

# Iran's 'War on Drugs': Potential for U.S.-Iranian Cooperation?

Nov 21, 2000



## Brief Analysis

Iran faces serious drug problems. It has 1.3 to 2 million addicts, and it is a principal transit point for drug smuggling from Afghanistan to the West. President Mohammed Khatami has criticized the West for its "meager help in the anti-drug campaign." However, before the United States decides whether or not to cooperate with Iran on counter-narcotics issues, it should consider that Iran may be using its counter-narcotics campaign to suppress domestic dissent.

### Iran's Eastern Border Problem

Afghanistan produces three times more opium than the rest of the world combined. The United Nations Drug Control Program (UNDCP) estimates that Afghanistan's annual production to be at 4,600 metric tons, although this year's production may be less due to drought conditions in the region. Afghanistan's ruling Taliban regime collects taxes from growers, exporters, and laboratories. It claims to be seeking help in planting alternative crops, but so far there is no evidence to suggest this.

Opium flows out of Afghanistan in various directions, such as toward central Asia, but the path through Iran is one of the principal routes used. About forty percent of the opium entering Iran is consumed domestically, while the rest flows on to Turkey, the southern Caucasus, Iraq, and the Persian Gulf. Iran accounts for 85 percent of all drugs confiscated globally, excluding cocaine.

There are constant reports of violence between Iranian forces and drug smugglers along Iran's eastern frontier — along its border with Afghanistan and Pakistan. To date, 3,000 security forces, including Revolutionary Guards, have been killed in the east. The Law Enforcement Forces (LEF) commander of the northeastern province of Khorasan (opposite Afghanistan) has complained about the advanced nature of the weapons confiscated from drug smugglers — including rocket-propelled grenades and heavy machine guns, as well as the advanced communications equipment smugglers use. This highlights the magnitude of resistance confronting the forces along the border region. Members of the IRGC (Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps), the Basij, the regular army, and the LEF are involved in the government's anti-narcotics effort. Iran has established several hundred miles of defenses along the border — including trenches, barbed wire, and concrete walls — designed to channel smugglers into specific areas where they can then be apprehended or attacked.

Security measures taken along Iran's eastern frontier may have a secondary purpose. The scale of operations and the rhetoric of the official statements describing them lead to the suspicion that what is called "counter-narcotics" is actually counterinsurgency against well-armed local dissident groups. Eastern Iran has witnessed high sectarian tensions between Shi'ites, who are by far the majority in Iran as a whole, and the large Sunni population in this region. For instance, on October 17, a car bomb exploded near a Shi'ite mosque in the Sunni-majority southeastern city of Zahedan, which local security officials blamed on "subservient elements of arrogance" (meaning the United States). Only after this bombing did President Khatami send a delegation to inspect extreme drought damage in the

region, which has only worsened the problems facing what Iran admits is the country's least developed area. Meanwhile, in the northeastern province of Khorasan, the governor general recently emphasized "the need to preserve unity between Sunnis and Shi'ites in the province to prevent security problems." In late October, reports indicated that four insurgents were killed and some had escaped in clashes near three villages which, a few days later, were evacuated by the military, purportedly due to an explosion at an ammunition depot. Iran's counter-narcotics campaign also may be caught up with the government's program to forcibly repatriate 1.4 million Afghani refugees, many of whom have settled in eastern Iran. Some of the refugees who are deported return illegally, sometimes armed and sometimes also smuggling drugs.

### Domestic Impact

Five tons of opium are consumed each day in Iran. Widespread drug use has contributed to serious problems with prostitution, theft, and the spread of HIV. There are between 1.3 and 2 million addicts in the country, out of a population of about 65 million – that means between two and three percent of the population are addicts. Tehran alone has 150,000 to 180,000 addicts, and 160 people are arrested there daily for distributing or selling drugs. Sixty percent of people in Iranian prisons are incarcerated for drug-related offenses. However, that figure may be inflated, because Iran has in the past accused political dissidents of drug use as a means of discrediting them and justifying their harsh punishment, including the death penalty.

There is debate within the Iranian government with regards to what approach to take in confronting the rising addiction rate. A 1989 law calls for the death penalty for anyone found in possession of at least five kilograms of opium or thirty grams of heroin. So far, there have been around 8,000 drug-related executions in Iran. Lately, the focus has shifted from punishment to treatment. Now, there are special rehabilitation camps and temporary amnesty programs for addicts who seek treatment.

Some Iranian officials do not seem to be placing much of a priority on the counter-narcotics effort. President Khatami has attended meetings of the counter-narcotics headquarters only three times, whereas his predecessor made bimonthly visits to the agency. Infighting among government officials leads to poor coordination in the anti-narcotics effort. Meanwhile, counter-narcotics officials have been unsuccessful in persuading top religious leaders to issue fatwas against the use or sale of opium, the traditional intoxicant of choice in Iran. Some government officials have even proposed legalizing opium.

Iran also seems to make use of drug smugglers for its own purposes. Following the arrest of its leader Abdullah Ocalan, the Turkish-based Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK) relocated its main bases to Iran. From there, it operates heroin refineries and taxes narcotics smugglers, relying on drugs as a significant source of income. An Iranian defector to Turkey reports that the Iranian government tolerates the PKK smuggling operation in exchange for intelligence information.

### Potential for U.S. Cooperation

The United States can readily offer to cooperate with Iran about limiting drug demand. For instance, it could encourage more non-governmental organizations to join Narcotics Anonymous, which is already working inside Iran. However, it is by no means clear how willing Iran would be to accept aid from the U.S. government on reducing drug demand.

Iran and the United States are both members of the "6 + 2" group of countries concerned about Afghanistan. This can provide a channel through which high-level officials can discuss the drug trade from Afghanistan, if Iran is so inclined.

Combating drug smuggling is a different from enforcing drug laws. Campaigns against drug smuggling require the use of equipment that has military applications. There is serious reason to be concerned that Iran's counter-

smuggling operations are also directed against dissent by minorities and that its drug enforcement is sometimes a cover for suppressing dissidents. Iran also seems to sanction drug smuggling by terrorists where politically convenient. For these reasons, it would not be appropriate for Washington to work with Iran against drug smuggling. Indeed, the current U.S. policy is to deduct from its contribution to the UNDCP the amount of financial support the program provides to Iran.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Ramin Seddiq.

Policy #504

---

## RECOMMENDED

---



BRIEF ANALYSIS

### [Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Farzin Nadimi

[\(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

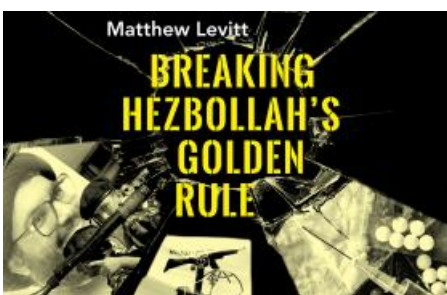
### [Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism\)](#)



## Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule

Feb 9, 2022



Matthew Levitt

[\(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule\)](#)

### TOPICS

[U.S. Policy \(/policy-analysis/us-policy\)](#)

### REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Iran \(/policy-analysis/iran\)](#)