

# Drug Trafficking in Central Asia

## A POORLY CONSIDERED FIGHT?

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 218  
September 2012

Sébastien Peyrouse  
*George Washington University*

As strategizing for the “post-2014” regional order in Central Asia picks up speed, the fight against drug trafficking from Afghanistan is evolving as a key objective of international donor involvement in the region. It is also a major area of cooperation among key actors. The United Nations Organization for Drug Control (UNODC) wants to strengthen its role in Central Asia; the European Union will continue to finance the Border Management in Central Asia (BOMCA) program; the United States has launched a Central Asia Counternarcotics Initiative (CACI); and Russia wants to assume the head of a new international anti-drug campaign, if possible in cooperation with NATO.

This new attention on drug trafficking through Central Asia, however, is far from groundbreaking. Calls for the in-depth rethinking of regional security tools and innovative mechanisms are essentially rhetorical. Thus far, the strategy international actors have adopted is the same that was decided on in the 2000s, a decade marked by the widespread failure to combat drug trafficking from Afghanistan. To take but one example, heroin seizures in Tajikistan amounted to 4,794 kilograms in 2004 but only 1,132 kilograms in 2009, despite rising production in Afghanistan and an increase in transit along the so-called “northern route” through Central Asia. The fear of “spillover from Afghanistan,” often mentioned but never precisely identified, has appeared to paralyze implementation of innovative strategies and bolstered classic mechanisms related to border security.

This memo addresses three factors to help explain the uninspired start of the fight against drug trafficking in Central Asia. The first is an erroneous conflation of Islamic insurgency with drug-fueled shadow economies that primarily serve the interests of the ruling elites. Second is the implicit assumption that physical border checkpoints between Central Asia and Afghanistan can resolve the drug trade in the

absence of a political will to fight corruption. The third is an excessive focus on security as opposed to demand reduction and treatment.

### **Confusing Insurgency and Drug Trafficking**

The official narrative of Central Asian governments, echoed by all regional structures involved in the fight against drugs, is that terrorism and narcotics are intrinsically linked. In Central Asia, this assumption has been legitimized by the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan's well-documented involvement in drug trafficking in its incursions into Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan during the summers of 1999 and 2000. The linkage between terrorism and drugs in Afghanistan, however, is based on a very simplistic reading of the Afghan situation, whereby drug trafficking is just one way that the Taliban and their allies finance their activities.

It is necessary to deconstruct the conflation of drug trafficking and Islamist insurgency. This interpretation says nothing about the complexity of realities on the ground, including the lack of alternative agricultural opportunities for Afghan farmers, the role of warlords and patronage mechanisms, and the deep involvement of the whole administrative apparatus in the drug industry. In particular, this framing says nothing about the predominance of criminalized structures with political connections in high places. Indeed, in Afghanistan, drug trafficking has become an *official* activity as much – if not more – than it is an *insurgent* one. According to UNODC figures, in 2009 Afghan traffickers made an estimated \$2.2 billion in profits, while insurgent groups made only \$155 million. A similar profit-sharing proportion exists in Central Asia, where experts tend to separate the drug trade into three different types represented by the colors green, black, and red.

- “Green” refers to trafficking organized by clandestine Islamist movements to self-finance their operations. Its share of total drug profits is relatively low.
- “Black” consists of the trafficking of minimal quantities by small criminal groups or individuals at high personal risk (concealing drugs on their body or in clothing, suitcases, and so on) in order to supply local markets.
- “Red” refers to the largest share of the drug trade, organized by larger criminal structures with the support of some senior officials.

The distinction between the “black” and “red” types of drug trafficking is sometimes ambiguous. In particular, the relevant mechanisms of corruption in law enforcement agencies, border guards in particular, can appear to be the same. However, two differences may be observed. First, black trafficking involves far more limited quantities than the red one. Second, black trafficking presupposes corruption at lower echelons of the administrative chain and depends on the clandestine transportation of drugs. Red trafficking, on the other hand, is based on a well-structured pyramidal hierarchy that guarantees the smooth operation of the transport chain and distribution network.

National drug fighting agencies in Central Asia, which often act only under pressure from the international community, exclusively target the black and green sectors, leaving the red one totally untouched. On the rare occasions when red trafficking is uncovered, this is typically assumed to reflect the settling of scores among elites who have just had a political or commercial rival struck down. In Tajikistan, the fact that members of the presidential family are at the head of national agencies confirms the eminently political nature of these institutions (the same was true in Kyrgyzstan under former president Kurmanbek Bakiyev).

External actors that accept the narrative of Central Asian governments on **jointly** fighting terrorism and drug trafficking indirectly help to legitimize domestic policies of repression and rent-seeking strategies. It is easier for Central Asian governments to secure outside support by emphasizing the risk of terrorism and presenting themselves as victims, weakened by “spillover” from Afghanistan. This diverts attention from their own responsibility for the drug trade and legitimizes the repression of local Islamist movements by fusing notions of political opposition, Islamist extremism, and the drug trade.

### **The Border Security Illusion**

Defining drug trafficking as a “spillover” effect from Afghanistan also leads to a poor assessment of the mechanisms that are needed to counter it. International institutions are focused on improving border security, principally its material aspects (like buildings, infrastructure, and equipment), again in accordance with the needs that local authorities express. In a recent report published by the Open Society Foundations, George Gavrilis showed how a focus on personnel training came much later, notably within the BOMCA framework. It is, of course, true that Central Asian states need better border security. Their border guards require better material conditions and training in new technologies and best practices. And as new states on the international scene, they require foreign assistance to rise to international standards.

However, it is naïve to assume that the fight against drug trafficking can be waged successfully with such measures. To secure a border with checkpoints, barbed wire, and watchtowers is not enough to make the frontier impermeable, as the recurrent failure of the United States to “close” its southern border with Mexico has shown. In Central Asia, all border points, even those that the international community has best equipped, are open borders, as corruption has rendered them permeable. Every entry into Central Asian territory can be negotiated (by buying a false passport, bribing a border guard to forego a document check, and so on). The smaller-scale “black” and “green” drug traffickers are the only ones that try to get across borders by avoiding checkpoints, through mountain passes or across rivers. The “red” traffic, on the other hand, utilizes the main roads and official checkpoints, recently upgraded with the international community’s assistance.

Central Asian borders with Afghanistan cannot be made secure by physical means alone. It requires the political will to fight against corruption, and for the long-term. To be effective, efforts to combat drug trafficking in Central Asia must therefore be

first political in nature. This does not only mean getting the principled consent of Central Asian governments. It also requires establishing measures similar to those in Colombia several years ago or those Mexico tries to implement today: forcibly separating criminal networks from their pawns in the state apparatus and fighting real wars, likely with casualties, against drug cartels.

Such an approach is unlikely to obtain the support of Central Asian ruling elites today, however, and the international community cannot force it upon them. Border security thus will remain the lowest common denominator for international cooperation, requiring important financial commitments for more than limited effectiveness.

### **From Supply to Demand**

International efforts to combat drug trafficking from Afghanistan are distinctly focused more on production and manufacture than they are on demand reduction, treatment, and prevention campaigns. Strategies of prevention and treatment are considered national issues dependent on public policy, while the fight against drug trafficking is held to be the legitimate province of international and regional organizations. Thus, for example, UNODC's budget for Central Asia allocates only 11 percent of its funds to prevention, while 88 percent is assigned directly to the fight against drugs as well as against organized crime, corruption, and terrorism.

International actors' strategies for fighting against trafficking have been subject to contradictory interpretations. Russia, for example, wants NATO to go directly after production by destroying poppy fields and laboratories. In this context, the Russian government has put forward a "Rainbow-2" plan, a large scale poppy eradication program, and has lobbied the UN Security Council to have Afghan production declared a threat to global peace and security. Such a decision would enable sanctions to be imposed on Afghan landowners who authorize the cultivation of opium, as well as legitimize the destruction of poppy fields. However, NATO has refused to accede to Russian demands, on the pretext that it would be necessary to provide Afghan farmers alternative sources of revenue or risk worsening the image of the organization among the Afghan population. It has stated that it wants to focus eradication efforts against drug storage sites, so that the losses inflicted are targeted only at criminal settings.

When it comes to treatment, all Central Asian states are affected by their Soviet heritage. As the studies of historian and anthropologist Alisher Latypov have shown, the Soviet past, which places the medical and psychiatric domains at the service of law enforcement agencies, still carries great influence. The tendency to criminalize drug addicts complicates the implementation of effective prevention strategies. Alleging a synergy between insurgency, terrorism, and drugs does not lend itself to forming new approaches or creating more appropriate support structures for persons requiring care. Several Central Asian states, for instance, require treatment centers to transmit the names of drug addicts to security organizations. Moreover, treatment centers are poorly equipped and oriented around abstinence and zero tolerance. While Kyrgyzstan has accepted opioid substitution therapy, the latter remains quite controversial in most post-Soviet states, and Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan are vehemently opposed

to it. In Uzbekistan, substitution therapy was termed “inappropriate” by the Ministry of Health and banned in 2009, while in Kazakhstan a recent official evaluation group concluded that substitution therapy is a “security threat” to the nation.

### **Conclusion**

There is no easy solution for drug trafficking from Afghanistan, whether in terms of its impact on public health or the shadow economy it generates. The states of Central Asia cannot fight the problem alone. They are located on transit routes from Afghan production sites to Russian and European consumers. For the most part, they are limited in their abilities to allocate funds to the fight, to train personnel, and to build responsive policies. They must also contend with an underlying geopolitical competition, which sometimes creates rivalry between U.S. and Russian projects while turning NATO and UNODC platforms into arenas of power projection.

However, these limitations do not legitimize the poor assessment of external donors or strategies that are based on myths propagated by Central Asian authorities. These myths render the efforts of the international community both costly and largely in vain. If “post-2014 stability” in Central Asia is to be a real strategic goal and not just rhetoric, the drug trade from Afghanistan merits a more courageous assessment.