“Voices of the Quchaqbar”
– Understanding opiate trafficking in Afghanistan from the perspective of drug traffickers
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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INTRODUCTION

For nearly two decades, Afghanistan has been the major source of the world’s illicit opium production. Opiates produced in Afghanistan impact governance and economic development and continue to fuel insurgency, terrorism, corruption and poor health, within Afghanistan, the south west Asia region and further afield. The trafficking of illicit opiates contributes to the destabilization of Afghanistan and countries along the main trafficking routes. While there has been considerable research on opiate production in Afghanistan, there are few detailed studies on how trafficking occurs in Afghanistan. This special update aims to fill the knowledge gap on Drug Trafficking Organizations (DTOs) and how they operate in the context of Afghanistan.

This qualitative study is based on in-depth interviews conducted with 41 Afghan opiate traffickers – or Quchaqbar in Dari - who are directly involved in the trafficking of opiates in Afghanistan and abroad, and who are, mostly still active in the business. Thirty-six of the interviewed Quchaqbar were operating freely in Afghanistan and had not been arrested or convicted, while five were under arrest or in detention at the time of writing but had not been convicted. The traffickers who were interviewed for this study were located in Afghan provinces that bordered Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Iran (Islamic Republic of), and Pakistan, as well as in the capital, Kabul. These provinces include: poppy cultivating provinces; provinces where there has been history and evidence of opiate processing, and border provinces that are located on the major opiate trafficking routes out of Afghanistan. The Quchaqbar had authentic knowledge and hands-on experience of inter-provincial and cross-border trafficking in drugs and chemical precursors in Afghanistan and beyond. Information provided by the drug traffickers provides the backbone of the study, but the report also draws upon secondary data from multiple sources, including UNODC’s previous research and publications, international literature, country reports, and sources from the scientific drug research domain. A detailed description of the methodology and the data tables used for the infographics used in this study can be found in an Annex at the UNODC website: https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/aotp.html

Previous studies of those involved in drug trafficking, have largely been based around interviews with prison inmates convicted for drug related offences. By comparison, this research:

• is one of the first qualitative studies that involves self-identified, active drug traffickers operating in Afghanistan and who had not been convicted.

• contributes to filling several key gaps in the knowledge on how drug traffickers located in Afghanistan engage in the trafficking of opiates.

• contributes towards a well-informed international debate to guide efforts to counter illicit drug trafficking.

• paves the ground for further qualitative field studies to address a wide range of the least studied areas, including the role of women in the trafficking of opiates, the monetary aspects of opiate trafficking (including money transfer systems such as Hawala), and the links between drug trafficking and the insurgency.

Contribution to the Sustainable Development Goals

This report provides research that supports the implementation of several the Sustainable Development Goals. In particular:

No Poverty. Poverty has many dimensions, but its causes include unemployment, social exclusion, and high vulnerability of certain populations to disasters, diseases and other phenomena which prevent them from being productive. Some traffickers interviewed for this report stated that avoiding poverty was one of the key motivating factors for becoming involved in, and remaining in, the trafficking of opiates. Some traffickers reported using the profits from opiate trafficking to meet immediate, subsistence living costs, or large one-off costs like a wedding. However, other traffickers reported investing their profits elsewhere including back into the trafficking business or in real-estate and elsewhere including back into the trafficking business or in real-estate and

Gender Equality. Ending all discrimination against women and girls is not only a basic human right, it is crucial for a sustainable future; it is proven that empowering women and girls helps economic growth and development. Traffickers interviewed for this report mention their perception that the role of women in opiate trafficking in Afghanistan has increased in the past 5 years. While research on women’s involvement in opium poppy cultivation has been documented previously, this report shows that women are involved in many other aspects of...
the opiate business including acting as couriers, working in labs and protecting opiate inventories. The report also highlights the issue that Afghan women can be exploited by drug trafficking organizations to become involved in opiate trafficking as a result of losing their husband or head of the household, and as a means of escaping poverty. Understanding that women are also involved in opiate trafficking will encourage the development of policies that will address the issue for both men and women.

Decent work and economic growth. Over the past 25 years the number of workers living in extreme poverty has declined dramatically, despite the lasting impact of the 2008 economic crisis and global recession. However, slower growth, widening inequalities, and not enough jobs to keep up with a growing labor force are still significant issues. The traffickers interviewed for this report stated that one of the factors in becoming involved in opiate trafficking in Afghanistan was the result of insufficient licit employment opportunities available in Afghanistan. The report shows that while some of those who are currently involved in opiate trafficking would like to participate in legal employment, the lack of such opportunities means they believe they have no choice but to engage in illegal and potentially harmful employment.

Peace, justice and strong institutions. Corruption, bribery, theft and tax evasion remain a considerable concern in Afghanistan. Among the institutions most affected by corruption are the judiciary and police.

Glossary

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
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<tr>
<td>AGE</td>
<td>Anti-Government Elements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ARQ</td>
<td>Annual Response Questionnaire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CNPA</td>
<td>Counter Narcotics Police of Afghanistan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DAB</td>
<td>Da Afghanistan Bank</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DTO</td>
<td>Drug Trafficking Organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MCN</td>
<td>Ministry of Counter Narcotics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ILO</td>
<td>International Labor Office</td>
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<tr>
<td>IMO</td>
<td>International Migration Organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UAE</td>
<td>United Arab Emirates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USD</td>
<td>United States Dollar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USFOR-A</td>
<td>United States Forces - Afghanistan</td>
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<tr>
<td>UNAMA</td>
<td>United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan</td>
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<td>UNODC</td>
<td>United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime.</td>
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Opiate trafficking in Afghanistan and neighbouring countries, continues to be a threat to the stability and development of both Afghanistan and the south west Asia region, and poses a threat to public health globally. This qualitative study provides important insights about various aspects of the modus operandi of domestic and cross-border drug trafficking and Afghan Drug Trafficking Organizations (DTOs). Drug traffickers operating in different locations in Afghanistan provided first-hand information on their motivations for becoming involved in the business, and how they operate their drug businesses, reflecting the diversity of trafficking in Afghanistan. The traffickers were open and willing to discuss and share their opinions, experiences, knowledge, and observations. This encouraging level of cooperation potentially opens the way for further in-depth qualitative studies with traffickers.

Although the sample size of this qualitative study was moderate, it provided important insights about Afghan Drug Trafficking Organizations (DTOs) and was significant given the challenges of locating suitable interviewees both in terms of subject matter and in the complex environment of Afghanistan. While the study provides details on certain aspects of opiate trafficking business models, the understanding of DTOs in Afghanistan, and the region more widely, remains incomplete and fragmentary. Further research is needed to fill in the gaps. The study points to specific areas where future research could invest in the future, for example women’s involvement and role in opiate trafficking and the financial operations of DTOs.

There are several points of interest to be drawn from this qualitative study, with potential importance for policy makers, criminal justice practitioners, and researchers who are investigating drug trafficking in Afghanistan and world-wide:

**Trafficker’s Motivations are a Combination of “Need and Greed”**

Many traffickers reported that their main motivation for becoming involved in opiate trafficking was the profit and money that could be made. However, some also mentioned poverty and a lack of alternative licit employment opportunities to meet basic living costs. Other factors – including a permissive enabling environment, more prevalent in some regions than others - also seemed to be important, with traffickers reporting that others had encouraged them into trafficking, or that drug trafficking was an easy business to become involved in. While profit was an important driver in traffickers becoming involved in trafficking, it appeared to be even more important as a motivation for traffickers remaining involved – once traffickers were involved, the profits to be made, made it difficult for them to give up trafficking in favor of licit alternatives, even if those were available. This shows that the drivers of entering and staying in the drug trafficking business are complex and seem to be combination of “need and greed”, depending on the socio-economic context of those involved.

**Family Ties are Important in DTO’s Operations**

Many small, medium and large-scale Drug Trafficking Organizations operate in Afghanistan and in the countries along the main opiate trafficking routes. The information provided by the interviewed Afghan drug traffickers provided a picture of DTOs both large and small that are mainly based on family-structures, around shared tribal connections and localised neighbourhoods. Interviews revealed a range of family based trafficking organizations, from the small – consisting two or three family members operating in a single province or district - to much larger organizations consisting of many members of an extended family working together in Afghanistan and Europe.

**Hierarchical and Flexible Trafficking Organizations**

It was noticeable that, although predominately family based, DTOs were complex and able to mobilize individuals from different segments of society to illicitly produce, transport, and distribute drugs, and sometimes precursors, including across international borders. The organization of these activities occurs through a
series of hierarchical relationships, usually overseen by the head of theDTO. The study detected several functions/roles exercised by the heads ofDTOs such as leadership, decision making, coordination, communica-
tion, problem solving, and conflict management. This appears to give the
DTOs sufficient flexibility to address new circumstances and make necessary
changes to their modus operandi.

Co-operative Networks
of DTO’s

Many DTOs in Afghanistan worked
within broader “alliances”, loosely
coordinating and co-operating with
a wider network of similar organiza-
tions in the supply chain. Interviewed
traffickers were able to source opiates,
precursor chemicals and access to clandes-
tine laboratories from other DTOs
across Afghanistan. In some cases,
there was a specific head of the wider
network who co-ordinated the activi-
ties of several DTOs. There appear to
be many advantages to being part of
a wider network, including sharing
profits and risk, and sharing informa-
tion about major trafficking routes,
but few disadvantages. DTO’s were
also generally co-operative rather than
competitive, although in some limited
cases rivalries and violence between
organizations was reported.

Interprovincial Trafficking
of all Types of Opiates is
Widespread

The study shows that there is a high
volume of inter-provincial opiate
trafficking within Afghanistan, in
addition to international trafficking
across Afghanistan’s borders. While
some of the interviewed traffickers
could move opiates to neighbour-
ing countries or further afield, many
of those interviewed only trafficked
within Afghanistan. This suggests
that smaller traffickers operate only
in a particular province or region but
are able to supply opiates to the larger
DTO’s who can move opiates to inter-
national markets. “High demand”
and “high price” were important drivers
for inter-provincial opiate trafficking.
Avoiding law enforcement intercep-
tion was also named as a reason for
inter-provincial trafficking, as well
as trafficking outside of Afghanistan,
with some traffickers stating that they
move illicit drugs towards provinces
of Afghanistan that border other
countries, with the aim of trafficking
abroad.

Protective Measures
Taken During Trafficking

Drug traffickers stated that they under-
took risk assessments and applied a set
of risk mitigation measures to avoid
law enforcement interception, prevent
potential clashes with other DTOs,
and to reduce the risk of theft when
trafficking opiates and other types of
drugs from one province to another or
toward International borders. These
protective measures include assess-
ing the trafficking routes before shipping
drugs, delaying transportation until
security had improved, limiting opiate
deals to trusted people, using complex
concealment methods and bribery,
information gathering including back-
ground checks on customers, working
with the Taliban, or using women and
children to avoid security searches.

The Use of People with
Dual Nationalities as
Couriers

Several drug traffickers highlighted
the use of couriers with dual nation-
alities to traffic opiates outside of
Afghanistan. While the profits from
drug trafficking are attractive to
traffickers in Afghanistan, financial
gain from trafficking also appeals to
Afgans with dual nationality living in
the West who are willing to smuggle
heroin from Afghanistan to Europe
and North America. For example,
one interviewed trafficker, who runs
a small drug trafficking organization
with six couriers, noted that the people
working for him “all have a double
nationality”, specifically Afgans who
have lived in Europe and Canada for
a very long time.

Most Traffickers Keep an
Inventory of Opiates…

The majority of the traffickers inter-
viewed had a small to medium size
trafficking business. Only six of the
interviewed traffickers reported that
they owned a drug manufacturing laboratory, and most traffickers reported that they purchased heroin from laboratory owners or bought opiates from other traffickers. Almost all of the traffickers interviewed kept a portion of their annual opiate production as a reserve inventory. Most traffickers reported that, over time, stored opiates lost their potency, but that they kept some of their product to meet sudden demands for opiates from customers or other traffickers. Traffickers also reported that only a small portion of opiate supplies were stored at processing sites – often only enough for a specific production run – and that the majority of their production supplies were kept in hidden locations away from the laboratories.

… to Facilitate a “just-in-time” Supply Process

Traffickers had different perceptions on recent trends in the demand for heroin, both within Afghanistan and internationally. Slightly over 60 per cent of the participants assessed that demand for heroin in general was high and increasing. Traffickers used their opiate inventories in case they needed to respond to an unanticipated request from local or international demand. They also appeared to source opiates to meet demand from other organizations or contacts in the wider trade if needed. Few traffickers had formalized process for assessing demand and tended to supply opiates based on a specific request. This suggests that opiate supply in Afghanistan, is driven by customer demand, through an ad-hoc, “just-in-time” supply process.

Chemists and Cooks Recruited from the Region

Skilled and experienced chemists play a pivotal role in opiate production and producing quality heroin, and drug traffickers seek to recruit the best available talent from around the region. Chemists were reportedly recruited internally to Afghanistan (in Helmand, Nangarhar, Badakhshan and Kandahar provinces) and from abroad (Pakistan, Iran (Islamic Republic of) and Turkey). It is important to note that the countries mentioned by traffickers does not necessarily indicate the nationalities and/or citizenship of those chemists but only refer to where they were recruited from.

Increased Involvement of Women in Opiate Trafficking

This study reveals male traffickers’ perception that women’s involvement in opiate trafficking has increased over the past five years. The research suggested that, like opium poppy cultivation, opiate trafficking in Afghanistan is predominantly managed, controlled and conducted by male individuals. However, women do take part in a range of opiate trafficking activities, including as couriers, in hiring other women as couriers, processing opiates and providing information on trafficking routes. However, there was no evidence of women’s leadership roles in opiate trafficking organizations.

Drug Profits Invested in Different Sectors

Many small DTOs use profits from opiate trafficking to meet their immediate living costs, build savings to cope with economic shocks, or to meet larger expenses like weddings or private schooling. Traffickers with larger operations invest their profits in several sectors including real-estate inside and outside of Afghanistan, licit businesses, or reinvesting drug profits into their drug businesses. In some cases, opiates are exchanged for other legal or illegal commodities rather than cash. The majority of traffickers use the Hawala system for their transactions, and very few use the formal banking sector. Traffickers also use part of their drug profits to pay “taxes” – commonly Zakat and Ushr – to insurgents for protection, and to bribe public officials to facilitate trafficking activity.

Technological Developments have Helped Traffickers

Many traffickers noted that their communication methods had changed significantly in the past five years with the growth of Internet access and smart cell phone technology. The traffickers seemed to be comfortable in communicating through common day-to-day Internet-based mobile communication tools, though some of them were cautious and took counter-security measures when communicating. This was confirmed by national law enforcement authorities who generally struggled to intercept Internet-based communications.

Policy Implications and Further Research

This report demonstrates that the drivers of drug trafficking in Afghanistan
are diverse. Money is obviously a factor, however country-wide poverty, a lack of licit livelihood opportunities and a permissive social environment are also motivating factors. The report also shows that Quachaqbar are capable of a high degree of complexity. Comments from Quachaqbar across Afghanistan demonstrated that traffickers were adept at using modern communication methods, co-ordinating relationships with multiple different actors including other trafficking organizations, corrupt officials and insurgent groups, and developing complex concealment methods for drug shipments. A multi-faceted approach, based on law enforcement, alternative development, education and political will is required to address the drivers and the complexity of drug trafficking organizations in Afghanistan.

The findings of this report dovetail with some activities either ongoing under the UNODC Afghanistan Country Office Program 2016-2020 or planned under the Program for 2021-2024. Expanding forensic intelligence capacity on heroin manufacture and trafficking – initiated under the current country program and to be extended under the future program, is urgently required. Heroin manufacture is a regional and global issue, and countries beyond Afghanistan would benefit from examining this topic in more detail. The Country Program has also, in conjunction with UN Women, initiated the concept “Empowering Women to Transform Social Norms Driving Opium Poppy Cultivation”. The findings in this report suggest that broadening the concept to also include trafficking may be beneficial.

This research study has begun to fill in some of the knowledge gaps associated with drug trafficking organizations in Afghanistan and how they operate, both within Afghanistan and in international markets. However, this research was very much an initial look at these issues, and in some cases exposed areas that would benefit from further research. These areas include: further understanding the motivations behind why traffickers enter and remain involved in opiate trafficking, and the variety of business models of Afghan drug traffickers. Links between opiate trafficking and Anti-Government Elements and the role of women in opiate trafficking are also important areas for future research.
SECTION 1: Motivational factors behind starting and continuing to traffic illicit drugs

Drug traffickers smuggle drugs for a variety of reasons. This section seeks to explore the main motivational factors for traffickers in Afghanistan through interviewing a study group, exploring why traffickers became involved in opiate trafficking and why they continued their involvement once they had entered the business\(^1\). The interviews revealed a number of drivers that individually and/or collectively influenced drug traffickers in entering the drug business in Afghanistan. The the quote to the left from a trafficker based in Northern Afghanistan highlights several motivational forces (i.e. earning money, power, having a good life style, and influence over other people) that lie behind involvement in illicit drug trafficking.

Motivations for Starting to Traffick Opiates

The personal and socio-economic motivations of the interviewed traffickers for their involvement in opiate trafficking are illustrated below. Respondents gave multiple motivations for them entering the opiate trade.

The primary motivation for traffickers in entering the drug business is undoubtedly the lure of money and personal enrichment, in an environment where there is a lack of social security to provide resilience against economic shocks. Their choice to start trafficking is well embedded in an environment where employment and income can be scarce, irregular, and where conditions conducive to illegal activities are permissive. Social and economic factors, including country-wide poverty and a lack of licit livelihood opportunities are also motivating factors. According to the World Bank, few Afghans have access to sustainable, productive or remunerative employment. A quarter of the labor force is unemployed, and 80 per cent of employment is vulnerable and insecure, comprising self- or own-account employment, day labor, or unpaid work\(^2\). This requires people to seek other, sometimes illegal, means...

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\(^{1}\) The major socio-demographic characteristics of the study group are detailed in Section 2.

of obtaining an income. More recently, the International Labour Office (ILO) reported that insufficient paid work affects almost half a billion people worldwide, and a large proportion of traffickers interviewed for this report, across all regions of Afghanistan, stressed that earning money – often in the absence of any other licit employment opportunities - was a major driving force behind their involvement in drug trafficking.

Detailed analysis of traffickers’ answers to the question of “Can you please explain to us what motivated you to trade drugs?” indicates that earning money from opiate trafficking is either linked with “expectations of a pleasant and a comfortable life” or is associated with coping with “high living costs and/or difficult economic conditions”. Statements from traffickers contained the following expressions and key words: “making a lot of money”, “having a good lifestyle”, “economic issues”, “difficult conditions”, “high living costs”, and “debt”. All of these key expressions demonstrate the multiplicity of economic reasons motivating traffickers, and the influence on traffickers’ decision-making processes to start opiate trafficking. Some traffickers reported that they used profits from trafficking to cover large one-off costs, such as a wedding or private schooling. Understanding more deeply the key drivers behind an individual’s involvement in drug trafficking, would need to examine the socio-economic situation of individual traffickers. Previous UNODC research on the motivation of opium poppy farmers identified the high sale price of opium, poverty, a chance to improve living conditions, gaining a high income from little land, a high demand for opium, lack of employment opportunities and insecurity as reasons for cultivating opium poppy.

There was a sense from some traffickers that not only did opiate trafficking provide a good income, but that it was also an easy business to enter and to remain involved in and required less effort than other work.

Fifteen per cent of traffickers reported a lack of legal employment opportunities as their main reason for starting opiate trafficking. 37 per cent of the interviewees were influenced by multiple factors. In other words, both major key motivational forces (i.e. earning money and a lack of employment) coupled with other factors such as a lack of (social) security or having no other option than drug trafficking persuaded those to traffic illicit opiates, suggesting that involvement in the illicit drug business is more complex than simply earning money.

In the same manner that opium cultivation has become a crucial pillar of Afghanistan’s economy - not only for farmers, but also the many communities who have become dependent on the income from opium poppy to sustain their livelihoods - the trafficking of illicit drugs within Afghanistan also contributes significantly to the Afghan economy and provides employment opportunities.

Most of the motivational reasons for traffickers starting to traffic drugs stated above, could be clustered under the category of economic and financial factors. However, in addition to reporting earning money, unemployment, and poverty, as motivational factors, several traffickers believed that their social environment provided a significant contributory motivation for them to traffic illicit drugs.

Social factors appear important with most participants indicating that they use family members, friends, colleagues and other contacts whom they know in their neighborhood and whom they can trust, to assist in trafficking activity. For example, one trafficker suggested that the “drug trade is a business that you do with friends and people you know and trust. There are people from different tribes and also friends and relatives that I work with”. The focus on trust and use of family members or close friends for trafficking activity is important, as it may provide an extra degree of security and protection against law enforcement activity. The immediate physical and sociocultural settings appeared to be exerting an influence on individuals and/or encourage those who do not have the possibility to access legal employment opportunities to start trafficking. The following quotes from the interviews, from traffickers across Afghanistan, underline the role and the influence of social environment, peers, friends, and family members in encouraging people to start trafficking:

“The profit from drug trafficking is very good. It requires very little investment and is an easy job.”

“It is easy to traffic drugs... and if one had the necessary connections [anyone] would have done it.”

“...the money is good, there is a lot of cash involved and it is an easy business with less efforts [required].”

“I was motivated and encouraged by others into drug trafficking.”

“Drug trafficking is a common business in our province.”

“Because others do [it], we also do [drug trafficking].”

“...because of money and having a good life style like others.”

“A friend of mine is a major drug trafficker. I used to work for his real estate agency [a front business] and as we developed trust, he told me his real business and told me if I am interested, he can teach me how to do the business.”

“In our area if a man does not cultivate poppy or [do] drug smuggling, [he] will be addressed as a woman.”
Motivations for Continuing to Traffick Opiates

The dominant factors associated with the continuation of illicit drug trafficking are shown in the chart below. Earning money appears to be the most important determinant for traffickers to continue in illicit drug trafficking – more so than initially becoming involved in trafficking. 54 per cent of the participants agreed that earning money was the most important factor in their continuing to traffick opiates, compared with only 37 per cent of respondents who said it was a motivation for starting to traffick opiates. This suggests that once involved, the financial benefits obtained from traffickling opiates make it difficult for traffickers to stop trafficking once they had entered, especially in the context of limited employment opportunities mentioned above.

One group of the interviewed traffickers, consider drug trafficking to be a business for which they don’t see an alternative:

“I will continue as long as there is corruption and unfairness and the government is not [strong] enough to stop drug trafficking…”

“I continued in the drug trade because of its profit[ability], compared to many other jobs”

“This is my business now. I have gained experience and expertise in this business and have no interest in doing anything else. The drug trade also has good money.”

“I have invested so much money in this business I am not able to leave now and need to continue.”

“It is over 20 years [that] I have been in this business. This is now my job and [I] cannot do any other work.”

As an example, one of the interviewees is a well-established trafficker operating since the 1980s, who manages a large international drug trafficking organisation (trafficking outside of the region to North America and Europe). He indicated that he considers himself to be a business person, who makes significant profits and enjoys his wealth and lifestyle. The power, social and economic status, influence, and excitement of living a comfortable life are associated with his willingness to continue in this role long after he has accumulated significant wealth.

Fig. 2: Motivational Factors for Continuing in the Illicit Opiate Trade* (Number of Times Mentioned by Traffickers)

* Traffickers gave multiple responses, so the total number of answers is more than the 41 traffickers interviewed.
Some of the socio-demographic characteristics of the opiate traffickers who were part of the study group are outlined below. These socio-demographic characteristics include age, gender, the size of drug trafficking activity, years of experience in drug trafficking, extent of legal business activity, and their consumption of drugs. Other socio-demographic details were also obtained, including trafficker’s role in opiate trafficking organizations, their motivations for continuing to be part of a DTO and their involvement in running an opiate laboratory. These characteristics are covered in more detail in later sections of the report.

The average age of the interviewed traffickers was 43 years, with the youngest respondent aged 22 and the oldest 65 years old. 76 per cent were younger than 50 years. All of the 41 interviewed traffickers were male. While previous studies illuminated the role of women in poppy cultivation and opium production\(^5\), the research team was unable to interview female traffickers.

In the wider literature on drug trafficking, there is no standard classification used for determining whether a trafficker should be considered a large or small trafficker. For this study, the threshold volume of drug trafficking activities was defined as the following amounts of opiates trafficked per month: small scale trafficker 1-10 kg; medium scale trafficker 11-40 kg; and large-scale trafficker ≥ 41 kg. According to the above classification, of the 41 study participants, 18 self-identified themselves as small scale traffickers, with the remaining 23 (56 per cent) self-identifying as medium and large-scale drug traffickers. Only one of the interviewed traffickers could be considered a large-scale international trafficker, with a large heroin

The interviewed traffickers had different levels of seniority and experience in the business from the very junior (an inexperienced drug courier who had been involved in trafficking for one month, arrested at Kabul International Airport trying to smuggle the drugs to India), to a senior and experienced drug trafficker who has been trafficking illicit drugs for 30 years. Some 24 traffickers had more than five years of drug trafficking experience, with a range of between 6 and 30 years. Of the others, 16 had five or less years of experience in trafficking. The majority of interviewed traffickers could therefore be considered to be relatively well-established traffickers, with eight traffickers being very well established having 16 or more years of experience in opiate trafficking.

Of the study group, twelve respondents said they have consumed, or currently consume, illicit drugs including heroin, opium, hashish and methamphetamine (locally known as Shisha). Of the twelve, four said that they consumed hashish and one consumed opium. The other six respondents reported that they consumed opiates for “quality control” purposes, but in their opinion, this did not make them addicts or frequent drug users. The one large-scale drug trafficker who was interviewed reported, “I have been using Shisha (meth) for the last few years. I had to stay awake during the night for my business and needed something strong to keep me awake and Shisha was very helpful”.

The interviewed traffickers came from several provinces within Afghanistan. The participants come from and/or operate in: poppy cultivating provinces; provinces where there has been history and evidence of opiate processing; and/or border provinces that are located on the major opiates trafficking routes out of Afghanistan.
SECTION 3: Business models of drug trafficking networks

One of the objectives of this research is to shed light on the different business models of drug traffickers and drug trafficking organizations operating in Afghanistan. Business-related information provided by the drug traffickers, covered subjects including the number and size of illicit opiate laboratories, the volume of heroin production, the recruitment of chemists and/or cooks, the number of laboratory workers, and the extent of trafficking of other drug types and commodities. This knowledge facilitates further understanding of the characteristics of drug trafficking networks operating in Afghanistan.

Internal Trafficking Methods and Modus Operandi

Traffickers were asked to describe how they organize their drug trafficking in Afghanistan. Generally, the interviewed drug traffickers transport opium, heroin and other types of drugs, as well as the heroin precursor chemical acetic anhydride, from district to district and province to province within Afghanistan. Some 22 of 41 drug traffickers reported only moving drugs between provinces within Afghanistan but did not traffic outside Afghanistan's external borders. Such inter-provincial trafficking was a widespread practice among the study group. A trafficker from Eastern Afghanistan, who has trafficked illicit drugs for the last three years described a business model whereby “small scale illicit drug traders buy the opium from farmers, then sell to the medium level traders. At the end of the trade-chain are the major drug dealers who operate at the national level”. Two other drug traffickers from the same region supported this observation by saying that it was the “medium and major level traffickers [who are] involved in inter-provincial trafficking”. One of them added that my “business is small and limited so [I] do not know much about this... [however] the major drug traffickers can answer this question since this is their area of business”.

These statements are in line with the concentric trafficking circles model. In this model, the peripheral circle is dominated by small-scale traffickers who sell the drugs to the inner circles. Major traffickers at the centre of the circle are those who traffic large quantities of opiates to international destinations. While this model is relatively simplistic, the trafficker’s responses suggest that, in part, this model may apply to opiate trafficking within Afghanistan.

A senior trafficker interviewed in this study, and based in western Afghanistan, described his trafficking activity as following: “[I]smuggle from Farah to Nimroz since the Taliban provide protection and sometimes from Farah to Helmand, provided that the route is open, and the prices are high”. Another drug trafficker stated, “We smuggle from Farah to border areas with Iran. If the security along the border is tight and we do not get support and protection from the Taliban, then we smuggle to Helmand through the routes under Taliban control”. Another drug trafficker provided a detailed account of his modus operandi concerning inter-provincial trafficking: “If the shipment is large then [we] organize a security escort, if small then we smuggle with a motorbike or sometimes with a car. If the security is tight in Farah, then we traffic to Helmand and Nimroz and from there to outside Afghanistan”. He added that “the amount of trafficking is linked to the prices in Farah, Nimroz, and Iran as well as to the demand. If the prices are high in Helmand and Bahram Chah”, then we traffic there”.

Reasons for Internal Trafficking Within Afghanistan

This study sought to understand what drives inter-provincial trafficking within Afghanistan. The major motivational factors for inter-provincial drug trafficking were reported to be: high demand for opiates in other provinces, greater financial gain and profit, high quality of drugs and avoiding law enforcement interception. “High demand” for opiates was the most recurrent reason given by...
the interviewed traffickers, with 21 of them referring to the “high demand in other provinces” as an important driver for inter-provincial opiate trafficking. Narrative text analysis revealed that for this study group, the opiate market within Afghanistan is demand-driven. Demand in other provinces is also closely linked with trafficking outside of Afghanistan, with nine traffickers stating that they move illicit drugs towards Afghan provinces that border neighbouring countries, in order to traffic drugs outside of Afghanistan. Economic and financial factors are also clearly important, with the “high price” of opiates in other provinces being the second most frequent answer to describe the reasons behind trafficking internally within Afghanistan. Indeed, one trafficker was very brief and straightforward in his reply, stating that illicit opiates were trafficked internally “because of the higher price in certain provinces”. Traffickers in some provinces reported that they sought higher quality drugs from other provinces. For example, Badakhshan province has long had a reputation for high quality processing, so traffickers either bought heroin from the province and trafficked it to their home provinces or sent their opium there for processing.

The Estimated Costs of Interprovincial Trafficking

Trafhcokers were asked to describe the cost of transporting opiates within provinces in Afghanistan. The estimated costs reported by the respondents were based on their experience and knowledge and was contingent upon risk factors including the time and location of trafficking activity, the quality of the drug trafficked, and other factors. From the data shown below, the lowest value for the cost of internal transportation for 1 kg of heroin reported by traffickers was 20 USD (from Nangarhar to Kabul), whereas the highest transportation cost was around USD 300-360 (from Nimroz to Helmand). Even though Nimroz and Helmand have a strong Taliban and Anti-Government Element (AGE) presence, ongoing counter-insurgency and counter-narcotics operations in those provinces may increase the risk, and therefore compensation, required when trafficking opiates. The cost for Herat was provided by an interviewed trafficker in another province, who estimated that trafficking a kilo of heroin across Herat province cost between USD 80-200.

Two drug traffickers shared their knowledge on the cost of transportation to destinations outside of Afghanistan. From Kabul to Canada, the transportation cost of 1 kg of heroin was reported as being between USD 7,000-10,000, while to unspecified countries in Europe the cost was between USD 4,000-6,000. One of the interviewees - a courier- reported that he was paid USD 2 per gram to smuggle heroin to India, equivalent to USD 2,000 per kilogram. Participants appeared to use a range of different currencies to pay for transport costs, including Iranian Rial (Toman), Pakistani Rupees (Kaldar), and Afghan Afghanis. During the analysis of survey reports those currencies were converted to US Dollars8.

Main Destinations for Opiate Trafficking

Trafhcokers gave a range of answers when questioned about the final internal destinations within Afghanistan for their opiate shipments. According to traffickers from Northern Afghanistan, illicit opiates depart from Argo, Derayem, Wardoij, Tashkan, and Kishim districts in Badakhshan province for trafficking to Eshkashim, Yaftel, Shahr Bozor Ragh, and Sheghnan districts in the vicinity of the Afghan-Tajik border, presumably for onward trafficking to Central Asia and potentially beyond. One drug trafficker added that illicit drugs were trafficked from Badakhshan to Takhar and, in particular, Khaja Bahuddin district. Traffickers from Northern Afghanistan also reported that from

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ROUTE</th>
<th>PRICE IN USD-</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>From Badakhshan to Kunduz and Takhar</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From Badakhshan to Kabul</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From Balkh to other provinces</td>
<td>100-127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From Farah to Helmand and Herat</td>
<td>300-350</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From Balkh, Jalalabad, and Kandahar to Helmand</td>
<td>45-95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within Herat</td>
<td>80-200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average price from Provinces to Kabul</td>
<td>80-150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From Jalalabad to Kandahar</td>
<td>80-90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From Balkh to Kandahar</td>
<td>80-90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From Nangarhar to Kabul</td>
<td>20-60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From Nimroz to Helmand</td>
<td>300-360</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From Farah to Nimroz</td>
<td>350</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

8 Exchange rates for October 2019 were used for the conversion.
Balkh province, illicit opiates are trafficked to destinations in Sari Pul (Kohistanat district), Farah, Faryab, Helmand, and Jawzjan provinces. The major destination for opiate trafficking from Farah province, mentioned by interviewed drug traffickers, was reportedly the Islamic Republic of Iran, with some drugs also trafficked to Nimroz in Afghanistan. From Herat, major destinations for trafficked opiates included Farah Province and other districts within Herat province, and neighbouring countries including the Islamic Republic of Iran. From Nimroz province, traffickers reported that the main destination for trafficked opiates were Iran and specifically to Zabol city in Iran’s Sistan va Baluchistan province.

In the eyes of the interviewed traffickers located in Southern Afghanistan, the major destination for illicit drugs trafficked into Helmand, was to other locations in Helmand. They also reported that opiates are trafficked from eastern and northern provinces of Afghanistan passing through Zabul and Uruzgan provinces to Helmand, as well as to Nimroz, probably for onward trafficking to Iran and Pakistan, passing by both official and unofficial borders crossing and customs points to reach these countries. Confirming other statements, one trafficker reported the inter-provincial trafficking of heroin, opium and hashish into Helmand province from multiple areas including Balkh, Nangarhar, Kandahar, Uruzgan, Herat, and Nimroz provinces. Another drug trafficker from Southern Afghanistan, underlined the extent of inter-provincial drug trafficking in Afghanistan. In his observation, he noted that heroin was trafficked to Helmand from Nangarhar, Balkh, Uruzgan, Kandahar, Zabul, and Kunduz.

Interviewed drug traffickers also reported that illicit drugs are trafficked to Kandahar province from Balkh, Farah, Helmand, Herat and from Jalalabad city in Nangarhar. One southern trafficker reported that he has “many customers from Herat and Helmand and [his] business is going well”, suggesting that trafficking from Kandahar to Herat and Helmand also occurs. Another southern based trafficker reported that opiates were trafficked from Mazar-i Sharif in Balkh province through Bamyan to Helmand. The statements from traffickers in Afghanistan’s Southern Region, suggests a considerable north-south and east-south flow of opiates from other regions of Afghanistan to the southern region.

For international trafficking, the surveyed drug traffickers stated that over the last ten years Iran, Pakistan, India, United Arab Emirates, Turkey, Tanzania, United States, Canada and the Netherlands have been the major international destinations for the trafficking of their opiates. According to the interviewed traffickers, illicit opiates are trafficked from Herat, Farah, Nimroz, Kandahar and Nangarhar to Kabul, most likely for onwards trafficking to international markets.
Large shipments of opiates appear to be trafficked through insecure areas outside of Government control, while smaller shipments are sent through the main roads that are under Government control. Drugs are trafficked along the National Ring Road from the provinces of Herat, Farah, Nimroz, Kandahar and Nangahar to reach Kabul.

**Protective Measures Taken During Trafficking**

When moving opiates and other types of drugs from one province to another, the interviewed drug traffickers stated that they undertook risk assessments and applied a set of risk mitigation measures to avoid law enforcement interception, prevent potential clashes with other DTOs, and reduce the possibility of the theft of their opiates. The figure below presents the breakdown of the protective measures described.

Undertaking an assessment of the route prior to trafficking, was the most common protective measure made by traffickers. When moving opiates and other types of illicit drugs, traffickers prefer to limit trades and to trade only with those whom they trust, if risks appear to be high. Similarly, the quantity of illicit drugs trafficked in a shipment are sometimes decreased to reduce the risks and presumably financial losses should a shipment be intercepted.

**Fig. 7: Risk Mitigation Measures Taken by Drug Traffickers to Protect Drug Shipments** (Number of Times Mentioned by Traffickers)

- **Assessing routes**
  - Undertaking an assessment of the route is the most common protective measure before trafficking opiates. Employing additional people to serve as security escort or to conduct reconnaissance of the route in advance to identify any potential problems.
  - Number of times mentioned: 35

- **Delaying transportation**
  - A number of traffickers delaying the transportation of illicit drugs until security issues were resolved.
  - Number of times mentioned: 23

- **Limit trade to trusted people**
  - Traffickers prefer to limit trades and to trade only with those whom they trust, if risks appear to be high.
  - Number of times mentioned: 12

- **Complex concealment methods**
  - Some traffickers use novel or sophisticated methods to hide drugs and prevent detection.
  - Number of times mentioned: 5

- **Bribery**
  - Bribe are offered to influence deliberations and actions, including police activities and judicial decisions, thereby easing the rule of law and trust institutions.
  - Number of times mentioned: 2

- **Information gathering**
  - Some traffickers share information about the best trafficking routes to use, or security risks that might be present that might risk their opiate shipments.
  - Number of times mentioned: 3

- **Working with Taliban**
  - Some traffickers worked with or paid insurgents to protect shipments from law enforcement activity.
  - Number of times mentioned: 1

- **Using women or children**
  - Most Afghan police are male so using women to traffic drug shipments make them less likely to be searched.
  - Number of times mentioned: 1

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Source: UNODC.

The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations. Dashed lines represent undetermined boundaries.

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**Map 3: Official and Unofficial Border Crossings in Afghanistan, and Trafficking Flows Reported by Drug Traffickers**

“Voices of the Quachaqbar"
traffickers before they shipped opiates. This involved employing additional people to serve as a security escort or to conduct reconnaissance of the route in advance to identify any potential problems. Six traffickers stated that when security was tightened in their provinces, and especially if there had been a recent drug related seizure or arrest made in that province, they moved their drugs to other provinces. In connection with increased law enforcement presence and actions, traffickers reported that when a new chief of police and/or new governor was appointed they considered these new appointments to be a force majeure requiring a need to apply counter-security measures and to transport illicit drugs to other provinces.

The second most common countermeasure against risks, was delaying the transportation of illicit drugs until the situation had stabilised. When risks appeared to be high, traffickers preferred to limit activity and to traffic only with those people whom they trust. Similarly, traffickers sometimes decreased the quantity of illicit drugs trafficked in a shipment to reduce the risks (and presumably to reduce financial losses should a shipment be intercepted). Drug traffickers also stated that bribing public officials was used as a protective measure. Bribes are offered to influence deliberations and actions, including police activities thereby eroding the rule of law and trust in institutions, and the delivery of public services within Afghanistan is severely affected by bribery and corruption.

Drug traffickers also reported that they apply a range of concealment methods and make background checks of their customers to reduce risks. For example, one trafficker - a courier who has been working as a transporter moving illicit drugs between provinces for several DTOs - stated that during trafficking operations, he ensures that women and children are present in his vehicle. This was his way of deterring male law enforcement officers from stopping and searching the vehicle.

DTOs appear to be sensitive, responsive and adaptive to changing conditions and are aware of security issues. The wider literature on drug trafficking describes the most successful dealers as those who are able to adapt to new circumstances and exploit new opportunities. The interviewed traffickers do appear to try to identify and measure the risks to their shipments and take calculated actions to mitigate them. In the course of conducting risk assessments, they reported that they collect and gather information from civil and governmental sources and can cooperate with anti-Government elements and tribal authorities in exchange for freedom of movement for the members of their organisation as well as their drugs.

Although the “cooperation” or “symbiotic” relations between the Taliban and drug traffickers are frequently referenced in literature, in this study only one trafficker explicitly referred to seeking the cooperation of the Taliban as a protective measure, suggesting that the Taliban may play a limited role in providing protection for drug trafficking – at least for the traffickers interviewed. Several factors may explain this result, including the relatively small sample of traffickers interviewed and a possible concern from traffickers that too close engagement with the Taliban or other AGEs may actually generate greater risk to their business due to counter-insurgency operations.

Cross-Border Drug Trafficking

The study sought information regarding the major arrangements drug traffickers made for cross-border opiates smuggling to other countries. Traffickers were asked to share their experience, knowledge and observations regarding the trafficking of opiates across Afghanistan’s national borders. Respondents were very brief and direct in their responses, probably because this question was sensitive or because they had limited knowledge about cross border trafficking activity. Just over half of participants (51 per cent) were of the view that both official and unofficial border crossing points are used in trafficking illicit drugs. Just over a third (34 per cent) believed that only unofficial border crossing points were used as a point of departure. A small number of traffickers (3 per cent) thought that only official border crossings were used in external trafficking. One trafficker suggested that “trafficking [generally] takes place through unofficial border crossings. When there are no issues with official border crossings and the situation is good, then official border crossings are also used, particularly during holidays and at weekends”.

In a meeting with CNPA in August 2019, Afghan government officials
assessed that drug trafficking from the four international airports in Afghanistan had increased in the last five years. Two interviewed traffickers also indicated that airports were being used to smuggle heroin to India and a third interviewed trafficker described his heroin trafficking modus operandi using persons with dual nationality to smuggle heroin to Europe and North America. Although he didn’t specifically mention airports, his modus operandi was clearly based around the use of air couriers. He also revealed that when moving drugs across official borders, his organisation traffics small amounts of drugs (possibly swallowed or hidden by couriers) and uses “complex concealment methods” to disguise drugs.

One of the research questions in this study related to the strategies that opiate traffickers use to overcome the risks associated with transporting drugs and to understand how they choose the best routes. The largest proportion of respondents (41 per cent) preferred to use roads where there was limited control by the Government or no presence of law enforcement. Seven respondents (17 per cent) reported using roads close to the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. According to some interviewed traffickers, and also confirmed by Afghanistan’s CNPA, opiate trafficking from Nangarhar, Badakhshan and Kabul provinces often happens through roads controlled by the Taliban and, that areas under Taliban control are increasingly used for trafficking of drugs from one province to another. Other traffickers had a different assessment and reported that the roads under the Government’s control were a better option when engaging in cross-border drug trafficking, possibly because they could bribe officials to let the shipments pass unopposed.

Interviewed traffickers were asked to what extent they work with international drug traffickers. Almost half of the interviewed drug traffickers (19 traffickers) said they worked with international drug traffickers. The other part of the interviewed traffickers (18 traffickers) said they did not work with international traffickers and only operated in Afghanistan. The remaining drug traffickers did not answer this question or said they did not have knowledge on this matter.

Some of those who work with international smugglers shared their working arrangements. For example, one interviewee from western Afghanistan said:

“The best route is a route where there are more corrupt police officers, we do info exchange and regular update along the trafficking route.”

12 These are Kabul International Airport, Kandahar International Airport, Herat International Airport, and Mazar-e-Sharif International Airport.

13 Meeting with CNPA officials, August 2019, Kabul, Afghanistan.

14 Meeting with CNPA officials, August 2019, Kabul, Afghanistan.
We meet with Iranian traffickers and make the deal and necessary arrangements. A money dealer (Hawaladar) then provides a financial guarantee for the Iranian trader and we deliver the drugs to our Iranian partner in the border area and later get our money from a money dealer. Another drug trafficker from the same region, further underlined the role of a Hawaladar in acting as a trustee or notary between the seller and buyer, in addition to transferring funds. The trafficker said: “With Iranian traders, based on trust and a financial guarantee from a Hawaladar, I deliver the heroin and they pay me immediate wherever I want”. The Hawala financial transaction system will be discussed in later sections.

Interviewed traffickers provided a mixed picture on whether drug deals are made with international traffickers inside Afghanistan or abroad. One trafficker reported that “foreign traders have people who come to the area and some of them work as a courier and smuggle outside Afghanistan”. Between 2014-2019, Afghanistan has arrested and charged 23 foreign nationals for drug trafficking offences from Afghanistan, suggesting that some foreign drug trafficking organizations enter Afghanistan to make drug transactions.

Thirty-seven per cent of the traffickers interviewed reported that they travel to other countries (Iran, Pakistan and UAE) to sell drugs, with some travelling every two to three months to make trafficking deals. One drug trafficker indicated that he travelled after every one or two “deals” abroad, “to meet his contacts and discuss the business and [to] also import legal products to Afghanistan”. Several participants reported that they have a legitimate business passport that makes easier to travel abroad. However, the majority of the study group indicated that they do not travel to neighbouring countries for the purpose of drug trafficking, confining their trafficking activity is limited to within Afghanistan.

The Main Illicit Drug Markets in the Region

Trafickers were asked to share their perception on the most promising drug market among the neighbouring countries. Participants acknowledged one or more countries in their responses. A common view was that Iran and Pakistan were the most promising illicit opiate markets in the region. Iran was stated by twenty-five traffickers, followed by Pakistan (twenty-two traffickers). Less frequently were Tajikistan (three traffickers), India (four traffickers), and Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan (one trafficker each).

“\textit{I used to travel a lot to India, Dubai, Pakistan, Iran, Turkey, and Holland, but [during] the last two years, I have been in Afghanistan due to some issues with my travel. I cannot give you the details, but I have had problems in India, Dubai, Iran and recently Pakistan.”}
the mid-level traffickers did not traffic other types of drugs, with the majority (55 per cent) of mid-level drug traffickers reporting that they were involved in the trafficking of methamphetamine tablets and crystal, hashish and acetic anhydride in addition to opiates. The figures for large scale traffickers were similar, albeit the sample size was smaller. Sixty per cent of the large-scale interviewed traffickers reported that they were involved in the trafficking of hashish, Tablet K, synthetic tablets (unspecified) and acetic anhydride in addition to opiates. The remaining 40 per cent said they were not involved in other types of drug trafficking. There was no correlation between the location of traffickers and their trafficking behaviour patterns in relation to other types of illicit drugs.

It therefore seems that small-scale traffickers in the study were more likely to engage only in opium and heroin trafficking, while the large and mid-scale traffickers were more likely to traffic other drug types in addition to opiates. As the types of drugs available in Afghanistan have diversified some Afghan opiate DTOs – mainly the larger organizations – appear to be using their connections and experience in opiate trafficking to traffic other drug types as well. Since there has been long-standing production of cannabis in Afghanistan, the poly-trafficking of cannabis and opiate may reflect established operations. Newly emerging methamphetamine manufacturing in Afghanistan is presenting Afghan DTOs, traditionally engaged only in opiate or hashish trafficking, new opportunities to diversify their trafficking portfolio.

**Precursor Chemical Trafficking by Afghan DTO’s**

The study group was asked to share their knowledge regarding the trafficking of the heroin precursor chemical acetic anhydride into and within Afghanistan. Four drug traffickers who were involved in the trafficking of acetic anhydride as well as opiates, reported that the precursor was sourced from Iran and Pakistan. A large-scale trafficker added Europe as a further source of the chemical. Statements by other traffickers who did not traffic in acetic anhydride supported the claims made by those who did traffic the precursor chemical. Sixteen traffickers mentioned Pakistan as the source of the acetic anhydride that was trafficked into Afghanistan, while 12 mentioned the Islamic Republic of Iran as the source. Two participants indicated China as the source of acetic anhydride used in Afghan heroin manufacture, while Turkmenistan, the UAE, and Europe were reported by one respondent each. The reference to Turkmenistan was based on the perception of one trafficker rather than on his direct involvement in acetic anhydride trafficking, and it opens up the question whether acetic anhydride trafficking is still ongoing through Central Asia. Previous UNODC research suggested that trafficking of the precursor through the northern route had significantly declined.

It should be noted that the locations reported by traffickers as source of acetic anhydride, do not necessarily point to illicit manufacturing or diversion of the chemical in those locations. These locations were simply the places where traffickers thought it had been sourced, and they could well be transit locations rather than sources. As with the trafficking of opiates, participants suggested that both official and unofficial border routes were used to traffic precursor chemicals into Afghanistan.

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19 The UNODC report, “Afghan Opiate Trafficking Along the Northern Route” stated that AA trafficking from Central Asia had almost completely stopped.
One group of drug traffickers, who were not directly involved in the trafficking of acetic anhydride, listed the provinces within Afghanistan where the chemical was trafficked. According to six participants, acetic anhydride entered Afghanistan mainly through Nimroz and Herat provinces. Along this route, traffickers believed that the chemical was trafficked both through official customs posts and unofficial border crossing points. Traffickers from western Afghanistan suggested a number of routes for the trafficking of acetic anhydride, with one stating that “acetic anhydride is smuggled through Nimroz and Herat customs, and through unofficial crossing routes to Bahram Chah and Gerda Jungle20 and then to Helmand”. Another trafficker, from the same region, reported that the chemical was trafficked to Herat and Nimroz customs through unofficial border crossing points and areas in Afghanistan such as Bahram Chah, Kalata Nazar and Deh Dost Mohammad. A third trafficker, also from the western region of Afghanistan said that acetic anhydride comes through “Nimroz and Herat customs and sometimes from Farah customs concealed inside legal products... [also] from Islam Qala and Pule Abrisn and Abo Nazar Farahi customs”, with a fourth trafficker reporting that “acetic anhydride arrives into Afghanistan through official customs in Herat and Nimroz and sometimes from Gerda Jangl of Helmand and also through the customs in Farah”.

20 Girdi Jangle [Gerda Jungle] is in Pakistan, not Afghanistan.
SECTION 4: Trafficker’s views on opiate processing

Out of the 41 traffickers, only six said they owned a drug laboratory where they processed opium into morphine and heroin. The 83 per cent who did not own a drug laboratory – including large traffickers as well as smaller traffickers – reported either buying heroin directly from laboratory owners or other traffickers or sending their opium to independent labs operating elsewhere to be processed. Traffickers were asked about their perception, observation and knowledge of opiate laboratories in their province of origin. Based on the information reported by traffickers it is possible to draw some conclusions on the number and location of laboratories, although it should be noted that it is solely based on their knowledge, which in some cases was not comprehensive.

Information provided by the interviewed traffickers revealed that they were aware of the presence of between one and ten laboratories operating in Balkh, Badakhshan, Herat, and Kandahar and of 10-20 illicit opium manufacturing laboratories in Farah and Nimroz. Some traffickers believed that there might be nearer 20 or 30 laboratories in Farah. One trafficker considered that the number of laboratories in Nangarhar was more than 40. Traffickers could not assess the number of laboratories in Helmand but two of them reported they were “many” in the province. The number of laboratories in Kandahar also could not be assessed by interviewees, although the one large-scale international drug trafficker interviewed highlighted that some “big labs are in Helmand, Kandahar, and Farah”.

Some of the feedback given by traffickers on the presence of laboratories was contradictory possibly because of security concerns, loyalty to the laboratories’ owner, or simply lack of knowledge. One trafficker reported that “we have a small laboratory in Helmand province that has limited production and sometimes we need to purchase from Jalalabad to meet the demand of our customers”. He did not mention any laboratories in his own province, and his statement supports the view that the traffickers may not necessarily have comprehensive knowledge of laboratories in their provinces. Another potential reason for conflicting reports could be that laboratories are generally becoming more compact and mobile in order not to be noticed and destroyed by law enforcement.

Determining the number of laboratories active in Afghanistan at any one time is challenging, given that laboratories are frequently located in areas outside of the government’s control, and are, by their nature, hidden and increasingly mobile. A number of clandestine opiate processing laboratories across Afghanistan have been destroyed over the years. According to media sources, USFOR-A destroyed 200 heroin laboratories between 2017 and 2018, while over the past eight years, CNPA reported the dismantlement of a total of 329 heroin manufacturing laboratories across the country. These operations may have influenced the number of laboratories present in the Afghan territories, although, even when laboratories are reportedly dismantled, in many cases they are quickly re-established. A 2013 study published by the Ministry of Counter Narcotics of Afghanistan (MCN) indicated that heroin laboratories were operating in Badakhshan, Balkh, Faryab, Badghis, Kandahar, Helmand, Nangarhar, Farah and Herat, but the number could not be accurately determined. The small numbers of laboratories reported in each province by the interviewed traffickers may be a reflection of the fact that traffickers might only have a very localised understanding of the extent of heroin manufacturing activity in a province or district.

Fig. 12: Number of heroin laboratories dismantled by the Government of Afghanistan, 2012-2019

Estimated Production Capacity of Laboratories

A common view amongst interviewed traffickers was that the capacity of an opiate laboratory was variable, with the capacity subject to: the number of people working at the particular laboratory; the size of the facility; the knowledge, skills and experience of the chemists and cooks and the level and urgency attached to the demand for opiates. Smaller, urban laboratories were deemed to have a lower production capacity than larger, rural laboratories. The capacity of laboratories reported by traffickers also does...
Heroin labs across Afghanistan. It is possible that in the case of laboratories located in Helmand, Kandahar, Badakhshan and Nangarhar - provinces, which have a long history of heroin manufacture relative to other parts of Afghanistan - greater experience may lead to a more efficient manufacturing process, although this requires further research.

In describing the logistics of the opiate manufacturing process, almost 80 percent of respondents stated that drug traffickers store the raw materials used in opiate manufacture in a separate location from the actual laboratory. The average capacities reported by traffickers may not reflect the real capacity for a variety of reasons. Significant variations in estimates, with informants reporting average monthly production in labs ranging from a few kilograms to more than 300 kg, confirm that perception. Most informants stated monthly production was an amount of between 1 and 60 kg. There does not seem to be a link between Afghan regions and reported capacity of a laboratory. Production capacity was reported to be between 1-60 kgs per month by traffickers from Badakhshan, Balkh, Farah, Nimroz and Herat provinces, and between 61-180 kg by traffickers in Helmand and Kandahar as well as Herat and Balkh. Eight traffickers located in Herat, Helmand, and Nangarhar provinces reported an average capacity of over 300 kgs per month for laboratories in those provinces. So even within a province there were significant differences in perception of how much heroin a lab could produce.

Fig. 13: Estimate of Monthly Heroin Production (Unknown purity) of Heroin Laboratories by Interviewed Drug Traffickers Who Owned a Laboratory, (5 respondents)

Fig. 14: Estimate of Monthly Heroin Production (Unknown purity) of Heroin Laboratories by Interviewed Drug Traffickers who did not own a Laboratory (25 respondents)

“10% [of raw material] is kept in the lab and the remaining [amounts] are stored in the village storage.”

“Raw materials such as opium and AA are stored somewhere secure not in the labs.”

“The bulk of raw materials such as opium and precursors are stored away from the labs in the homes. During production days, they transport the amount of raw materials needed for the day and once heroin is produced, they are taken away from the labs and kept somewhere else.”

“Raw materials, such as opium and AA, are stored in a nearby village and are transported to the lab from time to time and when needed. After heroin is produced, it is either sold while still in the lab or [is] moved to somewhere else for storage.”

“[We] keep raw material needed for a production cycle and keep the bulk somewhere else, away from the lab.”

“Raw materials are kept somewhere else. The daily production materials are kept in the lab.”

not account for variations in purity of produced opiates, or the addition of adulterants to the final product.

Due to these variable factors, a variety of perspectives were expressed by the traffickers when discussing the estimated production capacity for laboratories. The average capacities reported below are based on the knowledge that traffickers had on how laboratories operate, which for some traffickers may not have been very thorough.

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UNODC research in 2011 estimated that laboratories in Kandahar and Helmand had an annual manufacturing capacity of around 1,300 kg of heroin. The participants’ general view and knowledge of laboratories and their capacity is in line with previous research findings by the UNDOC and the Government of Afghanistan on the number of workers and capacity of heroin labs across Afghanistan. It is possible that in the case of laboratories located in Helmand, Kandahar, Badakhshan and Nangarhar - provinces, which have a long history of heroin manufacture relative to other parts of Afghanistan - greater experience may lead to a more efficient manufacturing process, although this requires further research.

In describing the logistics of the opiate manufacturing process, almost 80 percent of respondents stated that drug traffickers store the raw materials used in opiate manufacture in a separate location from the actual laboratory. Only the necessary amount required to produce an order was kept on site, while supplies of precursors and...
Fig. 15: Range of Workers Needed at Laboratories Owned by Interviewed Traffickers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lab owner</th>
<th>Workers Needed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>owner 1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>owner 2</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>owner 3</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>owner 4</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>owner 5</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>owner 6</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Staffing Requirements for Laboratories

Drug traffickers were also asked for their opinions on the workforce requirement for opiate laboratories. The six traffickers who reported that they own a heroin manufacturing laboratory gave different numbers of persons required to run a heroin laboratory. A laboratory workforce was defined as chemists, cooks and other staff, including people who protected the labs and those who provided supplies to keep the labs functioning.

Over half of the traffickers interviewed, reported that the number of staff required by a laboratory is between 10 to 20 people. For example, one trafficker whose laboratory was destroyed by the police in the previous year, stated that he had had 16 people working at that laboratory. The traffickers who did not own a laboratory provided diverse answers regarding the number of people needed at a laboratory. In their accounts, answers ranged from between two people for a small urban laboratory, up to 40, 50 or even 80 people – numbers which are generally considered too high for all but the largest laboratories. Their answers may reflect the fact that the size and capacity of heroin manufacturing labs vary, although clearly, the limited knowledge of those not owning a laboratory is an important factor to consider. The study came across some interesting observations concerning how clandestine laboratories operate. A trafficker reported that “in the laboratory, 20 people work in two sections [shifts] and monthly 45-60 kgs. The laboratory works all days except weekends, holidays, and when the security situation is not good”.

Recruitment of Chemists

Heroin manufacture is a complex and time-consuming process. The chemists who turn raw opium into morphine and heroin play an important role both in terms of the amount and the quality of the opiates produced. Chemists are supported by cooks and other workers at labs who possess some practical experience and basic knowledge of the manufacturing process. Given that skilled and experienced chemists play a pivotal role in opiate manufacturing and producing quality heroin, drug traffickers seek to recruit the best available talent from around the region. When participants were asked from where chemists were found or hired, respondents provided one or more country or province. It is important to note that the countries mentioned by traffickers does not necessarily indicate the nationalities and/or citizenship of those chemists but only refer to where they were recruited from.

After Afghanistan (21 traffickers), Pakistan was acknowledged as the main country of origin of recruited laboratory chemists (14 drug traffickers), followed by Iran (8 traffickers) and Turkey (3 traffickers). Within Afghanistan, Helmand province was reported as the main place where chemists were recruited from (10 drug traffickers), followed by Nangarhar (8 traffickers), Badakhshan (2 traffickers) and Kandahar (1 trafficker). Several traffickers stated more than one name of a country and/or province in a conditional manner, for example either “Pakistan or Iran”, “Pakistan and Iran” or “Pakistan, if not then Helmand” as the origins of chemists.

Traffickers from western and southern Afghanistan indicated that Afghan nationals have been hired as chemists or cooks, with one southern trafficker reporting that: “Most of the experts come from Pakistan and Iran and there are few Afghans who can also produce heroin”; This was supported by testimony from other southern based traffickers who suggested that “There are also Afghans who learned how to produce heroin, but their number is very limited”; other traffickers from western
Afghanistan reported that “qualified and experienced cooks/chemists are usually hired from Pakistan; if [this is] not possible, then from Helmand the local chemists are hired”, and “Pakistanis are more experts, the waste from the production made by a Pakistani is less than a Helmandi cook.” It is also worth noting the comments from two traffickers, who stressed that “the location of chemists is not an important issue… as long as the chemist is experienced and qualified”. These statements support the view that some drug traffickers are ready and prepared to hire chemists from wherever they can be found, provided that they have the necessary skills and experience.
SECTION 5: Women's role in illicit opiate trafficking in the context of Afghanistan

While research on issues related to women who consume drugs has improved in recent years, little consideration has yet been given to understanding women's participation in the supply chain, including illicit drug crop cultivation, drug manufacturing and drug trafficking. What research that has been done on women's participation in drug trafficking has largely examined drug trafficking in Latin America or Europe; none has been done in Afghanistan. Investigating Afghan women's position in drug supply and trafficking was a key research question in order to help narrow the knowledge gap on this topic.

However, at the time of the data collection, the research team was not able to include female traffickers into the sample group for cultural reasons and due to the lack of access to female traffickers. This is one of the key limitations of the study, which can examine and explore the role of women in opiate trafficking only through the knowledge and experience of male traffickers. However, the opinions, observations and experience of male drug traffickers still provides some information to increase the knowledge on women's role in Afghanistan's complex drug trafficking picture. Previous literature and research examined women's participation in opium cultivation within Afghanistan, but women's participation in opiate trafficking has largely remained unexplored.

Women and children provide unpaid labour in the cultivation opium poppy and harvesting opium gum. Research suggested that Afghan women largely play a passive role in terms of decision-making in opium cultivation, with few being able to influence the decision by the male head of the household on whether to cultivate opium poppy.

Like opium poppy cultivation, opiate trafficking in Afghanistan is predominantly managed, controlled and conducted by male individuals. However, 66 per cent of traffickers interviewed for this study acknowledged that women have various roles in opiate trafficking. In contrast, 34 per cent believed that women were not involved in trafficking. A number of traffickers (61 per cent) mentioned that not only are women involved in opiate trafficking, but that their involvement has increased over the past five years. During a meeting with UNODC experts, CNPA officials also believed women's participation in opiate trafficking has increased in the past five years.

The role of the arrested women in the opiate industry is unclear, but it is likely that the majority were couriers. While the majority of traffickers reported the increased role of women in trafficking, and that they fulfil several roles in the opiate business, none provided any evidence of women's involvement in the management layer of opiate trafficking organizations.

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However, at the time of the data collection, the research team was not able to include female traffickers into the sample group for cultural reasons and due to the lack of access to female traffickers. This is one of the key limitations of the study, which can examine and explore the role of women


31 For example, see Carey, E. “Women Drug Traffickers: Mules, Bosses and Organized Crime”, 2014.


In general, traffickers from southern Afghanistan reported that women did not take part in opiate trafficking. The same picture was provided for Balkh province. According to 15 traffickers, women take part in the manufacture of illicit drugs, either poppy cultivation or processing of opiates. 12 traffickers reported that women are involved in trafficking, acting as couriers. For example, one trafficker reported that “there is one woman who works for me. She is Afghan-Canadian and smuggles heroin to Canada”. Another trafficker who reported women’s involvement in opiate trafficking concurred with the role of women as couriers: “most of the time when trafficking to India, women are being used as a courier”. There was a general perception that women were often employed as couriers since they are less likely to stopped and searched during security operations, which are usually conducted by men. The interviews revealed that in addition to manufacturing and trafficking, women are employed in several other related roles, including the concealment of drugs prior to shipping36, gathering information, hiring other people (usually other women) as couriers, providing logistical support and securing or protecting drug shipments. However, one respondent also commented that “sometimes they are also being abused by drug traffickers”.

Colombian “Godmother of Cocaine” Griselda Blanco.

36 For example, in some cases women are involved in sewing heroin into carpets which are then transported out of Afghanistan.
SECTION 6: The structure of Afghan Drug Trafficking Organizations (DTO’s)

Overview of Afghan DTO’s

Many small, medium and large-scale organizations are involved in drug trafficking in Afghanistan and in the countries along the main trafficking routes. However, it is difficult to provide an accurate estimate of their number and size. In 2007, a UNODC survey estimated that the total number of mid- and high-level traffickers in Afghanistan was between 800 and 900 but was unable to determine the number of small-scale traffickers in the country. Previous research has also identified a possible structure of DTOs and the movement of opiates within Afghanistan in terms of interlinking concentric trafficking circles, with each layer selling to the next. While such a model simplifies the complexities of the situation on the ground, the model helps to understand some of the potential trafficking structures that operate in Afghanistan.

Other research on Afghan’s drug industry revealed some characteristics of the DTOs operating in Afghanistan, which were similar to the concentric trafficking circles model. At the outer rim, and in the highest numbers, are itinerant traffickers who buy opium from farmers and trade on a seasonal basis during the main period of opium production. One step closer to the core of large traffickers are the middle-level traffickers. They are still relatively small-scale actors and their engagement in drug trafficking also tends to be seasonal. The majority of the traffickers interviewed for this study (88 per cent), fit into one of these two categories. According to 2006 UN and World Bank research, at the centre of the illicit opiate business were large-scale, specialist and highly organized drug traffickers who bought opiates throughout the year, and often arranged shipping to border areas or directly abroad of quantities sometimes amounting to several tons. This core might consist of a relatively small number of traffickers, who potentially own land and might be quite wealthy and have significant tribal or political influence. Few of the traffickers interviewed for the present study are in that category. For this study, traffickers were asked about the structure of their DTO, including the size, the membership and whether they were part of a wider network or alliance of several DTOs.

Number of People in DTO’s

Traffickers were asked about the structure of their DTO, including the size, the membership and whether they were part of a wider network or alliance of several DTOs. Ninety-three per cent of respondents identified themselves as facilitators or couriers. Some 17 traffickers identified as part of a wider drug trafficking organization consisting of between 6 to 20 people, with the remaining 24 participants working as individual traders/traffickers. Of the traffickers who worked with a DTO, 94 per cent had a strong desire to continue to be part of that organization with only one participant expressing an intention to cease working as part of a group. The number of individuals and their interrelations, roles, and responsibilities are a key part of understanding the structure of DTOs.

Defining Organizations and Networks

For the purpose of this study, a Drug Trafficking Organization (DTO) defined as an organization made up of a number of people (two or more) who are involved in the trafficking of drugs, either within Afghanistan, or to external markets, or a combination of both. For the purpose of this study, a Drug Trafficking Network is defined as a group of DTO’s who work together for mutual benefit, and who co-operate with each other to a degree.

Fig. 18: Distribution of Traffickers by Size of Workforce (Number of Responses)

[Bar chart showing distribution of traffickers by number of people working for key informants]

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40 For example, the major trafficker Haji Juma Khan could move up to 40 tons shipments of drugs at a time from Afghanistan to international markets.
Table 2: Summary of structure and organisation of DTOs based on respondents’ answers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>LARGE-SCALE TRAFFICKERS (N=5)</th>
<th>MID-SCALE TRAFFICKERS (N=18)</th>
<th>SMALL-SCALE TRAFFICKERS (N=18)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of interviewed traffickers that employ more than 10 people</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of interviewed traffickers whose DTO is part of a wider drug trafficking network</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of interviewed traffickers that involve family member(s)</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of interviewed traffickers that travel to other countries to traffic drugs</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Some 23 drug traffickers (56 per cent) indicated that their workforce includes people from their family and/or tribe. Amongst these, 16 respondents suggested that the share of family/tribe members within their working network was over 50 per cent (up to 100 per cent). Some 13 participants (32 per cent) said none of the workers in their DTO belong to their family and/or tribe.

Traffickers reported that they are cautious when hiring people outside of their immediate confidence and trust zone. Trust and confidence play a crucial role in the hiring process, with many traffickers reporting that they run reference checks before hiring people for various tasks such as couriers and drivers. Six of the nine respondents who reported working alone also hired people on an ad-hoc basis to meet a specific need, such as processing opiates or couriering drugs abroad.

Several informants highlighted that paying a good amount of money not only attracts couriers to traffick opiates inside Afghanistan, but also appeals to Afghans with dual nationality living in the West who are willing to smuggle heroin from Afghanistan to Europe and North America. One trafficker, who runs a small drug trafficking network with six couriers, noted that the people working for him “all have a double nationality”, specifically Afghans who have lived in Europe and Canada for a very long time. Dual nationality appears to be an attractive trait for Afghan DTOs seeking to traffic opiates to international markets.

Large Scale Traffickers

In the study group for this report, five drug traffickers (12 per cent) identified themselves as large-scale illicit drug traffickers. Self-identified large-scale drug traffickers interviewed for this study came from northern, western and eastern Afghanistan, from provinces that border Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Iran (Islamic Republic of), and Pakistan. The majority of the large traffickers employ more than 10 people, and they have the ability to travel to neighbouring countries to establish business connections with their partners and arrange cross border trafficking activity. All the large-scale traffickers reported being part of a wider network made up of several cooperating DTOs, and 80 percent of them had one or more family members involved in opiate trafficking. Only one of the large-scale traffickers owned a heroin manufacturing laboratory to produce his own opiates - the majority of large-scale traffickers purchased opiates from other traffickers or directly from laboratories. In terms of cross border drug trafficking, the interviews confirmed that it is mainly the large-scale drug traffickers who are involved with drug trafficking across international borders, whereas inter-provincial trafficking within Afghanistan was more common amongst large- and small-scale traffickers.

Mid- and Small-scale Traffickers

The remaining 36 drug traffickers (88 per cent) divided equally under the categories of mid and small-scale drug traffickers and came from all regions of Afghanistan. Four out of eighteen of the mid-scale traffickers (22 per cent) reported that they own a drug manufacturing laboratory. In terms of the size of their DTO’s, one third of the mid-scale traffickers employ 10 or more people, the remaining two thirds work with smaller numbers of people. The mid-scale drug traffickers interviewed appeared to be mostly trafficking inter-provincially within Afghanistan. Two thirds of mid-scale drug traffickers reported that they did not travel to other countries as part of their drug trafficking business. Half of them reported that their DTO worked with a wider network of several DTOs, and 50 per cent had one or more family members involved in their DTO. 78 per cent of the small-scale traffickers reported working with between 1 to 6 people, and none of them employ more than 7 people. The remaining 22 per cent, reported that they work alone as independent traffickers or couriers. The number of small-scale drug traffickers who have family member(s) involved in drug trafficking is relatively less than the large and mid-scale drug traffickers.

41 As discussed in Section 2 large scale traffickers for this study were defined as being able to traffic more than 40 kilograms of opiates per month.

42 As discussed in Section 2 mid-scale traffickers for this study were defined as being able to traffic between 11 and 40 kilograms of opiates per month. Small scale traffickers were defined as being able to traffic 10 kilograms or less of opiates per month.
According to the responses given by Afghan drug traffickers, many DTOs within Afghanistan appear to be family-based structures, loosely coordinating and cooperating with a wider network of similar organizations in the supply chain. The size of the organisation is relatively small, and the majority of workforce mainly comes from family members, associates based on tribal connections, and from the local neighbourhood of a trafficker: DTOs are complex and mobilize individuals from different segments of society to produce, transport, and

“I worked independently with my wife. She helped with facilitation/coordination and trafficking of drugs.”

“I work independently [from a wider network or alliance, with] my wife, my son and my brother.”

“I work independently [from a wider network or alliance, but] two of my brothers are working with me. When needed, I hire up to 6 people to help me produce Chaynak.”

“Women take care of the inventories, provide protection when the Government is searching the village, and assist in trafficking from time to time.”

A major trafficker describing the extent of his family’s involvement in his opiate business

“Voices of the Quchaqbar”

Structure of Afghan Drug Trafficking Organizations, Based on Trafficker Interviews

Management, Authority and Hierarchical Structure Within Afghan Opiate DTO’s

“It has been a long time. In the early years of Karzai’s first presidential term I took over the leadership of the network from my father who decided to retire in his early 80’s. I have seven brothers and five sisters, and six step-brothers and -sisters. We don’t have a good relationship with our stepbrothers and -sisters. Three of my brothers were involved [in drug trafficking], the eldest one who worked with my father became an addict and he is no longer in the business. Two younger brothers became addicts later and are no longer in the business. One of my brothers is living in Turkey, who is a member of the network. One brother and sister are based in Europe, who are members of the network. Another brother, also in Europe, is not interested in this business and he has a hotel. Two of my sister’s husbands are also members of my network. I have four sons and one little daughter from my first wife and one little girl from my second wife. The two eldest sons and my first wife also help with the business.”

Interviewee

Direct member of DTO

Brothers-in-law – drug traffickers

Eldest sons – drug traffickers

Became addicts and gave up trafficking

Based in Europe

Based in Turkey

Management, Authority and Hierarchical Structure Within Afghan Opiate DTO’s

Temporary workers hired to produce Chaynak

Interviewee

Direct member of DTO

Temporary member of DTO

“Voices of the Quchaqbar”
as coordination with other DTOs and government structures are also associated with the head of DTOs. These managerial roles and responsibilities are similar to those that could be observed in licit businesses. One drug trafficker reported that “when trafficking drugs, if we are attacked by Government forces, the head of the network decides whether to fight back or escape.” This is a clear indicator of a command-and-control, as well as leadership, function attached to the management of that trafficker’s DTO.

Members of DTOs clearly work under a chain of command and they are aware of the decision-making process and the defined division of labour. One drug trafficker described the manager of his DTO as being someone who shows “leadership in smuggling, signs agreements, solves problems with other networks, Government and law enforcement.” Another trafficker reported a similar situation: “the head of the organisation is responsible for the management [of the DTO] and maintaining communication with partners and is in charge of the coordination with other DTOs”. A third

an assessment of the trafficking routes, and decides about the size of opiate consignments.

One trafficker reported that management makes decisions “concerning the business with other groups/organizations, security related decisions, and coordination with traders with outside of the country”. Another trafficker from western Afghanistan stated, the leader of the DTO “is responsible for coordination, leadership, coordination with government officials, and solving problems”, including conflict management: “Problems and conflicts are solved by the manager and his decisions are binding and should be taken seriously”. A second trafficker from the western region reported that “management finds customers, does business with other [drug trafficking] organizations, and exercises [a] coordination function”.

These statements illustrate that there are hierarchical functions or roles such as leadership, decision making, coordination, communication, problem solving, and conflict management exercised by the heads of DTOs. Some tasks and responsibilities such as coordination with other DTOs and government structures are also associated with the head of DTOs. These managerial roles and responsibilities are similar to those that could be observed in licit businesses. One drug trafficker reported that “when trafficking drugs, if we are attacked by Government forces, the head of the network decides whether to fight back or escape”. This is a clear indicator of a command-and-control, as well as leadership, function attached to the management of that trafficker’s DTO. Members of DTOs clearly work under a chain of command and they are aware of the decision-making process and the defined division of labour.

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trafficker revealed that the management of his DTO takes “decisions related to strengthening coordination with other DTO’s and provision of financial support to the members if they lose their heroin shipments or heroin is damaged due to the bad weather conditions”. Commenting on the role of management, one of the interviewees said:

“If it is a family organization, then the elder brother who runs the business makes most of the decisions, but there are times that you need to consult with your other members. In this kind of organization, while power and influence are important at the end of the day, what matters is that we make a good decision that is beneficial for the family business and, taking into account the nature of our relationship, we do not want any of the members to be arrested”.

This statement contains several important characteristics of a family-run Afghan DTO. The respondent stated that his three brothers had started off the business of trafficking opiates, but later all three had become drug addicts and had to quit from the business, where upon he took over control of the DTO. He, as the eldest male member of the organisation therefore, makes most of the decisions and from time-to-time consults with the other members of the DTO. While the person in the position of seniority occupies a dominant role in exerting power and influence at the management level, in this case, there is also room for consultation with the other family members.

The social functions of DTO leadership is also worth noting. According to one drug trafficker, the leader of a DTO sometimes also embraces social responsibilities i.e. providing financial support to the family of members of the DTO or contributing funds to tribal elders.

“Having relationship with other [drug] organizations is important in this business. For instance, one of the organizations I work with [has] a good coverage of southern Afghanistan, where there is a lot of opium available, and sometimes I buy opium from them and sell them acetic anhydride or order their labs to produce heroin for me, or one of their chemists comes to Herat to produce heroin for me when I need [it]. The advantages of being a member of a network [of DTO’s] are numerous and depends on the nature of your relationship with the network.”

“Being member of a network is good since it can help solve problems, and whenever needed the support of the network is there for you. I wanted to continue since I was aware of the situation along all the trafficking routes and I had the opportunity to exchange ideas and coordinate with other members [of the network]”. “If someone is member of an alliance they are being protected. I wanted to be part of an alliance and it was important to me. All the major decisions are made by the head of the alliance. Usually the head of the alliance decides how to resolve the conflicts within the group. Members of an alliance share the safe trafficking route among each other”.

“[I am a] member of a network. It is not possible to work alone. Depending on the needs of the networks and geographical location, groups work together and hold face to face meetings once they build trust”.

“The network has more resources to support us during [a] crisis and when there are problems [but] you have to obey the rules and regulations of the network and cannot act independently. The profit is also less compared to when one is independent. Coordination and cooperation with other networks occur through face to face meetings and follow up through phone calls”.

“I don’t always work with [a] network, only when needed. I started working, occasionally, with a network four years ago. [The] head of network is responsible for management and maintaining communication with partners and is in charge of coordination with other DTOs. Every DTO does their own work, and only when needed, cooperate with each other on issues such as sale, production and trafficking”.

“Networks” of DTO’s

In addition to describing the structure of their individual DTO, a number of interviewees reported that they and their DTO was part of a broader “network” or “alliance” made up of several DTO’s that co-operated with each other for mutual benefit and support. All of the large-scale traffickers, and half of the mid-scale traffickers reported that they were part of a broader network of several DTO’s while only 16 per cent of the small-scale traffickers reported that they were part of such a networked organization. The members of the drug trafficking networks reported that they enjoyed being part of the structure, which offered many advantages. The only identified risk associated with the membership was being arrested. Some respondents suggested also that the potential profit from opiate sales was less when being a member of a network. Some of the drug traffickers expressed their loyalty to the network, agreeing with the statement that “as long as I am alive and not arrested, I will be part of the network”. Although six traffickers reported that they paid to join their drug trafficking network, the majority did not.

Conflict Resolution in Afghan trafficking Networks

“Sometimes conflicts are never resolved, and the networks become enem[ies] of each other and compete”.

35
Illegal drug markets have been described as ‘stateless’ settings, leaving members to resolve their problems and disputes without the benefit of legal mediating agents and guidelines. The narrative analysis of the answers from 17 of the interviewed traffickers, operating within trafficking networks, showed that conflict resolution amongst Afghan trafficking organizations, usually rests with the head of the DTO or the wider network. However, some general information was given. One drug trafficker from the south stated that “whenever there is a seizure, then there is a conflict among the DTOs in a network and usually such conflicts are solved by the money”. The majority of those who provided information on internal conflict (mainly traffickers from western Afghanistan) felt that conflicts are resolved by the head of their organization and other senior members of the group. A participant stated that “the head of the organization tries to solve the problems and the members also cooperate with each other”. One trafficker added an important dimension in conflict resolution: “decisions are binding and should be taken seriously”. This conflict resolution pattern conforms with the cultural, tribal and ethnic customs, codes, and practices across Afghanistan, where conflicts are frequently resolved through a co-operative, consensus based, ‘Shura’ process, overseen by those with a degree of formal or informal authority. There appears to be an implied obligation on the members of a DTO or a wider network not to act in any way that is calculated to, or likely to, breach the trust and confidence of the head of the DTO or its members. In cases where a lack of trust or confidence develops from an unresolved conflict, the members may leave the organization or sometimes even become each other’s enemy and try to take revenge.

Slightly differing from the top-down approach to conflict resolution, one trafficker from the western region suggested that conflicts are addressed through discussion and negotiation among the members and are not just resolved by the head of a DTO. Another drug trafficker also echoed this practice: “In our case, we have a consultation meeting to resolve the conflicts”. Third-party mediation is also suggested as an option. Another trafficker stated, “if the conflicts among the networks were not solved, parties became enemies of each other and start competing. Sometimes negotiations or a third-party intervention is required to solve the problems and make a peace”. This statement suggests that a conflict between parties are sometimes addressed by third-party mediators and conciliators, who act as an independent broker between conflicting parties. Drug traffickers did not describe the third-party mediators.

In the absence of legally binding contractual arrangements found in the legal public or private sectors, actors in illegal drug markets can turn to violence. This study was not able to measure the scale of violence within, or between, Afghan drug trafficking organizations. However, violence associated with drug trafficking organizations is not a given and defining drug related violence can be challenging. UNODC’s Global Study on Homicide suggests that it “is not so much the quantities of trafficked drugs as changes in flows, that destabilize the market and drive violence among drug trafficking organizations, or between drug trafficking organizations and State authorities.” As drug flows in Afghanistan are relatively static, this may in part account for the lack of violence between Afghan DTOs. The perception of violence associated with drug trafficking can also be a product of biases associated with the overwhelming attention to extreme situations of violence, and some researchers have suggested that drug markets and the actors within them can be relatively peaceful. Violence between DTOs is often the last option, with consensus agreements and the identification of various alternatives to violence often applied by drug traffickers. In the Afghan context, understanding drug related violence is made more complicated by the on-going insurgency within the country.

Among the 17 traffickers who answered the question on drug related violence, only one reported the killing of DTO members, as being a response to disagreements. According to this trafficker, “in most cases, conflicts are not resolved and creates a lack of trust among the members and sometimes ends up in the assassination of one or more members of the network”. The killing of network members and/or other types of violence was not reported by other drug traffickers. This limited reporting suggests that drug trafficking may not produce a large amount of violence in Afghanistan, but more research is needed to test this assumption.

47 Only those who operated in drug trafficking networks were asked about network and management related questions.
Opium supply in Afghanistan fluctuates year on year, causing the market to react by adjusting prices.\(^5\) Drug traffickers were asked to share their strategies and how they supplied opium and heroin to meet international and local demand, and how they reacted to fluctuations of demand and supply in the market. Overall, traffickers provided diverse observations regarding local and international demand for drugs. Traffickers had different perceptions on recent trends in the demand for heroin, both within Afghanistan and internationally. Slightly over 60 per cent of the participants (26 out of 41) assessed that demand for heroin in general was high and increasing. However, they had varying opinions with regard to international and national demand.

Traffickers from southern and western Afghanistan assessed that, in comparison to past years, the current demand for heroin had declined. According to one of them: “the demand has decreased compared to previous years. The major traffickers don’t have contacts with foreign traders like in the past and there is more control at the borders”. One fifth of surveyed traffickers - mainly those from the provinces of Farah, Helmand, Herat, and Nimroz - reported that local demand for heroin had declined, whereas international demand was high.

While the surveyed drug traffickers did not report any specific methods in relation to their supply strategy, 73 per cent of them reported that they keep a portion of their annual heroin inventory for at least six months. All the large-scale traffickers and many middle-scale traffickers (83 per cent,) stated that they kept a portion of their heroin aside as an inventory. The proportion of small-scale traffickers who keep inventories was a bit lower, at slightly over 55 per cent. All participants confirmed that after one to two years both morphine and heroin start to lose quality, and therefore many do not keep heroin in storage for a long time. According to traffickers, storage locations should be dry and cool. For those 73 per cent who stockpile opiates, 18 traffickers out of 30 (60 per cent) keep 10 to 30 per cent of their heroin supply as a reserve stock. Seven drug traffickers (23 per cent) keep 40 to 70 per cent of their stock in reserve. Four drug traffickers (13 percent) suggested that they only kept a small, unspecified, percentage of their annual heroin inventory as a stock.

Analysis of drug traffickers’ responses suggests that the surveyed traffickers do not employ a formal, analytical method to predict the level of demand for coming months or years, and they are comfortable using their opiate inventories in case they need to respond to an unanticipated request from local or international demand. This suggests that opiate supply, within Afghanistan is driven by demand, or an ad-hoc, “just-in-time” supply process (taking account of the level of individual drug inventories). It appears from the interviews, that opiates are widely available, and if a trafficker has a request for opiates that he cannot fulfil within his own inventory, he can obtain them from traffickers in his district, province or wider network.

SECTION 9: Financial and monetary issues related to illicit opiate trafficking

Understanding how Afghan opiate traffickers make financial transactions was a key objective of this study. The first question sought to examine how opiate traffickers arrange monetary relations with their business partners, which financial instruments were used, and where they keep their financial assets/resources. The second was to explore traffickers’ payments to Anti-Government Elements (AGE) under the pretext of Islamic ‘taxes’, such as Ushr, Zakat, and Eidi as well as other payment motivations such as security and protection payments and voluntary contributions.

For this study traffickers were asked to describe how monetary relations with their business partners were arranged and how outstanding balances were settled. The participants stated that they either use Hawala exclusively, or Hawala in combination with other payment tools. Some 15 drug traffickers out of 41 reported that they only use Hawala to make financial transactions. Some 25 drug traffickers reported that in addition to using the Hawala system, they arrange financial settlements either by: direct cash payments; exchange

with other commodities imported inside Afghanistan including fuel, food or vehicles; or exchanging opiates for other drugs (such as Tablet K), acetic anhydride, weapons, and other commodities. Only one respondent reported that he used the formal banking system for financial settlements with his business partners. Where cash payments were made, both for international and domestic trafficking, US dollars were reported as the most commonly used currency, followed by Pakistani Rupees and Iranian Toman. Euros were the fifth most frequently used currency after the local currency, the Afghani. One participant reported that he used United Arab Emirates Dirham in cash payments with business partners.

When arranging opiate trafficking deals, 26 drug traffickers (63 per cent) stated that they received advanced payment from their trading partners before shipping the opiates. Only 22 per cent of the participants did not receive pre-payment, while one participant commented that he sometimes collected a deposit.

The study group was asked to share opinions on the licit or illicit sectors the profits generated from opiate trafficking are invested in. 27 per cent of drug traffickers (7 per cent small-scale and 20 per cent mid-scale drug traffickers) reported that opiate trafficking profits were invested in real estate markets (although it was unclear if this was in Afghanistan, abroad or a combination of the two). In addition to real estate, 27 per cent of respondents, said the money was re-invested in their drug business, “kept with Hawaladar”, or was used for bribing government officials. 17 per cent reported that they invested the drug profits in licit business.

Some traffickers stated that in addition to investing in licit business, they kept a portion of their drug profits with their Hawaladar to give credits and receive additional profits from realized interest. In the view of the respondent, “the money generated from illicit drug trafficking was kept with the money dealers/Hawlaladars and sometimes also [earned] interest”.

Traffickers were asked whether they also had a licit employment or business. Some 23 drug traffickers said that they had never worked in, or owned, a licit business, and they became involved in opiate trafficking because of the lack of other licit opportunities. Of these 23 traffickers, 21 expressed their desire to entirely migrate to legitimate business sectors (e.g. agriculture, animal husbandry, import businesses, real estate, and car dealership) at some point in the future, should suitable alternative employment become available. Some 15 drug traffickers (37 per cent) said that in addition to their drug trafficking activity, they were also operating in licit business sectors such as real estate, construction, and carpet vending businesses.

54 Eidi is a form of payment made during the Eid (a Muslim festival) from elders to children/youth.

55 Generally, interest is not earned in Islamic finance, so it is unusual that this trafficker reported that he receives interest on drug profits.
The information provided by traffickers suggests that there is space in the real estate market to invest profits from opiate trafficking, although the geographical location of where opiate traffickers invest in the real estate sector was unclear. The research shows that profits from opiate trafficking penetrate both the illicit and licit business sectors, and that much of the profits from drug trafficking by Afghan trafficking organizations remains mostly within Afghanistan.

Only a small segment of the Afghan population has access to formal banking services. According to the World Bank, as of 2018, 15 percent of the population over 15 years old had an account at a financial institution or with a mobile-money-service provider⁶⁶. This does not include the Hawala system, which in Arabic simply means ‘transfer’, and refers broadly to money transfer mechanisms which exist in the absence of, or parallel to, conventional banking channels⁵⁷. The role of Hawala in Afghanistan has been enhanced due to the decades of conflict, and especially under the Taliban regime when the Hawala markets fully replaced the formal banking system. As the only facility for the transfer of money inside and outside of Afghanistan, the system involves a complex interplay of actors, with a strong potential to be misused for illicit purposes⁵⁸.

According to a 2003 study, Hawala transfers between major international cities can take, on average, six to twelve hours and much less for transfers between cities inside Afghanistan⁵⁹. Commonly, 24-48 hours is required for transfers between countries with a different time zone or where communications are less reliable⁶⁰. The direct cost of making fund transfers between major international centres averages between two to five per cent. The final fee paid for the transfer ultimately depends on the volume of the transaction, the financial relationship between the remitter and the Hawaladar, the currency of exchange, the destination of funds, and the negotiating skills of both parties and their understanding of how the market operates.

Generally, Hawala dealers should be registered and report regularly on money transactions⁶¹. However, until recently none of Afghanistan’s Hawaladars were registered by the Government, until efforts to regulate the industry increased⁶². As per the Da Afghanistan Bank (DAB) regulation, money transfer can only be conducted through the following: money transmission, cheque cashing, and currency exchange. Any person providing these services are defined as Money Service Providers (Hawaladar) and are legally required to obtain a business license from the Financial Supervision Department of DAB. According to the 2018 Annual Report of the Financial Transactions and Report Analysis Centre of Afghanistan⁶³, 1,245 Hawaladars were registered, spread across Afghanistan’s regions as shown below. However, despite efforts to register and regulate the Hawala industry, there is no clear indication of how many Hawalas are in Afghanistan. It is likely that the majority of hawalas remain unregistered, and even registered Hawalas may not report all transactions⁶⁴.

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⁶⁴ FATF “The role of Hawala and other similar service providers in money laundering and
Payment to Anti-Government Elements (AGEs)

Most of the profits generated from drug trafficking benefit traffickers, but some go to corrupt government officials and insurgents within Afghanistan. Where they can, AGEs raise two forms of traditional taxation, namely, Ushr a tax on agriculture and other natural resources, and Zakat, a mandatory religious tax on wealth. In addition to these traditional taxes, traffickers also pay AGE’s to protect drug shipments and labs that are in AGE controlled territory. While tax is normally defined as a compulsory contribution to legitimate States in relation to legitimate profits, drug traffickers described taxes in the context of illicit activities and non-state actors, Ushr, Zakat and other forms of payments regulated in Islam can be considered a tax under Islamic law. Voluntary donations to senior insurgent commanders are also made by drug traffickers, and the Taliban receive large ad hoc donations from major traders in the narcotics business. However, as the main economic activity in areas under Taliban and other AGE control is farming, a significant proportion of which is poppy cultivation, Ushr collected from opium poppy cultivation is possibly the main source of their income from opiates, rather than payments by traffickers. Drug traffickers were asked about possible payments to AGE and their observations on this matter. Of all interviewed traffickers, 34 (83 per cent) confirmed that they made payments to the Taliban for different reasons. Five disaggregated factors were used to identify the reasons: need for security or protection, Ushr, contribution to legitimate States in relation to legitimate profits, investigation, prosecution and adjudication. However, one drug trafficker from southern Afghanistan said: “In areas under the Taliban’s control, drug trafficking is not a crime”. This statement underlines that some drug traffickers (12 per cent) did not specify the Taliban but confirmed that they paid money to AGEs. The most frequent reason behind the payment to the Taliban and other AGEs was the need for security or protection. Ushr was referenced 13 times, which was followed by Zakat. Nine participants acknowledged voluntary payments to the AGEs and to the Taliban. The fear of the consequences of not paying the Taliban was found thrice in the interview transcripts.

Profits obtained from an illicit business is not a subject to a tax, and in theory are exempt from Ushr and Zakat but are subject to a criminal justice response such as seizure, confiscation, investigation, prosecution and adjudication. However, one drug trafficker from southern Afghanistan said: “In areas under the Taliban’s control, drug trafficking is not a crime”. This statement underlines that some drug traffickers (12 per cent) did not specify the Taliban but confirmed that they paid money to AGEs. The most frequent reason behind the payment to the Taliban and other AGEs was the need for security or protection. Ushr was referenced 13 times, which was followed by Zakat. Nine participants acknowledged voluntary payments to the AGEs and to the Taliban. The fear of the consequences of not paying the Taliban was found thrice in the interview transcripts.

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Traffickers see drug profits as legitimate profits and probably justify their payment to the Taliban either as a tax or Ushr/Zakat.

Traffickers were asked to estimate the amount of money they paid to the Taliban and other AGEs for the protection of their trafficking activity. Study participants provided a range of different figures suggesting that in Kandahar 10,000-15,000 Pakistani Kaldar (USD 63-95) are paid to the Taliban per kilogram of heroin and 5,000 Pakistani Rupee (32 USD) for a kilogram of opium; while in Helmand payments were approximately USD 83 per kilogram of heroin, and in Farah 1,500 Afghani (USD 20) per kilo of opium. A kilogram of high-quality crystal heroin can be sold for some USD 2,10068 in Afghanistan, so the payments to the Taliban appear to range only between 3-5 per cent of the value of the drug if it were sold in Afghanistan.

This means that, theoretically, for example, a Taliban commander in Kandahar providing protection for a ton of heroin moving through his area of control could potentially make between USD 63,000 and 95,000 for a ton of heroin moving through their area, which is a considerable sum for a Taliban field commander, but far less than what traffickers could make in selling the same amount of heroin in Afghanistan: approximately USD 2 million. The amount of money charged by the Taliban and other AGEs as protection and transit fees appears to be rather low, relative to the value of the opiates, and further research is required to explore the factors behind this. It should be noted that, based on traffickers’ responses, the Taliban do not appear to be systematically paid by traffickers. Some interviewed traffickers suggested that they only paid the Taliban if they are stopped by insurgents while trafficking, rather than having formalised, regular or established procedures:

“When [the] Taliban stop a drug shipment, they ask for money and we pay them.”

“If we encounter [the] Taliban, then [we] need to pay protection payment to them.”

“We have no security related problems inside Afghanistan since [the] Taliban provide protection, but in Iran there are challenges posed by the Iranian law enforcement.”

 “[The] Taliban promise [that] they [will] maintain our security and provide protection and ask for money in return.”

“We pay cash and provide weapons to the Taliban.”

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Drug traffickers were asked about their communication methods. The majority of respondents employed multiple methods and used different tools to communicate with their team members, business partners, and others. The majority of drug traffickers (82 per cent) believed that over the last five years communication methods and tools used by traffickers have significantly changed. According to them, access to the internet and smartphone applications, including encrypted messaging services that facilitate audio and video communications, were considered to be the driving force in this change.

Some 27 drug traffickers reported that in addition to the local mobile phone networks, smartphone applications such as Facebook Messenger, Telegram, WhatsApp, Viber, and WeChat as well as non-smart phone systems including Thuraya satellite phones were used. The latter and face-to-face meetings were reported as being more frequently used in the past, especially during the late 1990s and early 2000s when Afghanistan communication infrastructure was far less developed. However, following the increased availability of internet access and mobile phone service provision throughout Afghanistan, drug traffickers have reportedly increasingly relied on mobile phone service providers and smart phone applications to communicate.

Several drug traffickers reported that they had completely migrated from Thuraya satellite phone communication to internet-based mobile phone applications. However, due to the interruption of or limited local mobile network service in some provinces and in remote parts of southern and western Afghanistan (including Helmand, Kandahar, Nimroz, and Farah), some traffickers do continue to use Thuraya.

The study also interviewed members of the CNPA to understand their view on the changes in trafficker communications. The CNPA confirmed that the use of mobile phones and the internet was more frequent than in the past. CNPA officers also stated that internet-based communication methods used by traffickers were proving to be a challenge, as the CNPA did not have the capability to intercept or monitor this type of communication.

Although the majority of traffickers interviewed believed that changes in communication methods were beneficial, one drug trafficker believed that such changes worked against DTOs. According to him, everything (including communications) was subject to the Government’s monitoring. He said that “communication has changed a lot compared to five years ago when the borders were open but now everything is under control including communication”.

Although traffickers seemed to be comfortable in communicating through common day-to-day communication tools, some of them were cautious and took security measures when communicating. Several traffickers reported that they arranged initial meetings with business partners through individual messengers and only later agreed on the ways and means for further communications. Another group of drug traffickers employed other techniques, such as regularly changing both the mobile phone and individual SIM cards.
cards, using pre-communicated and agreed upon codewords when using mobile phones, or keeping verbal communication and SMS and/or other messages short and brief. Some interviewed traffickers acknowledged using several code words refer to opium, heroin, morphine and other types of drugs, but in the context of this study, those keywords were largely not made explicit. Only one trafficker, divulged some codewords that he used: “When communicating over local mobile network, we use words such as powder, Goara, Talka”.

Areas for Further Research

This research study has begun to fill in some of the knowledge gaps associated with drug trafficking organizations in Afghanistan and how they operate, both within Afghanistan and in international markets. This research has explored how trafficking organizations are structured and operate; the motivations for traffickers entering and remaining in the illicit opiate business; the role of women in Afghan drug trafficking organizations; the financial methods used by traffickers; their links to corrupt governance and insurgents, and their understanding of opiate processing. However, this research was very much an initial look at these issues, and in some cases exposed areas that would benefit from further research.

The Motivations Behind Entering and Remaining in Opiate Trafficking

This research highlighted the fact that for many traffickers, the motivations for entering and remaining in the illicit drug business were a combination of need and greed. However, the factors driving people to become involved in opiate trafficking are complex and require further study including a more detailed look at the socio-economic backgrounds of those involved, and the reasons why they continue to participate in an illegal business rather than in licit employment. Many traffickers in this present study expressed an interest in eventually migrating into licit employment, and further research could examine what factors would encourage them to do so.

The Business Models of Afghan Drug Traffickers

Traffickers interviewed for this study gave different examples of how they operate their businesses. Some traffickers only engaged in trafficking between provinces in Afghanistan, some only trafficked outside of Afghanistan and others had a combination of the two. Some traffickers only trafficked to neighbouring countries, and others could traffick further afield to North America and Europe. While some traffickers described a business process that corresponded to the concentric trafficker circle model, others described a very different system. Further research is required to explore the different types of business models in Afghanistan, including how they are structured, the extent of traffickers capabilities and how they interact with trafficking organizations outside of Afghanistan.

The Role of Women in Opiate Trafficking

This research provided some initial insights into women’s involvement in opiate trafficking, and the range of areas in which they were involved in. However, this research only examined the issue from the perspective of male traffickers. Understanding the motivations behind why women become involved in opiate trafficking, women’s roles in trafficking organizations, and their thoughts and beliefs about trafficking– from a female perspective – is a key area of future research.

Links Between Opiate Trafficking and Anti-Government Elements

This study demonstrated that traffickers did interact with and pay the Taliban and other insurgent groups. But the extent of this interaction was unclear. Some traffickers suggested that they only pay the Taliban when they were stopped and asked to, and the amounts traffickers paid to AGEs was rather low. Further research could shed light on the extent of traffickers relations with insurgent groups and how they work together. This research only looked at the question of drug trafficker- insurgent relations from the perspective of the traffickers. Further research could also examine the insurgent’s perception of drug trafficking and their relationship with traffickers.

"Voices of the Quchaqbars"