

Crystal crescent

Matthew C. DuPée on the spread of the methamphetamine trade in south west Asia

As the 21st century unfolds, Afghanistan finds itself in a profound socio-economic crisis. It is one in which the illegal drug trade and insurgency plays a very complex and important role.

According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the global dynamics of the illicit opiates market “are not well understood” – and the same can be said of south west Asia’s transforming narcotics industry. All the attention given to Afghanistan’s poppy problem obscures the rapidly growing distribution, trade and production of other narcotics in the region.

The first UNODC *Afghan Cannabis Survey*, published in 2010, confirmed suspicions that Afghanistan is the now the world’s largest producer of cannabis resin, better known as hashish, accounting for approximately 1,500 to 3,500 metric tons of resin in 2009 alone.

Alarming, little to no attention has been paid to another creeping problem: the proliferation of cheaply produced south west Asian amphetamine-type-stimulants (ATS) such as amphetamine, methamphetamine, methcathinone, and ‘ecstasy’-like substances (MDMA and its analogues). The UNODC has issued two comprehensive reports on the proliferation of ATS production and abuse in south east and east Asia since 2008. Unfortunately, these reports do not elaborate on the growing storm of cheaply produced ATS in the historical drug producing region known as the Golden Crescent (comprised of Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran).

Synthetic drugs, such as crystal methamphetamine (called *shisheh*, which means “glass” in Farsi), LSD, and various forms of refined heroin including a smokeable condensed rock form (referred to locally as ‘crack’), are flooding south Asia and feeding the region’s underground drug culture.

Despite the strict Sharia laws which govern the country’s Islamic system, according to the UN World Drug Report for 2005, Iran has the highest proportion

of opiate addicts in the world – 2.8 percent of the population over the age of 15. Each year, across east and south-east Asia, hundreds of Iranians are charged with drug trafficking and manufacture offences. In January an Iranian drug ‘mule’ died at Kuala Lumpur airport in Malaysia after some of the 137 methamphetamine capsules he had swallowed ruptured in his stomach.

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Iranian authorities, who last April seized 220 lbs of crystal methamphetamine in the south eastern town of Hirmand, blame the proliferation of synthetic drugs in the region on an attempt by drug-traffickers to switch drug use from conventional drugs like opium and hashish to those most prevalent in the West. However, implications from the emerging trends reported from the Iranian front are not just restricted to regional concerns; rather, the production of synthetic drugs, especially cheaply made ATS which include the street variants of ecstasy, has major global implications concerning addiction habits, social and health costs, as well as security concerns.

Currently, the center of gravity for south west Asia’s production of ATS remains Iran. According to Iranian counternarcotics reports, *shisheh* ‘kitchens’ are springing up across the region and counter-drug operations are increasingly seizing multi-kilogram quantities of *shisheh* on the Iranian

railway system destined for Turkey and Syria. Earlier this summer, the UNODC reported that Iranian produced *shisheh* was being trafficked to “lucrative markets” as far away as south east Asia because its manufacture outpaced domestic consumption.

Anecdotal evidence shows that during the past few years, a growing number of Iranian nationals have been arrested in several Asian countries, including Japan, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand, for attempting to traffic crystal methamphetamine and its liquid form. Among items disclosed in the controversial release of thousands of classified US embassy cables by the whistle blowing website *Wikileaks* in November, American diplomats have voiced concern over the growing threat of Iran’s emergence as the next larger exporter of narcotics to Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Russia and other countries in the region. In one cable from Baku, US officials citing Azerbaijani reports documented the dramatic increase in Iranian trafficked heroin through its territory; reporting that the seizure of 20 kilograms of heroin in 2006 soared to 59,000 kilograms seized in 2009. Furthermore, evidence exists that Iranian mafia figures in Azerbaijan, some of whom maintain close contacts with the Iranian government, act as liaisons between Iranian and Azeri/Russian drug trafficking syndicates.

Iranian organised crime syndicates are major participants in trafficking Afghan origin narcotics both internally and internationally. Despite serious efforts to counter the region’s drug menace, the entrenched smuggling infrastructure of Afghanistan’s narco-industry is robust. Traffickers are believed to smuggle over 60 per cent of all illicit opiates over the ‘western route’, which includes the wild Iran-Afghan frontier, a desolate section of Turkmenistan and a desert area of Pakistan’s Baluchistan province. From here, tons of opium and refined heroin

Iranian DIY: shisheh (crystal meth) kitchens are springing up across the region according to counternarcotics reports



are smuggled to Caspian Sea ports and to Turkey where drug shipments continue their route to Europe via the 'Balkan Route'. In October 2010, Serbia's Interior Minister Ivica Dacic said close to 80 per cent of the heroin smuggled from Afghanistan to Europe goes through the Balkans, with a lack of efficient control in Kosovo making this route an attractive one to traffickers.

State efforts to identify and adapt to the emergence of ATS production in the region remains slow going, however an increase in ATS production has resulted in a surge of synthetic drug seizures. In Pakistan, the increase in ATS seizures between 2005 and 2006 increased 64 per cent; in Iran, the seizures of ATS increased 60 per cent between 2008 and 2009. Two years ago, abuse of synthetic drugs like ATS in South Asia was restricted to affluent young people because of high prices and limited availability, but with increased manufacturing of these harmful stimulants, market prices are quickly dropping. Iran's Drug Control Headquarters indicates that the price of a kilogram of high quality *shisheh* decreased significantly between 2008 and 2009; going from \$100,000-125,000 per kilogram to \$10,000-15,000 per kilogram.

If methamphetamine production and consumption becomes deeply rooted in Iran, the production of ATS could easily spread, through cultural, social

and economic ties, to neighbouring Afghanistan. Unlike organically produced drugs like cannabis, coca and opium poppies, there are no hectares of crops to measure, no timeframe or seasons to analyse growth patterns, and no ability for anti-narcotics authorities to remotely sensor the clandestine nature of chemically 'cooked' synthetic drugs that take place indoors.

The prospect of ATS production in Afghanistan is very real – the criterion for its production are already in place. Porous and uncontrolled borders, deeply corrupt security and government officials, large swathes of territory that are outside the jurisdiction of law enforcement, entrenched and functioning smuggling networks, the presence of networks apt to smuggling pharmaceutical and industrial chemicals and exporting drugs, a surge in domestic and regional narcotics consumption, and the presence of clandestine narco-processing workshops (labs) are reasons to believe that ATS production could eventually supplement the traditional organic narcotics market of Afghanistan.

When Burma transferred from the world's number one producer of illicit opium to the world's largest supplier of ATS (over 700 million tabs of ATS annually by 2007), Burmese chemists found it quite easy to convert heroin-processing workshops into ATS production houses. The first

large seizures of ATS by Thai officials found trace amounts of opiates within the tablets, indicating an overnight conversion of the workshops had taken place. In 2007, it is also believed a Burmese chemist traveled to Afghanistan to advise on better ways to refine heroin and how to use fewer chemicals during the process, possibly also introducing methods to 'cook' cheaply made versions of amphetamine.

There is a strong need to enhance existing monitoring systems and actively track any possible emergence of new synthetic drugs being manufactured and trafficked from South Asia. Iran is currently emerging as the new conglomerate of cheaply produced ATS, a trend that has serious implications for the flow of illicit narcotics into Eurasia and Western Europe. If left unchallenged, Iran's ATS production will likely spill-over into neighboring states, causing Afghanistan to emerge as a galvanized global narco-hegemony, dictating the global market price for a wide-range of illicit narcotics.

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