

## **Poor Frontiersman – Sound Frontiers: A Paradox in Drug Trafficking in Eastern Borderline Regions of Iran**

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### **Abstract**

The paradox of security-development (PSD) has been a major global issue in borderline regions, particularly occurring in developing economies presented with drug trafficking. International drug trafficking in such regions is hidden under a cloud of political issues, which in turn has triggered the undertaking of martial-security tactics in matters of drug trades. Herein, this study proceeds with an audit of PSD in eastern borderline regions of Iran, with an analysis of the impacts of martial-security policies on border residents and international drug trades using qualitative methods and interviews with 75 frontiersmen, border officials, and drug traffickers. The findings indicate that policies have not been able to control drug smuggling into the country. Reducing and eliminating drug-trafficking in the eastern borders of Iran requires a perspective which views the issue as independent alongside development-based strategies instead of the existing security policies. One resolution to this puzzle is coordinated border management (CBM), centered on expanding development capacities in eastern borderline regions of Iran, to enable continuing security measures against illicit drug deals.

**Keywords:** Paradox of Security, Development (PSD), Eastern Borders of Iran, Drug Trafficking, Frontiersman, Coordinated Border Management (CBM).

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## **1.Introduction**

The paradox of security-development (PSD) is a global issue occurring in borderline regions, with a diverse range of impacts on control and growth of international drug trades. In the case of the US-Mexican border, the US administration is on one hand anxious about further strengthening economic bonds with Mexico, while on the other concerned about drug trafficking and other security measures. Through policies of borderless economy as alternative to a barricaded border, the US launched the Merida Initiative of the NAFTA agreement to push drug dealings into Mexican borders, freeing itself of strict matters of security, while maintaining commercial interests with the country (Ashby,2014); however, Trump's policies (2017-2021), calling for the construction of the Mexico-US border wall, hints at the persistence of this paradox in US policies. One study of the causes of drug dealings in St. Vincent & Grendines specifies how the government has been able to reduce drug-trades through development-oriented initiatives in borderline regions, rather than increased security measures (Helm,2018).

The security aspect of PSD is particularly more prevalent in border policies of developing countries; where despite the poverty and deprivation (known causes of crime, especially drug trafficking), government initiatives involved more police violence than development. This paradox is analogous to when increased poverty in border regions and among border residents ensue from enacted security policies leading to rises in drug trades. From 1960 to 1980, as O'Donnel (1973) mentions, in authoritarian ruled countries such as Brazil, Chilli, Argentina, and Uruguay, the governments have sought to block economic developments and instead have turned to increasing security measures against drug trafficking. The notion put forth by O'Donnel was further elaborated by Collier (2001) and Heiss (2017) to elucidate on the status of other governments such as those of Mexico, Columbia, Venezuela, or more modern non-Latin-American countries in Asia such as the Middle East; where by monopolizing important resources such as petroleum, the countries are at an advantage for modernization concerning economic opportunities. In fact, as Mahra et al. (2017) have shown, crimes like drug trafficking in these regions are linked to central political-economic constitutions which are carried out in an undeveloped environment in the form

of security measures. On another note, ratifying security policies in border regions has been itself a sign of authoritarianism leading to increased Cartel recruits and expansion of drug trades as studied in Mexico, where economic blockades in the 1970s and 1980s led to the formation of local and non-official economies in border regions of the country, with ensued changes in culture (Tielemans,2014). Campbell (2005) mentions the emergence of unofficial cultures and folklore music in border regions of Mexico, despite the lack of a local government and high rate of drug trafficking. This form of folk culture common to other border regions of countries like Iran, Iraq, and Turkey serves to demonstrate how drug trafficking has become intertwined with the daily lives of border inhabitants and poses a challenge to governmental policies against drugs. In fact, as Mejia (2010) puts, “Plan Colombia”, the government’s initiative on drug trafficking which spent 80% of its total budget on military programs, was a notable failure.

Asian countries are peculiarly more susceptible to the security side and adverse ramifications of PSD in border-region policies. According to Keefer and Loayza (2010), the “War on Drug” initiative in developing regions is a descendent of colonialism induced by countries such as England or Spain. This strategy has proved unsuccessful in developing countries by damaging border inhabitants and imposing sumptuous military costs (Reuter,2010; Thoumi,2010; Robles et al.,2015).

The ruling security discourse among Asian states has also hindered the unfolding of important associations between security policies and drug trafficking. As for central Asia military policies of the Tajikestan state on borderline drug trades has primarily been aimed at consolidating the governments military position and advancing political agendas. The state of affairs has arrived at the point where the government has refused to acknowledge the economic indigence causing drug-trafficking in the region as the result of imposed economic blockades and high military budgets (Rahmani,2018) or geographical factors and terrorist groups (Roberts,2018). According to Chin & Zhang (2007), inhabitants of the China-Myanmar border have also resorted to drug trafficking as an unofficial economy. The Myanmar administration however, has only tightened security in border regions, as have border regions of the Golden Triangle—comprised of parts of

Laos, Burma, and Thailand—where security policies are justified given the harsh geography of the regions (Chouvy,2013).

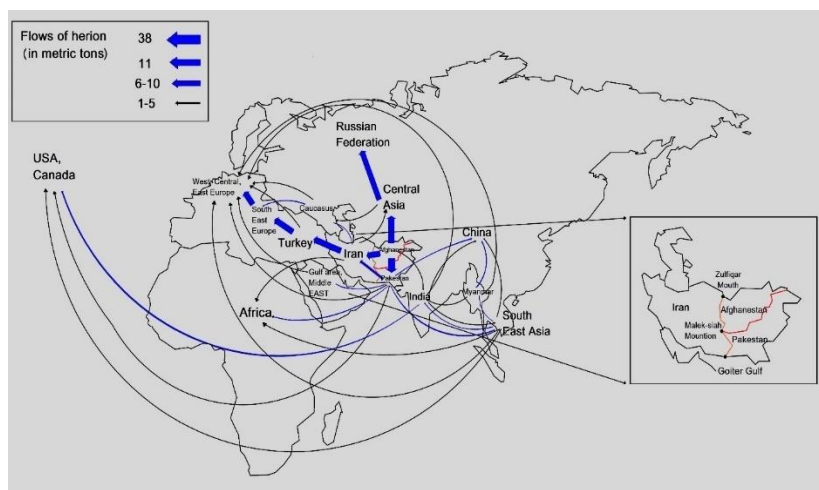
Challenging geographies of border regions in south Asia joined with terrorist activities have given governments further pretext to endorse security measures. For instance, in Pakistan, even international development initiatives by countries such as the US have remained ineffective at the behest of politically corrupt governments (Shukla,2010:80-81). The interchangeable notions of “drug-trafficking” and “terrorism” in borderline regions has only inspired military policies on part of the government, as well as oversights on development policies. As for Afghanistan, the bureaucratic government is considered the main patron of drugs in the region (Aggarwal,2010).

Drug-trafficking in the Middle East is at the heart of most state and foreign policies. It is a place where a ruling insecurity controlled by high power figures has kept secret the violent acts of terrorism and internal conflicts relating to international drug trafficking under the mask of political issues. This distinctive feature has forced Middle Eastern governments to adopt a war on drugs strategy that is consistent with their security approaches in combating drug trafficking (Ar dovini,2019). Along this thread Cengiz (2017) observed the formation of significant social and economic changes in border regions of Turkey, Iran, and Iraq. Governmental policies in Syria, Lybia and Jordan are also central to drug-trafficking processes (Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime,2016). The entanglement of drug-trafficking with governmental policies in Middle Eastern and South Asian countries has made it difficult for the government to distinguish between tactics and responses, ultimately relying on security measures.

Iran, among other Middle Eastern countries, is particularly more exposed to international drug trades. The long borders of the country with Afghanistan and Pakistan have been governed by military-security policies from the ground up, that the result has not been successful. The area of study includes the eastern borders of Iran, running 1845 km north to south, with land boundaries of 945 km with Afghanistan, and 900 km with Pakistan. The Afghanistan-Iran border starts at the Zulfaghar tripoint (between Iran, Turkmenistan, and Afghanistan) far into Malek Siah Kuh (mountain), and is continued by the Iran-Pakistan border beginning at Gwadar and proceeding to the Gulf of Oman (Fig.1). The plurality and extent of highlands and

expansive desert plains together with relatively intense heat, harsh climates, and dry air in the borderline regions has made it hard for border-control over drug trafficking (Alinezhad and Abedi, 2014; Ezzati and Savarrakhsh, 2013). Iran is bordered by perhaps the most important global supplier of drugs, Afghanistan. As the latest UNODC (2018) report shows, 263 thousand hectares of agricultural land in Afghanistan are used for poppy cultivation, amounting to 6400 tons of opium per year. The highest ingress of drugs among the neighboring countries of Afghanistan take place in Pakistan and then Iran (UNODC,2010). Based on UNODC (2010) maps, the main drug trafficking routes in the region run through Iran, Middle Asia, Balkans, and other northern, central, and southern detours (Fig.1). Herein, Iran, due to its transit-friendly status-quo, acts as the best hub for trafficking drugs from Afghanistan to the West, particularly Europe. Accordingly, drug-trafficking is more pronounced in the eastern borders of the country where, despite escalating military measures, drug-trades have ramped up.

Now the main issue is why and how security policies have not been able to prevent drug trafficking in the eastern borders of the country and what alternative strategy is there to prevent drug trafficking in this region? The findings of this study can contribute to new perspectives on handling PSD in other developing economies such as Iran.



**Figure (1): Drug-Trafficking Routes, Eastern Iran, the Golden Crescent Area (Source:UNODC,2010)**

## 2. Methodology

This study proceeds with a qualitative analysis of data gathered in accordance with the study objective of obtaining precise information through semi-structured interview.

### 2-1. Statistical Population, Sampling, and Sample-Size

Access to inclusive data relevant to the study objective was a prerequisite to interviewing different groups engrossed in border-region issues. Accordingly, the target statistical population included three categories of frontiersmen, drug-dealers and border officials. Given the complex nature of the study and the need to acquire precise and accurate information, the mixed purposeful sampling method was used, where two or more purposeful or non-probabilistic methods are mixed (Patton,2002; quoted by Jalali,2012). Herein, a mix of judgement sampling and snowball method were used in which a few interviewees from border regions of Sistan and Balochistan, South Khorasan, and Razavi Khorasan were initially selected for inclusion based on judgement and study objectives, and later snowball sampling was employed for other interviewees. Sample size was estimated on the basis of data saturation and a total of 75 interviewees were selected; 37 of which were frontiersmen, 25 border officials, and 13 drug-dealers.

**2-2. Questionnaire Items**

The questionnaire items were designed initially on bases of indicators extracted from the theoretical literature and later validated using expert opinion. An itemized form of the extracted indicators and components was then analyzed by a team of 20 experts, who were asked to rate the indicators or components based on significance. Later screening was performed to obtain the final questionnaire of open-ended items acquired from the main indicators. Table (2) lists the components and indicators.

**2-3. Interview Process**

Given the significance of trust in an interview, the interviewers were selected from the residents of border regions. The sense of mutual trust provided between interviewer/interviewee somewhat mitigates the limitations of interviews. Among groups interviewed, meetings with border officials were more straightforward, whereas interviews with frontiersmen and drug-dealers were peculiarly hard. Some interviewees first believed the process to be a waste of time, but were encouraged to participate after discussions on the significance of the issue. Altogether, the entire process was time consuming in order to observe morality and ethics during interviews. Hence, the obtained data have the required comprehensiveness for analyzing and explaining the study questions.

**2-4. Coding and Analysis of Data**

Given the number of interviews, the obtained data were also analyzed quantitatively to further advance study objectives. After interviews were conducted, written texts were coded and frequency distributions were obtained.

**2-5. Reliability Testing**

Reliability tests are often performed as a standard procedure for qualitative methods such as interviews (Memon & Bull,1999). Methodology standards like trained interviewers were observed throughout all interview processes to ensure uniformity in the form and method of asking questions and setting up guidelines. Termination conditions were also employed such as requirements of skill, insight, and experience for coders; precision of items and rules of

coding; and careful considerations in regulating items based on existing empirical evidence.

### **3.Theoretical Framework**

Border threats differ according to the geographical location of countries as well as their internal and external environments. These threats encompass a wide spectrum of risks—security-related, political, economic, and cultural—as well as illicit activities such as the smuggling of goods, drugs, people, fuel, medicine, and weapons. Identifying the sources of these threats—such as the length of borders, the number of neighboring countries, environmental and human diversity, underdevelopment of peripheral and border regions, environmental and natural resource challenges, political transitions in neighboring states, regional instability, the strategic interests of global powers, globalization and the evolving role of borders, and the lack of coherent national border management strategies—is the first step toward addressing and mitigating them (Dawivedi,1990:141–42).

From a theoretical standpoint, analyzing the relationship between development and security in border regions is crucial for several reasons:

- **Strong Mutual Correlation:** There exists a high degree of correlation between development and security in border regions. In other words, development and security influence each other reciprocally: any effort toward development has a direct impact on the realization of security, and vice versa. Thus, regions with higher development indices often enjoy greater levels of security compared to less developed areas (Zarghani,2007:98).
- **Interaction Between Physical and Non-Physical Components:** A direct and mutual influence exists between the physical and non-physical dimensions of security and development. These complex and interrelated dynamics constitute a system in which enhancing one set of factors influences the others. For instance, the implementation of physical development projects—such as the establishment of industrial, agricultural, commercial, or service infrastructure—can lead to improvements in non-physical development indicators, including literacy, social and cultural integration, alignment with the central government, as well as reductions in insecurity indicators such as crime rates and illegal border crossings (Pishgahi-Fard & Mirzadeh,2011:154).

- **Link to National Security and Development:** The security and development of border regions are directly and reciprocally connected to national security and development. Effective actions in border areas influence national indicators, just as national-level initiatives have varied impacts on border regions (Zarghani,2007:99).
- **Necessity of Integrated Perspective:** Establishing a rational and effective relationship between development and security in border areas requires comprehensive and integrative attention to the developmental factors that influence security and vice versa. This relationship demands a systemic and coherent approach to both development and security. Spatial and regional imbalances between central and peripheral (border) areas often lead to reduced levels of security in border zones (Mir Heydar,2000:162).

In borderland studies the theoretical approaches to the relationship between border security and development can generally be categorized into four main groups:

- **The Approach Prioritizing Security over Development:** This approach emphasizes that development in border areas must occur within a secure environment. Accordingly, security must first be established before development can be pursued. In other words, proponents of this view consider the achievement of security a necessary and preliminary condition for development. From this perspective, development is seen as an instrument to ensure security. Countries that adopt this view often share certain characteristics: the presence of vital resources in border regions adjacent to neighboring states, a historical legacy of conflict over these resources, a strategic and critical geographical position of the border areas, and the concentration of settlements and economic activities near these borders. Naturally, such countries view their border regions as essential and vital areas where security must be enforced first. Development is then considered a secondary priority, to be pursued only in areas where security has been established.
- **The Approach Prioritizing Development over Security:** This perspective asserts that security is achieved through development. It is grounded in the belief that underdevelopment is a root cause of insecurity; thus, to establish security in border areas, development must

first be introduced. The subsequent outcomes of development will then contribute to the establishment and maintenance of security. Countries and political systems aligned with this viewpoint are typically more developed than their neighbors and enjoy higher income levels. Given that their border regions are adjacent to less developed and often insecure neighboring countries, they are exposed to the consequences of underdevelopment and insecurity spilling across borders. Hence, they see development as a proactive strategy to prevent insecurity by raising the standard of living and social stability in border areas.

- **The Approach Emphasizing Mutual Understanding between Development and Security:** This approach does not prioritize one over the other but considers development and security to be interdependent and of equal importance. Security and development are viewed as parallel, interconnected processes. In countries subscribing to this approach, there is a mutual understanding that both elements are essential and inseparable. Key features of such countries include limited territorial size, being part of a broader regional or supranational system, highly active cross-border interactions, and deep economic, political, and social interdependence with neighboring countries. As such, development and security are managed as mutually reinforcing pillars of national strategy (Hafeznia, 2004:134).
- **The Approach Separating Development and Security in Practice:** In this approach, the connection between development and security is disregarded, and there is no reciprocal understanding between the actors involved in either domain. Development and security in border regions proceed independently and without coordination. As a result, priorities are separately addressed within each field by their respective authorities. In such countries, planning tendencies often lean toward fragmentation and unilateralism, particularly in the spheres of development and security. Decision-makers in each sector perceive their objectives as isolated from those of other sectors, leading to a lack of integrated vision or action. This separation between development and security is evident both in theory and practice (Zarghani, 2007:170).

#### **4. Findings**

The findings elaborate on the interrelations of the entangled network of factors influencing drug-trafficking in border regions and sheds light on the priorities of border regions in terms of the influence, nature, and type of developed-based border-control policies applied against border drug-trafficking.

##### **4-1. Border Blockage and Tightened Security**

Iran's policy in all border regions reduces to increased border security, which is particularly more pronounced in the eastern borders in the form of border blockage. Both traditional and modern border blockage policies have evolved throughout the eastern borders in the course of time, reaching its current state of "ideal" as stated by a border official:

"Three layers of blockages have caused increased security in the eastern borders; physical, aerial and optical supervision, and information layers. The state of drug trafficking in the eastern regions having reached the Gulf (of Oman) shows that all land routes are closed."

As interviews showed, border residents, despite differences of opinion with border officials on matters of border policy, found the adopted border-security policies of Iran as ideal, but also highly permeable to drug trafficking. One border resident mentioned:

"They have closed everything down, but smuggling is increasing day by day. Drug trafficking is not the result of lack of security to be eliminated by military-security policies".

Contentions with terrorist groups in the eastern borders of Iran have also increased the number of military forces in the region and the government draws no distinction between drug trafficking and authoritative actions in border regions to control terrorist activities. One border official had this to say:

"Border security is comprehensive for us and includes both drug-trafficking and terrorism. In practice, we make no distinction between the two because terrorist groups are themselves the most important agents of drug-trafficking in the region. Border threats are increasing day by day and we must increase security"

Nevertheless, interviewed border residents and drug-dealers believed that engaging with terrorist groups in the eastern borders is separate from matters of drug-control, and the government has implemented two different strategies and military forces for each. One border resident mentioned:

“you can see all sorts of military forces in the border, some of whom have no business with drug-control...since the 90s, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps has entered the region and eradicated all terrorist group. Terrorists here have no desire for drug-trafficking but move on a different path...the Corps entering the region is a sign of a terrorist attack”.

Furthermore, a weakened neighboring country, such as the incapacitated governments of Afghanistan and Pakistan, can cause further authoritarianism in border regions similar to Iran’s increased militarism in border areas. A Baloch border-resident mentioned:

“My cousins live across the border and there is no sign of strict security measures, not for drugs nor terrorist groups. The Pakistani government is the agent of drug-trafficking...this has been compensated for by the Iranian government which protects the border”

The eastern borders are the gateway for enemies (US) and must be fully blocked...during its stay in Afghanistan, the US had taken drug-trafficking under its own control with high-ranking US officers being the main stakeholders”. These are only parts of what Iranian border officials had to say in justifying increased security in the eastern borders, which itself shows how hostile policies of Iran and the US have effectuated increased border security. According to interviewees, the main shortcomings of the border blockage policy are: 1) prolonged eastern borders, which according to one interviewee “...cannot be blocked entirely. Blocked borders only lead to increased control and rearranged drug-trafficking via other routes. Throughout the years, border blockage has caused the transfer of drug-trafficking from land routes to sea lanes.”; 2) high civilian casualties and military costs which pose various challenges in prospect. According to one border official “we’ve kept the border safe with blood and sacrifice. No country has had as many border martyrs as Iran. We fight drug-dealers and terrorists on a daily basis and forces are constantly martyred”; 3) inaptness of border blockage policies in

free-trade zones of the border. A customs official mentioned “border blockage is still ineffective in the region, particularly for industrial drugs and required ingredients, which pass customs due to small size; i.e., custom formalities are not observed within the free zone. A pharmacist can then release the ingredients from customs”.

#### **4-2. Border Blockage and Drug Trafficking**

Border blockage in the eastern borders has posed major problems to the livelihood of border residents, one of whom mentioned:

“The security-oriented view of the border has made it difficult the livelihood of border residents. We live in a place of no economic opportunity. The only sanctuary for the people is this border, but a security-driven view has blocked it. Several young individuals earned money from the border but now everyone is unemployed”.

As stated by the interviewees, unemployment and economic indigence have directed border-residents towards drug-related activities or have facilitated drug-trafficking. One official mentioned in concern with the causes of drug-trafficking:

“The primary cause is unemployment. People need to make a living and border-residents who have no job opportunities are forced to steer towards drug-trafficking. The perils of drug-trades in the eastern borders are extremely high to the point of human casualties, even though the traffickers were forced into it... Most of them are poor and only act as peddlers who might get less than 500 thousand tomans (\$10) for trafficking one kilo of drugs”.

One convicted drug-dealer who had spent years in prison talked about the causes of drug-trafficking as:

“It’s clear what the cause is, no need to ask questions, just look. There are no facilities here to inspire living. The area is entirely security-governed, which is why most people turn to drug-dealing to earn a living”.

Enforcement into drug-trafficking has introduced drugs as part of the local culture of border residents, creating unique local identities. In fact, as stated by one border resident:

“people here do not view drugs as bad, and at times may feel proud to be drug-dealers....the culture here is entangled with drugs, I have seen with my own eyes school kids who feel proud of their father’s being drug dealers to the point of competing with their peers”.

#### **4-3. Development Capacities of Border Regions and Local Governments**

The Eastern borders of Iran have long been considered the economic hub of the country; located along the ancient Silk Road, consisting of Sistan and Balochistan Province, known as Iran’s primary grain depot. As stated by One local academic:

“.... The entire border has a high economic capacity. If the expenses for blocking the border are used to activate the economic capacities of the region, both poverty and unemployment will disappear, as well as drug trafficking. Economic capacities of the region remain unnoticed. For instance, Saravan has one of the best quality dates in the world, but lacks the facilities to package it. Moving northward, border regions in South Khorasan, Razavi Khorasan, and North Khorasan provinces all have fertile soil fit for planting saffron, which is one of the rarest commodities in the world. The high market for industrial goods, especially construction material, in Pakistan and Afghanistan makes good opportunity for our border regions, which possess suitable soil for producing construction material and establishing factories. However, no plans or agendas have been made. All such capacities could be instantiated via a local government and poverty and drug-trafficking can be dealt with”.

Some interviewees also made mention of other capacities such as tourism, industry, and commercial as a means for economic boom. Another local academic (university assistant professor) stated:

“All cities in the vicinity of border regions have the capacity for factory establishments, which can then be sold to cross-border markets in Afghanistan and Pakistan....there are many tourist attractions/capacities in the region as well which remain unknown...the large population living across the border in Pakistan and their high demand for goods, makes the eastern

regions of Iran a potentially capable region for commercial markets, which also go unused...Balochistan is situated along delivery routes to south Asian countries, which unfortunately is only being used for delivering opium...the Chabahar Free Zone is considered a major eastern commercial hub and international commercial port which is yet to be used to its full potential”.

Based on the interviewees opinion, due to the established security policies, the human capacities of the eastern border regions, particularly cultural traits of the Baloch tribe, have yet to be activated in the sense of converging policies with environmental capacities to create opportunities like tourism, agriculture, and industry; this has left the region in a state of indigence.

One Baloch border resident stated:

“The Baloch tribe are descendants of Aryan tribes of Iran... Even in border control, local forces can be used, whereas these local forces also require jobs and doing so would also improve the region... a Baloch’s homeland is worth as much as his family. This is a realistic view and can be exploited as a capacity when defending the border”.

Interviewees also found the tribal system of Baloch ethnics possess the required capacities for a strong local government which can be used to promote political convergence with the state as well as border-security. One of the elders of the Baloch tribe mentioned in this regard:

“To non-native eyes, tribes appear as a threat, whereas the very same tribal elders and Moulavi’s (religious missionaries) can be incorporated into a strong security system that covers the entire border. One Fatwa (religious doctrine) from a Moulavi here can be very helpful in controlling and dealing with drugs ...deploying the power of Moulavi’s requires a strong social structure (local government) which is currently absent”.

**Table (1): Quantification of Interview Finding**

Components	Indicators	Frequency	Percentage
	Traditional Border Blockage Policy	12	16
Border Control and Management Policy	Modern Border Blockage Policy	6	8
	Traditional and Modern Bborder Blockage Policy	53	70/7
	Development-Based Policy in Border Regions	4	5/3
	Total	75	100
	Poverty and Unemployment	62	82/7
Main Causes of Drug-Trafficking	Ethnic Divergence	4	5/3
	Drug Mmafia	1	1/3
	Region Geomorphology	1	1/3
	External Factors	0	0
	Utilitarianism of Border Residents	4	5/3
	Lingual and Religious Minorities	0	0
	Afghan Nationals	2	2/7
	Border-Residence Culture	1	1/3
	Nomad Population	0	0
	Total	75	100
	Distance from Centers	10	13/3
Main Causes of Poverty and Unemployment	Lack of Development Capacities	0	0
	Security Discourse over Border Regions	55	73/3
	Ethnic Discrimination	6	8
	Feeble Economic Management	4	5/3
	Total	75	100
	Local Government	20	26/7
Development-Based Capacities of Border Regions in Drug Control	Social and Cultural Capacities	6	8
	Commercial, Industrial, and Tourist Capacities	40	53/3
	Agricultural Capacities	8	10/7
	Geographical Position	1	1/3
	Total	75	100

The table above represents the various components and indices involved in drug-trafficking in Iran’s eastern borders, as acquired from interviews with border residents, drug-traffickers and border authorities. As evident, the significant difference between index values in three categories hint at the possible impact of these indices on increased drug-trafficking. As for the first component, the interviewers recognized border blockades as the primary border-control policy instigated in the region, and further mentioned the security discourse to be a main influencer of high poverty and unemployment rates and thereby a main instigator of increased drug-trafficking. Similar

differences can also be observed between index values with respect to four mentioned components, which clearly show signs of a direct relationship between security discourse, poverty and unemployment, and drug-trafficking. As for the fourth component, the interviewees showed consensus on the possible solution to this dilemma as a policy which endorses, in order of significance, commercial, industrial, tourism, and local government capacities.

### **5. Discussion**

The significance of scrutinizing the relation between border policies and drug-trafficking primarily converges towards the entangled network of factors causing drug-trafficking in different regions around the globe. Such studies (Goodhand & Pain's,2021) are particularly important in the Middle East and Southern Asia, where drug-trafficking is concealed by a myriad of hidden issues.

Drug-trafficking in border regions has been mainly seen through the frame of international business given the commercial and economic status of borderline territories. The major body of studies on this matter view drug-trafficking as an international business matter and thereby emphasize the role of mafia groups outside Afghanistan and/or Iran as the main instigator of increased drug-trafficking (Bradford,2019), whereas the role of local factors, particularly policies, has been overlooked. Of course, the impact of drug mafias and international drug trades is inevitably an ongoing affair in the Middle East and South Asian countries like Iraq and Afghanistan—especially Afghanistan wherein signs of increased drug-trafficking can be tracked to the times when foreign forces resided in the country (Mercille,2012). However, the role of international drug trades lessens in significance to strict border-security measures and independent foreign policies in countries like Iran. As concluded from interview findings (Table1), the primary causes of drug-trafficking in the study region relate to The effects the dominant discourse of security on the social and economic context of the border areas and especially the border residents security policies over drug-trafficking in the undeveloped eastern border regions of Iran have contradictorily induced the diminishing of economic capacities and further poverty among border residents to the point

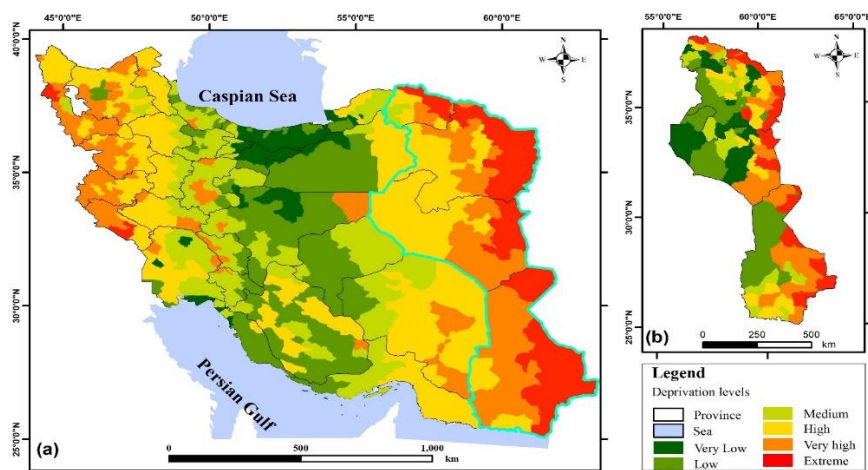
where the only option left to escape poverty and unemployment is to pursue the business of drug-trafficking.

### **5-1. Political Economy of Border Regions and Drug-Trafficking**

The most ideal way to manage and administer the border of this strategy is to make maximum use of border opportunities and facilities, which leads to the economic, social, and cultural development of society, especially border areas, and as a result, many threat factors are eliminated. According to this thinking, placing borders and border areas within a security fence and under strict military protection and control leads to the loss of opportunities and the destruction or non-use of potential facilities and capacities. As a result, the military and security environment prevailing in border areas brings a vicious cycle of underdevelopment, poverty, threats, and insecurity to the country, especially the border areas.

Economic growth in Iran is center-oriented in terms of geography, lacking environmental justice, and has reformed border regions into the most underdeveloped areas in the country. Conducted studies indicate a significant gap between border regions and other areas of the country in terms of level of general economic development (Shayan,2004; Khaniha,2014; Easaabadi and Shah Ghal'e,2013; Fetres and Fatemi Zardn,2020; Ebrahimzadeh et al.,2016; Yasoori,2005). Poverty and unemployment has further extended the growth of fake jobs (no value to society) and drug-trafficking. The level of underdevelopment in border areas is highest in the eastern regions of Iran, unlike the central and western parts which possesses suitable economic infrastructure and growth hubs creating a state of intense inequality (Ebrahimzadeh et al.,2016; Sheykh Bagloo et al.,2012; Miri and Torkamani,2018). This shows the significance of considering development-centered policies in the region. Experiences from other countries also indicate how employing development-oriented policies is a more fruitful policy in terms of drug-trafficking in border regions. The necessity of such policies is especially notified in countries where the social and cultural context differs between border regions and inland areas. In the case of Iran, the ethnic populations in these regions differ from inland populations in terms of race,

religion, and language and so require development-based initiatives and policies maintain a degree of national convergence (Sojasi Qeidari et al, 2016). Centralized development strategies in Iran have only ensued development in central regions of the country, and underdevelopment in border regions (Fig. 2 and Table 2). In fact, as economic and social indicators suggest, there is a significant difference between border regions and the remaining areas of the country (Majlis Research Center, 2017b). In addition to the contrast between border and central regions in Iran, the eastern and western fronts of the country also differ significantly, such that despite the high capacity and potential of the eastern regions, it still remains underdeveloped (Office of land use and regional planning, 2004); with eastern provinces such as Sistan and Balochistan and South Khorasan subdued by underdevelopment (Atlas of Deprived Areas of Iran, 2017). Development at the inter-regional level in eastern borders is also subject to the center-border (centralized-decentralized) pattern, with underdevelopment and deprivation increasing towards border regions (point zero). Fig. 2 illustrates development map of different regions calculated using data from Atlas of Deprived Areas of Iran (2017). As evident, underdevelopment indices, particularly unemployment and poverty, are increasing at eastern borders of the country (Haidari et al., 2011).



**Figure (2): Center-Border Development Map of Iran**  
(Source: Atlas of Deprived Areas of Iran, 2017)

It can be concluded that in the case of eastern borders of Iran, the span and impassible nature of the borderlines alongside territorial junctions with primary drug production hubs of the world, the transit capacity for drug-trafficking, the border insecurities resulting from terrorist activities, the underdevelopment of the region, and the governing security policies have engendered a complex and enmeshed network of drug-related factors which relate to one another in a reproductive fashion. Thus, to discover the interrelations of this enmeshed network and recognize the primary reasons and solution to this problem requires an in-depth qualitative analysis, which is pursued in this study.

**Table (2): Ranking of Provinces in Social, Economic and Infrastructure Indicators**

Row	Province	Score	Row	Province	Score
1	Tehran	17.48	17	Markazi	2.69
2	Isfahan	5.06	18	Hamadan	2.56
3	Khorasan, Razavi	4.38	19	Azerbaijan, West	2.34
4	Alborz	4.07	20	Kurdistan	2.21
5	Bushehr	4.03	21	Zanjan	2.12
6	Pars	4.01	22	Kermanshah	2.11
7	Kurdistan	3.81	23	Ardabil	2.2
8	Mazandaran	3.62	24	Lorestan	2.01
9	Azerbaijan, East	3.29	25	Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari	1.99
10	Yazd	3.29	26	Golestan	1.89
11	Qom	3.03	27	Khorasan, South	1.63
12	Kerman	2.98	28	Ilam	1.58
13	Gilan	2.91	29	Khorasan, North	1.54
14	Semnan	2.82	30	Sistan and Baluchestan	1.45
15	Qazvin	2.79	31	Kohgiluyeh and Boyer-Ahmad	1.42
16	Hormozgan	2.76			

(Source: Parsipour et al.,2022)

Poverty and unemployment are two key results of underdevelopment in eastern border regions, which entail further expansions in drug-trafficking. A direct relation can be observed between increases in poverty and unemployment and increased drug-trafficking in the study region, as also accredited by frontiersmen, that the lack of understanding on economic capacities of the region and the dominant military approach has ensued in a state of poverty which itself encourages border-residents toward drug-trafficking (Afzali & Karimi,2019). It is worth noting that certain populations were more involved in drug activities than others; for instance, the increasing number of Afghan nationals residing in border regions, who due to relations with the producers of drugs across borders, play a major role in drug trafficking (Soltani et al.,2015). The Baluch tribe, comprising the main population in the eastern border region, have majorly been witness to poverty and the lack of other profitable options required to make a living and so have sought out drug-trafficking to make ends meet. Although the main drug gangs in the region are essentially controlled by international drug trade mafia, the employed human sources for the actual trafficking of drugs are selected from local border residents who are thoroughly acquainted with the local routes. According to conducted interviews, young populations are recruited by drug mafias and later undergo training to become professional drug-traffickers. Findings from empirical inquiries in the study region apropos of the relations between development-based proceedings and stable security show that even small-scale development measures like establishing an economic company has proven successful in directly reducing drug-trafficking by means of supplying new job opportunities and promoting welfare ; or governmental proceedings for establishing border markets in certain regions in order to act positively in terms of promoting welfare and reducing drug-trafficking (Afzali and Karimi,2011; Ahmadipoor and Elyasi,2013). Nevertheless, such development-oriented policies have not yet been fully implemented.

### **5-2.Authoritarian Border Security and Increased Drug-Trafficking**

The foundation of Iran's strategy on the eastern borders is based on the threat posed by borders and border areas. According to this view, the threat level outweighs the opportunity level in relation to borders, and the conditions and situation are such that the potential and actual threats that threaten borders and border areas far outweigh the opportunities, or the situation and situation

are not suitable for taking advantage of border opportunities. Based on this thinking, the framework and structure of the country's border management and control is formed in the form of strict control through military and security methods. As a result, borders and border areas are under strict protection as military and security areas, and their management is often in the hands of military forces and security agencies.

Border security is investigated under criminal policy in Iran, where criminal measures are enforced by a security-driven administration to eradicate crime within society (Khoshbakht et al.,2020). Entrenched authoritarian security measures in border regions—which calls for military policies in confronting border crimes such as drug-trafficking—are defined in connection with governmental policies for other border affairs such as terrorism, foreign involvements, and militia group activities. As global experiences show, Border blockage pave the way for the emergence of illicit economies in border areas. In such economies, drug trafficking officially becomes part of the local work culture and can severely affect the social and cultural systems of these areas.

The findings suggest that Iran's confrontational policy in the eastern regions has been based on intimidation and border blockage (classic and modern); on the other hand, proceedings for development of eastern borders are limited, episodic, and unstable. Results have shown that Iran's security policies in the eastern borders are primarily affiliated with conflicts with terrorist groups, incapacities of neighboring governments in Afghanistan and Pakistan in matters of drug control, and finally hazy US policies on drug trafficking. The increasing security has made the border safe and powerful, but instead, it has led to poverty and unemployment and increased drug trafficking by denying the fields of development.

Evidence suggests that tightened security measures in eastern border regions has also been accompanied by increases in drug-trafficking, while other insecurities such as terrorism and foreign involvements have decreased (Ibrahimi Salami,2005). This difference in impact, as stated by border residents, can be interpreted in terms of distinctions in the nature of drug-trafficking and other insecurities such as terrorism. Iran's eastern borders are a major hub for tense terrorist activities, while on the other hand both

Afghanistan and Pakistan have been used in the last decades as a facilitator of terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda, Taliban, and ISIS. This elaborates on why Iran has increased security measures in its eastern borders, albeit the policies have failed to differentiate between terrorism and drug-trafficking, which require distinct policies (Izadi and Dabiri, 2013:96).

The connection between the security discourse in the eastern borders of the country and drug trafficking has been in several ways; first, through decreased economic capacities, which trigger poverty and unemployment, transforming drug-trafficking into a primary source of income for border-residents. Recently however, the government has performed sectional economic and commercial projects such as establishing border markets and commercial relations with neighboring countries, that was not helpful enough (Afzali and Karimi, 2011; Ahmadipour and Elyasi, 2013); Second, the border security discourse has increased the broader intervention of the government in that area. The grounds for political convergence with the Baloch tribe are rich and expansive, as they are Aryan ethnics and highly patriotic, with less divergent activities compared to other ethnic groups. This can be attained by substituting a development-based approach for the traditional security-oriented approach to drug control which can also activate economic capacities through a local government that can also provide stable border security; third, through longitudinal expansions in drug-trafficking in 1800 km long segments along the eastern border, and further into southern sea borders of the country. security policies, as also noted by Thoumi (2010), cease to eradicate drug-trafficking and only succeed in redirecting the flow. Despite important established safeguards in border regions, following the approach of “narrow-controlled border” and increasing military measures along main drug-trafficking routes has only further exacerbated the issue of drug control by ensuing relocations in trading routes from land to the Gulf of Oman.

### **5-3. Towards Resolving the Paradox: Coordinated Border Management (CBM)**

Increases in drug-trades in the eastern borders of Iran while other insecurities such as terrorism and foreign threats decrease is a clear sign of the different nature of drug-trafficking compared to other affairs. In Iran, the government’s successful attempts in addressing insecurities other than drug trafficking in

the eastern border regions has somewhat masked the negative impacts of security discourse centered on maintaining stable border security. This discourse has created border security, but it has not prevented drug trafficking, which has a different nature from other insecurities.

In a theoretical analysis, it can be said that borders and border areas have appropriate capacities for development and power generation for countries, but at the same time, these areas must remain protected from threats and damages that may endanger the material, territorial, and spiritual values of a country and nation from various aspects. Therefore, for the management of borders and border areas, it is ideal to not only include strategies and policies to deal with threats, but also include the context and conditions for the development of existing capacities and how to benefit from these advantages as part of the executive policy. Based on this strategy, the best management model for borders and border areas is hybrid management.

Local and sustainable security in the border areas of eastern Iran requires their land use planning and the implementation of Coordinated Border Management (CBM) as a suggested approach for border control. CBM is an approach that the World Trade Organization has proposed to negate border security approaches in developing countries. The organization had previously proposed other approaches, but in 2023, it replaced CBM with a more operational strategy for these countries. CBM is actually a management approach that can be used to activate the economic capacities of the border and border areas, taking into account the characteristics of the border areas of developing countries.

To this end, the first step to regressing from the challenges brought forth by the existing security-based approach in eastern borders is to define three different function layers for border areas:

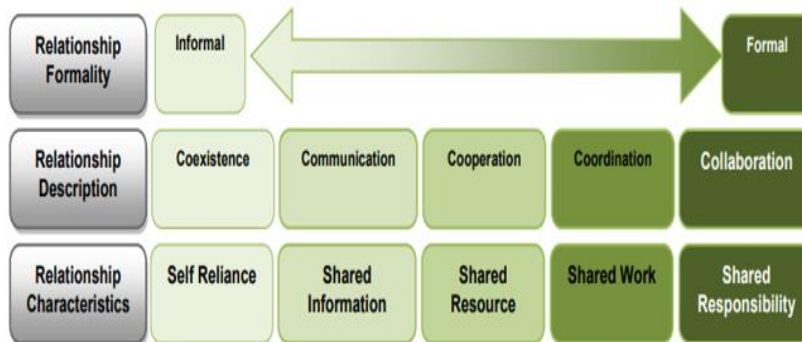
The security layer comprises areas starting from the border (point zero) and extending to the point of hitting the full security margin. As is the case for other countries (Silo,2017), the security layer is often managed by military forces. Under the rules of this layer, border-control is enforced as modern border blockage policies which incorporate intelligent and electronic facilities to overcome impediments on regional development in the other two economic layers.

The commercial layer deals with border affairs which can accrue various benefits for countries (Brühlhart et al.,2019). As for the eastern borders of Iran, this layer consists of major transit routes to South and Central Asia, free-trade zones and potential areas for small commercial trades such as markets. The Chabahar free trade zone is also a major advocator development in the northern-southern corridor, which allows access into Pakistan and south Afghanistan. The transit corridor then continues along to the provinces of Khorasan, which meet the northern borders of Afghanistan at Dowaqrun, and lead to central Asian countries from Sarakhs, Bajgiran, and Lotfabad, until finally reaching open waters through the Gulf of Oman and the Strait of Hormuz in the Persian Gulf—considered a major strategic location in the globe. Activating the commercial layer in this area can lead to economic prosperity in the eastern-western corridor all the way to the western and north-western exit points in the country.

The investment layer is considered the most important function layer inclusive of the entire border regions outside the security layer and deals with four categories of industry, agriculture, mines, and tourism. through specific rules of decentralization, the local economy in border regions can boom in all four categories through cooperation with government officials and institutions or private development agencies, creating major investment opportunities. Partakers involved in local economic developments can be selected from local groups of investors to form development companies and agencies with the support of official governmental institutions. In this sense, the high potential and capacities of the region in the four mentioned categories allows for rapid growth. In fact, the primary result of a strong investment layer, as revealed in other countries as well (The Federation of Canadian Municipalities,2014), is the elimination of non-official economies and false jobs such as drug-trafficking and the ingress of individuals into official economic boundaries. Development companies and agencies can gradually foster social convergence and eliminate crime culture by extending services to social settings such as education.

Step 2 involves the implementation of CBM as a managerial approach alongside four other approaches issued by World Customs Organization (Fig. 3). The comprehensiveness of CBM lies in its ability to account for

collaborations between border authorities, private units and agencies, and border structures in neighboring countries. The primary objective of CBM is to overcome the paradox of security-development using a definitive and organized structure and conclusive rules and regulations with both internal and external functions, that ultimately take different forms based on environmental and human factors in the border regions (World Customs Organization; Polner,2011). To put CBM into practice requires less centralized policies and more support for local economic development. As observed by Razin (2000), a local government can help modify patterns of spatial development and overcome inequalities in any type of administration. CBM can tacitly solve social and cultural challenges arising out of the formation of a local government and help surmount the paradox of security-development in eastern border regions of the country.



**Figure (3): Border Management Approaches Based on Institutional Ties**  
 (Source: World Customs Organization; Polner,2011,53)

Border management in the eastern borders of Iran is currently conducted through the approach of coexistence, wherein border control is solely centered on security objectives rather than development, without any convergence or coordination of official authorities. CBM creates a suitable platform for economic boom through creating organized structures and institutionalizing interorganizational relations in all three function layers; i.e., security, commercial, and investment. Currently, such proceedings in the eastern regions of Iran are endorsed by the UNODC as part of the “Alternative

Livelihoods and Sustainable Development” initiative (unodc.org, Islamic Republic of Iran).

The following includes the steps to implementing CBM:

- **Preparing Political, Economic, and Social Requisites of CBM:** concerning internal matters, thorough rendition of CBM demands the complete implementation of certain prerequisites, the most important of which include decentralization and support for local economic development (European commission,2016), high political volition of the government in implementing CBM, augmented political and social convergence with border residents, creation or completion of primary communication and economic infrastructures. CBM also accounts for larger dimensions (cross-border) in all three function layers, requiring regional convergence treaties and commercial and economic contracts with Afghanistan and Pakistan.
- **Organizational Structure of CBM:** consists of both public (governmental) and private sectors and institutions, distributed unevenly across different funtional layers in border regions. Other than military forces and customs as the most important governmental components in border control, organizations and ministries of economy, industry, communication, environment, agriculture, foreign affairs, transportation, and health also comprise the main governmental components of CBM, which act through operationalizing their private affiliates for investment. The private sector’s contribution to CBM primarily includes development agencies, which can become active in various areas of border-control (Mountford,2009). As for transnational issues, CBM requires an organizational structure that can establish institutional ties with neighboring countries. One of Iran's problems in this regard is how to communicate with the two countries of Afghanistan and Pakistan, which lack border management institutions and the ability to implement CBM on the other side of the border. Global experiences in this regard have shown that the country implementing CBM takes over its management in neighboring countries by concluding a specific contract. This experience has previously been carried out by the US government in St. Vincent and the Grenadines.

Here, the US has carried out institutional border control and management in this country based on a bilateral contract.

- **Assigning Institutions and Agencies in each Functional Layer:** allotting technical institution and agency sources plays a major role in advancing CBM objectives in all function layers (Polner,2011). Differences in objectives and functions of border-control institutions and units such as police force and customs under existing non-coordinated circumstances of the eastern borders of Iran has posed various institutional challenges and a security-development paradox, ultimately lending control to security policies. A coordinated allocation of institutions and agencies between layers of security, commerce, and investment on the other hand can help align the functional identity of each layer with CBM objectives and thereby decamping the security-development paradox. Development agencies in this regard can take a leading role in the commerce and investment layer to overcome poverty and unemployment and thereby establish a native and stable form of security against drug-trafficking, while military institutions can work in the security layer of CBM to maintain border security against terrorist activities. In fact, local institutions operating in the form of development agencies perform their functions in relation to each of the government agencies in charge in the three designated border layers. In the security layer, these agencies activate development capacities under the guidance of military institutions, and in the investment and trade layer, under the guidance of economic institutions.
- **Defining Inter-Relations Among Institutions and Agencies Based on Specified Legal Contract:** Agencies in CBM can link with one another among different layers by sharing information, responsibilities, rules, tasks, and objectives to improve coordination. Relations among institutions and agencies in each layer and with organizational units of other layers are defined based on specific legal CBM contracts, while relations with transnational institutions are established based on inter-government treaties. In the eastern borders of Iran, where a lack of coordination between the governments of Afghanistan and Pakistan over drug-control is a major challenge, endorsements for creating

organizational units—leastwise in the security layer—and defining tasks for each unit under the CBM framework can prove beneficial (Abbasi,2012).

- **Observing Global Standards of Border Control:** Procedures, managerial plans, and border regulations updated regularly throughout the world can also prove helpful in controlling borders in developing countries such as Iran. Border control IT is also progressing along with other advancements in the globe, however, few smart border-control applications used in the eastern borders of Iran are far from global standards. Using experiences in the US and Canada on smart border control can help alleviate the challenges of the security-development paradox (Salter and Mutlu,2011). Standardizing border control can help share activities, objectives, tools, methods, and local experiences on a global scale, which in turn endorses a linguistic space and discourse of a “secure and developed border”.

one of the features of the applied CBM approach is its multi-level nature in looking at the development of border areas. In this approach, the three scales of local, national and international are in mutual relation to create development. Local institutions in the form of development agencies in each of the three layers of security, investment and trade are the main economic actors in the development of border areas. The national scale is related to the institutional ownership of development in all three layers through the government and how it relates to local institutions. CBM on the international scale also creates connections between neighboring countries through local development institutions and diplomatic relations of governments.

## **6.Conclusion**

The PSD paradox in border regions is considered a global issue which in the case of developing countries, due to governmental priorities about security, has ensued various detrimental ramifications for border-residents and brought on the underdevelopment of these regions. The present study is an empirical inquiry into the eastern border territories of Iran which given their specific geographical location are considered one of the primary transit routes for drug trades. The following elaborates on the study results security policies

undertaken in developing countries for controlling international drug trafficking have not been fruitful. Circumstances are more severe in strategic regions such as the Middle East, where countries are constantly faced with a network of entangled issues other than drug trafficking in border regions. Iran, as one of the most important countries involved in international drug-trades, has taken a security discourse on drug control in the eastern borders aimed at combating the entangle network of political-security issues, particularly terrorism, but it has not been successful in controlling drug trafficking. The enactment of security policies in the once economically affluent eastern borders of the country has prevented the flourishing of their economic capacities, so that economic problems, especially poverty and unemployment, have been caused by them, which in turn has incentivized border-residents to become drug-traffickers.

The reason for continuation of the security-military policy of the government in border regions has been to deal with terrorism and opposing activities. Security functions applied at the border have overcast drug-trafficking under a thick layer. Other issues such as the fight against terrorism, without thoughts for a separate strategy. And thus the border has remained powerful but the frontiersmen has resorted to drug trafficking to escape from poverty.

Reducing and eliminating drug-trafficking in the eastern borders of Iran requires a perspective which views the issue as independent alongside development-based strategies instead of the existing security policies. Under the proposed CBM in this study, border regions are divided into three function layers, each of which can be enhanced in terms of development capacities in order to eradicate the main cause of drug trafficking; indigence. The proposed solution can be implemented as a means for solving the PSD paradox in other developing countries as well. Future works are encouraged to work on land use planning and functional layering of eastern border regions of Iran in a way to provide suitable academic basis for CBM policy making.

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