



State Fragility and Drug Trafficking in the Peshawar Region: A Criminological Analysis

Maqsood Anwar¹, Dr. Ahmad Ali², Afsah Butt³, Irfan Ullah⁴

¹ M.Phil Criminology and Criminal Justice System, Minhaj University Lahore.

² Associate Professor Sociology, Abdul Wali Khan University Mardan.

Email: ahmadali@awkum.edu.pk

³ B.Sc Criminology and Criminal Justice, University of Lahore.

⁴ LLB M.Sc criminology Advocate Peshawar high court

ARTICLE INFO

Submission:

April 08, 2026

Revised:

April 23, 2026

Accepted:

May 06, 2026

Available Online:

May 21, 2026

Keywords:

Drug Trafficking, Organized Crime, Terrorist financing, Regional conflicts, State Fragility, Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa, Peshawar, Criminological Analysis

Corresponding author:

Dr. Ahmad Ali

Email:

ahmadali@awkum.edu.pk

ABSTRACT

The problems of state fragility and drug trafficking are related and pose great dangers to governance, security and social order. This research will examine that how the drug trafficking and state fragility are related in the Peshawar area of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa through the lens of criminology. The research will explore how such issues like weak governance, corruption, ineffective law enforcement, bad border management, political instability, poverty and unemployment create conditions that are conducive to the growth of drug trafficking syndicates. Being close to the border of Afghanistan-Pakistan, Peshawar has always been known to be a significant transit point for all kinds of drugs including heroin, opium, and methamphetamine. Qualitative research design was used in this study with purposeful sampling and 20-25 participants including police officers, officials from Anti-Narcotics Force, criminologists, lawyers and community leaders were selected for interview. Semi-structured interviews were conducted and the results were analyzed with the help of thematic analysis. The study revealed that state fragility is a factor that greatly enables drug trafficking because of the presence of governance vacuum and reduction of effective institutional control. The main facilitators that were mentioned were weak border management, corruption, lack of institutional capacity and ineffective law enforcement. Moreover, the socioeconomic factors, like poverty and unemployment, increase vulnerability of communities and make them prone to engage in trafficking. In addition to the impact on the region's security, drug trafficking also plays a role in organized crime and in the undermining of the legitimacy of state institutions.

Introduction

Governance, security and socioeconomic development are facing one of the most severe issues of state fragility in many developing countries. Fragile states have a low level of institutional strength and are unable to uphold the rule of law, suffer from political instability, are corrupt and lack of adequate public service delivery. Such situations provide opportunities for organized crime networks to thrive, especially those involved in illicit drug trade (UNODC, 2011). From a criminological point of view, state fragility undermines the efficacy of formal social control structures, enabling criminal organizations to take advantage of gaps in governance and to create their own social control structures and economic leverage.

The Government of Pakistan holds a strategic geographic location between Afghanistan, the biggest producer of illicit drugs (opium) and international markets in Asia, Middle East and Europe (UNODC, 2011). The area of Peshawar is close to the border with Afghanistan and the region has been a primary hub for the narcotics trade. Heroin, opium, methamphetamine and other

drugs have been trafficked through the region, which has led to the growth of organized crime, corruption, violence and financing of militant groups, all of which pose serious threats to national and regional security (UNODC, 2009).

The issue of drug trafficking and state fragility is multi-faceted. The lack of good governance institutions, weak law enforcement, poverty, unemployment, political instability and border insecurity all contribute to an environment that is conducive to the development of the illicit economy. Criminal groups take advantage of institutional weaknesses through bribing officials and infiltrating state institutions and recruiting from economically marginalised populations into trafficking networks. Such activities also further erode public confidence in government, and fragility and organized crime reinforce each other (Khan & Ahmad, 2018).

The Peshawar area is a significant focus regarding this relationship as it is geographically located, historically played an important role in cross-border trade, and has been a region of long-standing conflict along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. While there has been a lot of research on drug trafficking in South Asia, little has been done to elucidate the criminological role state fragility plays in the perpetuation of narcotics trafficking in Peshawar. The gap is important as it is essential for policies to be effective that they understand the structural, institutional and social conditions that enable organized crime to operate.

Objective

To analyse the relationship between state fragility and drug trafficking in Peshawar region from criminological point of view.

Research Question

How does the Peshawar region become fragile from a criminological point of view in the context of drug trafficking?

Literature Review

In areas with weak governance, political instability, and conflict across borders, there are clear linkages between state fragility and drug trafficking. The Peshawar (Pakistan) area is one of the most important routes for illicit drug trafficking from Afghanistan to Pakistan, as well as for the distribution of drugs from Pakistan to Afghanistan, and is also a hub for criminal networks involved in the trade. In criminological research, there is a line of argument suggesting that fragile state institutions are conducive to the organized criminal groups taking advantage of the potential for a lack of governance, weak law enforcement, and socioeconomic vulnerabilities. In fragile settings, drug trafficking is a major source of corruption, violence, and illicit financial networks that further erode state institutions, and this is the reason for the fact that drug trafficking thrives in fragile settings (Felbab-Brown, 2010; Paoli et al., 2014).

State fragility is defined as the lack of government functioning with legitimacy of political control and the failure to deliver security, justice and public services effectively. Criminological views suggest that fragile states are ones with a low capacity of central government, inadequate governance, corruption and weak control over peripheral areas. These circumstances will allow criminal groups to build alternative structures of power and economic activity. In border areas like Peshawar, state authority has been weak in the past owing to militancy, refugee flows and open border zones, which has created conducive environment for drug trafficking networks (Felbab-Brown, 2010).

Routine Activity Theory states that crime occurs when the following three conditions intersect: the presence of suitable targets, the absence of capable guardianship and the presence of motivated offenders. Weak Borders Management, weak policing and weak corruption control leads to weak guardianship and this allows the movement of illicit drugs. Likewise, Social Disorganization Theory suggests that communities that suffer from poverty, social disintegration, unemployment, and lack of institutions are more vulnerable to criminal behaviours such as drug production and trafficking. Theories of criminology aid in understanding the persistence of trafficking networks in vulnerable border areas like Peshawar.

Pakistan is in a strategic position on the so called "Southern Route" for the trafficking of opiates from Afghanistan to international markets. Pakistan is a significant transit route for opium to Afghanistan, which is one of the major producers of opium in the world, partly due to its geographical location and transportation links. The difficulty of terrain and the wide informal trade across

the border with Afghanistan have been reported as reasons for the facilitation of legal trade as well as illegal and irregular trafficking in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa districts adjoining the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Afghanistan borders (Tariq et al., 2024).

There are several studies which have made it clear that drug trafficking is not only a criminal activity but it has also turned into a multidimensional security threat in Pakistan. Illicit drugs also create vast amounts of money that can finance organised criminal groups, fuel corruption among public officials and may even provide money for financing non-state armed groups. These dynamics erode trust in government institutions and the rule of law. The trafficking networks have also become more nimble, taking advantage of trade routes, technology and international logistics systems, according to recent research, making it more difficult to police.

The literature also shows that there is strong correlation between corruption and organized drug trafficking. Corruption undermines criminal justice, which can be used to bribe or detract from the success of prosecutions, as well as to evade detection by traffickers. In some cases, political economy theories suggest that criminal organizations forge symbiotic ties with corrupt officials, enabling them to form mutually beneficial agreements that help to maintain illegal markets. The relationship between state and crime appears to function in a similar way in Central Asia, where the state's involvement in narcotics trafficking plays an important role in the continued existence of narcotics trafficking despite the efforts of the drug enforcement authorities (Paoli et al., 2014).

Other socio-economic factors also play an important role in drug trafficking in Peshawar region. The high rates of unemployment, poverty, population displacement, refugee inflows and lack of educational opportunities create vulnerabilities for individuals, especially youth, to recruitment by OCGs. Illegitimate drug economy can be more profitable than legitimate jobs, offering high incentives to participate. Previous studies indicate that criminal networks actively recruit economically vulnerable communities with material benefits, protection, or jobs in trafficking networks (Tariq et al., 2024).

The issue of border management has been one of the topping subjects of research in relation to drug trafficking in Pakistan. The Afghanistan-Pakistan border is highly challenging in terms of enforcement due to the mountainous terrain and the presence of many informal crossing points and enduring tribal and commercial links, which date back to before the inception of formal borders. Experts say increased surveillance and action by the Anti-Narcotics Force (ANF) and other security forces have failed to alter the transportation paths or methods of traffickers who continue to shift these operations and hide them. The above adaptive strategies reflect the ability of organized criminal activities to survive across the region.

A major challenge for the Anti-Narcotics Force (ANF) in combating drug trafficking in the Peshawar region is the lack of adequate border control measures and the limited resources allocated to the department, inadequate training of staff members and the changing methods and strategies being used by drug traffickers (Anwar et al., 2024).

It is now recognised by existing literature that the Anti-Narcotics Force (ANF) played an important role in combating drug trafficking by intelligence gathering, interdictions and cooperative efforts with other nations. However, researchers report that merely stopping trafficking is not enough, as structural problems like corruption, weak governance, socioeconomic inequality, and regional instability remain as breeding grounds for trafficking to continue. Therefore, integrated strategies that integrate law enforcement, institutional reform, border management, socioeconomic development, and international cooperation are recommended by researchers (Tashfeen et al., 2026).

Research Methodology

In this study a qualitative research design has been used to explore the issue of State fragility and Drug trafficking in Peshawar region in a criminological frame of reference. For the purpose of selecting the participants (20-25) a non-probability purposive sampling technique will be used which includes police personnel, Anti-Narcotics Force (ANF) officials, criminologists, lawyers, community leaders with relevant knowledge on the issue. The data will be gathered by semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis will be used to analyze the data. Ethical guidelines will be followed, informed consent will be obtained, voluntary participation will be ensured, confidentiality and anonymity will be maintained, and participants will be allowed to withdraw from the study at any time.

Result and Discussion

The results have shown that state fragility is one of the factors which contributes in drug trafficking in the Peshawar region. Inconsistent: Participants recognised weak border management, corruption, low institutional capacity and ineffective law enforcement as factors that facilitate traffickers to operate. The strategic location of Peshawar in proximity to Afghanistan-Pakistan border and the fact that it is a hub for transportation of illegal drugs were also mentioned by many of the respondents. Lack of opportunity and poverty, unemployment and lack of education were also cited as socioeconomic factors which were said to make local communities more vulnerable to being involved in drug related activities.

The research also revealed that drug trafficking activities are linked with organized crime activities, affect the trust in the state institutions and have serious implications on security in the region. Participants highlighted the need for sustainable progress despite the increased efforts of law enforcement agencies in combating drugs; that is, to have better governance, more inter-agency coordination, effective border control, anti-corruption measures and community-based prevention programs. The results align with criminological theories that indicate poor state institutions lead to the emergence and expansion of organized criminal networks for perpetrating crime.

Findings

The study revealed that the state fragility has a significant role in the drug trafficking in the Peshawar region due to weak governance, corruption, ineffective border security and lack of law enforcement. Poverty, unemployment and the close geographical proximity of the region to the Afghanistan-Pakistan border were also cited as key factors that enable trafficking. In addition, the results suggest that drug trafficking fuels organized crime, which in turn results in a decrease in trust in the state institutions and major security issues in the region. Participants stressed the importance of effective governance, better border control, anti-corruption mechanisms and better inter-agency coordination in order to effectively fight the issue.

References

1. Khan, A., & Ahmad, A. (2018). Organized crimes and governance gap in the conflict affected North-Western Pakistan. *Pakistan Journal of Criminology*.
2. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. (2009). *Addiction, crime and insurgency: The transnational threat of Afghan opium*. United Nations.
3. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. (2011). *The global Afghan opium trade: A threat assessment*. United Nations.
4. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. (2023). *World Drug Report*. United Nations.
5. Tariq, A., Khan, Z., Pervez, S., Qadeem, S., & Ullah, N. (2024). International drug trafficking: A case study of the South Asian region. *Journal of Humanities, Social and Management Sciences*.
6. Felbab-Brown, V. (2010). *Narco-Jihad: Drug trafficking and security in Afghanistan and Pakistan*. Brookings Institution.
7. Paoli, L., Rabkov, I., Greenfield, V. A., & Reuter, P. (2014). Beyond the drug-terror nexus: Drug trafficking and state-crime relations in Central Asia. *International Journal of Drug Policy*, 25(6), 1235-1240. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.drugpo.2014.06.00>
8. Tariq, A., Khan, Z., Pervez, S., Qadeem, S., & Ullah, N. (2024). International drug trafficking: A case study of the South Asian region. *Journal of Humanities, Social and Management Sciences*.
9. Tashfeen, M. N., Rehman, S. U., Ansari, M. I., & Shah, S. G. A. (2026). Drug trafficking routes through Pakistan and national security. *Physical Education, Health and Social Sciences*, 4(1).

10. Anwar, M., Khan, M. F., Nadir, S., & Fawad, M. (2024). _Challenges faced by Anti-Narcotics Force in combating drugs trafficking: A case study of Regional Directorate Peshawar_. ACADEMIA International Journal for Social Sciences.



2026 by the authors; Journal of Global Social Transformation (JGST). This is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC-BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).