

The opium cables

How Druglink used Wikileaks to reveal the secret story of heroin's journey from Afghanistan to the UK. By **Adrian Gatton**

Dispatch 09DUSHANBE569: Dushanbe, a pleasant enough neo-classical city in Tajikistan, bordering Afghanistan. A mobile phone number belonging to a man known as 'The Doctor'. Further research reveals his real name is Saidabrор K*****. Born in 1965, he lives in an apartment on F**** Street and is trained as a dentist.

Phone call pattern analysis links 'The Doctor' to people in Russia, India and Afghanistan – even to the shores of the UK. Who is at the end of a mysterious Kabul phone number used by this man becomes a matter of intense interest to agents at the America Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA). 'The Doctor's' role in that riddle will be explained later, because it brings us right up to the border of Britain's own fight against the drug trade.

How does heroin get to Britain from Afghanistan? The complex logistics of this black export business are necessarily shrouded in mystery. Secrecy is the name of the game: for drug traffickers of course, and quite often for police and intelligence agencies tackling it (or facilitating it, unfortunately, depending on where they are in the chain). How then can we be accurate cartographers of this trade?

The renowned criminologist Letizia Paoli, of Leuven University, is refreshingly honest about the problem

of mapping out the heroin trail: "Knowledge about trafficking ... routes derives from the barest of indirect statistical evidence," she wrote, pretty damningly, in her recent (co-authored) book *The World Heroin Market*. The volume of smuggled heroin is equally hard to assess, she adds.

When I rang the Home Office, SOCA and Europol, they helpfully pointed me to assessments, reports and their own maps. But it's all amorphous 'hubs' of activity, with Dad's Army-like arrows pointing this way and that across Asia, the Middle East and Europe. They feel as disorientating as a weathervane in a hurricane. Indeed, the big arrests are publicised, but their 'nodal' significance on the heroin trail is not.

So to create a map of the opiate trail, I went down another avenue of research – generously offered-up by the biggest leak of government secrets in history. By excavating the 250,000 US State Department cables, released by Julian Assange and Wikileaks (the second, and unredacted, data-purge was just a few months ago).

That's how I identified 'The Doctor' in Dushanbe.

Most of these cables have not been cited before – not surprising really, when you consider that if the Wikileaks cables were printed and bound they would be equivalent to a library of 20,000 books.

Flashes of insight can be had by using carefully considered keywords or acronyms (try tapping in the phrase 'toll analysis' and read for yourself, or even 'Drugscope', this magazine's publisher).

This insider knowledge we can now be privy to comes from State Department reports, DEA field officers, White House officials, and closed-door discussions between policy-makers, lawmakers, police, intelligence officers and secret informants everywhere from Kabul, Moscow, Baku, Ankara, Istanbul, Sofia, to Podgorica, Brussels and dozens of other cities. Of course some of this will be tittle-tattle, some of it could be malicious gossip – disinformation or just plain wrong. Yet many of the cables identify ongoing international police operations to eliminate major players in this trade. Players who, incidentally, are not mentioned in press reports and press releases.

Doing this cable-bashing, we can track heroin's passage from Afghanistan across Europe and to the UK's borders. It is really a fascinating, sometimes eerie, series of snapshots and vignettes – we can scan across time and the landmass of Asia and Europe, zooming in and out



Dispatch 09DUSHANBE569:
Dushanbe in Tajikistan – a key part
of the heroin trail

Dispatch 10MOSCOW293:
The American Embassy in
Moscow, where DEA Director of
Operations, Tom Harrigan, met
his Russian counterpart



recent cases such as convicted Afghani drug baron Hajji Bashir Noorzai, spotted by the DEA in New York, have shown). But British users depend on them nonetheless.

Mr Aulov, for his part, trades intelligence: "There are enough opiates in storage in Afghanistan that can supply the [world] demand for the next five years," he says, discouragingly. The source of Britain's heroin problem is not about to dry up any time soon then.

The meeting also highlights a DEA 'top priority' target, Khairtadin R*****, who is shipping heroin from Afghanistan to Frankfurt "for distribution all over Europe". Aulov and Harrigan agree a joint operation against this Dubai-based operator (he deals in 100kg shipments, Russia is another of his markets, as are far-flung places as Tajikistan and Arizona). Britain's Serious & Organised Crime Agency (SOCA) could expect to be informed of such an operation, given that Frankfurt is a pathway to Belgium and Holland, the final transit point to the UK's ports. Mr R*****'s drug nexus has been revealed partly by 'toll analysis', analysing his phone records (and those of his associates).

Other diplomatic cables shed light on a surveillance operation by SOCA in Afghanistan against Haji Abdullah Khostel – a smuggler and heroin lab owner, who is close to the Taliban.

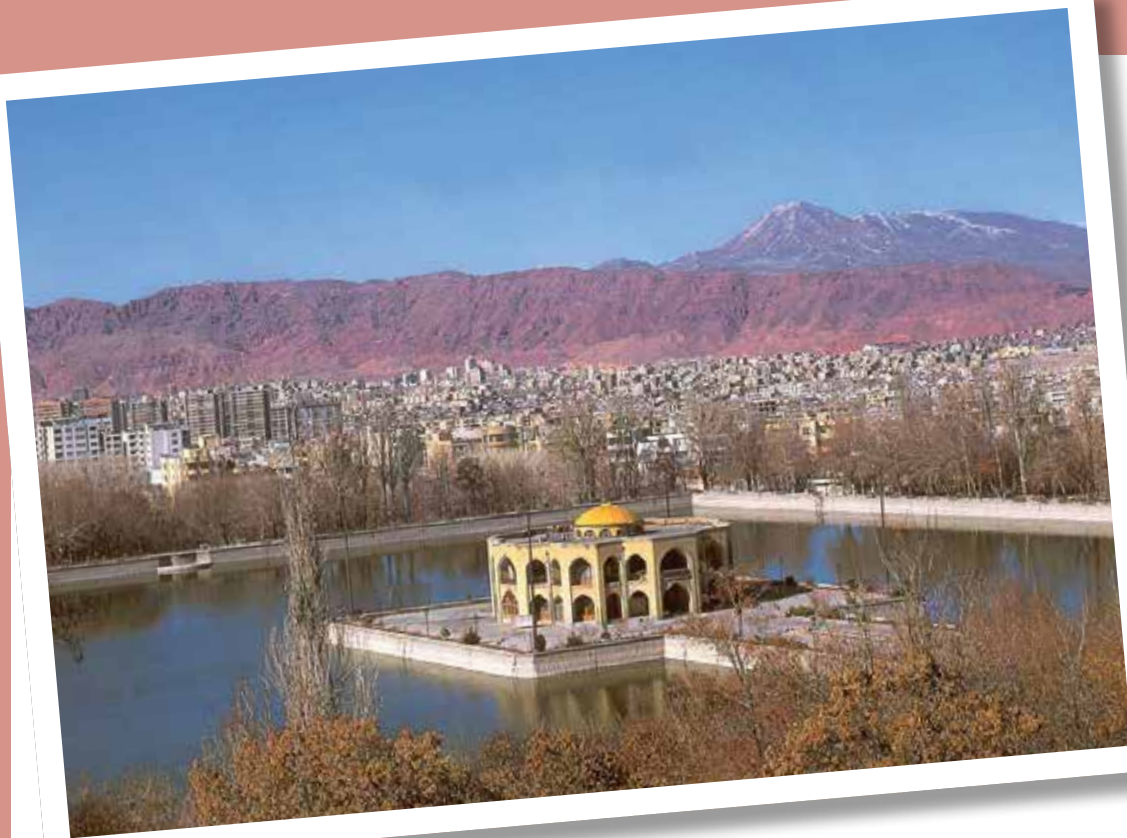
at will, effectively eavesdropping on individuals alleged to be involved in the trade, looking behind the closed doors of anonymous houses in faraway cities, hearing code-names, flipping through drug traffickers' rolodexes, zoning-in on heroin processing labs, reading urgent requests for wiretaps. Call the numbers: I did, they still ring, and ring.

Afghanistan produces nearly all the heroin used in Britain and across Europe. To find the first exporters on the route, this is where the trail must begin.

Except to know the identities of Afghanistan's opium barons, we need to drop-in on a meeting held last year in Moscow. Go to diplomatic cable 10MOSCOW293. This cable reveals how

on a freezing day in Moscow, at the US Embassy building on 5 February, the DEA's Director of Operations Tom Harrigan met his Russian counterpart Nikolay Aulov (Moscow, and Russia, has a huge heroin problem, for which the Russians blame the US invasion of Afghanistan). They agree to share intelligence. Harrigan tells his Russian friend that Afghanistan's heroin business is dominated by eight major DTOs (drug trafficking organizations), whose bosses he goes on to name.

British heroin users will never have heard of these men, they could pass them on the street and never know (yes, these kind of lynchpins in the drug world can be found shopping in the West, as



Dispatch 08BAKU904: Tabriz in Iran, where raw opium is processed in secret laboratories

Haji Abdullah Khostel was one of Afghanistan's top three heroin barons, flooding Britain with millions of pounds of heroin. SOCA's operation was a success and he was jailed in 2009 – even a £1m bribe didn't get him a get-out-of-jail card.

However, while Pakistan also plays a big part in transporting heroin to Britain by air or by ship, the diplomatic telegrams show Iran is the major trans-shipment country for Afghan heroin bound for Western Europe and Britain. Haji Abdullah Khostel was a big exporter to Iran. Mr Aulov, back at the meeting in Moscow with DEA Director Harrigan points out that Afghan-based drug traffickers are using Iran as a key conduit for shipping opiates.

Iran is fighting its own war on drugs: it has at least 1m opiates addicts and this figure may be much higher; 3,700 border guards have been killed in skirmishes with traffickers. Towers, trenches and fences mark its border with Afghanistan yet the drugs keep coming. The problem for Western governments trying to stem this tide is their poor diplomatic relations with Tehran.

Dispatch 08BAKU904, sent from the US Embassy in Baku on 23 Sept 2008, says: "Iran may be emerging as a major processing as well as transshipment center for Western-Europe bound heroin." Furthermore, Iran has its

own heroin labs: "He [the embassy's secret source] said that interrogations and other intelligence over the last six months suggest that a significant amount of raw heroin and opiates are being processed in laboratories in Tabriz [near the Azerbaijani and Turkish borders], and perhaps other locations in Iran."

Iran is, together with Afghanistan, the major laboratory for turning opium into heroin.

The embassy's source complains that the Iranians are not helpful when it comes to sharing information. Back in Moscow, however, Mr Aulov tells Director Harrigan that he will provide the Americans with intelligence supplied by their Iranian friends.

After Iran, we go to Azerbaijan. The cables show that Azerbaijan is a crucial leg of the heroin trail to the UK – trans-shipment has "sky-rocketed" says one dispatch (08BAKU904). Azerbaijan is not a direct route to the West, but the Turkish army's significant presence in Kurdistan, where they are fighting a war with the Kurds, has forced traffickers to move drugs via this Caspian oil state. Hence in just four years Azeri heroin interceptions have exploded from 2kg a year (2003) to 250kgs in 2007. This is only five per cent of what they think is being moved altogether. The heroin is 'ready for market' – and 95 per cent of

this importation is headed for Europe, according to the embassy's secret source.

Who handles this trade? In a 6 March 2009 cable, 09BAKU175, marked 'Secret', an officer at the US Embassy profiled suspected Iranian agents living in Baku (this as part of America's non-stop covert war against Iran). We see through this diplomatic keyhole, so to speak, into the urbane world of one Mr S**** S*****, a "mild-mannered and well dressed" Iranian gentleman who runs a marble shop in the centre of Baku; the city is undergoing a boom and many residences and office buildings are built with marble.

However, behind this apparent façade, Mr S***** is described as "a well-known mafia-like figure from Iranian Azerbaijan". The dispatch says his shop is generally shut and Mr S***** is seen "holding court" in the elegant cafes and restaurants on the boulevard 28 May Street. The Embassy describes him as a "liaison" between the Iranian and Russian/Azerbaijani narcotics traffickers.

The "vast majority" of heroin entering Azerbaijan is headed for Western Europe, officials say. The route, according to sources quoted in a number of cables, is Iran-Azerbaijan-Georgia-Black Sea (and thence to Turkey and the Balkans) and even Iran-Azerbaijan-Russia-Baltic Sea route (and into Eastern Europe).

Unofficially, the Embassy's UNODC

source, speaking privately, suspects that even more heroin could be reaching Europe via Iran and Armenia, than by the Iran-Azerbaijan route. The official names a very high-level former political figure who may be profiting from the trade. Kuwait is another outlet for Afghani heroin trafficked through Iran.

Now we come to the behemoth of heroin trafficking: Turkey. There are scores of cables (the US has historically had a big diplomatic presence in Turkey, a key ally).

The entire route is summed up well at a meeting with US Ambassador to Turkey, Ross Wilson in March 2006, and mentioned in a cable: "Most of the world's supply of opiates originates in Afghanistan and passes through Turkey on its way to Western consumers."

This is the world of the Turkish babas, or godfathers, who control Europe's heroin trail. In February, Steve Coates, the deputy director of SOCA, explained to British MPs that the heroin coming to Britain – enough to fill a 40-foot container truck – is run by five Turkish crime groups, controlled by kingpins based outside the UK.

Many babas have strong links with London and Liverpool. Many, such as the alleged "most dangerous drug baron in Turkey" Hursit Yavas, picked up last November in a drugs bust in Istanbul, have strong UK connections – Yavas lived in London and served time in British jails. Or their contacts come out to Istanbul, like Michael Showers, the flamboyant Liverpoolian drug runner who was arrested last year in Istanbul during a drugs swoop (and is awaiting trial). The drug barons live outside the UK, however. But now SOCA and the Turkish police collaborate closely to catch them.

Telegram 06ANKARA6373 from November 2006 is old, but neatly explains what many later cables repeat: "Turkey remains a major route, and storage, production and staging area, for the flow of heroin to Europe. Turkish-based traffickers and brokers operate in conjunction with narcotics smugglers, laboratory operators, and money launderers in and outside Turkey. They finance and control the smuggling of opiates to and from Turkey. Afghanistan is the source of most of the opiates reaching Turkey." The opiates come overland via Pakistan, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, and Georgia."

In another cable the Embassy in Ankara assesses that "multi-ton amounts of heroin are smuggled through Turkey each month". A small amount of heroin is refined in Turkey, although, as other cables reveal, a lot of refining is now done in Afghanistan itself (NATO bombers occasionally destroy these opium bunkers). Turks have interests in Iranian laboratories, including the Tabriz area.

MANY OF THE CABLES IDENTIFY ONGOING INTERNATIONAL POLICE OPERATIONS TO ELIMINATE MAJOR PLAYERS IN THIS TRADE. PLAYERS WHO, INCIDENTALLY, ARE NOT MENTIONED IN PRESS REPORTS AND PRESS RELEASES.

The Turkish National Police has been collaborating closely with SOCA. But the US Embassy cables reveal worries about the TNP's boss. His alleged ties to heroin trafficking are well-enough established that he is ineligible for a US non-immigrant visa." This is worrying in a country where the state has so often been under suspicion of playing a key role in the heroin trade.

From Turkey the drugs move into the Balkans – en route for the UK. The routes and local players become varied. Some heroin travels straight across Europe on sealed TIR trucks. Other consignments get routed in more complex ways; the cables carry reports of drug trafficking through Bulgaria ("most states have a mafia, but in Bulgaria the mafia has a state"), Serbia, Macedonia, and particularly the badlands of the western Balkans – particularly Kosovo (often used as a "warehouse" for heroin).

The small break-away republic of Montenegro on the Adriatic Sea emerges as one staging post for heroin passing from Turkey, according to the local embassy's telegram 07PODGORICA229, from July 3rd, 2007. The cable picks out the Rozaje criminal clan's alleged role

in heroin: "Very powerful financially, and connected to criminal structures in Kosovo, they are centrally involved in the smuggling of heroin from Afghanistan and Turkey. Lead figure is Stefan Kalic." Indeed, in July this year his wife and brother were arrested – Stefan himself is on the run, thought to be in Turkey. His network is Balkan-wide, as the cables explain.

Drugs bound for the UK cross Europe en route for the key ports to Britain: Antwerp, Rotterdam, Amsterdam, Hamburg in Germany, also Le Havre in France.

Belgium is a vital staging post if you're a heroin trafficker feeding the British market. US Cable ID: 09BRUSSELS1514 from 2009: "Turkish groups, predominately from the Kurdish region of Turkey, control most of the heroin trafficked in Belgium. This heroin is principally shipped through Belgium and The Netherlands to the UK. Authorities find it difficult to penetrate Turkish trafficking groups responsible for heroin shipping and trafficking because of the language barrier and Turkish criminal groups' reluctance to work with non-Turkish ethnicities."

And that's where our friend 'The Doctor' comes back in. The DEA, working in a unique collaboration with the Tajik Ministry of Interior, have tracked down a key associate through that mystery phone number in Kabul. It is a Tajik trafficker (linked to crime groups in Europe, say the cables). The DEA working with the Tajiks, have bugged his phones and his associates' phones. Surveillance teams have been deployed. It emerges that 'The Doctor' is also a key contact of one of the top eight trafficking Afghan drug barons mentioned by Tom Harrigan to Aulov. The DEA operation now ties in with operations in Dubai, Russia – and even Belgium. Tajikistan, it's said, has not historically been a major route to the UK. But could 'The Doctor', based 2000 miles away in Dushanbe, be pioneering a new heroin pathway to Britain? Interestingly, another cable reveals a British citizen is also a major player in Tajikistan. Is it time to open a SOCA office in Dushanbe?

Some names and identifying features have been redacted for legal reasons

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