, United Nations drug control personnel based in Tehran and Vienna, and Iranian physicians, mental health professionals, and

journalists. I also used DEA documents secured through the Freedom of Information Act, U.S. State Department reports, and UN reports. News reports from and about Iran were used as well.

Where Does it Come From?

About nine million people, or two-thirds of the world's opiate abusers, consumed illicit substances from Afghanistan. Until the year 2000, Afghanistan was "the main source of the illicit opium and heroin produced, trafficked, and consumed in the world."³ This situation changed abruptly in July 2000, when Taliban leader Mullah Omar banned opium cultivation. Afghan opium production fell by 94 percent from 3,276 tons in 2000 to 185 tons in 2001.⁴ During the 2001 season there was a 91 percent reduction in the land used to cultivate opium poppy in Afghanistan (7,606 hectares in 2001, compared to 82,172 hectares in 2000).

For Iran, the initial effect of the ban was to increase opium prices, which were matched by drops in the price and purity of street heroin as suppliers tried to make their stockpiles last. In the words of the United Nations Drug Control Program (UNDCP) spokesman:

One possibility is that, with the lack of opium supply, you will have the same amount of heroin in the market, but at a very much lower grade of purity. 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.⁵

Over time it appeared that the cultivation ban was having a real impact in Iran. The UNDCP chief in Tehran said in September 2001 that seizure rates for opium, heroin, and morphine dropped substantially in the first seven months of the year (1 January - 31 July 2001), when compared to the same time frame in 2000.⁶

Table 1: Drug Seizures in Iran

Drug	Seizures, 2000 (kg)	Seizures, 2001	Percentage Change
heroin	3145	2,644	-18.9%
morphine	11778	4,002	-66%
opium	109738	51,063	-54%

Source: UN Office on Drugs and Crime

That trend changed after the Taliban told Afghan farmers that they could resume opium poppy cultivation if American forces attacked the country in retaliation for the 11 September terrorist attacks in the United States. The immediate effect of this was a reduction in opium prices and the value of stockpiled narcotics, and farmers began replanting. The victorious anti-Taliban Northern Alliance (United Islamic Front for the Salvation of Afghanistan) promised that under its rule opium production and sales would be eliminated.⁷ The new Afghan leadership also issued a counter-narcotics decree.⁸

All countrymen, especially peasants and farmers, are informed that from now on, the cultivation, manufacturing, processing, impermissible use, smuggling, and trafficking of opium poppy and all its derivatives is declared illegal...Violators will be dealt with severely.

There were grounds for skepticism about the Northern Alliance's sincerity. Opium cultivation and production in areas under the Northern Alliance's control skyrocketed when the Taliban's opium ban went into effect.⁹ In northeastern Badakhshan Province, cultivation increased from 2,458 hectares in 2000 to 6,342 hectares in 2001 (an almost 260 percent increase), making the province responsible for 83 percent of the national poppy area.

Moreover, some of the individuals who seized control after ousting the Taliban have a discouraging record of involvement with the narcotics trade. The UNDCP chief in Kabul said that he was under orders not to name names, but he emphasized that the relevant individuals would be approached "in order to ensure that whatever is related to drug trafficking is put to an end."¹⁰ He continued, "We know that Afghanistan is [a country where], unfortunately, some permanent figures in some areas have been involved in, or encouraged, drug trafficking in a certain way." Nur Zai tribal leader Haji Sultan said that before they came to power officials in the current Afghan government "made it clear" that if the southern provinces ended their support of the Taliban, "the government would look the other way if opium was grown."¹¹

Iran and the rest of the international community promoted crop substitution in Afghanistan. It made no inroads with the Taliban, but Tehran has a much closer relationship with the post-Taliban leadership in Afghanistan. Tehran offered in mid-December 2001 to discuss crop substitution with the Afghan leadership, and in the following month an Iranian Foreign Ministry official said during a visit to Kabul that Iran has already implemented several poppy substitution projects in the regions bordering Iran.¹² This topic was formalized in February 2002 via a memorandum of understanding signed by Iranian Minister of Agriculture Jihad Mahmud Hojjati and Afghan Minister of Agriculture Hussein Anwari.¹³ An Iranian newspaper recommended that Tehran guarantee that it would purchase these substitute products so the farmers would be confident of

an income.¹⁴ Tehran reiterated its readiness to provide funds for the crop substitution plan in May.¹⁵

The Afghan administration offered to compensate farmers for not planting poppies, including rewards for destroying the crops (about \$350 per jerib or 2,000 square meters). Yet farmers could earn much more by harvesting the opium, and the amount of money offered by the government did not match the cost of fertilizer, seeds, water, and labor (about \$800 per acre in total). Another major disincentive is that farmers accumulate debts that they pay off through the sale of opium. In reaction to the eradication drive, furthermore, opium prices increased tenfold.

Arif Khan, a farmer in Wardak Province, described the difficult choice he and other farmers faced in 2002. Arif Khan said that because of the long-running drought there is not enough water for the apples, wheat, and potatoes that he used to grow, and he must grow opium to reimburse the narcotics traders from whom he borrowed money.¹⁶ In his words:

All Afghans are against the cultivation of poppies and we know that this is against Shariah and against humanity, but the farmers of this region are very vulnerable and very needy people because we have been deprived of water, there's no water in the river and so that all the orchards have withered and the people are very poor and the money they had they have spent drilling wells and now people have no money to run the generators for the water pumps. There's no work for the people here and you can't find most of the inhabitants of this area.

Corruption and ineptitude also affected the compensation scheme.¹⁷ The scheme to compensate farmers who destroyed their crops was not uniformly enforced. Some received compensation even when their crops were hardly touched, while others got nothing when their crops were destroyed—and officials pocket the money instead. Thousands of kilograms of opium seized in a raid on the opium bazaar in Qani Khel, Jalalabad Province, went missing.

The head of Iran's Drug Control Headquarters (DCHQ) said he expected the 2002 opium harvest in Afghanistan to be in the range of 3,500 to 4,000 tons.¹⁸ His estimate was pretty close. The UN annual *Afghanistan Opium Survey* released in October 2002 described a considerable level of opium production: 3,400 metric tons. This was less than the amount produced in 1999 (4,581 metric tons), but it was in excess of the crops in 2000 (3,276 metric tons) and 2001 (185 metric tons).

Alternatives to Opiates

Consumption habits in Iran have changed since 2000, partially because of the Taliban ban on opium cultivation. The UNDCP chief in Tehran said that hashish

was being used in the place of opium.¹⁹ Hashish seizures increased 50 percent in the first seven months of 2001 (1 January to 31 July 2001), when compared to the same time frame in the previous year (15,303 tons in 2000 and 23,000 in 2001).

The head of Iran's Drug Control Headquarters noted in October 2001 that the overall consumption of natural narcotics had decreased, but the use of synthetic drugs had moved upward.²⁰ On the other hand, the officer in charge of Iran's police counter-narcotics effort denied the actual discovery of any synthetic or manufactured drugs although he acknowledged reports of the presence of such substances.²¹ He suggested that Iranians who travel to the West purchase synthetic drugs for personal use, but the amount is not significant enough to warrant official concern. Asked about club drugs such as ecstasy and hallucinogens such as LSD, the police officer said his subordinates are trying to locate such substances but so far they have been unsuccessful. The official warned that discussion about such topics should be avoided because curious young people could create a demand for them.

There also have been some cocaine seizures in Iran, but these are relatively insignificant when compared to the traffic in opiates. A Tehran Province police official said in August 2000 that in the previous five months one kilogram of cocaine was seized in the capital.²² 450 kilograms of cocaine smuggled in from Colombia, Peru, and Russia was seized at the Tehran airport in February 2001.²³ The Tehran police chief said in September 2001 that his force had seized one kilogram of cocaine in the previous six months, and he "expressed worry at this first instance in Iran of seizure of cocaine."²⁴

Why Get High?

After the narcotics shipments cross the Iranian border they usually are broken up into smaller units so they are more difficult to intercept. 60 percent of the drugs that enter Iran pass on into Turkey, the Caucasus, and the Persian Gulf. The remaining 40 percent stays in the country. The number of people using drugs—from addicts to casual users—is estimated to be around 2 million, although the head of the Drug Control Headquarters believes that the real figure could be much higher because most drug abusers want to avoid the stigma of being identified as addicts.²⁵ The average age of users is falling. A Gilan Province official says the average addiction age has fallen to 10-19, whereas it used to be 25-29, and the head of the Drug Control Headquarters ascribed the increase in young drug abusers to the country's population explosion.²⁶

Drug abuse has led to a growing prison population. Forty percent of all crimes in Iran are drug-related felonies.²⁷ The head of the Prisons, Security, and Correction Organization said in July 2001 that out of the 170,000 prisoners

under his supervision, some 68,000 are incarcerated for drug trafficking and another 32,000 are imprisoned for drug addiction.²⁸ He also said that drug-related arrests (of dealers, smugglers, and consumers) had increased the overall prison population by 25 percent.²⁹ Some 150-200 petty dealers and users are arrested in Tehran every day, but some are released because of the shortage of prison space.³⁰

A related problem is the rise in HIV/AIDS transmitted through the sharing of needles for intravenous drug use. Between 19,000 and 20,000 Iranians suffer from AIDS, and almost 3,500 are HIV-positive. Approximately 65 percent of all the recorded cases are transmitted through the sharing of needles, the remainder are through sexual contact (10 percent), contaminated blood products (less than ten percent), or from mother to infant.³¹ In 1995, 146 out of 400 inmates in a Kerman jail were found to be HIV-positive.³² And the number of imprisoned addicts is on the rise, with a Health Ministry official saying that 56 percent of the cases in the corrections system come from sharing needles.³³

The economy, and especially the high rate of joblessness, tops the list of reasons given by Iranians for drug abuse. Unemployment stands at 14 percent officially and is estimated by outside experts to be in the 25 percent range.³⁴ This grievance combines with general boredom and a lack of options. A young man in the town of Islamshahr explained, “We’re all jobless. We have nothing to

“We have no freedom, no jobs, nowhere to go and have fun. So we are all addicts.”

do. We try to do a little bit of business here and there and we get arrested as troublemakers. That’s why there are so many drug addicts here. It’s the despair.”³⁵ Another addict said that he had been in combat for forty months during the Iran-Iraq War, but

when he returned the regime abandoned him.³⁶ He supported his drug habit with odd jobs and charity, and he warned, “The youth are becoming drug addicts. We have no freedom, no jobs, nowhere to go and have fun. So we are all addicts.”

National and community leaders are aware of the relationship between jobs and drug abuse. Young people turn to drugs because of “unemployment, depression, and neglect,” a parliamentary representative said, adding that “no hope for the future or social joy” are contributory factors.³⁷ A Friday prayer leader said that unemployment and poverty are among the root causes of drug abuse, and he urged the government to create job opportunities.³⁸

The availability of drugs also makes an impact. In the words of an individual who deals with addiction treatment and prevention at the Welfare Organization, “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.”³⁹ When a war veteran who was describing

the lack of alternatives to taking or dealing drugs complained that the local park only has four trees, an opium addict chimed in, "Instead of trees in our parks, all you find are drug dealers."⁴⁰

There are also other factors contributing to drug abuse in Iran. A member of parliament who also happens to be secretary of the Antidrug Society attributed drug abuse to the way individuals are treated in society: "In our society, human beings are not looked upon with dignity and respect, otherwise people who are socially accepted would not turn to drugs."⁴¹ Another parliamentarian explained that culture is behind the demand for drugs: "Today, the youth are bored with what they have and wish for things they haven't got. This is rooted in Western culture and should be confronted with the use of cultural tools."⁴² A supervisor at Tehran University's Cultural Center said that culture—not enough sports, depressing and overcrowded dormitories—is a significant reason for the prevalence of drug abuse.⁴³ There also are the kinds of reasons one expects to hear from Iranian officials. One cleric said that weak religious faith is the main reason why people are attracted to drugs.⁴⁴ Another cleric said that Iran's enemies are encouraging the youth to consume drugs.⁴⁵

Interdiction and Treatment

The Iranian government's primary approach to the narcotics threat is interdiction. Iran shares a 936 kilometer border with Afghanistan and a 909 kilometer border with Pakistan, and the terrain in the two eastern provinces—Sistan va Baluchistan and Khorasan—is very rough. The Iranian government has set up static defenses along this border. This includes concrete dams, berms, trenches, and minefields.

In addition to the static defenses, personnel from Iran's Law Enforcement Forces, Islamic Republic of Iran Ground Forces (the regular army), Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC), and the paramilitary Basij Resistance Forces conduct operations in the border regions. Iran's police chief announced in December 2001 the creation of an "anti-drug regiment" that would cover the area from the Sea of Oman to the Caspian Sea, and he said that this unit would "complete the missing ring in the national security chain."⁴⁶ The IRGC created village-level Basij units in mid-2000 by arming villagers and giving them rudimentary military training. These units went from a purely defensive role to conducting offensive operations.

These government measures may seem excessive, but smugglers are well armed and have employed sophisticated equipment such as night-vision goggles, global positioning systems, and satellite communications devices. Narcotics are smuggled via camels, four-wheel drive vehicles, and even Afghan refugees. The Iranian government claims that over 3,000 of its personnel have been killed battling the smugglers.

Iranian security measures came to be part of the international community's effort after countries gave up trying to work with the Taliban to contain Afghanistan's opium production. The UN has encouraged Afghanistan's neighbors to strengthen their anti-smuggling efforts and to create what would in effect be a cordon around Afghanistan. The current Afghan government, with whom Tehran has a strong relationship, also favors such an approach. An official from Iran's Khorasan Province said in December 2001 that security along the eastern border was at a favorable level and drug smuggling had dropped since the Northern Alliance took control of the neighboring Herat Province, and he praised the efforts of Herat Province Governor Ismail Khan.⁴⁷ In April 2002, furthermore, the Afghan Anti-Drug Commission chief said that Iran had suffered many losses in the fight with drug traffickers, and he called for a "security belt" to protect the shared border.⁴⁸

The legal penalties for drug-related offenses have been changed as well. In 1979-1980, revolutionary courts headed by Ayatollah Sadeq Khalkhali carried out many executions, and although reliable statistics are unavailable it is known that in 1979 there were about 18,000 people imprisoned in connection with narcotics.⁴⁹ This phase of the counter-narcotics campaign ended because of a debate over whether an unarmed smuggler is "at war with God" (*muharib ba Khoda*, which entails capital punishment) or "corrupt on earth" (*mufsid fil arz*, which does not necessarily require a death sentence). The beginning of the Iran-Iraq War also diverted attention, and until the war ended in 1988 counter-narcotics received little notice.

After the war Iran's leaders became cognizant of the drug problem facing them. A January 1989 law required the death penalty for addicts and traffickers possessing more than five kilograms of opium or 30 grams of heroin, and executions were carried out quickly and publicly after hasty trials presided over by an intelligence officer.⁵⁰ The U.S. State Department expressed concern that the law was being used to execute political dissidents.⁵¹ An official who was involved with the Iranian counter-narcotics effort at the time described the legislation as the result of a "superficial and simplistic" attitude that called for eliminating the problem in six months.⁵²

Iran has executed over 10,000 narcotics traffickers in the last decade, usually by hanging, and some 800 people are on death row for narcotics offenses. Sometimes the penalties are carried out in public to serve as a deterrent. By 1999 it was obvious that harsh penalties were not having the desired effect. Capital punishment for smugglers continues, but drug abusers are treated less harshly now.

Addiction to drugs has come to be seen as something treatable. Iranian newspapers carry advertisements by treatment specialists and Narcotics Anonymous—brought over from Los Angeles in the mid-1990s—is increasingly

important. There is a privately funded drug hotline named "Tehran Call." Some 86 treatment centers have helped about 50,000 addicts so far.⁵³ A psychiatrist who treats addicts at one of the government-funded rehabilitation centers in Tehran said that treatment comes in two phases—two weeks of detoxification followed by long-term group therapy.⁵⁴ Treatment at some government facilities, which are similar to penal "boot camps" of the United States, often requires forced labor and religious indoctrination.

Methadone treatment is legal, too, and the Outpatient Clinic for the Treatment of Addictive Behavior at the Zahedan Psychiatric Hospital is one place that has tried this approach.⁵⁵ In June 2002 Tehran hosted a UN-organized workshop on methadone treatment, and the workshop's facilitators came from Australia, Poland, and the United States. An American facilitator said that there were just a handful of methadone treatment specialists in Iran, but he estimated that by the end of 2002 there would be dozens. He noted that the Iranian government is "absolutely, firmly committed to making treatment available to everyone who needs it."⁵⁶

Many who quit using drugs, however, resume their addictions because of the country's bleak realities and because of the lack of alternatives.⁵⁷ The ex-addicts are rejected by their families and cannot get good jobs if they have served prison time, even though work centers have been created for them. As a result, they fall back in with drug users. A psychiatrist who works with addicts concurred that many who supposedly are cured resume their habits, because the focus is on curing what causes addiction, rather than on really curing the addict.⁵⁸

Hindrances to Counter-Narcotics Success

Bureaucratic disputes over funding and strategy, corruption, and ethnic/regional problems hinder Iranian counter-narcotics efforts. The 1989 law created a new Drug Control Headquarters (DCHQ) to centralize counter-narcotics efforts. Iran's president is the acting chairman, and the secretary of the DCHQ serves as the country's "Drug Czar." Other members of the DCHQ are the Ministry of the Interior, Ministry of Intelligence and Security, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Islamic Culture and Guidance, the Prosecutor General, the chief of the Law Enforcement Forces, the Prisons Organization, Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting, the head of the Tehran Courts, and the Basij. There also are DCHQ offices in the country's 28 provinces. Until November 2001 the DCHQ depended on revenues secured through the confiscation and auctioning of smugglers' assets and the fines levied against them.⁵⁹ After that date the Management and Planning Organization was tasked with funding the DCHQ.

This unwieldy structure has led to difficulties. The DCHQ chief complained about the lack of cooperation he received from other branches of the government because his was not a cabinet-level organization, while they complained about him and the counter-narcotics strategy. This situation peaked in February 2001, when British Cabinet member Mo Mowlam visited Iran to attend a counter-narcotics event, sign a memorandum of understanding, and pledge money to the DCHQ. DCHQ chief Mohammad Fallah was supposed to be Mowlam's host, but Vice-President Mohammad Hashemi had to escort her because Fallah had just resigned due to policy differences.⁶⁰ President Mohammad Khatami had to persuade him later to resume his post.

Complaints related to the lack of institutional cooperation continued after Fallah got back to work. The official in charge of the police counter-narcotics effort said that state broadcasting, the prisons organization, and the Ministries of Islamic Culture and Guidance and of Education had not made a contribution to the state's efforts.⁶¹ Fallah himself said that just trying to seal the borders was superficial, that highly-publicized drug sweeps were ineffective, and the law gives judges too much leeway in sentencing addicts to prison, whereas imprisonment should be the last resort.⁶²

The law-and-order approach, of course, has its advocates. The police chief called last year for "more effective law enforcement."⁶³ The head of the Judiciary said, "Drug traffickers and sellers must no longer benefit from any amnesty—on the contrary they must be severely repressed."⁶⁴ And a Deputy Interior Minister complained in June 2001 about the number of executions: "Some 15,869 drug traffickers deserved death, but only 1,735 were meted capital punishment. The death sentence against 400 convicts was upheld, but finally only 233 were sent to the gallows."⁶⁵ The officer in charge of the Law Enforcement Force's counter-narcotics effort announced in August 2002 the creation of a special headquarters with representatives from the Judiciary, the Prisons Organization, and the police that would hand out harsher punishments, and he said that captured drug smugglers and dealers would be sent to a special camp south of Tehran.⁶⁶

Seyyed Mahmud Alizadeh-Tabatabai, who served in the DCHQ during the presidencies of Ayatollah Ali-Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani (1989-1997) and Mohammad Khatami (1997-2001), gave a possible explanation for the emphasis on law enforcement. He said, "In the government budget no funds are allocated for agencies that have a cultural mission in this area and the revenues of the headquarters is not to the extent that it can fund the programs of the agencies, therefore, one cannot carry out cultural work with a slogan."⁶⁷ He also said that President Khatami only attended one DCHQ meeting a year, so none of the cabinet-level officials bothered attending the meetings.⁶⁸

Parliamentary observers also registered their unhappiness with the official approach to drug control. In March 2001 the parliament summoned the Ministers of Intelligence and Security, of Foreign Affairs, of the Interior, and of Defense so they could explain the reasons for increased insecurity along the country's eastern borders.⁶⁹ One parliamentarian said that "limiting the campaign to military campaigns against the bandits is not sufficient and to better secure the border, there should be political, economic, and even diplomatic efforts."⁷⁰ A member of parliament from Kashmar, an area where many smuggling-related incidents occur, also called for a clear-cut counter-narcotics strategy, because, "Under the present circumstances, each of our security, law enforcement, and military forces are acting in their own separate and independent ways."⁷¹

The same parliament, however, is at times reluctant to provide the necessary funding. In January 2001 the parliament slashed the proposed 200 billion rial (about \$25 million at the market rate) budget for eastern security measures to only 50 billion rials, which led to complaints from the Khorasan Province police commander.⁷² A parliamentarian from Khorasan Province suggested that money was not the solution, because only 3 billion of the 200 billion rials allocated in 2000 for security in Khorasan were spent, and if anything, the security situation worsened.⁷³ Eastern villagers pressed into service in Basij units demanded financial compensation, too, because participation in military activities prevented them from farming.⁷⁴ In May 2002 the legislature again approved a 200 billion-rial budget for controlling the eastern borders.⁷⁵

President Mohammad Khatami on 7 July 2002 appointed Ali Hashemi—formerly of the Ministry of Intelligence and Security and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs—as the new head of the Drug Control Headquarters. Hashemi announced two months after his appointment that a new anti-narcotics plan would go into effect in 2003, and he modified his statement a month later, when he said that there would be a new plan for the next year, but the really comprehensive plan would go into force in 2004.⁷⁶

Corruption has hampered the Iranian counter-narcotics effort at all levels. Real estate deals are used in a remittance system similar to the hawala system and could be used for money laundering disguised as legitimate remittances.⁷⁷ The real estate transactions would be made in Iran but the funds would be exchanged overseas.

Former DCHQ official Seyyed Mahmud Alizadeh-Tabatabai said that his first encounter with drug-related corruption occurred in 1986, when he was with the Plan and Budget Organization and was tasked with allocating a budget for the Revolutionary Committee's drug control activities.⁷⁸ Alizadeh-Tabatabai said, "We were quite aware of the existence of underground and Mafia organizations that had part of their activities here [in Iran] and were at the same time connected with outside organizations," and a colleague told him 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.” People purchased rugs with the profits from selling narcotics, and they smuggled the rugs overseas.

Alizadeh-Tabatabai questioned how the activities of the terrorist Mujahedin-i Khalq Organization (MKO) could be eliminated while the drugs problem persists. He explained, “Efforts to limit or eradicate the transit and trade in narcotics will endanger the economic interests of some people. However, the eradication of a movement such as that of the Hypocrites [the MKO] does not cause economic loss to anybody.”⁷⁹

In 1995 the U.S. State Department described “intermittent reports that drug-related corruption is endemic...extensive bribing of border guards...traffickers are sometimes set free upon payment of a bribe.”⁸⁰ A police commander later admitted, “Traffickers sometimes persuade police personnel to take bribes. In the province so far this year [March 1999-January 2000] there have been 47 such cases.”⁸¹ A parliamentary deputy from the southeastern town of Minab said that 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 [police] are taking bribes, while people who suffer from hunger and poverty are accused of illicit drug trade.”⁸² A Western journalist noted that official reports do not mention corruption, while in Tehran “street dealers pay police patrols \$15 a day to turn a blind eye.”⁸³ Security officials are poorly paid. They can earn finders’ fees for confiscating narcotics, but smugglers can offer them much more money. The chief of police specifically mentioned the problem of low salaries when he complained about inadequate financial resources for drug interdiction.⁸⁴

The ethnic mix of the Iranian population also hinders counter-narcotics efforts. Many of the people in southeastern Sistan va Baluchistan Province, which borders Pakistani Baluchistan, and some of the population in the Khorasan Province, which borders Afghanistan, are ethnic Baluchis who practice Sunni Islam, whereas Shia Islam is the state religion and is practiced by the Persian majority.⁸⁵ The provincial people, therefore, may have more in common with co-religionists and co-ethnics from across the border than they do with the state leadership. An indication of this situation appeared when a police official had to ask the locals not to give incorrect information about the “bandits” they were pursuing: “People’s non-cooperation leads to the failure of the operations and even martyrdom of the security forces’ members.”⁸⁶

Sistan va Baluchistan Province is the least developed in the country, and a long-running drought has made the situation worse. Earning a living through smuggling has a long tradition, as locals do not have many other options. In the words of a street dealer from the provincial city of Zahedan, “Life here is a

disaster. Only smuggling is worthwhile. The rest is useless. We can't do anything else."⁸⁷

Conclusion


Iranian officials and news media frequently complain that their country is paying a heavy price for being between opium supplies in Afghanistan and opiate consumers in Europe. They therefore demand that Western states help shoulder that burden. Indeed, France, Spain, the United Kingdom, and some other European states have provided financial assistance or counter-narcotics equipment, such as drug-sniffing dogs and bulletproof vests. Moreover, Tehran has signed counter-narcotics related memoranda of understanding with Afghanistan, Armenia, Australia, Cyprus, France, Georgia, Great Britain, Greece, Italy, Japan, Kuwait, Norway, Oman, Pakistan, Russia, Singapore, Spain, Switzerland, Tajikistan, Thailand, Turkey, and Turkmenistan.

Tehran also is part of several multilateral drug-control activities. As a member of the Economic Cooperation Organization,⁸⁸ Iran is involved with its Drug Control Coordination Unit. The 6+2 group—China, Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, as well as Russia and the United States—also addressed drug control. The UN Drug Control Program opened its Tehran office in 1999. Tehran is a signatory to the 1988 UN Convention Against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances and the 1961 UN Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs.

The real solution to Iran's drug abuse problem lies closer to home. From the supply side, opium cultivation in Afghanistan must be wiped out in what must be an international effort. Unfortunately, it could take up to three years for the elimination of opium cultivation as a key source of revenue in Afghanistan.⁸⁹

From the demand side, the Iranian government must provide jobs—the Minister of Labor and Social Affairs described an unemployment crisis with 3.2 million jobless people currently and the expectation that 5.5 million high-school graduates would join the unemployed in the next four years.⁹⁰ The government says that it wants to create 760,000 jobs annually, but in an October 2002 speech President Khatami said that in the previous two years they created only 410,000 (in the year starting March 2000) and 460,000 (in the year starting March 2001) new jobs.⁹¹ Yet to create all the necessary jobs would require dramatic and painful changes in the oil-dependent, state-run economy.

The resolution of Iran's economic problems also could result in bigger paychecks for police officers, which would make them more resistant to bribery. It is impossible to predict whether or not this would affect higher-level corruption. Economic development could benefit the denizens of Sistan and Baluchistan Province and give them alternatives to smuggling. A final point is that drug

abuse is unlikely to disappear, but it can be greatly reduced if the Iranian government confronts its problems realistically. 

Notes

1. Rasht Friday Prayer leader Ayatollah Zeinolabidin Qorbani, cited by Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA), 31 May 2002.

2. U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, Intelligence Division, Europe, Asia, Africa Unit (NIBE), *Iran — Drug Situation Report*, May 2000, (secured through the Freedom of Information Act).

3. United Nations Office for Drug Control and Crime Prevention (UNODCCP), *Global Illicit Drug Trends 2002*: 11.

4. UNODCCP, *Afghanistan Annual Opium Poppy Survey 2001*, October 2001.

5. UN Drug Control Program (UNDCP) spokesman Sandro Tucci, cited in *RFE/RL Iran Report*, Vol. 4, No. 20 (28 May 2001).

6. Antonio Mazzitelli, the UNDCP chief in Tehran, told *RFE/RL Iran Report*, Vol. 4, No. 37 (1 October 2001).

7. Northern Alliance Interior Minister Yunis Qanuni promised that opium would not reappear; *Guardian*, 26 November 2001. Law and order ministry official Sohrab Qadri, on the other hand, said that “the top authorities have not yet decided whether to let the farmers continue cultivating poppies,” *New York Times*, 26 November 2001.

8. An official Afghan statement read out by UNDCP official Bernard Frahi in Kabul on 16 January 2002; see *New York Times*, 17 January 2002.

9. UNODCCP, *Afghanistan Annual Opium Poppy Survey 2001*, October 2001.

10. UNDCP official Bernard Frahi, cited in Ron Synovitz, “Kabul Continues To Struggle With Poppy Cultivation, Drug Trade,” *RFE/RL Weekday Magazine*, 26 June 2002.

11. *The Financial Times*, 10 April 2002.

12. Agence France Presse, 19 December 2001. Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Mohsen Aminzadeh in a meeting with Afghan Interior Minister Yunis Qanuni, IRNA, 3 January 2002.

13. IRNA, 26 February 2002.

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