

Drug Trafficking in the Middle East and North Africa

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The Middle East has served as a crossroads for global illicit trade and criminal syndicates, as well as a hub of local production, providing a channel through which these activities can evolve and thrive. Illicit narcotics trades in particular have embedded themselves into the region's criminal landscape, exploiting the growing local demand for drugs. While illicit economies have been a fixed feature of porous border communities for centuries, illicit narcotics trade has steadily risen in the region. A combination of factors, such as the overspill of violence, widespread corruption amongst customs and law enforcement, encroaching influence of malign militant non-state actors and lack of public health services across the region, have contributed to the steady increase in illicit narcotics proliferation in the Middle East, from North Africa to the Levant and on to the Gulf. However, it is both supply and demand for synthetic drugs that have begun to steadily increase throughout the region, posing severe challenges to local rule of law, governance, public health and human security in general.

Amphetamine Trafficking

The amphetamine-type stimulant commonly branded as "captagon" has become the most popular illicit substance in the Middle East in the last seven years. While the drug has been a feature of the region's illicit landscape since the early 2000s, it was only in the late 2010s and early 2020s that law enforcement and customs systems began interdicting the drug in industrial-scale amounts.

The rapid increase in seized captagon consignments indicates not only improved production capacity amongst manufacturers, but an increasing sophistication and expansion of smuggling routes, as well as a surge in demand – primarily in Arab Gulf states like Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. There are several factors that have contributed to the expansion of captagon as a major criminal industry in the Middle East: the sponsorship of regime-aligned actors in Syria, feasibility of captagon's synthetic production process and captagon's spectrum of user profiles. Seeking alternative revenue streams amidst a civil war, Western sanctions and a plummeting Syrian economy and currency, key commercial, security and agricultural actors closely aligned with the Assad regime turned to industrial-scale manufacturing and trafficking of captagon in Syria. Captagon's cheap and feasible production process – requiring little scientific knowledge and few materials – enabled producers to manufacture the pill at industrial levels, dispatching consignments of captagon that flooded transit countries and destination markets in the Gulf. As manufacturers and traffickers aligned with state security forces, such as the Fourth Armoured Division – led by Bashar al-Assad's brother, Maher – they were able to glean greater access to border checkpoints, regime partner forces such as Hezbollah and Iran-aligned militias, formal and informal maritime ports, commercial shipping vessels and transnational criminal syndicates to facilitate the movement and interdiction resiliency of captagon consignments (Rose & Soderholm, 2022). An increased supply of captagon was encouraged by a growing demand for the drug amongst a spectrum of consumers in the Gulf and Levant. Captagon's amphetamine-type qualities bolster productivity, stave hunger and produce feelings of euphoria and invincibility – qualities

sought out by a diverse array of users. The drug's mass appeal amongst students, foreign workers, wealthy club-goers and food and income-insecure populations heavily contributed to the drug's proliferation across the Middle East.

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Captagon trafficking stems from production sites primarily located in regime-held territories in Syria and the Qalamoun Mountain range in Lebanon and extend through overland trafficking routes in neighbouring Jordan, Turkey and Iraq, as well as maritime routes through the Mediterranean and Red Seas. Traffickers have notably taken advantage of transshipment ports in the southern Mediterranean, such as Romania's Port of Constanta and Italy's Port of Salerno, as well as inland storage facilities in Europe, to outsmart law enforcement systems and reroute shipments back to Gulf destination markets. Notably, there has been an uptick in violent clashes related to captagon smuggling along the Syrian border, as trafficking networks have deployed armed smugglers to engage against Jordanian Armed Forces during trafficking operations – a dynamic that has sparked increased readiness amongst Jordanian security forces, investment in the border surveillance system and even strikes against known smuggling networks inside Syrian territory.

Methamphetamines on the Rise

In the last year alone, several Middle Eastern customs and border security systems have intercepted a notable spike in crystal methamphetamine consignments, commonly referred to as “shabo” or “shisheh” amongst dealers and users, signalling a new challenge for law enforcement and public health. Armed forces in countries like Jordan have shot down sev-

eral drones dispatched from southern Syria carrying impressive quantities of crystal meth, while airport customs systems in countries like Turkey have intercepted the most methamphetamine consignments in recent history. The steady increase in seizure rates have served as a narrow window into the increasing demand for methamphetamines in the region, as well as revealing the diversified smuggling methods traffickers are employing to distribute the drug.

Not only are seizure rates steadily on the rise in the Middle East, but the chemical composition is changing. The majority of methamphetamines in circulation in the region have originated from Iran and Afghanistan, in addition to methamphetamine flows from Australia and South Asia's Golden Triangle, flowing into busy commercial ports in the Arab Gulf. However, recent fluctuations in Afghanistan have

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sparked an evolution in methamphetamine production and accessibility with the discovery of the ephedra plant: a natural, cheaper alternative to synthetic ephedra, that is less labour-intensive, cheaper and feasible for producing methamphetamine. Despite the Taliban's 2021 ban on cultivating the ephedra plant, the circulation of dried ephedra continues to operate with low prices. Iran has served as a transit country for methamphetamine flows from neighbouring Afghanistan, as well as a burgeoning hub for methamphetamine production and reprocessing, trafficking the drug both domestically and throughout the region. Syria, too, poses risks of becoming a hub for methamphetamine production, given the scale of its existing industrialized amphetamine production facilities, checkpoint economy and transnational trafficking networks, which have facilitated the captagon trade.

Crystalized methamphetamine has steadily risen in the Middle East, with traffickers targeting existing

demand hubs for synthetic drugs, like Iraq and Jordan. Collapsing public services, increased unemployment amongst youth, low economic opportunities and poor public health have contributed to methamphetamine usage across the region. Furthermore, while captagon is currently the most in-demand amongst regional users, methamphetamine's lighter weight, stronger potency and similarly-cheap production process is more lucrative for criminal actors. Traffickers have already begun to incorporate methamphetamines into captagon and hashish trafficking routes, particularly along Iraq's Al Qaim route (UNODC, 2024). As producers seek out cheaper, more accessible inputs for methamphetamine production, while broadening consumer markets and transit routes in the Middle East, there is a high risk for methamphetamine to become the most popular drug of choice amongst consumers, posing severe public health and human security risks.

Hashish, Opium, Heroin, Khat and Other Drugs

While seizures of synthetic substances like captagon and methamphetamines have skyrocketed in the Middle East, other illicit drugs such as khat, heroin, hashish, opium and precursor materials used for drug manufacturing have continued to dominate the region's illicit landscape.

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Cannabis is cultivated largely in Lebanon's Bekah Valley region and areas in Syria's northwest, south and eastern provinces, exported as hashish from maritime ports to international transshipment hubs and border checkpoints into Iraq, Jordan and Turkey. Criminal actors have diversified existing hashish trafficking routes by incorporating other illicit products, such as tobacco, counterfeit currency and illicit arms into the hashish consignments. Hashish trafficking networks working out of Lebanon, Morocco and Algeria have further broadened the illicit industry's in-

frastructure, establishing port transshipment sites, storage facilities and staging grounds for hashish and cannabis resin across Libya as an entry point into North African consumer markets and trafficking routes (Mangan, 2020).

Khat, a chewable flower plant that induces amphetamine-like effects, is primarily produced and trafficked from Yemen – where 1/3 to 60% of Yemeni farmland is estimated to be producing the drug – and distributed throughout the Middle East and Africa (Kiley, 2019). Yemen and Saudi Arabia conduct the largest seizures of khat globally each year, with consumer markets located primarily throughout the Arab Gulf, the Horn of Africa and India (Mohaddes Ardabili et al., 2022). However, the civil war in Yemen has both exacerbated demand for khat as well as producing a need for alternative revenue sources for financially-insecure civilians and a source of taxation for both state actors, such as the Yemeni government, and non-state militant actors like the Houthi rebels (Bulos, 2021).

Opium and heroin have been a fixed feature of the Middle East's illicit landscape, with the majority of opium and heroin seizures conducted in Iran – a key transit route and consumer hub, given its proximity to Afghanistan, the world's top opium producer. In the wake of the Taliban's recent ban on the Afghan poppy trade, the opium and heroin supply has been restricted with severe price hikes, paving the way for alternative narcotics like synthetic drugs. Still, opium and heroin continue to circulate through the region, via Iran and transit routes in Iraq – aided by Iran-aligned militia-controlled checkpoint economies – to be distributed locally and to key destination markets in Egypt, the United Arab Emirates and other countries.

Conclusion

The Middle East is experiencing a spike in the production, trafficking and consumption of illicit narcotics, raising risks to governance, rule of law, public health and human security. As criminal actors have augmented the sophistication of trafficking operations, acquired cheaper and accessible production tools and broadened trafficking routes, synthetic narcotics like the amphetamine-type stimulant "captagon" and methamphetamines have become a key feature of the Middle East's illicit landscape, as well

as a foreboding health and human security crisis. Additionally, as the Israel-Hamas war continues to overspill beyond the Gaza Strip into a broader regional security dilemma, opportunistic actors will look to illicit narcotics trades for alternative revenue, battlefield performance and a tool for political and security leverage, ultimately strengthening the region's crime-conflict nexus.

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