

## **Drugs to Suit All Tastes in Tunisia**

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Homegrown marijuana on the illicit market alongside narcotics imported by trafficking networks.

Four years ago, M, a woman in her mid-twenties, agreed to marry a young street vendor in a Tunis market. What she did not know was that he was addicted to cannabis resin, known here as “zatla”.

She only found out when her fiancé was arrested and sentenced to a year’s imprisonment. At the time, she thought the treatment provided in prison would cure him. But instead, he spent his time getting to know inmates who were large-scale dealers, so when he got out he started selling drugs himself.

When she heard her fiancé had been jailed again – this time for seven years on a smuggling conviction – M tried to kill herself and was admitted to the capital’s Charles Nicolle hospital.

Her sister-in-law said that M drank pesticide. “The family was able to hide the news from her for a month, but they weren’t able to hide it any longer,” the sister-in-law said.

Although Tunisia was an early signatory to the The United Nations Convention Against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances, a quarter of a century later, few statistics are available on the number of users, the number undergoing treatment or imprisoned on drug charges, or the amounts of drugs seized and destroyed. Limited data can be gleaned from news reports and comments by experts.

One survey by the Tunisian Institute of Health showed that ten per cent of a sample group of 2,453 young people aged between 15 and 24 had used narcotics, 3.5 per cent had injected, and 3.3 per cent were habitual users.

Hichem Ayari, a neurology specialist at a Tunis teaching hospital, said the health consequences were always serious.

“Drugs adversely affect any part of the body they pass through. Inhaled or smoked, they affect the respiratory system severely, while drugs taken by injection affect the veins and the heart. And they all have very negative effects on the brain,” he said.

Ramzi, a pharmacist, says most of the customers who buy barbiturates have a medical prescriptions. He noted that the Tunisian health ministry of health had prohibited sales without prescriptions, but he acknowledged that drug users tried to obtain them by other means.

### **MULTIPLE TRAFFICKING ROUTES**

Hedi, an officer in the Tunisian police’s drug squad, explained how the country’s drug problems stemmed from its location on overland and sea routes used by traffickers.

“Drugs come from Morocco through Tunisia’s western border with Algeria, and also from several African countries via our southern border with Libya,” he said. “In recent years, our maritime borders have also seen smuggling by the European mafia bringing in large quantities of cocaine and heroin... Consignments are delivered directly under cover of darkness, or dumped in the sea to be picked up and distributed by their Tunisian partners”.

The drug squad officer said it was hard to assess the full extent of the trade.

“One of our teams seized 500 kilograms in a car during a regular inspection,” he said. “The police seize small quantities of drugs almost every day and that, of course, can’t be quantified.

“Sales and consumption of zatla are widespread both in crowded, populated neighbourhoods and into rural areas because there’s demand for it. Heroin is less prevalent, and then comes cocaine which is rare and expensive.”

Hedi continued with a gruesome tale – “A dealer who was arrested admitted to the investigating judge that he stole the bones of a dead person from a grave to crush them and mix in with cocaine, together with other substances. Hence one kilogram of pure cocaine becomes 7.5 kilograms with the additives, and they multiply both quantity and profits.”

Bouraoui, a retired sergeant from the investigations department of the customs service in the northwestern region of Jendouba, said that at the beginning of 2013, the security forces seized a tractor carrying the equivalent of 11,000 dollars’ worth of barbiturates and other pharmaceuticals.

Bourauoui said one of his sources had told him that “networks trafficking in these types of drugs have begun spreading dramatically in recent years because of the demand”.

## **DEALERS PLEAD INNOCENCE**

It's clear from looking at Rabiaa, a wild-eyed man of 40, that he has lived through some hard times. He is on the run, having escaped from prison during the January 2011 uprising, where he was serving a drugs-related sentence. He is now wanted on five other charges and says the police are after him.

Thin and shaking, Rabiaa says he found out about drugs at an early age, after his family moved from a village in the northwest of Tunisia to settle near the capital in the 1970s.

“The neighbourhood became crowded with an influx of people from different regions of the country, and all sorts of crime began spreading,” he said. “I dropped out of school. I discovered the world of drugs easily; I met several people who led me into it.

“I was working hard during the day, selling vegetables on a cart in the city's alleyways, and in the evenings I would use my earnings to buy zatla so as to forget reality. I was chased by police several times until I got arrested and sentenced to a year in prison and a 1,000 dinar fine. ”

Rabiaa's troubles continued. “After I left prison, I started consuming heavily,” he said. “I would buy large quantities all at once in order to avoid coming back to the dealers. One day, when there was a shortage, I sold an amount I was keeping for myself for five times its normal price. That whetted my appetite and I decided to shift from consuming to dealing and I got rid of my vegetable cart.”

Dealing drugs was very different from taking them. Rabiaa needed to find a wholesale supplier who trusted him enough to be sure he would never report him to the police, as well as devising a distribution system.

He says he made big money in a short time, which enabled him to get married. Despite his wife's entreaties, he continued dealing after she had a child. This eventually led to the breakdown of his marriage and separation from his son.

“Absolute discretion and high quality have improved my reputation in the marketplace, especially because my product contains oil, increasing its price and attracting more customers,” he said. “Most of my clients are teenagers. There are also some whose families have broken down, and women who buy through intermediaries. I use school children as distributors and I pay them ten dinars [six US dollars] for every five deliveries.”

Rabiaa agreed to be interviewed on condition that he could explain that “the addict is not a criminal – he does harm anyone and is ultimately a victim, not a perpetrator”. He said zatla should not be banned at all since some European countries had decriminalised marijuana use.

“There are real gangs in this country. Why do [the police] leave them alone and pursue us instead? Many families are making a living from this trade,” he said. “A person cannot commit a crime under the influence of these drugs – alcohol and pills are more dangerous. There are pious old men trafficking drugs, which means that even from a religious perspective, dealing is not forbidden”.

## **WIDE RANGE OF DRUGS ON SALE**

Although cannabis is cheap compared with heroin or cocaine, some people cannot afford it and turn instead to barbiturates and other commercially-produced pharmaceuticals.

Radhwane, a young vendor of jasmine flowers, explained that pills were not only cheaper than zatla, the effects lasted longer and the sentence for possession was more lenient. These days, he added, zatla was adulterated with other substances.

“Zatla costs is five dinars for a piece you'll use up in two spliffs, with effects lasting for seven hours, “But a box of Artane tablets [anti-anxiety drug] for example, is priced at 3.8 dinars from the pharmacy. There are 50 tablets in a box, each with effects lasting more than eight hours, which means a box is enough to last the buyer a whole month. And if you wanted to sell them on, a single tablet would cost 1.5 dinars, so that the whole box would be worth 75 dinars – a massive profit in a very short time.”

Radhwane said drugs were available to suit all price brackets – “cocaine for the wealth at between 250 and 300 dinars a gram, and ketamine tablets that help you sleep at around eight dinars a pack from pharmacies or much more on the black market”.

Ecstasy sold at 50 dinars per individual tablet on the black market. “Some people grind it up and heat it in a teaspoon above a candle fire to turn it into a paste which solidifies on cooling. They grind it up again and sniff it to produce almost total anaesthesia... the addict enters a semi-comatose state and can no longer

control his actions.

“Poor people usually use cheap Parkizol and Artane pills blended together or placed under the tongue to dissolve them quickly. The user quickly loses all grip on reality and acquires a sudden burst of energy, which explains why drug users sometimes become violent. There is a second method used by some poor people who resort to Subutex [an opiate tablet]. They take tablets which they crush and sniff, which initially causes nosebleeds until you get used to it. They sometimes progress to injecting, first into veins in the arms until the frequent injections mean these disappear. Then the addict shoots up via the cervical vein [in the neck] or under the tongue. That’s the most dangerous stage of addiction.”

Although Radhwane refused to reveal own way of taking drugs, he rubbed his nose constantly and there were track marks visible on his arms.

**Samir Nefzi Ahlem Tamraoui produced this story after attending an IWPR training workshop in Tunis in September 2013.**

**Location:** [Tunisia](#)

**Topic:** [Health](#)

**Focus:** [Tunisia](#)

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