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Drug Trafficking Dynamics across Iraq and the Middle East: Trends and Responses

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NORTH AFRICA**

UNODC
Research

**Drug Trafficking Dynamics across Iraq
and the Middle East
(2019 – 2023):
Trends and Responses**

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Acknowledgements

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Key takeaways

- Countries across the Near and Middle East have registered an escalation in both the scale and sophistication of drug trafficking operations over the past decade. The destabilizing risks posed by illicit drugs have become increasingly prominent on the regional agenda. Of particular concern for governments and societies across the region is the rising production, trafficking and consumption of amphetamine-type stimulants (ATS), in particular, tablets containing amphetamine sold under the name “captagon”, and methamphetamine.
- UNODC research has found that Iraq is at risk of becoming an increasingly important node in the drug trafficking ecosystem spanning the Near and Middle East. Iraq lies near the intersection of a complex global drug trafficking ecosystem spanning Southwest Asia, Africa, and Europe, notably the Balkan and Southern routes associated with opiate smuggling from Afghanistan to Europe, through Southeastern Europe, and towards the Indian Ocean and Eastern Africa, including through the Arabian Peninsula.⁴
- Iraq and neighbouring countries have documented a sharp increase in the trafficking and use of “captagon” over the past five years. “Captagon” seizures in Iraq increased by almost 3,380 per cent in Iraq from 2019 to 2023. Iraq reported the seizure of over 4.1 tons of “captagon” tablets between January and December 2023 alone.¹ Seizures of amphetamine (mainly in the form of “captagon”) in the Near and Middle East doubled from 2020, reaching a record high of 86 tons in 2021.² In parallel to “captagon” trafficking, a methamphetamine market is quickly developing in the Near and Middle East, as shown by a rise in seizures.³
- Within Iraq, drugs are trafficked along three key internal corridors, in the north, central and southern regions of the country. There are distinct territorial, ethnic, economic, and political factors and differentiated drug market dynamics connected to each route. The main categories of drugs trafficked through Iraq include opium, heroin, hashish and especially, methamphetamine and “captagon”.⁵ While Iraq is not necessarily the most affected country in the region in terms of volumes of drugs seized, there are risks that the situation could deteriorate if drug trafficking, in particular of methamphetamine and “captagon”, keeps intensifying.
- A particular challenge facing countries across the Near and Middle East are armed groups with cross-border affiliations and transborder economic interests. Alongside a recent history marked by armed conflict and corruption, this situation has contributed to cross-border trafficking.

- The Government of Iraq and its partners have stressed the need for collective responses to tackle the security, social and economic ramifications of drug trafficking across the Near and Middle East. As seen in different regional contexts, the persistence – and potential reactivation – of armed groups poses a significant threat, not least given their potential involvement in illicit drug production and trafficking. There is growing awareness among governments of how drug trafficking intensifies corruption, undermines governance and legitimate business, degrades services and contributes to violent competition between armed groups. There is also growing concern over evidence of increasing drug use and related social harms, requiring sustained treatment and rehabilitation efforts.⁶
- Practical responses are being implemented but are still at an early stage. Iraq established its first drug law and commission in 2017 and in 2023 launched a National Strategy on Narcotics and Psychotropic Substances (2023–2025) in 2023. Moreover, Iraq organized the first regional event on the issue in 2023 to accelerate collaboration and coordinate efforts in drug detection and disruption.

Introduction

Iraq is increasingly at risk of becoming an important node in the drug trafficking ecosystem spanning the Near and Middle East. The expansion of criminal networks in Iraq and across the region was facilitated by chronic political and economic instability. For over four decades, the country has been impacted by multiple wars and persistent armed conflicts. These include the war with the Islamic Republic of Iran (1980 to 1988), the first Gulf War (1990 to 1991), and the prolonged instability following the US-led invasion in 2003, as well as the fight against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL).

Iraq has been experiencing a dramatic surge in drug trafficking and consumption for the past five years. Increasingly large drug seizures have netted tons of illicit drugs and contraband pharmaceuticals. Throughout 2023, for example, Iraqi police-led operations from remote border areas to the centre of Baghdad have exposed the scale of Iraq's escalating drug crisis.⁷ Alongside more traditional drugs such as heroin, opium and cannabis are amphetamine type stimulants (ATS) – especially “captagon” and methamphetamine – all of which are being trafficked and consumed in Iraq.⁸ There is also evidence of attempts to produce certain types of ATS in Iraq.⁹

The legacy of armed conflicts and fragmented state authorities in the wider region have created an environment conducive to the spread and entrenchment of drug production, trafficking, and consumption.¹⁰ What is more, the emergence of multiple armed groups with differing affiliations has undermined governance in some countries and the integrity of borders. Iraq's strategic location means that it is also a conduit for the flow of drugs between Southwest Asia, the Arab Peninsula and Europe. The dramatic increase in methamphetamine from across the border on one side of the country, alongside the surge in “captagon” production and trafficking from the other side, particularly in Syria, has not only solidified Iraq's position as a critical conduit connecting major producers and consumers within the drug trade, but it has also been accompanied by growing consumption within the country itself.¹¹

External shocks such as international economic sanctions have helped consolidate underground economies, smuggling networks and supply routes, including for drugs. The challenges of central authority, the complexity of Iraq's social and political fabric, and competition for control over supply lines among different actors is particularly acute in border areas. Iraq alone has over 3,637 kilometres of land border with the Islamic Republic of Iran, Jordan, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Syria and Türkiye.

This report on “Drug Trafficking Dynamics across Iraq and the Middle East (2019–2023): Trends and Responses” sheds light on the increasingly complex and dynamic drug trafficking landscape across the Near and Middle East region, and the efforts invested by Iraq and other countries in confronting this threat. This can serve as a roadmap to assist national, regional, and international counterparts in implementing coordinated strategies to prevent and reduce drug production, trafficking and consumption.

As such it provides evidence that can support the implementation of the outcome document of the United Nations General Assembly Special Session on the World Drug Problem (2016) and the Ministerial Declaration (2019), aimed at reinforcing global efforts to address and counter the world drug problem, adopting the shared responsibility approach.

UNODC in Iraq

UNODC has maintained a presence in Iraq since 2019 and, in partnership with Iraqi institutions, is implementing projects on counter-narcotics, human trafficking, smuggling of migrants, border control, counterterrorism, prisons, firearms, juvenile justice and prevention of violent extremism, anti-corruption, and anti-money laundering and countering terrorism financing. In the areas of counter-narcotics and counterterrorism, border management initiatives, including the Container Control Programme (CCP) and the Airport Communication Project (AIR-COP), are being implemented at Baghdad International Airport and at the Turaybil land border crossing with Jordan.

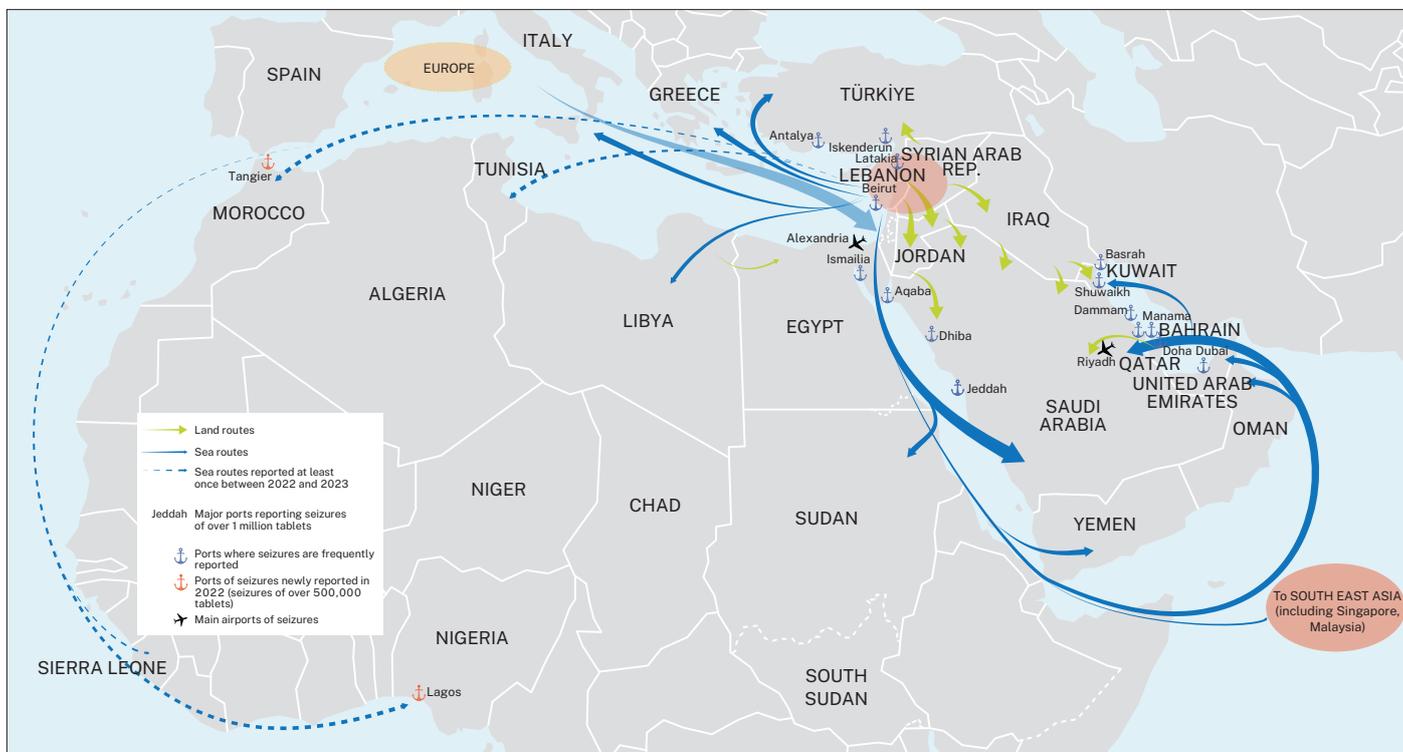
Section 1. Regional dynamics

The Near and Middle East, severely affected by conflict and instability, is an increasingly important location for illicit drug production and trafficking, including from Southwest Asia and the Middle East.¹²

Armed conflicts not only generated significant casualties and development setbacks in the region, but also

contributed to the formation of political and territorial entities and dynamic black markets for different types of drugs.¹³ A particularly alarming development over the past decade in the region is the increase in exports of “captagon”, including from Syria and Lebanon, and methamphetamine originating primarily in Afghanistan.^{14, 15}

Map 1 Main trafficking routes for counterfeit Captagon, 2021–2023



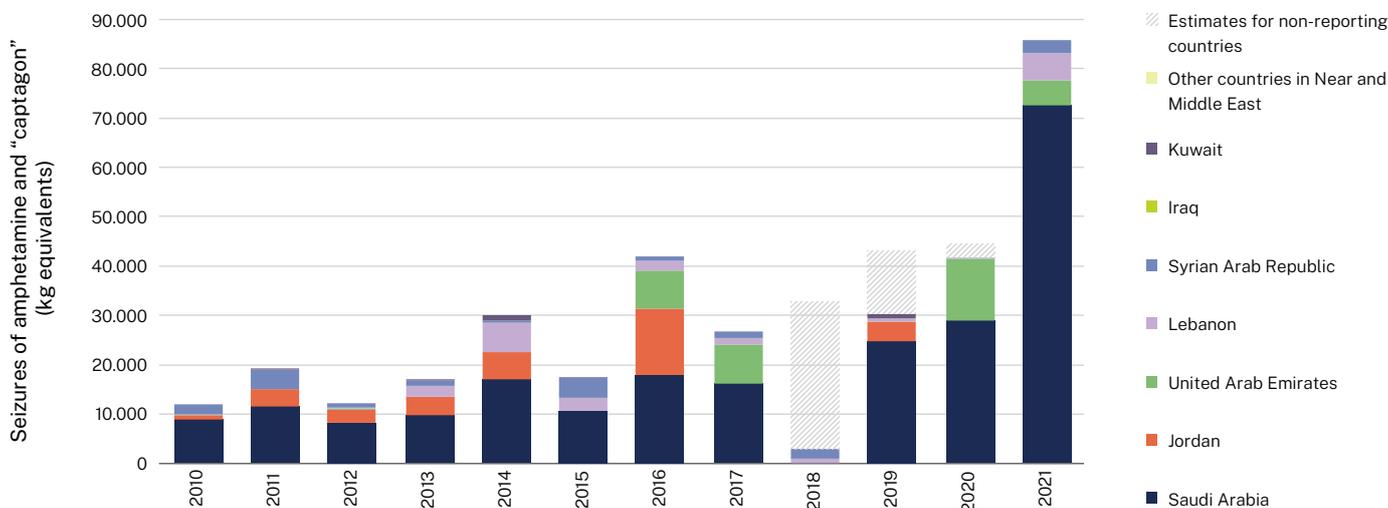
The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations. Final boundary between the Republic of Sudan and the Republic of South Sudan has not yet been determined.
Sources: UNODC, based on a number of sources, including the following: UNODC, responses to the annual report questionnaire; UNODC, Drugs Monitoring Platform.

“Captagon” trafficking has increased dramatically in Near and Middle East countries particularly over the past five years. The largest quantities of “captagon” seized were reported by Saudi Arabia (67 per cent), followed by countries such as the United Arab Emirates (11 per cent), Jordan (9 per cent), Lebanon (7 per cent) and the Syrian Arab Republic (4 per cent) over the last decade (2012–2021).¹⁶

Several factors are contributing to surging “captagon” availability, including war and instability in the Syrian Arab Republic since 2011.¹⁷ While the trafficking of “captagon” was already a significant concern within the

Near East prior to the war in Syria (2011 -), official seizure data indicates the Syrian Arab Republic and Lebanon as countries of origin of increasing importance.¹⁸ For example, between January 2019 and December 2023, 82 per cent of the “captagon” seized and reported in individual drug seizures where the origin could be identified pointed to the Syrian Arab Republic as the country of origin, followed by Lebanon (17 per cent).¹⁹ In Lebanon, the authorities reported the destruction of a “captagon” laboratory in the eastern part of the country in February 2022.²⁰

Fig 1 Quantities of amphetamine, mainly “captagon”, seized in the Near and Middle East, 2010–2021

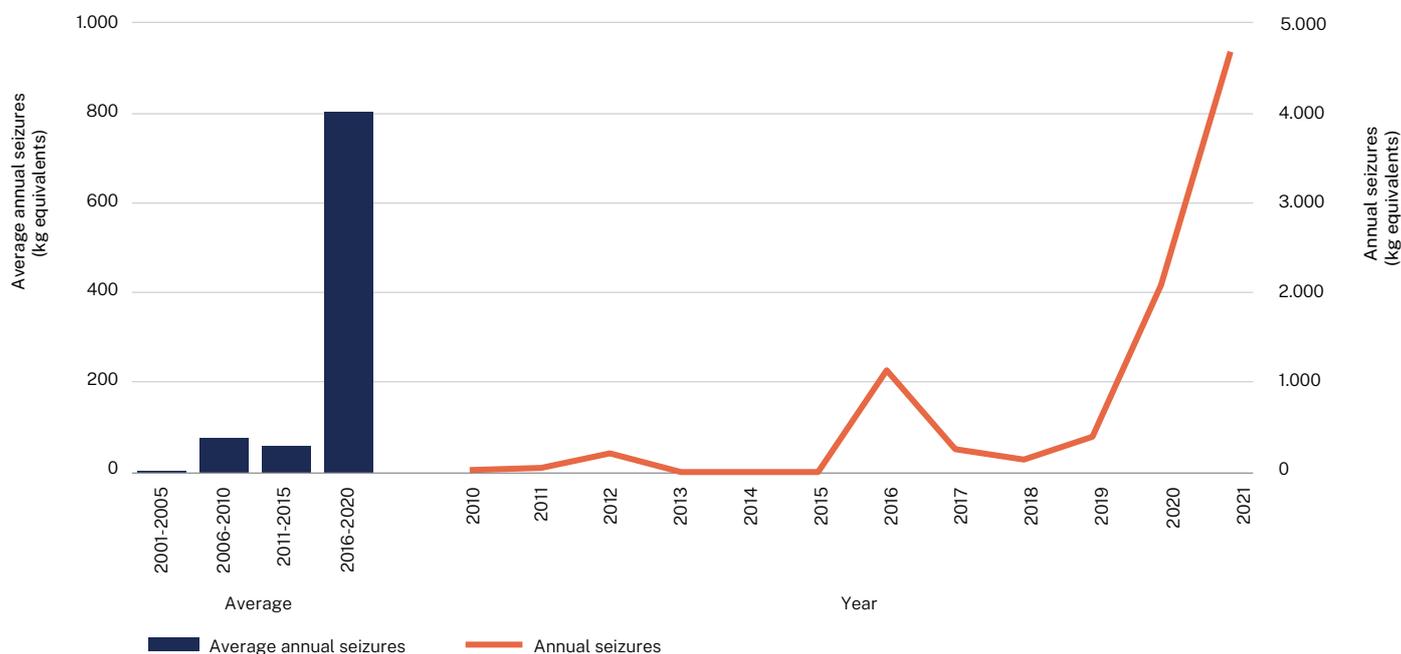


Source: UNODC, responses to the annual report questionnaire.
 Note: Estimates for non-reporting countries are based on the assumption that countries which failed to supply information to UNODC in specific years, may have seized similar amounts as a year earlier.

Even if Iraq appears to be less affected by trafficking of “captagon” than other countries in the Near and Middle East, “captagon” from Syria and Lebanon also feeds markets in Iraq.²¹ There is active smuggling of “captagon” between the Syrian borders toward the Iraqi provinces of Al Anbar and Ninewa (see maps 3, 7 and 8).^{22, 23, 24} The drugs are then reportedly distributed to northern, central and southern regions of Iraq and along established routes to Kuwait and Saudi Arabia.²⁵ According to anecdotal information from the Iraqi government, ISIL (Da’esh), among others, may be involved in drug trafficking in a limited capacity, though the evidence available warrants further investigation.²⁶

In parallel to “captagon” trafficking, a methamphetamine market seems to be developing in the Near and Middle East, including Iraq, as shown by a rise in seizures of the drug. Nearly all countries in the region have reported methamphetamine seizures over the period 2016–2020, with the United Arab Emirates reporting the highest volumes seized.²⁷ Historically, East and Southeast Asia served as the primary source of methamphetamine.²⁸

Fig 2 Seizures of methamphetamine in the Near and Middle East, 2001–2021

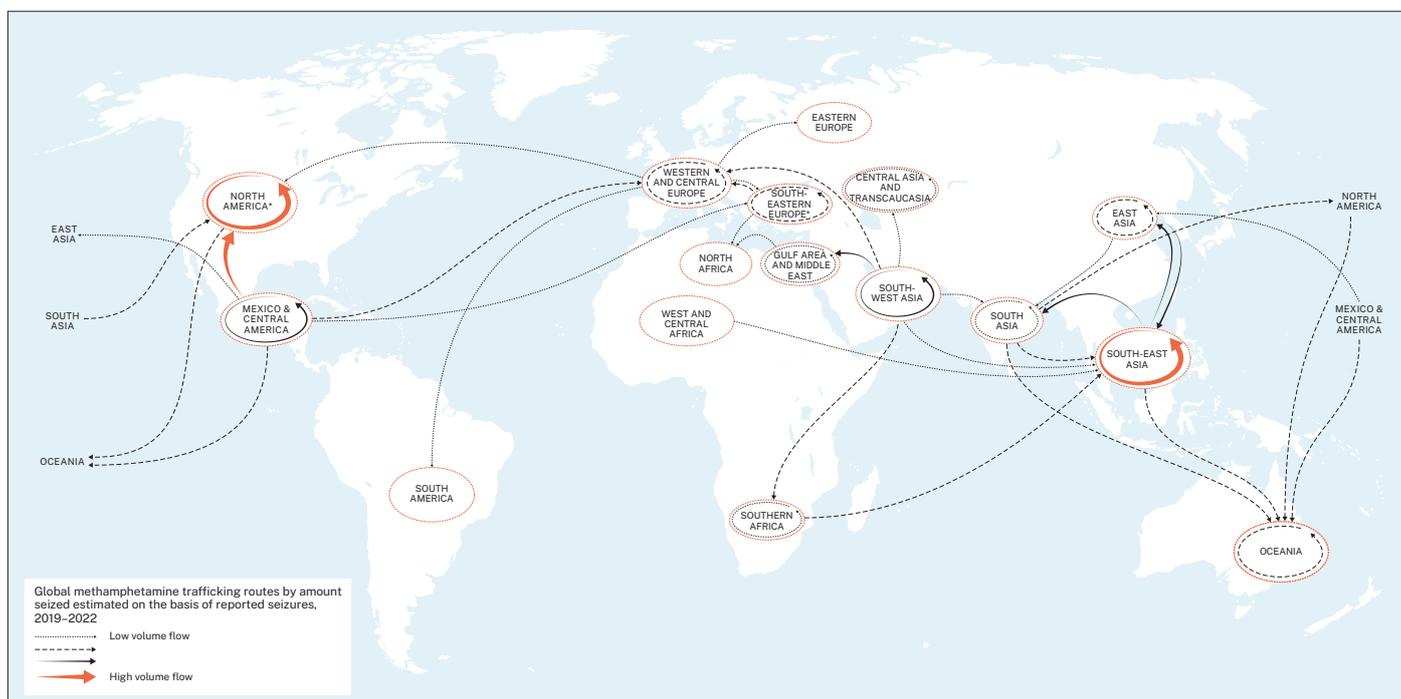


Source: UNODC, responses to the annual report questionnaire.

However, law enforcement operations indicate a shift in origins, with methamphetamine increasingly sourced in Southwest Asia, most prominently Afghanistan.²⁹ Afghanistan’s drug market is undergoing a major transformation, with opiate production collapsing, affecting drug trafficking patterns in the region and beyond.³⁰ While methamphetamine is a synthetic drug that can be produced virtually anywhere, changes observed in its manufacture in Afghanistan can have implications for its production and trafficking in the Near and Middle East.³¹

Iraq appears to be at the nexus of regional trafficking routes for both methamphetamine and “captagon”, and becoming a critical juncture in the complex trafficking dynamics observed in the Near and Middle East region. The methamphetamine trafficking channels emanating from Afghanistan traverse Pakistan and the Islamic Republic of Iran.³² As a result, Iraqi territories bordering the Islamic Republic of Iran are vulnerable to becoming transit points for methamphetamine. Furthermore, according to Iraqi officials, both methamphetamine and “captagon” are being routed southward through Iraq towards Kuwait and Saudi Arabia.³³ This includes

Map 2 Main methamphetamine trafficking flows as described by reported seizures, 2019–2022



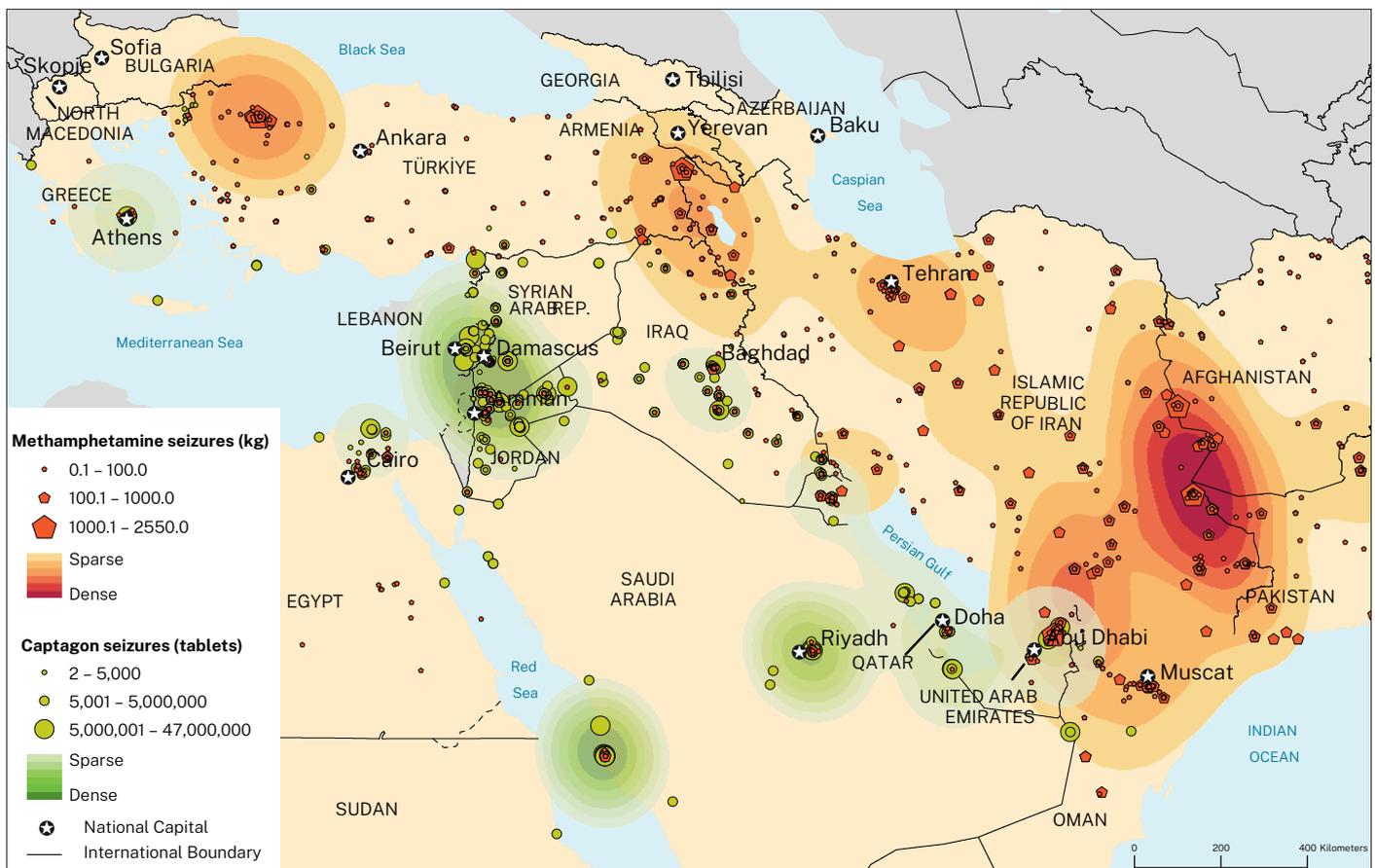
The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.
 Sources: UNODC, based on a number of sources, including the following: UNODC, responses to the annual report questionnaire; UNODC, Drugs Monitoring Platform.
 The size of the route is based on the total amount seized on that route, according to the information on trafficking routes provided by Member States in the annual report questionnaire, individual drug seizures and other official documents, over the 2019–2022 period. The routes are determined on the basis of reported country of departure/transit and destination in these sources. As such, they need to be considered as broadly indicative of existing trafficking routes while several secondary routes may not be reflected. Route arrows represent the direction of trafficking; origins of the arrows indicate either the area of departure or the one of last provenance, end points of arrows indicate either the area of consumption or the one of next destination of trafficking. Therefore, the trafficking origin may not reflect the country in which the substance was produced. Please see the Methodology section of this document.
 * North America excluding Mexico. South-Eastern Europe including Türkiye.

trafficking via the strategic ports in the province of Al Basrah and through the expansive desert zones located west and southwest of the Euphrates River.³⁴

Iraq's proximity to two major transnational opiates trafficking routes crossing the Near and Middle East leaves the country at risk of becoming a major transit corridor for drugs, subjected to potential shifts in supply (see map 4). The first transnational trafficking route affecting the region is the so-called Balkan route, which has served as the main conduit of Afghan opiates to Europe since the 1970s. Tens of billions of

dollars' worth of opiates have been trafficked from Afghanistan and Pakistan through the Islamic Republic of Iran, and in some cases through Iraq, continuing onward to Türkiye and into the West Balkans before being transported to markets in Western Europe.^{35, 36} The second trafficking route is the Southern route with opiates smuggled from Afghanistan southwards through Pakistan and the Islamic Republic of Iran towards the Arabian Peninsula, the Indian ocean, and East Africa.³⁷

Map 3 Main seizures of methamphetamine and “captagon” reported in the Near and Middle East, 2019–2023

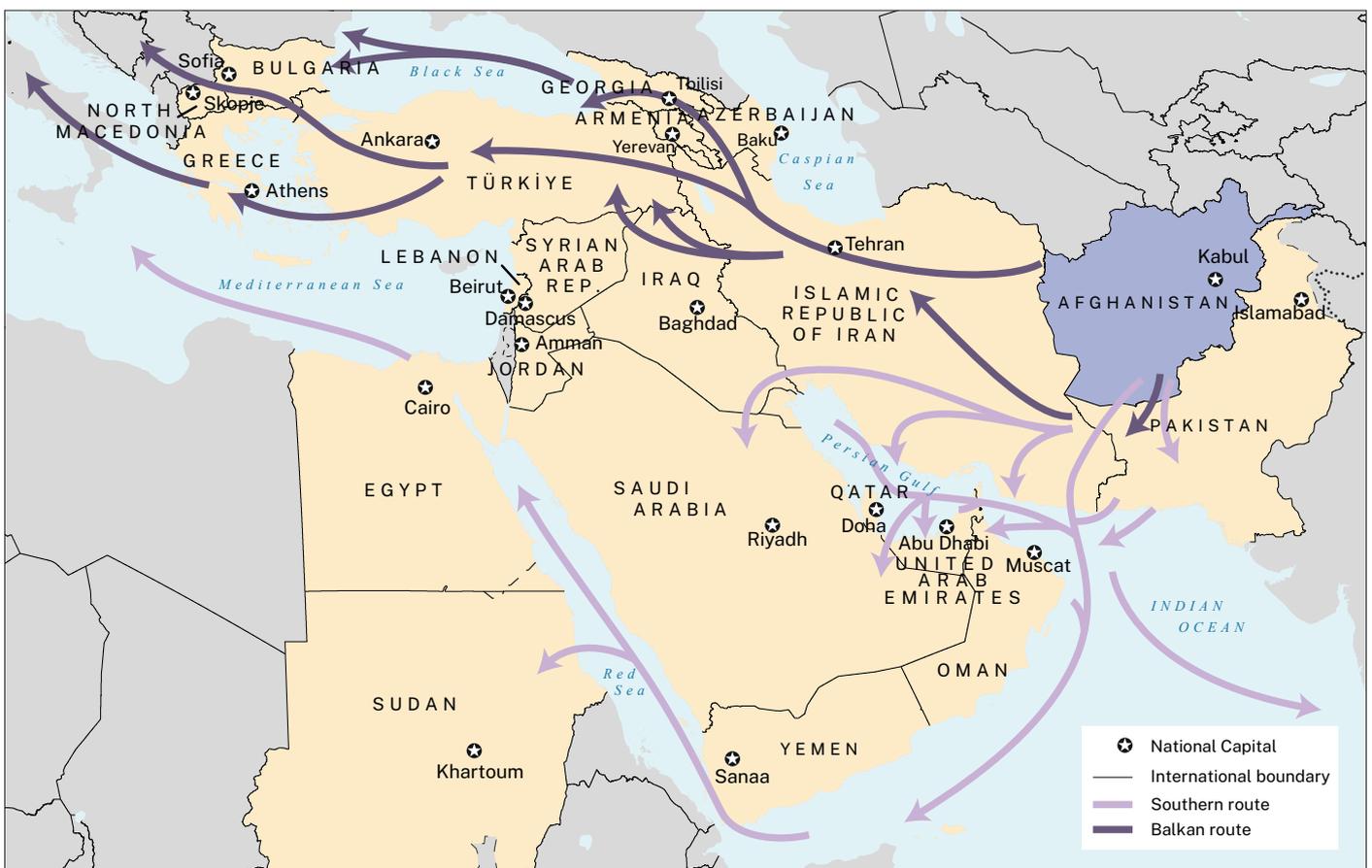


The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.
Source: UNODC Drug Monitoring Platform.

Along the Southern route via the Islamic Republic of Iran toward Asia and Africa, a share of opiates is destined for Saudi Arabia and other countries in the Arabian Peninsula.³⁸ The eastern and southern borders of Iraq are at the crossroads of the opiate trafficked from Afghanistan through the Islamic Republic of Iran

to the Arab Peninsula. Opiates transit the Iraqi provinces of Missan and Al Basrah to reach local markets but also to be shipped to the Arabian Peninsula also through third countries, ostensibly as a “diversionary tactic” to reduce risk of detection.³⁹

Map 4 Indicative routes for opiates trafficking originating from Afghanistan along the Balkan and Southern routes, 2023



The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations. Dotted line represents approximately the Line of Control in Jammu and Kashmir agreed upon by India and Pakistan. The final status of Jammu and Kashmir has not yet been agreed upon by the parties. Final boundary between the Republic of Sudan and the Republic of South Sudan has not yet been determined. Sources: UNODC WDR, AOTP, EMCDDA.

Since 2019, Iraqi authorities have observed an increase in smuggling activities occurring along these eastern and southern borders of the country.⁴⁰ In addition to opiates, drug traffickers are increasingly transporting methamphetamine produced in Afghanistan through similar routes.^{41, 42, 43} Individual seizures made in the province of

Al Basrah show that methamphetamine as well as cannabis resin are being trafficked through the established opiate Southern route. This trend aligns with observations made regionally: the Southern route, originally mostly used for opiates trafficking, is now being used for trafficking of other drugs, mainly methamphetamine.⁴⁴

Map 5 Administrative map of Iraq



The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations. Sources: UNAMI, Natural Earth, FAO AQUASTAT.

Section 2. Drug trends in Iraq

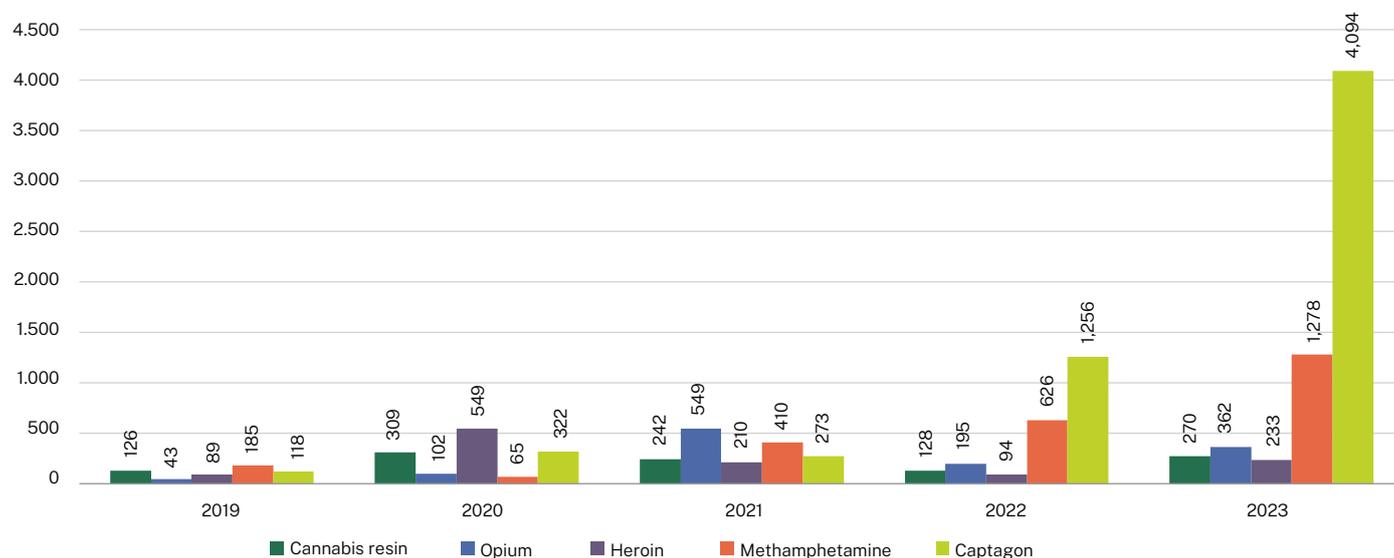
Until recently, assessments of drug trafficking trends in Iraq have been frustrated by limited reliable data on drug production, trafficking and use in the country. Moreover, according to Iraqi officials, the fight against ISIL (Da'esh) potentially diverted attention away from counter-narcotics efforts.⁴⁵

According to official sources, Iraq has experienced a significant increase in drug seizures in recent years (see figure 3). Methamphetamine seizures increased almost sixfold in 2023 compared to 2019, while “captagon” seizures reportedly tripled between 2022 and 2023, and overall amounts seized in 2023 are 34 times higher than in 2019.⁴⁶ The sharp increase in seizures may reflect both an increased availability of drugs traf-

ficked through the region, as well as enhanced Iraqi and international counter-narcotics and interdiction measures. These trends help explain the growing international and national concern about the expansion of “captagon” trafficking, not just in Iraq but also in other countries such as Jordan and Saudi Arabia.⁴⁷

While “captagon” intercepted in the Middle East continues to be reported as originating from Syria and to a lesser extent Lebanon, attempts of “captagon” production in the southern provinces of Iraq were reported by Iraqi authorities as of 2023.⁴⁸ In May 2024, a laboratory for both “captagon” and methamphetamine manufacturing was dismantled in the northern province of Sulaymaniyah.⁴⁹

Fig 3 Annual amounts of drugs seized in Iraq per type, 2019–2023 (kg equivalents)

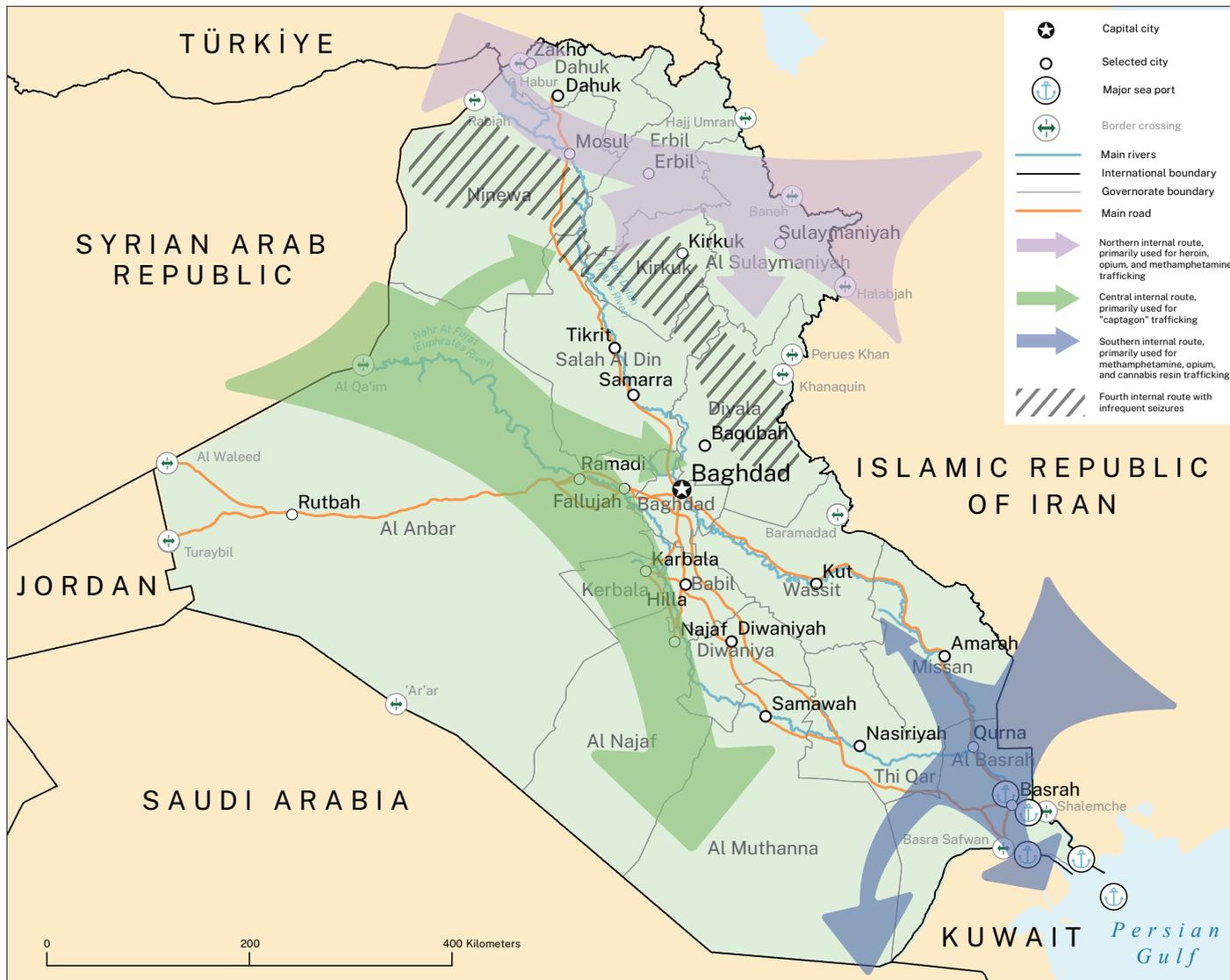


Source: Iraqi Ministry of Interior, including from the Federal Government and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG).

There are three principal domestic drug trafficking corridors through which drugs are transhipped within and across Iraq, linked to particular historical and geopolitical developments, as well as the related evolution and affiliations of criminal groups. They include the northern, central and southern internal routes and con-

nect the borders between Iraq and the Islamic Republic of Iran, as well as Türkiye, the Syrian Arab Republic, and Saudi Arabia in particular (see map 6). Each of these domestic corridors exhibits distinct trafficking dynamics, with specific types of smuggled drugs.⁵⁰

Map 6 The main three corridors used for drug trafficking in Iraq



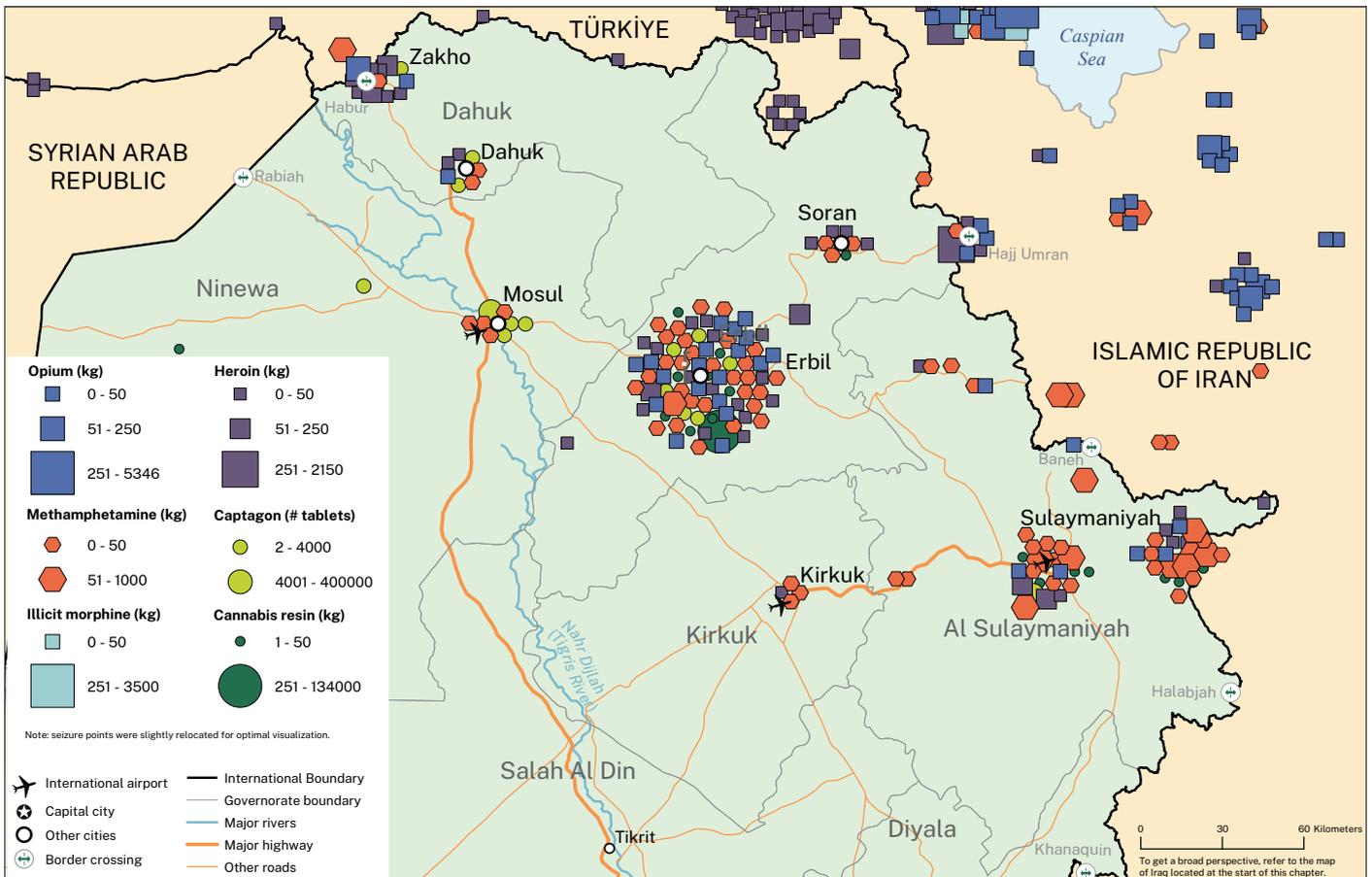
The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations. Sources: UNAMI, Natural Earth, FAO AQUASTAT. Also based on information provided by the Iraqi Ministry of Interior, including from the Federal Government and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG).

There is also an additional fourth domestic drug trafficking route affected by constant tensions and shifts in power dynamics among the multiple actors operating in the area, generating specific strategies by drug traffickers that may explain the low number of seizures reported along this route. Specifically, according to interviews, drugs are known to flow through Wasit and Diyala provinces and to be smuggled across disputed areas such as the province of Kirkuk as well as the provinces Salah al-Din and Ninewa.⁵¹

Northern internal route

The northern internal route traverses the Kurdistan region of Iraq (KRI) and connects Iraq with the north-western provinces of the Islamic Republic of Iran, with the southern districts of Türkiye and the north-eastern provinces of the Syrian Arab Republic (see map 7). Since at least 2017, the northern internal route has provided smugglers an alternative to the Iran-Türkiye border for opiates trafficking.⁵²

Map 7 Main seizures reported through the northern internal route in Iraq and neighbouring countries, 2019–2023

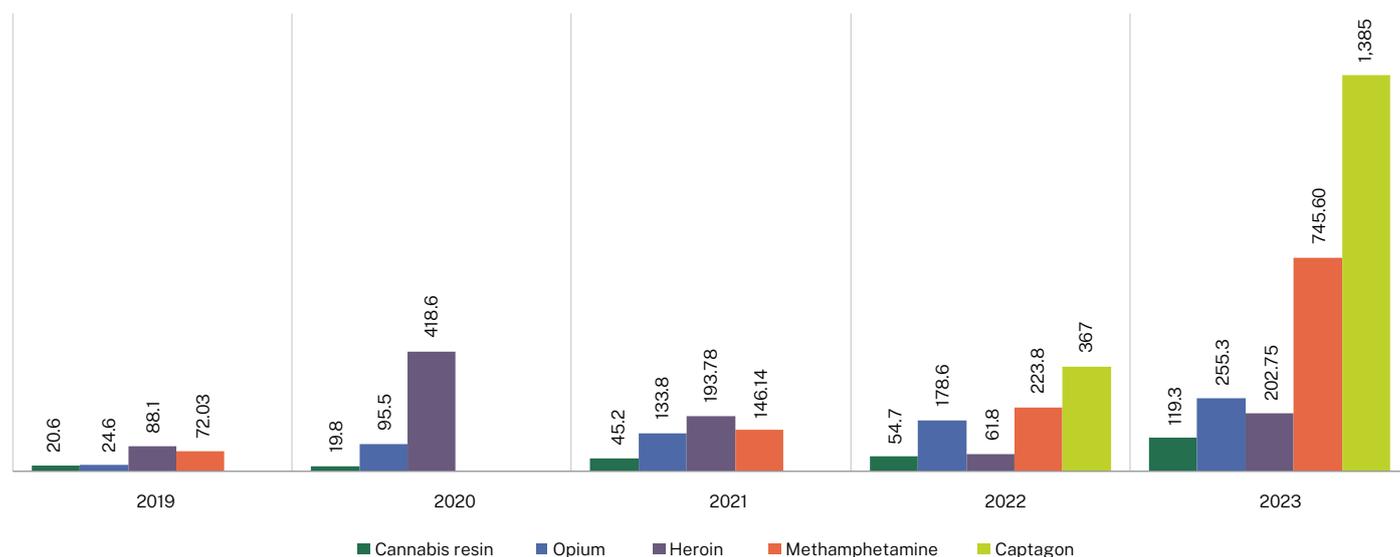


The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations. Sources: UNODC Drug Monitoring Platform, Natural Earth, FAO AQUASTAT.

The proximity of the KRI with the north-eastern province of the Syrian Arab Republic, along with Iranian provinces of West Azerbaijan and Kordestan, makes the Kurdish region a geographical crossroad of drug trafficking networks. In this region, there has been a sharp increase of methamphetamine and “captagon” seizures since 2019 while heroin has continued to fluctuate (see Figure 4). The General Directorate of the anti-narcotics of the Kurdish Security Agency perceives that the overall volume of drugs being trafficked through the region is steadily increasing.⁵³

The northern internal route primarily involves the trafficking of opiates, and methamphetamine smuggled through the Iraq-Iran border.⁵⁴ According to authorities’ perception, roughly 80 per cent of the drugs traversing the northern internal route cross the eastern border while the remaining 20 per cent pass through the Syrian Arab Republic and Türkiye.⁵⁵ Modest amounts of opium were trafficked through the northern internal route from 2019 to 2023, with seizures mostly concentrated in the city of Erbil, including at the international airport.⁵⁶ Likewise, small amounts of cannabis resin from Afghanistan, Pakistan and to a lesser extent the Syrian Arab Republic and Lebanon are also smuggled into Iraq via the same corridor, though appear more likely to be destined for local markets.⁵⁷

Fig 4 Annual volumes of drugs seized in the Kurdish region of Iraq by type, 2019–2023 (kg equivalents)



Source: Information provided by the General Directorate of the Kurdish Security Agency for the provinces of Erbil, Dahuk and Al Sulaymaniyah.
 Note: these volumes are part of the annual volumes of drugs seized in Iraq indicated in figure 3

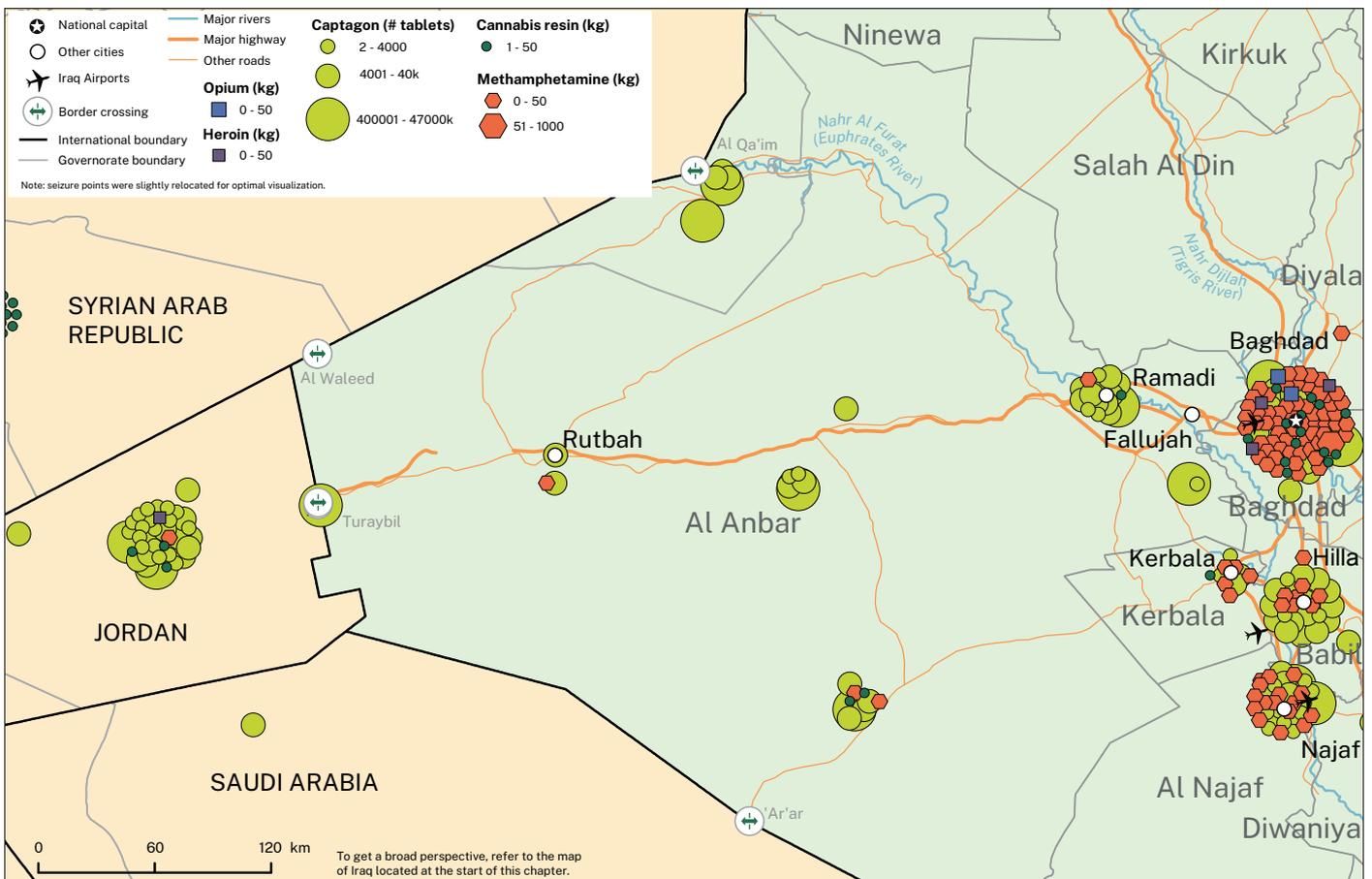
Officials have observed an increase in smuggling of methamphetamine across the northern internal route from the Islamic Republic of Iran through the KRI. Trafficking of methamphetamine especially has expanded dramatically since 2021, marking a distinct shift in the volume and type of drugs being transported. As of 2022, volumes of methamphetamine and “captagon” have surpassed heroin seizures.⁵⁸ According to the General Directorates of anti-narcotics in Erbil and Sulaymaniyah, drugs are also suspected to be produced in clandestine laboratories in the outskirts of urban centres, near the mountainous borders and

around cities such as Kirkuk and Tuz Khurmatu.^{59, 60} The dismantlement of a laboratory used for methamphetamine and “captagon” manufacturing was reported in May 2024 in the province of Sulaymaniyah.⁶¹

Central internal route

The central internal route connects the Syrian Arab Republic and Lebanon to the Arabian Peninsula, as well as the Islamic Republic of Iran, primarily via the Iraqi province of Al Anbar (see map 8). In the past three years, Al Anbar province which borders the Syri-

Map 8 Main seizures reported through the central internal route in Iraq and neighbouring countries, 2019–2023



The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations. Sources: UNODC Drug Monitoring Platform, Natural Earth, FAO AQUASTAT.

an Arab Republic, Jordan and Saudi Arabia, has become an epicentre for drug smuggling, particularly of “captagon” and, to a lesser extent, methamphetamine.⁶² Indeed, along this route specifically, it appears that drug traffickers are combining “captagon”, produced in countries to the west of Iraq, with methampheta-

mine manufactured in the east, and then rerouting these substances to the Arabian Peninsula.⁶³ Seizures of “captagon” have reportedly increased sharply since 2019 along this internal route, mostly around cities and on key highways headed to the southern and eastern borders.^{64, 65}

Fig 5 Main seizures reported in the province of Al Anbar, 2019 - 2024 (kg and tablets)

Date	Location	Concealment method	Drug seized
10/05/2020	Ramadi	Not specified	“captagon” (100,000 tablets)
26/10/2020	Ramadi	Not specified	“captagon” (177,000 tablets)
26/10/2020	Ramadi	Not specified	“captagon” (177,000 tablets)
24/03/2021	Rutbah	Hidden in modified truck chassis	“captagon” (7 million tablets) methamphetamine (9 kg)
22/04/2021	Rutbah	Not specified	“captagon” (121,000 tablets)
13/06/2021	Al Tash	Not specified	“captagon” (290,000 tablets)
30/06/2021	Al Qa'im border crossing	Hidden in truck tires	“captagon” (152,000 tablets)
05/10/2021	Ramadi	Not specified	“captagon” (100,000 tablets)
09/10/2021	Al Qa'im border crossing	Not specified	“captagon” (108,000 tablets)
17/10/2021	Al Qa'im border crossing	Not specified	“captagon” (93,000 tablets)
27/01/2022	Ramadi	Not specified	“captagon” (96,000 tablets)
28/01/2022	Ramadi	Not specified	“captagon” (1 million tablets)
06/04/2022	border with Syria	Not specified	“captagon” (1.8 million tablets)
15/08/2022	Ramadi	Not specified	“captagon” (2 million tablets)
26/02/2023	Ramadi	Not specified	“captagon” (720,000 tables)
11/03/2023	Al Qa'im border crossing	Not specified	“captagon” (3 million tablets)
20/06/2023	Furat	Not specified	“captagon” (187,000 tablets)
28/07/2023	Ramadi	Not specified	“captagon” (250,000 tablets)
25/12/2023	Rutbah	Not specified	“captagon” (200,000 tablets)
23/01/2024	Ramadi	Not specified	“captagon” (100,000 tablets)
02/03/2024	Ramadi	Not specified	“captagon” (370,500 tablets)
28/05/2024	Not specified	Not specified	“captagon” (2.5 million tablets)

Tightened border controls in neighbouring countries can influence drug trafficking dynamics along the Iraqi central internal route. When Saudi Arabia imposed import bans on Lebanon exports due to drug smuggling in 2021, and Jordan reinforced its border control with Iraq and Syria, a rapid increase in seizures within the Iraqi province of Al Anbar was observed by Iraqi counternarcotic units. This could suggest that traffickers may have diverted shipments from Lebanon and the Syrian Arab Republic through the western Iraqi border to reduce the risk of detection.⁶⁶ The Al Qa'im border crossing between Syria and Iraq and surrounding areas is a noted supply route, with the reported presence of multiple groups colluding with drug traffickers. Increased tensions have also been reported as competition between those involved in the trafficking has intensified.⁶⁷

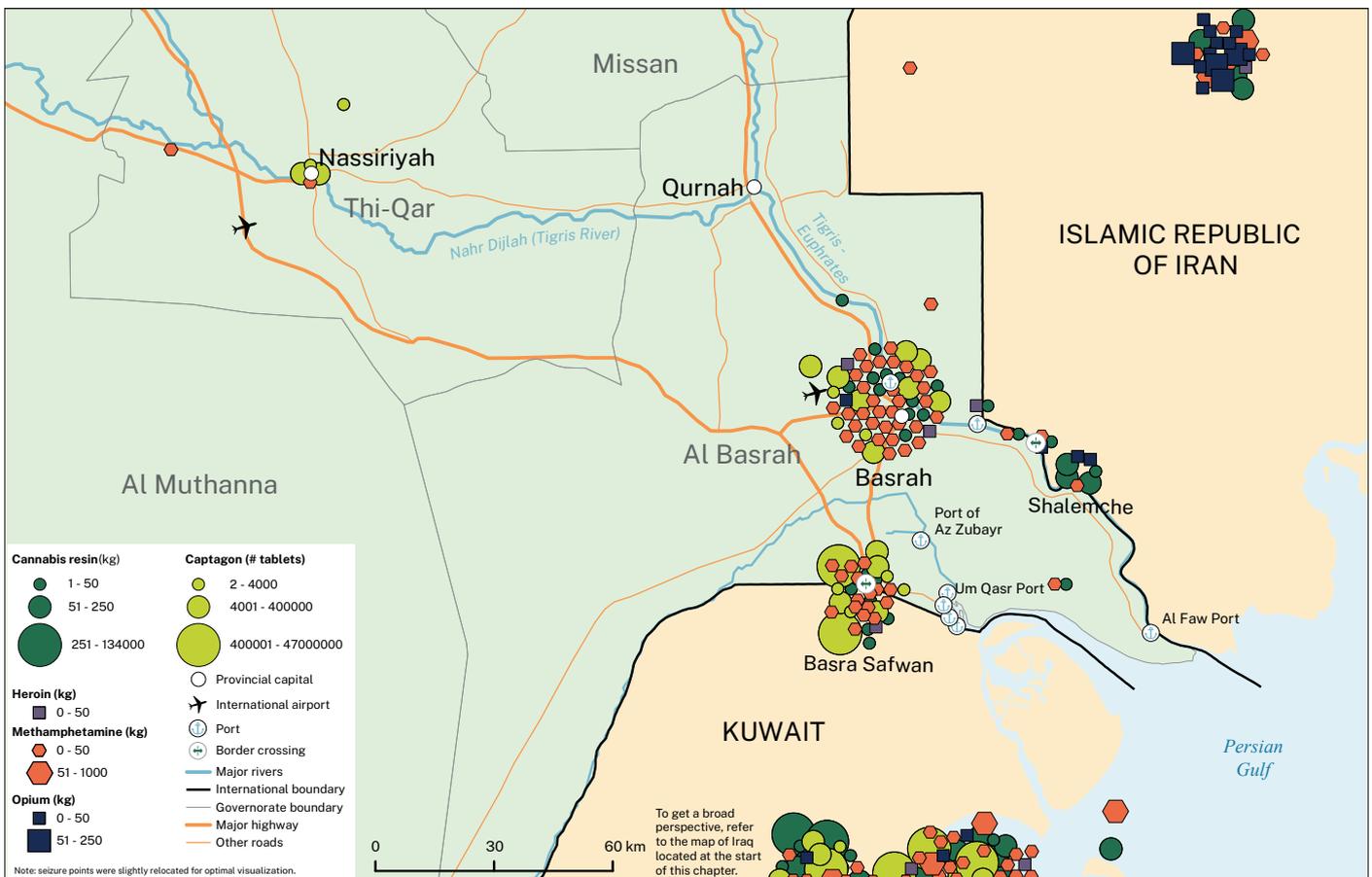
According to key informants, the main thoroughfare for drug trafficking across the central internal route is Highway 1, particularly near the Syrian border. Drug traffickers are reportedly bypassing stricter enforcement on the Jordanian border and moving product from Syria through the Al Qa'im Iraqi crossing and its surrounding areas, and then further transporting the drugs along key roads east and southward via Ramadi, Fallujah and Rutbah.⁶⁸ The central internal route has grown in prominence since 2020, with drugs transiting through Karbala, Najaf and Baghdad before moving onwards to Basrah and/or directly to the borders with Saudi Arabia and Kuwait.⁶⁹ Drugs can then move into both Saudi Arabia and Kuwait and further on into other countries in the Arabian Peninsula.⁷⁰ Traffickers appear to operate in the desert areas along the 800-kilometre southern border between Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, sometimes using unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) to drop the trafficked goods over the border.⁷¹ For example, in 2022, Iraqi authorities intercepted a micro-light aircraft, reportedly bound for Kuwait, which was carrying one million "captagon" pills.⁷²

Southern internal route

The southern internal trafficking route connects the Iranian province of Khuzestan and Al Basra to Baghdad and the wider Arabian Peninsula, and the majority of drug seizures along this route appear to comprise methamphetamine and cannabis resin (see map 9).⁷³ Although the numbers of seizures reported in the province of Al Basrah are relatively modest compared to other provinces in the country, the southern internal route is strategic from an operational standpoint for trafficking. The city and ports in Basrah play a pivotal commercial role in the Iraqi economy, with the Port

of Um Qasr alone handling most of the country’s legal commercial traffic.⁷⁴ Considering this central role in facilitating imports and exports, Iraqi authorities and experts believe that a significant portion of narcotics enter and exit the country via these ports.⁷⁵ Key informant interviews likewise revealed concerns about corruption, coupled with the involvement of multiple actors in the trafficking of illicit commodities at ports, including drugs.⁷⁶ Despite disagreements among these actors, most groups suspected of involvement in moving illegal drugs through these ports are driven by shared economic interests, which help to mitigate competition-related tensions there.⁷⁷

Map 9 Main seizures reported through the southern internal route in Iraq and neighbouring countries, 2019–2023



The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.
Sources: UNODC Drug Monitoring Platform, Natural Earth, FAO AQUASTAT.

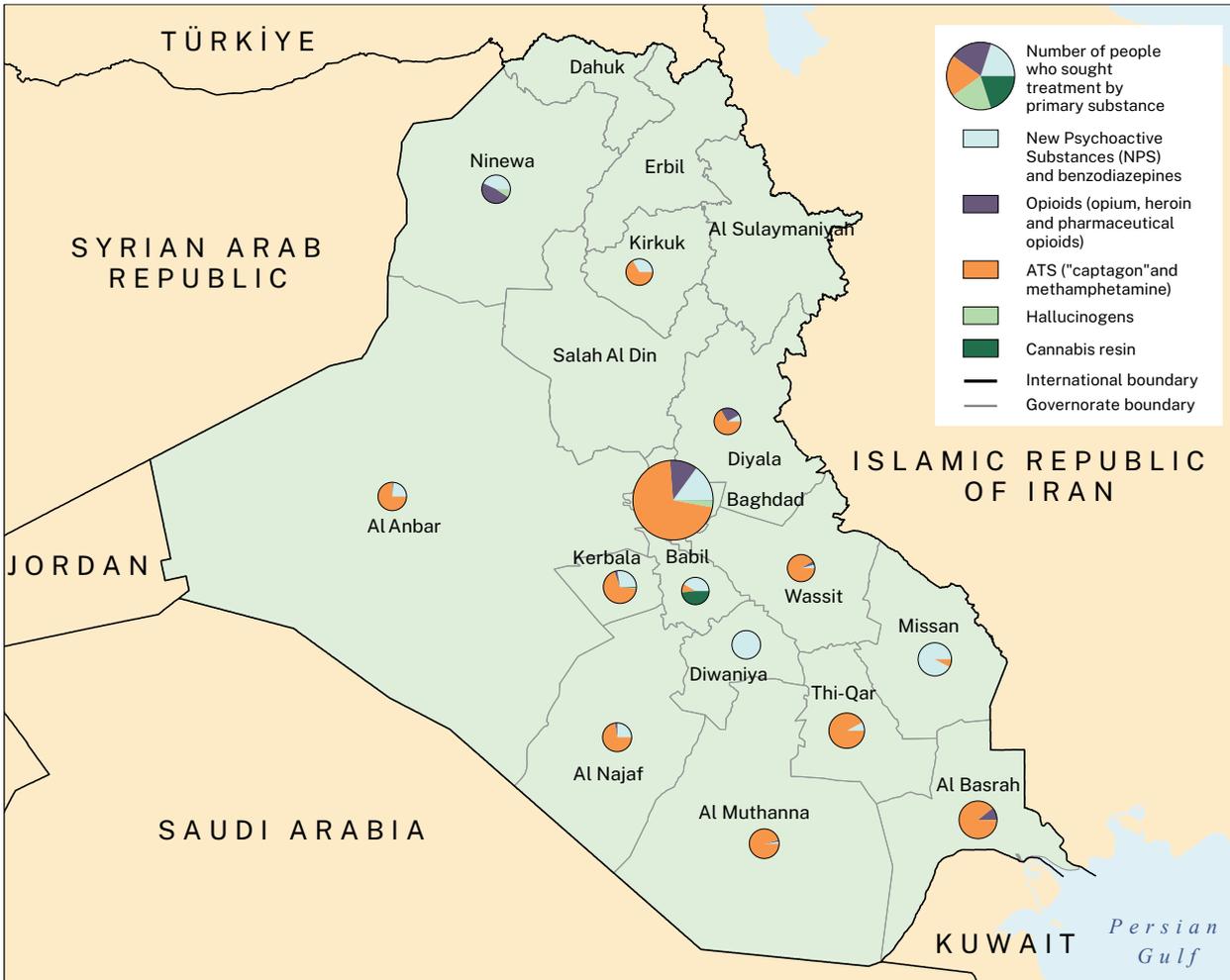
On entering Iraq through this route, drugs are subsequently trafficked into cities such as Baghdad, Amarah, Najaf and Karbala, including via taxi drivers and allegedly by other individuals during busy seasons such as pilgrimage. If not destined for the local market, the drug can be stored and then smuggled to the Arabian Peninsula.⁷⁸

Drugs are also reportedly smuggled along the Shatt al-Arab river using small and easily concealed vessels.⁷⁹ South of Basrah, in Um al-Rasas, there are reports of drugs being transported through shallow waters and through the islands facing Khorramshahr in the Islamic Republic of Iran, delivered to the local market or other nearby cities for sale and storage.⁸⁰ There are also reports of increased use of aerial surveillance and drones in response to counter-narcotics operations, including to identify riverine routes for drug shipments and secure storage.⁸¹

Fig 6 Main seizures reported in the province of Al Basrah, 2019 – 2023 (kg and tablets)

Date	Location	Concealment method	Drug seized
18/06/2019	Basrah	On a fishing boat	methamphetamine (11 kg)
15/06/2020	Border with Kuwait	Hidden in electric towers	methamphetamine (20 kg)
			cannabis resin (90 kg)
16/10/2020	Al Faw	With the dealer	methamphetamine (1.7 kg)
			cannabis resin (1.3 kg)
10/12/2020	Al Faw	Not specified	cannabis resin (13 kg)
03/01/2021"	Basrah	With the dealer	methamphetamine (2 kg)
16/04/2021	Basrah	With the dealer	cannabis resin (10 kg)
12/05/2021	Al Faw	With the dealer	cannabis resin (10 kg)
29/06/2021	Basrah	With the dealer	methamphetamine (6 kg)
16/10/2021	Basrah	Not specified	methamphetamine (not specified)
			counterfeit "captagon" (not specified)
			cannabis resin (3.5 kg)
05/08/2022	Basrah		methamphetamine (6 kg)
26/08/2022	Basrah		methamphetamine (11 kg)
10/04/2023	Basrah		methamphetamine (20 kg)
03/05/2023	Basrah		methamphetamine (10 kg)
04/05/2023	Basrah		"captagon" (194,000 tablets)
09/05/2023	Basrah		"captagon" (200,000 tablets)
03/06/2023	Basrah		"captagon" (1 million tablets)
07/12/2023	Basrah		methamphetamine (22 kg)
14/12/2023	Basrah		methamphetamine (12 kg)

Map 10 Primary substances for which people sought treatment across Iraq, 2022



The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations. Sources: Official statistics provided by the Iraqi Ministry of Health; UNAMI.

Note: Benzodiazepines are not classified as NPS. However, benzodiazepines are grouped with NPS in the legend due to information from the Iraqi Ministry of Health regarding the primary substances for which individuals sought treatment.

The evolution of drug consumption and responses in Iraq

Rising drug transshipment through Iraq and neighbouring countries has been accompanied by increased domestic consumption across the country. The number of people with drug use disorders registered by public health services doubled from 2,979 in 2017 to 6,101

in 2021.⁸² Despite the absence of a nationwide survey, some reports indicate a correlation between substance use and communities experiencing higher unemployment rates and economic challenges, especially among adolescents and young adults.⁸³ Reports are emerging of a surge in methamphetamine use in the city of Basrah, and in "captagon" use in areas such as Al Anbar, Ramadi and Baghdad, in particular (see map 10).

As of 2022, over 3,308 Iraqis were receiving treatment for substance use disorders, of which over two-thirds (2,251) were seeking treatment for use of ATS.⁸⁴ Over half of all people in treatment (1,743) and a third of all those using ATS (1,235) were in Baghdad. The next highest caseloads of people in treatment were in the province of Al Basrah (369, including 328 for ATS), Thi Qar (292, including 269 for ATS), Kerbala (210, including 143 for ATS), and Al Muthanna (116, including 111 for ATS). Across the country, over 90 per cent of those receiving treatment are males, which suggests a significant disparity between females and males in drug use and access to care. In general there are more males using drugs than females, but the use of ATS has among the lowest female-male gap at global level, and a comparatively higher female-male gap for women accessing drug treatment.⁸⁵ The large discrepancy between the number of men and women in treatment suggests that women may be a harder-to-reach population than men and further research is needed to understand and address these disparities.⁸⁶

Iraq issued Law 50 on Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances in 2017, which defined penalties for drug trafficking and use.⁸⁷ According to judicial authorities, in 2023 some 7,522 people were arrested for drug use, 2,036 were in pre-trial detention (of whom 130 were women) and 5,486 were sentenced for drug use (of whom 55 were women). During the same year, 7,182 people were arrested for drug trafficking (of whom 213 were women), and 3,560 were in pre-trial detention.⁸⁸

Until recently, there were very few health institutions to support drug dependence and rehabilitation in the country. The first public-private rehabilitation centre in Iraq was launched in Erbil, Kurdistan Region in 2021.⁸⁹ In 2023, Iraq's national authorities started opening a network of formal drug rehabilitation clinics. These are located in Baghdad, the Al-Canal Center for Social Rehabilitation, as well as in Al Anbar, Kirkuk and Najaf. There are plans to extend the programme to other provinces. Baghdad hospital had previously opened a section for treatment and psychological rehabilitation in 2022.⁹⁰

Box. Estimating the retail value of the 2023 ATS seizures in Iraq

In 2023, Iraqi authorities seized a record-high 24 million “captagon” tablets.⁹¹ With a 2023 retail price of \$3.5 per tablet in the province of Anbar, and between \$3.5 and \$6 in Baghdad, the overall retail value of intercepted “captagon” in 2023 can be estimated between \$84 million (Anbar prices) and \$144 million (Baghdad prices).⁹² Assuming that each tablet weighs 0.17 grams, this amounts to approximately four tons of seized “captagon”.⁹³

As for methamphetamine, the upward retail value of \$10 per gram in Baghdad and \$7 in Basrah in 2023, the total estimated retail value of seized methamphetamine in 2023 is between \$8.9 million (Basra prices) and \$12.8 million (Baghdad prices).⁹⁴

Estimated retail value of ATS seizures in Iraq in 2023 (\$) ⁹⁵

Drug type	Seizures* (kg)	Estimated retail value (\$)
Captagon	4,094.00	84 to 144 million
Methamphetamine	1,277.00	8.9 to 12.8 million

Note: These volumes include seizures reported by the Kurdish region of Iraq's General Directorates of anti-narcotics in Erbil and Sulaymaniyah.

Section 3. Drug trafficking enablers in Iraq

Iraq's history over the past four decades, marked by continuous armed conflict and instability, has been a significant factor in shaping its current landscape of illicit activities, including drug trafficking.

The Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s was followed by a series of conflicts, including the Gulf War and the post-2003 conflicts after the US-led invasion, as well as counter-terrorism actions from 2013 to 2017 which resulted in Iraq's territorial victory over ISIL (Da'esh).^{96, 97} These wars caused immense casualties and instability. They also led to the emergence of cross-border criminal networks, including those led by ISIL (Da'esh), and dynamic black markets. These circumstances provided a space for illicit activities as different groups, including drug traffickers, sought to capitalize on the chaos and lack of effective governance at the time.

In addition to armed conflict and political instability in the wider Near and Middle East, international sanctions (1990 – 2003) contracted the Iraqi economy and fuelled underground economies.^{98, 99} Several analyses show that these shocks increased local dependence on informal economies and trafficking, as profiteers sought to take advantage of price differentials for goods and services across borders. Moreover, international sanctions on the Islamic Republic of Iran (2006 –) and the different blockades imposed on neighbouring Syria since 2011 could have also amplified opportunities for trafficking and illegal economies in overcoming sanction restrictions in and around Iraq.^{100, 101} These opportunistic cross-border trafficking activities have later consolidated in a context where Iraq's forces were tied-up in campaigns against ISIL (Da'esh).¹⁰²

As highlighted in the UNODC World Drug Report 2022, conflicts in different regions of the world that challenge the rule of law and governance can create the conditions for starting or expanding illicit drug markets.¹⁰³ Conflicts can substantially alter the illicit drug trade and drug trafficking routes. Armed groups may seek to profit indirectly from existing drug markets via taxation or become involved in illicit production and

trade themselves. Territorial control, enabling actors to secure production and revenues, can lead to competition and violence between groups.¹⁰⁴

In Iraq, the fight against ISIL (Da'esh) and its fall reportedly reshuffled power dynamics. Blurred distinctions between different groups, contested borders and shifting territorial control contributed to a complex geometry of actors then involved in illicit economies, which included trafficking in drugs as well as other commodities.¹⁰⁵ Beyond those involved in smuggling, and other illicit activities, there were a multitude of intermediaries that facilitated the trafficking, such as those involved in transporting and warehousing merchandise, as well as corrupt individuals in different capacities.¹⁰⁶ Armed groups, including local warlords exerting influence over territory, and others, may also have been involved in the drug trade. Checkpoints were established to facilitate the movement of goods, legal and illegal, and these routes became crucial for securing unofficial "taxes" and revenue, often leading to tensions.¹⁰⁷

The 44 interviews conducted for this study highlight the dynamic and diverse ecosystem of actors directly or indirectly involved in trafficking of drugs and related crimes, at times competing or colluding to secure supply chains and financial returns. Despite their heterogeneity, they have the common priority of ensuring territorial control, including along some of the internal routes identified and at some of the borders to manage transit areas.¹⁰⁸

Illegal trading networks that were established during successive wars and in the wake of sanctions have proven to be highly resilient. Dotted with mountains, marshes, and desert and spanning 1,599 kilometres, the frontier with the Islamic Republic of Iran is described as being extremely challenging to control by interviewed Iraqi border control officers.¹⁰⁹ Extensive trans-border kinship networks reduce transaction costs, making it easier for criminal groups, drug smugglers and intermediaries to operate.¹¹⁰ These networks created informal arrangements to facilitate the move-

ment of legal and/or illegal goods in areas under their control. Territorial influence over the borderlands and trade routes, including through the use of checkpoints, have therefore become critical sources of arbitrage and tax revenue for multiple actors. Some of tensions that arise among different actors in Iraq can sometimes be explained with securing economic interests over the control of these trading routes and strategic geographic locations.

Border-crossings and checkpoints along internal routes are reportedly easily breached by diverting illegally sourced products from official crossings, blending and concealing products in legitimate shipments, allegedly forging documentation and permits, and/or bribing law enforcement officials.¹¹¹ For decades, the Iraqi government had struggled to secure control

over large swathes of the country, with a wide array of actors competing, coexisting and colluding, including armed groups and criminal groups. Interviews indicate that entrenched corruption among customs and border officers on different sides of the border can facilitate the movement of all manner of contraband: products are allegedly smuggled against fees depending on the size and type of drug shipments.^{112, 113} For example, some officers at checkpoints across the country reportedly collude with criminal organizations, extracting bribes rather than reporting drug trafficking up their chain of command. According to interviews, some for example earn about \$100 per convoy of methamphetamine smuggled along the fourth domestic drug trafficking route identified, spanning from Ninewa to Diyala province, which is higher than their monthly salary (see map 6).¹¹⁴

Section 4. Conclusions and recommendations

The sheer scale of drug trafficking across the region, the low cost of production and rising demand, in particular for “captagon” and methamphetamine, has led to growing calls for urgent action. There are a number of factors that highlight the importance of a consistent, regional approach to drug trafficking if sustained impact is to be achieved.

Approximately 60 per cent of the Arab world’s population – around 200 million people – are under 30 years old, with many facing unemployment or under-employment.¹¹⁵ The ongoing conflicts in the Middle East further exacerbate the socio-economic problems that drive young men and women towards initiating drug use and participating in illegal economies. Collective, regional responses will be needed to address young people facing deteriorating economic opportunities and to steer them away from drugs and related activities.

Measures to crack down on drug production and trafficking in one country can impact the dynamics of drug production, smuggling, and consumption in another. Political and economic instability, the introduction and enforcement of international sanctions, and changes in the leadership of criminal groups in one jurisdiction can also generate knock-on effects. Shifts in the cost of production of drugs, whether due to increased border and counter-narcotics efforts or the rising price of precursors, can also result in the movement of manufacturing across borders. At the same time, changes in governmental leadership can disrupt ongoing efforts to tackle the problem, leading to inconsistency in approaches. Furthermore, transnational criminal networks adapt quickly to changing circumstances and it is difficult to track their activities in real-time and adapt measures accordingly. Consequently, confronting the transnational nature of criminal activities requires effective and steady collaboration between countries in the region.

While there are multiple political sensitivities both between and within countries, the resilience and agility of criminals involved in drug trafficking, along with their extensive distribution networks, pose a serious risk to security and development. Establishing systems to share information and exchange both best and promising practices among law enforcement and drug rehabilitation centres provides opportunities to develop region-wide strategies. A pragmatic focus on addressing common drug trafficking challenges along shared borders will benefit all in the region and the international community at large.

To advance momentum towards more effective regional solutions, the following recommended actions and support can help to accelerate and operationalize commitments:

- **Governments in the Near and Middle East can step up collective action by urgently implementing international drug-related agreements.** International agreements such as the United Nations Drug Control Conventions, the United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC) and its associated Protocols, and the United Nations Convention Against Corruption (UNCAC) provide ample basis for regional cooperation. National authorities can also enhance information sharing and technical support by leveraging the Commission on Narcotic Drugs (CND) and the Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice (CCPCJ). Not only can this facilitate cooperation to tackle drug trafficking, but it can also provide the basis for coordination to disrupt illicit financial flows and money laundering, including recovering illicit assets that can be re-invested in supporting sustainable development progress.

- **Iraq and fellow members of the League of Arab States, Arab Ministers of Interior Council, and Gulf Cooperation Council can build on existing regional agreements and frameworks.** The Directorate of Social Policies Department of the League of Arab States, with support from UNODC, launched an Arab Plan for the Prevention and Reduction of the Dangers of Drugs to Arab Societies in March 2023.¹¹⁶ The initiative establishes actionable recommendations for developing national and regional strategies to address the impact of drugs. UNODC also signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Arab Ministers of Interior Council in May 2023 to support member states in the fight against narcotics and psychotropic substances, including new forms of transnational organized crime and terrorism.¹¹⁷ Likewise, the UNODC Regional Framework for Arab States (2023–2028) endorsed in March 2023 serves as a platform to foster cooperation with the League of Arab States.
- **Strengthening of bilateral and regional partnership agreements among governments in the Middle Eastern region to enhance their capability to share information and intelligence, conduct joint operations and to collectively disrupt and dismantle narcotic trafficking networks.** Iraq has amplified calls for regional cooperation to enhance counter-narcotics efforts across the Middle East. In addition to hosting the “International Baghdad Conference on Drug Control” in May 2023, the Iraqi Parliamentary Committee established to address counternarcotics visited neighbouring countries to explore the development of legal frameworks and mutual assistance agreements.¹¹⁸
- **The establishment of a regional centre assembling research expertise, law enforcement and security specialists** could be considered to support the design and development of evidence-based coordinated and harmonized responses, including to tackle “captagon”. Such a regional hub could be modelled on existing regional instruments operating in line with international commitments and in collaboration with different specialized international entities. This hub would ideally be located within the region, as per the Iraqi Government’s proposal and in line with the “Final Statement” of the Regional Meeting on counternarcotics held in Iraq in December 2023.¹¹⁹
- **Support is needed to improve data quality, collection and analysis of the sources of drug production, trafficking networks and consumption patterns in Iraq and its neighbours.** While improving, the coverage, quality and availability of data on drug trafficking in Iraq remains partial and fragmented. Technical assistance is also needed to enable the measurement of outcomes and impacts of specific interventions to reduce supply and demand including efforts to address drug use and treatment options.¹²⁰

- Further support is required to promote balanced drug responses. These could encompass **evidence-based demand reduction interventions**, in particular in areas along key drug trafficking corridors which are suffering from increased drug use, along with measures to ensure that people who use drugs are not stigmatized or prevented from accessing adequate treatment and rehabilitation, in line with the Iraqi counter-narcotics strategy (2023–2025).¹²¹ Such counter-narcotic strategies should include a focus on women and youth and acknowledge the important role that civil society, community leaders and religious figures, as well as influencers such as sport leaders, have in addressing and preventing drug problems.
- Capacity building for regional and national authorities should focus on **strengthening monitoring, early warning, and disruption capabilities**. Given the rapid spread and use of synthetic drugs across Iraq and the region, a specific focus is needed to monitor ATS, including local manufacturing, trafficking nodes, and the involvement of different actors.
- **International technical assistance to operationalize commitments to reduce corruption, including petty corruption** is needed to limit illicit flows. Iraq is working with international partners, including UNODC, to strengthen border control, customs, and law enforcement with a special focus on addressing the widespread corruption that enables drug trafficking.¹²² Developing capabilities to “follow the money” and disrupt the revenue and profits that sustain organized crime should be considered a priority.
- “Whole-of-government” and “all-of-society” approaches are key to building ownership of strategies and ensuring the sustainability of responses. **Promoting shared understanding and commitment to tackle the criminal and drug trafficking ecosystem in the region through integrated strategies is critical. Counter-narcotic measures, reinforced border control, and investigative capacities become more effective when they are harmonized and implemented simultaneously across the region.**
- Lessons and experiences from the reform efforts described above can be shared and promoted with partners across the region. This would include adapting responses to address trafficking enablers and simultaneously implementing more geographically and technically targeted cross-border interventions. Regular evaluations of strategies and programmes should be conducted to measure advances, address gaps and ensure effective implementation.

Some first steps along these lines have already been taken by Iraq and other governments in the region. A meeting of foreign ministers from Arab League member states in May 2023 resulted in an agreement with Syria to address illicit drug smuggling on the borders with Jordan and Iraq. Syria's membership of the Arab League was also reinstated.¹²³

In a statement issued in August 2023, the Arab ministerial contact group on Syria welcomed the first meeting of the Jordanian Syrian joint security committee to discuss border control to combat drug

production and smuggling, as well as drug control cooperation and information exchange between the governments of Iraq and Syria, which the statement claimed resulted in the dismantling of an international smuggling network.¹²⁴

In remarks to the General Debate of the 78th session of the United Nations General Assembly in September 2023, Iraq's Prime Minister highlighted Iraq's intensifying efforts to combat drugs and its commitment to being "part of the solution to any international and regional problem".¹²⁵

Methodology and research approach

The UNODC adopted a mixed methodology in preparing this report, integrating both qualitative and quantitative methods, including geospatial and open-source methods that allowed collecting and analysing data from online and official sources and representing it visually on maps. Geolocation coordinates were also encoded allowing for the visualization of seizures by size and location.¹²⁶

Qualitative methods included interviews with key informants from decision-makers, practitioners, subject matter experts, and others. Between 2020 and 2022, a wide range of law enforcement officers, judges, prosecutors, health professionals, civil servants, as well as individuals connected to drug trafficking networks were interviewed, including inmates, drivers, and representatives of affected communities (see interview list below). Findings generated from testimonies were cross-referenced with primary and secondary sources. Additional consultations with Iraqi authorities took place (online) between October and December 2023.

Quantitative methods consisted of data collection and analysis of administrative datasets. Primary information included the Annual Report Questionnaire (ARQ)

and Individual Drug Seizure (IDS) database of the Drug Monitoring platform (DMP). Likewise, UNODC drew on statistical data compiled and shared by the governments of Iraq and neighbouring countries from 2019 to 2023.

In order to better understand the relationships between conflict, border disputes, the impacts of international sanctions on narcotic supply chains, and the proliferation of actors involved, UNODC consulted secondary literature that includes academic studies, policy reports, and declassified documents. A goal was to understand Iraq's challenges in an historical and comparative context.

The report features several limitations that warrant consideration. First, field research was conducted primarily between 2020 and 2022, and data collection efforts were constrained by the COVID-19 pandemic. Second, limited data availability and incomplete datasets resulted in a greater dependence on qualitative methods. Third, the research did not focus on either the local dynamics of conflict economies or the financial dimensions of smuggling.

Details of interviews conducted: 2020–2022

Interviewee	Occupation	Gender	Country
Interview #1	Law enforcement	Male	Iraq
Interview #2	Law enforcement	Male	Iraq
Interview #3	Law enforcement	Male	Iraq
Interview #4	Magistrate	Female	Iraq
Interview #5	Magistrate	Female	Iraq
Interview #6	Magistrate	Female	Iraq
Interview #7	Lawyer	Male	Iraq
Interview #8	Inmate	Male	Iraq
Interview #9	Inmate	Male	Iraq
Interview #10	Inmate	Male	Iraq
Interview #11	Inmate	Male	Iraq
Interview #12	Inmate	Male	Iraq
Interview #13	Inmate	Male	Iraq
Interview #14	Lawyer	Male	Iraq
Interview #15	Law enforcement	Male	Iraq
Interview #16	Law enforcement	Male	Iraq
Interview #17	Law enforcement	Male	Iraq
Interview #18	Low level facilitator	Male	Iraq
Interview #19	Low level facilitator	Male	Iraq
Interview #20	Low level facilitator	Male	Iraq
Interview #21	Law enforcement	Male	Iraq
Interview #22	Low level facilitator	Male	Iraq
Interview #23	Inmate	Male	Iraq
Interview #24	Inmate	Male	Iraq
Interview #25	Inmate	Male	Iraq
Interview #26	Inmate	Male	Iraq
Interview #27	Inmate	Male	Iraq
Interview #28	Inmate	Male	Iraq
Interview #29	Drug user	Male	Iraq
Interview #30	Drug user	Male	Iraq
Interview #31	Drug user	Male	Iraq
Interview #32	Law enforcement	Male	Iraq
Interview #33	Law enforcement	Male	Iraq
Interview #34	Law enforcement	Male	Iraq

Interview #35	Law enforcement	Male	Iraq
Interview #36	Law enforcement	Male	Iraq
Interview #37	Health practitioner	Female	Iraq
Interview #38	Public official	Male	Iraq
Interview #39	Public official	Female	Iraq
Interview #40	Public official	Male	Iraq
Interview #41	Analyst	Male	Iraq
Interview #42	Analyst	Female	Iraq
Interview #43	Analyst	Female	Iraq
Interview #44	Analyst	Male	Iraq

Note: This list comprises interviews primarily with experts and practitioners who were consulted for their expertise only and therefore remained anonymous. Additionally, a select number of interviews with Iraqi officials were carried out in 2021, providing them an opportunity to express official stances. These were supplemented by online consultations conducted from

October to December 2023, involving various representatives from the Iraqi Ministry of Interior, including the Counternarcotics Department, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Kurdish Region of Iraq General Directories of Anti-Narcotics in Erbil and Sulaymaniyah.

Details of consultation conducted online from October to December 2023:

Dates of consultation	Entities concerned
October 2023	Ministry of Interior (Federal Government)
November 2023	Ministry of Interior, including from the Federal Government and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG)
December 2023	Ministry of Interior, including from the Federal Government and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG); Ministry of Health; Ministry of Justice

Annexes

Annex 1. Annual volumes of drugs seized in Iraq, 2019 – 2023 (in kg)

	Total volume seized per type of drugs per year (in kg)					
	Hashish	Opium	Heroin	Cocaine	Methamphetamine	Captagon
2019	20.60	42.50	88.90	0.00	185.30	117.67
2020	19.80	102.40	548.50	0.28	64.80	322.08
2021	45.20	148.70	210.00	0.11	409.80	273.00
2022	54.70	194.90	93.50	0.20	625.70	1,255.50
2023	119.30	362.00	233.00	10.20	1,277.60	4,094.58

Source: Iraqi Ministry of Interior, including from the Federal Government and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG).

Annex 2. Volumes of drugs seized in Iraq, from January to April 2024 (in kg)

Total volume seized per type of drugs per year (in kg)						
Hashish	Opium	Heroin	Cocaine	Methamphetamine	Captagon	
33.00	24.00	19.00	0.00	314.00	610.00	

Source: Iraqi Ministry of Interior (Federal Government only)

Annex 3. Annual volumes of drugs seized per provinces in Iraq in 2023 (in kg)

Provinces	Seized drugs (in kg)						
	Captagon (tablets)	Cocaine	Heroin	Methamphetamine	Opium	Cannabis	Psychotropic substances (tablets)
Private investigations*	656,000.00	-	-	15.85	-	6.26	88,235,294.12
Baghdad Al Karkh	3,550,303.00	0.00	17.50	111.85	36.81	4.54	2,927.00
Baghdad, Al Rusafa	312,490.00	-	-	34.02	-	23.70	14,102.00
Al Muthanna	29,037.00	-	-	15.38	-	0.00	3,804.00
Kerbala	39,000.00	0.02	-	13.79	-	1.48	704.00
Babil	661,431.00	-	-	7.41	0.02	0.00	4,771.00
Al Najaf	41,230.00	-	-	16.16	0.36	0.05	1,760.00
Thi Qar	50,418.00	-	1.00	30.42	0.61	0.02	3,141.00
Diyala	7.00	-	0.01	10.10	7.61	4.25	28,463.00
Al Basrah	866,280.00	0.19	0.16	74.79	0.78	67.09	287,715.00
Salah al-Din	418,462.00	-	0.48	18.27	0.71	0.20	188,742.00
Missan	20,711.00	0.00	-	90.40	55.87	9.70	1,051.00

Wassit	10,341.00	-	0.12	15.34	4.05	2.43	13,456.00
Al Anbar	9,164,927.00	-	10.50	2.04	-	27.58	4,377.00
Al Diwanayah	16,012.00	-	-	10.30	-	0.02	3,147.00
Kirkuk	-	-	0.50	63.62	-	3.05	83,694.00
Ninewa	102,042.00	-	-	2.37	-	0.01	282,019.00
Al Sulaymaniyah	-	10.00	48.00	600.00	163.90	48.00	30,000.00
Erbil and Dahuk	8,147,058.82	-	154.75	145.54	91.36	71.27	4,118.00
TOTAL	24,085,749.82	10.21	233.01	1,277.64	362.07	269.64	89,193,285.12

Source: Iraqi Ministry of Interior, including from the Federal Government and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG).
Note: these volumes are part of the annual volumes of drugs seized in Iraq indicated in Annex 1.

* Refers to seizures handled by non-state security actors (e.g. private security companies).

Annex 4. Annual volumes of drugs seized per provinces in Iraq in 2022 (in kg)

Provinces	Seized drugs (in kg)						
	Captagon	Cocaine Captagon	Heroin	Methamphetamine	Opium	Cannabis	Psychotropic substances (tablets)
Private investigations*	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.11	0.00	0.04	238.00
Baghdad, Al Karkh	1.01	0.00	0.00	9.10	0.00	4.89	12,396.00
Baghdad, Al Rusafa	62.62	0.00	0.00	51.00	0.03	4.67	31,137.00
Al Muthanna	86.50	0.00	0.00	1.46	0.00	0.02	14.00
Kerbala	6.45	0.00	0.00	3.64	0.00	1.11	3,951.00
Babylon	8.00	0.00	0.00	11.50	3.33	0.02	9,624.00
Al Najaf	6.78	0.00	0.005	14.21	0.04	0.05	1,215.00
Thi Qar	14.80	0.00	0.00	17.50	0.00	1.45	1,045.00
Diyala	0.09	0.00	0.00	4.10	2.22	0.41	16,620.00
Al Basra	33.32	0.00	0.00	84.06	3.41	41.92	134,449.00
Salah al-Din	0.36	0.00	0.00	0.96	0.77	0.00	5,756.00
Missan	1.45	0.00	0.002	117.04	0.07	16.06	2,305.00
Wassit	0.04	0.02	0.137	6.34	6.51	1.21	17,243.00
Al Anbar	648.31	0.00	0.00	52.43	0.00	0.70	5,028.00
Al Diwanayah	2.81	0.00	0.00	16.63	0.00	0.07	8,378.00
Kirkuk	-	0.00	0.036	5.54	0.00	0.25	9,704,801.00
Ninewa	15.83	0.00	0.00	6.29	0.00	0.00	44,454.00
Al Sulaymaniyah	-	0.00	40	120.00	85.00	43.00	130,000.00
Erbil and Dahuk	367.24	0.00	21.747	103.83	93.55	11.74	777.00
TOTAL	1,255.58	0.00	61.93	625.74	194.93	127.60	10,129,431.00

* Refers to seizures handled by non-state security actors (e.g. private security companies).

Annex 5. Annual volumes of drugs seized per provinces in Iraq in 2021 (in kg)

Provinces	Seized drugs (in kg)						
	Captagon	Cocaine	Heroin	Methamphetamine	Opium	Cannabis	Psychotropic substances (tablets)
Private investigations*	0.13	0.00	0.00	9.54	0.00	0.15	862.00
Baghdad, Al Karkh	0.53	0.00	0.00	7.56	0.00	1.09	7,987.00
Baghdad, Al Rusafa	1.43	0.00	0.00	29.91	0.34	4.41	32,293.00
Al Muthanna	1.35	0.00	0.00	4.45	0.00	0.01	331.00
Kerbala	4.87	0.00	0.00	4.30	0.00	0.72	171,504.00
Babylon	14.00	0.00	0.00	19.20	2.00	1.02	20,082.00
Al Najaf	44.99	0.00	0.00	20.97	0.37	0.30	2,001.00
Thi Qar	9.78	0.00	0.00	35.29	0.00	1.31	2,698.00
Diyala	0.02	0.00	0.01	2.28	3.85	0.00	17,574.00
Al Basrah	3.72	0.00	0.40	55.02	2.33	28.19	70,384.00
Salah al-Din	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.77	0.00	0.00	10,244.00
Missan	7.03	0.00	0.81	48.20	5.19	91.30	4,668.00
Wassit	0.17	0.00	0.00	2.55	0.61	0.40	65,257.00
Al Anbar	159.84	0.00	0.00	1.98	0.00	61.77	64,815.00
Al Diwaniyah	5.17	0.00	0.00	16.39	0.27	0.09	1,665.00
Kirkuk	-	0.105	15.01	4.86	0.00	0.59	55,815.00
Ninewa	20.41	0.00	0.00	0.49	0.00	5.04	65,752.00
Al Sulaymaniyah	-	0.00	21.00	50.00	50.00	30.60	8,000.00
Erbil and Dahuk	-	0.00	172.78	96.14	83.79	14.56	30,810.00
TOTAL	273.44	0.00	210.00	409.87	148.76	241.55	601,932.00

* Refers to seizures handled by non-state security actors (e.g. private security companies).

Annex 6. Annual volumes of drugs seized in the Islamic Republic of Iran, per bordering provinces with Iraq, 2019–2021 (in kg)

		Total volume reported seized per type of drugs per year (in kg)				
		Opium	Heroin	Morphine	Hashish	Methamphetamine
West Azerbaijan	2019	4,439.00	4,278.00	1,525.00	204.00	263.00
	2020	3,602.00	3,987.00	804.00	921.00	270.00
	2021	2,534.00	5,834.00	1,992.00	1,931.00	1,043.00
Kordestan	2019	1,609.00	12.00	400.00	8.00	99.00
	2020	940.00	7.00	0.00	90.00	9.00
	2021	975.00	25.00	0.00	202.00	100.00
Kermanshah	2019	2,232.00	82.00	0.00	58.00	117.00
	2020	2,594.00	117.00	11.00	663.00	46.00
	2021	2,646.00	99.00	195.00	753.00	76.00
Ilam	2019	275.00	12.00	0.00	11.00	6.00
	2020	242.00	8.00	0.00	44.00	3.00
	2021	454.00	35.00	0.00	65.00	16.00
Khuzestan	2019	8,244.00	101.00	0.00	2,587.00	468.00
	2020	9,504.00	244.00	0.00	1,628.00	500.00
	2021	8,079.00	676.00	8.00	2,666.00	676.00

Endnotes

- 1 Based on information shared by the Iraqi Ministry of Interior in December 2023.
- 2 UNODC, World Drug Report 2023, Executive Summary, p. 52.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Opiate production and trafficking is undergoing a possibly lasting transformation, following an effective ban of opium cultivation by de-facto authorities in Afghanistan. In 2023, opium cultivation was reduced by 95 per cent when compared to the year before. If this trend continues, the region may face strongly reduced opiates trafficking, which may have wider implications on international drug markets, including a further shift to synthetic drugs including ATS. Also see Section 1.
- 5 Based on information provided by the Iraqi Ministry of Interior, including from the Federal Government and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), from 2020 to 2023.
- 6 Ministry of Interior of Iraq: Iraq annual regional meeting on counternarcotic held on 9–10 December 2023.
- 7 Based on individual drug seizures shared and related-drug incidents shared by the Iraqi Ministry of Interior from 2020 to 2023. Also see UNODC Drug Monitoring Platform.
- 8 Based on information shared by the Iraqi Ministry of Interior, and the Iraqi Ministry of Health in December 2023. See Section 2 and the annexes of this report.
- 9 Iraq National Security Services reported the dismantlement of a laboratory for “captagon” manufacturing in Al Muthanna province in July 2023, near the border of Saudi Arabia. In May 2024, a laboratory for “captagon” manufacturing was dismantled in the province of Sulaymaniyah. See UNODC Drug Monitoring Platform.
- 10 The 2022 World Drug Report found that: “Illicit drug economies can flourish in situations of conflict and weak rule of law, and can, in turn prolong or fuel conflict.” UNODC, World Drug Report 2022, Executive Summary, p. 48.
- 11 UNODC, World Drug Report 2022, “Drug market trends: Cocaine, amphetamine-type stimulants, new psychoactive substances”, p. 71.
- 12 UNODC, World Drug Report 2023 (United Nations publication, 2023).
- 13 Danilo Mandić, Gangsters and Other Statemen: Mafias, Separatists, and Torn States in a Globalized World (Princeton: Princeton university Press, 2021), available at: www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv12fw79d.
- 14 UNODC, World Drug Report 2023, Executive Summary, p. 52–53.
- 15 UNODC, World Drug Report 2024 (United Nations publication, 2024).
- 16 UNODC, responses to annual report questionnaire.
- 17 UNODC, World Drug Report 2022, Booklet 4, p. 71.
- 18 UNODC, World Drug Report 2022, Booklet 4, p. 66. Also see International Narcotics Control Board, Report for 2022 (E/INCB/2022/1).
- 19 UNODC, Drugs Monitoring platform.
- 20 International Narcotics Control Board, Report for 2022 (E/INCB/2022/1).
- 21 UNODC, responses to annual report questionnaire.
- 22 UNODC Drug Monitoring Platform.
- 23 Interviews #18, #19, interviews by UNODC, 2021. Interview #41, interview by UNODC, 2022
- 24 Interview #21, interview by UNODC, 2021. Interviews #32, #33, #36, interviews by UNODC, 2022.
- 25 Based on individual drug seizures reported, as well as information shared by the Iraqi Ministry of Interior in 2021 and 2023.
- 26 Based on individual drug seizures shared by Iraqi Ministry of Interior from 2020 to 2023, and information shared by the Iraqi Ministry of Interior during (online) consultations between October and December 2023.
- 27 Ibid.
- 28 UNODC, World Drug Report 2022, Booklet 4, p. 66.
- 29 UNODC, World Drug Report 2023 (United Nations publication, 2023).
- 30 Also see UNODC, Afghanistan opium survey 2023. Available at: https://www.unodc.org/documents/crop-monitoring/Afghanistan/Afghanistan_opium_survey_2023.pdf
- 31 UNODC, World Drug Report 2024 (United Nations publications, 2024).
- 32 UNODC, World Drug Report 2022.
- 33 Based on information shared by the Iraqi Ministry of Interior in 2021 and 2023. Additional sources include interviews #15, #16, #19, #21, interviews by UNODC, 2021.
- 34 Ibid.
- 35 UNODC, World Drug Report 2023, Online segment: <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/wdr-2023-online-segment.html>
- 36 UNODC, “Opiate Trafficking along the Early Stages of the Balkan Route,” 2020.
- 37 UNODC, “Afghan opiate trafficking through the southern route”, 2015. Also see European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA), “EU Drug Markets: Heroin and Other Opioids – Production of Opioids,” January 2024.
- 38 UNODC, responses to the annual report questionnaire.
- 39 Interviews #16, #17, #28 interview by UNODC, 2021. Interviews #32, #42, interviews by UNODC, 2022. Also see European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA), “EU Drug Markets: Heroin and Other Opioids – Production of Opioids,” January 2024. Available at: https://www.emcdda.europa.eu/publications/eu-drug-markets/heroin-and-other-opioids/production_en#box_edmrheroin_iranPakistan
- 40 Information shared by the Iraqi Ministry of Interior, including from the Federal Government and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in 2021 and 2023.
- 41 UNODC, “Drugs Monitoring Platform Brief: Patterns and Trends in Drug Trafficking Modus Operandi of Heroin and Methamphetamine Originating in Afghanistan,” 2022.
- 42 Based on individual seizures reported by the Iraqi Ministry of Interior in 2023, as well as seizures reported by the Combined Maritime Forces (CMF) in the Persian Gulf and Gulf of Oman. See UNODC Drug Monitoring Platform.
- 43 European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA), “EU Drug Markets: Heroin and Other Opioids – Production of Opioids,” January 2024.
- 44 Ibid.
- 45 Reported by Iraqi officials during (online) consultations conducted between October and December 2023.
- 46 Based on information provided by the Iraqi Ministry of Interior, including from the Federal Government and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in December 2023.
- 47 UNODC, World Drug Report 2023 (United Nations publication, 2023). Also see Ministry of Interior of Iraq: Presentation at Baghdad International Drug Control Conference, May 2023.
- 48 Iraq National Security Services reported the dismantlement of a laboratory for “captagon” manufacturing in Muthana province, near the border of Saudi Arabia, in July 2023. See UNODC Drug Monitoring Platform.
- 49 Iraq National Security Services, jointly with the Kurdish Security Agency in Sulaymaniyah reported the dismantlement of a laboratory for “captagon” and methamphetamine manufacturing in Sulaymaniyah, in May 2024. See UNODC Drugs Monitoring Platform.
- 50 Based on individual drug seizures and drug-related incidents shared by the Iraqi Ministry of Interior from 2020 to 2023. Also based on interviews conducted between 2020 and 2022 and detailed in the methodological section.
- 51 Interviews #15, #16, #18, interviews by UNODC 2021. Interview #38, interview by UNODC, 2022.
- 52 Based on individual drug seizures shared by the General Directorates of anti-narcotics in Erbil and Sulaymaniyah in December 2023. About traffickers’ strategy to decrease risks of detection, see also European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA), “EU Drug Markets: Heroin and Other Opioids – Production of Opioids,” January 2024.
- 53 Information provided by the General Directorates of anti-narcotics in Erbil and Sulaymaniyah in 2021, 2022, and 2023.
- 54 Based on information shared by the General Directorates of anti-narcotics in Erbil and Sulaymaniyah in 2021, 2022 and 2023.
- 55 Ibid.
- 56 Based on annual volumes of drugs seized in the Kurdish region of Iraq by type, 2019 to 2023 (see figure 4), and individual drug seizures shared by the General Directorates of anti-narcotics in Erbil and Sulaymaniyah in 2021, 2022 and 2023.

- 57 Interviews #1, #2, #5, interviews by UNODC, 2021. Also based on annual volumes of drugs seized in the Kurdish region of Iraq by type, 2019 to 2023 (see figure 4), and individual drug seizures shared by the General Directorates of anti-narcotics in Erbil and Sulaymaniyah in 2021, 2022 and 2023.
- 58 Methamphetamine is more frequently seized than heroin and opium since 2019 but in smaller quantities.
- 59 Based on information provided by the General Directorates of anti-narcotics in Erbil and Sulaymaniyah between 2020 and 2023.
- 60 Interviews #15, #16, #21, interviews by UNODC, 2021.
- 61 Iraq National Security Services, jointly with the Kurdish Security Agency in Sulaymaniyah reported the dismantlement of a laboratory for “captagon” and methamphetamine manufacturing in Sulaymaniyah, in May 2024. See UNODC Drugs Monitoring Platform.
- 62 Based on information provided by the Iraqi Ministry of Interior from 2020 to 2023. Also based on individual drug seizures and drug-related incidents reported and registered in UNODC Drugs Monitoring Platform.
- 63 Based on individual drug seizures and drug-related incidents shared by the Iraqi Ministry of Interior from 2020 to 2023.
- 64 UNODC Drugs Monitoring Platform.
- 65 Interview #18, interview by UNODC, 2021. Interviews #41, #42, interviews by UNODC, 2022.
- 66 Based on information provided by the Iraqi Ministry of Interior between 2021 and 2023, including individual drug seizures. Also based on interview #32, interview by UNODC, 2022.
- 67 Interviews #15, #21, interview by UNODC, 2021. Also see drug related incidents reported and registered in UNODC Drugs Monitoring Platform.
- 68 Interviews #15, and #16, interview by UNODC, 2021. Interviews 32, #33, and #36, interview by UNODC, 2022.
- 69 Based on information shared by the Iraqi Ministry of Interior between 2020 and 2023, including individual drug seizures.
- 70 Ibid.
- 71 Based on information shared by the Iraqi Ministry of Interior between 2020 and 2023, as well as UNODC Drug Monitoring Platform. Also based on interviews #15, #21, interviews by UNODC, 2021; and interviews #41 and #42, interviews by UNODC, 2022.
- 72 Press release from the Iraqi Ministry of Interior, 4 June 2023.
- 73 Based on individual drug seizures and on drug related incidents shared by the Iraqi Ministry of Interior in 2021 and 2022.
- 74 Information provided by the Iraqi delegation, Container Control Programme (CCP) round table, May 2023, Vienna.
- 75 Ibid. Also see interviews #43 and #44, interviews by UNODC, 2022.
- 76 Interview #21, interview by UNODC, 2021. Interviews #33, #41, #42, interviews by UNODC, 2022.
- 77 Interview #21, interview by UNODC, 2021. Interviews #33, #41, #42, interviews by UNODC, 2022.
- 78 Interview #14, #17, #21, interviews by UNODC, 2021.
- 79 The river extends 200 kilometres with a width ranging from 20 to 200 metres.
- 80 Interview #21, interview by UNODC, 2021; interviews #41, #42, interviews by UNODC, 2022.
- 81 Based on information shared by the Iraqi Ministry of Interior in 2021 and 2022.
- 82 Information on people in treatment in 2022, provided by the Iraqi Ministry of Health in December 2023. Also see <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4431571/>.
- 83 Al-Imam, Ahmed, Michael A. Motyka, Barbara Hoffmann, Hassan Al-Ka'aby, Mohammed Younus, Noor Al-Hemiary, and Michal Michalak, “Risk Factors of Suicidal Ideation in Iraqi Crystal Methamphetamine Users,” *Brain Sciences* 13, no. 9 (2021): 1279, available at: <https://doi.org/10.3390/brainsci13091279>.
- 84 Information on people in treatment in 2022, provided by the Iraqi Ministry of Health in December 2023.
- 85 UNODC, *World Drug Report 2023*, Executive Summary, p. 12. Available at: https://www.unodc.org/res/WDR-2023/WDR23_Exsum_fin_SP.pdf
- 86 Ibid.
- 87 Law 50 on Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (2017) allows courts to issue jail terms of 1–3 years and impose fines for the import, production, or possession of narcotics. Article 288 stipulates life imprisonment for those found guilty of setting up drug production and retail outlets.
- 88 Information provided by the Iraqi Ministry of Justice in January 2024. These figures do not include statistics from the KRG.
- 89 Press releases from the the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), in 2021.
- 90 Press releases from the Iraqi Ministry of Health, in 2022.
- 91 Total volumes provided by the Iraqi Ministry of Interior, including from the Federal Government and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG).
- 92 Calculations based on estimated retail value shared by the Iraqi Ministry of Interior in December 2023.
- 93 One tablet of captagon weights about 0.170 grams. Source: UNODC Drug Monitoring Platform. To convert the number of pills (Q) to kilograms, the conversion factor is $Q \times 0.00017$.
- 94 Calculations based on estimated retail value shared by the Iraqi Ministry of Interior in December 2023.
- 95 The prices used to calculate these estimations for “captagon” are values in both Anbar and Baghdad. As for methamphetamine prices are considered for Baghdad and Basrah. Estimations based on prices provided by the Iraqi Ministry of Interior (Counternarcotic Department) and the General Directorates of anti-narcotics in Erbil and Sulaymaniyah in December 2023.
- 96 Pierre Razoux, *The Iran-Iraq War*, The Belknap Press, Harvard University, 2015.
- 97 S/RES/2682(2023).
- 98 The Iraqi Human Development Index ranked 123 out of 189 countries in 2020. See UNDP (2019). And World Bank (2020) *Iraq Economic Monitor*. Also see: World Bank, “Poverty in Iraq, 2012–2014”, 2016. Available at: https://www.worldbank.org/content/dam/Worldbank/document/MNA/Iraq_unfulfilled_promise_report_chap1.pdf
- 99 Jones, Lee, *Societies under Siege: Exploring How international Economic Sanctions (Do Not) Work*. Oxford University Press, 2015.
- 100 UN sanctions imposed on the Islamic Republic of Iran were primarily focused on its nuclear programme, and compliance with the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and IAEA safeguards. See the following Security Council resolutions: S/RES/1737 (2006); S/RES/1747 (2007); S/RES/1803 (2008); S/RES/1929 (2010).
- 101 The UN did not impose sanctions on the Syrian Arab Republic. Individual countries and regional bodies have imposed their own sanctions and embargoes.
- 102 Field interviews conducted between 2021 and 2022, as well as online consultations conducted between October and December 2023.
- 103 UNODC, *World Drug Report 2022* (United Nations publication, 2022).
- 104 Danilo Mandić, *Gangsters and Other Statesmen: Mafias, Separatists, and Torn States in a Globalized World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021), available at: www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv12fw79d.
- 105 See example of Sinjar in IOM, “Returning to Sinjar: Challenges, Opportunities, and Dimensions of Conflict,” 2020, p. 40.
- 106 Interview #14, interview by UNODC, 2021; and interviews #33, #41, #42, interviews by UNODC, 2022.
- 107 Ibid.
- 108 Interview #14, interview by UNODC, 2021; and interviews #33, #41, #42, interviews by UNODC, 2022.
- 109 Field interviews conducted between 2020 and 2022. A majority of anti-narcotic officers, customs officers and other law enforcement interviewed mentioned that the Iran-Iraq border especially is “extremely challenging to control.”
- 110 Interviews #1, #2, #15, #16, interviews by UNODC, 2021. Interviews #32, #33, #40, interviews by UNODC, 2022.

- 111 Interviews #1, #2, and #11, #12, #24, #18, #19, interviews by UNODC, 2021. Interviews #40, #42, interviews by UNODC, 2022. Also based on individual drug seizures shared by the Ministry of Interior, including from the Federal Government and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) between 2021 and 2023.
- 112 Interviews #18, #19, interviews by UNODC, 2021. Interview #38, interview by UNODC, 2022.
- 113 Interview #22, interview by UNODC, 2021. Interviews #35, #42, interviews by UNODC, 2022. Also on other types of smuggling through the eastern border of Iraq: interviews #18, #19, interviews by UNODC, 2021.
- 114 Interview #22, interviews by UNODC, 2021.
- 115 See ASDA BCW, Arab youth survey, 2023. Available at: <https://arabyouth-survey.com/en/>
- 116 The Plan provides recommendations for development of national and regional strategies to address the impact of drugs at all levels, drawing attention to the importance of international cooperation in addressing this transnational threat, using international standards when it comes to health issues; importance of prevention, treatment and rehabilitation, and sensitizing communities to the nexus with development, human security, violence and organized crime.
- 117 The MoU refers to the need to provide comprehensive responses to countering narcotics and psychotropic substances; ensuring accountability; respecting and promoting human rights in the policy and responses of legal and criminal justice systems; and commit to strengthening border and port security at land, sea and air, and preventing and combatting trafficking in drugs, among others.
- 118 Iraq has accelerated outreach to Arab nations to unify efforts and expand information sharing on drug-related challenges. In 2023, for example, the government-initiated talks with Jordan, the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Syrian Arab Republic, and other Middle Eastern countries to agree on common approaches to tackling the challenge. Iraq also hosted the first ever International Baghdad Conference on Drug Control in May 2023 attended by Egypt, Jordan, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Kuwait, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Türkiye.
- 119 The Final Statement was delivered by the Iraqi Ministry of Interior on the regional annual meeting of the Heads of Counternarcotics in Baghdad on 9–10 December 2023. Available at: <https://www.moi.gov.iq/?article=11171>
- 120 UNODC/WHO International standards on drug use prevention and for the treatment of drug use disorders. Available at: [International Standards on Drug Use Prevention \(unodc.org\)](https://www.unodc.org/international-standards-on-drug-use-prevention)
- 121 The Plan also stresses that drug use surveys must be undertaken to examine trends and dynamics.
- 122 See, for example, UNODC, “Iraq: International cooperation a means to halt transnational drug trafficking and criminal networks”, 18 February 2021. Available at: https://www.unodc.org/romena/en/Stories/2021/February/iraq_international-cooperation-a-means-to-halt-transnational-drug-trafficking-and-criminal-networks.html.
- 123 See declaration of Iraqi Ministry of Foreign Affairs: <https://mofa.gov.iq/2023/37063/>
- 124 See communique of the Arab ministerial contact group on Syria, August 16, 2023. Available at: <https://www.spa.gov.sa/en/fa42d24df3t>.
- 125 See statement of Iraqi Prime Minister at the General Assembly, September 22, 2023. Available at: [UN press release GA/12536](https://www.un.org/press/en/2023/ga/pr202312536.html)
- 126 For more information about UNODC Drugs Monitoring Platform, see <https://dmp.unodc.org/>

