



## **Narco Routes: From Afghanistan to Africa**

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**November 2021**

### **Abstract**

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Afghan, Pakistani, African, and Indian drugs cartels continue to use circuitous sea and air routes of heroin consignments from Afghanistan through Mozambique and Iran, to India, South Africa, Australia, and some of the western countries. Each passing year, the trade is being marked by increasing sophistication that pose challenges to the state authorities. The Taliban capture of power in Afghanistan in August 2021 can potentially worsen the situation.

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## Analysis

### Introduction

As Afghanistan descended into violence and chaos, the rise of narco trade has emerged as a major concern. A July 2021 [investigation by India's Directorate of Revenue Intelligence \(DRI\)](#) in 2021 have reconfirmed the circuitous routes of heroin consignments from Afghanistan to Australia and some of the western countries, using both the sea and air routes, by Afghan, Pakistani, African, and Indian drugs cartels. While these routes for narcotics trade have existed for decades, each passing year, the trade is being marked by increasing sophistication and complexities that pose constant challenges to the state authorities. The Taliban capture of power in Afghanistan in August 2021 can potentially worsen the situation.

### The Routes



(Image: Indicative heroin trafficking routes along the southern route. Source: UNODC)

Since the 1990s, huge volumes of Afghan heroin have been traveling from Pakistan to East Africa, through what is known as the '[southern route](#)'. Such consignments are first transported from Afghanistan to the Makran coast, off Pakistan and Iran. These are either in the form of opium paste which are converted into heroin in Pakistan, or also as heroin, having been converted from the poppy seeds inside Afghanistan itself. In the last couple of years, [research by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime \(GIATOC\)](#) has also identified the potential spread of Afghan methamphetamine in eastern and southern Africa, with a new type of methamphetamine, known locally as 'Pakistani meth' but likely to be of Afghan origin, emerging on the South African market in early 2020. Afghan methamphetamine is transiting through countries such as Mozambique for distribution in the region.



From Pakistan, small packets of drugs (each packet varying between three to six kilograms) are loaded onto small boats, most of the time, fishing vessels, which travel to the Mozambique coast, which has emerged as a major corridor for international drug trafficking, ever since the end of the civil war in that country in 1992. The vessels leave the Makran coast and sail along on the Indian Ocean undetected by satellite or patrol vessels. If they are stopped, they pretend to be fishing vessels, with the drugs hidden in concealed compartments. Pemba and the Quirimbas archipelago, usually associated with Mozambique's tourist spots, are identified as landing areas for the drugs with calm waters and sand dunes that are good for hiding smugglers. Larger quantities of heroin arrive via container, packed with motorcycles and appliances from the Middle East or rice from Pakistan, indicates a report by [Quartz Africa](#). A bribe is believed to be enough to avoid searching.

A small amount of Afghan heroin in the form of methamphetamine also lands in Mozambique from Iran, using the same sea route from the Makran coast. Cross-border smuggling of licit and illicit goods and resources is a protracted issue facing the Iranian state due to decades of international isolation. A large part of the Afghan heroin is consumed within Iran, where there are an estimated [2.8 million drug users](#) (2017 estimate). According to a 2009 estimate, 40 percent of all opium produced in Afghanistan entered or transited through Iran. The country also has hundreds of methamphetamine production facilities.

### In and out of Mozambique

Once in Mozambique, drugs travel to small or medium size warehouses located all over the country. Major recoveries in 2021 have been made from the townships of Quelimane, Murrupula, Pemba, and Nacala Porto. These warehouses, where Afghan as well as South American drugs (typically Cocaine from Brazil to Maputo by the air route, and also via maritime shipments to container seaports like Pemba) are stored, are managed by Mozambicans as well as Tanzanians, arrests have revealed. Increased surveillance by Tanzanian and Kenyan authorities have pushed the drug syndicates more towards Mozambique, where the capacities of custom authorities are considered to be comparatively weak and affected by endemic corruption.

From Mozambique, the consignment, in small packages, travels directly to Johannesburg or to India (New Delhi, Bangalore and Hyderabad) and Doha, before being connected to Australia and the western countries. While the Mozambique-India route are typically by air, the Mozambique-Johannesburg route is mostly on road. Preference of a particular route is based upon what the cartels think is economical as well as relatively safe.

African drug cartels using the circuitous Mozambique-India-Doha-Johannesburg air route, typically use individual drug mules from several African countries other than South Africans.

Between June and July 2021, Zambian, Mozambican, Tanzanian, and Ugandan couriers (both male and female) have been arrested in India carrying drugs of about three kilograms each. A Mozambican national was arrested in New Delhi in July 2021 and [36 capsules containing heroin of 400 grams](#) were recovered from his stomach. Quantities of drugs carried through the air route, however, are believed to be rather small compared to the consignments sent through the sea routes.



## Outlook

The United Nation's Office on Drugs and Crime's (UNODC) World Drug Report 2021 reported that [83 percent of all opiates](#) (opium, morphine, and heroin) produced globally are sourced out of Afghanistan. These generate revenue streams that contribute as much as 11 percent to the country's domestic gross product. The UNODC, further says that, the total area under opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan was approximately 224,000 hectares in 2020, which is an increase of 37 per cent or 61,000 hectares when compared to 2019. This was one of the highest ever measured.

Another [UNODC report](#), released on 15 November 2021, indicated that Afghanistan has already produced 6,800 tons of opiates in 2021, thereby marking the fifth straight year when the figure has crossed the 6000 ton mark. In August and September, owing to the uncertainty resulting from the Taliban's takeover of the country, opium prices have increased. This potentially benefits the country's new rulers who, according to the U.N. officials [likely earned more than US\\$400 million](#) between 2018 and 2019 from the drug trade. A May 2021 U.S. Special Inspector General for Afghanistan (SIGAR) report [quoted a U.S. official](#) as estimating they derive up to 60 percent of their annual revenue from illicit narcotics. With the Taliban at the helm of power in Afghanistan and looking to fill their dried coffers amid a steep cut in international aid, such dependence on drug money could grow. This would mean larger manufacturing of heroin and its transshipment to Africa.

Within Africa in general and Mozambique in particular, such drug trade money can be a source of societal and political instability. It can destabilise Southern Africa and embolden Islamists throughout the region. Having large amounts of drugs trafficked through Southern African Development Community (SADC) countries also increases the vulnerability of local populations to drug addiction, especially the youth, especially in some of the poorer regions. This invariably necessitates strengthening of Mozambique's counter-narcotics capacities.

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**Remarks:** The opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the authors.

This analysis first appeared in Mantraya, MANTRAYA ANALYSIS #55, 17 November 2021 and has been published as part of Mantraya's ongoing "Fragility, Conflict, and Peace Building" and "Organised Crime and Illicit Trafficking" projects. All Mantraya Briefs are peer reviewed publications.

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