

The Golden Crescent heroin connection

by Jeffrey Steinberg

On May 27, 1986, a Soviet cargo ship, the *Kapitan Tomson*, was busted by Dutch authorities in Rotterdam with 220 kilos of pure heroin aboard. At the time, it was the largest heroin seizure in European history. The container with the heroin originated in Kabul, where the drug was hidden among 30 tons of raisins. The shipment was trucked overland across the Soviet Union, and placed on the ship at either Leningrad or Riga. For the first time, western security services had hard proof that the Soviet occupation forces in Afghanistan were directly involved in the dope trade.

And the Soviets weren't alone in the trade either. In the late 1970s, as the United States was first becoming involved in the covert support for the Afghan mujahideen, Dr. David Musto, a member of the Carter administration's drug advisory board, issued a prescient warning that the United States was moving "into Afghanistan to support the opium growers in their rebellion against the Soviets. Shouldn't we, try," Dr. Musto asked, "to avoid what we had done in Laos?"

The Laos parallel was precise. Back in the 1960s and '70s, the CIA had conducted a secret war in Laos, which was predominantly funded by the sale of opium. The CIA's private airline, Air America, became notorious for its dope shuttle flights in and out of Southeast Asia's "Golden Triangle" opium region. The CIA station chief in Laos, Theodore G. Shackley, would later emerge as a key behind-the-scenes player in the Reagan-Bush-era secret wars.

Dr. Musto was not alone in his fears. Already in December 1979, the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) called an emergency behind-closed-doors meeting at New York's JFK Airport to come up with a plan for dealing with the flood of South Asian heroin about to hit the eastern seaboard of the United States.

A rival to the Golden Triangle

Over the next decade, the Golden Crescent region, encompassing the mountain valleys of Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, emerged as one of the world's two biggest sources of opium, for several years even surpassing the nearby Golden Triangle. While some of the opium-producing areas of Afghanistan were unquestionably under the control of the Red Army, the majority of poppy fields were in areas like the Helmand Valley in southern Afghanistan that were in the hands of the mujahideen, especially the Hezb-i-Islami of

Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, which also controlled a string of heroin laboratories just across the Pakistani border at Koh-i-Soltan.

By the late 1980s, the DEA reported that Pakistan's annual revenue from heroin sales was \$8-10 billion, one-fourth of the country's Gross Domestic Product. Most of the raw opium processed into heroin at the hundreds of clandestine laboratories in the North West Frontier Province (NWFP) and in the area around the Khyber Pass, came from Afghanistan, which was producing over 1,000 tons per year by the midpoint of the Afghan War!

One consequence of this opium boom was an epidemic increase in drug addiction among Pakistanis. Whereas in 1980, the total addict population of Pakistan was under 5,000, by 1988, the country had 1.3 million opium addicts.

When the Red Army completed its pullout from Afghanistan in February 1989, "opium warfare" erupted among rival mujahideen groups. Hekmatyar's Hezb-i-Islami attempted to take control over the opium fields in an area of the Helmand Valley controlled by Mullah Nasim Akhundzada. Hekmatyar's forces were defeated, but two years later, Nasim—by then the deputy defense minister of Afghanistan—was assassinated by his opium rival, and fighting broke out again between the Hezb-i-Islami and the Helmand Valley group, now headed by Nasim's older brother Mohammed Rasul.

In Pakistan, a similar factional struggle over the dope business broke out in 1988, after President Mohammed Zia ul-Haq, along with several top generals and the U.S. ambassador, were killed in a plane crash. When Benazir Bhutto came in as prime minister, she launched a crackdown against the Pakistani Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI). Gen. Fazle Huq, the commander of the NWFP, was arrested for covering up his own brother's drug trafficking. General Huq's personal pilot, Maj. Farooq Hamid, was arrested on heroin-trafficking charges.

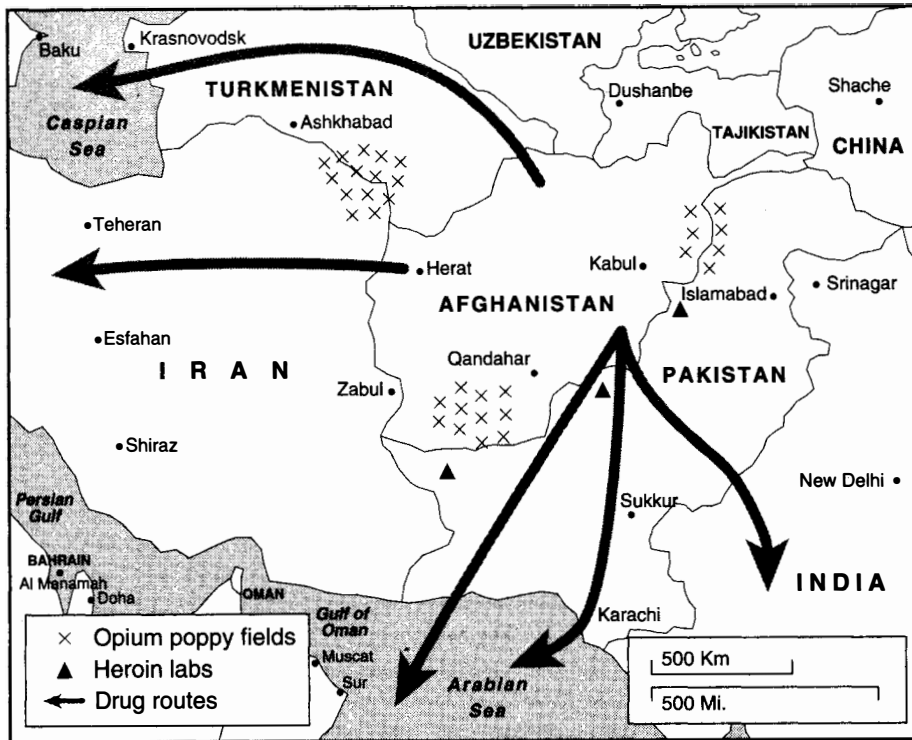
As early as 1983, Norwegian customs officials had arrested a Pakistani smuggling a large quantity of heroin. A follow-on investigation led to the indictment of Hamid Hasnain, the vice president of the Pakistan government's Habib Bank. Hasnain was the personal account manager for President Zia.

The drug crackdown was short-lived, however. When General Zia's former finance minister, Ghulam Ishaq Khan, became President of Pakistan, many of the indictments were overturned or never prosecuted. Ghulam Ishaq Khan had been General Zia's liaison to the Bank of Credit and Commerce International, serving as the president of the BCCI Foundation, the "charity" through which drug money was laundered, and bribes were paid out.

The DEA's most recent annual study of the supply of illicit drugs to the United States reported that opium production and processing in Afghanistan has increased, and that a crime syndicate based in Quetta, Pakistan has emerged as a major channel for Afghani heroin into the United States and western Europe.

MAP 1

The Golden Crescent heroin trail



Since 1980, Afghanistan has been the source of half the heroin sold in Europe and North America. Some opium was grown in areas under Soviet control, but most of the production was in the Helmand Valley in southwest Afghanistan, and along the Afghan-Pakistan border northeast of Kabul, areas controlled by the mujahideen and the Pakistani Army. Hundreds of heroin labs were set up in the nearby frontier areas in Pakistan. Heroin was routed to world markets via Iran, India, the Asiatic republics of the U.S.S.R., and by Arabian Sea routes to Turkey.

MAP 2

The mujahideen weapons pipeline



Arms were funneled to the Afghan mujahideen via the same routes that heroin was smuggled out. British Special Air Services in Oman ran arms into Karachi, Pakistan, and the United States arranged shipments of Soviet arms from Egypt, China, and Iran. Most weapons were shipped by sea to Karachi and trucked to Peshawar in the North West Frontier Province, under the control of the Pakistani Inter-Service Intelligence. Peshawar was the main weapons depot for all mujahideen factions. Often the trucks carrying arms to the mujahideen returned to Karachi loaded with heroin.