Rise of methamphetamine & stimulants

ISSDP – UNODC WEBINAR: 2020 WORLD DRUG REPORT

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WDR 2020 Findings on Stimulants

1. Brief overview of general findings on stimulants, focusing on methamphetamine

2. Focus on methamphetamine production in Afghanistan (ephedra/Oman)
   - LSE Research:
WDR 2020 Findings on Stimulants

- **Booklet 1: ‘Stimulant use on the increase’ (p.18)**
  - Stimulant scene is dominated by cocaine and methamphetamine, and use of both substances is rising in their main markets
  - 2018: 27 million people used amphetamines, methamphetamine being the most used ATS in South-East Asia (further information/break-down in Booklet 2 p.18 onwards)
  - 21 million people used ecstasy
  - 19 million people used cocaine
  - Increase in methamphetamine use in Australia/New Zealand, East and Southeast Asia, and increased level of consumption in Western and Central Europe
WDR 2020 Findings on Stimulants

- **Booklet 1**: ‘Markets for amphetamine-type stimulants show signs of continued expansion’ (p.18)
  - Indicators suggest that the global market of such substances, especially methamphetamine, is expanding
  - Meth dominates global ATS seizures: quantities of seized methamphetamine, the ATS with the largest market globally, reached a new record high, at 228 ton-equivalents, in 2018
    - Booklet 3 (p.37): Seizures increased sevenfold over the period 2009–2018
    - Those reporting seizures of methamphetamine increased by more than 50%, from 69 to 105 countries, which suggests that there has been a significant increase in the geographical spread of methamphetamine trafficking at the global level
WDR 2020 Findings on Stimulants

- **Booklet 3: Manufacture of amphetamine-type stimulants continues to be dominated by methamphetamine (p.37)**
  - 2014–2018, Member States reported the dismantling of close to 30,000 clandestine laboratories used in the manufacture of ATS
  - Approximately 95% of those laboratories had been manufacturing methamphetamine
- **Booklet 3: Manufacture of methamphetamine is increasingly complex (p.39)**
  - Methamphetamine precursor seizures almost tripled in 2018 compared with 2017
  - Increasing quantities of methamphetamine are now being produced from pre-precursors that are not under international control; for example, substances such as benzaldehyde and nitroethane are used in the clandestine manufacture of P-2-P
WDR 2020 Findings on Stimulants

- **Booklet 4: Shifts from opioids to stimulants in the Russian Federation and Central Asia (p.27)**
  - Data for the Russian Federation and Central Asian countries indicate a significant decline in both the use of and trafficking in opiates over the period 2008–2018
  - By contrast, quantities of stimulants seized rose twentyfold over the period 2008–2018, in particular seizures of ATS, which rose to almost 33 times the initial level
  - Treatment demand for the use of stimulants (mostly related to ATS) rose from 1 per cent to 19 per cent over the period 2008–2018
  - Also reported that the Russian Federation may have the highest proportion worldwide of Internet users who use the darknet for purchasing drugs
WDR 2020 Findings on Stimulants

- Booklet 1: ‘IMPACT OF COVID-19’ (p.23)
  - Large-scale illicit production of synthetic drugs using precursors imported from other regions is likely to be affected
  - Where there is domestic manufacture using domestic precursors, as is the case with mephedrone and other popular synthetic drugs in the Russian Federation, no major impact on the domestic drug market has been visible
    - This is of great relevance to Afghanistan as well: whereby the proliferation of low-cost methamphetamine has taken place through extracting ephedrine from the wild-growing ephedra/Oman crop
  - Stimulant users are particularly susceptible to inflammation of and damage to the lung tissue

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WDR 2020 Findings on Stimulants: Rise of Afghan Methamphetamine Production
WDR 2020 Findings on Stimulants: Rise of Afghan Methamphetamine Production

- Booklet 4: ‘Rapid evolution in some sub-regional drug markets’, (p.24)
  - Methamphetamine manufacture and consumption used to be largely unknown in Near and Middle East/South-West Asia
  - 8 countries in sub-regions reported seizures of methamphetamine in the period 2000–2009
  - 14 countries in the period 2010–2018
  - Bulk of the methamphetamine seized continued to be seized by the Islamic Republic of Iran
  - 12/15 countries reported the use of methamphetamine by 2018 (or the latest year for which data are available)
  - Iran a major meth producer, with production beginning around 2005, but declining in recent years
  - Manufacturing is rapidly increasing in Afghanistan
WDR 2020 Findings on Stimulants: Rise of Afghan Methamphetamine Production

- **Booklet 4: ‘Rapid evolution in some sub-regional drug markets’, (p.24)**
  - Clandestine manufacture of methamphetamine appears to have begun in Afghanistan in 2014
  - Main destination country of the methamphetamine manufactured in Afghanistan is Iran
  - 2018, Iranian authorities reported Afghanistan as the main source country for methamphetamine found on its territory

- **Reports indicate that the ephedra plant has been used as a raw material for ephedrine production**

  - *Ephedra plant appears to grow wild in the central province of Ghoriyan in Afghanistan, and traders from several parts of the country, including from the Provinces of Farah and Helmand, have started to purchase ephedra plants in various districts of Ghoriyan province*
  
  - *Ephedra is now also reported to be grown in mountainous areas of other provinces, including Bamyan, Daykundi, Herat, Ghazni, Helmand, Kabul, Oruzgan and Wardak*
*All images courtesy of OSDR/Dr David Mansfield/Alcis

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Rise of Methamphetamine production in Afghanistan using 'Oman'/ephedra-plant

Why is it important?

1. The potential production levels of methamphetamine in Afghanistan are huge. This is a low-cost production method, where scale, price, and existing trafficking routes raises a serious threat to the region and beyond. There is an estimated 192,000 square km where the Oman plant can grow (+2,500m altitude). Hundreds of tonnes of Oman are traded annually. What will this mean for meth use in the Middle East and beyond? Where is all this meth going?

2. To what extent is the Oman/meth economy emerging as a supplement to the opiate economy? What will this mean for insurgency and unrest in Afghanistan, particularly in the highland areas? How will this impact on regional stability and security?

3. The production of meth using Oman raises unique methodological challenges unlike many other drug crops. It is a wild growing grass or bush, with no unique signature for remote sensing. Highlights the need for mixing and integrating various methods.
Main stimulant drug used, 2018 or latest available data

Source: UNODC, responses to the annual report questionnaire.

Note: Information is based primarily on the reported prevalence of stimulant drugs (cocaine, amphetamine, methamphetamine and "ecstasy") and, when that was not available, on the ranking or data on treatment of stimulant drug use reported in the annual report questionnaire.

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. The dotted line represents approximately the Line of Control in Jammu and Kashmir agreed upon by India and Pakistan. The final status of Jammu and Kashmir has not yet been agreed upon by the parties. The final boundary between the Republic of Sudan and the Republic of South Sudan has not yet been determined. A dispute exists between the Governments of Argentina and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland concerning sovereignty over the Falkland Islands (Malvinas).
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Research:
- 2019: Blog posts published (Dr David Mansfield, OSDR, Alexander Soderholm, with support from ALCIS):
  - ‘New US airstrikes obscure a dramatic development in the Afghan drugs industry – the proliferation of low-cost methamphetamine’ (LSE USAPP, May 2019)
  - ‘Long Read: The unknown unknowns of Afghanistan’s new wave of methamphetamine production’ (LSE USAPP, September 2019)
- Ongoing work, iterative, using different methods to constantly cross-verify data
- Methods: qualitative and quantitative data generated from interviews with key stakeholders (traders, producers, lab operators/cooks) on the ground in Iran and Afghanistan, coupled with high-resolution satellite imagery and analysis
  - Initial research focused on harvest/production in several key areas, to better understand potential production and implications

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Knowledge-transfer from Iranian meth producers, and a large domestic market for meth use:

• By 2010, 1/3 of all psychiatric hospital bed-uptake was by shisheh (crystal meth) users, and by 2015 there were 400,000 regular methamphetamine users in the country
• Iranian methamphetamine production allegedly began in 2005, and at the height of the Iranian meth production, 445 labs were identified and dismantled in 2013, down to 141 in 2017
• Influx of producers, ensuing profit squeeze, regulations on over-the-counter medicines, improved law enforcement capacity, and a struggling economy -> all contributed to the shift to Afghanistan
• Knowledge-transfer, both active and passive
  • Active knowledge-transfer ('training sessions'): by Iranian cooks helping setting up labs in Afghanistan, which is something that Iranians have done as far away as in Southeast Asia and Japan in early 2010s
  • Passive knowledge-transfer: Cooking meth requires labourers. Many of these labourers were recruited from the large number of impoverished and unemployed Afghans in Iran. Over time, they would learn the methods and open their own labs, sometimes back home in Afghanistan
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- Until 2018, meth production in Afghanistan involved decongestants, syrups or cold and flu tablets
- Imported from Pakistan and Iran: high input costs, some lab owners making losses
- The use of Oman has led to a reported 50% reduction in meth production costs
- Summer/Fall 2018, traders from Farah and Helmand buying Oman at the ‘mountain gate’
  - Perennial plant: dormant in winter, growing in March, harvested June/July-October
  - Once crop is purchased, traders dry it for around 25 days before it is treshed
- Ghazni: harvest of Oman a daily job over the course of the 3-month harvest, important part of a household’s overall livelihood portfolio
- Reports of Oman crop grown across the mountainous areas of Bamiyan, Daykundi, Herat, Ghazni, Ghor, Helmand, Kabul, Uruzgan and Wardak
- In Ghor, traders are purchasing the crop in the districts of Taywara, Pasaband, Saghar, Sharak and Tulak
- Conversion rate ranges from 56-250kg of Oman to 1kg of methamphetamine
  - Conversion rates have improved markedly over time

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Taywara -> Abdul Wadood bazaar

- Demand for payment from various armed actors begins immediately in Taywara
- Taliban charge a tax as the crop is loaded, the equivalent of US$0.07 per kilogram. Same crop is worth the equivalent of $3.20 per kilogram by the time it is sold in Bakwa
- Levied on a load of 15 metric tonnes, it can earn the insurgency as much $1,000 per truck
- Once reaching Abdul Wadood bazaar, the oman traders once again take control of their crop
- Traders set up stall, selling the dried and threshed crop to the lab owners in the surrounding area
- Oman Harvest (Taywara): ca US$ 0.16/kg
- Dried Oman Wholesale (Bakwa): ca US$ 0.63/kg
- Methamphetamine Labs (Bakwa): ca US$ 316/kg of methamphetamine
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Scale of production is hard to judge, further research needed:

- **Ball park figures indicate the harvest from a valley of 15 villages in Ghazni could be as much as 2,500 metric tons of Oman in a single season**
- **This is enough to produce anything from 8 to 25 metric tonnes of methamphetamine**
- Typical harvester in Taywara in Ghor will talk of working from 30 to 40 days over the course of the harvest season, alongside up to 12 other people from the same village. Harvesting up to 45 kilograms per day, one village could produce as much as 22 metric tons of Oman per year, enough to produce 390 kilograms of meth.
- District of Taywara alone, there are as many as 1400 villages located at the foothills of mountains of 2500 metres or higher
- Oman traders themselves claim even larger loads purchasing up to 180 metric tons of Oman a season
- **Just one 15 metric ton truck of Oman is enough to produce around 265 kilograms of methamphetamine**

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The shift in meth use/trafficking patterns in the region and beyond:

- **2019**: Large number of Iranian newspaper reports about an influx of Afghan shisheh into Iran, which is increasingly being consumed locally (cheaper than Iranian-produced meth, higher impurities)

- **30 October 2019**: Several Iranian media outlets published statements made by the head of the Iranian anti-narcotics police, who stated that 6 tonnes of ‘Afghan shisheh’ had been seized along Iran’s eastern border since March 2019

- **1 January 2020**: Spokesperson for the Iranian Drug Control Headquarters (DCHQ) stated that methamphetamine seizures had increased by 332% between March 2019-January 2020, compared to the same period the previous year

- **February 2020**: 100 kg of crystal methamphetamine seized by the Sri Lankan navy. Sri Lankan customs official stated: ‘indication of an emerging trend of meth produced in Afghanistan being smuggled out through an already well-established route for heroin trafficking to different parts of the world’ (more seizures of Afghan meth recorded along this route since)

- **24 April 2020**: Australian LEAs arrested two men in Sydney during an operation which seized almost 160 litres of liquid methylamphetamine worth a reported $80 million AUD. The shipment originated from Iran, concealed in a larger import of bottled water, and arrived in Australia in early April. Initial analysis by AFP shows that this was plant-based meth.
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The ‘Known Unknowns’

- This is a parallel economy to opium, not a substitute (growing areas fundamentally different from poppy)
- What implications will this have for criminality and insurgency in the highlands? What are the implications for the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan?
- Question we asked ourselves in May 2019: where is all this methamphetamine going?
- Events of late-2019 and throughout 2020 point towards a worrying answer: potential global spread
- Is it only a question of time before methamphetamine producers in Afghanistan, begin to take advantage of the well-established contacts and routes used by heroin traders into Western Europe? Has Afghanistan added a new low-cost drug crop to its already diverse portfolio?
- Is Afghan lower-quality meth partly sold in Iran for domestic consumption? And/or parts of it repurposed as a higher quality product for international export? (seems to be the case in Australia seizure)
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