

Kabul's heroin injectors

A Paris-based human aid organisation is aiming to expand its drop-in centres by building a carpet factory, while Kabul's injecting underclass are left to squat in the city's underbelly

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Opium amounts to half of Afghanistan's GDP, employs 12 per cent of its citizens and partly contributes to funding for the Taliban. Beyond its status as a producer, the country is also a big consumer. It is estimated there are one million opiate users in a country of 28 million people, with spiralling levels of HIV, hepatitis C and mental health problems among drug users.

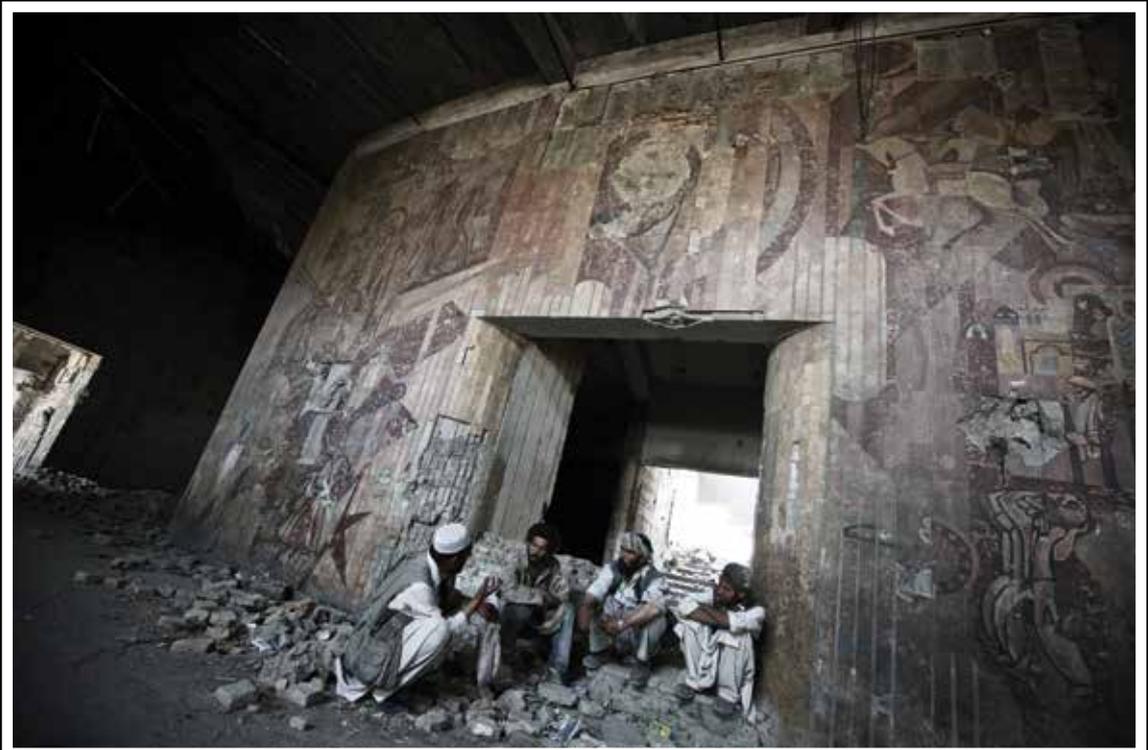
The international human aid organisation, Medecins du Monde, has set up a harm reduction drop-in centre in Kabul to attempt to address this problem. The centre has operated a successful methadone clinic since 2009 and has 70 patients on its books. It also provides resources and training for scores of harm reduction workers in readiness for the expansion of drop-in centres around Kabul and the rest of Afghanistan.

Olivier Maguet, the outgoing head of Medecins du Monde's six year harm reduction mission in Kabul, was handed the Bonnie Devlin Memorial Scholarship Award for his work in Kabul at a ceremony hosted by Liverpool-based drug project HIT in November. Maguet said that Medecins du Monde was planning to set up a carpet factory in Kabul that would sell carpets on the international market to raise money for 14 new drop-in centres.

While in the provinces opium continues to be smoked in the traditional manner, in Kabul, intravenous injection of heroin is growing. Until it was broken up at the end of last year, hundreds of injectors had created a huge squat within the bullet-ridden remains of the former Soviet Cultural Centre in the west of Kabul.

The complex was chiefly a refuge for Afghan nationals who had been deported from neighbouring Iran after developing addictions to heroin there. Some were children, many had to leave their families behind them and the death rate from overdoses in the squat was high. Since the government built a wall around the complex in November, the squatters have moved to a new compound in the area, underneath a bridge, living amidst mud and insanitary water.

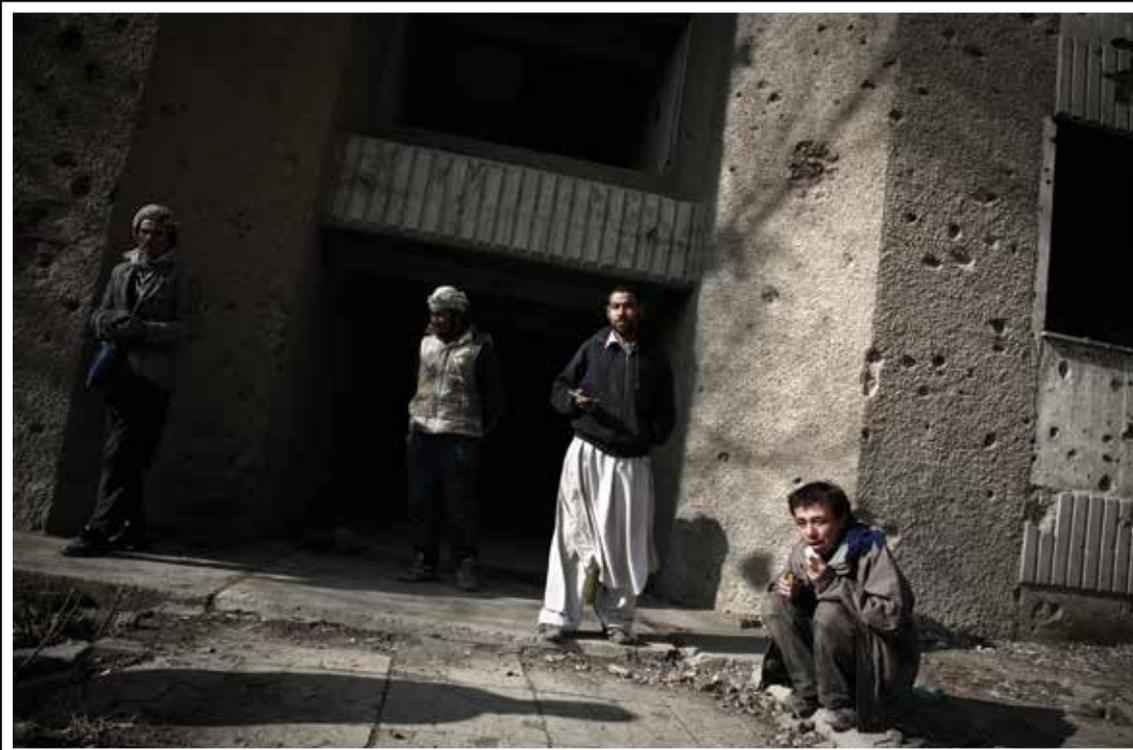
Drug users standing in the ruins of the former Russian Cultural Centre. Above them, Lenin's portrait, destroyed by Islamic insurgents.



Said (left side) and Mussa (right side) smoking heroin. Mussa died a few weeks after. He was only 19.



Drug users standing outside the former Russian Cultural Centre. In the middle of the picture, Said and Jawed are two brothers, both users. Jawed died a few months after.



Hassan, sleeping in the room he was living. Hassan died a few months after. He was HIV positive.

