



Shifting Currents: Drug Trade Dynamics and Security Risks in Bahrain



T A B L E O F

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1.

Bahrain's Drug Threat Landscape:

*A Strategic
Overview*





1.1 Introduction

Over the past decade, countries across the Gulf have faced a marked rise in both the scale and complexity of regional drug trafficking, bringing counter efforts to the forefront of regional security and illicit finance agendas. Strategically positioned between major production hubs and key consumer markets, the Gulf is a pivotal artery for illicit drug flows. Traffickers exploit busy maritime corridors like the Arabian Sea, Gulf of Oman, and Red Sea, along with porous land and air borders, turning the region into a critical junction for global narcotics networks.

Despite being a stable and strict enforcer against drug crime, **Bahrain is not immune to regional drug trafficking threats, leaving it exposed to both security and illicit finance risks.** The Kingdom is dealing with evolving challenges driven by various factors—including rising drug production in neighbouring countries, increased use of commercial transport corridors for trafficking, and escalating domestic demand. These dynamics underscore the need for enhanced security and illicit finance responses at the regional level.

While Bahrain does not rank among the Gulf's top drug trafficking hubs, it still occupies a meaningful role in the regional illicit drug landscape. The Kingdom functions as both a modest consumer market and an increasingly used transit point within wider regional and international smuggling networks—particularly for synthetic drugs and cannabis.

Its strategic location and active international trade environment make it an attractive waypoint for traffickers, despite its small size and

island geography. At the same time, a growing domestic demand for illicit substances has further entrenched its role in the region's drug trade.



Drug seizure patterns underscore this dual threat: frequent small-scale possession cases point to ongoing domestic consumption, while occasional large-scale interdictions indicate Bahrain's involvement as a transit point in these wider regional and international trafficking routes.

About this report:

• **This report analyses the key threats associated with drug trafficking in Bahrain, situating them within the broader context of the Gulf region.**

Drawing on open-source research, desktop analysis, and intelligence gathered through AMAN's network, it assesses both current dynamics and emerging risks.

• The report identifies three principal drug threats—**methamphetamine (meth), Captagon, and cannabis**—each presenting distinct but interconnected trafficking trends that reflect the evolving nature of regional narcotics networks.

• The report also examines critical jurisdictional risks. Chief among these are the Kingdom's geographic proximity to the "Golden Crescent" countries (**Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan**) and its shared artificial border with Saudi Arabia via the **King Fahd Causeway**, which exposes Bahrain to shifting patterns in regional drug production, trafficking, and consumption.



KEY TAKEAWAYS

Overview



Drug trafficking is a major security concern for Bahrain, reflecting regional trends across the Gulf.

Key factors driving drug trafficking risks include: **rising drug production in neighbouring countries, increased use of commercial transport corridors for trafficking, and escalating domestic demand.**

The uncovering of large-scale trafficking operations suggests that Bahrain is being targeted by sophisticated criminal networks, heightening the Kingdom's vulnerability to the convergence of organised crime and illicit finance.

The Kingdom has recorded a sharp increase in both the number and scale of drug seizures in recent years: **In the first half of 2025, authorities recorded over 700 drug-related cases, with the Kingdom on track to surpass previous years' seizure totals.**



KEY THREAT 1 – METHAMPHETAMINE

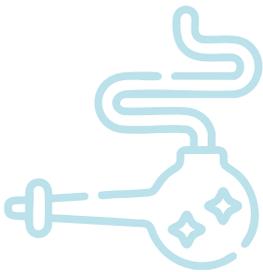
- **Meth (“shabu”)** has emerged as a primary drug trafficking threat to Bahrain, with trafficking networks leveraging maritime, air, and land routes to move meth into the country.

- **Key jurisdictional risks:** Bahrain’s geographic proximity to the **‘Golden Crescent’** countries—Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan—exposes it to cross-border maritime meth trafficking, as these nations play an increasingly central role in global meth production and distribution.

- Regional crackdowns on Captagon production are likely contributing to a **rise in meth trafficking risks**, driven in part by strong demand for and high profitability of meth across the Gulf.

- Criminal trafficking networks are **moving away from strictly traditional small-scale methods (e.g., dhows) to large-scale, containerised shipping.**

- This shift indicates that traffickers are shifting to **harder-to-interdict vessels** (e.g. commercial ships protected under international law) and more sophisticated trafficking routes involving international trade.



KEY THREAT 2 – CAPTAGON

- Captagon is among the **most frequently seized** drugs in Bahrain, with traffickers using a variety of techniques to move pills into the country.

- The Gulf’s Captagon trade is undergoing a fundamental shift with the fall of the Assad regime, with **new production hotspots emerging.**

- **Jurisdictional risks:** Evidence of increased **Captagon production in Houthi-controlled areas in Yemen**—financed by Iranian-backed actors—creates a direct land corridor into Bahrain via Saudi Arabia (King Fahd Causeway). Moreover, Saudi Arabia also exposes Bahrain to heightened risks due to Saudi serving as the globe’s key consumer market for Captagon.

- There is a notable trend of **Europe as a transshipment hub** for Captagon, with European transnational criminal groups involved in trafficking operations.



KEY THREAT 3 – CANNABIS

- Bahrain is a major destination for cannabis (herbal and hashish), with the drug consistently ranking **among the most seized** drugs by Bahraini law enforcement.

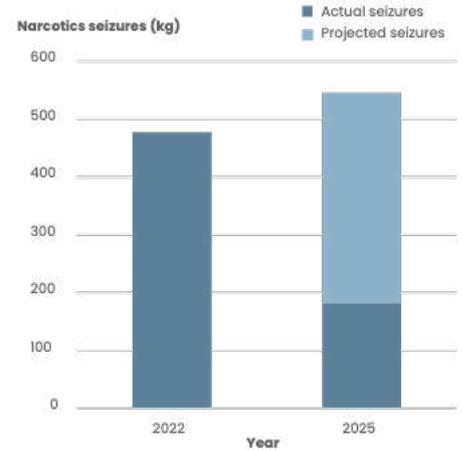
- **Jurisdictional risks:** The primary source countries for cannabis entering Bahrain are **Saudi Arabia and Iran**, with Iran-based trafficking networks implicated in maritime smuggling operations targeting Bahrain.

- One striking trend is the **co-occurrence of both meth and hashish smuggled within the same shipments**—suggesting that trafficking groups may be consolidating smuggling efforts to maximise profit and efficiency.

1.2 An evolving threat landscape in Bahrain

Drug trafficking remains a major security concern for the Kingdom as a key predicate offense to money laundering and a vehicle for transnational criminal activity. As Bahrain prepares for its next Financial Action Task Force Mutual Evaluation in 2026, it is crucial for the country to examine drug trafficking risks, given the illicit drug trade’s status as a key predicate crime for money laundering. The Kingdom has recorded a sharp increase in both the number and scale of drug seizures in recent years.

- Bahrain’s Customs Affairs [reported](#) a 48% rise in narcotics, pills, and related substances trafficked through Bahraini ports from 2021 to 2022. Moreover, 830 trafficking operations were stopped in 2022 and seizures reportedly, included about 478 kilograms of various narcotic substances and 241,000 narcotic pills.
- Comparatively, between January and April 2025, authorities [recorded](#) over 700 drug-related cases and seized over 182 kilograms of illegal substances. If narcotics seizures continue at the same pace, 2025 is likely to surpass 2022 by approximately 68 kilograms. These figures suggest that there are many small-scale smuggling cases, alongside somewhat frequent large-scale seizures.



BAHRAIN’S STRONG ENFORCEMENT CAPABILITIES

Bahrain’s increased drug seizure levels are indicative of various developments—including escalating threat, improved law enforcement effectiveness, or a combination of both. As drug trafficking remains a pervasive threat across the region, seizure levels in Bahrain likely reflect the sustained presence of associated risks.

At the same time, the rise in seizures likely reflects Bahrain’s ongoing commitment to enhancing enforcement capabilities—such as improved intelligence gathering, advanced screening techniques at ports and airports, and closer inter-agency coordination. This focus signals Bahrain’s determination to disrupt drug networks despite its smaller size, positioning the country

as a proactive player in regional drug control efforts.

Bahrain is also an active member of regional and international counter-drug efforts, including cooperation with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Anti-Narcotics Committee and collaboration with INTERPOL and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), as well as combined operations such as the Combined Task Force 150, which conducts maritime interdictions to prevent the smuggling of drugs in the region.

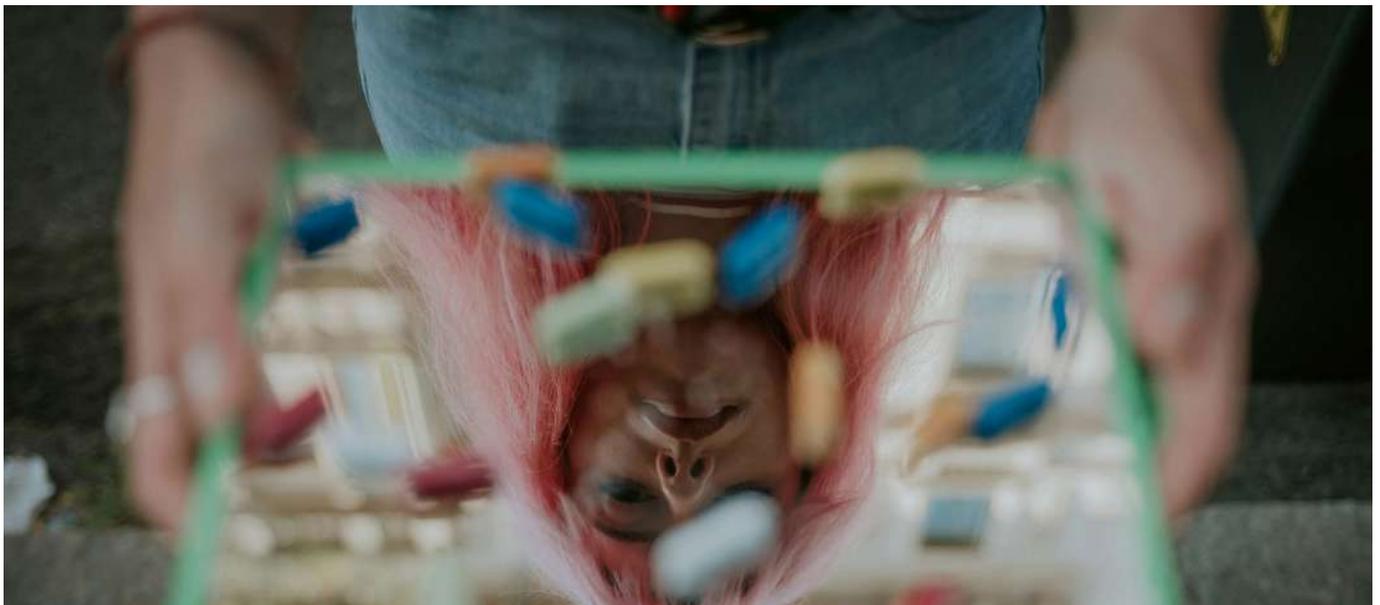
Taken together, these efforts reflect Bahrain’s strategic approach to combating drug trafficking—balancing domestic enforcement with active regional and international cooperation to address a shared and evolving threat.

Overview of Bahrain’s Illicit Drug Market:

- The synthetic drug trade has become Bahrain’s largest drug market in recent years—most notably methamphetamine (meth) and Captagon. According to [research](#) by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (Global Initiative), Captagon and meth has become the most seized drugs in the country, accounting in large part for the substantial rise in the overall drug seizure levels in the Kingdom.
- Cannabis (including hashish) also remains a key threat and is also one of the most seized drugs in the country. The Global Initiative’s research also suggests that Bahrain primarily serves as a destination market for these drugs, although to a lesser extent functions as a transshipment hub for cannabis.

Notably, drug trafficking operations targeting Bahrain have become more sophisticated and international in scale. During **Bahrain’s 2018 Financial Action Task Force (FATF) Assessment**, the National Committee for Combating Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Crimes [concluded](#) that trafficking was mostly limited to small-scale trafficking rings with minimal cash flow. However, seizures since 2018 suggest a key shift: **larger volumes, cross-border supply chains, professional concealment tactics, and the use of methods like dead drops all point to involvement by international, highly organised networks.**

The scale and complexity of recent trafficking operations suggest Bahrain is being consistently targeted by regional networks, exposing the Kingdom to the interconnected threats of drugs, conflict, and illicit finance.



Growing sophistication of trafficking threats in Bahrain

A 2023 [seizure](#) of over 33 kilograms of hashish and BD700,000 worth of meth (or “Shabu”) by Customs Affairs highlights how trafficking risks in Bahrain are becoming increasingly more organised, professional, and large-scale. Authorities intercepted a shipment of drugs hidden inside a potato shipment from an Asian country. An investigation uncovered that the owner of the company behind the import shipment has been linked to transnational trafficking efforts, including attempting to build networks of customs and shipping intermediaries.

OVERVIEW OF BAHRAIN'S KEY TRAFFICKING PATTERNS

Between January and April 2025, Bahraini authorities recorded over 700 drug-related cases and seized over 182 kilograms of illegal substances.

According to the Global Initiative's Global Organized Crime Index, the most seized drugs in Bahrain as of 2023 were:

- Methamphetamine (shabu)
- Captagon
- Cannabis (including hashish)



Type	Smuggling Pattern/Tactics	Geographical Dynamics
Maritime	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Traffickers using international commercial shipments via container ships. • Traffickers using small boats or dhows for offshore clandestine transport and drops. • Traffickers using ship-to-ship transfers or offshore drops. • “Criminal networks are exploiting large, highly connected ports as transshipment hubs to lend an appearance of legitimacy. • Criminal networks using intermediaries and shell companies to obscure origin or beneficial owners. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Source originating in Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, or India and entering via Persian Gulf or Gulf of Oman. • Source originating in the Middle East more broadly and entering via transshipment ports.
Air & Postal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Traffickers using commercial flights and concealing drugs on person or in luggage. • Traffickers using international postal or courier services. • Traffickers using air freight and commercial shipments. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Source origin can be more international in scope as air trafficking lends itself to a wider international reach.
Land	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Traffickers using private or commercial vehicles and travel. • Drugs are hidden in cargo or car parts. • Criminal groups often use human “mules” or couriers. • Bribery of custom officials and use of illicit networks to bypass controls is commonplace. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Primary route: King Fahd Causeway from Saudi Arabia (as only land route). • There is a secondary risk of neighbouring countries to Saudi Arabia who may seek to transport via Saudi Arabia into Bahrain.

1.3 The Gulf drug trade in context

Drug trafficking has become an increasingly significant challenge across the Gulf region, marked by rising narcotics volumes and growing domestic drug issues—particularly involving Captagon and meth. Seizure data and enforcement activity in Bahrain, as well as in countries like Saudi Arabia and the UAE, likely indicate a sharp rise in smuggling attempts. (However, this trend may also reflect more sophisticated and proactive law enforcement efforts, rather than solely an increase in trafficking activity—though the scale, complexity, and regional entrenchment of trafficking networks indicate a clear rise in drug levels).

While the overall scale of drug trafficking in the Gulf is alarming, the impact and dynamics vary across individual countries within the region. As the table below shows, Bahrain’s drug seizures remain smaller compared to other Gulf countries—however this is largely due to the size of Bahrain compared to its neighbours. For example, the UAE [seized](#) 12,340 kilograms of narcotics in 2024,

reflecting its larger population and trade volume. Saudi Arabia also reports higher seizure levels which is largely reflective of it being the largest country in the region.

In contrast, Bahrain is smaller, with fewer transit routes and a more limited international transportation sector. It still faces significant drug threats relative to its size, however. While smaller in scale, Bahrain’s per capita seizure rate remains noteworthy. Moreover, recent cases reveal more sophisticated concealment and transnational criminal involvement, trends that could give cause for concern.



OVERVIEW OF GULF REGIONAL TRAFFICKING TRENDS

Scale of Threat: In the span of just three months in 2025, an International Security Alliance operation linked to the Gulf [seized](#) over \$2.9 billion in narcotics, resulting in the arrest of more than 12,000 individuals.

- This underscores the vast scale of the problem, reflecting growing concerns over rising trafficking of drugs in the region, especially amphetamine-type stimulants and methamphetamine.

- Many Gulf countries have recorded multi-year highs in drug seizures, highlighting the region’s escalating role in the illicit drug trade.

Country	Current Landscape
Bahrain	Bahrain has a projected annual drug seizure of around 500–600 kilograms for 2025 (if year maintains current trajectory), reflecting a notable increase in enforcement activity. As previous outlined, while its absolute seizure volumes remain smaller than those of its larger neighbours, Bahrain faces substantial threats from sophisticated regional trafficking networks.
Saudi Arabia	Saudi Arabia, the largest Gulf country by both population and land area, reports significantly higher drug seizure levels than Bahrain. The Kingdom regularly intercepts massive drug shipments, including multi-ton consignments of Captagon, hashish, amphetamines, and other narcotics. Its vast land borders with several countries, extensive coastline, and proximity to major trafficking routes make it a critical frontline.
UAE	The UAE also reports significantly higher drug seizure levels than Bahrain, reflecting both its larger population and its role as a major international transit and logistics hub. Its extensive ports, global air links, and advanced trade infrastructure make it an attractive route for illicit drug trafficking. Organised criminal networks also frequently exploit the UAE’s financial systems and free trade zones.



2.

Bahrain's Methamphetamine Trafficking Landscape



2. Threat 1 – Bahrain’s Methamphetamine Trafficking Landscape

2.1 Overview of threat landscape

Meth, locally referred to as “shabu,” has emerged as one of the most significant synthetic drugs trafficked through Bahrain in recent years.

The country has increasingly become a key destination market for meth, alongside other synthetic narcotics such as Captagon and synthetic cannabinoids.

Traffickers employ a variety of sophisticated methods to smuggle meth into Bahrain. As will be discussed below, recent [busts](#) reveal that air cargo and international mail remain prominent channels for smuggling, with drugs often [concealed](#) within seemingly innocuous packages. In some cases, traffickers have utilised dead drop techniques, hiding shipments in predetermined locations for covert retrieval, complicating enforcement efforts. These methods underscore the adaptability and resourcefulness of trafficking networks operating within and around Bahrain.

Given Bahrain’s geographic proximity to regional meth production and transit hubs, the threat landscape is further complicated by cross-border smuggling networks. This has prompted enhanced cooperation between Bahrain’s security agencies and international partners to disrupt trafficking routes and dismantle organised criminal groups. Continued vigilance and collaborative efforts remain essential to mitigating the meth trafficking threat and protecting public health and security in Bahrain.

2.2 A shifting regional landscape

As [outlined](#) by the New Lines Institute, **a staggering surge in meth production—especially crystal meth—is occurring across the Middle East.** Following the Assad regime’s fall in Syria and the subsequent seizure of major industrial-scale Captagon labs, the region is now facing a probable shortage of Captagon. Given that meth and Captagon share many of the same precursor chemicals and manufacturing processes, there is a significant overlap in production capabilities. As a result, as **more enforcement efforts turn towards Captagon by regional security actors, a shift towards meth is likely to occur—which could lead to a rise in meth trafficking across the region.**

The United Nations has already reported a surge in meth seizures in recent years in the Middle East, with one [report](#) highlighting a drastic increase in seizures of the drug, from 2.5 tons in 2017 to 29.7 tons in 2021. Criminal groups across the region are increasingly exploiting the drug’s high market value and small physical size, which makes it a highly lucrative commodity and ideal for smuggling across borders. Furthermore, the drug’s growing popularity, especially among younger populations, combined with its addictive properties, ensure a steady and expanding customer base. This rising demand incentivises criminal networks to ramp up production, distribution, and marketing efforts.





2.3 Jurisdictional risks – the Golden Crescent region

The **recent surge in methamphetamine trafficking within the Golden Crescent region—the region centred around the mountainous peripheries of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and eastern Iran long associated with illicit opium production—poses a growing threat to Bahrain.** As trafficking routes evolve and expand, Bahrain’s strategic geographic location makes it increasingly vulnerable as both a transit and destination country for meth produced in the region.



Iran as key source country

Over the last half decade, Iran has been a key source of narcotics trafficked into Bahrain. According to the Chief of Bahrain’s General Directorate of Criminal Investigations, Iran was the [main source](#) of narcotics smuggled into the Kingdom from 2007 to 2021.

There have been various large-scale arrests of Iranian trafficking networks and drug seizures in recent years in Bahrain. For instance, in 2019 Bahraini authorities arrested a drug smuggling network operation across the sea from Iran, according to reporting by [CNN’s Arabic branch](#). It had smuggled drugs worth approx. BHD 1.65 million that included hashish, marijuana, and shabu. In total, Bahraini authorities have said that over 52 individuals involved in drug trafficking networks in Bahraini waters in coordination with contacts in Iran have been arrested over the past decade.

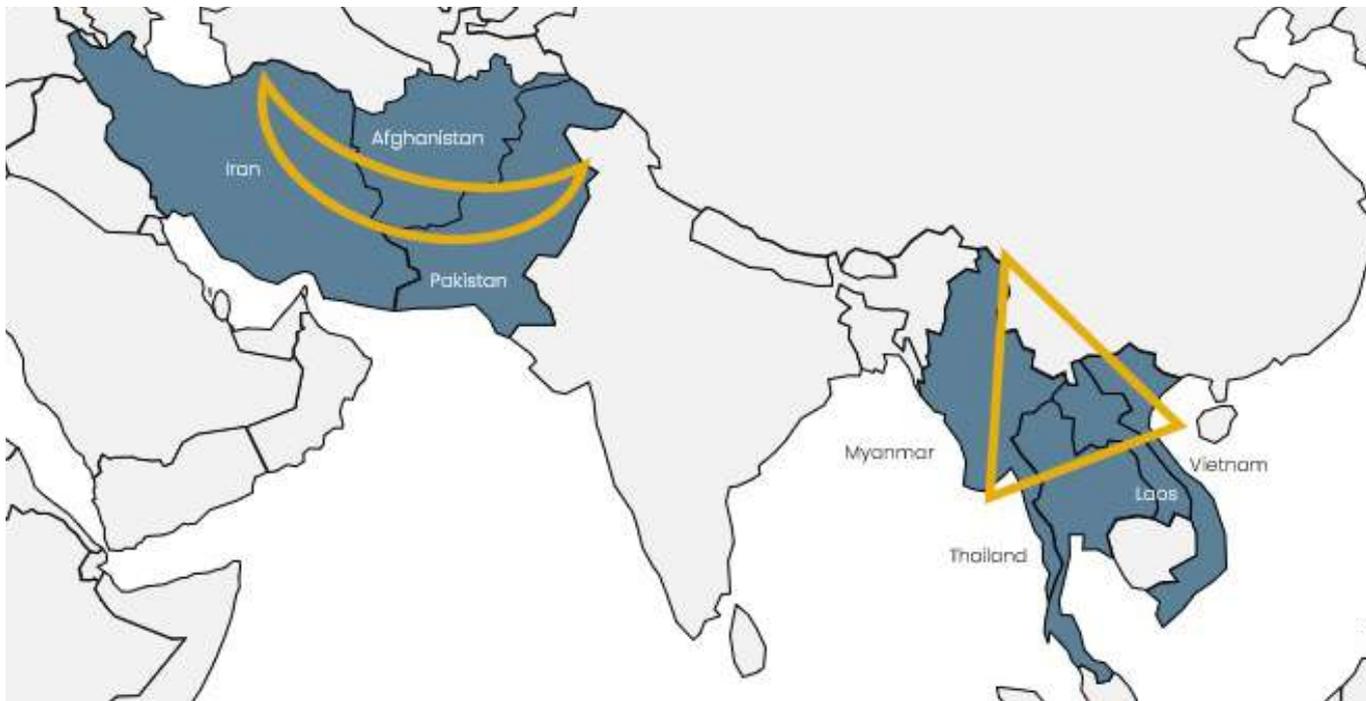
Following a Taliban-imposed [ban](#) on opium cultivation in 2022 and a corresponding [95% drop](#) in poppy cultivation in Afghanistan the following year, there has been a noticeable shift toward synthetic drug production and trafficking in the country. Experts have pointed towards **a surge in Afghan-based meth production and trafficking.** (It is important to note, however, that poppy cultivation saw a rebound in 2024, which could be for a multitude of reasons including a strategic tolerance on the part of the Taliban; this suggests that a widespread shift towards meth trafficking from heroin in Afghanistan may not in reality pan out.)

Given Afghanistan’s porous borders and lack of effective law enforcement, an increase in domestic meth production and trafficking pose a threat to the entire Middle East.

The Gulf of Oman serves as a key trafficking corridor for groups operating in this region. For [example](#), in 2024 Combined Maritime Forces seized an estimated \$24.5 million worth of drugs from vessel in the Gulf of Oman in just two days. Experts believe that sizeable portions of the heroin and meth that transit via this route are shipped in steel-hulled ships flagged by Iran or Pakistan.

Experts have also pointed towards a **notable trend of increased meth trafficking along the Pakistani coast**. The amount of meth seized in Pakistan [increased](#) nearly sevenfold in just one year, from 86.7 kilograms in 2022 to 589.1 kilograms in 2023. The UN has [reported](#) on the key involvement of Pakistani brokers in regional meth trafficking operations, citing a 2023 trafficking assessment.

While not part of the Golden Crescent region, **India is a neighbouring country to the region and has also seen a reported increase in meth trafficking and production in recent years**. One of the key drivers of this trend is its geographic proximity to the Golden Triangle region (comprising Myanmar, Laos, and Thailand) which remains one of the world's largest illicit drug-producing areas.



- Most notably, India has reportedly become a [key transit point](#) for meth trafficked from Myanmar, with the 2021 military takeover in Myanmar triggering a significant spillover effect.

- The resulting instability has weakened state institutions and enabled the expansion of conflict-driven economies, creating fertile ground for drug production and cross-border trafficking.

India also increasingly serves as a processing and redistribution hub, with reports of clandestine meth labs being uncovered in states like Maharashtra and Gujarat. These labs suggest that Indian criminal networks may be expanding their role from transit and conduit hubs to producers and refiners of meth. This would present another concerning trend for Bahrain as it could increase volumes and more consistent flows of meth entering Gulf markets, especially through maritime routes across the Arabian Sea.

challenges and lead to greater enforcement burdens at air and seaports, especially in the screening of commercial cargo.

Together, an increase in meth production across the Golden Crescent region (and India) could intensify maritime trafficking pressure on Gulf ports. New production networks and hubs mean less understood supply chains and trafficking routes, which can intensify law enforcement

UNODC cites India as major precursor hub

Both the US and UN have [cited](#) India as a major hub of illicit shipments of precursor drugs destined for meth labs internationally, with criminal enterprises operating in the country taking advantage of India's huge chemical industry. For Bahrain, this not only raises concerns about increased trafficking of India-produced meth entering Gulf markets but also the potential for Bahrain to become a transit or destination point for precursors coming from India.

Exploration of Routes from Afghanistan into Bahrain

Segment	Overview
<p>Route 1: Via Iran (Primary Maritime Route into Bahrain) - High Risk</p>	<p>This is likely one of the most active trafficking routes into Bahrain currently. Meth produced in Afghanistan may move over land into Iran and is then smuggled by sea from Iran's southern coast across the Persian Gulf directly to Bahrain.</p> <p>Most seizures involving Iran have been maritime in nature. This route has primarily involved small boats such as fishing dhows, with traffickers concealing drugs in boat cargo and using seabed drops, where drugs are dumped underwater and retrieved later near Bahrain.</p> <p>Iran is also in its own right a major production hub of meth, another key driver of meth trafficking risks to Bahrain.</p>
	<p>Route 2: Via Pakistan (Less Direct Route) - Medium Risk</p> <p>This is commonly thought of as a less direct but still viable route, especially for meth trafficked via the Makran Coast of Pakistan. Smuggling could involve long-range maritime routes containerised cargo. Taking this trajectory, ships pass through the Gulf of Oman and may stop at other Gulf country ports. This route may also be used in cases when Bahrain is used as a transshipment point for other destination markets.</p> <p>The Arabian Sea more generally is a major maritime route for drug trafficking, serving as a critical transit point for drugs such as heroin and meth coming from India. Unflagged ships are a growing issue in the Arabian Sea, and its vast international waters provides traffickers with a degree of operational flexibility.</p>

2.4 Maritime trends

A regional shift noted by experts is that of criminal trafficking networks carrying out more sophisticated, large-scale maritime operations—leading to an increased involvement of containerised shipping and steel-hulled vessels over traditional, small-scale smuggling methods. A UN [report](#) from 2025 highlighted this growing trend across meth trafficking internationally, stating that there was an indication that **“traffickers are now willing to take greater risks by moving larger quantities through maritime routes.”**

Historically, dhows and other small fishing vessels have been widely used to traffic meth, heroin, and hashish across the Gulf region. The effectiveness of this technique stems from the ability of these small vessels to blend seamlessly with legitimate commercial and fishing fleets, as well as their capacity to operate under minimal regulation. Often lacking formal registration, these vessels were typically exempt from strict maritime tracking and documentation requirements — a loophole that has enabled their extensive use in illicit trade.

However, in recent years, law enforcement agencies across the Gulf have increasingly scrutinised these vessels due to their frequent use in drug trafficking. In response, **traffickers have begun shifting to alternative maritime methods**—most notably the use of steel-hulled ships and containerised cargo. These larger, commercial vessels have reportedly become integral to regional trafficking networks, including those that operate over land and through air routes. This matches global trends as well.

- For example, a September 2025 BBC [report](#) found that a group of cartels linked to the notorious Kinahan organised crime group, which operates globally including in the Gulf region, have purchased cargo ships directly to use in trafficking operations.

- In one case, the group bought a ship for around £10m, flagged in Panama, which was used as the primary way to smuggle drugs into European waters.

Often, **trafficking via these larger cargo ships across international waters includes the use of at-sea drop off methods** (i.e. “cross-ships” or “dumping sites”) to offload drugs—where the “mother” vessel transfers illicit cargo onto smaller vessels. These smaller, “daughter” boats are then used to take drugs ashore.

- This suggests that even with the trend of larger cargo ships being used in the Gulf to traffic drugs, smaller boats such as dhows may continue to play an important role as daughter crafts. They may not be the primary form for long-haul smuggling (which utilises larger vessels), but their flexibility, lower detection risk, and ability to slip in near coasts or use informal landing sites make them ideal for the final leg.

Overall, the trend towards using larger, commercial ships and more sophisticated smuggling strategies underscores the need for enhanced maritime and customs surveillance at the domestic and cross-country level. The use of legitimate commercial shipping—where narcotics are concealed within everyday goods such as construction materials, furniture, or foodstuffs—makes law enforcement and detection far more difficult.

In fact, some maritime security coalitions—which have more limited and conditional law enforcement powers than national coast guards—have seen reported declines in drug interdictions in the Gulf in recent years. This decline is likely reflective of the reduced effectiveness of these coalitions, which typically cannot board commercial ships at will and need explicit consent from a vessel’s flag state. **As a result, more sophisticated and complex smuggling operations that exploit commercial**



shipping are less likely to be detected or disrupted by these coalitions.

Importantly, this trend should not be interpreted as a broader failure of drug law enforcement across the region nor a decline in seizure rates overall; **rather, it highlights the challenges faced in international waters and how criminals look to exploit these challenges, as outlined in more detail below.**



COMBINED TASK FORCE 150 CASE STUDY

A commander from Combined Task Force 150 (CTF 150)—which leads maritime interdiction operations in the Gulf—noted in a troubling trend in 2025: although the number of vessel boardings has increased, narcotics seizures have declined sharply, indicating a drop in interdiction effectiveness.

- In 2022, CTF 150 conducted 33 boardings and seized illicit cargo in 32 cases—a 97% success rate.
- By 2024, boardings rose to 55, but only 17 seizures were made, reducing the success rate to 31%.
- As of mid-2025, just six seizures have resulted from 26 boardings, bringing the success rate down further to 23%.

These figures—compiled by the Regional Narcotics Interagency Fusion Cell, which supports the

Combined Maritime Forces and U.S. Naval Forces Central Command—suggest a strategic shift by traffickers toward larger, more elusive vessels such as commercial container ships. Unlike traditional dhows, these vessels are harder to interdict due to legal protections under international law: under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), enforcement agencies cannot board foreign commercial vessels on the high seas without flag-state consent, except under limited and specific circumstances.

Interestingly, this shift suggests that drug traffickers are likely to be exploiting legal and jurisdictional limitations of international maritime coalitions to transport and smuggle drugs across the Gulf.

Task Force 150 Interdiction Records*		
Boardings	Seizures	Hit Rate
2022		
33	32	97%
2024		
55	17	31%
2025**		
26	6	23%

2.5 Trafficking air and land routes

Meth smuggling into Bahrain via Bahrain International Airport has become a growing concern for authorities. Traffickers increasingly use creative and risky concealment methods to bypass customs inspections. Recent cases reveal a range of techniques including body packing, luggage modifications, and concealment within everyday consumer goods.



4.75 kg of meth seized at Bahrain International Airport

A smuggling attempt was prevented in March 2025 when a customs officer [discovered](#) 4.75 kilograms of meth glued beneath a suitcase lining, triggering a string of arrests that exposed a cross-border trafficking network. The drugs were stuffed in black nylon packets. The two men caught with the luggage claimed to have been used as unknowing mules by a foreign national.

Air cargo and postal packages have also been exploited as smuggling channels. Meth has been seized from packages arriving through air freight services, often disguised within legitimate commercial shipments or addressed to third parties. There is evidence of both small-scale operations, such as smuggling 1,000 grams of meth [via shampoo bottles](#) in a postal package, as well as larger scale operations using commercial air cargo in Bahrain.

Smuggling via air cargo facility

In November 2024, Bahraini authorities [seized](#) a significant quantity of drugs with an estimated street value of BD11,000—including meth and cannabis—at an air cargo facility. Suspects were arrested after attempting to collect the packages.

Customs intelligence plays a significant role in intercepting these attempts—suspicious patterns or tips frequently lead to successful interdictions. Authorities have also reported the use of third-party couriers or unknowing recipients, which complicates investigations and obscuring the real perpetrators. In 2025, one individual's drug trafficking sentence in Bahrain was [overturned](#) after it was found that no evidence linked him to a parcel sent from Europe containing drugs hidden in toy kits, for instance.

Bahrain faces non-trivial risks of meth trafficking linked to its shared land connection to Saudi Arabia via the King Fahd Causeway. The causeway is a major transit route for people and goods between the two countries, which makes

it a natural channel for smugglers to attempt transporting illicit substances. The causeway sees large numbers of vehicles daily, which allows for concealment opportunities (in vehicle cavities, hidden compartments, or mixed with legitimate cargo). This makes border inspection more challenging.

Saudi Arabia is facing a growing challenge with meth trafficking and consumption, which leaves Bahrain vulnerable to secondary effects. Saudi Arabia has seen rising domestic demand and recent seizures highlight the scale and sophistication of trafficking operations—meth is increasingly smuggled in bulk through Saudi ports and border crossings, including [via vehicles](#).

Major operations have uncovered attempts to traffic hundreds of kilograms of drugs into Saudi Arabia.

• In one April 2025 [case](#), Saudi authorities arrested four individuals, one Saudi national and three Pakistani residents, after they attempted to smuggle 147 kilograms of meth into the Kingdom. They had concealed the drugs in marble shipments arriving at Jeddah Islamic Port.

The scale of the threat is concerning for Bahrain, especially as Bahrain is [reportedly](#) itself experiencing rising demand domestically for the drug.

Domestic trafficking: Dead-drop method

Once drugs are inside Bahraini borders, the task of moving the drugs to domestic traffickers and consumers is presented. Discussions with AMAN's local network indicates that "dead drop method" is a common technique used by drug traffickers and dealers to avoid direct, traceable contact with buyers. In Bahrain, this method has been increasingly adopted by criminal networks to distribute narcotics while minimising detection risk.

Typically, traffickers advertise drugs via encrypted messaging apps like WhatsApp, often using foreign phone numbers. Once a buyer transfers payment—usually through local bank accounts—the dealer sends a photo and GPS location of the "dead drop" site, where the

drugs have been pre-hidden in public areas such as construction sites. This allows the seller to remain physically removed from the transaction, reducing the risk of arrest during the handover.

In one case from 2024, Bahraini law enforcement [dismantled](#) a four-person criminal network involved in the import, sale, and distribution of narcotics using the "dead drop" method via WhatsApp. The group would wait until after receiving payment via money transfers to send the location to buyers. The network was led by a foreign national who lived outside Bahrain, highlighting the key transnational nature of even domestic smuggling operations.

Illicit financial risks

- 1. FORMAL FINANCIAL CHANNELS** – This case showcases the risk of exploitation of local banks for laundering of drug proceeds. Criminals may set up local bank accounts under the guise of legitimate transactions (e.g. small business payments).
- 2. MONEY MULES** – These bank accounts most often do not belong directly to the leadership of the criminal enterprise or traffickers, but instead to low-level money mules or dealers who are recruited to maintain the bank account without real control over it. Criminals employ local residents as mules to obscure beneficial ownership and avoid suspicion.
- 3. SOCIAL MEDIA AND MESSAGING APPS** – Criminals often recruit young or economically vulnerable individuals to serve as money mules. There is a worrying trend of mules being recruited via social media (e.g. Instagram) or via encrypted messaging platforms (e.g. Telegram) to open bank accounts or receive transfers for small sums of payment.
- 4. STRUCTURING TECHNIQUES** – Criminals often use structure payments for local bank accounts to avoid detection and suspicious activity reporting thresholds. Under this technique, large drug proceeds will be broken down into smaller deposits.

3.

Bahrain's Captagon
Trafficking
Landscape





3. Threat 2 – Bahrain’s Captagon Trafficking Landscape

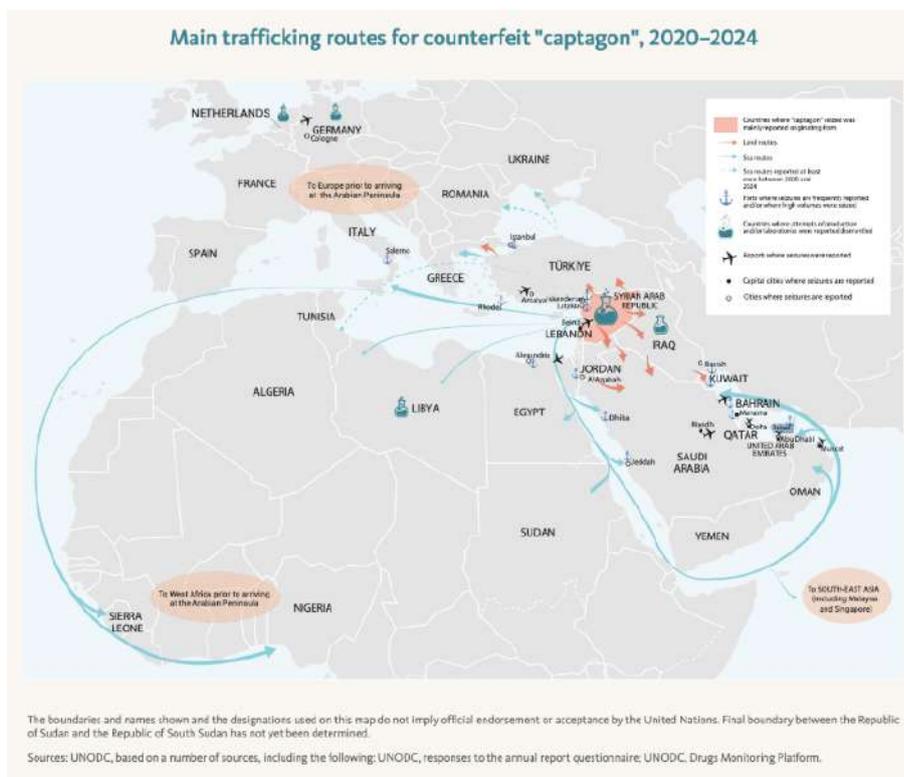
3.1 A new era for the Gulf’s Captagon trade

Once a little-known pharmaceutical, Captagon has become one of the most trafficked and profitable illegal drugs in the Middle East. Originally [manufactured](#) in the 1960s in Germany to treat attention and behavioural disorders, it was quickly banned worldwide for its addictive and harmful effects. The drug re-emerged during the Syrian civil war and is now widely consumed across the Gulf, especially by young adults and low-wage workers. [According](#) to the Global Initiative, although data on Bahrain’s specific consumer market for Captagon is limited, reports indicate that the drug is used in the country both for its stimulant effects to promote wakefulness and for its appetite-suppressing properties to assist with weight loss.

Until 2025, the Assad regime, backed by Hezbollah, had been the driving force behind Captagon production. Facing sanctions and economic collapse, the regime [turned](#) to the drug as a survival strategy. Production was protected by regime forces—particularly the elite Fourth Division, led by Maher al-Assad—making Captagon a major state-backed revenue source and blurring the lines between government, organised crime, and illicit finance. The Observatory of Political and Economic Networks [estimated](#) that the profit generated by the Assad regime and linked Lebanese actors from Captagon alone from 2019–2022 was \$7.3 billion, well above any other single source of revenue.

Seizure levels across most of the Middle East during this period were highest for Captagon of all drugs, with over a billion Captagon pills seized.

- To put this into context, the number of Captagon pills seized in those four years exceeds the combined total of all other synthetic drug seizures in the region over the same period (although towards the latter half, meth seizures were increasing rapidly)—and represents a scale of production and trafficking on par with major cocaine flows from Latin America to Europe.
- At its height, some [estimates](#) have placed the illicit trade at three times the combined profit of all major Mexican drug cartels.



Source: https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/WDR_2025/WDR25_Special_points_of_interest.pdf

The Gulf region plays a pivotal role in both the trafficking and consumption of Captagon. Bahrain has thus far experienced fewer incidents related to Captagon compared to some of its Gulf neighbours.

- Notably, Saudi Arabia has been the world's [leading consumer market](#) for Captagon in recent years and a prime target for traffickers seeking to exploit this lucrative demand. The country's vast size and extensive land borders create numerous entry points, complicating efforts to control smuggling routes. Traffickers have developed sophisticated networks and methods, establishing Saudi Arabia as a central hub in the regional drug trade (and leaving Bahrain exposed, which will be discussed in detail later).

- Bahrain is not immune to the challenges posed by the illicit trade and Captagon continues to enter Bahrain, raising concerns for law enforcement and public health officials alike. In fact, [according](#) to the Global Initiative, Captagon is among the most frequently seized drugs in Bahrain.

Captagon trafficking into Bahrain

Captagon is smuggled into Bahrain using a variety of techniques. Often, the pills are hidden in shipments of food or other commodities. In other cases, they are concealed inside vehicle parts or hidden within false compartments in cargo or personal luggage.

There have been multiple reported cases of pills smuggled inside shipment of fruit, as being perishable and fragrant can help mask the smell of the drugs. In one warehouse raid in Douma, Syria of a Captagon factory, for instance, false labels were [found](#) for a plum shipment to Bahrain. As fruit is commonly shipped globally in large volumes, this offers a supply chain cover and seemingly legitimate commercial rationale for shipments.

There have also been reported cases of pills concealed within other commodity shipments. In October 2024, Bahraini authorities [announced](#) the arrest of an individual linked to the smuggling of approximately 130,000 Captagon pills, worth approximately \$1.7 million. Authorities revealed that the drugs were cleverly concealed within a shipment of tightly sealed pipes, which were prepared in specialised workshops to evade detection. The investigation traced the origin of these specific Captagon pills back to Lebanon.



The regional Captagon trade has entered a new era. Following the fall of the Assad regime, Syria's new leadership has sought to dismantle the trade, [targeting](#) production facilities and destroying hundreds of million Captagon pills. Despite these efforts, entrenched networks remain, and Syria continues to be a key hub, according to a UN 2025 World Drugs [report](#). Violent [retaliation](#) by criminal groups against the new government highlights the ongoing challenges in fully disrupting the Captagon pipeline.

Captagon appears to have enduring staying power in not only Syria but the whole region. While Syria remains central to the trade, ongoing crackdowns by the current regime have created supply constraints that other regional actors are eager to exploit. There is little evidence that demand is declining across the region, suggesting a production gap that presents an opportunity for other players to step in. The widespread availability of precursor chemicals, coupled with strong financial incentives and existing smuggling networks, makes the Captagon trade an attractive venture for illicit actors.

Production and trafficking operations have shifted into new countries and even regions. Production equipment has been [uncovered](#) in countries like Libya and Iraq, while Turkey has become an increasingly important [transit point](#). [Research](#) from the New Lines Institute also suggests that Sudan is rapidly emerging as a key hub for Captagon production, highlighting the trade's evolving geography and growing international footprint.



High-profit margin of Captagon

The market price per pill will likely increase as there is a shortage in supply. Already a drug with a high profit margin—costing less than \$1 to produce and selling for as much as \$20 a pill in the Gulf—this means that the financial incentive to engage in the Captagon trade has likely never

been higher. Moreover, criminal actors can make more money now with smaller production and smuggling operations, meaning more organised crime groups can enter the market and make profit even with smaller scale trafficking operations.

3.2 Rise of Houthi and Iranian-backed Captagon production

The shifting dynamics of Captagon production and trafficking signal the emergence of new regional threats for Bahrain. The rise of alternative production hubs and financing networks brings with it a proliferation of illicit actors and smuggling routes, reshaping the landscape of regional drug trafficking. In fact, [research](#) by the New Lines Institute highlights the increased sophistication and expansion of smuggling routes for Captagon, as well as a surge in demand.

One of the most concerning developments for Bahrain is the risk of Yemen, via Houthi-controlled areas, becoming a key Captagon production hub. Recent reports suggest that Houthi-controlled areas in the country are playing a growing role in the drug's production and trafficking. In June, Yemeni authorities [seized](#) 1.5 million Captagon pills hidden in a truck travelling from Houthi-controlled areas to Saudi Arabia. Authorities said the bust reflects the presence of extensive drug production and smuggling networks operating inside Houthi-controlled territory, and that the Houthis were exploited the fall of the Assad regime to try and transform Yemen into a new starting point for the Captagon trade.

Moreover, Yemeni authorities have [stated](#) that investigations point to **the Iranian regime as the primary financier and coordinator for Houthi-established production**, including the establishment of drug factories and trafficking networks. This could lead to Iranian smuggling routes or networks playing an increasingly prominent role in the Captagon trade, which leaves Bahrain vulnerable—as Iran has been a key source of drugs into Bahrain over the last decade. Moreover, the potential illicit financial side of these operations would be a key security threat to the region.

Additionally, as Yemen shares a border with Saudi Arabia, this means that there would be a **near-direct “land” route into Bahrain via a Captagon production hotspot**. There have been documented cases of Captagon smuggling into Bahrain via the King Fahd Causeway. Smuggling pressure could inevitably spill over into Bahrain and smugglers would not need to navigate maritime or air operations.

The Houthi-Bahrain Trafficking Nexus

YEMEN



- Captagon is produced primarily in Houthi-controlled areas such as Sana'a and Saada.
- Large-scale production via labs with Iranian financing and operational support.

SAUDI ARABIA



- Captagon is trafficked across the Yemen-Saudi border, such as via the Al-Wadiah border crossing.
- Domestic and regional trafficking networks carry out the operations by hiding drugs in vehicles or cargo.

BAHRAIN



- Captagon enters Bahrain via the King Fahd Causeway, with same or new smugglers using similar smuggling methods such as hiding within the vehicle itself.
- The drug enters domestic markets.

3.3 King Fahd Causeway as a potential nexus

Saudi Arabia, Bahrain's largest neighbour, has widely been recognised as the world's top domestic market for Captagon, a position that has amplified the region's overall demand and incentivised large-scale trafficking operations. Between 2012 and 2021, Saudi Arabia reportedly [accounted](#) for a staggering 67% of all global Captagon seizures, underscoring the scale of the problem and its potential spillover effects on neighbouring countries like Bahrain.

This risk is especially pronounced for Bahrain due to the shared King Fahd Causeway. While the causeway serves as a critical artery for legitimate trade and travel between Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, it also represents a significant security vulnerability. The sheer volume of cross-border traffic makes comprehensive monitoring and inspection challenging, creating opportunities for traffickers to conceal illicit shipments.

As a result, **the causeway is frequently exploited as a smuggling route**, with reports from both Bahraini and Saudi authorities, as well as regional

news outlets, consistently showing the causeway as a major entry point for drug smuggling.

Given these dynamics, Bahrain faces not only the direct threat of domestic consumption and trafficking but also the broader implications of being connected—economically, geographically, and logistically—to the region's largest Captagon market.

KING FAHD CAUSEWAY

In January 2025, Saudi authorities announced the [seizure](#) of approximately 120,000 Captagon pills inside a vehicle attempting to enter Saudi Arabia from Bahrain via the King Fahd Causeway. The pills were found hidden inside the cavities of the vehicle's doors. There have also been other busts of individuals attempting to transport Captagon via vehicles along the King Fahd Causeway.

3.4 Risk of Europe as a key transshipment hub

The risks associated with the Middle East's Captagon trade extend well beyond the region itself. A key area of concern is the involvement of European organised crime groups, along with the exploitation of Europe's logistics and commercial sectors as a method to lend legitimacy. The Mediterranean in particular has played—and continues to play—a critical role in the Captagon trade, as an operations and logistics hub.

Europe has served as a key transshipment point for Captagon arriving from the Middle East and bound for the Arabian Peninsula, particularly Saudi Arabia. This is because traffickers seek out the legitimacy that EU documentation and custom stamps lend to shipments. This can allow large commercial shipments containing Captagon, or other drugs, to pass through Gulf customs with less scrutiny.

- Captagon trafficking networks have also increasingly exploited European shell companies to obscure the ownership and origin of drug shipments. These paper entities—often registered in jurisdictions such as Cyprus and Malta—facilitate access to international shipping routes and financial systems while helping traffickers forge documentation that makes containerised shipments appear legitimate.
- Shell companies are frequently linked to European organised crime groups, which provide logistical expertise, warehousing, and port access, particularly in Southern Europe.



A CASE STUDY: THE NOKA

In 2018, the Greek Hellenic Coast Guard [intercepted](#) the cargo ship “Noka” as it was carrying over \$100 million in Captagon pills and hashish. En route from Latakia, Syria to eastern Libya, the bust highlighted extensive links between Captagon trafficking and European organised criminal networks.

In this case, an intricate web of companies, individuals, and intermediaries was exposed. **An internal AMAN investigation reveals links between the Noka bust and Captagon shipments headed for Bahrain**—specifically via ties to the warehouse in Douma that contained the plum shipment labels mentioned earlier in this report.

See the AMAN risk map below for details on this network.

One individual prominently linked to the operation was **Mahmud Abdulilah Dajj**, a Syrian-Libyan national sanctioned internationally (including by OFAC). According

to Libyan court documents, Dajj leads a criminal enterprise that has carried out various Captagon trafficking operations. In addition to being linked to the Noka bust, he has also been linked to other drug seizures, including at the ports of Al Khums, Benghazi, and Tobruk in Syria. An investigation revealed that Dajj rented a depot in eastern Benghazi through his company Al Tayr International Trading to receive drug shipments, reportedly bribing local customs officers to clear the consignments without inspection.

Another key player in this case is the owner of the Noka ship, **Taher al-Kayali**, a maritime and logistics businessman with an unsavoury past. Al-Kayali's history includes a 2015 conviction in Italy for luxury yacht theft and smuggling, and since 2023, he has been on multiple sanctions lists across the UK, EU, and US, as well as on the UK's Companies House Disqualified Directors list (which he remains on as of 2025).

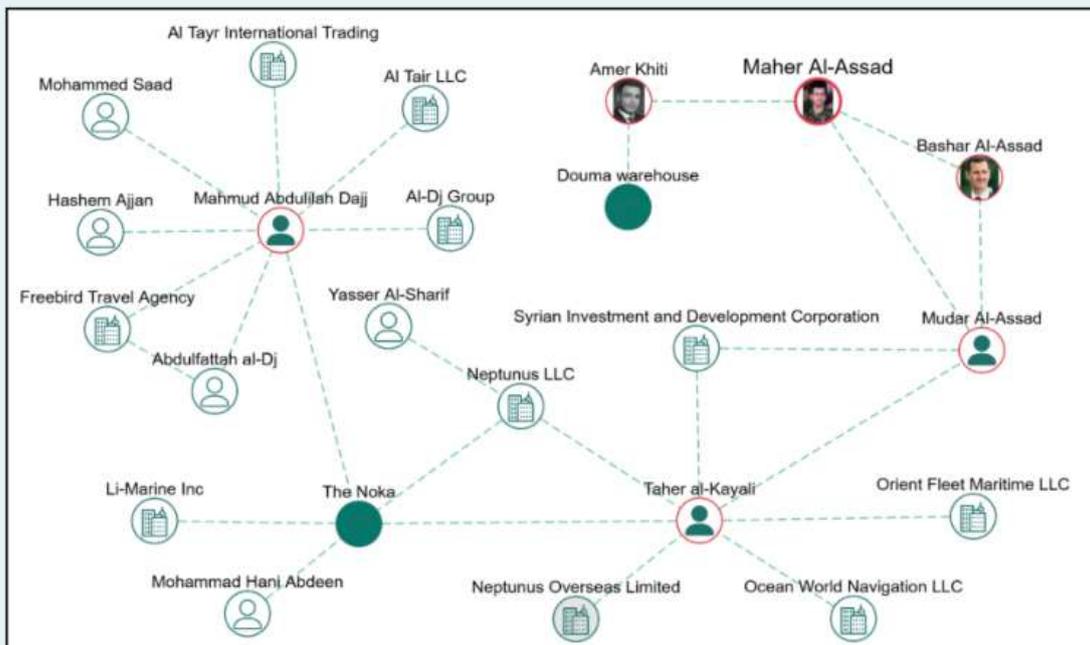


Al-Kayali’s companies—Neptunus Overseas Limited (UK), Neptunus LLC (Syria), Ocean World Navigation LLC, and Orient Fleet Maritime LLC—formed the backbone of a shipping and concealment network used to transport Captagon and other illicit goods. **Yasser Al-Sharif**, co-owner of Neptunus LLC, worked alongside Al-Kayali in acquiring the Noka and facilitating its voyages. The ship was directly managed by Li-Marine Inc., a Syrian-Lebanese entity noted in Greek court records.

Together, these individuals and their affiliated companies and intermediaries created a complex network that blended legitimate commercial fronts with illicit operations. By exploiting complex corporate structures and international shipping infrastructure, this criminal group not only fuelled Captagon drug trafficking but also contributed to regional illicit finance and conflict.

The network had direct links to **Maher Al-Assad**, who oversaw much of Syria’s Captagon trafficking at the time. For instance, Latakia port was under tight control of the Fourth Division under Al-Assad’s leadership, including control over customs and permitting. According to the US Treasury, this consolidated control and resulting trafficking operations materially assisted the Syrian regime.

Revenue from the sale of Captagon was likely used to buy weapons, pay fighters, maintain control of territory, and sustain patronage and criminal networks. By using companies and intermediaries overseas, this specific network was able to obfuscate its connections to the Assad regime and its trafficking infrastructure.



4.

Bahrain's Cannabis
Trafficking
Landscape



4. Threat 3 – Bahrain’s Cannabis Trafficking Landscape



4.1 Bahrain’s cannabis landscape

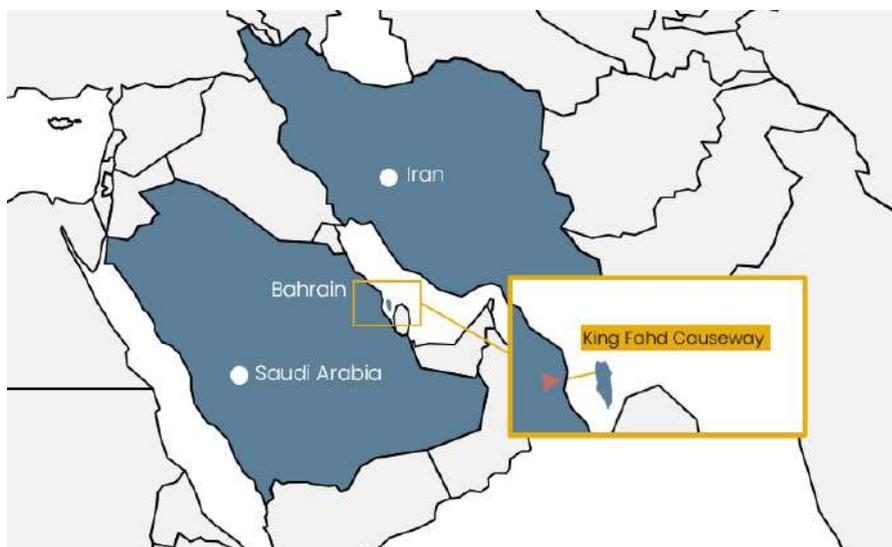
Bahrain is a large destination country for cannabis and, to a lesser extent, a transit country, [according](#) to the Global Organized Crime Index. Cannabis, in both herbal and resin (hashish) form, consistently ranks among the most seized narcotics by Bahraini customs and law enforcement authorities. This is supported by both domestic trafficking networks and foreign-linked supply chains and highly organised international criminal enterprises.

The Gulf struggles with large levels of cannabis and hashish trafficking, with regional production hubs, established trafficking routes, and high domestic demand. There have been cannabis resin trafficking networks linked to Afghanistan and Pakistan, as well as Lebanon and Syria. Lebanon’s Bekah Valley region and areas in Syria’s northwest, south, and eastern provinces are also key cultivation hubs for cannabis in the Middle East. These hubs export cannabis from maritime ports to international transshipment hubs, as [outlined](#) by the New Lines Institute.

4.2 Jurisdictional risks for Bahrain

The primary source countries for cannabis and hashish entering Bahrain are Saudi Arabia and Iran, according to [research](#) by the Global Institute. Interestingly, this matches Bahrain’s risk landscape for meth, with many of the same routes, methods, and actors involved in the trafficking of both cannabis and meth.

A notable pattern is the involvement of **Iranian-based trafficking networks**, which have been frequently implicated in maritime smuggling operations targeting the Kingdom. The King Fahd Causeway is another common entry point for hashish. Smuggling operations are often international in nature and can involve individuals of multiple nationalities, increasing both the complexity and the risk of detection.



One striking trend is the co-occurrence of hashish smuggled within the same shipment as meth or Captagon—several seizures have included multiple drug types, suggesting that traffickers are consolidating their smuggling efforts to maximise profit and logistical efficiency. This overlap not only highlights the multifunctional nature of trafficking networks in the region but also underscores the growing complexity of Bahrain’s drug interdiction challenges.



4.3 Domestic trafficking

Domestic trafficking networks and criminal groups in Bahrain utilise similar methods for trafficking cannabis and hashish domestically as they do for meth and Captagon. These tactics often include the use of drop-points, coded communication and social media, and small, organised distribution cells.

Notably, foreign nationals appear to play a significant role in the domestic trafficking and street-level distribution of cannabis and hashish, suggesting the presence of transnational elements within the local drug trade.

This involvement may reflect both the diverse expatriate population in Bahrain and the influence of external supply chains connected to regional or international trafficking routes.



DEAD-MAIL METHOD USED FOR CANNABIS

In September 2025, Al Bilad [reported](#) that Bahraini authorities had arrested two suspects for their attempts to smuggle CBD (Cannabidiol, the non-psychoactive compound found in cannabis) into the country via a mail parcel. A customs official at Bahrain International Airport noticed that one of the mail parcels arriving from abroad appeared suspiciously dense. Upon examination, it was found to contain bed sheets weighing 850 grams hidden inside the package. The bed sheets contained 27 A4 sheets of paper soaked in CBD, which is illegal in Bahrain. The investigation revealed that the package was linked to a criminal network importing drugs for the purpose of trafficking in Bahrain.

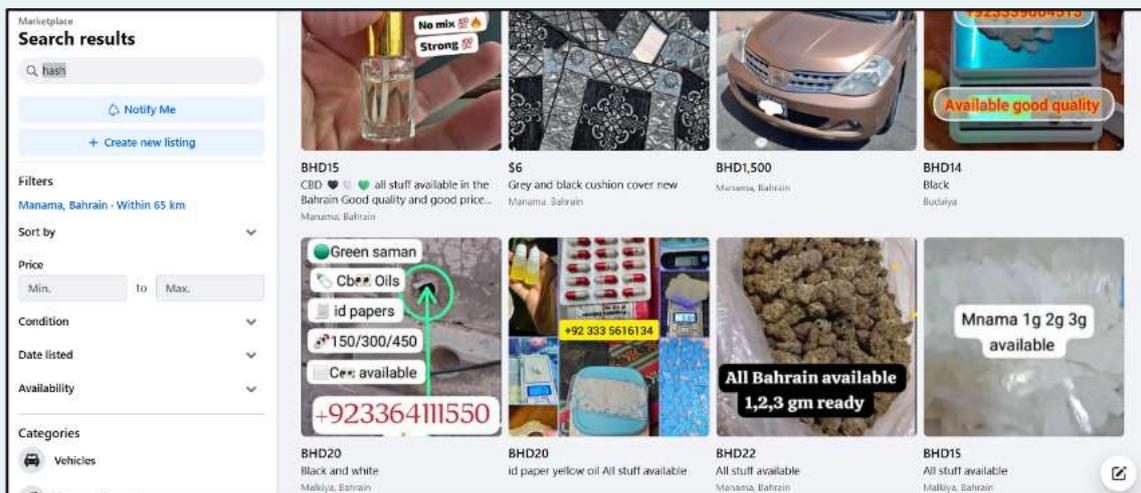
This case reflects a growing smuggling trend regionally—the “dead mail” method. This technique is used normally for smaller amounts of drugs to avoid detection more easily. The method involves an untraceable mail package, often without a valid return address, to traffic illegal drugs or other contraband through postal systems. Often, a random drop address or residency is used as the shipping address—with smugglers then monitoring the delivery address to retrieve the package before the actual resident picks it up. This can result in individuals being identified as the recipients of packages despite having no actual connection to the drug operation, making them victims as well.



USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA FOR DOMESTIC TRAFFICKING

Law enforcement and the media have warned about the increasing use of social media platforms for drug promotion in the Gulf states. One Al Bilad article from 2023 investigated the role of social media platforms for drug promotion and sale in Bahrain specifically. The article found that several types of narcotics—including hashish—were being advertised on social media by numbers with Pakistan’s country code. The dealers indicated that the drugs could be delivered locally to buyers, signalling that the drugs were already present in Bahrain.

Our AMAN team did an internal investigation and found that hashish is commonly listed on Facebook marketplace in Bahrain. Using the search term “hash,” several advertisements with pictures of hashish and cannabis, as well as their “stash” locations, were revealed.



5.

Conclusion



5. Conclusion

The findings of this report underscore that Bahrain is facing a growing and multifaceted threat from regional drug trafficking networks—mirroring broader patterns observed across the Gulf. Driven by rising drug production in neighbouring states, increasingly sophisticated trafficking methods utilising commercial shipping routes, and sustained domestic demand, the Kingdom is becoming a target for transnational criminal actors and their illicit financial networks.

As regional trafficking routes diversify and expand, Bahrain’s strategic position has inadvertently placed it at the crossroads of a much larger geopolitical and criminal web. The rise in drug seizures and trafficking-related cases in recent years suggests that traffickers are both adapting and intensifying their operations in and around Bahrain. These developments not only pose a direct threat to public health and community safety but also undermine financial integrity by fuelling money laundering and related crimes. The convergence between criminal networks, violent actors, and informal financial channels adds another layer of complexity that requires a comprehensive, whole-of-government response.

By leveraging the insights gained from this research, Bahraini stakeholders have the opportunity not only to reinforce the Kingdom’s national security and safeguard the integrity of its financial system, but also to take on a leadership role in the Gulf region at large. Through proactive engagement and collaboration with international authorities and neighbouring countries, Bahrain can help shape a more unified, strategic, and resilient regional response to the growing challenges posed by drug trafficking, its transnational criminal enablers, and the illicit financial flows they generate.





What can be done? The findings of this report highlight the importance of broader strategic efforts to combat transnational crime and illicit finance in Bahrain and in the Gulf. Rather than viewing illicit drug threats in isolation, Bahrain and its partners must begin to interpret these patterns as early warning indicators of new forms of convergence between organised criminal networks, regional security dynamics, and financial crime.

What emerges from this analysis is a clear need to shift from a reactive posture to a more anticipatory and intelligence-led approach.

- The increasing complexity of trafficking operations demands a broader understanding of how licit infrastructure and unknowing actors are being exploited for illicit purposes.
- The overlap of trafficking networks, the consolidation of multi-drug shipments, and the involvement of international actors all point to a level of organisation and adaptation that requires equally agile and coordinated responses from international coalitions and security efforts.
- The use of commercial transport systems—such as containerised shipping and air cargo—requires more robust screening protocols and better risk-profiling tools that balance security with the flow of legitimate trade.
- The geographical diversification of production and transit hubs—especially in unstable or conflict-affected areas—means that traditional assumptions about trafficking routes are no longer reliable, requiring continuous monitoring and real-time intelligence sharing.
- The expansion of transnational criminal drug networks and their overlap with other illicit economies and regional conflicts underscores the need for a more holistic threat-mapping approach that goes beyond drugs alone.

For Bahrain, this means enhancing how drug trafficking is addressed within the wider national security and financial crime landscape, efforts which are already [underway](#) with the government's own **National Strategy for Combating Money Laundering and Terrorist Financing**. Anti-drug trafficking efforts—as a key threat vector within the Kingdom's AML/CFT strategy—must go hand in hand with illicit finance law enforcement and regulatory efforts.

Bahrain's upcoming MENAFATF Mutual Evaluation in 2026 presents an opportunity—not just for compliance, but for transformation. Effectively addressing these evolving threats requires investment across four critical pillars:



• **Technology and innovation.** Advanced anti-financial crime solutions—including enhanced due diligence, network analysis, and automated suspicious activity detection tools—are essential for identifying the financial footprints and illicit networks of drug trafficking operations. These technologies enable both law enforcement and the private sector to detect emerging criminal typologies, expose complex schemes, and map hidden connections at the depth and scale needed to truly fight transnational organised crime.



• **Capacity building and training.** Investing in capacity building and targeted training across both the public and private sectors—including law enforcement, regulatory bodies, and businesses—is critical to strengthening the ability to detect and respond to red flags linked to drug trafficking. Developing this expertise is key to disrupting illicit financial flows and enhancing coordinated efforts to combat drug-related crime. Effective training should cover a range of typologies, including trade-based money laundering, the misuse of corporate structures, and the convergence of drug proceeds with the legitimate economy.



• **Research and intelligence.** Building a comprehensive threat picture requires ongoing research into trafficking patterns, emerging routes, and the financial methods employed by criminal organisations. Enhanced analytical capacity—supported by better cross-agency data sharing and regional intelligence partnerships—will enable authorities to move from investigating individual cases to dismantling entire networks. This includes developing Bahrain-specific typologies, conducting sectoral risk assessments, and maintaining current intelligence on how traffickers exploit the Kingdom's financial system and commercial infrastructure. Moreover, ongoing research into effective policy and regulatory approaches to combat transnational organised crime and associated illicit financial flows is essential for closing potential gaps that could be exploited by criminals.

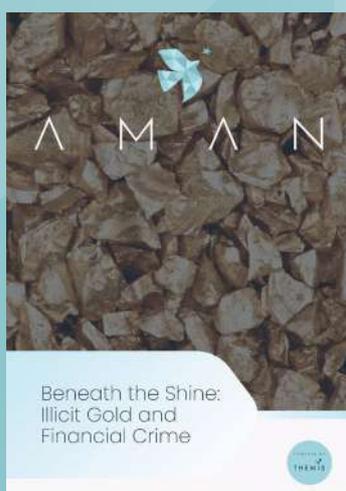
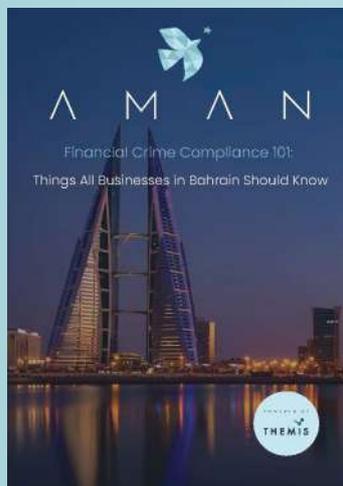
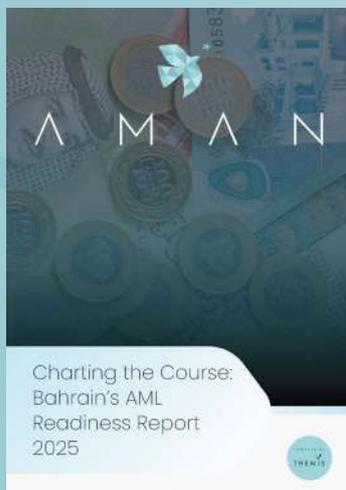


• **Awareness and engagement.** Public-private partnerships are crucial for creating an ecosystem where potential unknowing enablers—from shipping companies to social media platforms—understand their vulnerability to exploitation. Raising awareness across vulnerable sectors about how criminals abuse legitimate business channels and fostering a culture where reporting suspicious activity is seen as protecting rather than impeding business will help improve the effectiveness of enforcement efforts. This also requires educating both public and private sector stakeholders on the importance of investing in the tools, systems, and capabilities needed to combat transnational crime and illicit financial flows.

To gain deeper insights into Bahrain's financial crime threat landscape

and the measures being taken to address these challenges, we encourage readers to explore AMAN's additional research and resources.

These materials offer comprehensive analyses, data-driven findings, and policy insights that shed light on key risks and ongoing efforts to strengthen financial integrity in the region.



Get in Touch

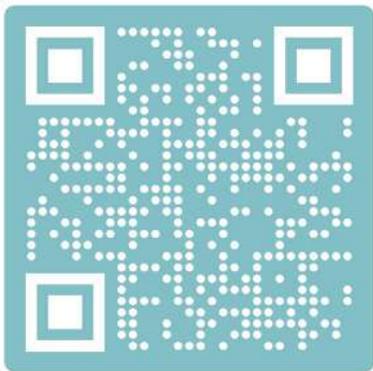
If you would like to talk to us about any of the themes or updates covered in this report, please let us know.

info@amal-aml.com

About AMAN Powered by Themis

AMAN helps organisations identify and manage their financial crime risks with a blend of innovation, insight, intelligence and insourcing. We offer a cutting-edge platform that provides deep understanding of strategic threats through an ESG and socio-economic lens. Our platform protects clients, suppliers, and third parties from criminal attacks or association, meeting the stringent requirements of the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Justice for SAR and STR submissions. Created and supported by financial crime experts, AMAN is endorsed by the Government of Bahrain.

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Find out more

info@amal-aml.com
+973 39 111 675
www.aman-aml.com

