

Countering Convergent Effects of Narcotics Economy, Militancy and Weak Governance in Balochistan

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Abstract

Balochistan region has been facing a convergent combination of narcotics economy, militancy and weak governance since creation of Pakistan. This has resulted into social, economic and political chaos in the province, affecting the basic fabrics in the province. This article finds a self-reinforcing dynamic and an interlinked phenomenon which has created an eroding cycle of social, economic resilient order, fueling militancy and challenging writ of state in Balochistan. Political economy and conflict governance frameworks form the conceptualizing basis for this study, which identify that narcotics economy is not just a criminal activity but an interlinked system of financial networks handled by militants. This undercurrent system just does not distort local power structures but highlight fragile institutional vulnerabilities. The analysis of the study highlights flourishing culture of narcotics which facilitates finances and provides strategic leverages to militants due to extremely-long and undermanaged porous western borders, limited capacity of the state institutions and weaknesses in governance. Modus operandi of these militants and their organizations involve engaging with soft targets, state institutions and hindering development projects through creating images of insecurity in the region. This creates a pseudo image of marginalization to local people, supervising patronage networks and results in grievances of political exclusion, economic deprivation and identity issues. This article argues that present federal and provincial efforts of counter-narcotics and counter-terrorism often produce counterproductive results due to isolated and limited efforts at each level and by each institute. Findings of this article contribute to both academic and policy discourse through proposing a policy framework, providing solutions to structural interdependencies in illegal spectrum, insurgent activities, fragile governance structures, dislodging their financial networks, enhancing border and maritime control measures and an inclusive community-based political and developmental way forward in Balochistan.

Keywords: Narcotics traffickers, methamphetamine, golden crescent, insurgency, Balochistan, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime.

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Introduction

Narcotics economy has been one of the most coherent non-traditional threats on the global, regional and domestic canvas and has affected stability in Balochistan since the beginning of 21st century. Narcotics trade has socioeconomic and psychological effects on people, communities and societies. It stimulates organized crime, undermines governance structures and builds inter-continental illicit economical hierarchies, resulting in socioeconomic disorders in the society. Balochistan has emerged as victim of this illicit trade for production, transportation, stocking and a geographic transit corridor to global underworld narcotics markets.¹ There is a need to develop an understanding of the narcotics economy in Balochistan and deep appreciation of global narcotics business pyramid, its production, trafficking, consumer markets and social and economic effects on the people. Spillover effects of this narcotics economy are not just socio-political, but also divert the rich culture and traditions of Baloch nation to unidentified ways of finding easy money solutions and short-term livelihood dependencies. This chain of global narco-business through Balochistan needs an impartial and empirical study to understand the real issues of narcotics trade, finding remedial measures with out of the box and practical solutions to remove menace of narcotics from Balochistan.

Narcotics trafficking constitutes one of the biggest and decentralized underworld economical businesses. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime report of year 2005 estimates heroin, opium and methamphetamine are main components of illicit narcotics economies, costing approximately \$600 Billion per Annum, mostly demanded in Europe, Gulf States and East Africa. Afghanistan becomes one of the centers of gravity of this global supply chain system, while Balochistan suffers one of major trade route from poppy fields of Afghanistan to Arabian Sea and further towards international markets.²

Regionally, Balochistan is strategically positioned at the crossroads of South Asia, Middle East, Central Asia and South East Asia sharing extremely long and semi-porous borders with both Afghanistan and Iran. Despite being a war torn and foreign invaded country, Afghanistan remains one of the world's largest producers of illicit drugs.

¹ Rida Sajid, Aneel Salman, and Maryam Ayub, *Narcotic Trafficking in Pakistan: A Comprehensive Review*, Policy Brief (Islamabad: Islamabad Policy Research Institute, October 2024), 2. <https://ipripak.org/narcotic-trafficking-in-pakistan-a-comprehensive-review>

² United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 'World Drug Report 2005', vol. 1, *Analysis* (Vienna: United Nations, 2005), 127-28.

Return of Taliban to power in 2021 has created uncertainty in drug enforcement, fluctuating poppy bans and increase in synthetic and semi-synthetic drugs which needs transportation routes to reach global markets.³ Balochistan offers a transitory outlet from its coastal shores to global markets due to its geography, facilitation from social fabric and weak border management.⁴ Tri-border areas of Iran-Pakistan-Afghanistan provide a heaven for smuggler mafia, militants and local facilitators, exploiting jurisdictional confusion and corruption in Balochistan.⁵ Pakistan's law enforcement agencies including Frontier Corps, Anti-Narcotics Force, and other security agencies have repeatedly attempted to control this flow of drugs, but regional instability coupled with vastness of the area and complicity in local populace has limited their efforts. Balochistan, already grappled with insurgency, ethnic tensions and militant violence now faces the added burden of being a narcotics transit zone.⁶ This socio-economic aspect of narcotics is believed to be fueling armed groups, facilitating the insurgency and sustaining low-intensity conflict and further bleeds into domestic fragility in Balochistan.⁷

Domestically, Balochistan is Pakistan's largest but most underdeveloped province, both in economic and institutional development. Population is sparse, terrain is mostly inaccessible and rugged and infrastructural development is lacking.⁸ These factors have created an enabling environment for smuggling operations. Means of

³ Shehryar Fazli, *Narcotics Smuggling in Afghanistan: Links between Afghanistan and Pakistan*, SOC ACE Research Paper No. 9 (Birmingham, UK: University of Birmingham, June 2022), 16.

⁴ Nicholas Lassi, 'Pakistan's Opioid Squeeze: Impacts of Taliban Edicts, Indian Synthetics and Chinese Regulations', *South Asia Research*, 43:3 (November 2023), 325-42. <https://doi.org/10.1177/02627280231161001>.

⁵ Siân Herbert and Iffat Idris, *Effects of Pakistan-Afghanistan Borderlands Instability on Stability and Security in Pakistan*, Rapid Literature Review (Birmingham, UK: GSDRC, University of Birmingham, and XCEPT, July 2024), 3.

⁶ Uzair Younus and Roohan Ahmed, *Pakistan Cracks Down on Illicit Economy Amid Economic Crisis*, Intelligence Briefing (Washington, DC: New Lines Institute for Strategy and Policy, January 2024), 9-13.

⁷ Giorgi Koberidze, 'Balochistan: Historical Struggles and Contemporary Implications for Iran-Pakistan Relations', *Journal of Politics and Democratization*, 5:7 (August 2024), 6.

⁸ Aziz Ahmed, Noor Mohammad, and Abdul Wadood, 'Balochistan: Overview of Its Geo-economic and Socio-economic Perspectives', *Review of Applied Management and Social Sciences*, 3:2 (2020), 235-246, <https://doi.org/10.47067/ramss.v3i2.58>.

stable as well as alternative livelihoods in most of marginalized communities are absent and state neglect has pushed segments of the population into supporting smuggling networks.⁹ Some other factors include institutional corruption, political patronage, and influence of shadow economies which combine in making of "narcotics-networks" that stretch from tribal middlemen to facilitators at enforcing channels, making interdiction an uphill task.¹⁰

This pervasive narco-smuggling enterprise leads to devastating consequences. Socially, growing domestic drug abuse particularly among youth in urban centers of Balochistan are at rise. Economically, drug trafficking undermines value of legitimate markets, creates black economies, and fosters dependency on criminal syndicates. Politically, public trust is eroded in state institutions and multiplies narratives of pseudo-neglect and marginalization which have become manifold due to social media by the Baloch nationalist elements. These social, economic and political consequences funnel to a conclusion that drug trade is not only a security issue, but also a development and governance crisis.¹¹ Narcotics smuggling in Balochistan is deeply embedded in a multi-layered pyramid connecting global demand, regional instability, and domestic underdevelopment and needs to adopt a holistic, multi-scalar approach to solve the issue of drug economy, strengthening through international cooperation, inclusive development and state-building within Balochistan.¹²

This article critically seeks to unpack, how and under what conditions the emerging nexus between narcotics economy, militancy, and weaker governance interact to shape insecurity in Balochistan. It searches for extent of effects of narcotics economy post-2022 in shaping

⁹ Najeeb Ullah, Abdul Raheem, and Hussain Ali Hashmi, 'Exploring the Functionality of Smuggling and Hindrance for Border Dwellers: A Case Study of Paroom-Iran Border, District, Punjgor, Balochistan', *Global Political Review*, 7:2 (Spring 2022), 130.

¹⁰ Michael Miklaucic and Jacqueline Brewer (eds.), *Convergence: Illicit Networks and National Security in the Age of Globalization* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2013), 64.

¹¹ Englevert Pongan Reyes, Jose D. Velez Jr., and Ma. Aira Chenessa C. Benitez, 'Drug Trafficking and the Socio-Political Economic Contexts in Selected Countries', *Recoletos Multidisciplinary Research Journal*, 4:2 (2016), 87-94. <https://doi.org/10.32871/rmrj1604.02.07>.

¹² National Initiative against Organized Crime (NIOC), *Drug Trafficking in Pakistan*, Policy Brief (Islamabad: National Initiative against Organized Crime, July 2020), 10. <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Drugs-Trafficking-in-Pakistan.pdf>

and reshaping power relations in the province. It also focuses on how drug economy intersects with sub-nationalist groups, undermining state authority with implications on Pakistan's national security as well as on stability in the region.

Literature Review

Narcotics economy, militancy and weak governance in any part of the world receive growing attention in domestic, regional and global security and social studies.¹³ Most of the academic and social foundational work narcotics economy has been built in the name of narco-insurgency where it fuels armed groups and undermines authority of the state.¹⁴ In South Asian and Central Asian regions, most scholarships emphasized on opium trade wars in Afghanistan. These researches concluded in creating shadow economies and resisting formal state policies.¹⁵ These economies have overarching spillover effects on socioeconomic culture of Pakistan's Balochistan.¹⁶

Existing literature in Pakistan, primarily focuses on the supply and demand-side dynamics of drugs cultivation, production, stocking and its trafficking from Afghanistan to Pakistan. In Pakistan, it further travels within Balochistan, other provinces, Iran and coastal regions to further to regional and global markets.¹⁷ There remains a wide research gap in Balochistan, its effects on socioeconomic and political discourse, it's facilitating and spillover effects on militancy and exaggerating vulnerabilities on already weak and fragile governance. This research gap remains due to lack of uniform and direct access within the region due to armed insurgency and limited studies by the verified academias.

¹³ Tamara Makarenko, 'The Crime-Terror Continuum: Tracing the Interplay between Transnational Organised Crime and Terrorism', *Global Crime*, 6:1 (February 2004), 129-45. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1744057042000297025>.

¹⁴ Vanda Felbab-Brown, *Shooting Up: Counterinsurgency and the War on Drugs* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2010), 26. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7864/j.ctt6wpgt0>.

¹⁵ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *World Drug Report 2023* (Vienna: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, June 2023), 26.

¹⁶ David Mansfield, *A State Built on Sand: How Opium Undermined Afghanistan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 50-51. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780190608316.001.0001>.

¹⁷ Frédéric Grare, 'Pakistan's Foreign and Security Policies after the 2013 General Election: The Judge, the Politician and the Military', *International Affairs*, 89:4 (July 2013), 995. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12055>.

Province's transit and storage hub has been treated as peripheral rather than a central theatre of narcotics economy in Pakistan.¹⁸

International Crisis Group discusses Balochistan with regards to center-province tension, political exclusion, resource grievances and coercive governance. The group carried out a study on Iran's Balochistan, which discloses parallel effects of governance, underdevelopment, discrimination and weak governance on both sides of the border.¹⁹ Harrison discusses Baloch nationalism to its identity issues, political autonomy and uneven and undefined territorial claims. Bansal finds political marginalization, resource governance and coercive state policies as the reasons of insurgency in the province.²⁰

Fair's analysis of Pakistan Army strategic culture helps in contextualizing preferences of security for threat responses in the province.²¹ Durán-Martínez identifies that drug abuse and its effects vary with state response capacity and criminal competition networks.²² Crisis Group's study of Myanmar's Shan State demonstrates that forms of drugs shift from one region to another in their various forms. These conflict-affected border areas got shifts from opium and heroin to methamphetamine and how revenues from such illicit economies deepen corruption and militarization in the region.²³ Lacher very precisely cautions against drug and terrorism nexus and their cumulative effects in the conflict-affected zones.²⁴ Reno, Keen and Tilly collectively discuss

¹⁸ Maryam Noor, 'US Withdrawal from Afghanistan and Rise of Terrorism in Pakistan', *E9 Quarterly*, 4:3 (2025), 52-55, <https://issra.pk/insight/2025/correlation-between-us-withdrawal-from-afghanistan/insight.html>

¹⁹ International Crisis Group, *Pakistan: The Worsening Conflict in Balochistan*, Asia Report no. 119 (14 September 2006); 16. International Crisis Group, *Grievance and Flawed Governance in Iran's Balochistan*, Middle East Report no. 250 (19 August 2025), 7-21.

²⁰ Selig S. Harrison, *In Afghanistan's Shadow: Baloch Nationalism and Soviet Temptations* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1981), 71.

²¹ C. Christine Fair, *Fighting to the End: The Pakistan Army's Way of War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 126.

²² Angélica Durán-Martínez, *The Politics of Drug Violence: Criminals, Cops, and Politicians in Colombia and Mexico* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 153.

²³ International Crisis Group, *Fire and Ice: Conflict and Drugs in Myanmar's Shan State*, Asia Report no. 299 (January 8, 2019), 10.

²⁴ Wolfram Lacher, 'Challenging the Myth of the Drug-Terror Nexus in the Sahel' (background paper prepared for the West Africa Commission on the Impact of Drug Trafficking on Governance, Security and Development in West Africa, 2013), 9.

various forms of political orders that reinforce each other converging on weak institutions, wartime economic incentives and extraction and coercion of narcotics.²⁵

Investigative journalism and recent policy briefs point an evolving situation in which drug trafficking networks are linked to organized crime, tribal patronage, facilitators in bureaucratic machineries in Balochistan.²⁶ Yet, financial support to narcotics becomes uneven in armed insurgency, so the study does not assume direct and institutionalized involvement of narcotics economy in militancy in Balochistan. Academic inquiry still remains sparse due to role of weaker government and leaves an important gap in our understanding of how narcotics economy is entrenched in power structures in under and un-governed regions in Balochistan. This article seeks to fill this gap through a critical synthesis of existing knowledge followed by limited field insights, security briefs through a lens of political economy. This article concludes in the broader convergent impacts of narcotics on militancy and weak governance in Balochistan.

Methodology and Limitations

This article adopts a qualitative and method-approach to investigate the convergent effects of narcotics economy, militancy and weak governance in Balochistan. This research focuses on discourse analysis of security briefs, policy papers and reports by national and international organizations. Data collection involves the use of secondary sources, focusing on border management reports, developmental indicators at federal and provincial levels, and criminal records. This approach has enhanced the analytical interpretation in conflict governance, political economy and conflict framework. Methodological conclusions involve deep, valid and context-based sensitive and exhaustive results. These

²⁵ William Reno, *Warlord Politics and African States* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998), 15-44; David Keen, *The Economic Functions of Violence in Civil Wars*, Adelphi Paper 320 (Oxford: Oxford University Press for the International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1998), 15-22; Charles Tilly, 'War Making and State Making as Organized Crime', in *Bringing the State Back In*, ed. Peter B. Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, and Theda Skocpol (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 171-72.

²⁶ Huma Zafar, Siraj Bashir, and Muhammad Asif, 'Drug Addiction: A Review of Challenges and Solutions', *Balochistan Review*, 39:2 (2018), 150. <https://www.uob.ac.pk/Journals/Balochistan-Review/data/BR%2002%202018/143-156%20Drug%20Addiction%20A%20review%20of%20challenges%20and%20solutions,%20Dr.%20Huma%20Zafar.pdf>

results are adoptable to complex and evolving security environment in Balochistan.

Several factors limit this study when field access restricted in remote and conflict-affected areas in Balochistan. This uneven access restricts any independent verification of narcotics trafficking facilities and their routes and militant financial and local networks. Data is often aggregated; incomplete or incoherent and official and security-related data may have institutional limitations. Illicit economies are usually clandestine which further limit any direct observations. Keeping all these limitations of the study in view, spatial overlap between narcotics trafficking and militant activities remains suggestive rather than conclusive.

Global, Regional and Domestic Narcotics Environment

a. Global Narcotics Environment

Globally, narcotics trafficking fuels violence in the society, cartel wars among power elites and results in mass deaths of innocent people. It destroys social and family structures, undermines governance authorities and heavily relies on coercive tools, terror actions, child recruitment, resulting in generational effects in the families as well as the societies. Most common and major drugs include cocaine, cannabis, amphetamine and ecstasy tablets. Another main drug opioid impacts global burden of the diseases. Presently, at global level index one in every seventeen persons is involved in drug abuse, almost 23 % higher rate than the last decade. Out of them female users involve 45 – 49 % out of total drug users in the world. As per type of drugs, Cannabis is used by 219 million persons globally, Amphetamine by 36 million, Cocaine by 22 million and Ecstasy Tablets by 20 million persons. These types of drugs are mainly categorized into natural drugs, semi-synthetic and synthetic drugs.²⁷

Natural drugs are derived from plants and require little or no processing before use. Natural drugs include cannabis, poppy and coca etcetera. These drugs are further sub-divided into two types, mood depressants and mood elevators. Mood depressants include opium, poppy plant and its derivatives. These are poppy straw and poppy seed and are mostly produced in Afghanistan and Myanmar. Mood elevators include weed, hash, bhang, ganja and hashish powder. These are mostly

²⁷ United Nations International Drug Control Programme (UNDCP), *Economic and Social Consequences of Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking*, UNDCP Technical Series, no. 6 (Vienna: United Nations, 1998), 45. https://www.unodc.org/pdf/technical_series_1998-01-01_1.pdf.

produced in regions to include Afghanistan, South America, Africa and Australia. Semi-synthetic drugs are obtained by processing natural drugs to limited chemical processing. These include Heroin, Cocaine, Amphetamine, Ice, Ecstasy and Tranquillizers.²⁸

As per estimates, global narcotics trade volume is estimated around \$550 Billion annually. Semi-synthetic drugs to include, Cocaine, shares maximum trade value worth \$180 Billion and Heroin closely trailing at \$150 Billion. Natural drugs to include Cannabis, worth \$100 Billion trade. Synthetic drugs worth \$60 Billion and other miscellaneous ones worth \$70 Billion trade approximately.²⁹ Global production hotspots are Golden Triangle; Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam and Laos, and Afghanistan. Afghanistan produces approximately one-fifth, of overall types of global narcotics trade, mostly, opium and its derivatives. Eighty percent of global opium trade originates from Afghanistan. Global demand and supply merits production tempo in Afghanistan and is catalyzed by financial investment by international drug cartels, feasibility of suitable cultivation areas, internal security situation environment and drug tolerate society to accept and help it nourish as a major investment revenue in the society.

b. Regional Narcotics Environment

Afghanistan is a landlocked country and serves as a breeding ground for narcotics, and provides narcotics to global and regional narcotics markets via three main routes. First, Northern Route involves through Russia, second, Western Route through Balkan states and third, Southern Route through via coastal regions of Arabian Sea.³⁰ Afghanistan has been a dominant source of illicit opiates in the region before Taliban's April 2022 Prohibition, and has affected Pakistan, especially Balochistan. In

²⁸ Louise I. Shelley and Nazia Hussain, 'Narco-Trafficking in Pakistan-Afghanistan Border Areas and Implications for Security,' in *Narco-Jihad: Drug Trafficking and Security in Afghanistan and Pakistan*, NBR Special Report no. 20 (Seattle, WA: National Bureau of Asian Research, December 2009), 4-5. <https://www.nbr.org/publication/narco-jihad-drug-trafficking-and-security-in-afghanistan-and-pakistan/>

²⁹ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *Afghan Opiate Trafficking through the Southern Route* (Vienna: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2015), 39. https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/Studies/Afghan_opiate_trafficking_southern_route_web.pdf.

³⁰ National Initiative against Organized Crime (NIOC), *Drug Trafficking in Pakistan: Policy Brief* (Islamabad: National Initiative against Organized Crime, 2020), 12. <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Drugs-Trafficking-in-Pakistan.pdf>

2022, an estimation of opium-poppy cultivation by UNODC informed 232,000 hectares in Afghanistan. This survey also identified about 6,200 tons of potential production which was capable of yielding about 350–580 tons of export-quality heroin. These are appropriate historical figures and provide baseline to understand weight and scale of drug trafficking from Afghanistan, resultantly, shaping socioeconomic environment of borderlands in Pakistan. These estimates can be taken as evidence of pre-ban narcotics economy, not as verified indicators of present production.³¹

Taliban regime in Afghanistan enforced strict prohibition policy after April 2022. As a result, opium economy contracted sharply and transformed regional narcotics environment in Balochistan. In 2025, again, UNODC estimated opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan. This resulted in only 10,200 hectares, as compared to 232,000 hectares in 2022. Potential production fell to 296 tons from 350-580 tons as of 2022. This decline does not imply the disappearance of drug trafficking in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Yet the decline in opiates does not imply the disappearance of trafficking pressures. Another aspect of monitoring by UNODC discloses methamphetamine trafficking remained more resilient in and around Afghanistan. Analysis of Post-2022 period indicates a comparable transition from opiate-centered economy to more diverse and overwhelming synthetic-drug sensitive regional illicit market.³²

Afghanistan has banned cultivation of narcotics as a good step, but it has yielded economic effects in the region as farmgate prices dramatically increased almost four times since 2020 and onwards. One-kilogram dried opium averaged price \$100 in 2020-21, compared to \$ 408 as of now. Afghanistan has tried to become noble by scuttling the production, but aims to benefit concurrently from extra-ordinary rates. On other hand, Pakistan has always remained in lime light owing to regular blames by the international communities with respect to flow of drugs through it towards land and sea routes.³³

Methamphetamine economy has emerged significantly in Afghanistan-Balochistan landscape. It does not depend on poppy

³¹ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *Afghanistan Opium Survey 2022: Cultivation and Production* (Vienna: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2022), 4.

³² *Ibid.*, Afghanistan Opium Survey 2025 (Vienna: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2025), 4-6.

³³ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *The Global Afghan Opium Trade: A Threat Assessment* (Vienna: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, July 2011), 75. https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/Studies/Global_Afghan_Opium_Trade_2011-web.pdf.

cultivation and can be produced through flexible synthetic supply chain systems. This complicates the enforcement policies by Afghanistan, adding a new dimension to narcotics economy and hiking prices of already opium-poppy products. This resilient indication of methamphetamine trafficking from Afghanistan has been observed by UNODC through their seizure analysis, even after April 2022 ban by Afghan authorities. This transition dictates special attention in Balochistan to precursor special control measures, border management and surveillance of trafficking routes. Yet, available seizure data does not indicate any direct funding to militancy; however, this economy do add facilitation to the success of militant activities indirectly through local support.³⁴

Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries has also observed often to the drug flow through Pakistan. It has been reported that drugs have been transported through human resource across Pakistan towards GCC Countries. Most of the cases were found with Afghan nationals using Pakistani passports, and were approaching in search of various jobs.³⁵ Saudi Arabia also highlighted a large number of detained individuals are involved in cases of drug trafficking; directly or indirectly. UAE, Bahrain and Qatar also have similar views and regularly share details of multiple social media platforms used for drug promotion with Pakistan.³⁶

c. Domestic Narcotics Environment

Being a strategically precarious geopolitical region, Balochistan forms part of infamous ‘Golden Crescent’ due to its borders with Iran and Afghanistan. This Golden Crescent is historically responsible and notorious for a significant fraction of global opium and heroin

³⁴ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *UNODC Drugs Monitoring Platform Brief on Afghanistan and Neighbouring Regions: Update on Patterns and Trends in Heroin, Methamphetamine and Opium Trafficking from 2020 to 2023, before and after the April 2022 Afghanistan Drug Ban* (Vienna: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 17 September 2024), 4-5. <https://dmpone.unodc.org/index.php/brief6-public>

³⁵ Shehryar Fazli, *Narcotics Smuggling in Afghanistan: Links between Afghanistan and Pakistan*, SOC ACE Research Paper No. 9 (Birmingham, UK: University of Birmingham, 2022), 12.

³⁶ Medhat Bassiony, ‘Substance Use Disorders in Saudi Arabia: Review Article,’ *Journal of Substance Use*, 18:6 (2013), 450. <https://doi.org/10.3109/14659891.2011.606349>.

production.³⁷ Since 2001, this tricorder-junction region has quietly evolved into a smooth transit motorway for narcotics. This corridor links Afghan production factories to global narcotics consumer markets through land and sea routes. Earlier, it possessed only a trafficking challenge for the state, but with passage of time it has evolved into a multidimensional threat. This threat translates into regional militancy, organized crime and weakening governance structures.

Geographically, Balochistan is extremely vast, sparsely governed and ethnically diverse. Narcotraffickers benefit from this inherent and ideal impunity to operate without any checks and balances of the state within and in neighbor region. Federal and provincial administrative institutions have limited capacity to operate distant, especially border-belt districts. Socioeconomic and political alienation in the region provide open vacuums for the narcotics economy to flourish without any limits. Local and transnational drug cartels especially, Afghanistan, exploit these vulnerabilities and establish narcotics production, storages, refining factories, smuggling routes, protective local networks, often having direct or indirect links with insurgent support for local hegemony, further facilitating common interests of both.³⁸

Geographic and demographic support to narcotics economy is facilitated by local power elites of the society. This trap not only makes Balochistan a passageway, but also a buffer-zone to illicit economies, violent insurgencies and a burden of governance neglect.³⁹ This narcotics-economy has certain implications which are tied into the questions of national sovereignty, socioeconomic exploitation, transnational organized crime in Balochistan.⁴⁰ Although, this does not mean that Balochistan is a main cultivation area for narcotics, yet it

³⁷ Sanjeev Kumar, 'Narcotics Trafficking Impact on Human Security in South and Central Asia', *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Trends*, 4:1 (2022), 244-50. <https://doi.org/10.22271/multi.2022.v4.i1c.186>.

³⁸ Michelle Hughes and Michael Miklaucic, eds., *Impunity: Countering Illicit Power in War and Transition* (Washington, DC: Center for Complex Operations and Peacekeeping and Stability Operations Institute, 2016), 133.

³⁹ Paddy Ginn, 'The Two Faces of Balochistan: Illicit Economies Thrive in the Spectre of Taliban Stability', *Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime*, 26 November 2025. <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/the-two-faces-of-balochistan-taliban/>.

⁴⁰ Abdullah Tariq et al., 'International Drug Trafficking: A Case Study of the South Asian Region', *Journal of Humanities, Social and Management Sciences (JHSMS)*, 5:2 (2024), 105-6. <https://doi.org/10.47264/idea.jhsms/5.2.7>.

contributes an important role in processing, storing and transiting and transporting of opiates and synthetic drugs.⁴¹

Security briefs and seizure reports inform presence of heroin processing plants in borders areas close to Pak-Afghan borders in Balochistan. These versatile processing plants are mobile and are operated and supervised by transnational criminal and militant networks with the help of local facilitation. These plants are fed by raw material from Afghanistan in the form of morphine and refined into heroin. The products are stocked in border districts of Dalbandin, Taftan and also in Turbat before they are transported to domestic, regional and global markets. These districts also provide consolidation hubs, repacking and redistributing hideouts of narcotics. Local tribal protection networks shield this trafficking mechanisms from state scrutiny.⁴²

Narcotics economy in Balochistan is complex and intertwined by local facilitators, tribal chiefs, transnational drug trafficking organizations, insurgent groups and weak administrative channels in governance structures, each actor having their specific and unique role in overall narcotics mosaic. Working mechanisms of these actors provide basis to understand convergent effects of narcotics economy, militancy and weak governance in Balochistan. Social, economic, political and security fabric of Balochistan have interlinked interests and provide nourishing cultural support to the narcotics businesses. Narcotics economy forms one of major part of political economy of Balochistan and interacts with weak governance, illegal spectrum, informal border trade, institutional vulnerabilities and is susceptible to some distinct forms of militancy.

Licit and illicit cross-border trade by most of border-belt tribal groups have a long historical roots of narcotics economic activities in Balochistan.⁴³ People in the area take smuggling as a cultural trade and a surviving means to their livelihood. This makes smuggling an institutionalized and legitimized activity and an economic lifeline to the local population. This environment strengthens local patronage systems, inter and intra-tribal rivalries and pseudo belief system of rightful

⁴¹ Shehryar Fazli, 'The Impact of Afghanistan's Drug Trade on Its Neighbours: The Case of Pakistan, Iran and Tajikistan', *SOC ACE Research Paper* 25 (Birmingham, UK: University of Birmingham, November 2023), 7-30.

⁴² Paddy Ginn, *op.cit.*

⁴³ Muhammad Ehsan, 'Cross-Border Trade: Challenges and Prospects. A Case Study of Pakistan-Iran Borders' (MPhil thesis, Pakistan Institute of Development Economics, Islamabad, 2024), 45.

smuggling activities in the region.⁴⁴ Regional and local drug cartels are taken as untouchables in the society and have indefinite employing economic lifeline standards in a tribe. This finds, sometimes, a drug cartel, a tribal chief, a powerful elite, and a pseudo-nationalist may be a one person, performing all responsibilities single handedly. This conclusion has certain implications; an emergence of nexus among drug traffickers, locals, insurgents, militants, criminals and local power elites. This nexus also dilutes government efforts on one side and facilitates transportation of high value drugs in huge quantities to other parallel areas on the other side.

Institutional capacity limitations form another indirect and undercurrent facilitating framework to all these actors, mechanisms and their local socioeconomic drug culture. Sometimes, it provides a blind eye, taking bribes, providing direct or indirect cover to narcotics involved actors.⁴⁵ Being profit-heavy, narcotics economy, is one of the gravitational pulling forces to human trafficking, money laundering, weapon smuggling, and global maritime smuggling networks of terrorist organizations who operate in Pakistan and Iran. Such a multi-layered, multi-dimensional and intertwined convergent narcotics economic, insurgent and weak governance enterprise makes it very difficult to dismantle by the state.⁴⁶

Narcotics Economy, Militancy and Weak Governance Nexus

Historic weak governance structures and institutional vulnerabilities in Balochistan facilitate a nourishing environment to interposed crimes,

⁴⁴ Tehseena Usman and Minhas Majeed Khan, 'Drug Trafficking from Afghanistan to Pakistan and Its Implications', *Journal of the Research Society of Pakistan*, 50:2 (July–December 2013), 36-37.

⁴⁵ Dolapo Michael Oyedokun and Martin Abimbola Ogunbanjo, 'Illicit Drugs Trafficking, Institutional Frameworks and Sustainable Development', in *National Drug Law Enforcement Agency and National Security: Perspectives on Drugs, Crime and Human Security*, vol. 1, ed. Sunday Adejoh, Bashir Bello, and Biola Shotunde (Kaduna, Nigeria: Nigerian Defence Academy Press, 2023), 275-77.

⁴⁶ Amy Pate, Mila Johns, Gary Ackerman, and McKenzie O'Brien, 'The Threat of Pakistani Criminal Organizations: Assessing the Potential for Involvement in Radiological/Nuclear Smuggling, Collaboration with Terrorist Groups, and the Potential to Destabilize the Pakistani State,' in *The 'New' Face of Transnational Crime Organizations (TCOs): A Geopolitical Perspective and Implications to U.S. National Security*, ed. Ben Riley and Kathleen Kiernan (Strategic Multi-layer Assessment Occasional White Paper, May 2013), 129-30.

narcotics ecosystem, illegal spectrum and criminal and militant activities.⁴⁷ This narcotics ecosystem is both a symptom as well as a contributing cause of broader security challenge to the state. Federal and provincial enforcing institutions are weak and incapacitated due to structural and well as spatial and temporal defaults in the province. Drug tolerate society and internal dynamics of the local power structures often accept parallel narcotics economy to flourish. This narcotics economy benefits day to day finances of locals but damages core youth and talented Baloch society. Geographic and demographic aspects often limit state authorities to distant districts and leave dependency of local populace at the mercy of local tribal codes, informal judicial system or under any armed group control.⁴⁸

Federal and provincial law enforcing agencies and security institutions have limited coordination in operational and policies formulation due to institutional restrictions. They work in isolation with isolated and negligible dividends and have limited capacity in information gathering, intelligence collection, specialized training, kinetic operations and non-kinetic domains. These law enforcing institutes include Anti-Narcotics Force, Frontier Corps, Customs, Levies, and Police and have limited central authoritative control or policy guidelines from federal and provincial authorities. They have institutional weaknesses including corruption, low capacity, lack of will to enforce policies, narcotics-tolerate social culture and historical culture of narcotics-economy as source of livelihood in few areas, leads to an environment where insurgent elements operate with impunity.⁴⁹

Border towns with sparse livelihood provide employment, transport, logistics to narcotics-business within and across the borders in Balochistan. Balochistan is also plagued with other illicit economies to include smuggling of fuel, arms, and consumer business.⁵⁰ Narcotics-

⁴⁷ Zeenat, Ibtasam Zafar Butt, and Ayesha Malik, 'Interposed Crimes and Pakistan: Causes and Consequences', *Journal of Development and Social Sciences*, 5:4 (October–December 2024), 305-7. [https://doi.org/10.47205/jdss.2024\(5-IV\)28](https://doi.org/10.47205/jdss.2024(5-IV)28).

⁴⁸ Shahid Kardar, 'A Possible Reform Agenda,' *Discourse*, November-December 2023, 4-9.

⁴⁹ Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, Balochistan's Crisis of Trust: An HRCF Fact-Finding Report (Lahore: Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, 2025), 8-9. <https://hrfp-web.org/hrfpweb/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2025-Balochistans-crisis-of-trust.pdf>.

⁵⁰ Abdul Raheem, Ikram Badshah, and Wasia Arshed, 'Political Economy of Smuggling: The Living Source for the Natives (A Case Study of Jiwani-

economy operates in tandem with these illicit economies and forms an illegal spectrum. This environment blurs lines of survival strategies and organized crime in the drug-tolerate and smuggling culture heavy society. The result involves reinvesting narcotics revenues into political protection, tribal patronage and more dangerously militant financing, deepening strong hold of illegal spectrum over formal governance structures.

Although a fair effort is being calculated and being managed to enforce at some levels, yet counter-narcotics policies remain incoherent, reactive and underscoring. Most of the policies focus on interdiction only, not on the root causes. Policy-practice gaps provide another void to drug traffickers and their facilitators to grow with sophistication and work with impunity in Balochistan. Federal and provincial counter-narcotics strategy remains incoherent, reactive and underscoring.

The Anti-Narcotics Force and other law enforcement agencies suffer from institutional limitations with regards to human resource, its quality, financial support, training and policy-practice gaps. Vast stretches of open valleys and rugged mountains to unending deserts and extremely long and deserted borders in Balochistan, are all hard to monitor in same time and space with limited federal and provincial resources.⁵¹ Long stretches of coastal region of Balochistan put another open and untied Arabian Sea route to be left under-surveilled and under-patrolled. Jurisdictional overlaps, and limited coordination between Anti-Narcotics Force, Frontier Corps, Pakistan Customs, Police, and intelligence services hamper efforts of counter-narcotics forces. This fragmentation leads to intelligence gaps, duplicacy in efforts in some areas and no-effort at all in some regions, and operational stagnation in Balochistan.

Present policy designs do not identify, limit or address the basic structural drivers of the narcotics production, trade, poverty, unemployment, and underdevelopment. People do not find any alternatives for earning and managing any livelihood and have to depend on trafficking as an easy alternative economic necessity. Lack of vocational training, negligible infrastructural development and enforcement-only approaches further alienate local communities and fuel

Iran Border, Balochistan)', *Journal of Development and Social Sciences*, 2:4 (October–December 2021), 835-48. doi:10.47205/jdss.2021(2-IV)66.

⁵¹ Maqsood Anwar et al., 'Challenges Faced by Anti-Narcotics Force in Combating Drugs Trafficking: A Case Study of Regional Directorate Peshawar', *Academia International Journal for Social Sciences*, 4:2 (2025): 9-14. <https://doi.org/10.63056/ACAD.004.02.0097>.

resentment against the state and its institutions. Any verified data on drug production, drug venues, trafficking routes, user demographics, and law enforcement performance is rarely available due to unstable law-and-order situation and access of a common Pakistani citizen to these areas is hardly possible. There is not a single academic institution in Balochistan which possess any dedicated narcotics research program. There is not even any sustained partnership programs between educational universities, law enforcement agencies, and civil society.

Conclusion

Narcotics crisis in Balochistan need a paradigm shift from security-centric approach to a well-defined, fully comprehensive, locally-informed and development-based strategic and cultural shift. Drug abuse or its trafficking is not just a social or law-enforcement affair, but a deeper political and economic dilemma. This multidimensional and dysfunctional social evil undermines public-health and trust, distorts local economy, finances militant networks and weakens state authority. This creates an environment of criminal impunity and geopolitical vulnerability. Stringent and accountable measures on border control, strict implementation and an overarching implementation of anti-narcotics policy by the federal-provincial governments, enhancing community-state trust, and investment in people centric developmental projects may dismantle drug economy and lead to a narcotics-free Balochistan.

Recommendations

An anti-narcotics policy specific to Balochistan be established considering local geography, demography, socio-political structures, federal-provincial institutional capabilities. Such policy may be strengthened by community-based surveillance, local prevention campaigns and district-level rehabilitation centers in Balochistan. To centrally monitor, control and implement provincially established anti-narcotics policy, a provincial narcotics control coordination cell may coordinate efforts of law enforcement agencies to include ANF, Police, FC, Customs and maritime forces. This can be achieved through real-time intelligence sharing, satellite imaging, modern drone technologies and maritime radar systems, most importantly through a stringent system of accountability oversights by provincial government. Drug-prone districts to include Panjgur, Chagai and Kech be given special economic substitutes. These may form some microcredit schemes, skill development programs, agricultural initiatives and infrastructural investments. An overarching, independent Anti-Narcotics Oversight

Commission may investigate the efficiency of enforcing agencies with judicial and parliamentary scrutiny powers to ensure transparent accountability. All divisional headquarters in Balochistan be equipped with federal-provincial funded drug treatment and rehabilitation centers. These centers may have their off-shoots through civil-society schemes, school-bases anti-narcotics programs, mosque-level campaigns and mobile health clinics. Youth being main victims, be educated through university-led research centers through informative programs on narcotics, social-crimes, insurgents modus operandi and their financial supports. A central drug-tracking database on arrests, seizures, users' profiles and their demographics and trafficking patterns may inform and help policy makers devise and implement more workable policy efforts.⁵²

⁵² Syed Kaleem Imam and Samza Fatima, 'Illicit Drugs: Challenges and Tenacities', *Journal of Pakistan Psychiatric Society*, 19:2 (April–June 2022), 52-58. <https://doi.org/10.63050/jpps.19.02.152>.