



Study Guide UNODC

*“Emerging Threats of Afghan Opiates and  
Synthetic Drugs to Central Asia UNODC”*

Tashkent International Model United Nations 2023

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## Introduction

The United Nations Office on Narcotic Drugs (CND) is the central policymaking body within the United Nations system for dealing with drug-related matters. It plays a key role in developing and implementing international drug control policy.

Afghanistan, one of the world's largest producers of heroin and methamphetamine, with a significant portion of these drugs smuggled abroad, is facing a severe crisis. The country is home to nearly 4 million drug users, which accounts for nearly 10 percent of its total population, as reported by the United Nations.<sup>1</sup> The deteriorating situation has placed immense strain on most of the nation's drug treatment and rehabilitation centers. The issue of "Emerging Threats of Afghan Opiates and Synthetic Drugs to Central Asia" is a matter of significant concern. It centers around the production and trafficking of narcotics originating from Afghanistan, encompassing traditional opiates like heroin and the more recent introduction of synthetic drugs such as methamphetamines and amphetamines. This concern is particularly pertinent to Central Asia, which comprises countries like Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan. These nations face heightened vulnerability due to their geographic proximity to Afghanistan, as well as their role as crucial transit routes for drug smuggling. Since the political change in August 2021, many drug treatment and rehabilitation centers in the country are finding it challenging to stay functional due to limited resources.<sup>2</sup> In 1993, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) initiated its presence in Central Asia by establishing the Regional Office for Central Asia (ROCA) in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. Today, ROCA is actively engaged in providing support to the five Central Asian countries, namely Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, with the aim of curtailing the abuse and illicit trade of drugs, combating transnational organized crime and corruption, and

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.unodc.org/afghanistan/en/frontpage/2015/supporting-drug-users-in-afghanistan.html>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.unodc.org/coafg/en/supporting-drug-users-in-afghanistan.html>

preventing terrorism. UNODC ROCA has set up five Program Offices in the region, located in Astana and Almaty (Kazakhstan), Bishkek (Kyrgyzstan), Dushanbe (Tajikistan), and Ashgabat (Turkmenistan).<sup>3</sup>

## History

Historical Opiate Production of Afghanistan has been a major producer of opium poppy and opiates like heroin for decades. It has consistently ranked as one of the world's leading opium producers. Conflict and Instability of the country's ongoing political and military conflicts, coupled with weak governance and instability, have created an environment conducive to opium production and illicit drug trade. In recent years, there has been a shift from traditional opiates to the production of synthetic drugs in Afghanistan, such as methamphetamines and amphetamines. This diversification has added complexity to the drug trade. The global trafficking of illegal Afghan opiates has emerged as a significant worldwide transnational threat involving drug trade and criminal activities. This issue carries profound implications for public health, governance, and security on national, regional, and international scales. Illicit Afghan opiates are distributed to nearly every corner of the world, except for South America, utilizing three major routes: the Balkan route, the northern route, and the southern route. Recognizing the gravity of this problem, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and the international community have prioritized the analysis and monitoring of Afghan opiates. To address this challenge, a dedicated project was established in 2008 to facilitate monitoring and enhance our comprehension of the global ramifications of Afghan opiates.<sup>4</sup> Afghanistan is responsible for approximately 90 percent of the global opium production used in the manufacture of heroin, contributing to a thriving

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.unodc.org/centralasia/en/unodc-in-central-asia.html>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/aotp.html>

international trade estimated at around \$65 billion annually, as reported by the United Nations. Additionally, Afghanistan serves as the primary source of hashish, or cannabis resin, worldwide.<sup>5</sup>

Significant quantities of these narcotics are cultivated and processed in the Taliban-controlled regions of Kandahar and Helmand provinces in southern Afghanistan. Historically, a large portion of these drugs has been illicitly transported across the borders to neighboring countries, particularly Pakistan and Iran. However, in 2010, Afghan and NATO-led International Security Assistance Force troops exerted substantial pressure on the Taliban and the networks associated with drug production and trafficking, marking one of their most substantial offensives in the ongoing 10-year war. Simultaneously, enhanced counter-narcotics collaboration from Pakistan, along with intensified border security along the Iran-Afghanistan border, further restricted the operations of drug traffickers in southern and western Afghanistan. In the 1990s, the Taliban's involvement in the drug trade wasn't initially driven by a requirement for financial gains, nor did it rely on drug profits to enhance its military capabilities or escalate the conflict. When the movement first emerged in Kandahar in 1994 and commenced its expansion in southern Afghanistan, its financial resources and operational capabilities, including weaponry, were primarily derived from other sources. These sources included external sponsors like Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, and they also profited from the clandestine trade of legal goods in violation of the Afghan Transit Trade Agreement (ATTA). Furthermore, the Taliban's territorial expansion throughout the country occurred mainly before it engaged in the illicit narcotics trade. It was the necessity to solidify its political authority following its military expansion that prompted the Taliban to embrace the drug trade.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-afghanistan-drugs-analysis-idUKTRE70H1R620110118>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctvfc535q#>

## Causes

Drug trafficking is a principal concern for Central Asia, given its link to opiate use, injecting drug use, HIV/AIDS, and drug-related crime. There are several major trafficking routes through the region making use of the improved road and rail links. However, traffickers also move off the main roadways and make use of the maze of trails through the mountains and across “green borders” to avoid detection. UNODC estimates indicate the scope of opiate trafficking in the region is both significantly higher than the volume seized (total seizures amount to less than 4 percent of estimated opiate flows in heroin equivalence) and increasing annually (12 percent increase in 2006) due to copious supply from Afghanistan.<sup>7</sup>

- **Opiate Production in Afghanistan:** Afghanistan has long been a significant producer of opium poppy, the primary raw material for heroin. Weak governance and prolonged instability have allowed the illicit opium trade to thrive.
- **Historical Drug Trade Routes:** Afghanistan's strategic location has made it a central point on traditional drug trafficking routes. Central Asia, being a transit region for these narcotics, is particularly vulnerable.
- **Conflict and Instability:** The ongoing political and military conflicts in Afghanistan have created an environment conducive to drug production, especially in areas under the control of the Taliban.
- **Emergence of Synthetic Drugs:** In recent years, the production and trafficking of synthetic drugs like methamphetamines have added complexity to the drug trade originating from Afghanistan.

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<sup>7</sup> [https://www.unodc.org/documents/regional/central-asia/Illicit%20Drug%20Trends\\_Central%20Asia-final.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/regional/central-asia/Illicit%20Drug%20Trends_Central%20Asia-final.pdf)

- Geopolitical Factors: International factors, such as the support from external sponsors and the illicit trade of legal goods in violation of agreements, have contributed to the financial resources of actors involved in the drug trade.

- Territorial Expansion of the Taliban: The need for the Taliban to consolidate political power after their military expansion played a role in their engagement with the drug economy.

- Vulnerability of Central Asia: Central Asian countries, due to their proximity to Afghanistan and their role as transit routes, face the consequences of drug trafficking, including social and security problems.

The demand for treating drug-related disorders remains largely unmet, according to the report. Only one in five people suffering from drug-related disorders were in treatment for drug use in 2021, with widening disparities in access to treatment across regions. Youth populations are the most vulnerable to using drugs and are also more severely affected by substance use disorder in several regions. In Africa, 70 per cent of people in treatment are under the age of 35. Public health, prevention, and access to treatment services must be prioritized worldwide, the report argues, or drug challenges will leave more people behind. The report further underscores the need for law enforcement responses to keep pace with agile criminal business models and the proliferation of cheap synthetic drugs that are easy to bring to market. Reacting to the findings of the report, UNODC Executive Director Ghada Waly said “We are witnessing a continued rise in the number of people suffering from drug use disorders worldwide, while treatment is failing to reach all of those who need it. Meanwhile, we need to step up responses against drug trafficking rings that are exploiting conflicts and global crises to expand illicit drug cultivation and production, especially of synthetic drugs, fueling illicit markets and causing greater harm to people and communities.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/press/releases/2023/June/unodc-world-drug-report-2023-warns-of-converging-crises-as-illicit-drug-markets-continue-to-expand.html>

## The Problem

The central issue pertains to the significant challenges stemming from the "Emerging Threats of Afghan Opiates and Synthetic Drugs to Central Asia." This issue encompasses a range of complex and interrelated problems, including:

- **Public Health Crisis:** The influx of Afghan opiates, particularly heroin, has triggered a severe public health crisis in Central Asia. This surge in drug addiction has led to numerous health problems, including the spread of infectious diseases like HIV/AIDS among users who share needles.
- **Social Disruption:** Drug addiction and its associated problems disrupt families and communities. This leads to social issues such as broken families, increased crime rates, and a rise in child neglect and abuse.
- **Economic Impact:** The illicit drug trade generates substantial profits, often funding criminal organizations and extremist groups. This poses a long-term economic threat to the region.
- **Security Implications:** The drug trade has significant security implications, as it can finance criminal and extremist groups, potentially resulting in political instability and violence in Central Asian nations.
- **Border and Borderland Challenges:** The trafficking of narcotics from Afghanistan through Central Asia places considerable pressure on border security and management. It creates challenges for governments in terms of border control and law enforcement.
- **Weakened Governance:** The vast sums of money generated by the drug trade can lead to corruption and weakened governance. It can undermine the effectiveness of governments in addressing social and security problems.

The drug problem in Afghanistan has multidimensional aspects with internal and external dynamics. The problem has been exacerbated during the past few years; it has in fact reached an



alarming point for many countries especially those who have become the main destination and final consumers of drugs originating from Afghanistan. An October 2009 report by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) indicates that Afghanistan with 92% of the world's cultivation of opium Iranian Review of Foreign Affairs 217 has practically the monopoly of the raw material for production of heroin, the world's most deadly drug.(3) The devastating consequences of the 900 tons of opium and 375 tons of heroin that is trafficked every year from Afghanistan all the way to Europe, Russia and India impose great burdens on the health and security of the neighboring countries and those along the drug routes. The UNODC documents show that drugs have created an almost 65-billion-dollar market, catering to 15 million addicts, causing up to 100,000 deaths per year, spreading HIV at an unprecedented rate and, not least, funding criminal groups, insurgents and terrorists.<sup>9</sup> The issue of drug production in Afghanistan has had detrimental effects on various fronts, including the prospects for peace, stability, reconstruction, and development in the region.

The drug trade has expanded significantly, evolving into a highly profitable enterprise. This not only results in increased drug addiction and health risks in numerous countries but also serves as a source of financing for terrorism and insurgency activities within the region and beyond. Poppy cultivation in Afghanistan surpasses other crops primarily due to its economic advantages. Several years ago, reports indicated that the Taliban was generating \$90-160 million annually in and around Afghanistan solely from levying taxes on opium production and trade. It is highly likely that their profits have increased in recent years, given the expansion of poppy cultivation and processing. This illicit income also rises significantly through additional charges imposed by drug traffickers on laboratories and precursor imports, as well as taxes on economic activities in the regions under their control.

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<sup>9</sup> [https://www.unodc.org/documents/islamicrepublicofiran/publications/IRIRAN/The\\_Afghan\\_Drugs\\_Problem\\_and\\_Iran-Saghafi-Ameri-2010.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/islamicrepublicofiran/publications/IRIRAN/The_Afghan_Drugs_Problem_and_Iran-Saghafi-Ameri-2010.pdf)

## Past UN actions

Over the years, the United Nations has played a vital role in addressing the complex and multifaceted challenges arising from the trafficking of Afghan opiates and synthetic drugs into Central Asia. These challenges have had far-reaching implications for public health, governance, security, and regional stability. In response to this growing issue, the UN has adopted a range of strategies and initiatives to mitigate its adverse effects and promote cooperation among affected nations. The establishment of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) marked a significant milestone in the UN's commitment to addressing the drug-related challenges in the region. The UNODC was created to assist member states in their efforts to combat drug trafficking, organized crime, and corruption. This office has since played a central role in coordinating and implementing anti-drug initiatives in Central Asia. Special sessions and conferences convened by the UN have brought together governments, experts, and stakeholders to discuss and develop strategies to combat drug trafficking in the region. These sessions have been instrumental in fostering international cooperation and sharing best practices in tackling the issue effectively. International cooperation and coordination have been a consistent theme in the UN's efforts. The organization has actively encouraged collaboration among Central Asian nations and neighboring countries to enhance border security and disrupt the drug trade's flow. These collaborative efforts aim to strengthen the capacity of law enforcement agencies and improve cross-border information sharing. UNODC has launched regional programs tailored to address the specific challenges in Central Asia. These programs focus on issues like border security, drug prevention, and treatment, addressing the region's unique needs. The UN has also provided technical assistance and capacity-building support to Central Asian nations, strengthening their law enforcement and border control capabilities. This support is critical in enhancing their capacity to combat drug trafficking effectively.

In recognizing the public health aspect of the issue, the UN has supported and promoted drug prevention and treatment programs in Central Asian countries. These programs aim to reduce addiction rates and provide better access to treatment for those affected. Research and data collection have been fundamental to understanding the evolving drug trade and its impact on the region. The UN has engaged in research initiatives to gather crucial data that informs policy and strategy development. Addressing the root causes of opium production in Afghanistan, the UN has promoted alternative livelihoods for farmers, encouraging a shift from opium poppy cultivation to legal crops. These initiatives aim to reduce the economic incentives for opium production. Additionally, the UN has actively engaged with regional organizations and entities, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Collaborative efforts with these regional partners strengthen the overall response to the issue and promote regional stability. The UN's actions reflect its ongoing commitment to addressing the emerging threats of Afghan opiates and synthetic drugs to Central Asia. The organization continues to work closely with member states and regional partners to develop comprehensive strategies and initiatives that address the root causes of the issue while fostering cooperation to combat drug-related challenges in the region. A walk through what is considered in Kabul to be a 'gold standard' drug treatment center is heart-breaking. The conditions in the 1,000-bed facility are dire. Since the Taliban came to power in 2021, international funding has dried up, leaving underpaid, poorly trained staff to deal with patients.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> <https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/06/1138067>

## Solutions

Addressing the challenges posed by the emerging threats of Afghan opiates and synthetic drugs to Central Asia requires a multifaceted approach that encompasses a range of potential solutions. These solutions, some of which are currently under discussion or have been addressed within the United Nations (UN) framework, aim to mitigate the adverse effects of drug trafficking in the region and promote regional cooperation. One fundamental solution involves strengthening border security measures and fostering cooperation among Central Asian nations and neighboring countries. A second vital aspect is regional information sharing. Facilitating the exchange of intelligence and information related to drug trafficking among countries in the region is of paramount importance. Such mechanisms can help in the identification and interception of drug shipments.

Another key solution revolves around promoting alternative livelihoods for Afghan farmers. Shifting from opium poppy cultivation to legal and sustainable crops is a long-term strategy that can reduce the economic incentives for drug production. Capacity building is another significant solution. Offering technical assistance and capacity building support to Central Asian nations, particularly in the areas of law enforcement and border control, is essential. A stronger capacity to combat drug trafficking is a cornerstone of effective action. Promoting regional cooperation through organizations like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) is another noteworthy strategy. Such regional cooperation can serve as a platform for collective efforts in addressing the issue. Efforts to address the root causes of opium production in Afghanistan through sustainable development initiatives are indispensable. These initiatives aim to improve economic conditions and provide viable alternatives for communities currently reliant on drug production.

International assistance is a critical solution. Encouraging international support and assistance for Central Asian nations in their endeavors to combat drug trafficking can encompass funding, expertise, and resources for law enforcement, prevention, and treatment programs. Moreover, public awareness and education campaigns can play a significant role in reducing the demand for narcotics. Consistent and well-coordinated legal frameworks can lead to more effective responses to the issue. In conclusion, addressing the emerging threats of Afghan opiates and synthetic drugs to Central Asia demands a comprehensive and cooperative approach.

These potential solutions, while not exhaustive, provide a framework for tackling both the immediate challenges of drug trafficking and the underlying causes of opium production. Delegates should consider these approaches and collaborate to develop comprehensive, region-specific 11 United Nations Commission on Narcotic Drugs UNCND – TIMUN 2023 strategies during their deliberations.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the study guide on the "Emerging Threats of Afghan Opiates and Synthetic Drugs to Central Asia" underscores the pressing concerns surrounding drug trafficking from Afghanistan and its multifaceted impact on Central Asian nations. The United Nations and regional partners have played pivotal roles in addressing these challenges through initiatives such as strengthening border security, promoting alternative livelihoods, and fostering international cooperation. The solutions discussed offer a blueprint for delegates to consider during their deliberations, emphasizing the importance of addressing both immediate challenges and the root causes of drug production. Effective collaboration and commitment among all stakeholders are essential in mitigating the adverse effects of drug trafficking and enhancing regional stability.

## Links to research

<https://www.unodc.org/afghanistan/en/frontpage/2015/supporting-drug-users-in-afghanistan.html>

<https://www.unodc.org/coafg/en/supporting-drug-users-in-afghanistan.html>

<https://www.unodc.org/centralasia/en/unodc-in-central-asia.html>

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