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# COUNT THE COSTS OF THE WAR ON DRUGS

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## The War on Drugs: Undermining peace and security

The global war on drugs has been fought for 50 years, without preventing the long-term trend of increasing drug production, supply and use. But beyond this failure to achieve its own stated aims, the drug war has also produced a range of serious, negative costs. Many of these costs have been identified by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) – the very UN agency that oversees the system responsible for them – and are described as the ‘unintended consequences’ of the war on drugs.<sup>1</sup> They may have been unintended, but after more than 50 years, they can no longer be seen as unanticipated. These costs are also distinct from those relating to drug use, stemming as they do from the choice of a punitive enforcement-led approach.

This briefing explores how the UN seeks to promote the security of its member states through implementing a drug control system that treats the use of certain drugs as an ‘existential threat’ to society. The briefing will demonstrate, however, that this approach is fatally undermining international peace and security.

There is naturally overlap with other areas of the Count the Costs project, including: development, human rights, health, crime and economics. For the full range of thematic briefings and the Alternative World Drug Report, see [www.countthecosts.org](http://www.countthecosts.org).

## Introduction

Contemporary drug prohibition has gifted such a massive money-making opportunity to organised crime groups that they have accrued a level of wealth and firepower which enables them to challenge the state, or even usurp its monopoly on legitimate violence (sometimes considered the definition of the state itself<sup>2</sup>). The subsequent militarisation of the fight against these organised crime groups has served only to further undermine security.

As a result, member states that implement the UN's prohibition-based drug control system are effectively obliged to violate the organisation's founding principle: the maintenance of international peace and security. This is not to claim that all of the security costs identified in this briefing arise solely because of the global drug war; however, the evidence shows that the 'threat-based' response to certain drugs has created some of the world's greatest security threats.

## What is security?

Although 'security' is used differently in a variety of fields and contexts, in general, it is the concept that the state and its citizens require protection from threats. The maintenance of security occurs at different scales – human, citizen or public security focus on protection against threats to individuals, while national security refers to protection against threats to nation states and their institutions, and regional and international security to protection of international structures and organisations, such as the UN or European Union. This briefing primarily focuses on threats to international and national security.

## Two distinct drug wars undermine security

Governments justify global prohibition by claiming that the non-medical use of certain drugs (excluding alcohol and tobacco) represents a grave threat to humankind;

that users and suppliers constitute 'existential threats' to security; and that a punitive approach is the only way to provide protection for citizens. An international relations theory describes this as 'securitisation'.<sup>3,4</sup>

This threat-based approach is underpinned by the three UN drug conventions. The Preamble to the 1961 UN Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs starts by placing drugs in a health and welfare framework: 'Concerned with the health and welfare of mankind...' But quickly asserts that member states have a duty to treat them as a threat: 'Recognizing that addiction to narcotic drugs constitutes a serious evil for the individual and is fraught with social and economic danger to mankind ... Conscious of their duty to prevent and combat this evil...'<sup>5</sup>

The 1988 UN Convention Against Illicit Traffic In Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances then identifies the threat posed by the criminal organisations involved in the illicit drug trade: 'Recognizing the links between illicit traffic and other related organized criminal activities which undermine the legitimate economies and threaten the stability, security and sovereignty of States.'<sup>6</sup>

So, as the two conventions clearly articulate, there are in reality two distinct drug wars being fought, in parallel. The first is the fight against addiction, which criminalises those who use, supply or produce certain drugs for non-medical purposes.



UK anti-drug operation in Afghanistan, 2009  
(photo credit: Cpl Rupert Frere RLC)

*“Impunity and ungovernability pose a challenge to the collective security and well-being of any State ... When state structures become involved with and affected by violence and systemic corruption, drug trafficking can further weaken the efficacy of Governments to the point of creating ‘failed State’ conditions at the national or subregional level.”*

International Narcotics Control Board  
2016

However, it was an entirely predictable outcome that this prohibition would result in control of the drug trade defaulting to criminal entrepreneurs, given the persistently high demand for drugs. The second drug war is fought against these criminals who are enriched by the proceeds of the initial prohibition to the point where they threaten the security of the state and its citizens. Using increasingly militarised enforcement to try to eliminate these entrepreneurs, and the illicit market in which they operate, then further undermines security via a combination of interlinked direct and indirect impacts.

The UNODC’s World Drug Report 2008 describes five major ‘unintended consequences’ of the global drug control system.<sup>7</sup> Three of these have a negative impact on security: firstly the creation of a huge criminal market that supports the organised crime and insurgent groups that control it; secondly, the displacement of resources from health to enforcement; and thirdly, the ‘balloon effect’, which describes how enforcement, rather than eliminating the drug problem, often merely displaces it to new locations – like air moving around in a squeezed balloon.

On its website, the UNODC described how the process of enforcing prohibition creates regional insecurity:

‘Global drug control efforts have had a dramatic unintended consequence: a criminal black market of staggering proportions. Organized crime is a threat to security. Criminal organizations have the power to destabilize society and Governments. The illicit drug business is worth billions of dollars a year, part of which is used to corrupt government officials and to poison economies.

‘Drug cartels are spreading violence in Central America, Mexico and the Caribbean. West Africa is under attack from narco-trafficking. Collusion between insurgents and criminal groups threatens the stability of West Asia, the Andes and parts of Africa, fuelling the trade in smuggled weapons, the plunder of natural resources and piracy.’<sup>8</sup>

A similar conclusion was reached by the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) in their 2012 report ‘Drugs, Insecurity and Failed States: The Problems of Prohibition’.<sup>9</sup> As Nigel Inkster, Director of Transnational Threats and Political Risk at IISS, and former Deputy Head of the UK’s MI6 Special Intelligence Service, commented:

‘The so-called war on drugs has created a significant threat to international security... producer and transit countries [governments]...face the unenviable choice between allowing their institutions to become corrupted...or embarking upon what is effectively a civil war in order to defeat them.’

Reports from the UNODC and UN Security Council – which is charged with identifying and responding to security threats – show that illicit drug production and trafficking cover vast regions of the world. The Security Council has also concluded that this illicit trade poses a threat to international security:

‘The Security Council notes with concern the serious threats posed in some cases by drug trafficking and related transnational organized crime to

international security in different regions of the world, including in Africa. The increasing link, in some cases, between drug trafficking and the financing of terrorism, is also a source of growing concern.<sup>10</sup>

What it has failed to do, however, is to then apply the UNODC's analysis showing that this illicit drug production and trafficking is the inevitable consequence of prohibiting a global trade with hundreds of millions of consumers. Combining these two analyses would have identified the UN drug control system itself as a threat to international security.

It would also demonstrate that the UN itself is now overseeing a war that is seriously undermining one of the key pillars of its work – peace and security – and Article One of its own founding constitution, the UN Charter, and indeed its *raison d'être*, which is: 'To maintain international peace and security, and to that end: to take effective collective measures for the prevention and removal of threats to the peace.'<sup>11</sup> Instead, the UN Security Council has chosen to interpret the UNODC analysis, and its own evidence, as a prescription not for change, but for redoubled efforts.<sup>12</sup>

## The UN drug control system undermines the security of UN member states

The UNODC openly acknowledges that the enforcement-led UN drug control system creates the criminal drug market, meaning the system itself is effectively the cause of illicit drug production and trafficking globally. In turn, among many others, the UNODC,<sup>13</sup> UN Security Council,<sup>14 15</sup> and the US Presidential Determination for 2015<sup>16</sup> have identified this illicit trade as a cause of insecurity in over 60 countries across the globe. As a result, maps (such as those opposite) that illustrate global flows of illicit drugs in the UNODC's World Drug Report 2015 also inadvertently reveal where national, regional and international security is compromised or threatened by drug production and trafficking.<sup>17</sup> While many of the places negatively affected – such as Central and South America, West Africa, and South East Asia – are perhaps no surprise, even countries with large financial sectors like the UK may be threatened indirectly by the corrupting effects of laundering drug money.<sup>18</sup>

### Countries whose security is compromised by the UN drug control system

#### Asia

Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Iran, Burma/Myanmar, Laos, Thailand

#### North America

USA, Mexico

#### Central America

Honduras, Costa Rica, Belize, El Salvador, Panama, Nicaragua

#### South America

Argentina, Colombia, Bolivia, Peru, Guatemala, Guyana, Venezuela, Brazil, Ecuador, Paraguay

#### Caribbean

Haiti, Dominican Republic, The Bahamas, Jamaica

#### West Africa

Cape Verde, Guinea Bissau, Guinea, Equatorial Guinea, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Gambia, Togo, Benin, Ghana, Nigeria

#### Sahel

Senegal, Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad, Sudan, Eritrea

#### East and South Africa

Djibouti, Kenya, Tanzania, Somalia, Ethiopia, South Africa

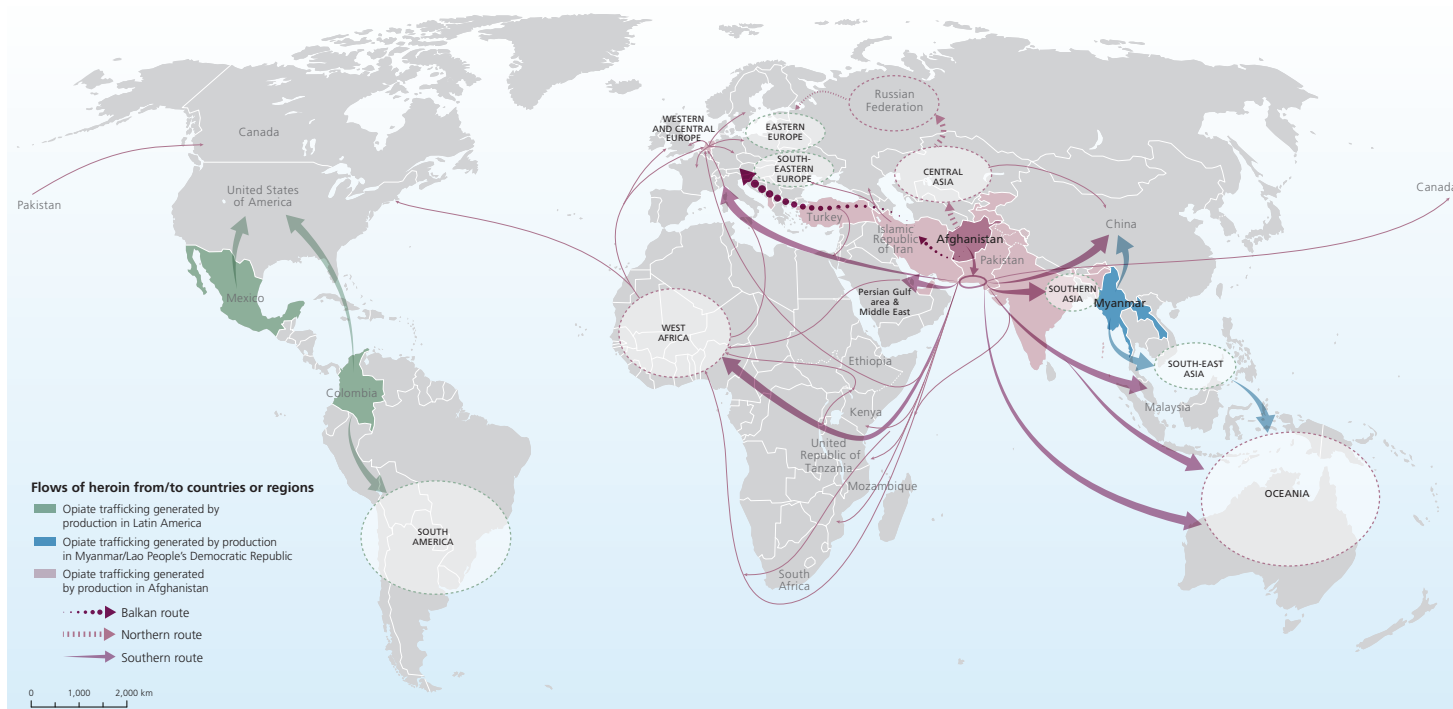
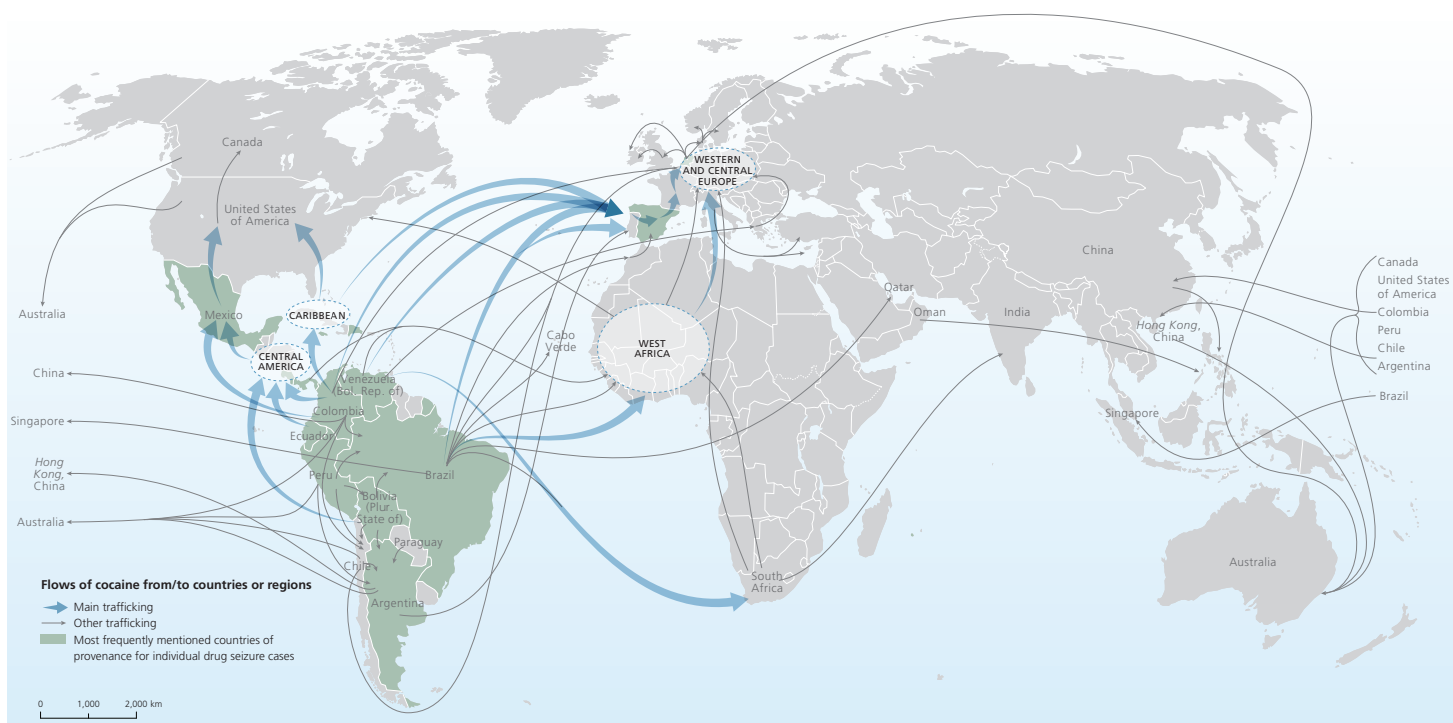
#### Central Asia

Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan

#### Other

Albania, Russia, UK





Sources: UNODC, responses to annual report questionnaire and individual drug seizure database.

Notes: The trafficking routes represented on these maps should be considered broadly indicative and based on data analyses rather than definitive route outlines. Such analyses are based on data related to official drug seizures along the trafficking route as well as official country reports and responses to annual report questionnaires. Routes may deviate to other countries that lie along the routes and there are numerous secondary flows that may not be reflected. The boundaries shown 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 Sudan and South Sudan has not yet been determined.

*“So long as there is an insistent market in a country like the United States for illegal narcotics and a sufficient profit to be made, they will probably be produced. And so long as they are illegal, their production and distribution will be through organized crime.”*

Ambassador David Passage  
former Director of Andean Affairs,  
US State Department  
2000

## The security costs of the war on drugs

### 1. Creating a criminal market of staggering proportions

The sheer size and financial power of the illegal drugs industry can undermine legitimate governments everywhere, generating lucrative funding streams for drug trafficking organisations (DTOs), transnational organised crime groups (TOCs) and, some evidence suggests, insurgent and terrorist groups.

A strong state is recognised as one that holds the monopoly on legitimate force, alongside other key responsibilities, such as being able to provide procedural justice; a recognised system – usually democratic – of government; a fair allocation of resources; and a sense of identity and citizenship. The drug war undermines these elements of good governance by creating corruption, violence and conflict, which can allow non-state actors such as DTOs, TOCs and insurgent groups to create parallel structures of power and capability that can threaten the

integrity of the state itself. Citizens’ faith in the state is undermined, which can also increase insecurity.<sup>19</sup>

As they grow in influence, DTOs and TOCs are particularly drawn to fragile states that are already struggling to provide security for their citizens. Here, the corruption, instability and conflict associated with the illicit drug trade is amplified by existing poor governance. Apart from a few cases where the state and its elites successfully collude with DTOs and TOCs to maintain a functioning state – such as in Burma<sup>20</sup> and Tajikistan<sup>21</sup> – effective governance is rare in very corrupt states, and can further exacerbate conditions for conflict.

Throughout Latin America, but also in Central Asia and West Africa, long-running civil wars and decades of poor governance have been exacerbated by the war on drugs. An estimated 95% of illicit drug production occurs in such areas, and trafficking from and across them is made easier by their chaotic environment.<sup>22</sup>



Schoolchildren fleeing drug-related violence in Tijuana, Mexico  
(Photo credit: Knight Foundation)

## Afghanistan: a study in insecurity

'You cannot carry a war on drugs because, again, if you look at the literature on Latin America, Central America, and particularly Mexico... the lesson that is fundamental, [is that] those are failures.'<sup>23</sup>

**Mohammad Ashraf Ghani**

Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction

2015

Afghanistan faces many security challenges, and has a long history of involvement in the global opium trade. Despite poppy eradication being one of the stated aims of the coalition invasion in 2001,<sup>24</sup> opium production increased dramatically during the war. Today it supplies more than 90% of global illicit opium/heroin,<sup>25</sup> which is fuelling unprecedented corruption, as well as funding insurgency, and terror groups, both nationally and internationally. It is important to exercise caution here, however, as governments have been quick to point to terrorist groups – for example, Al Qaeda – being funded by drugs when this was later shown not to be the case.<sup>26</sup>

- The UNODC estimates that in 2014:<sup>27</sup>
  - Opiates accounted for 13% of Afghanistan's GDP and considerably exceeded the export value of licit goods and services. This is down from 42% in 2008, but due to the expansion of the licit economy, rather than a contraction in opium production
  - The total area of opium poppy cultivation was 224,000 hectares in 2014, a 7% increase from the previous year. In Helmand province, opium accounted for almost 30% of the total area of agricultural land. Potential opium production was 6,400 tons, an increase of 17% from its 2013 level, and the second highest since 1994
- The UN Security Council estimates the Taliban earn \$90-160 million annually from opium/heroin production, 10-15% of their overall funding. This is substantial, but represents only 3% of the annual harvest sale.<sup>28</sup> Far more money goes to corrupt officials, traffickers and farmers
- Afghan government officials are believed to be involved in at least 70% of opium trafficking, and at least 13 former or present provincial governors are directly involved in the drug trade<sup>29</sup>

### Corruption and impunity

Public servants around the world who are supposed to be enforcing the drug control regime are often the most susceptible to corruption, simply because they control the mechanisms to which criminal gangs need access in order to carry out their trade. From low-level police officers to high-ranking politicians and the military, individuals are routinely corrupted, through bribery or threats, to either

turn a blind eye to, or actively participate in, illicit activity. They are rarely brought to trial, prosecuted or punished. In Mexico, the death toll from drug-market-related violence has risen to over 100,000 since 2006, with more than 40% of the bodies remaining unidentified and little justice for the affected families or redress from the state.<sup>30</sup> This corruption and impunity corrodes the state's ability to govern effectively, and undermines the rule of law.<sup>31</sup>



*“The illicit drug economy threatens security and development in countries already stricken by poverty and instability, but its deadly tentacles penetrate every country on the planet.”*

United Nations on Drugs and Crime  
2001

The vast amounts of money generated by the criminal market also has a destabilising and corrupting effect on financial systems. A 2015 UK Treasury report estimated that 2.7% of global GDP, or \$1.6 trillion, was laundered in 2009, much of which will have come from the drugs trade. The report concluded that both money laundering itself, and the criminality which drives the need to launder money, presents a significant risk to the UK's national security and fuels political instability in key partner countries. The drug trade, which largely generates proceeds in the form of cash, poses a high risk of money laundering, which is in turn a key enabler of serious and organised crime, which has estimated social and economic costs of £24 billion a year.<sup>32</sup>

Large parts of South and Central America now experience endemic illicit-drug-related corruption. The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, for example, has recognised the corrosive influence of criminal funds as a problem for the whole Latin American region, stating that in various countries, ‘corruption and impunity have enabled criminal organisations to develop and establish parallel power structures.’<sup>33</sup>

Unsurprisingly, the countries most closely involved in the production or transit of illicit drugs fare badly in Transparency International's corruption perception index: Afghanistan and Guinea-Bissau, for example, sit close to the bottom, while Mexico and Colombia are also heavily criticised.

- As the escape of Sinaloa drug cartel leader Joaquin ‘El Chapo’ Guzman Loera from a Mexican jail in July 2015 showed, corruption reaches all levels of the justice system. So far, seven prison officers have been charged with complicity in the escape<sup>34</sup>
- Afghanistan, already a fragile state, has been severely undermined by corruption and the profits from the illicit drugs trade. The police and intelligence services regularly kill and torture with impunity. Corruption is so rampant that a bribe is paid for every service – whether to secure access to electricity or purchase a highly valued public sector job, even within the judicial system<sup>35</sup>

## Violence and conflict

In the absence of formal regulation – such as legal contract enforcement, financial reporting, and the establishment of trades unions, for example – violence and intimidation have become the default regulatory tools for TOCs and DTOs wishing to protect and expand their illicit-market interests. To do so, cartels equip private armies and militias that are in many cases able to outgun local and state enforcement. Organised criminal networks can also finance or merge with separatist and insurgent groups, and illicit drug profits can become a key source of funding for domestic and international terror groups.

It might seem logical, in the light of the violence perpetuated by DTOs and TOCs, that enforcement responses directed at these groups would increase security and reduce conflict, but this is rarely the case. An overview of research into enforcement crackdowns found overwhelmingly that such market disruption increases levels of violence. This occurs not just because of increased violence between criminal groups and security forces, but also between and within criminal groups, when enforcement action creates a power vacuum, and corresponding opportunities to seize illicit market share or territory.<sup>36</sup> Inevitably, ordinary people are often caught in the crossfire.

## Mexico: where drug-war violence knows no bounds

While Mexico has a long history of internal violence, this was in decline until 2006, when President Calderon announced an intensification of enforcement efforts against the illicit drug trade, with a focus on eliminating the leaders of the country's drug cartels. This so-called 'decapitation strategy' has been – and still is – having severe negative consequences, with Mexico suffering an extreme upswing in violence. As cartel leaders were removed<sup>37</sup> and a power vacuum created, their organisations fractured into smaller factions battling each other for territory, while other cartels moved in to seize control, along with state security forces.<sup>38</sup> Estimates of deaths from violence related to the illegal drug trade in Mexico since the war on drugs was scaled up in 2006 range from 60,000 to more than 120,000,<sup>39 40</sup> of which at least 1,300 were children and 4,000 women. From 2007 to 2014, total civilian homicide deaths in Mexico were 164,000 – a substantially higher number than in Iraq or Afghanistan over the same period.<sup>41</sup>

These increasingly brutal murders are also designed to intimidate competitors and generate fear, with murders and torture being filmed and posted online, or the bodies left in public places.<sup>42</sup> This strategy is not restricted to Mexican drug gangs; a study on drug dealing and retaliation in St Louis, Missouri, in the US, found that direct and violent retaliation was used to serve three functions: 'reputation maintenance, loss recovery and vengeance.'<sup>43</sup> Such actions further increase insecurity and normalise violence at levels that destroy communities and deter legitimate economic activity.

Mexico's drug war is also fuelling the illegal arms trade, flooding the country with unregistered weapons, which inevitably leads to greater violent conflict. It has been estimated that up to 90% of these weapons come across the border from the US.<sup>44</sup> In 2009, the US Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives discovered large quantities of AK-47-style rifles were being shipped to Mexico, one of which was linked to the killing of a US border guard.<sup>45</sup>

*“Mexico's police and armed services are known to be contaminated by multimillion dollar bribes from the transnational narco-trafficking ... it is widely considered to have attained the status of a national security threat.”*

Transparency International  
2001

### State violence

Security is being undermined in many countries by the violence perpetrated by police and security forces, either at the direct instruction of governments, or indirectly as a result of drug-war-related policies.

- A report by the Fellowship of Reconciliation and the Colombia-Europe-US Human Rights Observatory has discovered a positive correlation between US military assistance (which has been a feature of Colombia's response to its drug problem) and extrajudicial killings, particularly when 'moderate' amounts of funding are received. Multiple killings were committed by soldiers in a higher percentage of units commanded by US-trained officers than by a random sample of military officers<sup>46</sup>

- A Global Drug Policy Observatory report on the militarisation of counter-narcotic police in Central America showed that, in Honduras alone, between January 2011 and November 2012, 149 civilians were murdered by their police force<sup>47</sup>
- In 2003, the Thai government launched a drug war crackdown, the first three months of which saw 2,800 extrajudicial killings. These were not investigated and the perpetrators were not prosecuted or punished. The Thai Office of the Narcotics Control Board admitted in 2007 that 1,400 of the people killed had no link to drugs<sup>48</sup>
- In 2015, the Indonesian government mooted a revival of their ‘shoot to kill’ policy for dealing with drug smugglers and dealers, which it described as ‘ruthless’. Opponents point out this would contravene the Indonesian constitution<sup>49</sup>
- As many as 1,000 executions occur worldwide for drug offences each year, but precise numbers are unknown. Statistics for China are most uncertain, with estimates of executions for all offences in 2007 varying from 2,000 to 15,000.<sup>50</sup> Iran has seen a rapid increase – 800 in 2015 alone.<sup>51</sup> The UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office says: ‘Iran continues to have the highest execution rate per capita in the world ... The death penalty was imposed largely for drug offences’<sup>52</sup>

### **Funding and arming insurgents, terrorists and separatists**

The extent of the links between the global drug war and funding for non-state actors – the so-called ‘drugs-terror’ nexus – is hotly disputed.<sup>53</sup> However, it would be hard to argue against the claim that in some circumstances the effect of the criminal market goes beyond merely undermining the state, to directly competing with it by giving non-state actors access to a rich source of funding. It is highly likely, given the vast sums of money generated by the criminal drug trade, and the fact that much of it is laundered through the

legal global banking system,<sup>54</sup> that illicit drug profits are funding efforts to undermine multiple states.

The drug war, and in particular its crop eradication tactics, has also been accused of pushing people off the land and towards insurgent groups. Richard Holbrooke, then US Special Envoy for Afghanistan and Pakistan, admitted that opium poppy eradication alienated ‘poor farmers ... growing the best cash crop they could ... in a market where they couldn’t get others things to market’, with the result that, ‘we were driving people into the hands of the Taliban.’<sup>55</sup>

Relationships between insurgents and drug trafficking groups can flourish despite there being strong, often ideological, differences between them,<sup>56</sup> as with the Marxist revolutionary FARC in Colombia, who have consistently used drug production and trafficking to fund their operations.<sup>57</sup> In addition, the smuggling networks of DTOs and TOCs can be used by insurgents to transport weapons, or be taxed to raise cash. As long ago as the 1980s, Peruvian President Fernando Belaunde Terry, described the Maoist insurgency group The Shining Path as ‘narco-terrorists’, alleging that they were involved in drug production and trafficking.<sup>58</sup> More recently, it was discovered that, in Brazil, smuggling networks associated with the illegal drug trade were supporting a parallel criminal market economy in consumer goods that was costing the nation over \$10 billion in lost tax revenues.<sup>59</sup>

It is important to note, however, that the extent of the ‘drugs-terror nexus’ may sometimes be exaggerated for political or economic reasons. Authorities may wish to blame criminal drug activity on insurgent groups in order to increase their own law enforcement funding, or as a distraction from their own illicit activities. For example, research initially suggested that Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and other Islamist groups in West Africa have been using cigarette smuggling, drug trafficking and kidnapping to provide them with funds, but news reports of this were overstated or unsubstantiated. AQIM may be providing armed escorts to cocaine traffickers for a fee of between 10-15% of the value of the drug,<sup>60</sup> an activity that could have netted them up to \$65 million since 2008

and helped them to become a serious political force.<sup>61</sup> However, this forms only a part of their funding stream.<sup>62 63</sup>

## Drug profits in West Africa weakening the state

In Mali, where Islamist fighters seized control of the north in 2012, drug trafficking has exacerbated the conflict. A 2013 UN Security Council report on West Africa and the Sahel recognised the impact of corruption from drug trafficking as a factor that contributed to state weakness in countries within the region, notably Mali and Guinea-Bissau.<sup>64</sup>

In June 2015, Mali's foreign minister, Abdoulaye Diop, called on the UN to provide a peacekeeping force to help regain control from the militias and for a major anti-drug trafficking operation to be put in place, because he argued: 'We will never achieve a definite settlement for this crisis without this initiative because drugs are fuelling all sides in this conflict.'<sup>65</sup> Mali therefore found itself calling for the UN to send in forces to deal with a problem that was being simultaneously fuelled by the UN-administered global drug control regime.

## 2. Displacing resources toward enforcement

Greater funding for the militarisation of drug law enforcement can starve vital social programmes of the resources and focus they need. This so-called 'policy displacement'<sup>66</sup> results in domestic and international drug control interventions and aid resources being heavily skewed towards military and law enforcement solutions, rather than policies focusing on improving development, health and human rights. Just as a balanced programme of spending to benefit all citizens contributes to security, so an unbalanced programme that favours weapons over

access to education, healthcare and economic opportunities, undermines security.

On a national level, this is perhaps best seen in the US, where the threat-based approach and harsh sentencing for drugs offences has resulted in the disproportionate mass incarceration of people from poor areas. The prison industry has swollen, in both financial and human resources terms, while many urban centres are left to decay without adequate investment, with few jobs outside the criminal economy.

The numbers are staggering: America's prison and jail population has increased sevenfold from 1970 until today, from some 300,000 people to 2.2 million – the largest prison population in the world. With less than 5% of the world's inhabitants – the US has about 25% of its prisoners.<sup>67</sup>

Internationally, resources can be similarly skewed to focus on enforcement and punishment. Since the 1980s, the US has instigated a series of aid programmes – such as the Andean Initiative, Plan Colombia and the Merida Initiative – that focus specifically on bolstering the ability of military and law enforcement agencies in the region to reduce the supply of drugs into the US. One of the major drivers behind these programmes was the alleged threat to the US's national security, rather than the actual needs of the populations receiving aid.<sup>68</sup>

In 1999, Colombia's President Andrés Pastrana requested US assistance in addressing the country's drug problem, and emphasised the need to prioritise development and social programmes over law enforcement and military agendas. But the US wanted the focus to remain on drug war approaches: of the \$860 million given to Colombia, \$632 million went on security agencies and only \$227 million was earmarked for economic development and other social priorities.<sup>69</sup> Security spending has increased massively in Colombia since the beginning of Plan Colombia, with the US spending about \$8 billion,<sup>70</sup> and from 2000-09 Colombia's defence spending nearly tripled to \$12 billion.<sup>71</sup>

In 2000, President Bill Clinton urged Congress to support the plan by emphasising the national security of both Colombia and the US. He argued that: ‘Colombia’s drug traffickers directly threaten America’s security’.<sup>72</sup> While things have improved in Colombia, the results of fighting the drug war remain overwhelmingly disastrous: murders and kidnappings remain high,<sup>73</sup> the number of internally displaced persons has barely altered,<sup>74</sup> the amount of cocaine entering the US has not decreased,<sup>75</sup> and coca production in Colombia rose from 48,000 hectares in 2013 to 69,000 hectares in 2014.<sup>76</sup>

*“Because drug cartels control such immense amounts of money, they now have the power to influence politics and business at the highest levels and gain control of entire regions.”*

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime  
2010

### 3. How the balloon effect impacts on security

The last of the UNODC’s ‘unintended consequences’ of the war on drugs that specifically impacts on security is the balloon effect.<sup>77</sup> This has serious implications for national and international security, because DTOs will successively target alternative regions; as enforcement efforts encroach on their territory, they simply move elsewhere. This means the negative impacts of the drug war and illicit trade are spreading across multiple regions, and present an ongoing threat to any fragile state or area that could be used for drug production or trafficking.

- Coca production has repeatedly shifted between Peru, Colombia and Bolivia, as a response to localised enforcement efforts<sup>78</sup>
- In recent years, as enforcement disrupted established drug trafficking routes from Latin America via the Caribbean to Europe, West Africa has become a new transshipment point for cocaine. This has had a hugely destabilising effect on an already vulnerable part of the world and is undermining security at state, regional and international levels<sup>79</sup>
- As Colombians started to regain control over their country and crack down on TOCs and DTOs, the violence and corruption moved to Mexico. It has been argued that, in turn, the best Mexico can hope to achieve is to apply pressure to the cartels so that they move elsewhere. To some extent, this appears to have happened, with Mexican cartels setting up operations in Central American countries such as Guatemala<sup>80</sup> and Honduras,<sup>81</sup> which are even less well equipped to cope with them than Mexico

*“We are now helping other countries, the Caribbean countries, Central American countries, Mexico, because our success means more problems for them ... There is the balloon effect.”*

Juan Manuel Santos  
President of Colombia  
2010



## Two parallel UN drug control systems: only one creates war and insecurity

The 1961 UN Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs created parallel drug control systems: one that treats some drugs as a threat, the other that treats some of the same drugs as resources to be traded.

### **Drug war 1: created by 1961 UN Single Convention**

The state criminalises non-medical drug users, suppliers and producers to combat the “evil of addiction” through global prohibition



Massive criminal market created



Organised crime groups accrue wealth and firepower to threaten states

### **Drug war 2: created by 1988 UN Convention against Illicit Traffic in Drugs**



Targets transnational organised crime groups



Further militarisation creates more conflict and violence, spreads it to more countries without reducing the global criminal drugs market



Drug war 1 and 2 fought harder with same results



Increasing conflict and insecurity

### **Regulated medical drug trade: created by 1961 UN Single Convention**

The state licenses farmers/pharmaceutical companies to produce and manufacture drugs, and doctors and pharmacists to supply users



Legally regulated market created



No disruption of peace and security

## Are there benefits?

For citizens in countries where corruption is endemic and where the state is fragile or absent, some stability (at least in the short term) can be provided by a combination of state apparatus and the power and largesse of organised crime groups working together, as occurs in places such as Burma<sup>82</sup> and Tajikistan.<sup>83</sup>

For those states seeking to achieve security primarily through a militarised response to existential threats, the global drug war provides ample opportunities to wield military and police power. However, the evidence is clear that this does not provide any long-term security benefits, and more commonly achieves the exact opposite.

*“From UNDP’s perspective and in light of the increasingly destabilizing effect of transnational organized crime and drug trafficking on state and regional security, Member States may wish to hold a discussion on the possibility of including the peace and security implications of this threat ... to exchange ideas and lessons learned on what has and has not worked in addressing the world drug problem, with implications for the work of the United Nations across its three pillars – namely development, human rights, and peace and security.”*

United Nations Department of Political Affairs  
2015

## How to count the costs?

When the UNODC identified the five major ‘unintended consequences’ of enforcing the UN drug control system in 2008, the question of whether the intended consequences outweighed the unintended ones arose. That question is only now beginning to be seriously debated at the international level. Because of the gravity of the harms created by the drug control system, it is incumbent upon all UN member states to have systems in place to measure positive and negative outcomes, in order to assess overall effectiveness, and for the relevant UN agencies to collate these responses in order to provide a global picture of costs against benefits. Indicators relating to the three pillars of the UN – peace and security, development and human rights – are currently almost absent from this scrutiny, throwing into doubt the claim that the drug control system has any meaningful evidence base at all.

Peace and security is absolutely fundamental to the workings of the UN, and identifying indicators that assess security impacts of drug control efforts is an essential part of this. In the absence of such indicators, member states are doomed to repeat the failings of the past.

## Conclusions

Illicit drug production and trafficking has not appeared from nowhere; it is a direct consequence of global prohibition in the context of rising demand, and the increasingly threat-based enforcement responses adopted by member states, with the tacit approval of the UN drug control agencies. But while people who use drugs have never been a genuine threat to society, the criminal entrepreneurs profiting from the illicit market that supplies them under prohibition, are now genuinely putting society in jeopardy. As a result, the UN now faces a major international security threat of its own making.

A growing number of governments are beginning to recognise that this is the case. At the UN Commission on Narcotic Drugs in 2009, Ecuador described its approach as a: 'De-securitisation of drug policy which allows us to address the problem from the perspective of health and human rights'.<sup>84</sup>

However, not only are many countries moving away from enforcement-led approaches with regard to drug users, supply-side reforms that reduce the illicit trade – and accompanying security threat – are also becoming a reality. The then president of Uruguay, José Mujica, for example, has stated that the decision to establish a government-controlled cannabis market, 'began essentially as a security issue'.<sup>85</sup> Evidence of the impacts on security of such reforms should be increasingly apparent as more US states, and other countries follow Uruguay in legally regulating cannabis, and shifting from a threat-based to a health and human rights-based approach.

Rather than viewing drug trafficking in isolation of its policy context, the UN Security Council should, using the UNODC's analysis, categorise the punitive enforcement-based drug control system as a threat to international peace and security. And all member states must, as a matter of urgency, review the security impacts of the drug war domestically and internationally, if true peace and stability is to be realised.

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