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All roads lead to Afghanistan

The robust central Asian drug trade often hurts minorities living in border areas.

Mary Mitchell
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About a quarter of Afghanistan's heroin is trafficked northwards through Central Asia towards Russia

As Tajikistan's Gorno-Badakhshan region begins to recover from **recent fighting** between government forces and an armed group led by a former warlord, questions remain regarding the long-term stability of the Central Asian nation.

While analyses of the situation have pointed to the legacy of the civil war, or parroted a straightforward "government versus Islamists" narrative, an examination of the conflict in the context of the region's location on the northbound Afghan narcotics trade route points to

another, more worrying, story that Western policy makers should acknowledge.

On July 24, the government of Tajikistan, the poorest of the former Soviet Union republics of Central Asia, sent troops into Khorog, the capital of the semi-autonomous Gorno-Badakhshan region in the southeast of the country. There followed clashes between government forces and supporters of Tolib Ayombekov, a former opposition leader during the civil war, in which 17 government troops and 30 opponents reportedly died. Officials say that one civilian also died, though some estimates put that figure higher.

Ayombekov stands accused of being responsible for the July 21 death of Major General Abdullo Nazarov, the local head of the State Committee for National Security. He also faces charges of drug trafficking and has reportedly fled to Afghanistan.

While there were other factors at play in the recent clashes in Khorog, control of the lucrative narcotics trade was key. Prior to these events, Ayombekov was a deputy commander of a Tajik-Afghan army border unit, and reportedly played a key role in drug trafficking and smuggling operations. Despite the fact that officials in Tajik capital Dushanbe have known for a long time of his alleged involvement in these activities, they have only now sought to remove him from his position in the region.

Since the NATO-led invasion of Afghanistan, opium production has dramatically increased, to the extent that it supplies 90 per cent of the world's opium. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) reports that 25 per cent of the 380 tonnes of heroin known to have been manufactured in Afghanistan in 2010 was trafficked northwards through Central Asia and onwards to the Russian Federation, with 85 per cent of this flowing directly through the porous 1,200km Gorno-Badakhshan border area of Tajikistan, the location of the recent violence.

An International Crisis Group report in 2009 which describes Tajikistan as "looking increasingly like its southern neighbour - a weak state that is suffering from a failure of leadership", suggests that observers and diplomats inside the country hold the belief that officials in the highest areas of government are involved in the drugs trade and are reaping its profits. It is therefore likely that a conflict of interests between the two parties linked to the lucrative drugs trade is behind the recent clashes.

Tajikistan is not the only Central Asian republic to suffer from violence related to Afghanistan's drugs trade. As narcotics have spread along this route, so too have insecurity and conflict, through Tajikistan into southern Kyrgyzstan.



The Gorno-Badakhshan region lies directly to the north-east of Afghanistan

Most heroin trade routes travelling through Tajikistan reconnect in the city of Osh, in southern Kyrgyzstan, where transportation is then organised for the journey to Kazakhstan and even further to the Russian Federation. Any instability in the region must therefore be viewed through the lens of the world's most lucrative drugs trade.

There is strong evidence to suggest that drug trafficking and organised crime were linked to the ethnic clashes in southern Kyrgyzstan in 2010, and according to UNODC, were used by ethnic Kyrgyz criminal groups who "chased ethnic Uzbek criminal groups out of southern Kyrgyzstan", therefore taking control of the drug routes through the country. Ethnic Kyrgyz groups based in Osh and Bishkek reportedly now control up to 80 per cent of the criminal markets. Following the ethnic violence, when law enforcement officials were forced to focus on the violence and instability that resulted, rather than drug trafficking, Kyrgyz seizures dropped by half, reaching their lowest point in seven years.

The tragedy is that the conflict not only affected those involved in the drugs trade, but the thousands of families who had their businesses and homes destroyed, and the hundreds who lost their lives. Despite the vast majority of crimes being committed against ethnic Uzbeks, to date there has been only one known conviction of an ethnic Kyrgyz for the murder of ethnic Uzbeks in the course of the June violence. The defendant has since been granted a conditional release.

The tragic truth is that these events indicate Central Asia is ill-equipped to deal with the powerful forces behind Afghanistan's narcotics industry. The instability travelling northwards from Afghanistan will only increase after NATO withdraws and media attention vanishes.

Without attention from the international community and a carefully executed withdrawal that bears in mind the particularities of Central Asia, the recent events in Gorno-Badakhshan could have dangerous repercussions.

The real losers of the violence surrounding the Afghan narcotics trade in Central Asia are not the likes of Tolib Ayombekov. Those who suffer are the minorities living in border areas who

become embroiled in conflict between those involved in transnational organised crime and governments seeking to obtain their share of the pie - a fact of which the minority Pamiris of Tajikistan's Gorno-Badakhshan region are currently all too painfully aware.