Counternarcotics Offers Chance to Cooperate with Tehran

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Brief Analysis

On March 31, Washington took its first step toward engagement with Tehran through a diplomatic encounter with the Iranian government at the Afghanistan conference in the Hague. Even though the initial contact was awkward, it was clearly a step forward for the Obama administration, and both countries agreed that the opium/heroin trade was a destructive force in both the region and the world. As such, the United States should consider using collaboration on counternarcotics as an effective means to jump-start diplomacy with Iran. Although such an approach would be difficult, it could succeed if both sides focused solely on law enforcement, without the intrusion of politicians, intelligence operatives, and diplomats.

Background

Afghanistan produces roughly 90 percent of the world's opiates -- principally opium and heroin -- and the resulting drug trade fuels the Taliban's war effort. The Taliban is becoming increasingly reliant on this illicit multibillion-dollar industry to fund its operations in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and there is evidence of growing al-Qaeda involvement.

The UN's 2008 World Drug Report states that more than half of the world's opiate users -- over 9.3 million people -- reside in Asia and are found mostly along the major drug trafficking routes from Afghanistan. More than 2.3 million of the users live in the Middle East and Southwest Asia, many in Afghanistan and Iran.

Estimates for the number of Iranian users vary widely. Iranian government sources report that between 1.2 million and 2 million Iranians are addicted to opiates, while other estimates are generally higher, especially when frequent users are added to the figures. In other words, at least 2.5 percent of the adult population is addicted, and since 90 percent of Iranian users are male, 5 to 8 percent of adult men in Iran are using opiates regularly.

Opiates are the traditional intoxicant of choice in Iran, with opium use well established in tradition, in contrast to the negative social image of alcohol consumption. Opium was a significant problem in Iran before World War II, when it was the drug's leading international producer. In the decades before the revolution, much progress was made in addressing drug addiction, but the problem roared back after 1979.

Part of the problem was government attitude, since not all clerics disapproved of opium. The problem is compounded by geography, since Iran has served for many years as a major transshipment route for opium and heroin to Turkey, Europe, and other international destinations. As in many other countries, outside traffickers, in this case Afghans, work with Iranian organized crime to create the infrastructure necessary within Iran to support the transshipment of Afghan opiates to Western markets. The Afghan traffickers pay their Iranian partners with product rather than cash, thus contributing to the development of markets and increased demand inside Iran.

Not only is the Iranian addiction rate extremely high, a number of Iranian military personnel have been killed in the line of duty as a result of drug-related violence. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), whose al-Quds Force is the country's primary support organization for regional terrorists, is at the same time a main actor in the fight against drug trafficking. A number of IRGC units appear to be involved in both tasks, which poses a significant

problem for U.S.-Iranian counternarcotics cooperation.

Another potential obstacle for a collaborative effort is the perception that Washington supports at least one of the major organizations smuggling opiates into Iran, Jundallah, an ethnically Baluch "political" group also known as Iranian People's Resistance Movement. This organization has engaged in acts of terrorism against the Iranian government, and its leader has spoken on Voice of America.

The Way Forward

The U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) should be allowed to establish direct communication and cooperation with its Iranian law enforcement counterparts. Iranian officials have sought this kind of arrangement in the past, and some senior U.S. State Department leaders have even lobbied for it; however, previous administrations have prohibited the DEA from moving forward.

This year the DEA is cohosting -- with its Mexican counterparts -- its twenty-seventh annual International Drug Enforcement Conference (IDEC) in Cancun, Mexico. The IDEC has grown from a five-country, Western-hemisphere-centric endeavor, to a global effort involving approximately one hundred nations. Ninety-one countries participated in the 2008 event in Istanbul, Turkey. The IDEC venue could provide an ideal opportunity to open relations between the DEA and Iranian law enforcement, as well as other law enforcement agencies from around the globe, ultimately paving the way for a new era of cooperation between the United States and Iran.

After initial exchanges, the next step is to share intelligence and evidence, ideally through the establishment of a DEA office in Tehran. The DEA has the largest U.S. law enforcement presence abroad (eighty-six offices in sixty-seven countries), made possible only by the acceptance of DEA agents as federal narcotics officers, not spies. Gaining that acceptance in Iran will be a great challenge, and it certainly would not happen overnight. But it is important to set long-term goals. Although no foreign government has succeeded in working with Iran in this manner -- and the recent conviction of a foreign journalist as a spy is alarming -- the DEA has been extraordinarily effective in sharing related leads and sensitive drug intelligence with their counterparts in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and other countries throughout the region and the world.

The Challenge

Policing is a science, and complex counternarcotics policing is even more challenging. Senior politicians from both countries becoming involved in police business could be disastrous. Since the problem will be compounded by the role of the IRGC, a reflexively anti-American force, the challenge will be to find a way for cooperation among senior law enforcement leaders, working at a "cop-to-cop" level.

From there, law enforcement officials could conduct collaborative work on efforts to address drug demand reduction and treatment, with professionals from those disciplines taking the lead. In this context, it is discouraging that Iran arrested two brothers, Arash and Kamiar Alaei, as they were heading to the 2008 international AIDS conference where they were due to be awarded a prize for their work with mostly drug-addicted AIDS victims. The brothers were convicted as spies on the charge that their foreign collaboration was promoting the "soft overthrow" of the Islamic Republic -- a preoccupation of Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, who sees cooperation with foreigners as potentially dangerous to his regime.

To succeed, any U.S. effort to cooperate with Iran on counternarcotics efforts must draw upon the DEA's successful and decades-long experience with law enforcement partners from around the globe. Although Iran does not subscribe to U.S. terrorist designations of the Taliban and al-Qaeda, it is nonetheless in Iran's interest to work aggressively with the United States to target the drug-trafficking activities of these groups, which destabilize Iran and the region.

Michael Braun retired recently from the Drug Enforcement Administration, after a twenty-three-year career with the agency. From 2005 until his retirement, he served as the DEA's assistant administrator and chief of operations, overseeing the agency's 227 domestic and 86 foreign offices. ❖

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