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THE NEXUS OF NARCOTICS, CONFLICT, AND RADICAL ISLAMISM IN CENTRAL ASIA

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Svante E. Cornell

In the past six months, Central Asia has been catapulted into the center of world politics. During most of the 1990s, it had been a geopolitical backwater of slowly growing interest to regional powers and the United States due primarily to its energy resources and its location at the heart of Asia, landlocked between the major power-wielders of Eurasia in the twenty-first century: Russia, China, Pakistan, India, and Iran. But throughout the 1990s, Central Asia also received attention as it was widely perceived as a region beset by an Islamic tide. Two armed insurgencies by Islamist rebels in the summer of 1999 and 2000 seemed to corroborate these fears. Former Soviet Central Asia was still largely seen in isolation from its neighbor, Afghanistan, which is a historical part of Central Asia and has often been its heartland together with the civilizational centers of what is today southern Uzbekistan. The 23-year old war in Afghanistan was acknowledged to have negative effects on Central Asia, although the exact linkages were poorly understood.

Compared to the nearby Caucasus, Central Asia has been spared large-scale ethnic conflict. The main exception to this was the five-year civil war in Tajikistan that devastated that country, already among the poorest in the region. Breaking out in the early days of independence after a remarkable yet short period of pluralism and openness, this civil war that pitted Islamic-minded rebels against the post-communist government (though in reality the faultlines were as much regional as tied to religion) led the four other Central Asian states to centralize power and establish authoritarian states, curtailing opposition forces and repressing dissent. These measures were taken with reference to the risk of the 'Tajikistan scenario' engulfing the entire region, and were initially met with silent understanding both in the west and in the region itself. However, these measures did not stop the growth of Islamic radicalism in Central Asia. Far from it, old native movements were replaced by foreign-linked and considerably more sinister forces. The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan made headlines in August 1999 when it undertook an abortive invasion of southern Kyrgyzstan, a military operation that was repeated on a larger scale a year later. These events had attracted substantial attention in the

west, and the regional governments – especially Islam Karimov's government in Uzbekistan – have been blamed for their repressive tactics, which according to an increasingly consensual western media are almost solely responsible for radicalizing oppositional forces and 'pious Muslims' and turning them into extremists and terrorists, because underground Islamic movements are the only possible expressions of dissent. Focus on the IMU has concealed the dramatic growth of another, more secretive Islamic grouping with roots in the Middle East: the Hizb-ut-Tahrir al-Islami (HuT), which seeks to restore, by peaceful means, the Khilafat-i-Rashida, the Islamic state that existed immediately after the death of the Prophet Muhammad (Pbuh), from 632 to 661 AD. HuT is believed to command thousands of adherents mainly in Uzbekistan, southern Kyrgyzstan, and northern Tajikistan – areas in or surrounding the Fergana Valley.

While these developments accentuated the fears of an Islamic wind engulfing Central Asia, other developments of an equally sinister but less spiritual nature were underway. In the late 1990s, the collapse of state authority and of legal economic activities in Afghanistan had propelled the rise of widespread production of opium in the country. Large-scale production began with the civil war in 1979, but did not explode until after the Soviet withdrawal and civil war in 1992, when production passed 2,000 tons, less than half of world production. In 1999, it reached an all-time high of close to 4,500 tons, or 79% of world production.[1] The main smuggling routes for the opium was through Pakistan, Iran and Turkey, where it was transformed into heroin for European consumption. But gradually, Pakistan and especially Iran began to crack down on drugs trafficking. With a mounting domestic abuse problem, these states made serious efforts in the late 1990s to interdict drug traffickers from their territories. Iran deploys 30,000 men on its border with Afghanistan mainly to stop drug traffickers, and 3,000 Iranian law enforcement officers and an unknown number of traffickers have been killed in fighting. As Iran was clearly not a path of least resistance, the traffickers increasingly began to use northern routes via Central Asia and Russia or the Caucasus to transport their drugs. This has led to a dramatic increase in opiates abuse in Central Asia and Russia, which is also now being coupled with a burgeoning HIV epidemic.

Far from being separate phenomena, the Islamic radical movements and the narco-trafficking issues are closely related. Evidence from other parts of the world have shown that extremist organizations and organized crime very often live in symbiosis with each other, a symbiosis that occasionally turns into a merger. The leftist insurgents in Colombia are on example of ideologically based organizations that increasingly get involved in crime (in Colombia's case, drug trafficking and abductions) to finance their struggle; eventually, the whole or parts of these organizations increasingly to commercial activities, and in the end it is doubtful whether their primary aim is ideological or commercial. In Central Asia, there is compelling evidence that the IMU has been a major actor in the drugs trade through Central Asia. The IMU finds a great deal of its financing from drugs, and reminiscent to the Colombian FARC guerrilla, it is rumored to have made a large sum of money on the abduction of four Japanese geologists in Kyrgyzstan in 1999. Its attempts to militarily destabilize the governments of the region also are a source of concern that a development similar to that in the Andean region will take place: that the radical groups will seek to entertain instability in order to have safe havens for their illegal activities. The end of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan may not necessarily be a blessing in the short term. Quite to the contrary, the Taliban regime had effectively banned and eradicated the overwhelming majority of the opium production in Afghanistan. While the fall of the Taliban has led to a great military setback for the IMU – its leader, Juma Namangani, is believed to have been killed in the battle for Konduz in November 2001 – it may have forced numerous militants back into Central Asia from their refuge in Afghanistan. Blending into the Central Asian milieu once again, militants are unlikely to miss the opportunity to use the routes and channels the IMU has established between Central Asia and

[1] United Nations Drug Control Program, *Global Illicit Drugs Trends 2001*, p. 39.

Afghanistan for the renewed upsurge in opium production that has taken place in past months. Concomitantly, a renewed enforced ban on opium in Afghanistan – though unlikely in the absence of economic alternatives – would not necessarily solve or even attenuate the problem in a demand-driven global drugs market, as production then risks to move to Central Asia, further destabilizing the states of the region.

This paper seeks to understand the linkages between radical Islam, drugs trafficking, and protracted conflict in the Central Asian region. A better understanding of the interaction between these phenomena is necessary for the U.S. at a time when it is engaging heavily in Central Asia's reconstruction and stabilization. The paper will therefore in turn analyze the Afghan-Central Asian drugs connection; the rise of radical Islamic movements in Central Asia; and the interaction between these two in order to arrive at conclusions regarding the present situation in the region.

The Rise of Radical Islam in Central Asia

As early as 1991 when the five Soviet Central Asian republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan gained independence, fears were voiced that these countries would be engulfed by a radical Islamic wave.[2] Ever since, a religious revival has undoubtedly taken place. Just as the collapse of communist ideology led to the revival of the Christian faith in Eastern Europe, the same phenomenon led to an increased interest in Islam among the populations of Central Asia. Hence, a religious revival was a natural, benign, and potentially stabilizing factor, as it filled a void created by the collapse of the Communist value system. Initially, governments even encouraged the restoration of religion to a natural role in society by facilitating the building of mosques, while trying to keep religious activity under state supervision. However, the ominous faces of Islamic revival in Central Asia have often been emphasized and not without reason. The region borders on two focal countries of the global radical Islamic movement: Iran and Afghanistan. Though of different and occasionally antagonistic persuasions, these two countries have acquired the dubious distinction of being at the center of Islamic radicalism in the 1990s. The unraveling of the Soviet Union also seemed to highlight the destructive potential of political Islam. Shortly after independence, Tajikistan descended into a murderous civil war that pitted the former communist élite against an opposition force that contained strong Islamic elements. This conflict led to desperate efforts in the four other regional states to check the development of political opposition, which was considered disloyal and subversive by nature. In particular, Islamic currents in the opposition were targeted and outlawed.

Yet the governing élites realized the need to embrace the Islamic faith, and most Central Asian presidents have performed the *Hajj*, the pilgrimage to the Islamic holy sites of Mecca and Medina. Whereas Central Asian governments have come to be identified as 'anti-religious' and 'suppressive' of any form of religious observance, this is a gross simplification: some regional governments in fact promote a traditional rather than radical form of Islam. Uzbekistan, perhaps the Central Asian state most criticized for its 'anti-Islamic' stance, actively and officially embraces the more mystical and less political Sufi form of Islam, which to a large extent originated in Central Asia. Uzbekistan maintains excellent relations with the global network of the most prominent Sufi order, the Naqshbandiya.[3]

The Radicals

What the Central Asian élites have been battling with fervor is what they interpret as an onslaught of an alien, politicized, and inherently violent brand of Islam – the strictly orthodox and politically radical forces, exemplified by the Taliban regime that has controlled most of Afghanistan since the mid-1990s. These forces are commonly

[2] This paradigm was reflected clearly in the titles of some of the early books on the region: Ahmed Rashid, *The Resurgence of Central Asia: Islam or Nationalism*, London: Zed, 1994; Dilip Hiro, *Between Marx and Muhammad*, London: Haper Collins, 1995.

[3] Specifically, The Washington-based Islamic Supreme Council of America, part of the Naqshbandiya order, is supportive of the current government in Uzbekistan. See http://www.islamicsupremecouncil.org/.

lumped together under the term 'Wahhabi', referring to a form of Islam practiced in its modern form in Saudi Arabia for little more than a century. Yet the Saudi influence is complemented by the *Deobandi* school of thought, another radical brand of Islam, originating in India in the 19th century. For example, the negative attitude to women's education espoused by the Taliban is a component of Deobandi thought. Most Taliban leaders were trained at the Deobandi religious seminaries (*Madrassahs*) in Pakistan's Northwest Frontier Province, and these madrassahs still form the main ideological influence on the movement. Hundreds of young men from Central Asia have been, and are currently enrolled in these seminaries, and after graduating bring back the radical teachings they internalize there to their home countries.

This phenomenon is older than the Taliban, however. The Taliban did not emerge until 1994 and did not approach the border with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan until 1997-98. The roots of the Central Asian Islamic movements are to a great extent domestic, dating back most directly to the early 1990s but in fact to a movement that began in the 1970s. Especially in Tajikistan, an underground Islamic movement had existed in the 1970s, which grew in strength with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan – an invasion that put numerous Central Asian nationals in contact with their ethnic kin across the border, with which they had previously had no connection as the Soviet southern border was closed. These connections with deeply religious Afghan Uzbeks and Tajiks made an imprint on many Soviet citizens, and fueled the Islamic revival there. A first public demonstration against the soviet occupation of Afghanistan took place in 1987 in Panj, near the Afghan border. The Islamic Renaissance Party of the USSR was founded in 1990, and in October 1991, a Tajik branch was inaugurated.[4] This party played an important role in the opposition to the newly elected head of the Tajik communist party, Rakhmon Nabiyev, which had assembled in the main square of the capital Dushanbe. As the situation deteriorated into civil war in early 1992, in which the Islamic forces found themselves in a strong position among the opposition forces to the Communist Party. The civil war ended in 1997 in a power-sharing deal between the two major factions, the government and the United Tajik Opposition, in which the IRP played a dominant role, The IRP integrated itself into the system, a development that was hailed by observers as a model for Central Asia. However, as the IRP moved into the mainstream, it moved away from the more radical elements that had formed part of it during the civil war, elements that are now joining other, more radical movements.

The IMU

Among Islamic groups in Central Asia, most attention has been drawn to the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), thanks to its high-profile military actions on the territories of Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan – but also thanks to its inclusion in the hall of fame of the worldwide extremist mainstream, the U.S. State Department's list of terrorist organizations. Vowing to establish an Islamic state in Central Asia based in the mountainous (mainly Uzbek-populated) Ferghana valley that straddles the territories of Kyrgystan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, the IMU launched abortive military actions in 1999 and 2000 that plunged the region into a frenzy. The Kyrgyz military especially was caught completely off-guard and displayed that the country was ill-prepared to repel such an attack. The IMU is widely known to have bases in areas controlled by the Taliban in northern Afghanistan. The IMU also has had strong links to the Al Qaeda network, which is a major reason why the movement was placed on the State Department's terrorist list. Evidence of these links is now beginning to peter out from post-Taliban Afghanistan.

The origins of the IMU began in the city of Namangan in Uzbekistan's Fergana valley in 1990. A group of men in their early twenties, formally belonging to the Uzbek wing of the IRP led by Tohir Yoldash and Juma Namangani, built a new Mosque in the city and tried to enforce Islamic dress codes and behavior in the town. They demanded that the Uzbek government declared an Islamic state, but this demand was rejected by Karimov and not supported by the IRP as a whole.

[4] Ahmed Rashid, *Jihad:The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002, p. 99.

Hence they split and formed the Adolat (Justice) Party, which spread to other areas in the Fergana valley. Throughout 1991, Islamic groups gained prominence in the valley, mainly Adolat but also groups like Islam Lashkarlary (The soldiers of Islam) and Tauba (Repentance). The government of Uzbekistan remained a bystander for several months, in stark contrast to its later policies. The government was apparently unable to judge the strength of the Islamic feelings in Fergana or to devise a strategy to deal with it. Only in March 1992 did the government outlaw Adolat, forcing its leaders into exile in Tajikistan – where the civil war was just breaking out. Yoldash and Namangani aligned themselves with radical forces within the Tajik opposition and fought the government there. The IRP there made use of Namangani's military prowess – he had been a Soviet paratrooper fighting in Afghanistan – and he took the Tavildara valley in northeastern Tajikistan as his base. This area remains the strongest IMU stronghold in the entire Central Asia. Meanwhile, Yoldash toured the Islamic world, including Chechnya, Turkey, and Pakistan. The different roles and different character of the two men are well known: Yoldash is the ideologue where Namangani is the guerrilla leader. After the 1997 peace accords, the two decided to break with their former Tajik allies. A serious crackdown on Islamic movements in the Fergana valley was in full strength at this moment, prompting an exodus of militants who ended up with Namangani in Tajikistan.[5]

With this new strength, Namangani moved to Afghanistan, where the Taliban were now extending their power, and founded the IMU in Kabul in 1998. Shortly thereafter, in early 1999, a series of bomb explosions rocked the Uzbek capital Tashkent that almost killed President Karimov. The IMU was blamed for these terrorist attacks, though conspiracies in the region are plentiful as to the perpetrators' identity. Namangani apparently moved back into Tajikistan at this point, utilizing the coalition government's weakness and inability to control its territory to assert its position in the Taivldara valley, near the Kyrgyz section of the Fergana valley. In August 1999, the IMU hit the world headlines by making its first military incursion into the Batken region in Kyrgyzstan, catching the Kyrgyz military by complete surprise and prompting a mobilization of the Uzbek army – Uzbekistan being the final target of the militants. The Uzbek air force retaliated by bombing Tavildara. The IMU contingents had no apparent military aim, instead limiting their activities to sowing general unrest and abducting some twenty people, including four Japanese citizens. Later, the IMU managed reportedly managed to extract a sum of up to $2-6 million in exchange for the safe return of these hostages. After receiving the ransom, the IMU detachments retreated to Tavildara. The Uzbek pressure had now built up on Tajikistan so much that the authorities convinced Namangani to leave the valley for Afghanistan. Hence several Russian army helicopters stationed in Tajikistan airlifted the main IMU contingents from Tavildara into Afghanistan, where Namangani and his men spent winter in camps in Kunduz and Mazar-i-Sharif.

A year later, the IMU stroke again. In Summer 2000, Namangani was back in Tajikistan and launched a series of significantly more sophisticated attacks. Although these incursions were awaited, their scale and geographical spread was much larger than the previous year. The southern Surkhandarya district of Uzbekistan was targeted, as were the mountains just North of Tashkent, in addition to the Kyrgyz section of the Fergana valley. Several foreign mountain climbers were taken hostages, but were all able to escape their captors. As operations ended, Namangani was again flown to Afghanistan by Russian army helicopters.

The fact that both the IMU's incursions into Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan were launched from the territory of Tajikistan, not Afghanistan, bears repeating. Although the group keeps training camps in Afghanistan, it has also on several occasions freely moved across the Tajik-Afghan border, despite the fact that this border is patrolled by over 12,000 Russian troops in accordance with a formal agreement reached by the Foreign and Defense Ministries of Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. The ease with which the IMU operates shows at the very least that it has contacts in the

[5] Rashid, *Jihad*, p. 147.

highest echelons of power in Tajikistan. In any case, the weakness of the Tajik government makes it incapable of controlling its territory effectively, enabling the IMU to operate with relative freedom. Hence, the IMU's ability to wreak havoc would not necessarily end even should members of the group be interdicted from Afghanistan, as seems to be happening presently. It relies on both Afghanistan and Tajikistan for its operations.

On an equally important note, the threat of the IMU has been inflated, especially in the Russian media, to such an extent that Uzbek President Islam Karimov has accused Moscow of exaggerating the threat of militant Islam in Central Asia in order to sustain its predominant influence in its former colonies.[6] The two IMU incursions were both too small to pose a serious threat to the governments or territories of Central Asian states. There is reason, however, to suspect that the IMU operations in part fulfilled another objective— that of creating unrest and instability, and weakening the regional governments, thereby also facilitating the trafficking of drugs through Central Asia, as will be discussed below.[7] Thus, while the attacks by the IMU were isolated and relatively small, they were perceived by the regional governments as an immediate challenge to their sovereignty and territorial integrity.

The IMU fought on the side of the Taliban and Al Qaeda fighters in the battle for Konduz in November 2001, where its military leader, Namangani, is reported to have been killed with several hundred followers. Most sources assess that the IMU was severely downsized by U.S. military and its Afghan allies during this fighting.

Hizb-ut-Tahrir

In fact, a far greater, though less extreme, concern is a secretive organization with roots in the Middle East, named the Hizb-ut-Tahrir (HuT). HuT shares the stated aim of the IMU—the establishment of an Islamic state across present borders in Central Asia. However, HuT seeks to achieve this objective through propagating its tenets at the grassroots level, rather than through the use of force. Practically unknown in the region three years ago, the growth of HuT has amassed remarkable support in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan. The group is distributing leaflets and recruiting new members in most areas of the Ferghana valley, and does not seem to have been deterred by massive government crackdowns. Within the last year, Uzbek, Kyrgyz, and Tajik security services have arrested hundreds, if not thousands of suspected HuT members, but seem to be fighting a losing war against the organization. Estimates of the number arrested in Uzbekistan alone range from 50,000 to 100,000. Whereas the IMU discredited itself in much of public opinion through its violent approach, HuT is gradually presenting itself as the only viable opposition to the present ruling élites, especially in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. The lack of secular opposition forces in these two countries, most of which are in exile or jail, has been an important factor in the quick rise of HuT. However, the organizational skills it apparently possesses, including working in hierarchical groups of five men only one of whom knows anything about a higher level, and a well-funded treasury, have also played their part.

The Complexity of Origins

The current situation in Central Asia highlights the mistake commonly made of assuming a conflict between Islam and secularism, whereas in fact, the real conflict lies *within* Islam: between the traditional, tolerant, and moderate faith adhered to by the overwhelming majority of Central Asia's Muslims on the one hand and a well-organized and radical, but numerically small number of groups on the other. The traditional brand of Islam has no difficulty accommodating secular forms of government, keeping religion in the private sphere. The radical brand, however, is often characterized by an inherently intolerant attitude, refusing compromise, debate, and the room for interpretation of the religious tenets (*Ijtihad*); moreover, radical groups often aspire for political power and the

[6] Karimov stated as much to the visiting Turkish foreign minister Ismail Cem in October 2000. See RFE/RL Newsline, October4, 2000.

[7] For an excellent analysis of the issue, see Tamara Makarenko, 'Terrorism and Religion Mask Drug Trafficking in Central Asia', *Jane's Intelligence Review*, November 2000.

overthrow of regimes that they consider 'infidel'.[8]

The struggle within Islam in turn implies that the repression taking place in Central Asia is not happening purely out of the whims of the leadership. Radical Islamic groups that threaten the relatively weak and poorly rooted governments in the region do exist; however, so do congregations with vague or modest political ambitions, as well as others devoid of interest for politics. The problem often lies in the difficulty of identifying the enemy. Various Islamic groups are often funded and sponsored from abroad, typically not by easily identified governments, but rather by private or semi-private institutions and multinational movements in the Muslim world, which are considerably more difficult to pinpoint and counteract. The regional élites, holdovers from the Communist nomenklatura of the Soviet era, rely on the policy tool they know best – using the security apparatus and the court system to liquidate the threat that the Islamic radicals pose. Moreover, they have had an increasing tendency to view all Islamic groups outside state control and supervision with suspicion, as threats to state security, and have therefore cracked down on them vigorously.

At a Congressional hearing on the human rights situation in Central Asia in July 2001, some members of Congress described the rise of Islamic extremism in the form of movements such as the IMU and HuT as resulting directly from the repression by governments on the human rights front. All government of the region—although to varying degrees—have reacted to the threats posed by these radical Islamic groups by taking similar measures. Opposition figures and journalists have been arrested and beaten, press freedoms have been significantly curbed, and basic human rights such as the freedom of religion and speech have been violated.[9] While it is true that the governments in the region are guilty of basic human rights violations to different degrees, and further that these crackdowns on religious and press freedoms are exacerbating the situation by limiting the number of available channels for opposition and expression, the reasons for the increased Islamic following in the region are in fact much more complex. Arguing that radical Islam is solely or mainly based on repression is clearly unsubstantiated. While repression of unorthodox religious groups is a fact in Central Asia, and to a higher degree than elsewhere in Uzbekistan, and though it may certainly play a role in attracting support to the most radical groups in some cases, the reasons for the upsurge in radical Islam is considerably more complex. The example of Pakistan is illustrative. In the last 15-20 years, radical Islamic groups have been accorded free sway in Pakistan. Repression against them has been minimal, and successive governments have gone to great lengths not to antagonize the radicals. This has not led to a calming of fervor, quite to the contrary, to a mushrooming problem that the military government of General Pervez Musharraf is now trying to clean up. The rise of radical Islam is a complex phenomenon whose causes are not well understood. There is considerable reason to argue, though, that one of the primary causes of societal discontent lies in the region's catastrophic economic condition.

Despite a marginal increase in GDP over the past few years, living standards for most people and production outputs remain far below the 1991 levels in all of the Central Asian countries – with only one country, Kazakhstan, seeming to do better economically. The GDPs of all of the economies today are only a fraction of the 1989 levels, before the collapse of the USSR. This steep decline is largely a result of the collapse of industries that could only be sustained through the Soviet supply and distribution system.[10] Endemic corruption and lack of government and economic reform have compounded the situation. Large portions of the populations, especially in

[8] For a wider discussion, see Olivier Roy, *The Failure of Political Islam*, London: Tauris, 1994. A wealth of information from and on radical Islamic movements is posted on the internet, for example at http://www.ummah.org/ and http://www.hizb-ut-tahrir.org/.

[9] Human rights groups such as Human Rights Watch and the Committee to Project Journalists have thoroughly documented these cases.

[10] *Calming the Ferghana Valley*, page 61. For example, Kyrgyzstan's 1997 real GDP was only 57% of that in 1989. Tajikistan's 1997 real GDP was a mere 40% of that in 1989. Also page 65.

Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, live below the poverty line and sustain their existence through the informal economy and shuttle trading across borders.[11] In Kyrgyzstan, estimates of the share of the population living under the poverty line range between 66% and 85%, while estimates of the unemployment rate in the southwestern Batken region of the country range from 50-80%.[12] Overall unemployment in Tajikistan is estimated at 80%.

The last two years of drought in the region have severely exacerbated an already fragile economic situation. The UN has warned that over five million people are at risk of starvation in Afghanistan and Tajikistan. This drought is particularly damaging in light of the fact that much of the population in Central Asia lives in rural areas and depends on crops such as cotton, silk, fruits, vegetables, and wool.[13] While only Kazakhstan had a majority of its population in urban areas as of 1990, over two-thirds of the population in both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan live in rural areas.[14] Due to security concerns and the threats of extremist incursions, governments have been diverting funds that could be used for social programs and development projects to invigorate the economy, and are instead using them to purchase military equipment and train their border guards in an attempt to bolster border security. Regional governments have also begun to mine their borders to prevent the infiltration of unwanted extremists, which has had a decidedly negative impact both on local civilians who have fallen victim to unmarked landmines, as well as large portions of the population in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, among others, who rely on shuttle trading across borders to survive. The increasing obstacles for the local population to sustain their livelihoods, coupled with the rapid population growth in the region, serves as a breeding ground for extremist groups to curry favor to disenchanted and poverty-stricken segments of society. It should be recalled that in contrast to many third world countries, living standards in former Soviet republics, including Central Asia, were considerably better ten to twenty years ago. The present situation hence signifies a considerable deterioration of living conditions, increasing popular frustration.

The Drugs Trade in Central Asia

Opium Production Trends

Afghanistan, until recently, produced 75-80 of the world's heroin through the large-scale cultivation of opium poppy plants. The variation in Afghanistan's production of opium and the trends in heroin production in the region betray a significantly more complex picture. Afghanistan has always been an opium-producing area, though the quantities produced were very small before the Soviet invasion. Gradually, however, with the eradication of opium in Turkey, Iran and Pakistan, Afghanistan became the chief southwest Asian producer of opiates. Still by 1986, Afghanistan produced less than 500 tons of opium, cultivated on 10,000 ha. The number reached 1,500 tons of opium, on 40,000 ha, which still amounted to less than 40% of global production in 1990. The big surge nevertheless came with the civil war in Afghanistan and the breakdown of state authority in the early 1990s, and Afghanistan produced 3,500 tons of opium on 70,000 ha in the previous record year of 1994. The Taliban coming to power originally led to a minor decrease in opium production, and areas under cultivation decreased to 54,000 ha in 1995 (2,200 tons). But from 1996, the area under cultivation steadily grew until it reached a record 90,983 ha in 1999, producing an estimated 4,600 tons of opium, which is considered to be roughly the double of Europe's yearly consumption of illegal opiates. Afghanistan now

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[11] See Gulzina Karim Kyzy, 'Kyrgyz Shuttle Trade in Crisis', *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, August 1, 2001.

[12] See the International Crisis Group's Report, *Incubators of Regional Conflict? Hyper-depression in Localities in Central Asia*, page 8.

[13] According to the CIA World Factbook, the following percentages of the population work in agriculture and forestry: Kyrgyzstan - 45%, Uzbekistan – 44%, Tajikistan – 50%, Kazakhstan – 23%, and Turkmenistan – 44%.

[14] The Central Asian successor states have the highest fertility rates of the former USSR. For details on demographics and the rural population in Central Asia, see Cynthia Buckley, "Rural/Urban differentials in demographic processes: The Central Asian states," *Population Research and Policy Review*, Volume 17, pages 71-89, 1998.

accounted for 79% of global opium production.[15]

The Taliban government had initially, when coming to power, promised to ban the opium production and trade as non-Islamic. This promise remain unfulfilled for several years, and instead the production boom of 1996-99 took place. This led to the creation of a virtual opium economy in Afghanistan, where farmers would receive credits from traders at the beginning of the growing season which would then be deducted from their earnings at harvest time. The collapse of the legal economy of the country pushed many farmers to opium production which is comparatively safe, and yields profits as much as five times higher than the next best crop, usually wheat or onions. Opium is also easy to store, meaning that farmers could, and did, hold their savings in opium and kept them for bad times. It should be mentioned that the money that the Afghan farmers receive from the opium trade is negligible compared to the money earned by traffickers.

Taliban Amir-ul-Momineen Mullah Mohammed Omar in July 2000 issued an edict banning opium production. While heavily speculated upon and doubted both as to its implementation and its motivation, this ban gradually entered into force. Production decreased in 2000 to little over 3,000 tons on 82,000 ha, still 70% of global production. But the full scope of the ban was not seen until 2001, when opium poppy production fell by 94% to 185 tons in 2001.[16] Most importantly, opium poppy was almost totally eradicated from the province of Helmand in the southwest, which by itself produced 40% of world opium in 1999. The irrigated areas with high yield of Helmand accounted for 51% of Afghanistan's production, whereas Nangarhar province in the East accounted for 25%. Opium production in Nangarhar was not totally eradicated, but decreased by 99% to a mere 218 ha from 19,747 in 2000. On the other hand, a dramatic surge of opium production took place in the areas under the control of the Northern Alliance. The province of Badakhshan was now the first producing area with 6342 ha, which accounted for a rise in 158% compared to the previous year, and 83% of national production.

This dramatic decrease in overall production, which could not be checked by the dramatic increase in the small and rain-fed northern areas of the country outside Taliban control, did not affect markets westward to a considerable extent. Prices in Europe did not change; however, prices in Tajikistan were beginning to be affected by the ban by the time the entire situation changed in September 2001. Yet trafficking from Afghanistan continued unabated, as witnessed by the continued and even increased levels of trafficking along the Central Asian routes. In fact, almost one year after the edict was issued, in July 2001, the largest seizure of more than two tons of raw opium was confiscated along the border between Afghanistan and Tajikistan.[17]

The reason for the small effect of the ban is the stockpiles that traffickers had been assembling in Afghanistan and along the trafficking routes. An estimated 240 tons of heroin and large quantities of raw opium had been stockpiled, accounting for close to two years of consumption in western Europe. Traffickers could hence rely on stockpiles for an extended period of time.

The military operations in Afghanistan have led to a surge in opium production. While the interim government interdicted opium production on January 17, 2002, it does not wield power in the regions of the country, where individual warlords and tribal chieftains are autonomously controlling their former dominions. Moreover, the international community has failed to quickly provide alternative economic opportunities for farmers, hence forcing many to resort to opium production. Moreover, given that the Northern Alliance engaged heavily in drugs production and trafficking and that its production of opium surged when the Taliban production fell, the credibility of the NA-dominated interim government is shaky at best. A pre-

[15] United Nations Drug Control Program, *Global Illicit Drugs Trends 2001*, p. 39.

[16] UNDCP, *Afghanistan: Annual Opium Poppy Survey 2001*, Islamabad: UNDCP, 2002.

[17] "Russians seize two tons of opium," *UPI*, July 15, 2001; Alexei Igushev, 'Tajikistan: Two tons of Opium Went Up in Smoke', *Central Asia-Caucasus* Analyst, August 1, 2001.

assessment of the UNDCP published in February 2002 confirmed that opium production has returned in a high scale in Afghanistan. The assessment holds that poppy cultivation in Afghanistan could cover 45,000 to 65,000 ha of land in 2002, generating between 1900 and 2700 tons of opium, a level comparable to the mid-1990s, putting Afghanistan again as the leading global producer of opium.[18] The areas of production include the high-producing provinces of Helmand and Nangarhar.

The conclusions from this development is that the Taliban did not control the opium trade in Afghanistan, and that blaming the Taliban for the surge in opium (or explaining eradication in 2001 as a ploy to increase prices) is misplaced. The exact reasons for the 2000 ban are unclear – probably boiling down to what it actually purported to be, a religious edict. Yet it is reasonably clear that the Taliban taxed the drugs trade just like any other activity, while the control of the trade is in the hand of traffickers of whom we know very little. Intelligence sources claim that most traffickers are carriers of Turkish passports; this would tend to confirm the theory that the Kurdish illegal groups (linked to the PKK) that controlled the heroin trade through Europe in the 1980s and very early 1990s have now moved to also control the northern route through Central Asia.

The Trafficking Routes

The surrounding countries of Afghanistan, including Pakistan, Iran, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan, have become major transiting routes for these drugs. While Pakistan remains one export route for Afghan drugs, Iran has perhaps been the most successful at curbing the flow of narcotics, seizing 85% of all the opium and nearly half of the heroin and morphine captured worldwide last year. Despite the over 30,000 law enforcement guards along the Afghan-Iran border and the daily gun-fights with traffickers, officials concede, however, that they are at loss trying to stem the flow of drugs.[19] As a kind of 'security belt' is created around Afghanistan to stem the flow of drugs, the traffickers are naturally drawn to the weak Central Asian states where government officials can be bought into the trade more easily, and where law enforcement authorities are nowhere near the efficiency or power as their colleagues Iran or Pakistan. That Uzbekistan is comparatively less affected by the drugs trade also show to the importance of weak states in the drugs trade. Uzbekistan, widely known as a repressive state, is a much higher risk for traffickers than to take the route through either Turkmenistan, which is repressive but where parts of government are cooperative, or through Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, states that are very weak and exert only limited control over their territories.

Over the past few years, Central Asia has become the primary export route for Afghan drugs. While the region's mountainous, rugged terrain might normally deter trafficking, the dearth of border posts and the difficulty in patrolling the often unmarked border has actually facilitated the ability for drug trafficking groups to operate freely. Reports suggest that more than half of all illicit Afghan heroin production is smuggled through Central Asia.[20] Four of the six trafficking routes from Afghanistan go through Central Asia, and three of these routes are through Tajikistan.[21] That does not necessarily mean that each route has comparable quantities. In fact, there is reason to believe that Turkmenistan is acquiring a position as the main trafficking route. Because Turkmenistan is a relatively closed society like that of North Korea, little confirmed information is available about drug trafficking along the Afghan-Turkmen border. However, estimates confirms that significant amounts of drugs are being trafficked via Turkmen territory – an estimated 80 tons of heroin a year - and involvement of high Turkmen officials in the drugs trade is

[18] UNDCP, *Afghanistan: Opium Poppy Survey 2002, Pre-Assessment*, Islamabad: UNDCP, 2002.

[19] Molly Moore, "Iran Fighting a Losing Drug War," *Washington Post*, July 18, 2001.

[20] Dr. Vladimir Fenopetov, "Drug Threat from Afghanistan via Central Asia," Presentation given….. For detailed information on the drug trafficking situation in Central Asia, see Martha Brill Olcott and Natalia Udalova, "Drug Trafficking on the Great Silk Road: The Security Environment in Central Asia," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace Working Paper*, Number 11, March 2000.

[21] International Crisis Group, *Central Asia: Drugs and Conflict*, Asia Report no. 25, 26 November 2001.

increasingly plausible.[22] Turkmenistan, with its policy of neutrality, is remaining aloof of regional cooperation efforts, including those in the narcotics field, and its efforts to stem the drugs trade have been less than satisfactory. From Turkmenistan, the drugs are transported by ship over the Caspian sea, where it transits the territories of Azerbaijan or Dagestan, over the Russian North Caucasus or Georgia, where the breakaway republic of Abkhazia is a major hub from which heroin is transported over the Black sea into Europe.

Significant amounts of drugs are also exported through Tajikistan to European markets, directly involving the Tajik population, including women traffickers, in the drug trade. The Tajik Interior Ministry's Directorate for Combating Illicit Drug Trafficking has announced that the number of cases of drug trafficking over the first six months of 2001 has increased 24% since the same period of last year.[23] Trafficking via Tajikistan involves mainly territory that has consistently been under the control of the Northern alliance, the areas bordering Jirgatal and Garm in Tajikistan. In particular, warehouses with large quantities of drugs seem to exist in Taloqan, a town that has changed sides several times in the war between the Northern Alliance and the Taliban – with little effect on the traffickers, who seem to cooperate equally well with both sides.[24] Additionally, reports have indicated that the trafficking of raw opium through Tajikistan has increased the role that heroin-making laboratories play in processing the opium. This involvement suggests the threat that segments of Tajik society will become dependent on the illicit narcotics industry not only by smuggling the product, but also in producing it.

The problem is complicated by the fact that members of the Tajik and Russian governments, who often vocally condemn the illicit drug trade, are often in fact directly implicated in its continuation. In particular, the Russian 201st armored division stationed in Tajikistan has been the target of widespread accusations of involvement. Its military aircraft traveling to and from Russia are not inspected, and it is reportedly easy to buy an informal 'ticket' to Moscow on such a flight. Excess baggage is not a problem, neither are any x-ray machines employed or any passport controls effectuated either in Tajikistan or upon arrival in Russia.[25] In the first public admission of its kind, a former Russian military intelligence officer confirmed in May 2001 that Russian members of the military and Tajik government officials are complicit in the Afghan drug trade.[26] Apparently, planes, helicopters, and trains that provided weapons and supplies to Tajikistan for further transfer to the Northern Alliance did and do not go back to Russia empty – instead, these vessels are filled with drugs and shipped directly from the Tajik capital of Dushanbe on to Russian destinations.[27] While this is not a new business for Russians and Tajiks—in fact, drug trafficking in the region has existed for decades—the scale of trafficking today and the monetary benefits that it brings to élites on top, far outweighs that of previous decades.

Effects of the Drugs Trade

This drug trafficking economy has a number of effects on Central Asia. First, the local populations are becoming increasingly subject to crime, harassment, and the whim of Afghan drug lords. The population in Tajikistan's Shuroabad district—a key point along the trafficking route—has become a target for Afghan drug dealers who harass or kidnap the local population to frighten them into cooperation in the narcotics business.[28]

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[22] Times of Central Asia, 26 July 2001.

[23] BBC Monitoring, July 20, 2001, Asia-Plus news agency, Dushanbe, July 20, 2001.

[24] Aram Roston, 'Central Asia's Heroin Problem', *The Nation*, 25 March 2002.

[25] Personal Communication from a person that actually traveled this way.

[26] His name is Anton Surikov. For the full interview with him, see Asal Azamova, "The Military is in Control of Drug Trafficking in Tajikistan," *Moscow News*, May 30, 2001.

[27] Jamestown Monitor, "Civil Order Still a Distant Prospect in Tajikistan," Volume 7, Issue 137, July 18, 2001; Jean-Christophe Peuch, "Central Asia: Charges Link Russian Military to Drug Trade," *RFE/RL*, June 8, 2001. Asal Azamova, "The Military is in Control of Drug Trafficking in Tajikistan," *Moscow News*, May 30, 2001.

[28] Bruce Pannier, "Tajikistan: Border District Victimized by Afghan Drug Trade," RFE/RL, July 13, 2001. "Tajikistan: Border villagers

Local authorities are also often guilty of illegal seizures and extracting bribes from the population under the pretext of stopping drug trafficking.[29]

The economic dependence on the drugs trade is also increasing. Tajikistan, having suffered from drought and from civil war, is a prime target; it is now estimated that 30-50% of the country's economy is linked to drug trafficking.[30] And as experience has shown in other parts of the world, drug trafficking does not take place without affecting the local population. Couriers are frequently paid in kind and not in cash; hence couriers contribute to creating a drug addiction problem as they seek to change their drugs received as payment into cash.

The addiction problem is increasing rapidly in Central Asia, Russia, and Eastern Europe. This is a repetition of the process that took place in Pakistan and Iran, where the main trafficking routes used to go; there are anywhere from two to four million opiate addicts in each of these two countries. Heroin addiction in Russia has increased by 400% since 1990, and there are an estimated three to four million drug users in Russia. Central Asian states are seeing a similar phenomenon, developing at an even quicker rate. Kazakhstan in particular is being hit hard, with an estimated 300,000 users for 16 million people (1,8%); Tajikistan an estimated 100,000 (1,8%) Kyrgyzstan an estimated 50,000 for five million people (1%). These figures should be contrasted with the 0,3% of the western European population that are thought to be drug addicts. Since the rates in Central Asia and Russia have not stabilized but are growing rapidly, while treatment is virtually non-existent in many places, drug addiction in Central Asia and the former Soviet republics as a whole is likely to constitute a very substantial public health problem in the next few years.

Concomitantly, the region's populations are also now subject to a growing HIV/AIDS epidemic that is approaching the scale of that in sub-Saharan Africa, especially among youth. While the actual numbers of people infected with the HIV/AIDS virus remain relatively small, the rapidly growing number of intravenous drug users is a precursor to increased incidences of HIV/AIDS, TB, and other sexually transmitted diseases, that is likely to take on epidemic proportions in the next few years. The medical systems in Central Asia, including the drug treatment centers, simply lack the funds and expertise to address this growing challenge. Russia is now the country in the world in which HIV is increasing most rapidly. Central Asian states are totally unequipped to handle such an epidemic. Kyrgyzstan does not even possess technology to perform HIV tests. The practice of seasonal labor, mainly working-age men traveling to Russia or other parts of the former Soviet Union for work during summer, is also speeding up the spread of sexually transmittable diseases to Central Asia, especially syphilis but increasingly also HIV. Though at present HIV is almost exclusively found among intravenous drug users as the disease is relatively recent in the region, it is likely to spread into the rest of the population with time, as has been the case elsewhere.

Also, crime rates are likely to keep rising as a consequence of increased drug trafficking. Corruption in government is already a large problem in the region, and it has risen sharply with the sums of money available through drug trafficking. Tajikistan's ambassador and trade representative to Kazakhstan, for example, were both apprehended transporting 62 and 24 kilograms of heroin.[31]

IMU and the Drug Trade

Finally, the drug trafficking industry unites groups who often oppose each other ideologically or otherwise. Drug traffickers have been able to move freely between Taliban-controlled and Northern Alliance-controlled territory. In particular, it appears that the IMU is heavily involved in the trafficking of opiates from Afghanistan through Central Asia to Europe.

victims of Afghan raiders," IRIN, June 15, 2001.

[29] See Nancy Lubin, "Central Asia's War on Drug Takes a High Human Toll," *Eurasianet*, May 14, 2001.

[30] International Crisis Group, *Central Asia: Drugs and Conflict*, Asia Report no. 25, 26 November 2001, p. 8.

[31] International Crisis Group, *Central Asia: Drugs and Conflict*, Asia Report no. 25, 26 November 2001, p. 16.

Indeed, the IMU's development follows a global trend, in which originally ideologically motivated movements gradually turn to organized crime, in particular abductions and drug trafficking, to finance their activities, especially in the absence of state support. Once involved in these activities, they become increasingly important for the organization, and gradually become an aim in itself for at least parts of the organization's members, either because of the profits earned or due to a decrease in ideological fervor, or both. In this sense, the IMU's development is very similar to the FARC and ELN guerrilla movements in Colombia, that have also resorted to drug trafficking and abductions on a large scale.

Whereas it is not uncommon for extremist groups to turn to trafficking for financing, there is reason to assert that the IMU 'is inherently both criminal and terrorist in nature'. The 1999 IMU incursion into Kyrgyzstan arguably took place partly as a reaction to the Kyrgyz government's relatively successful supervision of one of the major trafficking routes during the entire 1990s, the highway from Khorog in Tajikistan to Osh in Kyrgyzstan – along which the IMU bases in Tajikistan are located. During and after the 1999 incursion, law enforcement officials noted a threefold increase in trafficking attempts. Drug control experts assert that the IMU controls the majority, perhaps up to 70%, of the narcotics entering Kyrgyzstan.[32] A similar figure is given by regional governments and the Interpol's Criminal Intelligence Directorate.[33]

If the IMU is indeed involved heavily in drug trafficking, that would have significant implications for the region. As the Taliban were banning poppy, the effects of that ban were not yet apparent, as the IMU itself is thought to have significant stockpiles of opium and heroin in northern Afghanistan. Moreover, the IMU has in the past few years been moving large quantities of raw opium into Tajikistan – implying that the refining of opium into heroin is increasingly taking place in Central Asia. The drug business, in other words, is taking root in the region.

Though the IMU may have been cut to size by the military blow it received by U.S.-led forces in November 2001, the permissive conditions in Central Asia, especially the Fergana valley, that led to its emergence are not absent. The quest for identity at societal and individual levels, the lack of openness in the political sphere in Central Asian states, rampant poverty, and not least Islamic proselytizing funded from Saudi Arabia remain unsolved problems. Devoid of its military leader, the IMU lower-level commanders still have the experience and network that would enable them to keep running drugs to Central Asia. The risk is apparent that the IMU, or a splinter group of the IMU, will develop into an organization with a primarily commercial ambition. Should that happen, it would mean the survival and possible strengthening of a group whose primary interest will be to sow instability in Central Asian states and to deny regional governments control over large parts of their territory. For as the situation in Afghanistan, Colombia, Myanmar, and elsewhere have shown, drug traffickers seek areas outside government jurisdiction, where the state's monopoly on the use of force has been broken. That areas like Abkhazia figure prominently in the study of drug trafficking to Europe show with all necessary clarity the link between territories outside state control and international organized crime. In particular, the drug trade, with the large amount of money at its disposal, poses the greatest danger to state security in Central Asia and the Caucasus. The IMU is hence likely to continue posing a threat to regional governments in Central Asia. It is likely to keep staging low-intensity military operations in the region, especially if governments attempt to curb the drug trade with external support. The U.S. government seems to have clearly identified the drug trade as a primary financial source of drug trafficking. Its efforts to support the Colombian government suppress narco-terrorism, whether successful or not, show this determination to attack the drug trade; a similar effort may be forthcoming in Central Asia, whereas the U.S. has so far shown little interested in the drug trade in Central

[32] Personal communications from international drug control officials, Washington, May 2001; Tamara Makarenko, 'Crime and Terrorism in Central Asia', *Jane's Intelligence Review*, July 2000.

[33] Rashid, *Jihad*, p. 165.

Asia and Afghanistan given that very little of the drugs that reach the U.S. come from this region. The link between the drug trade and terrorist groups that target the U.S. is likely to change that. The IMU's links to the Al Qaeda network, which appear even stronger than was suspected before September 11, have driven home the point that the international drug trade is a global phenomenon, a threat not only to the countries directly affected but in many ways also to states further away.

The main danger for Central Asia at present is that like in the Colombian scenario, a force intent simply on sustaining instability and rebellion for mainly commercial reasons will develop in Central Asia. American military presence in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan may help train the local military forces to deal more effectively with the problem. Devoid of sanctuary in Afghanistan, the IMU will have to refine its tactics further to survive.

The situation in Afghanistan remains the key to the developments in the rest of Central Asia. If Afghanistan fails to stabilize, opium cultivation and drug trafficking through Central Asia will continue in the way it has in the past decade, increasing the societal and political problems in Central Asia. A stabilized Afghanistan will deny terrorist and extremist groups sanctuary in the country, which is positive for the Central Asian region; yet, a stabilized Afghanistan may prove a danger to Central Asia in another way. A stabilized Afghanistan will gradually eradicate opium cultivation and heroin production. It is unlikely that Afghan governments in the next few years will wield the power to not as drastically and instantly as the Taliban did, but a gradual reduction in poppy cultivation is likely. Most Afghans grow poppy not to earn money but to survive, though they would prefer, for religious, ethical, or other reasons to produce something else; if they are given an alternative to opium, they are likely to take it. But in the meantime, the surplus of opium production and the new trade routes through Central Asia, the Caucasus, Eastern Europe, and Russia, has led and is leading to the development of new markets for opiates. Global opium production was of 1,000 tons in 1981; between 1993 and 2000, it averaged close to 5,000 tons. Though much of Afghanistan's production was stockpiled, there was a clear increase in the global consumption of opiates, particularly heroin. This implies that if Afghanistan's production is reduced, and stockpiles depleted, demand in Europe and the former Soviet Union will not be met. Given the enormous sums of money in the drug trade, the force to seek new production areas will be substantial. In the Andean region, while coca cultivation decreased by about 70% in Peru and Bolivia between 1995 and 2000, cultivation increased by 172% in Colombia in the same period. The global drug market is demand-driven, and demand is inelastic, meaning that if production disappears in one place, the incentives to start producing opium in other areas are considerable.

If opium is finally eradicated in Afghanistan, and the new markets for opiates are North, this trend could repeat itself in Central Asia. This region, in particular Kyrgyzstan and perhaps parts of Tajikistan, have a climate suitable for poppy cultivation and already lies along existing trafficking routes.[34] Production could hence try to move to Central Asia, especially if the region is not stabilized, if poverty remains rampant, if economic alternatives to opium production are bad or non-existent, and if government control is not established over the regional states' territories.

CONCLUSIONS

The discussion regarding drugs in Central Asia is often sprinkled by Europeans blaming Afghanistan for the drug addiction problem in European societies. Are warlords and smugglers in Afghanistan corrupting European youth? Many in Europe, including policy makers, have drawn this instinctive conclusion. But the reality is the opposite: by failing to control its demand for drugs or, worse, by adopting supposedly cost-free policies on drugs that only shift the cost to others, Europe contributes to the destruction of societies in both

34 "Civil Order Still a Distant Prospect in Tajikistan," *Jamestown Foundation Monitor*, Volume 7, Issue 137, July 18, 2001; "The struggle to exterminate a much-loved Andean shrub," *Economist*, May 26, 2001; Svante Cornell and Marcela Londono, "The 'Andean Syndrome'? Regional Implications of the Taliban Opium Eradication," *The Analyst*, June 6, 2001;

Afghanistan and Central Asia, a process that is picking up speed.

Even if opium production in Afghanistan were to cease tomorrow and traffickers' stockpiles run dry, the flow of heroin into Europe would diminish only briefly, if at all. Prices would rise, stimulating production in other states, mainly in Central Asia, where networks for growing, processing, and trafficking are already well-established.

Drugs are best produced in impoverished states whose governments are too weak to control narco-trafficking. Domestic conflict and civil wars, as in Colombia, Myanmar, or Afghanistan, further improve the environment for traffickers, since they distract the government's attention. With so much money at stake, the drug trade also fosters conflict. Tajikistan offers a laboratory case-study of this process. Traffickers learned early that they could pay off customs officials and military officers, including Russian border troops stationed there. Processing facilities popped up, often paying vast sums to local administrators. Radical Islamists found they could fund their activities by engaging in the drug trade. Over the past decade warlords appeared, and began fighting both with local Islamists and more official forces over the main export routes. As in Colombia and Myanmar, drug production for western markets has given rise to guerrilla groups that protect and live off the trade. It has penetrated governments and corrupted law enforcement officials at every level. It has undermined the states' own development projects and often their very control over large tracts of territory, denying social services to millions of people. It has created a drug addiction problem where that did not exist previously, which is currently being followed by an HIV epidemic and a general deterioration of public health in Central Asia. In large parts of Central Asia today, narco-trafficking is the region's main link with world markets—a kind of "globalization for the poor." However, the industry's local opponents see it in more elemental terms: as nothing more than a particularly cynical manifestation of neo-colonialism.

Hence it is not Afghanistan that is corrupting Europe, but the addictions and vices of Europeans that are ravaging this desperately poor and war-torn land and, increasingly, its neighbors in the ancient heart of Asia. Besides providing warlords with the resources needed to sustain the fighting, European demand has fostered addiction within the region. Traffickers pay their couriers in kind and the couriers in turn sell their product to the locals. Hence Iran and Pakistan, both of which have been major conduits of drugs to Europe, now have several million heroin addicts each. Unlike their European counterparts, these souls have no access to treatment, which in turn leads to soaring rates of HIV infection throughout the region.

While all this goes forward, Europeans themselves have engaged in a debate on how best to address the problem of domestic addiction. On one side are those who would support ever-harsher measures at interdiction, on the grounds that nothing short of this will be effective. Against them are ranged those who would decriminalize many of the most popular drugs, so as to take distribution out of the hands of mafia-like groups and enable social services to work more effectively with the addicts. Champions of this view reject the notion that users should be treated as criminals, and instead approach these unfortunates as victims in need of help.

To date, Europeans have been far bolder than Americans and Canadians in experimenting with legalization and treatment, rather than interdiction and punishment. Yet neither policy has checked the upward trend in overall consumption and hence in demand. While this debate rages on, the real victims in Afghanistan and Central Asia are all but forgotten.

Suppose that Europe were suddenly to acknowledge its moral and practical responsibility in the spread of warlordism, addiction, and HIV in Central and Southwest Asia, what can it do about it? Ideally, Europe would reduce demand at home, something that does not look likely to happen in the near future. If sharp reductions in European demand are not in the offing, one obvious approach – strangely not considered so far – would be for those European countries considering legalization to take over the production of narcotics, as well as their distribution. Simple decency requires that this be done on their own territories rather than outsource it to some of the poorest countries abroad.

If Europe shies away from this high-minded solution, it must shoulder its share of responsibility for cleaning up the mess it has perpetuated in Afghanistan and Central Asia. It must get involved substantially and deeply in reversing the downward spiral of the region's societies. Europe needs to support large and sustained programs of agricultural assistance to those countries being ravished by the vices of its citizens. Until Europe recognizes that the Eurasian drugs problem is its own problem, opium poppies will remain the only sustainable crop in the remote and suffering countries of Afghanistan and Central Asia, and the region's only link with globalization.

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Figure 1: The Fergana Valley

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