

The Socio-Psychological Perspective on Narcotics Restrictions in Iran: A Critical Study

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Abstract

This article examines the implications of narcotics restrictions from a socio-psychological perspective, highlighting the increasing prevalence of mental disorders in Iran and the historical context of opium use in the Middle East as a drug. It delves into the legal framework governing narcotics, the socio-psychological consequences of these laws, and the broader implications for public health and social stability.

Keywords: Narcotics, Opium, Mental disorders

Introduction

Narcotics regulations and their enforcement have long been a contentious issue, intersecting with public health, legal, and socio-psychological domains. This article explores these intersections, particularly focusing on Iran, where mental health disorders are on the rise and where traditional uses of opium have a deep-rooted history. We have already stated the great concern of social disorders in the context of modern governance. In social disorders, we are confronted with a rising number of individuals whose conditions cannot be effectively managed with traditional psychological or pharmacological treatments. These disorders, often endemic to certain cultures and social environments, tend to resist conventional therapies over time. This persistence is particularly concerning as it leads to violations of social norms and the deterioration of human relationships (Davoudpour, A. R., 2024).

Prevalence of Mental Disorders in Iran

According to the Tasnim News Agency, Vahid Shariat, during the 39th press conference of the Annual Congress of the Iranian Psychiatric Association, highlighted the significant increase in mental health disorders in Iran. As of 2021, approximately 30% of the population suffers from some form of psychological disorder, a sharp rise from 21% two decades ago, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Shariat, 2024). Gholamreza Hajati, the executive secretary of the congress, further emphasized that psychiatric disorders could reduce a person's lifespan by 10 to 20 years, with 60% of Iranians being unaware of their mental health issues (Hajati, 2024).

This increase in mental health issues aligns with global trends observed during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, where the World Health Organization reported a 25% increase in anxiety and depression worldwide (World Health Organization, 2022). The mental health crisis in Iran reflects these broader global challenges but is compounded by specific socio-economic and cultural factors unique to the region.

Historical Context of Opium Use

Opium, derived from the poppy plant, has a long-standing history in the Middle East, particularly in Iran's Khorasan region. Historically, it was used as an analgesic and antidote, recommended by notable figures such as Ibn Sina and Razi. The primary active component of opium is morphine, which constitutes about 12% of its composition. Morphine is processed into heroin and other opioids for both medicinal purposes and illicit drug production. The traditional method of opium production involves lancing the poppy plant and collecting its latex (sap), which is then dried (Tasnim News Agency, 2024).

The use of opium in traditional medicine is well-documented. Ancient texts highlight its efficacy in treating pain and other ailments (Booth, 1996). However, the transformation of opium into potent drugs like heroin has significantly increased the risks associated with its use, leading to widespread addiction and severe social consequences (Courtwright, 2001).

Legal Framework and Restrictions on Narcotics

Iranian law strictly regulates the cultivation, production, and distribution of narcotics. The Law on Combating Narcotic Drugs lists several activities as criminal offenses, including the cultivation of poppy for narcotics production, the import, export, and manufacture of narcotics, and the possession and distribution of these substances. Penalties range from fines and imprisonment to execution for repeat offenses (Law on Combating Narcotic Drugs, 2024).

According to Article 1 of the Law on Combating Narcotic Drugs, the following acts are considered crimes:

- Cultivating poppy entirely or cultivating opium poppy for the purpose of producing narcotics.
- Importing, exporting, and producing various narcotics.
- Transporting and storing narcotics.

- Buying, selling, and distributing narcotics.
- Establishing and managing places for the use and consumption of narcotics.
- Using narcotics in any form except in cases permitted by law.
- The production of equipment and supplies related to the production and consumption of narcotics.
- Aiding and abetting criminals in the narcotics field who are being pursued or arrested by the police.
- Hiding evidence and reasons for the crimes of criminals.

Article 2 of this law states:

- Anyone who engages in poppy cultivation or pays attention to opium poppy cultivation for the production of narcotics will be punished according to the following scales, in addition to uprooting the cultivation each time:
 - First offense: a fine of one to ten million rials in cash.
 - Second offense: a fine of five to fifty million rials in cash and thirty to seventy lashes.
 - Third offense: a fine of ten to one hundred million rials in cash, seventy lashes, and two to five years of imprisonment.
 - Fourth offense: execution.

The legal approach to narcotics in Iran reflects a global trend towards stringent drug control policies, which have been criticized for their effectiveness and human rights implications. Studies have shown that punitive measures often fail to reduce drug use and instead contribute to overcrowded prisons and exacerbate public health issues (Global Commission on Drug Policy, 2018).

According to a report by Amnesty International, Iran remains one of the leading countries in executing individuals for drug-related offenses. In 2022 alone, at least 253 people were executed for drug-related crimes, a significant increase from previous years (Amnesty International, 2023). Additionally, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) has highlighted that Iran has one of the highest rates of imprisonment for drug offenses, with over 40% of the prison population incarcerated for drug-related crimes (UNODC, 2022). These statistics underscore the severe legal repercussions for drug offenses in Iran, reflecting the government's stringent anti-narcotics policies.

Socio-Psychological Impact of Narcotics Laws

While the prevalence of psychological disorders is a great concern in governance (Davoudpour, 2024), the stringent legal framework around narcotics fails to account for the socio-psychological conditions driving drug use, such as high rates of mental disorders and unemployment. The

criminalization of drug use and the severe penalties imposed exacerbate the stigma around mental health issues, making it more difficult for individuals to seek help. Additionally, these laws strip away recognized traditional treatments, such as opium for pain relief, and instead, push for an institutionalized religious framework for social control (Shariat, 2024; Hajati, 2024).

Research indicates that social stigma and legal penalties associated with drug use can hinder individuals from accessing necessary treatment, thereby perpetuating the cycle of addiction and mental health issues (Room, 2005). Furthermore, the focus on punitive measures rather than harm reduction has been shown to be less effective in addressing the root causes of drug dependency (Harm Reduction International, 2020).

Discussion

The increase in mental health disorders in Iran suggests a need for a more nuanced approach to narcotics regulation that considers the socio-psychological landscape. Current laws not only fail to address the root causes of drug use but also may contribute to the problem by criminalizing individuals who might otherwise seek help for their psychological conditions. A balance must be struck between controlling the illicit drug trade and providing compassionate, evidence-based care for those suffering from mental health disorders.

A more integrated approach that includes mental health services and harm reduction strategies could potentially alleviate some of the pressures caused by the current legal framework. Countries that have adopted such approaches, like Portugal, have seen positive outcomes in terms of reduced drug-related deaths and improved public health (Hughes & Stevens, 2010).

Conclusion

While Iran's stringent narcotics regulations aim to curb illegal drug use, they often neglect the significant socio-psychological factors that fuel the issue. The increasing prevalence of mental health disorders necessitates a comprehensive approach that addresses both the symptoms of addiction and its underlying causes.

Integrating mental health care into narcotics legislation is crucial for creating a more supportive and effective framework. Current punitive measures, such as execution and imprisonment, have proven ineffective in controlling drug abuse and dependency. These harsh penalties leave families vulnerable and exacerbate financial hardships, contributing to the escalation of mental and psychological problems.

A holistic approach that combines law enforcement with accessible mental health services and social support systems would offer a more sustainable and compassionate solution to this complex issue.

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