

Strategic Agility in Drug Control: Toward a Renewed Governance Model for Addressing Evolving Threats

الرشاقة الإستراتيجية في مكافحة المخدرات: نحو نموذج حوكمة مُتجدِّدة لمواجهة تهديدات مُتحوِّلة

Key Findings

- Shifting from traditional planning to strategic agility, so that drug control plans do not remain rigid for many years, but become continuously updatable in line with emerging changes and threats. This shift is based on early monitoring, rapid decision-making, resource reallocation, and innovation in control and prevention tools.
- Strengthening governance and institutional coordination among security, health, education, legislative, and judicial entities through clear mechanisms for information exchange, implementation follow-up, impact measurement, and course correction within a unified national system.
- Launching a joint Arab response to confront synthetic drugs, including the development of a specialized Arab strategy, the establishment of an Arab early-warning platform, and the implementation of targeted programs to build the capacities of leaders and policymakers.



Regional Policy Direction

The paper proposes an integrated Arab response: a specialized strategy for synthetic drugs, an Arab early-warning platform (Arab-EWS), and a regional programme to build strategic planning competencies among policymakers.

Abstract

The drug issue has become an existential challenge for Arab countries amid rapid transformations in patterns of production, trafficking, and consumption, particularly with the spread of synthetic drugs and new psychoactive substances (NPS), of which 50–80 new substances are detected annually. Despite the efforts undertaken, traditional national strategies continue to suffer from rigidity and a lack of adaptability, leaving them unable to keep pace with this accelerating evolution. This paper aims to provide an advanced analytical framework for effective strategic planning in the field of drug control, drawing on the “Strategic Agility” model, which represents a qualitative leap in planning tools. The paper adopts a qualitative methodology based on descriptive and prescriptive analysis, employing desk research and the analysis of relevant international documents and reports, while also drawing on best practices contained in the Gulf Strategy (2024), the Arab Strategy (2023), and the International Synthetic Drug Strategy (UNODC, 2021).

The paper concludes that adopting the strategic agility model is an imperative for confronting a world characterized by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA), through the model's six core elements. The paper presents a set of practical recommendations, most notably: conducting a comprehensive evaluative study of existing Arab strategies; formulating a specialized Arab strategy for synthetic drugs; developing institutional frameworks; and establishing regional programmes to build the capacities of policymakers.

المستخلص

أصبحت قضية المخدرات تُمثّل تحديًا وجوديًا للدول العربية في ظل التحوّلات المتسارعة في أنماط الإنتاج والاتجار والتعاطي، وبخاصّةٍ مع انتشار المخدرات الاصطناعية والمؤثرات العقلية الجديدة (NPS) التي تُرصد بمعدل 50 - 80 مادة جديدة سنويًا. وعلى الرغم من الجهود المبذولة، لا تزال الإستراتيجيات الوطنية التقليدية تعاني الجمود وعدم القدرة على التكيف، ممّا يجعلها عاجزة عن مواكبة هذا التطور المتسارع. وتهدف هذه الورقة إلى تقديم إطار تحليلي متقدّم للتخطيط الإستراتيجي الفعّال في مجال مكافحة المخدرات، بالاستناد إلى نموذج «الرشاقة الإستراتيجية» الذي يُمثّل نقلة نوعية في أدوات التخطيط. واعتمدت الورقة منهجية نوعية قائمة على التحليل الوصفي والتوجيهي، من خلال توظيف أسلوب البحث المكتبي وتحليل الوثائق والتقارير الدولية، فضلًا عن الاستلهام من أفضل الممارسات الواردة في الإستراتيجية الخليجية (2024)، والإستراتيجية العربية (2023)، والإستراتيجية الدولية لمكافحة المخدرات الاصطناعية.

وتخلص الورقة إلى أنّ تبني نموذج الرشاقة الإستراتيجية يُشكّل ضرورة حتمية لمواجهة عالم يتسم بالتقلّب وعدم اليقين والتعقيد والغموض (VUCA)، وذلك من خلال عناصره الستة الأساسية. وتقدّم الورقة مجموعة من التوصيات العملية، أبرزها: إجراء دراسة تقييمية شاملة للإستراتيجيات العربية القائمة، وبلورة إستراتيجية عربية مُخصّصة للمخدرات الاصطناعية، وتطوير الأطر المؤسسية، وإنشاء برامج إقليمية لبناء قدرات صانعي السياسات.



Introduction

The drug issue stands among the most complex and interconnected societal challenges of the present era, intersecting security, health, economic, social, cultural, and legislative dimensions in an entanglement that defies single-track or sector-specific approaches. The significance of this proposition is underscored by the findings of the World Drug Report issued by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) for 2025, which reported a 20% increase in the number of drug users worldwide over the past decade, bringing the total to approximately 316 million people. The report also indicated that the number of people suffering from drug use disorders has risen to 64 million, alongside a stark treatment gap reflected in the fact that only one in every seventeen patients receives treatment services (UNODC, 2025).

In this context, strategic planning assumes an existential dimension in addressing this complex phenomenon. Strategic planning is defined as “a deliberate, sustained effort aimed at translating organizational visions into clear implementation pathways, through long-term objectives that take account of internal and external variables and allocate resources efficiently and equitably” (Bryson, 2018). Its importance lies in being the instrument that moves organizations from a state of momentary reaction to events towards anticipation and systematic planning (David & David, 2017). Yet traditional models of strategic planning, despite their theoretical value, have proven inadequate in contexts of rapid change, above all in the drug issue.

Accordingly, this paper aims to provide an advanced analytical framework for effective strategic planning in the field of drug control, drawing on the “Strategic Agility” model, which represents a qualitative leap in planning tools. The paper adopts a qualitative methodology based on descriptive and prescriptive analysis, employing desk research and the analysis of relevant international documents and reports, while also drawing on best practices contained in the Gulf Strategy for Combating Drugs (Gulf Cooperation Council, 2024), the Arab Strategy for Combating Drugs (League of Arab States, 2023), and the International Synthetic Drug Strategy (UNODC, 2021b).

Shortcomings of Traditional Models and the Rationale for the Shift to Strategic Agility

Policy Planning Risk

A fixed strategy can be overtaken by new synthetic substances, encrypted markets, and shifting trafficking routes before it reaches mid-cycle.

In a world surging with successive challenges and changes in business environments, and indeed across all developmental and humanitarian domains, the term “VUCA world” has emerged, an acronym for Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity. International studies and reports reveal that traditional models of strategic planning are no longer viable in this type of environment, especially in the drug issue, which exhibits all of these characteristics (UNODC, 2024b; Bryson, 2018).

Volatility manifests in the rapid shifts in drug prices and smuggling routes; uncertainty lies in the impossibility of predicting which new substance will emerge six months from now; complexity stems from the multiplicity of actors involved (criminal gangs, terrorist organizations, technology companies, and financial institutions); and ambiguity arises from the difficulty of tracing the flow of money and information across the digital space.

Weaknesses of Traditional Models

Traditional models suffer from several structural weaknesses, well documented in the literature and in United Nations reports:

Rigidity and Inability to Adapt

Traditional strategic plans remain static, extending over five to ten years without flexible mechanisms for adjustment, which leaves them unable to accommodate substances that appear suddenly — such as Nitazenes — or abrupt crises such as the fentanyl crisis. In 2023 alone, 112 new psychoactive substances (NPS) were detected that had not been included in any strategic plan drawn up two years earlier (UNODC, 2024b).

Detachment From Reality

Environmental analysis is usually conducted only once, at the outset of the plan, leading to the neglect of fundamental variables that may emerge just months after implementation begins. The COVID-19 pandemic, for example, completely transformed traditional smuggling routes, and new patterns emerged relying on

express mail and e-commerce, while most plans drawn up before 2020 contained no scenarios for dealing with anything resembling such a pandemic.

Focus on Internal Procedures Rather Than Outcomes

Traditional models perpetuate programmes that deliver no tangible results merely because they are “listed in the plan”; the objective becomes implementing activities exactly as written, regardless of their effectiveness.

Absence of Institutional Learning Mechanisms

Strategic analysis indicates that the absence of independent evaluation systems and the loss of institutional memory deprive organizations of the capacity to draw lessons from past failures. The management literature indicates that more than 70% of organizational change initiatives fail because of an inability to learn from previous experience, which subsequently leads to the repetition of the same flawed performance patterns in successive strategic plans. To avoid this, the adoption of systematic mechanisms for documenting lessons learned and ensuring continuous feedback is recommended (Bryson, 2018).

Bureaucratic Slowness

Every amendment requires multiple approvals across successive layers of officialdom, squandering valuable opportunities for early intervention. While the life cycle of a new smuggling method is



measured in hours and days, a traditional plan needs months to amend a single provision.

The Inherently Mutable Nature of the Drug Issue and Demanding Rapid Responses

The drug issue possesses characteristics that render traditional models unworkable. With the continuous emergence of new substances, between fifty and eighty previously unknown new psychoactive substances (NPS) are detected every year (UNODC, 2024b). There is, moreover, rapid adaptation by the criminal groups and organizations engaged in drug manufacturing, smuggling, and trafficking: when a platform on the dark web is shut down, alternative platforms quickly appear within weeks. Likewise, the technological revolution the world is witnessing today means that new encrypted applications emerge overnight, requiring continuous updating of investigation and surveillance methods. Smuggling patterns may also shift in response to global events: the COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, redrew traditional smuggling routes, and geopolitical transformations can upend the entire set of assumptions underlying response plans.

Theoretical Foundations of Strategic Agility

The idea of strategic agility does not arise in a vacuum; it rests on well-established scientific theories. Complexity Theory

(Prigogine & Stengers, 1984) affirms that complex systems cannot be controlled through simple linear plans. Adaptive Systems theory (Holland, 1995) holds that successful systems are those that adapt rapidly to their changing environments. Scenario Planning theory (Schwartz, 1991) offers an alternative to forecasting a single future: preparing for multiple scenarios.

The Core Elements of Strategic Agility as an Alternative Model

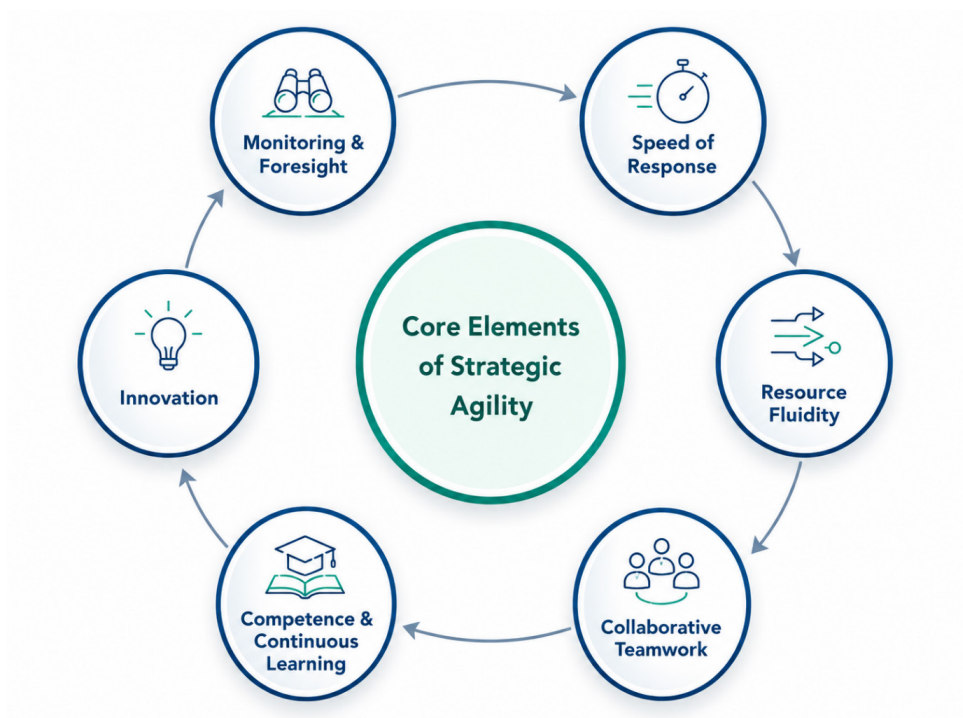
The management literature offers an integrated model of strategic agility comprising six principal elements developed and adapted here to the context of drug control (Othman, 2023).

1. Monitoring and Foresight: the continuous tracking of internal and external environments through early warning systems, and the analysis of emerging trends before they escalate. The UNODC global SMART programme has proven its value in this field, having detected 1,124 new substances from 134 countries by December 2021 (UNODC, 2022).

2. Speed of Response: the capacity to take swift and effective action as soon as a new threat is detected. Estonia offers a model worth emulating: it succeeded in scheduling new substances within fewer than 90 days, thanks to an early warning system and a fast-track legislative amendment procedure (EMCDDA, 2024; Prisco & Pricop, 2024).

3. Resource Fluidity: the capacity to rapidly redeploy financial and human resources

Figure 1
Core Elements of Strategic Agility as a Model for Effective Strategic Planning



from lower-priority activities to the most urgent ones, supported by a contingency fund of no less than 15% – 20% of the total budget.

4. Collaborative Teamwork: the engagement of all stakeholders — law enforcement agencies; ministries of health, education, and social affairs; the private sector; civil society; and people in recovery — in planning, implementation, and evaluation. This aligns with the “Whole of Society Approach”.

5. Competence and Continuous Learning: the ongoing development of staff capabilities, the fostering of a culture of learning from

mistakes, and the extraction of lessons from failures and successes alike.

6. Innovation: the encouragement of new ideas and unconventional methods, such as deploying artificial intelligence for data analysis, using virtual reality in prevention programmes, and developing mobile applications to support people in recovery.

Structural Framework of Effective Strategies: Five Dimension

For any national drug control strategy to be effective and comprehensive, it must rest on five principal dimensions covering all aspects of the response. This structural



framework is derived from best practice, including the Gulf Strategy (2024) and the Arab Strategy (2023).

Dimension 1: Enforcement

Focuses on combating the supply side and drying up its sources. It encompasses the eradication of drug cultivation, counter-smuggling efforts, the prosecution of traffickers, the control of chemical precursors, anti-money-laundering measures, the strengthening of international cooperation, and the design of alternative development projects.

Dimension 2: Legislative Framework

Ensures the existence of a supportive legal framework. It encompasses developing legislation in line with international conventions, supporting judicial cooperation, reviewing legislation on therapeutic measures as alternatives to punishment, and enacting laws that empower national committees to monitor implementation.

Dimension 3: Demand Reduction

Encompasses primary prevention (for the general population), secondary prevention (for the most at-risk groups), and tertiary prevention (treatment, rehabilitation, and the community reintegration of people in recovery), in addition to harm reduction services delivered according to defined standards.

Dimension 4: Research and Information

Encompasses conducting periodic

epidemiological research, developing unified databases and national drug observatories, encouraging researchers to produce academic theses, and conducting evaluative research to measure programme effectiveness.

Dimension 5: Capacity Building

Encompasses developing scientific manuals for the various cadres, designing professional diploma and master's programmes, delivering specialized training programmes, and developing interactive platforms for distance education and training (LMS).

Best Practices and Applied Models from International Strategies

Operation Azure: Operation Azure ranks among the most prominent successful international operations against synthetic opioids. It was conducted by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) in cooperation with the AIRCOP programme, with the participation of eight countries, covering Latin America, the Caribbean, and West Africa. The operation — whose first phase was launched in 2021 and second phase in 2023 — aims to enable criminal justice practitioners to detect and investigate synthetic opioids. It resulted in 125 seizure operations, the confiscation of more than 480 kilograms of drugs, and the arrest of 18 suspects (CARICOM IMPACS, 2025).

The regional REFLEX operations: The REFLEX operations represent a model of recurring regional cooperation against new psychoactive substances (NPS). They were conducted by the Central Asian Regional

Information and Coordination Centre (CARICC) in cooperation with the UNODC regional programme between 2017 and 2022, with the participation of numerous countries, including Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Russia. They aim to counter the spread of new psychoactive substances and synthetic drugs, and are frequently cited as a benchmark for effective regional cooperation in counter-narcotics patrols (CARICC, 2022).

The global SMART programme: The SMART programme (Synthetics Monitoring: Analyses, Reporting and Trends) represents a global model for early warning and laboratory capacity building. Launched by UNODC in 2008, it operates the Early Warning Advisory (EWA) and builds the capacities of national laboratories. The programme has demonstrated its effectiveness by detecting 1,124 new psychoactive substances (NPS) from 134 countries and territories worldwide as of December 2021 (UNODC, 2022), and has contributed to strengthening information analysis in the laboratories of many Central American countries (UNODC, 2022).

The Southeast Asia model (the Golden Triangle): The Southeast Asia model (Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, China, and Vietnam) offers lessons learned in confronting the mass production of synthetic drugs under difficult governance conditions. The data indicate an increase in methamphetamine seizures from under 10,000 kilograms in 2011 to more than 140,000 kilograms in 2020 — a fourteen-fold rise. It is also observed that falling prices may not necessarily signal the success of control efforts so much as a massive increase in supply (Abuza, 2021).

Recommendations and Proposed Policies

Building on the foregoing analysis, the paper presents a set of recommendations addressed to Arab governments, ordered with due regard to priority and feasibility:

Recommendation 1: Establish an Arab Early Warning Platform for New Drugs (Arab-EWS)

It is proposed to establish an Arab digital platform linked to the UNODC EWA database (the Early Warning Advisory on new psychoactive substances), enabling member states to exchange information on new substances as soon as they are detected. Implementation mechanisms include: training Arab forensic laboratories, adopting a unified protocol for reporting within 48 hours, and forming an Arab expert committee to analyse the information.

Responsible entity: *The Arab Interior Ministers Council, in cooperation with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime.*

Proposed timeframe: *6–9 months.*

Recommendation 2: Formulate a Specialized Arab Strategy for Confronting Synthetic Drugs

Drawing on the experience of the global Operation Azure, it is proposed to adopt a unified Arab strategy for synthetic drugs comprising four components: early warning; flexible legislation enabling rapid scheduling; advanced laboratory capacities; and specialized training for public prosecutors and judges.



Responsible entity: *The Arab Interior Ministers Council.*

Proposed timeframe: *12 months.*

Recommendation 3: Review and Evaluate Existing Arab Strategies

Conduct a comprehensive evaluative study of the extent to which Arab national strategies align with the elements of effective strategic planning, and with the strategic agility model in particular. A periodic Arab report (every four years) on a “Strategic Planning Quality Index” should be issued, including a ranking of states.

Responsible entity: *The Regional Expertise Centre for Combating Drugs and Crime (Naif Arab University for Security Sciences).*

Proposed timeframe: *18 months.*

Recommendation 4: Arab Programmes for Building Strategic Planning Competencies

Design an annual Arab training programme for policymakers (ARAB-STRAT) covering: environmental analysis; the formulation of strategic objectives (SMART); the selection of key performance indicators (KPIs); strategic agility techniques; and scenario analysis. The programme would be delivered in two formats: in person (two weeks) and online (six weeks).

Responsible entity: *Naif Arab University for Security Sciences.*

Proposed timeframe: *Launch within one year, continuing annually.*

Recommendation 5: Strengthen Multi-Sector Partnerships

Engage the private sector and civil society in the planning, implementation, and evaluation stages. This includes: signing cooperation agreements between law enforcement agencies and treatment service providers; obliging telecommunications and social media companies to support digital prevention; and establishing national coalitions to fund business incubators for people in recovery.

Responsible entity: *The competent national agencies, in coordination with chambers of commerce and bodies responsible for corporate social responsibility.*

Proposed timeframe: *6–12 months.*

Recommendation 6: Adopt a Recurring Joint Arab Operation Against Synthetic Drugs

Following the model of Operation Azure, it is proposed to design and conduct a joint Arab operation (to be named, for example, “Operation Badr”) with the participation of the Arab states, in cooperation with UNODC and INTERPOL, for the real-time exchange of intelligence, the coordination of joint seizure operations, and the development of financial analysis capacities.

Responsible entity: *The General Secretariat of the Arab Interior Ministers Council.*

Proposed timeframe: *12 months.*

Conclusion

This paper has concluded that traditional models of strategic planning are no longer fit to confront the accelerating challenges of the drug issue, particularly in a VUCA world. International evidence has demonstrated that adopting the “Strategic Agility” model is not an intellectual luxury but an existential necessity for preserving the effectiveness of control efforts. This model requires a radical transformation in planning culture: from rigidity to flexibility, from a focus on procedures to a focus on outcomes, and from working in isolation to working collaboratively.

The Arab states possess substantial financial, technological, and human resources that would allow them to apply this

advanced model — above all the Gulf states, which rank highly on technological readiness indices (World Economic Forum, 2024). The drug file, moreover, commands high-level political attention at the very highest levels in the Arab states, which facilitates the passage of major institutional transformations. Most importantly, the Arab states can learn from the mistakes of Western countries (as in the Canadian experience) and move directly to best practices without passing through prolonged experimental phases.

The paper hopes that the recommendations presented will serve as a practical roadmap for Arab decision-makers, and that they will stand as an open invitation to an Arab strategic dialogue on the future of drug control policies in the region.

Implementation Roadmap

Table 1
Implementation Roadmap for the Proposed Drug-Control Initiatives

Priority Initiative	Timeframe	Lead Actors	Strategic Value
Arab-EWS platform	6-9 months	Arab Interior Ministers Council + UNODC	Early warning and 48-hour reporting protocol
Specialized Arab strategy for synthetic drugs	12 months	Arab Interior Ministers Council	Early warning, rapid scheduling, laboratories, justice training
Review and evaluate existing strategies	18 months	Regional Expertise Centre / NAUSS	Arab Strategic Planning Quality Index
ARAB-STRAT capacity programme	Annual	NAUSS	Training on agility, scenarios, SMART objectives and KPIs
Multi-sector partnerships	6-12 months	National agencies + private sector	Digital prevention, treatment linkages, recovery incubators
Recurring joint Arab operation	12 months	AIMC Secretariat + UNODC + INTERPOL	Real-time intelligence and coordinated seizures



Executive message

The future of drug control will depend on the ability to detect early, decide quickly, coordinate institutionally, and act regionally against synthetic-drug threats.

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المركز الإقليمي للخبرة في مكافحة المخدرات والجريمة

جامعة نايف العربية للعلوم الأمنية

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