

# Guns, Drugs, and Thugs

## Smuggling in the Golden Crescent

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### ABSTRACT

The Golden Crescent, which includes Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan, is one of the most important regions in the world for the global narcotics trade. Afghanistan's poppy cultivation surged in the 1970s and it became a global supplier of opiates when other countries in the region banned poppies. Arms smuggling in Pakistan and Afghanistan traces back to resistance against British colonial rule, but the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan catalyzed the cross-border movement of weapons and narcotics in the region. Smugglers took advantage of preexisting routes and developed new ones during the 1980s to create the routes that are still in use today. Afghanistan's prolific poppy fields now produce a massive outpouring of opiates that smugglers transport to European and other foreign markets. Traffickers use well-developed networks and techniques to convey narcotics from Afghanistan to Pakistan and Iran and precursor chemicals to heroin labs near the border through a combination of force, stealth, and corruption. Despite the Golden Crescent's well-deserved reputation for narcotics, weapons trafficking predates the transnational drug trade, and entrepreneurial smugglers still provide the Taliban and other insurgent groups with firearms and heavier weapons. In many cases, the same smugglers who take drugs out of Afghanistan move weapons across the region's borders too. In addition to their role in the arms trade, Baluch separatists, Quetta Shura Taliban, and Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps are dissipating the line between narcotrafficker and terrorist as they develop deeper connections to the drug trade and use it to fund their operations.

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### INTRODUCTION

The Golden Crescent, which overlaps Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan, is one of the most active regions in the world for illicit narcotics and weapons trade. Throughout the region, narcotics and weapons move along the same routes and often through similar smuggling techniques. Many smugglers trade in both

narcotics and weapons, and traffickers who trade in other commodities accept either as goods for barter. Insurgents, terrorists, and state sponsors oversee the illicit traffic and often protect traffickers, act as their customers, or engage in smuggling themselves.

As the region has roiled through conflict and turmoil, the gun and drug trades have become so closely intertwined that separating the two is difficult, if not impossible. The 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan catalyzed the cross-border movement of weapons and narcotics in the region, and conflicting groups continue to rely on their illicit trade for funding to this day. In contemporary Afghanistan, the State Department notes that “[a] symbiotic relationship exists between the insurgency and narcotics trafficking.”<sup>1</sup> A Department of Defense audit questions “whether the Afghan government can ever prevail without tackling the narcotics problem.”<sup>2</sup> In addition to the linkage between narcotics and weapons, the involvement of Baluchi separatists, Quetta Shura Taliban, and Iranian Revolutionary Guards in smuggling operations is dissipating the line between narcotrafficking and terrorism, and creating a push for the continuity of the problem.

## THE DRUGS TRADE

Afghans have historically grown poppies and traded opiates within the region. However, Afghan narcotics only became a global commodity in the last half-century as countries that traditionally supplied Europe with opiates outlawed poppy harvesting. While the Shah in Iran ordered an ineffective prohibition in the 1950s, the revolutionary regime that later took control enforced its own ban more ruthlessly.<sup>3</sup> Pakistan outlawed poppies during this period as well.<sup>4</sup> Turkey, which had been the primary exporter of illicit opiates to Europe, banned poppies in 1972.<sup>5</sup> Opiate production surged in Afghanistan as a result and the amount of heroin refined from Afghan opiates tripled from 100 tons in 1970 to 300 tons in 1982.<sup>6</sup>

After the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, anti-Soviet insurgents and their Pakistani benefactors radically increased opiate production to fund the war and pioneered many of the routes used to this day. During that period, Pakistani President Zia-ul-Haq tacitly encouraged growing poppies in order to fund operations and divert resources to militant groups attacking India.<sup>7</sup> Pakistani opium production surged to 800 tons a year and 70 percent of the heroin processed in Pakistan was sold on the international market.<sup>8</sup> Zia also created the National Logistics Cell to transport weapons to the Afghan border and opiates back to the port of Karachi.<sup>9</sup> When the Iran-Iraq war endangered overland transport through Iran, narcotics traffickers relied on seaborne channels from southern Pakistan to reach customers in Europe.<sup>10</sup> After the Soviet occupation ended, poppy growth in Pakistan fell and the United

Nations designated Pakistan “poppy free” in 2000. Since then, however, poppy cultivation has resumed near the Afghan border and now covers about 2,000 hectares.<sup>11</sup>

The warlords and the Taliban government that replaced the Soviets continued to use narcotics for funding. As the government collapsed, warlords relied on poppies to fund their operations, especially in Helmand province.<sup>12</sup> When the Taliban overran these warlords, particularly in southern Afghanistan, it encouraged poppy farming as it consolidated power. By 1991, Afghanistan had surpassed Burma as the world’s largest opium producer.<sup>13</sup> By 1997, 96 percent of Afghan heroin came from the Taliban territory.<sup>14</sup> While Taliban banned poppy cultivation in 2000,<sup>15</sup> its unwillingness to proscribe narcotics trading or destroy stockpiles<sup>16</sup> led many to believe that it may have been more of an attempt to gain international favor while creating scarcity to inflate the value of its existing stockpiles.

There are three main pipelines for narcotics leaving Afghanistan: the Balkan route through Iran and Turkey to Europe; the northern route through Central Asia to Russia; and the southern route to South Asia, the Gulf, and Africa. The United Nations states that the Balkan route from Afghanistan through Iran is “the world’s most important opiate trafficking route.”<sup>17</sup> Over 80 percent of Afghanistan’s exported opium enters Iran, as does over one-third of its heroin.<sup>18</sup> Direct transportation from Afghanistan into Iran is the most common route, but some traffickers detour through Pakistan.<sup>19</sup>

The smugglers use complex methods and techniques, and involve various ethnic and border communities in their operations. A common technique is for individuals or small groups to transport a few hundred kilograms of heroin or opium on foot or with pack animals such as donkeys and camels.<sup>20</sup> Sometimes villagers hire armed guards to accompany them and travel at night on two-day round trips.<sup>21</sup> Smugglers also use small trucks to cross borders, while large traffickers drive in heavily armed vehicle convoys that carry up to one ton of opiates.<sup>22</sup> Some of the convoys travel with several dozen men to fight off Iranian law enforcement<sup>23</sup> and may be armed with surface-to-air missiles.<sup>24</sup> They are known to use car bombs and tanks to breach the Afghan-Iranian border wall.<sup>25</sup> In fact, more than 3,700 Iranian law enforcement personnel have died fighting drug traffickers since the 1979 Revolution.<sup>26</sup> Corrupt Afghan police units also take drug shipments to the border and ward off Iranian border guards before delivering their drugs to Iranian smugglers.<sup>27</sup>

The smugglers who bring opiates across the border into Pakistan are usually Afghan nationals. Some use the official Chaman border crossing into Pakistan, but they only do so for unusually large shipments of drugs or precursor chemicals, and rely on bribes or connections with local authorities to avoid confiscation. A United Nations report concluded that “[l]ittle is known about the multiplicity of routes through Pakistan itself,” although it does find that the

drugs continue their journey onto Iran, to official airports and seaports, or to small boats on the coast for transport to larger offshore ships.<sup>28</sup> The seaborne route proceeds over water from Pakistani to Iranian ports such as Bandar Abbas.<sup>29</sup> Smugglers use small boats and speedboats to move their cargo along the coastline before loading it onto larger ships at sea farther from the coast.<sup>30</sup> Smuggling along the seaborne route has increased since Iran constructed a wall on its eastern border,<sup>31</sup> but seizures of waterborne shipments have remained infrequent even as this route has become more heavily used.<sup>32</sup>

Traffickers also use the narcotic smuggling routes to move precursor chemicals from Europe or Asia to heroin labs in Afghanistan.<sup>33</sup> Using or importing acetic anhydride, the most important precursor to heroin, in Afghanistan is illegal.<sup>34</sup> The United Nations estimates that Afghan heroin refiners require 475 tons of the chemical each year, and high demand coupled with costs of smuggling raises the price of acetic anhydride from \$1 per liter in the United States to \$350 per liter in Afghanistan.<sup>35</sup> Afghan authorities estimate that 85 percent of acetic anhydride enters the country from Iran and 15 percent from Pakistan.<sup>36</sup> Iran is also a large exporter of high-quality methamphetamines to Pakistan. Despite attempts by the Iranian government to stop the meth trade in Iran, the State Department observes that “Iranian trafficking networks have expanded into major suppliers of methamphetamine across the Middle East, Southeast Asia, Central Asia, and parts of Europe.”<sup>37</sup>

## **THE WEAPONS TRADE**

Weapons trafficking in the Golden Crescent has a long history and has entwined with the drug trade as it has matured. The region of Baluchistan, now divided between Iran and Pakistan, has a long history of weapons trafficking. The Makran coast of Baluchistan was initially a transit point for slaves and gold, but the Baluchis started to use it to transport firearms from Oman to Afghans resisting the British Empire – this period of weapons smuggling continued until the Pahlavi monarchy in Iran clamped down on them.<sup>38</sup> However, the British government licensed local arms manufacturers to make and sell weapons to tribes along the Durand Line between Afghanistan and Pakistan, partially because local craftsmen made lower-quality weapons than the smuggled foreign ones that the tribes would otherwise purchase.<sup>39</sup> These local weapons manufacturers evolved into the industry that provides supplies to the Taliban and the traffickers today.

When the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, the United States and its allies sent massive supplies of weapons through Pakistan to anti-Soviet fighters in Afghanistan. As much as fifty percent of these weapons never reached the fighters because high-ranking Pakistani officials misappropriated them.<sup>40</sup> In many instances, poorly provisioned anti-Soviet leaders, especially

the nationalist ones, traded their weapons for cash.<sup>41</sup> Some havens of gun smuggling in the region developed their business during the war, as centers of weapons procurement for fighters crossing over into Afghanistan.<sup>42</sup> The Soviet military also left behind huge stockpiles when it retreated. Traffickers capitalized on these stockpiles by transporting them to southern Afghanistan and selling them to the Taliban.<sup>43</sup> The dispersion of these weapons created the “Kalashnikov Culture,” giving rise to heavily armed tribesmen and pervasive weapons smuggling along the border.<sup>44</sup>

To summarize, illicit weapons being traded in contemporary Pakistan and Afghanistan have come from several sources: stolen from Soviet forces during their invasion of Afghanistan, stolen from the U.S. supply lines to Afghanistan, manufactured in the region by private firms or state armories, trafficked from regions as far away as Vietnam or the Middle East,<sup>45</sup> or distributed by other foreign governments. Iranian and Russian weapons have also made their way to Karachi,<sup>46</sup> and the Iranian government has armed groups along the Afghan-Iranian border.<sup>47</sup> Despite the prevalence of Kalashnikov variants in the region, U.S. weapons are highly prized and have become status symbols. The U.S.-led coalition now ships rifles in parts for assembly in Afghanistan to discourage traffickers from breaking into and stealing the contents of containers en route from the seaports in Karachi to Afghanistan.<sup>48</sup>

Weapons buyback and confiscation campaigns in Pakistan have failed due to haphazard implementation. The government’s failure to provide adequate human security and its inability to clamp down on illegal weapons smuggling and manufacturing has left Pakistan awash in weapons.<sup>49</sup> While the country has about 20 million small arms in circulation, only 7 million units are registered.<sup>50</sup> Pakistanis legally import approximately \$130 million worth of small arms each year, which is eclipsed by about \$200 million worth of illicit weapons that are smuggled into the country.<sup>51</sup> Jamrud is the largest wholesale market for illicit firearms in Pakistan and Darra Adam Khel is the largest retail market,<sup>52</sup> but Jaffarabad, Jacobabad, and Shikarpur are thriving markets for illegal weapons in Baluchistan.<sup>53</sup>

Small private companies in the town of Darra Adam Khel, near Peshawar, produce up to 100 imitation Kalashnikov rifles daily and other manufacturers produce similar weapons in Baluchistan and Afghanistan.<sup>54</sup> Darra Adam Khel is also the host of a thriving black market of weapons smuggled from Afghanistan into Pakistan.<sup>55</sup> This town is a crucial source of supplies for Q.S.T. and T.T.P., a relationship that could be traced back to Pakistani military’s earlier initiatives encouraging local gunsmiths to sell their products to the Taliban.<sup>56</sup> As much as 70 to 80 percent of Darra Adam Khel’s population relies on the firearms market for its income.<sup>57</sup> Anti-Taliban operations by the Pakistani military have forced some manufacturers to leave Darra Adam Khel and have depressed the market,<sup>58</sup> but some locally-produced weapons are available for as little as \$125.<sup>59</sup>

Smugglers often use personal vehicles to bring their weapons across the border. Normally, a scout car drives ahead of a cargo-laden car and facilitates passage with border guards. Women wearing burqas sometimes accompany the smugglers.<sup>60</sup> Another method in use is to send groups of 20 to 50 people through hilly passes while carrying weapons on their backs or on animals. Widespread corruption and kinship networks impede police efforts to capture smugglers.<sup>61</sup> Routes from Afghanistan often start in Kunar province and flow into Pakistan,<sup>62</sup> but others use the Chaman border crossing into Baluchistan and travel through Pashin and Lasbela provinces or along the coast on the way to Karachi.<sup>63</sup>

## **INSURGENT INVOLVEMENT IN THE DRUGS AND WEAPONS TRADE**

Organizations that transport drugs arm themselves for protection and sometimes sell excess weapons to terrorists and insurgents.<sup>64</sup> Some of these smugglers are armed with weapons much more powerful than small arms and may even possess anti-aircraft weaponry.<sup>65</sup> Drug traffickers prefer weapons as a form of payment over cash, since carrying arms in the region is less risky than possessing large amounts of cash.<sup>66</sup> Along much of the border, smugglers are indifferent about what they transport as long as it produces profits. A Pakistani senior law enforcement official observed, “People keep on changing over here. From drugs to customs articles [contraband], from customs articles to weapons. Wherever there is money...”<sup>67</sup>

The Pakistan-based Quetta Shura Taliban (Q.S.T.) dominates poppy cultivation, heroin processing, and cross-border smuggling between Afghanistan and Pakistan. It is financially self-sufficient mostly due to its income from the narcotics trade.<sup>68</sup> General Nicholson, who has served as a top U.S. commander in Afghanistan, observed that “Helmand produces a significant amount of the opium globally that turns into heroin and... this provides about 60 percent of the Taliban funding.”<sup>69</sup> The Q.S.T. acquires this funding by taxing poppy farmers ten percent of their crop, extracting protection money from traffickers and heroin labs, operating its own labs, and collecting payments for its Quetta-based leaders from the largest smuggling groups. In recent years, U.S. raids against Q.S.T. bases in Helmand have seized opium and heroin stockpiles worth millions of dollars.<sup>70</sup> Indeed, the Q.S.T. halted its 2016 spring offensive to allow fighters to aid in poppy harvesting and to recruit migrant workers who harvest poppies.<sup>71</sup>

In addition to cultivating poppies and protecting smugglers, the Taliban’s senior leadership directly engages in transporting narcotics across the Afghan-Pakistani border. To reach Pakistan, the Taliban attacks government forces near the border to create diversions that allow its smugglers to slip across the border.<sup>72</sup>

High-ranking Taliban leaders are intimately involved in the drugs trade: the U.S. Treasury Department sanctioned the Taliban's shadow governor of Helmand in 2012 for owning heroin that moved from Pakistan through Iran to Turkey.<sup>73</sup> Afghan security forces captured the shadow governor of neighboring Nimroz while he was escorting roughly one ton of opiates from Helmand into Nimroz. Mullah Akhtar Muhammad Mansour, who led the Taliban until U.S. forces killed him in a drone strike, used the vast funds from his narcotics empire to pave his succession to Mullah Omar.<sup>74</sup> The involvement of the Taliban in trafficking is strategic as well: a 2009 raid of an opium market in Marjah, Afghanistan revealed a Taliban command center located in the middle of the market.<sup>75</sup>

Although the Taliban does not monopolize the illicit cross-border traffic, its various branches cooperate with smugglers. The Pakistan-based Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (T.T.P.) acquires small arms, explosives and heroin from traffickers and sometimes delivers them to their Q.S.T. counterparts in Afghanistan. The Haqqani network protects traffickers<sup>76</sup> and buys weapons from them.<sup>77</sup> Other smugglers give the Taliban "weapons, funding, and material support" in exchange for protection from government and other criminal groups.<sup>78</sup>

Baluchi insurgents in both Iran and Pakistan also benefit from these cross-border flows. Many Baluch separatists in Pakistan, also known as Sarmachars, purchase their weapons from narcotraffickers.<sup>79</sup> Anti-Iranian insurgent groups such as Jaish-ul-Adl maintain close ties with smugglers and often protect them.<sup>80</sup> The most prominent Baluch separatist group in Iran, Jundullah, also traffics narcotics.<sup>81</sup>

Powerful Iranian officials also participate in weapons and narcotics smuggling. In 2012, the Treasury Department designated Iranian Quds Force General Gholamreza Baghbani a drug kingpin for his involvement in the Afghan opium trade. It is highly unlikely that Baghbani could conduct operations on that scale without attracting the attention of his superiors,<sup>82</sup> so he may have done so at their behest. As the then-commander of a Quds Force station near the Afghan and Pakistani borders, Baghbani allegedly smuggled precursor chemicals and weapons into Afghanistan and opiates back to Iran.<sup>83</sup> The Revolutionary Guards and its domestic paramilitary arm, the Basij, control Iran's eastern border,<sup>84</sup> which must have given Baghbani a wide-ranging authority in the region. He is also a member of the Ansar Corps,<sup>85</sup> the Revolutionary Guards unit responsible for coordinating operations with the Taliban,<sup>86</sup> and it is possible that he collaborated with his Taliban counterparts to traffic opiates and weapons.

Despite the involvement of state and non-state actors, the smuggling culture in this region is also pervasive on a local level. A U.N. survey in Shirabad, a small Iranian border town near Pakistan, found that approximately one-half of the population depends on smuggling for income.<sup>87</sup> Through these vast indigenous networks, tracking smugglers also becomes harder. Few Pakistani smugglers are arrested in Iran and few of their Iranian counterparts are in

Pakistan, as smugglers exchange their shipments close to the border without traveling too deeply into the other's country.<sup>88</sup> The tight linkage between local communities and groups, and narcotics and arms trafficking, enhances the ability of non-state actors to gain financial security and ingrain themselves in local geography. This toxic brew is likely to remain potent and to poison the Golden Crescent for some time to come.

## **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

The narcotics and weapons smuggling in the Golden Crescent is a deeply entrenched problem that immiserates the region and narcotic users worldwide. The drugs and guns find their way to the market because farmers who grow the poppies, insurgents and government officials who facilitate trafficking, and traffickers who transport the materials derive substantial financial and strategic benefits from these activities. These actors reinforce each other and impede efforts to reduce the illicit trade. The U.S. government could use its resources to reduce the volume of material being transported, but it cannot completely inhibit this trade unless the Taliban loses the ability to control territory in Afghanistan, corruption is weeded out from within the governments of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran, and stability and peace are established in the region.

The primary source of funding for the illicit activities, including weapons trafficking, comes from the growth and trade of narcotics in the region, especially in Afghanistan. By focusing on this pivotal source of capital generation, the U.S. government can still make a significant impact on illegal narcotics and weapons trade in the region. Substantial progress could be made by encouraging poppy cultivators to produce other crops, discouraging corruption in the Afghan government, and developing international mechanisms to freeze the flow of funds to traffickers.

Current attempts to reduce poppy cultivation have proven ineffective. Eradication in particular has proven to be a dismal failure: As of July 2017, the U.S. allied coalition in Afghanistan had destroyed a mere 0.3 percent of the year's poppy harvest.<sup>89</sup> Even if it succeeded in destroying significant amounts of Afghanistan's opiates, it would be counterproductive. Corrupt government officials often shield their patronage networks from eradication drives and direct coalition efforts against rivals. As a result, many prefer the Taliban's rule over that of the internationally backed Afghan government.<sup>90</sup>

Attempts to develop the agricultural sector in Afghanistan have failed because they have not addressed many structural deficiencies in the economy, such as the lack of an accessible credit system.<sup>91</sup> Poppy farmers routinely list economic conditions as their primary motivation for growing poppies.<sup>92</sup> Many farmers prefer to harvest a reliable opium crop and directly sell it to traffickers – instead of growing a different crop, and enduring the risk of unfavorable

weather and unreliable middlemen to transport it to local markets.<sup>93</sup> Instead of distributing grain or pursuing other development projects, international and local aid groups could focus on creating strong, structural, and long-term incentives for Afghan farmers to switch from poppies to wheat or other products.

Supporting anti-corruption initiatives in the Afghan government is another key to reducing illicit activities in the region. Reforming and reducing corruption in the judicial system is vital; it will help diminish popular support for the Taliban and weaken its hold on opium-producing areas. Unlike government judges, who often require expensive bribes, many Taliban leaders resolve disputes, satisfy disputing parties, and avenge crimes without charging a fee.<sup>94</sup>

Clamping down on corrupt border control authorities is also necessary, and it will slow the outward flow of narcotics and arrival of precursor chemicals and weapons. Afghan law enforcement officials capture drug smugglers who are eventually let go by corrupt high-ranking policemen. Shipments of precursor chemicals as large as 15 tons have slipped through customs.<sup>95</sup> While the Afghan government has established the Anti-Corruption Justice Center, its success has been limited to enforcing customs and tax revenue collection.<sup>96</sup> The U.S. government should encourage the Afghan government to aggressively prosecute corrupt border officials and judges, institute merit-based promotion, and develop effective oversight to prevent corruption.

The U.S. government can further impede narcotics and weapons trafficking into the region by developing new international mechanisms to combat illicit financing. Currently, there is no worldwide system for governments to alert each other of traffickers or to freeze assets related to trafficking.<sup>97</sup> Developing such mechanisms would impede traffickers and make smuggling in the Golden Crescent less profitable. On this front, the U.S. government should also increase cooperation with countries that are key to the Golden Crescent's financial flows, such as China, Lebanon, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and the United Kingdom.<sup>98</sup> Combining attempts to reduce poppy farming with reform and anti-corruption efforts in Afghanistan and developing strong mechanisms to impede illicit financing could reduce the flow of drugs and arms within and out of the Golden Crescent.

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