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Asia Times

## High times for Iranian drugs mafia

By Matthew C DuPee and Ahmad Waheed

01/05/2011

Southwest Asia's robust illicit-narcotics industry is usually associated with Afghanistan, a narco-producing empire responsible for supplying 90% of the global supply of illegal opiates.

Additionally, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) recently crowned Afghanistan the largest global producer of cannabis resin (hashish) - with overall production ranging between an astounding 1,500 to 3,000 tons of hashish per annum.

However, the spillover effect from Afghanistan's booming drug industry is having a profound impact on Afghanistan's regional neighbors. Iran is emerging as an even more critical component in the region's drug-smuggling infrastructure, and while drug trafficking through Iran from Afghanistan and onto routes destined for Europe is nothing new, Iranian trafficking syndicates are now responsible for smuggling a large amount of crystal methamphetamine and liquid varieties of the drug into points further east, such as Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia and Japan.

According to new statistics issued by Thailand's Narcotics Suppression Bureau (NSB), Iranian nationals traveling to Bangkok (via Suvarnabhumi Airport) top the police watch list as the most prolific trafficking risk among international visitors entering the country. So far this year, NSB personnel have arrested 75 Iranian nationals carrying a total of 164 kilograms of methamphetamine, with the average drug courier carrying between 3 to 5.7 kilograms of narcotics.

NSB authorities also say that Iran is the number-one supplier of crystal meth and liquid forms of the drug to Thailand; while amphetamine tabs (known locally as ya baa) are still exclusively imported from Myanmar. Crystal meth is the second-most widely abused narcotic in Thailand after ya baa tablets. Iranian smugglers routinely use a circuit of 15 non-direct air-travel routes out of Tehran, using transit points such as Syria, Turkey, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, before landing in Thailand. Those smugglers who fly direct from Tehran to Thailand mostly fly via Mahan Air, a private airline based in Tehran, according to NSB authorities.

The commander of Iran's anti-narcotics agency, General Hamid Reza Hossein-Abadi, supported Thailand's assertions, telling reporters the seizure of synthetic drugs in Iran has surged over the past 10 months. According to Hossein-Abadi, Iranian law-enforcement authorities seized 268 tons of narcotics, including 16.8 tons of condensed heroin, a regional specific variant of smokeable heroin known locally as "crack". The seizure of condensed heroin is up drastically from the 6.8 tons of crack seized during the same period last year. Alarming, Hossein-Abadi indicated authorities seized 925 kilograms of methamphetamines over the past nine months, 320 kilograms of which had been seized in Iran's airports.

According to Iranian authorities, shisheh ("glass" in Farsi, a slang term locally for crystal meth) processing workshops are springing up across the country and counter-drug operations are increasingly seizing multi-kilogram quantities of shisheh on Iranian railways destined for Turkey and Syria. From here, smugglers are flying the highly potent and dangerous drugs further east into Asia where consumption of amphetamine-type stimulants (ATS) remains acute. So far, Iranian production of crystal meth outweighs the domestic demand, so smugglers are penetrating markets further east and suspected of funneling the crystal meth through traditional smuggling routes destined for Europe.

Globally speaking, the demand for ATS is increasing and areas producing these drugs are expanding. According to United Nations statistics, the number of people who have consumed ATS at least once within a 12-month time frame exceeds the number of people who have consumed cocaine and heroin combined.

According to the latest UNODC report on global ATS production and consumption, it is estimated that between 3.4 million and 20.7 million people in East Asia have used amphetamines in the past year. Many countries in this region also reported that ATS have become the primary drug threat, usurping traditional drugs of choice such as heroin, opiates or cannabis. Production capabilities are also increasing, with dominant producers like Myanmar and Indonesia able to produce an estimated 700 million ya baa (amphetamine mixed with caffeine) tablets on an annual basis.

Iran has intrinsic cultural, social and economic ties to the Afghan drug industry, ensuring that if methamphetamine production and consumption becomes deeply rooted, the production of ATS could easily spread to neighboring Afghanistan. Unlike with organically produced drugs like cannabis, coca and opium poppies, there are no hectares of crops to measure, no seasons to analyze growth patterns, and no possibility for anti-narcotics authorities to remotely detect the "cooking" of synthetic drugs indoors.

There is a strong need to enhance existing monitoring systems and actively track any possible emergence of new synthetic drugs being manufactured and trafficked from South Asia. If left unchallenged, the region could emerge as a galvanized global narco-hegemony, dictating the global market price for a wide range of illicit narcotics.

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