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REGIONAL OVERVIEW

**ASIA AND OCEANIA**

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# **CENTRAL ASIA AND TRANSCAUCASIA**

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# Key findings

## Methamphetamine

- The quantities of methamphetamine seized rapidly increased in the region during the past five years.
- Methamphetamine seized in the region reportedly originated from Iran (Islamic Republic of) and more recently from Afghanistan.
- Central Asia and Transcaucasia appears to be a transit point for methamphetamine trafficking to Africa, East Asia, North America and Oceania.

## “Ecstasy”

- A geographic expansion of “ecstasy” was noted, with 7 out of 8 countries in the region reporting seizures in 2018.
- A high number of reports indicate that “ecstasy” is trafficked from European countries including the Netherlands and Turkey to Central Asia and Transcaucasia.

## New psychoactive substances

- Several countries in Central Asia and Transcaucasia reported the emergence of NPS, with 119 substances identified until August 2020.
- After decreases in the number of NPS on the market in 2017 and 2018, the number of substances increased by 65 per cent in 2019.
- The recent emergence of clandestine manufacturing of stimulants and synthetic cannabinoid receptor agonists might indicate an expanding NPS market in the region.

## Synthetic opioids

- The appearance of synthetic opioids in Central Asia and Transcaucasia in recent years may suggest that the region is not immune to the opioid crisis, which mainly affects North America and parts of Africa.

## Increasing availability of methamphetamine and “ecstasy”

Although the region's drug market is dominated by cannabis and opioids, in recent years, synthetic drugs have been making their way into Central Asia and Transcaucasia<sup>237</sup> (later referred to as Central Asia). Over the period from 2014 to 2019, all countries in the region reported quantities of ATS seized, except for Turkmenistan. Although the quantities of ATS seized in Central Asia remain low compared to other regions, an increasing trend over the past five years has been noted. This trend was mainly driven by increasing seizures of methamphetamine. In 2019, the overwhelming majority of ATS seized in the region was methamphetamine and the seizure amount rapidly has increased annually since 2016. Prior to 2017, annual quantities of methamphetamine seized in the region were below 10 kg with Armenia reporting the largest annual seizures with almost 8 kg in 2015. Since then, several countries in the region experienced a significant rise in the seizure of methamphetamine.<sup>238,239,240</sup> A noticeable increase was observed in Azerbaijan which reported seizures of methamphetamine from 1.3 kg in 2017 to 95.6 kg in 2019.<sup>241</sup>

The rise in seizures of methamphetamine in Central Asia coincided with the increase in the manufacture, trafficking and seizures of methamphetamine in neighbouring regions, specifically South-West Asia. The authorities from Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia reported that the methamphetamine seized in their countries between 2014 and 2018 originated from Iran (Islamic Republic of). In addition, recently there have been some indications that methamphetamine from Afghanistan is trafficked into the region, particularly to Kyrgyzstan and

<sup>237</sup> Central Asia and Transcaucasia includes the following countries: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

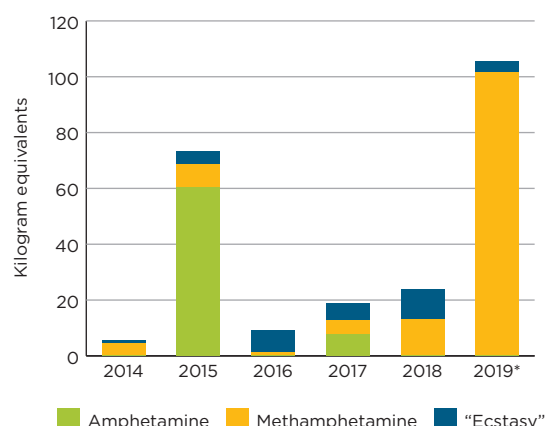
<sup>238</sup> Central Asian Regional Information and Coordination Centre for combating the illicit trafficking of narcotic drugs, psychotropic substances and their precursors, *CARICC weekly summary (based on mass media reports)*, 2019: Nr. 23,24 and 43 and 2020: Nr. 1,4,11,12,16,17,18 and 19.

<sup>239</sup> Central Asian Regional Information and Coordination Centre for combating the illicit trafficking of narcotic drugs, psychotropic substances and their precursors, *Express report analysis of major drug seizure facts in CARICC Member States (based on mass media reports)*, 2018: May, July, August and December, and 2019: January.

<sup>240</sup> Central Asian Regional Information and Coordination Centre for combating the illicit trafficking of narcotic drugs, psychotropic substances and their precursors, *Express report analysis of major drug seizures in CARICC Member States (based on mass media reports)*, 2019: January, March, May, July, October, November and December, and 2020: January.

<sup>241</sup> Central Asian Regional Information and Coordination Centre for combating the illicit trafficking of narcotic drugs, psychotropic substances and their precursors, *Drug Situation report 2018 and 2019* (Almaty, 2020).

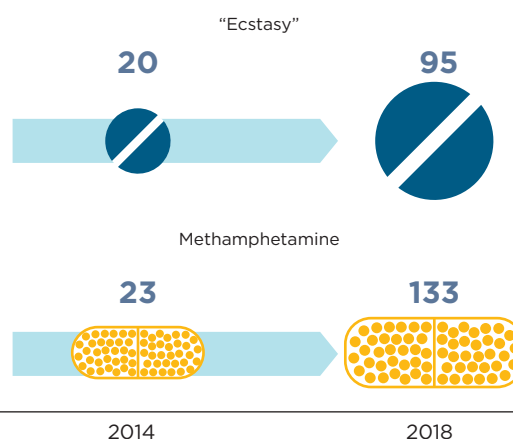
Figure 38. Quantities of amphetamine-type stimulants seized, 2014–2019



Source: UNODC, responses to the annual report questionnaire; UNODC, Drugs Monitoring Platform; Central Asian Regional Information and Coordination Centre for combating the illicit trafficking of narcotic drugs, psychotropic substances and their precursors, *Drug Situation report 2019* (Almaty, 2020) and *Drug Situation report 2018* (Almaty, 2019)

\*Data collection for 2019 is preliminary and only from the CARICC *Drug Situation report 2019*.

Figure 39. Number of “ecstasy” and methamphetamine seizure cases in Georgia, 2014 and 2018



Source: UNODC, responses to the annual report questionnaire.

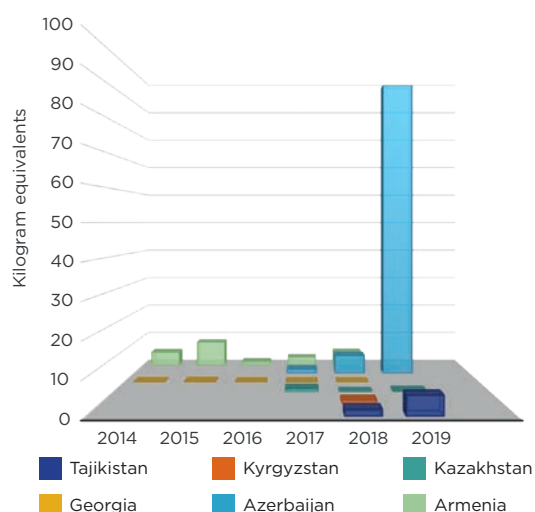
Tajikistan. For instance, almost 1 kg of methamphetamine seized in Tajikistan, in March 2020, originated in Afghanistan.<sup>242</sup>

It appears traffickers are targeting countries in Central Asia for methamphetamine market expansion and onward trafficking to other regions. For example, the Russian Federation seized methamphetamine destined for Kazakhstan in 2014 and 2015. Moreover, in 2017 methamphetamine seized by law enforcement authorities in

<sup>242</sup> UNODC, Drugs Monitoring Platform.

Georgia was most frequently transiting Azerbaijan, Armenia and Turkey but the final destination was unknown. Also, Armenia reported methamphetamine seized between 2014 and 2018, which was for both the domestic and the international drug market, intended for onward trafficking to countries in Africa, East Asia and Oceania. There are also reports of methamphetamine being trafficked from South-West Asia transiting Central Asia to North America.<sup>243,244</sup> Traffickers possibly try to exploit established opiate trafficking routes in the region for intraregional and interregional trafficking as the global methamphetamine market continues to expand.

Figure 40. Quantities of methamphetamine seized, 2014–2019

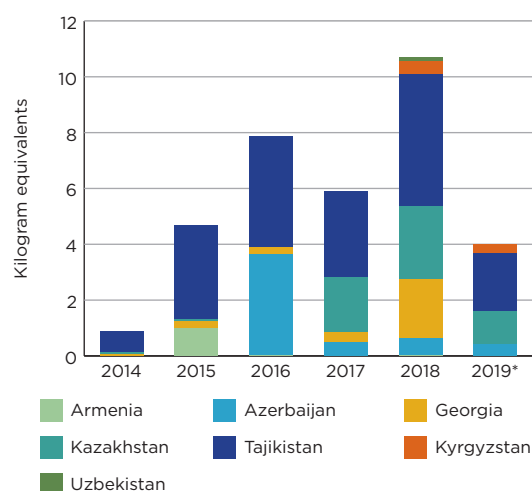


Source: UNODC, responses to the annual report questionnaire. Armenia and Georgia; Central Asian Regional Information and Coordination Centre for combating the illicit trafficking of narcotic drugs, psychotropic substances and their precursors, *Drug Situation report 2019* (Almaty, 2020) and *Drug Situation report 2018* (Almaty, 2019) – Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan (2017), Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan (2018); and Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan (2019).

Annual quantities of “ecstasy” seized in the region reached around 11 kg in 2018 with the highest annual amounts reported from Tajikistan (4.8 kg), followed by Kazakhstan (2.6 kg) and Georgia (2.1 kg). While quantities of “ecstasy” seized have generally been increasing since 2014, this was at a much slower rate than the increase in methamphetamine seizures. “Ecstasy” seized in Central Asia is mainly trafficked from other regions, in particular from Europe.<sup>245</sup> Kazakhstan (2017) and Uzbekistan

(2018) reported “ecstasy” seizures coming from the Netherlands,<sup>246</sup> and Azerbaijan (2018) reported “ecstasy” coming from Turkey.<sup>247</sup> In addition, Russian authorities in 2015, reported “ecstasy” seized that was partly intended for onward trafficking to Kazakhstan and Tajikistan.<sup>248</sup> Information from Armenia (2015) and Kyrgyzstan (2017) indicates that all “ecstasy” seized was trafficked into the countries by mail.<sup>249</sup>

Figure 41. Quantities of “ecstasy” seized, 2014–2019



Source: UNODC, responses to the annual report questionnaire; UNODC, Drugs Monitoring Platform; Central Asian Regional Information and Coordination Centre for combating the illicit trafficking of narcotic drugs, psychotropic substances and their precursors, *Drug Situation report 2019* (Almaty, 2020) and *Drug Situation report 2018* (Almaty, 2019) – Kazakhstan (2017), Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan (2018) and Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan (2019).

\*Data collection for 2019 is preliminary only from the CARICC *Drug Situation report 2019*.

## New psychoactive substances are expanding in Central Asia

In addition to ATS, countries in Central Asia are facing a growing threat posed by new psychoactive substances (NPS). A total of 119 different NPS were reported from all countries in Central Asia up to August 2020,<sup>250</sup> apart from Azerbaijan<sup>251</sup> and Turkmenistan. In terms of psychoactive effect, most of these NPS were stimulants accounting for 39 per cent, followed by synthetic cannabinoid receptor

<sup>243</sup>Ibid.

<sup>244</sup>Almost 1 kg of methamphetamine and 83 kg of opium in 2017 trafficked from Iran (Islamic Republic of) and destined for Canada was seized in Kazakhstan.

<sup>245</sup>United Nations, *Central Asia Synthetic Drugs Situation Assessment – A Report from the UNODC Global SMART Programme – December 2017* (Vienna, 2017).

<sup>246</sup>UNODC, Drugs Monitoring Platform.

<sup>247</sup>Ibid.

<sup>248</sup>UNODC, responses to the annual report questionnaire.

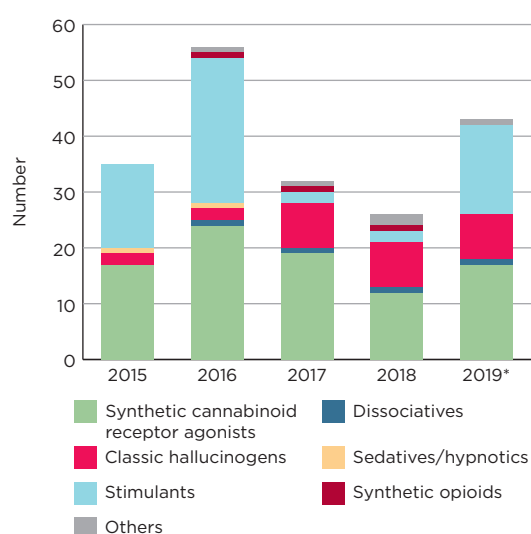
<sup>249</sup>Ibid.

<sup>250</sup>UNODC, Early Warning Advisory on New Psychoactive Substances.

<sup>251</sup>Open sources information shared by CARICC shows that Azerbaijan seized synthetic cannabinoid receptor agonists.

agonists at 38 per cent and classic hallucinogens at 11 per cent. Kazakhstan has reported 59 NPS since 2008, followed by Georgia (44 NPS) and Armenia (25 NPS). While the annual number of NPS on the market declined substantially across all effect groups after 2016, a 65 per cent increase, particularly in stimulants and synthetic cannabinoid receptor agonists, was reported in 2019 with a total of 43 substances for that year.

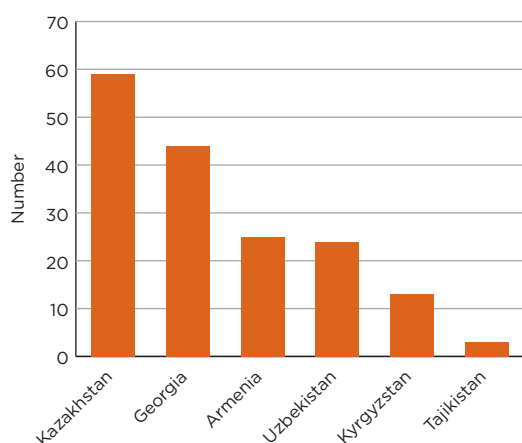
Figure 42. New psychoactive substances reported in Central Asia by effect group, 2015–2019



Source: UNODC, Early Warning Advisory on New Psychoactive Substances.

\*Data collection for 2019 is preliminary.

Figure 43. New psychoactive substances reported by country, 2008–2020



Source: UNODC, Early Warning Advisory on New Psychoactive Substances.

Note: Data collection for 2019 is preliminary.

There have been several reports of NPS trafficked from China and Europe to Central Asia. For instance, in 2016, one seizure of 0.2 kg of the synthetic cannabinoid receptor agonist AB-FUBINACA<sup>252</sup> in Uzbekistan was reported by the authorities to have originated from China.<sup>253</sup> Furthermore, in 2017 law enforcement authorities in Kyrgyzstan reported seizures of synthetic cannabinoid receptor agonists that arrived from China and seizures of *alpha*-PVP<sup>254</sup> originating from China and Europe. Mostly NPS were trafficked by mail.

Quantities of NPS seized were reported from several countries in Central Asia. For example, seizures of synthetic cannabinoid receptor agonists were reported from Uzbekistan<sup>255</sup> (2020) and Kyrgyzstan<sup>256</sup> (2017).<sup>257</sup> In addition, stimulant NPS were seized in Kazakhstan<sup>258</sup> (2019 and 2020) and Kyrgyzstan<sup>259</sup> (2017) and non-specified NPS in Georgia (2016 and 2017) and Uzbekistan (2016, 2017 and 2018).<sup>260</sup> However, information on NPS seizures in the region reported to UNODC may not be comprehensive, which makes it difficult to identify a regional trend.

A new challenge for Central Asia is the recent emergence of NPS manufacture, which might signal that the NPS market is gaining momentum in the region. For example, in 2019 a clandestine *alpha*-PVP manufacturing facility was dismantled in Georgia and 21 kg and 10 litres of the drug were seized at the site. This drug was reportedly sold in Armenia, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.<sup>261</sup> Moreover, Kazakhstan also dismantled a manufacturing facility that produced *alpha*-PVP and seized 2 kg of the drug at the site along with precursors and equipment.<sup>262</sup> In 2019, a facility that manufactured and packaged synthetic cannabinoid receptor agonists was also dismantled.<sup>263</sup>

<sup>252</sup> AB-FUBINACA has been under international control as of November 2020.

<sup>253</sup> UNODC, Drugs Monitoring Platform.

<sup>254</sup> *Alpha*-PVP has been under international control as of November 2016.

<sup>255</sup> UNODC, Drugs Monitoring Platform.

<sup>256</sup> In 2017, Kyrgyzstan seized five different synthetic cannabinoid receptor agonists including SF-MMB-PICA, AB-FUBINACA (under international control as of November 2020) and AB-PINACA (under international control as of November 2018).

<sup>257</sup> UNODC, responses to the annual report questionnaire.

<sup>258</sup> UNODC, Drugs Monitoring Platform. The seizures include mephedrone (under international control as of November 2015) and *alpha*-PVP (under international control as of November 2016).

<sup>259</sup> Kyrgyzstan reported a seizure of *alpha*-PVP in 2017 (under international control as of November 2016).

<sup>260</sup> UNODC, responses to the annual report questionnaire.

<sup>261</sup> UNODC, Drugs Monitoring Platform.

<sup>262</sup> Kazakhstan, National Security Committee of the Republic of Kazakhstan, *Elimination of Underground laboratory*, press release, 20 May 2020. Available at [knb.gov.kz/en/news/elimination-underground-laboratory](http://knb.gov.kz/en/news/elimination-underground-laboratory)

<sup>263</sup> Kazakhstan, Ministry of Internal Affairs, *Drug Laboratory Closed Down In Kazakhstan*, press release, 7 November 2019.

## Distribution of new psychoactive substances

NPS in Central Asia are mainly sold through non-contact sales<sup>264</sup> using the capabilities of Internet resources,<sup>265</sup> graffiti and banners on the street, and electronic payment systems.<sup>266</sup> In 2018, law enforcement agencies in Kazakhstan detected 4,700 websites retailing illicit drugs (compared with 430 websites in 2017), which were subsequently blocked by the authorities and over 2,540 graffiti inscriptions advertising websites that offer illicit substances were removed throughout the country.<sup>267</sup>

## The synthetic opioids market may be expanding in Central Asia

Seizures of synthetic opioids have emerged in the Central Asian drug market. For instance, between 2014 and 2016 Armenia reported small-scale seizures of tramadol<sup>268</sup> with

80 to 240 tablets seized annually. Additionally, Uzbekistan seized tramadol for the first time in 2018 with a total of 7.6 kg. Uzbek authorities reported that seizures made in that year were trafficked from Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan as well as from countries in other regions including Afghanistan, the Republic of Moldova and the Russian Federation. In 2018, Uzbekistan adopted amendments to its drug-related legislation to improve procedures for the import, export and transit of narcotic drugs, psychotropic substances and precursors, by scheduling tramadol preparations and other substances which had been associated with many cases of non-medical use. However, tramadol seizures continued in 2019 and 2020.<sup>269,270</sup>

Besides, small-scale fentanyl seizures were reported in Georgia between 2015 and 2019 and from Kazakhstan between 2014 and 2015.<sup>271,272</sup> Seizures made in 2018 and 2019 originated from Western and Central Europe, most notably from Italy and the United Kingdom.<sup>273</sup>

<sup>264</sup> Couriers hide packages with the ordered substances in public places. After leaving a package in a place, the courier sends a photo and GPS coordinates to the operator of an online shop or directly to a client after the payment was received.

<sup>265</sup> Internet resources include online shops, forums, social media and/or instant messenger services.

<sup>266</sup> Kazakhstan, Official Information Source of the Prime Minister of the Republic of Kazakhstan, *Work during emergency state, introducing new technologies and fighting against corruption – Minister of Internal Affairs reports at public meeting*, press release, 10 June 2020. Available at [primeminister.kz/en/news/reviews/work-during-emergency-state-introducing-new-technologies-and-fighting-against-corruption-minister-of-internal-affairs-reports-at-public-meeting](http://primeminister.kz/en/news/reviews/work-during-emergency-state-introducing-new-technologies-and-fighting-against-corruption-minister-of-internal-affairs-reports-at-public-meeting)

<sup>267</sup> International Narcotics Control Board, *Report of the International Narcotics Control Board for 2019, 2020*.

<sup>268</sup> A pharmaceutical opioid analgesic, that is widely used non-medically in parts of Africa and the Middle East.

<sup>269</sup> UNODC, Drugs Monitoring Platform.

<sup>270</sup> Between 2019 and May 2020, several seizures of tramadol were made in the country ranging from 20 to 39,500 tablets.

<sup>271</sup> UNODC, responses to the annual report questionnaire.

<sup>272</sup> UNODC, Drugs Monitoring Platform.

<sup>273</sup> Ibid.



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# **EAST AND SOUTH-EAST ASIA AND OCEANIA**

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# Key findings

## Methamphetamine

- Synthetic drugs, in particular methamphetamine, dominate the illicit drug market in East and South-East Asia, the region with the fastest growing methamphetamine market in the world.
- Manufacture of methamphetamine around the Golden Triangle as well as in Cambodia and Viet Nam shows signs of expansion, while other countries in East and South-East Asia experience a corresponding decline in the number of clandestine laboratories seized. This phenomenon strongly indicates a consolidation of methamphetamine production in the Greater Mekong Subregion.
- Despite record-setting seizures, the purity of methamphetamine is increasing while retail prices are decreasing in East and South-East Asia.
- Significant quantities of crystalline methamphetamine and precursor chemicals continue to be trafficked from East and South-East Asia to Oceania.
- Intensified effort in the trafficking of methamphetamine and associated precursor chemicals by transnational organized crime groups operating in East and South-East Asia region is a major driving force behind the increase in the region's methamphetamine production and supply in recent years.

## “Ecstasy”

- The use of “ecstasy” is not perceived as widespread. However, there is a growing availability of “ecstasy” in crystalline form as well as tablets containing high doses of MDMA trafficked from Europe.
- MDMA manufacture may be spreading from the maritime South-East Asian countries to some countries in the Greater Mekong Subregion.
- Tablet preparations sold as “ecstasy” but containing substances other than MDMA, including new psychoactive substances (NPS), continue to be found in the region.

## New psychoactive substances

- A total of 511 individual NPS were reported from countries in East and South-East Asia and Oceania to the UNODC Early Warning Advisory until August 2020.
- Potent synthetic opioids including fentanyl and NPS with opioid effects are being identified and increasing annually in some countries in the East and South-East Asia and Oceania.
- Clandestine ketamine laboratories dismantled in a larger number of countries in South-East Asia, accompanied by substantial increases in seizures, point to a geographic shift of manufacture.

## GHB and GBL

- Seizures and increasing use of GHB and GBL are reported by some countries in East and South-East Asia and Oceania.

## East and South-East Asia is the region with the fastest growing methamphetamine market in the world

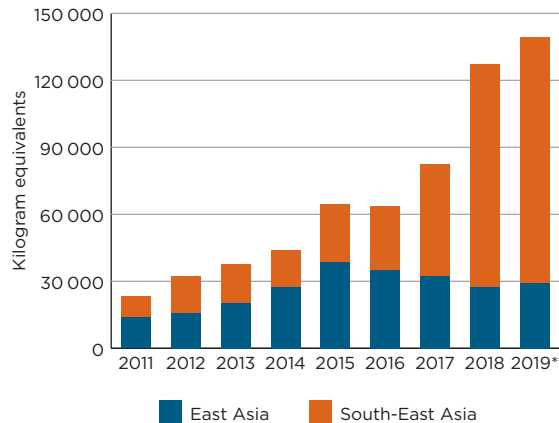
It is evident that a shift towards synthetic drugs has occurred in East and South-East Asia in the past decade. Along with a significant reduction in opium poppy cultivation and production, the region's drug market is now undergoing a significant transformation with large quantities of methamphetamine, both in tablet and crystalline forms, being manufactured in and trafficked from the Golden Triangle and surrounding countries.

Over the last decade, countries in East and South-East Asia have collectively witnessed sustained increases in seizures of methamphetamine, a unique trend which has not been observed in any other region in the world. While annual seizures of the drug have increased over the last 10 years, there have been several notable developments which warrant attention. Between 2011 and 2014, seizures of methamphetamine almost doubled, increasing from 23 to 44 tons. In the following years, however, seizures of methamphetamine almost tripled and increased by more than 80 tons between 2015 and 2018, reaching almost 140 tons in 2019.

This further rapid increase was primarily due to increased amounts of methamphetamine seized in South-East Asian countries. For instance, in 2011, South-East Asia seized 9.4 tons of methamphetamine, accounting for 40 per cent of the total seizures made in East and South-East Asia. However, in 2019 South-East Asia alone seized 110 tons of the drug, and its proportion increased to nearly 80 per cent of the total reported from East and South-East Asia.<sup>274</sup> In addition, available data indicate that the amount of methamphetamine produced in and trafficked from China and maritime South-East Asia has decreased in recent years.

The increases in annually seized amounts of methamphetamine in East and South-East Asia over the last decade have not negatively impacted the availability of the drug in the market. In fact, methamphetamine prices in East and South-East Asia have plummeted, reaching the lowest price points in the last decade. The decrease in retail prices of crystalline methamphetamine can be observed among many countries in the region, including Indonesia, Thailand, and Viet Nam, where retail prices of 1 g of crystalline methamphetamine have more than halved, respectively from \$255 to \$100, \$90 to \$41, and \$100 to \$17. Moreover, the four countries in the Greater

Figure 44. Quantities of methamphetamine seized in East and South-East Asia, 2011–2019



Source: UNODC, *Synthetic Drugs in East and South-East Asia: Latest Developments and Challenges* (May 2020); National Narcotic Control Commission (NNCC) of China, *Annual drug situation report 2019*, June 2020.

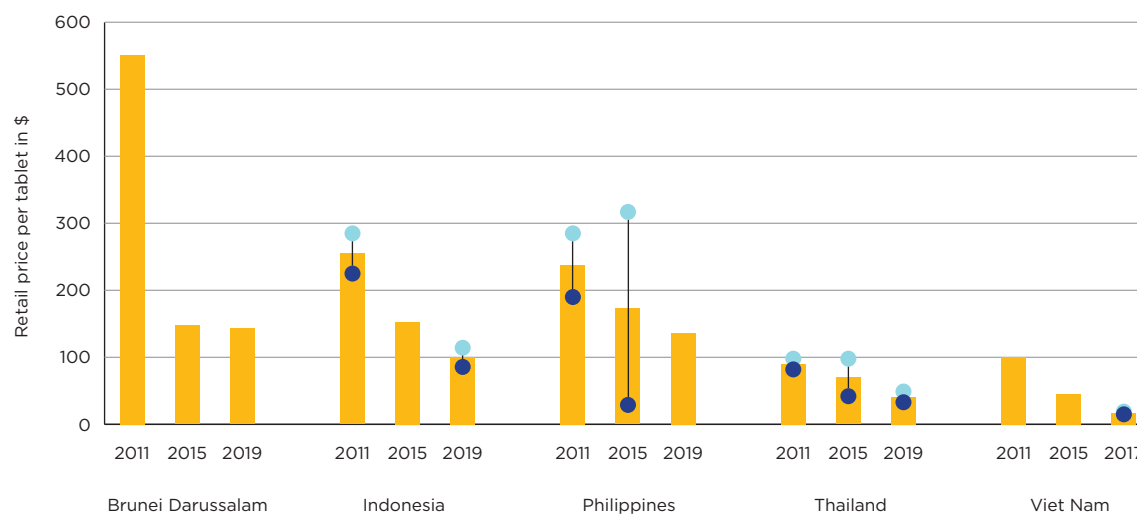
\*Data for 2019 is preliminary, as it does not include data from Democratic Republic of Korea, Macao (China), Mongolia and Timor Leste.

Mekong Subregion, Cambodia, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Myanmar and Thailand, which account for the largest annual amounts of methamphetamine tablets seized in South-East Asia, have reported sharp decreases in typical retail prices of the drug over the last decade. In Thailand, the reported price for a methamphetamine tablet in 2019 was \$2.5, marking a 70 per cent decrease in nominal prices compared to 2011 (\$8.2).<sup>275</sup> Although the prices of methamphetamine have decreased substantially, purities remain high and have even increased in a few countries in the region over the last decade. As the limited information available on drug use trends does not point to a reduction in demand, this development suggests a supply-driven increase in availability.

<sup>274</sup> UNODC, *Synthetic Drugs in East and South-East Asia: Latest Developments and Challenges* (May 2020).

<sup>275</sup> Drug Abuse Information Network for Asia and the Pacific.

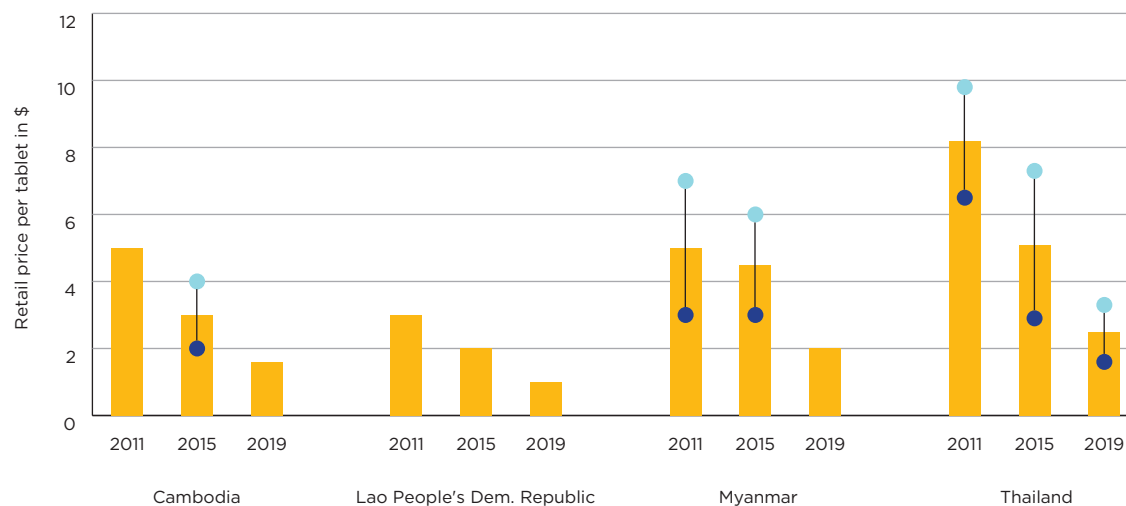
Figure 45. Changes in typical retail prices of crystalline methamphetamine of selected countries in East and South-East Asia, 2011, 2015 and 2019 or latest year available



Source: UNODC, responses to the annual report questionnaire; Drug Abuse Information Network for Asia and the Pacific; Official communication with National Authority for Combating Drugs of Cambodia, Laos Commission on Drugs Control, Central Committee for Drug Abuse Control of Myanmar, and Office of the Narcotics Control Board of Thailand, February 2020.

Note: The high-low bars represent the upper and lower limits of the price range for those countries which reported such ranges in addition to the typical price; data in the table are not adjusted for purity. For the purpose of this figure, a mid-point of upper and lower limit was used when data were reported in a range format.

Figure 46. Changes in typical prices of methamphetamine tablets of selected countries in East and South-East Asia, 2011, 2015 and 2019



Source: UNODC, responses to the annual report questionnaire; Drug Abuse Information Network for Asia and the Pacific; Official communication with National Authority for Combating Drugs of Cambodia, Laos Commission on Drugs Control, Central Committee for Drug Abuse Control of Myanmar, and Office of the Narcotics Control Board of Thailand, February 2020.

Note: The high-low bars represent the upper and lower limits of the price range for those countries which reported such ranges in addition to the typical price; data in the table are not adjusted with purities. For the purpose of this figure, a mid-point of upper and lower limit was used when data were reported in a range format.

## The use of crystalline methamphetamine appears to be on the rise in East and South-East Asia

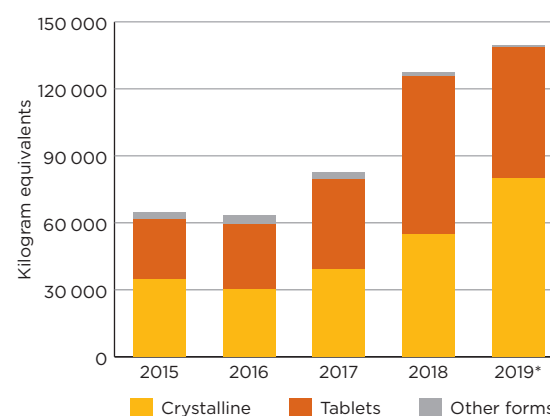
All countries<sup>276</sup> in the region reported methamphetamine as their primary drug of concern in 2019 or the latest year available, representing a significant increase from only five countries a decade ago.<sup>277</sup> While the use and seizures of methamphetamine tablets remain largely confined to the Mekong region, a major development observed in the methamphetamine market in East and South-East Asia is the increased supply of crystalline methamphetamine. In 2019 several countries in the region, including Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Myanmar and Viet Nam, reported record seizures of crystalline methamphetamine while Malaysia and Thailand recorded the largest annual seizures in 2018.<sup>278</sup> On the other hand,

<sup>276</sup>The 13 countries are Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Japan, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, the Republic of Korea, Singapore, Thailand and Viet Nam.

<sup>277</sup>Drug Abuse Information Network for Asia and the Pacific.

<sup>278</sup>Ibid.

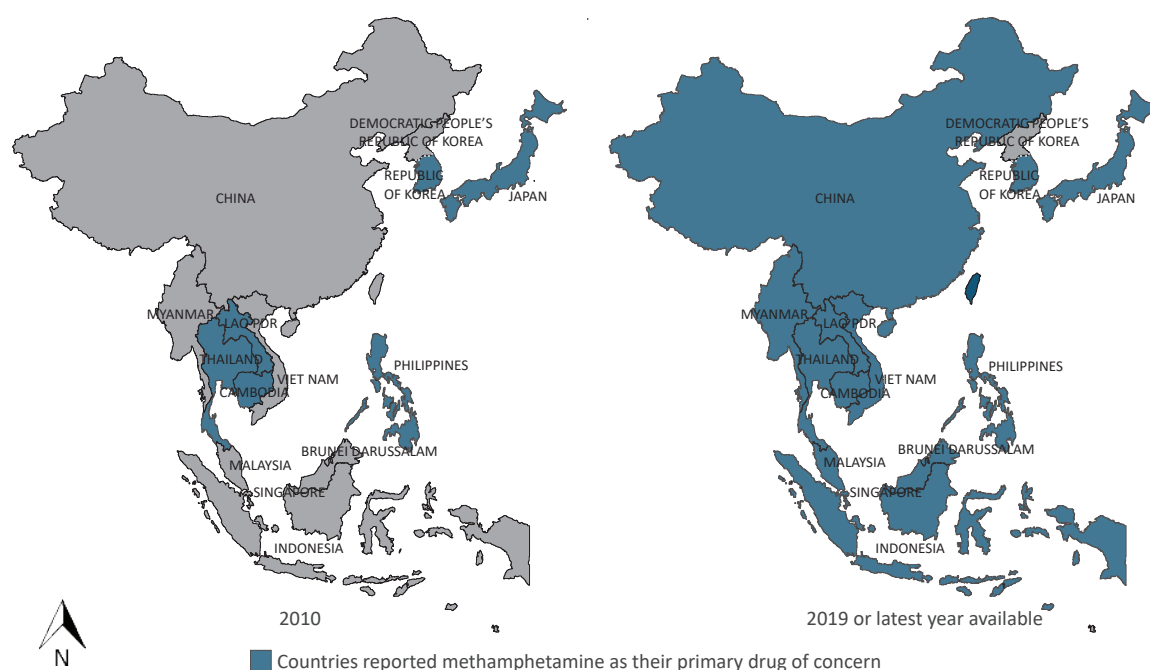
Figure 47. Quantities of methamphetamine seized in East and South-East Asia, by form of presentation, 2015–2019



Source: Drug Abuse Information Network for Asia and the Pacific; UNODC, responses to the annual report questionnaire; National Narcotic Control Commission, *Annual drug situation report 2019* (June 2020).

\*Data for 2019 is preliminary, as it does not include data from Democratic Republic of Korea, Macao (China), Mongolia and Timor Leste.

Figure 48. Countries reporting methamphetamine as their primary drug of concern, 2010 and 2019 (or the latest year available)



The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.

Source: Drug Abuse Information Network for Asia and the Pacific; UNODC, responses to the annual report questionnaire.

amounts of methamphetamine tablets seized in South-East Asia decreased for the first time in 2019 by a fifth but remained at a comparatively high level.<sup>279</sup>

Available, albeit limited, data on drug demand indicate increased use of crystalline methamphetamine in several countries in the region. According to expert perception on the use of crystalline methamphetamine for 2019 or the latest year available, several countries in the region, including Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Republic of Korea, Singapore and Viet Nam reported increased use of crystalline methamphetamine.<sup>280</sup>

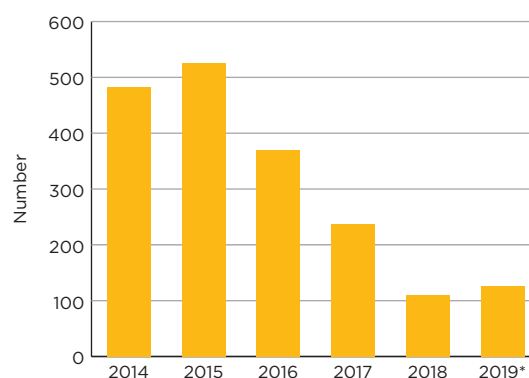
Other indicators such as treatment admissions and the number of drug users brought into formal contact with authorities for crystalline methamphetamine seem to confirm this trend. For instance, in Malaysia, the number of treatment admissions related to crystalline methamphetamine increased almost 10 times between 2015 and 2018 from 1,213 to 11,531 admissions.<sup>281</sup>

### How are transnational organized crime groups increasingly involved in the manufacture and trafficking of methamphetamine in the Golden Triangle?

Although seizures of methamphetamine have continued to increase over the past decade in East and South-East Asia, the number of clandestine methamphetamine manufacturing facilities dismantled in the region has been declining every year since its peak in 2015. This has been mainly driven by the significantly decreased number of clandestine methamphetamine laboratories dismantled in China in recent years. The trend observed in China has increased the importance of the Golden Triangle as a major source of supply of methamphetamine in the region. This displacement is mirrored by the relocation of large transnational organized crime syndicates that once operated in China to the Golden Triangle, to evade law enforcement pressure in China.<sup>282</sup>

Transnational organized crime groups operating in and around the Golden Triangle have successfully engineered the expansion of the methamphetamine market through

Figure 49. Number of methamphetamine manufacturing facilities dismantled in East and South-East Asia, 2014–2019



Source: Drug Abuse Information Network for Asia and the Pacific; UNODC, responses to the annual report questionnaire; National Narcotic Control Commission, *Annual drug situation report 2019* (June 2020).

\*Data for 2019 is preliminary, as it does not include data from Democratic Republic of Korea, Macao (China), Mongolia and Timor Leste.

large-scale manufacturing resulting in a marked price reduction. The significant price differential between methamphetamine manufactured in the Golden Triangle and the rest of the region may have led drug trafficking syndicates to increasingly source the drug from the Golden Triangle and in turn, accelerated the consolidation of methamphetamine production in that area.

In 2019, major shifts in trafficking routes of crystalline methamphetamine were reported from countries in East and South-East Asia, demonstrating the agility and flexibility of organized crime in the region. For instance, in Myanmar, almost all crystalline methamphetamine seizures (98.2 per cent) were made in Shan State in 2018. However, in 2019 about 55 per cent of all crystalline methamphetamine seizures were made in other states and regions of the country for subsequent trafficking to neighbouring countries. In addition, organized crime groups have started using the Rakhine State of Myanmar for trafficking of crystalline methamphetamine since early 2020.<sup>283</sup> For instance, in January 2020, 200 kg of crystalline methamphetamine together with 490 kg of ketamine were intercepted on a fishing vessel leaving Rakhine State.

Organized crime groups have been increasingly targeting Lao People's Democratic Republic and Viet Nam as major transit points for subsequent trafficking of crystalline methamphetamine to countries and territories in the region, including China, the Philippines and Taiwan

<sup>279</sup> UNODC, *Synthetic Drugs in East and South-East Asia: Latest Developments and Challenges* (May 2020).

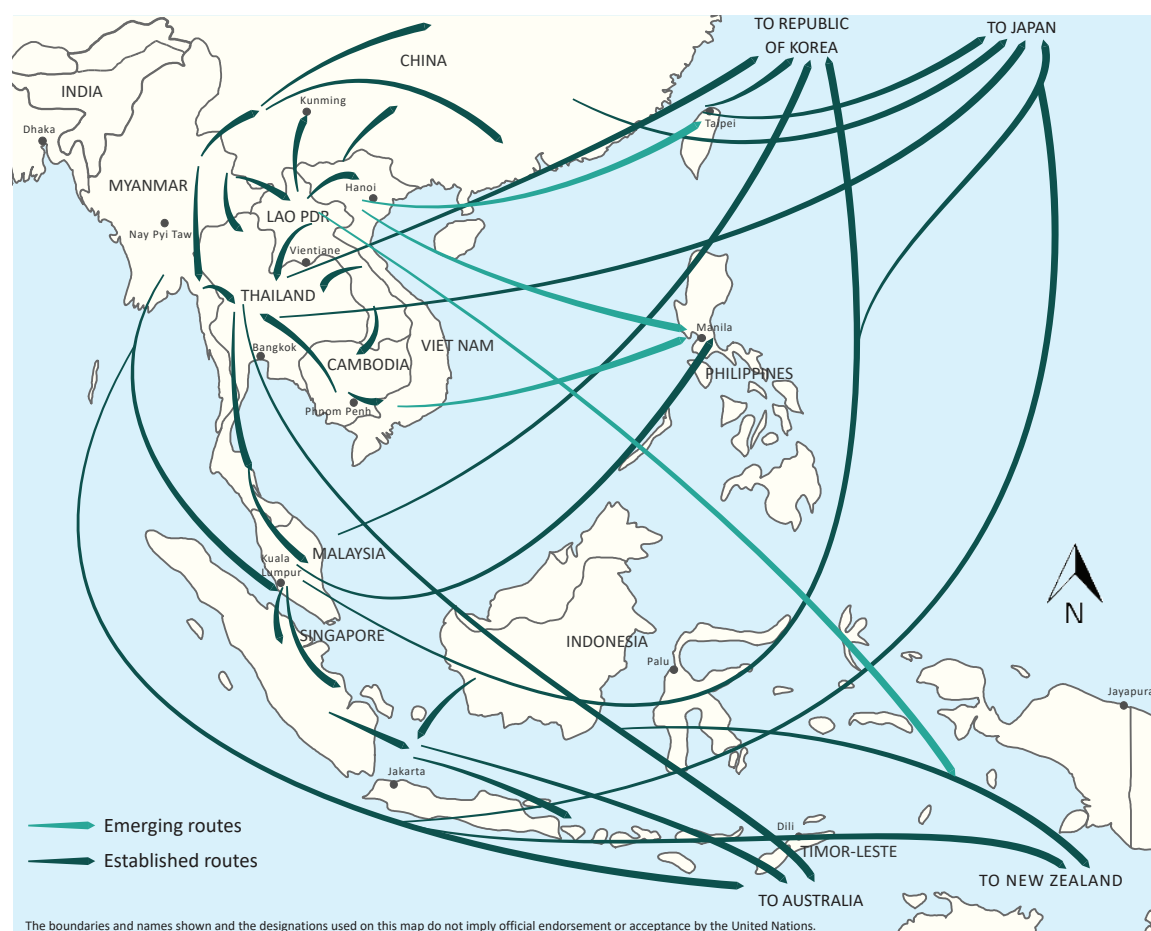
<sup>280</sup> Ibid.

<sup>281</sup> Drug Abuse Information Network for Asia and the Pacific.

<sup>282</sup> UNODC, *Transnational Organized Crime in Southeast Asia: Evolution, Growth and Impact* (July 2019).

<sup>283</sup> UNODC, *Synthetic Drugs in East and South-East Asia: Latest Developments and Challenges* (May 2020).

Figure 50. Crystalline methamphetamine trafficking flows in East and South-East Asia, 2019



Source: UNODC elaboration based on information presented at the 2019 SMART Regional Workshop, Singapore (August 2019) and the Meeting of Drug and Precursor Intelligence Specialists, Mandalay, Myanmar (February 2020).

Note: Flow arrows represent the general direction of trafficking and do not coincide with precise sources of production or manufacture and are not actual routes, or weighted for significance/scale.

Province of China. In addition, Cambodian authorities noted that the coastal province of Sihanoukville is gaining importance as a transshipment point for regional and interregional methamphetamine trafficking.

Outside the Golden Triangle, seizures of crystalline methamphetamine made in Japan and the Philippines indicate continued involvement of transnational organized crime groups from other regions, in particular North America, in the region's drug trade. These groups target countries with high prices of methamphetamine, such as Australia and Japan.

At the time of writing this report, countries in East and South-East Asia were enforcing measures to restrict mobility of travel and movement of goods. However, these measures seem to have had only a limited impact on trafficking of methamphetamine. For instance, during the first three months of 2020, Lao People's Democratic

Republic authorities seized more than 1.7 tons of the drug while only 52.7 kg of the drug were seized during the same period in 2019.<sup>284</sup> Also, between January and April 2020, seizures of crystalline methamphetamine in Cambodia amounted to 112.4 kg,<sup>285</sup> representing more than a twofold increase compared to the same period in the preceding year. At the same time, Cambodian authorities reported a decrease in the typical wholesale price of crystalline methamphetamine from \$8,000 per kg to \$6,50–\$7,000 per kg,<sup>286</sup> indicating no impact on the availability of the drug in the context of COVID-19 as reflected in prices.

<sup>284</sup> Lao People's Democratic Republic, National Commission on Drug Control and Supervision, "Country briefing", presented at the 2020 Mekong MOU Focal Point Meeting (May 2020).

<sup>285</sup> Cambodia, National Authority for Combating Drugs, "Country briefing", presented at the 2020 Mekong MOU Focal Point Meeting (May 2020).

<sup>286</sup> Ibid.



## Diversification of precursors for methamphetamine manufacture

Transnational organized crime groups have shown a remarkable degree of adaptability by diversifying the types of chemicals used for the manufacture of methamphetamine in response to changes in regulatory and law enforcement priorities and strategies. Since 2017, several chemicals which can be used for synthesizing P-2-P were seized in the Golden Triangle for the first time, for example, benzyl cyanide, sodium ethoxide, and methylphenylacetate and substantial quantities of sodium cyanide.<sup>287</sup> Seizures of substantial quantities of 2-bromo-1-phenyl-1-propanone (2-Bromopropiophenone), a chemical not under the international control but which can be used for the manufacture of ephedrine, reported by China, demonstrate the continuing importance of ephedrine as a precursor for the manufacture of methamphetamine.

## The impact of the high availability of methamphetamine on the prevalence of use in Oceania

The methamphetamine markets in Australia and New Zealand are closely linked to developments in the manufacture and trafficking of the drug in East and South-East Asia. Substantial quantities of crystalline methamphetamine and precursor chemicals have been trafficked from East and South-East Asia to Oceania, primarily to Australia and New Zealand. Between 2017–2018, several countries in East and South-East Asia, including Thailand, Malaysia and China (including Hong Kong, China) and Viet Nam (in descending order of quantities seized) were reported to be major embarkation points.<sup>288</sup> In New Zealand, authorities seized 469 kg of methamphetamine shipped from Thailand in September 2019, and the amount was the largest ever seized at its border.<sup>289</sup> In addition, large quantities of methamphetamine have been trafficked to Australia and New Zealand from North America in recent years. For instance, Australia reported the United States as one of the “countries of departure” of the

methamphetamine found in Australia in 2018.<sup>290</sup> The analysis of the precursors used in the manufacture of such methamphetamine (mainly P-2-P over the first two quarters of 2018) points to Mexico as possibly the main country of origin of such methamphetamine. At the same time, in 2018 Malaysia was the most important transit country from where methamphetamine, manufactured overseas, entered Australia.<sup>291</sup>

While available data show that methamphetamine found in the illicit drug markets in Australia and New Zealand has been increasingly sourced from overseas, domestic manufacture remains a concern. For instance, nearly 5 tons of precursor chemicals related to ATS (excluding MDMA) were seized at the Australian border in 2017–2018, and the amount represents more than a twofold increase compared to the previous record weight detected in 2008–2009.<sup>292</sup> Considering the continuous decreases in the number of clandestine laboratories for ATS (excluding MDMA) dismantled in Australia in recent years, increased quantities of precursor chemical seizures may indicate the enlarged scale of methamphetamine production in the country. In New Zealand, ephedrine has become the primary methamphetamine precursor chemical seized in the country in recent years, and substantial quantities of the substance have been seized each year. Between 2014 and 2019, about 4.2 tons of ephedrine were seized in New Zealand, indicating the presence of sizable domestic methamphetamine production in this country as well.<sup>293</sup>

With high volumes of methamphetamine trafficked to and manufactured in Australia and New Zealand in recent years, there are strong indications of increased use of the drug. According to the national wastewater drug monitoring programme in Australia, an estimated 11,516 kg of pure methamphetamine was consumed in the year 2018/2019. The figure represents a 37 per cent increase compared to 2016/2017.<sup>294</sup>

The large number of commercial shipping routes between Oceania, Asia and North America offer ample possibilities for drug trafficking. Most Pacific islands countries and territories (PICTs) have porous maritime

<sup>287</sup> A combination of benzyl chloride and sodium cyanide is required for the synthesis of benzyl cyanide and subsequently P-2-P. The absence of seizures of benzyl chloride makes it difficult to determine if the sodium cyanide seized in recent years is intended as precursors to produce P-2-P.

<sup>288</sup> Australia, Australian Criminal Intelligence Commission, *Illicit Drug Data Report 2017–2018* (July 2019).

<sup>289</sup> New Zealand, Customs Service, “Customs’ biggest methamphetamine seizure”, official press release (September 2019). Available at [www.customs.govt.nz/about-us/news/media-releases/customs-biggest-methamphetamine-seizure](http://www.customs.govt.nz/about-us/news/media-releases/customs-biggest-methamphetamine-seizure)

<sup>290</sup> UNODC, responses to the annual report questionnaire and Australia, Australian Criminal Intelligence Commission, *Illicit Drug Data Report 2018–2019* (September 2020).

<sup>291</sup> Ibid.

<sup>292</sup> Australia, Australian Criminal Intelligence Commission, *Illicit Drug Data Report 2017–2018* (July 2019).

<sup>293</sup> New Zealand, Environmental Science Research, “New Zealand Briefing”, presented at the Meeting of Drug Forensic Specialists, Beijing, China (December 2019).

<sup>294</sup> Australia, Australian Criminal Intelligence Commission, *National Wastewater Drug Monitoring Programme Report 9* (March 2020).



borders and long coastlines. This represents almost insurmountable challenges to effective border control. In addition, the geographical proximity to major markets for illicit drugs, particularly methamphetamine, renders the region very attractive for drug transits and clandestine manufacture.

The limited data available suggest that drug trafficking transiting through PICTs has intensified in recent years, which is also reflected in several seizures and arrests made in PICTs. For instance, in November 2019, New Zealand Customs seized 34 kg of methamphetamine from a ship arriving from Fiji.<sup>295</sup> In addition, the number of drug-related offences increased by more than 560 per cent between 2013 and 2018, from 217 to 1,440 cases. Fiji authorities reported increased flows of illicit drugs, including methamphetamine, originating from China, the United States and South American countries, during the same period.<sup>296</sup>

Methamphetamine manufacture in PICTs has been also reported in recent years. According to media reports, smaller scale production facilities were dismantled by Fijian authorities in 2013 and 2015 in Suva and, most recently, in February 2019.<sup>297</sup> In addition, in March 2016 the Vanuatu Police Force reported that an attempted methamphetamine manufacturing operation was dismantled.<sup>298</sup>

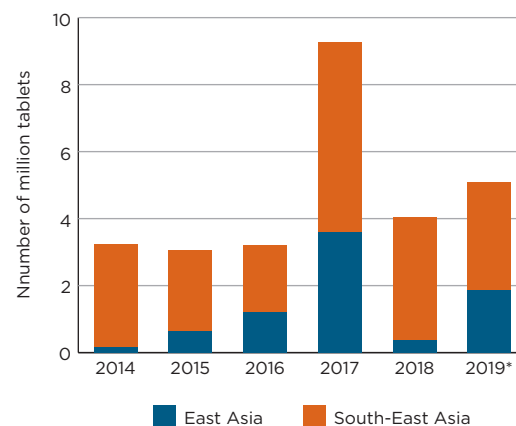
### “Ecstasy” market also expanding and diversifying in East and South-East Asia but at a slower rate compared to methamphetamine

MDMA trafficking originating in other regions, specifically Europe, continues being reported across East and South-East Asia. In addition, there are strong indications of increases in MDMA manufacture in the Greater Mekong Subregion although, judging from seizure statistics, its extent is far below the level of methamphetamine manufacture.

Between 2015 and 2018, seizures of “ecstasy” in East and South-East Asia were stable except for 2017 when 9.2 million of tablets were seized in the region due to large

seizures reported from China and Indonesia.<sup>299</sup> However, several countries in the region, including Cambodia, Japan, Malaysia, the Republic of Korea and Thailand have reported steep increases in seizures of “ecstasy” in recent years. Based on preliminary data for 2019, at least 5 million “ecstasy” tablets were seized in the region, with about 90 per cent of the total seized by Cambodia, Indonesia, Hong Kong, China, and Malaysia.<sup>300</sup> In addition, while the use of “ecstasy” is not perceived as widespread, expert perceptions point to increased use in East and South-East Asia particularly in Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Hong Kong, China, Japan, Singapore and Viet Nam.<sup>301</sup>

Figure 51. Quantities of “ecstasy” tablets seized in East and South-East Asia, 2014–2019



Source: UNODC, *Synthetic Drugs in East and South-East Asia: Latest Developments and Challenges* (May 2020); China, National Narcotics Control Commission, *Annual drug situation report 2019* (June 2020).

Note: Figures reported in units other than number of tablets were converted into estimated tablet equivalent at 300 mg per tablet.

\*Data for 2019 is preliminary, as it does not include data from Democratic Republic of Korea, Macao (China), Mongolia and Timor Leste.

Available data indicate that “ecstasy” has become purer, and crystalline MDMA, a form of the drug associated with an increased risk of overdose in other regions, appears to be increasingly available in East and South-East Asia.<sup>302</sup> For example, the average MDMA content of an “ecstasy” tablet in Malaysia during the first ten months of 2019 was 50 per cent by weight compared to only

<sup>295</sup> New Zealand, Customs Service, “Two Fijians arrested in Tauranga for methamphetamine” (November 2019).

<sup>296</sup> Fiji, Police Force, “Fiji’s Drug Trend”, presented at the 43rd HONLAP, Bangkok, Thailand (October 2019).

<sup>297</sup> New Zealand, Radio New Zealand, *Fijian drug taskforce gets US help* (July 2019).

<sup>298</sup> Vanuatu, Police Force, Presentation made at the 1st National SMART Workshop, Port Villa, Vanuatu (August 2017).

<sup>299</sup> UNODC, *Synthetic Drugs in East and South-East Asia: Latest Developments and Challenges* (May 2020).

<sup>300</sup> Ibid.

<sup>301</sup> Drug Abuse Information Network for Asia and the Pacific, and UNODC, responses to the annual report questionnaire.

<sup>302</sup> UNODC, *Synthetic Drugs in East and South-East Asia: Latest Developments and Challenges* (May 2020).

30 per cent in 2018.<sup>303</sup> In Cambodia, the average MDMA content of “ecstasy” tablets in 2019 was 37.6 per cent, signifying a marked increase compared to the three preceding years.<sup>304</sup> The Philippines also noted an increase in average MDMA purity, reporting a rise from 25.2 per cent in 2015 to 40 per cent in 2019.<sup>305,306</sup> In addition, drug products in liquid form containing MDMA in combination with other synthetic drugs including methamphetamine and ketamine (referred to in some countries as “happy water”) have been reported in the region.<sup>307</sup>

“Ecstasy” trafficked from other regions, in particular Europe, continue to be seized in East and South-East Asia. Belgium, France, Germany and the Netherlands were among major embarkation points for “ecstasy” seized in Hong Kong, China, Indonesia, Myanmar, the Philippines and the Republic of Korea in recent years.<sup>308</sup> Moreover, in 2018 trafficking of “ecstasy” from North America to the region was reported by China.<sup>309</sup>

There has been a noticeable change in the trends of MDMA manufacture in South-East Asia. For instance, Malaysian authorities dismantled just one clandestine MDMA manufacturing facility in 2019 after having dismantled a total of 33 facilities between 2014 and 2018. Indonesia did not report the dismantling of any MDMA manufacturing facilities in 2019 after having dismantled eight ecstasy manufacturing facilities between 2014 and 2018.<sup>310</sup> In 2019, Cambodian authorities dismantled two clandestine manufacturing facilities in Phnom Penh and seized a substantial amount of MDMA, together with methamphetamine and ketamine.<sup>311</sup> Moreover, 173 kg of pyrovalerone,<sup>312</sup> a substance with stimulant properties, prepared to be sold as “ecstasy” tablets was seized at one of these sites. These trends may indicate a shift in MDMA manufacture from South-East Asia to the Greater Mekong Subregion.

<sup>303</sup> Malaysia, Department of Chemistry, “Country report”, presented at the Meeting of Drug Forensic Specialists, Beijing (December 2019).

<sup>304</sup> According to National Authority for Combating Drugs of Cambodia, the average MDMA content for 2016, 2017 and 2018 were respectively 25.4, 24.9 and 30.6 per cent; Official communication with National Authority for Combating Drugs (March 2020).

<sup>305</sup> Philippines, Dangerous Drugs Board and Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency, “Country report”, presented at the Meeting of Drug Forensic Specialists, Beijing (December 2019).

<sup>306</sup> Data on the absolute amount of MDMA per tablet were not reported from Cambodia, Malaysia and the Philippines.

<sup>307</sup> UNODC, *Synthetic Drugs in East and South-East Asia: Latest Developments and Challenges* (May 2020).

<sup>308</sup> UNODC, responses to the annual report questionnaire.

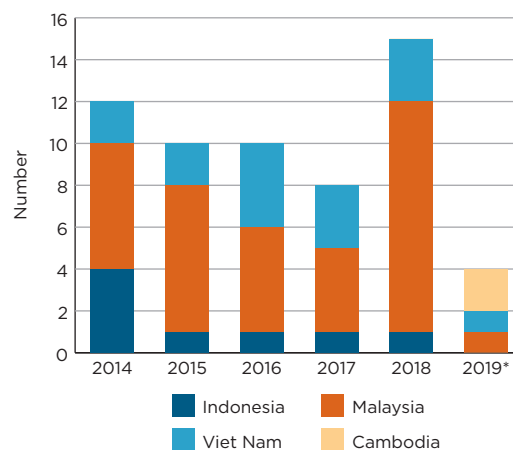
<sup>309</sup> Ibid.

<sup>310</sup> UNODC, *Synthetic Drugs in East and South-East Asia: Latest Developments and Challenges* (May 2020).

<sup>311</sup> Ibid.

<sup>312</sup> Pyrovalerone is a substance listed under Schedule IV of the Convention on Psychotropic Substances of 1971.

Figure 52. MDMA manufacturing facilities dismantled in Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia and Viet Nam, 2014–2019



Source: UNODC, *Synthetic Drugs in East and South-East Asia: Latest Developments and Challenges* (May 2020).

An increasing number of synthetic new psychoactive substances, including potent synthetic opioids, reported from the East and South-East Asia and Oceania

Beyond methamphetamine and “ecstasy”, a diverse range of other synthetic drugs, including new psychoactive substances (NPS), are being consumed in East and South-East Asia. Over the last few years, a wide variety of NPS and other substances have been discovered in tablets sold as “ecstasy” that were seized in East and South-East Asia. For instance, Singapore authorities reported that the main NPS found in “ecstasy” tablets in the country were synthetic cathinones, but synthetic cannabinoids, piperazines, tryptamines and phenethylamines have also been detected.<sup>313</sup>

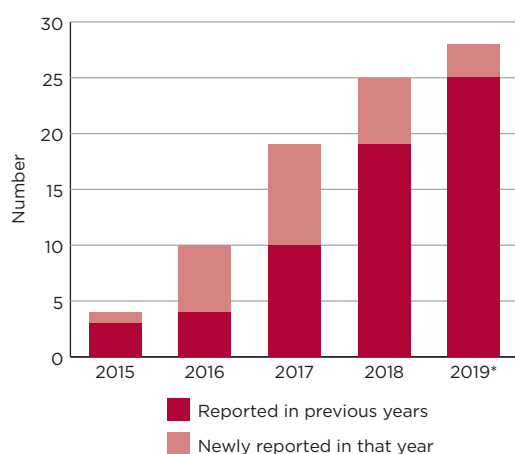
By August 2020, a total of 511 different NPS had been reported by countries in East and South-East Asia and Oceania, more than half of the total number reported at the global level.<sup>314</sup> Japan reported the largest number of NPS (377 substances), followed by China (209), New Zealand (140), Singapore (123), Australia (111) and the Republic of Korea (97). However, the number of NPS reported from some countries in the region remain limited. This, in part, might be due to the limited capacity to identify these substances.

<sup>313</sup> Singapore, Central Narcotics Bureau, “Singapore’s approach to precursor control”, presented at the Meeting of Drug Forensic Specialist Task Force Meeting, Beijing (December 2019).

<sup>314</sup> UNODC, Early Warning Advisory on New Psychoactive Substances.

In terms of chemical substance groups, synthetic cannabinoids lead the total number of NPS identified in the region with 149, followed by synthetic cathinones (110 substances). Together they accounted for 50 per cent of the total number of NPS identified in the region. In terms of pharmacological effects, stimulants (including most of the synthetic cathinones) are the most reported (193) followed by synthetic cannabinoid receptor agonists (149). While up to 2015 only four synthetic opioids had been identified in the region, by 2020, this figure had increased to 30 substances. Some synthetic opioids identified in the region are extremely potent and have been implicated in overdose deaths outside the region, particularly in North America and to a lesser extent in Europe.<sup>315</sup>

Figure 53. Emergence of new psychoactive substances with opioid effects in East and South-East Asia, 2015–2019



Source: UNODC, Early Warning Advisory on New Psychoactive Substances.

\*Data collection for 2019 is preliminary.

Seizures of various NPS were reported by almost every country in East and South-East Asia and Oceania. In 2018, a total of 280 kg of several synthetic NPS were seized including 4-Methylmethcathinone (mephedrone), 3,4-Methylenedioxypyrovalerone (MDPV) and methylone (bk-MDMA) among others.<sup>316,317</sup> There was a significant rise in the number of synthetic cannabinoid seizure cases, which almost doubled to 850 cases in 2018 compared to 2017.<sup>318</sup> However, due to the lack of reliable data on seizures, treatment, use and legal status

of the NPS in the region, the complete picture of the synthetic NPS market is unknown.

In Oceania, Australia reported that the number of NPS<sup>319</sup> seized at its border decreased by 29 per cent from 968 detections in 2016–2017 to 687 detections in 2017–2018.<sup>320</sup> The international mail stream accounted for the overwhelming majority of these detections (82.5 per cent) followed by air cargo (17.3 per cent) and air passenger/crew (0.1 per cent). Furthermore, the weight of NPS seizures at the Australian border selected for further analysis, decreased significantly from 89 kg to 33.1 kg between 2016–2017 and 2017–2018. This was fifteen times less than its peak in 2013–2014 when more than 500 kg were seized.<sup>321</sup> Although a wide range of NPS has emerged on the illicit drug market of Australia, the use of these substances is not considered to be widespread in contrast to other synthetic drugs.<sup>322,323</sup>

### The non-medical use and manufacture of ketamine is a persistent challenge in East and South-East Asia

A significant and persistent trend observed in the illicit drug market of East and South-East Asia is the non-medical use of ketamine. In general, annual amounts seized of ketamine have been declining in the region since 2015 but information on use, trafficking and manufacturing show a more complex picture of the region's ketamine market.

Both in China and Hong Kong, China, the number of registered ketamine users has been declining in recent years. Between 2018 and 2019, the number of registered ketamine users in China decreased by 20 per cent from 63,000 to 49,000, representing only 2 per cent of the total number of registered drug users (2.14 million users) in 2019. In Hong Kong, China, the number of reported ketamine

<sup>319</sup>As reported by the Australian Criminal Intelligence Commission which classifies synthetic cannabinoids, cathinones, in particular 4-methylmethcathinone (4-MMC) and NBOMe compounds as NPS in their *Illicit Drug Data Report 2017–2018*. These substances are controlled and border-controlled drugs for the purposes of the serious drug offences in the Criminal Code Act 1995 (Criminal Code) of Australia.

<sup>320</sup>Australia, Australian Criminal Intelligence Commission, *The Illicit Drug Data Report 2017–18* (August 2019).

<sup>321</sup>Ibid. Note: The data refer only to seizures made by the Australian Federal Police, examined by Australian Federal Police crime scene teams, sampled and subsequently confirmed to contain NPS by the National Measurement Institute. Seizure data do not represent all Australian Federal Police seizures of NPS during the reporting period.

<sup>322</sup>Australia, Institute of Health and Welfare, *National Drug Strategy Household Survey 2019* (July 2020).

<sup>323</sup>Australian Criminal Intelligence Commission, *National Wastewater Drug Monitoring Program – Report 10*, June 2020.

<sup>315</sup>UNODC, “Understanding the global opioid crisis”, *Global SMART Update*, vol. 21 (March 2019).

<sup>316</sup>UNODC, responses to the annual report questionnaire.

<sup>317</sup>MDPV, mephedrone and methylone have been under international control as of November 2015.

<sup>318</sup>UNODC, responses to the annual report questionnaire.

users in 2019 was 405, which is a significant decline on 2015 when almost 2,000 persons were recorded.<sup>324</sup>

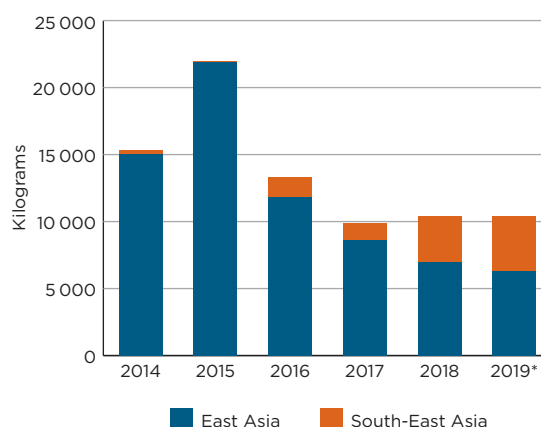
However, in recent years countries in South-East Asia, many of which are situated along major ketamine trafficking routes, have witnessed its increasing non-medical use.<sup>325</sup> For instance, the number of treatment admissions caused by the non-medical use of ketamine in Thailand has increased more than 20 times over the last five years, from just over 50 people in 2014 to 1,069 in 2019.<sup>326</sup> Moreover, in 2019, Cambodian authorities perceived an increase in the non-medical use of ketamine in the country.<sup>327</sup>

Seizure trends and the clandestine manufacture of ketamine reflect, to some extent, the decline of use in East Asia and its increase in South-East Asia. In recent years, South-East Asia witnessed a 14-fold increase in annual seizures of ketamine since 2014, reaching four tons in 2019. At the same time, annual amounts seized in East Asia decreased significantly from more than 20 tons in 2014 to only 6 tons in 2019, mainly due to a large decline in seizures in China from its peak in 2015 (19.6 tons) to only 1.8 tons in 2019.<sup>328</sup> In parallel, while available evidence on illicit ketamine manufacture in South-East Asia pointed to an increase, China reported a decrease in illicit ketamine manufacture. Malaysia dismantled its first ever illicit ketamine manufacturing facility in 2016,<sup>329</sup> Viet Nam reported dismantling small-scale clandestine ketamine laboratories in 2017 and 2018<sup>330</sup> and Myanmar reported the seizure of 2,350 kg of ketamine at clandestine manufacturing sites in 2018.<sup>331</sup>

In 2019 several countries in East and South-East Asia, including China, Myanmar, Malaysia, Thailand and Viet

Nam, seized large shipments of ketamine packaged in distinctive teabags originating from the Golden Triangle. This established concealment method for methamphetamine has so far been uncommon for ketamine. While most of the ketamine consumed in East and South-East Asia is manufactured within the region, there is some supply from other parts of the world, including South Asia and Europe.

Figure 54. Quantities of ketamine seized in South-East Asia, 2014–2019



Source: UNODC, *Synthetic Drugs in East and South-East Asia: Latest Developments and Challenges* (May 2020).

\*Data collection for 2019 is preliminary and includes only those confirmed or officially reported by countries in the region.

### Seizures and increasing use of GHB and GBL are reported by some countries in East and South-East Asia and Oceania

Trafficking and use of *gamma*-hydroxybutyric acid (GHB) seem to be spreading in parts of East and South-East Asia, with China and the Philippines reporting seizures and non-medical use of the substance in recent years.<sup>332,333</sup> However, the market for GHB and its related substances are especially pronounced in Oceania, which accounted for almost a quarter of the global GHB seizures between 2014 and 2018.<sup>334</sup> Total quantities of GHB, *gamma*-butyrolactone (GBL), and 1,4-butanediol (1,4-BD) seized in Oceania have seen a significant increase in recent years, rising from about 1 ton in 2014 to a peak of 9 tons in 2017, before declining to 5 tons in 2018.<sup>335</sup> This increase seems

<sup>324</sup>Hong Kong, China, Narcotics Division, Security Bureau, *Newly/ previously reported drug abusers by age group by common type of drugs abused (T3)*. Available at [www.nd.gov.hk/text/en/stat/statistics\\_list.htm](http://www.nd.gov.hk/text/en/stat/statistics_list.htm)

<sup>325</sup>Drug Abuse Information Network for Asia and the Pacific, and official communication with the Office of the Narcotics Control Board of Thailand (February 2020).

<sup>326</sup>Drug Abuse Information Network for Asia and the Pacific, and official communication with the Office of the Narcotics Control Board (February 2020).

<sup>327</sup>Ibid.

<sup>328</sup>China, National Narcotic Control Commission, *Drug Situation in China 2019* (June 2020).

<sup>329</sup>Malaysia, National Anti-Drugs Agency and Royal Malaysian Police, "Latest situation on synthetic drugs responses to the threats in Malaysia", presented at the Global SMART Programme regional workshop, Hanoi, Viet Nam (August 2017).

<sup>330</sup>Viet Nam, Standing Office of Drugs and Crime, "Synthetic drug situation in Viet Nam", presented at the 2018 SMART Regional Workshop, Chiang Rai (August 2018).

<sup>331</sup>Myanmar, Central Committee for Drug Abuse Control, "Myanmar country presentation", presented at the 2018 SMART Regional Workshop, Chiang Rai (August 2018).

<sup>332</sup>Philippines, Dangerous Drugs Board and Philippines Drug Enforcement Agency, "Latest situation on synthetic drugs and responses to the threats in Philippines", presented at the 2019 SMART Regional Workshop, Singapore (August 2019).

<sup>333</sup>UNODC, responses to the annual report questionnaire.

<sup>334</sup>Ibid.

<sup>335</sup>Ibid.



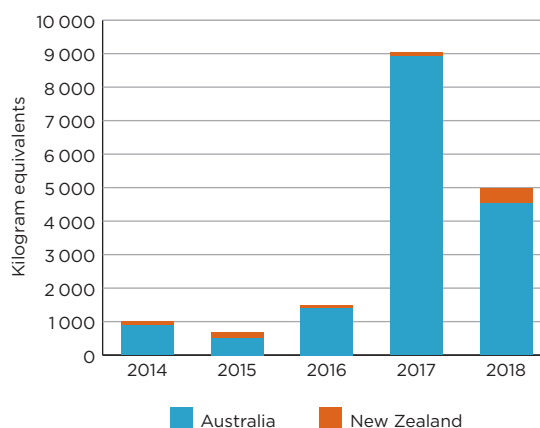
to be driven both by an increase in importation and illicit domestic production of either or a combination of these substances. Australia reported that GHB and GBL detections has increased by 28 per cent from 178 detections between fiscal year 2016–2017 to 227 detections in fiscal year 2017–2018, with China (including Hong Kong, China) being the primary embarkation point followed by parts of Europe, the United States and Thailand (in descending order of number of detections).<sup>336</sup> Over the same period, the number of GHB and GBL clandestine laboratories detected in Australia doubled to 22 in fiscal year 2017–2018.<sup>337</sup> The significant increase in seizures coincides with a widening price range on the illicit market for 1 litre of GHB or GBL, during the same time period, from \$A 800 – \$A 3,000 to \$A 600 – \$A 3,500 (Australian dollars), suggesting possible shortfalls in supply of the substance in parts of the country.<sup>338</sup>

<sup>336</sup> Australia, Australian Criminal Intelligence Commission, *Illicit Drug Data Report 2017–2018*, 2019.

<sup>337</sup> Ibid.

<sup>338</sup> Ibid.

Figure 55. Quantities of *gamma*-hydroxybutyric acid (GHB), *gamma*-butyrolactone (GBL) and 1,4-butanediol (1,4-BD) seized in Australia and New Zealand, 2014–2018



Source: UNODC, responses to the annual report questionnaire.

Note: Seizures by Australia include GHB, GBL and 1,4-BD and mixtures of one or more of these substances. Those of New Zealand are reported as GHB.

#### Box 4. Selling of synthetic drugs through the darknet in East and South-East Asia and globally

Over the past years, there has been an increasing proportion of synthetic drugs sold over the darknet. Synthetic drugs offered online include MDMA, amphetamine, methamphetamine, opioids in all forms, LSD, ketamine and prescription drugs (mostly benzodiazepines) among others. The use of anonymous technology and illegal activities has become more widespread as darknet marketplaces became more easily accessible and popular. Criminals seek to remain anonymous by hiding their operations and identity using technical methods such as encryption, and non-technical methods like communicating in English to avoid revealing their mother tongue.

The dark web and darknet is a collection of thousands of websites that use anonymity tools such as TOR to encrypt their traffic and hide their IP addresses. The high level of anonymity in the digital space enables criminals to act without being easily detected. This is increasingly being used by criminals in East and South-East Asia for the entire range of criminal activities, including buying and selling of illegal or controlled items such as drugs. The number of marketplaces increased from just one in 2011 to 118 in 2019 accompanied by an increase in the number and variety of products and sales transactions. It is not easy to determine the origin of synthetic drugs sold through the darknet. Arrests made in South-East Asia would indicate that organized criminal groups selling over the darknet are not involved in traditional trafficking and distribution. Law enforcement agencies have carried out multiple international operations and routine policing targeting darknet marketplaces, resulting in the arrest of buyers and sellers. This has prompted the remaining darknet markets to strengthen their levels for security for accessing them.<sup>a</sup>

Analysis of darknet transactions revealed significant differences between MDMA (“ecstasy”) and other drugs. Wholesale quantities of MDMA tablets manufactured in Europe and trafficked to customers globally accounted for more than double the revenue of sales compared to retail-level quantities. In contrast, darknet transactions involving cannabis and cocaine were overwhelmingly at the retail level.<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> UNODC, *Darknet Threats to South-East Asia* (November 2020).

<sup>b</sup> European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction, *European Drug Report 2019: Trends and Developments* (Luxembourg, Publications Office of the European Union, 2019).

In addition, the proportion of Australians aged 14 and above reporting past-year use of GHB has increased from less than 0.1 per cent in 2013 to 0.1 per cent in 2016.<sup>339</sup> In New Zealand, the amount of GHB seized has more than tripled from about 130 kg to 446 kg between 2014 and 2018.<sup>340</sup> Although there are no recent

population-wide surveys on the use of GHB, recent studies among gay and bisexual men in the region found that about 3 per cent (New Zealand) to 6 per cent (Australia) had used GHB in the past six months, indicating their continued popularity among this subpopulation.<sup>341,342</sup>

<sup>339</sup> Australia, Institute of Health and Welfare, *National Drug Strategy Household Survey 2016: Detailed findings*, 2017.

<sup>340</sup> UNODC, responses to the annual report questionnaire.

<sup>341</sup> Peter Saxton and others, "P557 'Flux NZ': an online national cohort investigating HIV, STI and drug-related practices among New Zealand gay and bisexual men", *Sexually Transmitted Infections*, vol. 95, suppl. 1, A251.

<sup>342</sup> Johann Kolstee and others, "Characteristics of gay and bisexual men who rarely use HIV risk reduction strategies during condomless anal intercourse: Results from the FLUX national online cohort study", *PLoS ONE*, vol. 15, no. 6, e0233922.

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# **THE NEAR AND MIDDLE EAST**

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# Key findings

## Amphetamine

- The largest quantities of amphetamine seized worldwide continue to be reported from Saudi Arabia, Jordan, United Arab Emirates and Lebanon (in order of aggregated amount seized).
- Most amphetamine seized in the region is reported to have originated in Lebanon and the Syrian Arab Republic, with manufacture reported from Jordan.
- Europe plays an increasingly important role in “captagon” trafficking to and from countries in the Near and Middle East.

## Methamphetamine

- Increases in quantities of crystalline methamphetamine seized in recent years suggest that the methamphetamine market in the region is expanding.
- Methamphetamine is trafficked from countries in East and South-East Asia, South Asia, and Western and Central Europe, to the Near and Middle East.

## Tramadol

- Non-medical use of tramadol continues to expand in countries in the Near and Middle East.
- Tramadol seems to be mostly trafficked to the region for domestic use from North Africa, West and Central Africa, and South Asia.

## New psychoactive substances

- New psychoactive substances, mainly synthetic cannabinoid receptor agonists, continue to be reported from the region.



## A large “captagon” market in the region

The large and growing amphetamine market in the Near and Middle East<sup>343</sup> continues to be the main feature of the synthetic drugs market in the region in terms of quantities seized, illicit manufacture and trafficking. In the Near and Middle East amphetamine is typically sold in tablet form under the street name “captagon”.<sup>344</sup>

Although quantities of amphetamine seized in the region are large, annual seizures fluctuated significantly between 2014 and 2018, within a range of 17.5 tons to 42 tons. Between 2014 and 2018, Saudi Arabia consistently reported the largest amount of amphetamine seized in the region, annually ranging between 10 tons and 33 tons. According to information from law enforcement authorities, in 2018 almost 24 tons of “captagon” tablets were seized.<sup>345</sup> During the same period, significant amounts of amphetamine seizures were also reported by Jordan, Lebanon, the Syrian Arab Republic and the United Arab Emirates. Qualitative information reported by countries on trafficking trends indicates an overall expansion of the amphetamine market, specifically with regard to amphetamine trafficking. Quantities of amphetamine seized increased in Oman with its first seizure of 1.4 tons reported in 2016. Multi-ton seizures continued to be reported by authorities in 2019 and 2020. Large seizures of amphetamine shipments, destined for the region, were also made in European countries (For more information please see the section on Europe).

## The increasing complexity of amphetamine trafficking

Amphetamine continues to be extensively trafficked within the Near and Middle East. Political instability, unresolved conflicts and lack of economic opportunities in some parts of the region may have contributed to increased trafficking in “captagon”.<sup>346</sup>

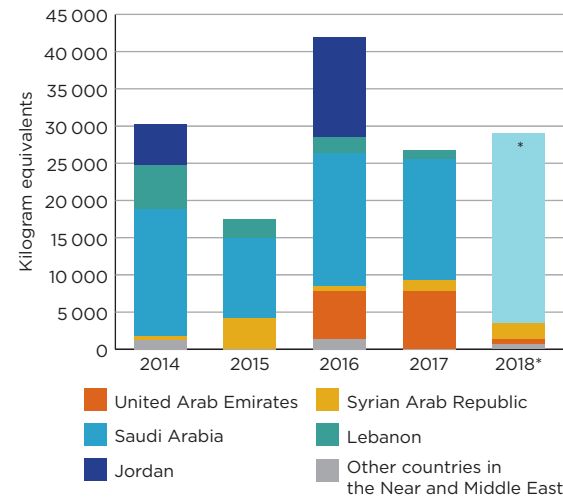
<sup>343</sup>Countries and territories covered are Bahrain, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, State of Palestine, Syrian Arab Republic, United Arab Emirates and Yemen.

<sup>344</sup>“Captagon” was originally the trade name for a pharmaceutical preparation containing fenetylline, a synthetic stimulant. Most tablets seized as “captagon” in recent years essentially contain amphetamine, typically in combination with caffeine and sometimes other adulterants. Source: UNODC, *World Drug Report 2020* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.20.XI.6).

<sup>345</sup>Heads of National Drug Law Enforcement Agencies, Fifty-fourth session, *Subcommission on Illicit Drug Traffic and Related Matters in the Near and Middle East, Country Report: Saudi Arabia*, 2019, UNODC/SUBCOM/54/CRP.3.

<sup>346</sup>International Narcotics Control Board, *Report of the International Narcotics Control Board for 2019, 2020*.

Figure 56. Quantities of amphetamine seized in the Near and Middle East, 2014–2018



Source: UNODC, responses to the annual report questionnaire.

\*Aggregate quantities seized: UNODC (2019), *Subcommission on Illicit Drug Traffic and Related Matters in the Near and Middle East, Fifty-fourth session – Country Report: United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia*. Individual seizures: Jordan Armed Forces – Arab Army (March 2018 to December 2018).

In order of importance, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar are major destinations for amphetamine trafficked to the region. Amphetamine was reported as the most used drug in Saudi Arabia (2017) and the second most used drug in Qatar (2016).<sup>347</sup> Jordan, Oman and the Syrian Arab Republic reported that some of the amphetamine seized within the countries was intended for trafficking to North Africa and South Asia. Most of the amphetamine seized in the Near and Middle East originated from Lebanon and the Syrian Arab Republic. Both countries reported each other as country of provenance and/or transit for amphetamine. Lebanese law enforcement authorities have speculated about possible collaboration of amphetamine manufacture and trafficking between criminal organizations of countries in the Near and Middle East.<sup>348</sup>

Within the region, amphetamine was primarily reported to have been trafficked from Lebanon and the Syrian Arab Republic to countries such as Israel, Jordan, Qatar and Saudi Arabia. In addition, Jordan has been identified by countries in the region, such as Saudi Arabia, as the

<sup>347</sup>UNODC, responses to the annual report questionnaire.

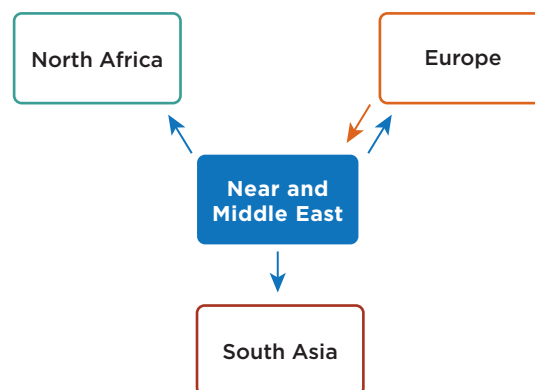
<sup>348</sup>Heads of National Drug Law Enforcement Agencies, Fifty-third session, *Subcommission on Illicit Drug Traffic and Related Matters in the Near and Middle East, Country Report: Lebanon*, 2018, UNODC/SUBCOM/53/CRP.8.

country of origin for amphetamine shipments.<sup>349</sup> Europe plays an increasingly important role in “captagon” trafficking to and from countries in the Near and Middle East. In recent years, countries in Western and Central Europe and South-Eastern Europe seized large quantities of “captagon” tablets originating from the Syrian Arab Republic<sup>350</sup> and are reported as source or transit points of amphetamine shipments destined for the Near and Middle East. In 2019 and 2020, multi-ton “captagon” seizures, originating from the Syrian Arab Republic, were made in Greece<sup>351,352</sup> (5 tons) and Italy<sup>353</sup> (14 tons).

Turkey is perceived as the country of provenance and transit point for trafficking of amphetamine by a number of countries, including Israel, Oman and Saudi Arabia. Several Western European countries such as Belgium, France, Germany, Italy and the Netherlands have been reported as transit countries for amphetamine trafficking to Saudi Arabia.<sup>354,355,356</sup>

The significance of amphetamine manufacture in the Near and Middle East is also reflected in precursor seizures. For instance, in 2015 and 2018, Lebanon reported large seizures of precursors frequently used in the manufacture of amphetamine, phenylacetic acid and P-2-P respectively. In addition, Lebanese authorities seized equipment used in the manufacture of amphetamine that arrived from the Syrian Arab Republic.<sup>357</sup> Large quantities of precursors that can be used in the manufacture of amphetamine were also seized outside the region. For

Figure 57. Interregional trafficking of amphetamine connected to the Near and Middle East, 2014–2018



Source: UNODC, responses to the annual report questionnaire.

example, in 2017 India seized a shipment containing 24 tons of phenylacetic acid that was destined for the Syrian Arab Republic. According to INCB, there is a possibility that existing manufacturing facilities in the Syrian Arab Republic are used to illicitly manufacture amphetamine.<sup>358</sup> In Jordan, a clandestine amphetamine laboratory was dismantled in 2018 and quantities of APAAN, a precursor of P-2-P, were seized.<sup>359</sup> The amphetamine found was allegedly destined for Saudi Arabia and neighbouring countries.<sup>360</sup>

### Methamphetamine: indications of an increasing presence on the synthetic drug market

In addition to amphetamine, the region is experiencing increased trafficking of methamphetamine which might indicate an expansion of the market, similar to other regions in Asia. While between 2013 and 2015 the total annual quantities seized in the region ranged between 5 to 12 kg, the quantities between 2016 and 2018 ranged between 133 kg to more than 1 ton. Several countries including Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates reported increasing seizures within the latter period, with Bahrain reporting the biggest seizures with more than 1 ton in 2016.<sup>361</sup>

<sup>349</sup>International Narcotics Control Board, *Report of the International Narcotics Control Board for 2018, 2019*.

<sup>350</sup>European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction, *European Drug Report 2019: Trends and Developments* (Luxembourg, Publications Office of the European Union, 2019).

<sup>351</sup>Greece, Ministry of Finance – Press Release, 1 July 2019. Available at [www.minfin.gr/web/guest/deltia-typou/-/asset\\_publisher/4kjd0lBldee/content/kataschese-tes-megalyteres-posotetas-synthetikon-narkotikon-captagon-apo-to-s-d-o-e-?inheritRedirect=false&redirect=https%3A%2F%2Fminfin.gr%2Fweb%2Fguest%2Fdeltia-typou%3Fp\\_id%3D101\\_INSTANCE\\_4kjd0lBldee%26p\\_p\\_lifecycle%3D0%26p\\_p\\_state%3Dnormal%26p\\_p\\_mode%3Dview%26p\\_p\\_col\\_id%3Dcolumn-2%26p\\_p\\_col\\_count%3D1](http://www.minfin.gr/web/guest/deltia-typou/-/asset_publisher/4kjd0lBldee/content/kataschese-tes-megalyteres-posotetas-synthetikon-narkotikon-captagon-apo-to-s-d-o-e-?inheritRedirect=false&redirect=https%3A%2F%2Fminfin.gr%2Fweb%2Fguest%2Fdeltia-typou%3Fp_id%3D101_INSTANCE_4kjd0lBldee%26p_p_lifecycle%3D0%26p_p_state%3Dnormal%26p_p_mode%3Dview%26p_p_col_id%3Dcolumn-2%26p_p_col_count%3D1)

<sup>352</sup>Greece, Ministry of Finance – News, 5 July 2019. Available at [www.minfin.gr/web/guest/-/dt-sdoe-captagon?inheritRedirect=true&redirect=https%3A%2F%2Fminfin.gr%2Fweb%2Fguest%2Fanakoinoseis](http://www.minfin.gr/web/guest/-/dt-sdoe-captagon?inheritRedirect=true&redirect=https%3A%2F%2Fminfin.gr%2Fweb%2Fguest%2Fanakoinoseis)

<sup>353</sup>Italy, Guardia di Finanza, Press release: *Sequestro record di 14 tonnellate di anfetamine: 84 milioni di pasticche col logo “captagon” prodotte in Siria da ISIS/DAESH*, 1 July 2020.

<sup>354</sup>Heads of National Drug Law Enforcement Agencies, *Fifty-fourth session, Subcommittee on Illicit Drug Traffic and Related Matters in the Near and Middle East, Country Report: Saudi Arabia*, 2019, UNODC/SUBCOM/54/CRP.3.

<sup>355</sup>UNODC, Drugs Monitoring Platform.

<sup>356</sup>Ibid.

<sup>357</sup>Heads of National Drug Law Enforcement Agencies, *Fifty-fourth session, Subcommittee on Illicit Drug Traffic and Related Matters in the Near and Middle East, Country Report: Lebanon*, 2019, UNODC/SUBCOM/54/CRP.4.

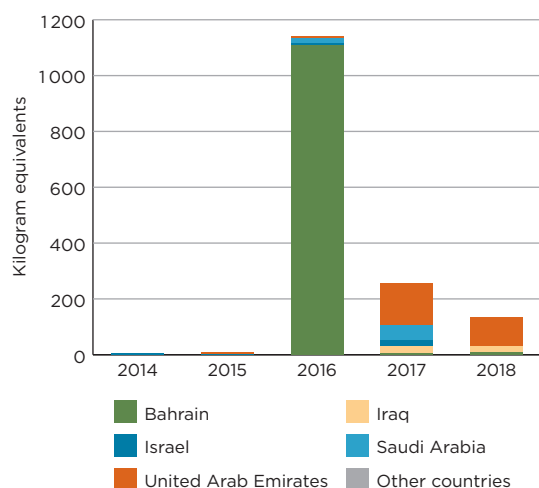
<sup>358</sup>International Narcotics Control Board, *Precursors and chemicals frequently used in the illicit manufacture of narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances 2017, 2018*.

<sup>359</sup>International Narcotics Control Board, *Precursors and chemicals frequently used in the illicit manufacture of narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances 2018, 2019*.

<sup>360</sup>Ibid.

<sup>361</sup>International Narcotics Control Board, *Report of the International Narcotics Control Board for 2018, 2019*.

Figure 58. Quantities of methamphetamine seized in the Near and Middle East, 2014–2018



Source: UNODC, responses to the annual report questionnaire.

### Diverse trends in methamphetamine trafficking

Countries in the Near and Middle East have mainly reported methamphetamine trafficking flows from East and South-East Asia. Between 2015 to 2018, countries of provenance of methamphetamine included China, Indonesia, Lao People's Democratic Republic, the Philippines, Thailand and Viet Nam. However, other regions including South Asia and Western and Central Europe also reported trafficking of methamphetamine to the Near and Middle East. For instance, methamphetamine intercepted in Pakistan in 2017 was presumably intended for onward trafficking to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. This trend seems to be continuing with Saudi Arabian law enforcement authorities reporting, in 2018, a gradual increase in seizures and trafficking of methamphetamine from Pakistan, particularly using air routes.<sup>362</sup> Moreover, in 2017 a significant proportion of the methamphetamine seized in some countries in Western and Central Europe was intended to be trafficked to the Near and Middle East.

On the other hand, countries in the Near and Middle East seem to be used as transit countries for methamphetamine trafficking to Oceania, Southern Africa, and Western and Central Europe. In the fiscal year 2017–2018, Australia reported the United Arab Emirates among

<sup>362</sup> Heads of National Drug Law Enforcement Agencies, *Fifty-fourth session, Subcommission on Illicit Drug Traffic and Related Matters in the Near and Middle East, Country Report: Saudi Arabia*, 2019, UNODC/SUBCOM/54/CRP.3. Seizures included 76 kg in 2017 to 105 kg in 2018.

others, as a key embarkation point by weight for ATS (excluding MDMA) trafficked to the country.<sup>363</sup> In addition, Italy (2016) and South Africa (2015) reported methamphetamine shipments that had arrived from the United Arab Emirates.<sup>364</sup>

### Use of methamphetamine

Information on methamphetamine use in the Near and Middle East is scarce but confirms that demand for the drug exists. For example, in the State of Palestine within Jerusalem, methamphetamine was one of the most commonly used substances and its use was also reported in the West Bank.<sup>365</sup> In addition, a survey among secondary school students in Israel showed a past-year prevalence of 3.8 per cent among 15 to 16-year-old students in 2014, with a higher prevalence in males (6 per cent) than females (1.5 per cent). Increased use of methamphetamine was also reported in Iraq for 2017 as well as in Saudi Arabia.<sup>366</sup>

### Non-medical use of tramadol continues to expand in the Near and Middle East

Countries in the Near and Middle East continue to be affected by trafficking and non-medical use of tramadol, a synthetic opioid not under international control. Several countries in the region reported tramadol among the top three most used substances, in particular Lebanon (2017), Qatar (2016) and the United Arab Emirates (2016). There are also increased reports of the non-medical use and trafficking of tramadol in Iraq as well as in the State of Palestine. High dose tramadol tablets trafficked from Egypt to the State of Palestine are believed to have contributed to a widespread non-medical use and a dependence among young people.<sup>367</sup> For instance, an assessment of illicit drug use in the State of Palestine showed that tramadol was the most commonly misused drug in the Gaza Strip, with the worsening security situation and high unemployment rates among university graduates

<sup>363</sup> Australia, Australian Criminal Intelligence Commission, *Illicit Drug Trade Report 2017–2018*, 2019.

<sup>364</sup> UNODC, responses to the annual report questionnaire.

<sup>365</sup> Palestine, Ministry of Health, UNODC, Korea International Cooperation Agency, World Health Organization, *Illicit Drug Use in Palestine* (November 2017). Available at [www.unodc.org/documents/publications/Illicit\\_Drug\\_Use\\_in\\_Palestine.pdf](http://www.unodc.org/documents/publications/Illicit_Drug_Use_in_Palestine.pdf)

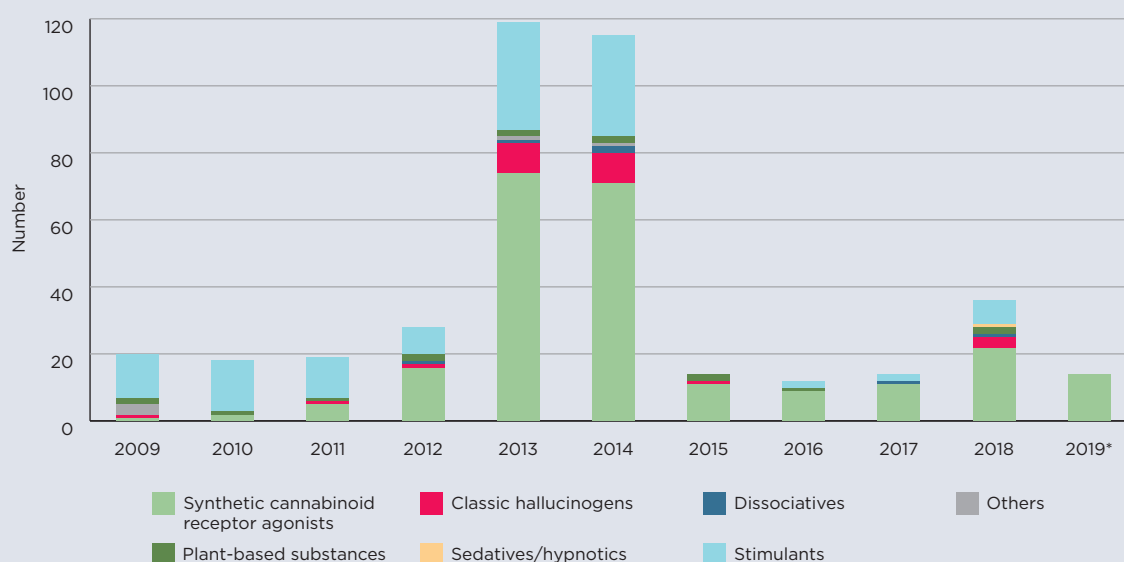
<sup>366</sup> International Narcotics Control Board, *Precursors and chemicals frequently used in the illicit manufacture of narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances* 2018, 2019.

<sup>367</sup> International Narcotics Control Board, *Report of the International Narcotics Control Board for 2018*, 2019.

### Box 5. New psychoactive substances in the Near and Middle East

Several countries in the Near and Middle East have reported the emergence of NPS with 180 substances reported by 11 countries in the region to the UNODC Early Warning Advisory (EWA) until August 2020. While the largest number of different NPS were reported in 2013 and 2014, numbers declined substantially since, with a small number of NPS showing signs of persistence on the market. For example, several synthetic cannabinoid receptor agonists have been reported since 2013, almost on an annual basis, including 5F-ADBICA, AB-CHMINACA,<sup>a</sup> AB-FUBINACA<sup>b</sup> and XLR-11.<sup>c</sup> In terms of quantities seized, most amounts of NPS seized in 2018 were plant-based NPS specifically khat (250 kg) and *Salvia divinorum* (23 kg). Large seizures of khat were made between 2014 to 2018 with 1.3 tons in 2014 and 8.8 tons in 2016. In 2016 and 2017 Jordan reported the seizures of synthetic cannabinoids with 227.8 kg and 72kg respectively.<sup>d</sup> Besides, some countries in the region also reported seizures of ketamine.

New psychoactive substances in the Near and Middle East by effect group, 2009–2019



Source: UNODC, Early Warning Advisory on New Psychoactive Substances.

\*Data collection for 2019 is preliminary.

<sup>a</sup> AB-CHMINACA has been under international control as of November 2018.

<sup>b</sup> AB-FUBINACA has been under international control as of November 2020.

<sup>c</sup> XLR-11 has been under international control as of November 2017.

<sup>d</sup> Heads of National Drug Law Enforcement Agencies, *Fifty-second session, Subcommittee on Illicit Drug Traffic and Related Matters in the Near and Middle East, Country Report: Jordan, 2017*, UNODC/SUBCOM/52/CRP.2.

identified as drivers.<sup>368</sup> In addition, a study conducted in 2018 among 935 students, aged between 15 and 25 years in Riyadh city (Saudi Arabia), showed that non-medical use of tramadol was at 8.61 per cent.<sup>369</sup> In Yemen, an

assessment on the misuse of prescription and non-prescription drugs in pharmacies showed that tramadol (10.3 per cent) was the second most suspected drug used non-medically after Alprazolam (16.3 per cent).<sup>370</sup> Moreover in Yemen, tramadol seems to be misused together with khat, which is widely used in the country.<sup>371</sup>

<sup>368</sup> Palestine, Ministry of Health, UNODC, Korea International Cooperation Agency, World Health Organization, *Illicit Drug Use in Palestine* (November 2017). Available at [www.unodc.org/documents/publications/Illicit\\_Drug\\_Use\\_in\\_Palestine.pdf](http://www.unodc.org/documents/publications/Illicit_Drug_Use_in_Palestine.pdf)

<sup>369</sup> Khadeejeh Khader and others, "Prevalence and Vulnerability to Drug Abuse among Students of High School and Colleges in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia: Cross-Sectional Study." *International Journal of Innovative Research in Medical Science*, 4(02), 128–132, 2019.

<sup>370</sup> Ebtesam A. Abood and Mayyada Wazaify, "Abuse and misuse of prescription and nonprescription drugs from community pharmacies in Aden City – Yemen", *Substance Use and Misuse*, 51(7), (2016):942–947.

<sup>371</sup> Ebtesam A. Abood and others, "User experiences of prescription and over-the-counter drug abuse in Aden City, Yemen." *Pharmacy*, 6(3), (2018):99.

There are also reports of widespread non-medical use of tramadol in the Syrian Arab Republic, buoyed by trafficking<sup>372</sup> and unregulated pharmacies in some parts of the country.

Countries in the region have reported seizures of tramadol since 2011, albeit with significant fluctuations in quantities. Of significance are the large annual seizures of 14.4 tons (Jordan) and 8.8 tons (United Arab

Emirates) in 2014 and 2017 respectively. Tramadol is mainly trafficked from North Africa, West and Central Africa, and South Asia to countries in the Near and Middle East. Several incidents in Saudi Arabia in 2017 and 2018 involving seizures of both “captagon” and tramadol might point to interconnectivity of those substances on the drug market.<sup>373</sup> (For more information on interregional trafficking of tramadol, see the section on of Africa.)

<sup>372</sup>International Narcotics Control Board, *Report of the International Narcotics Control Board for 2018, 2019*.

<sup>373</sup>UNODC, Drug Monitoring Platform.



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**SOUTH ASIA**

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# Key findings

## Amphetamine-type stimulants

- The ATS market in South Asia has expanded in recent years, with upward trends in the overall quantities of amphetamine, methamphetamine and ecstasy-type substances seized annually.
- The supply-led expansion of ATS trafficking has seemingly led to growing ATS use in the region.

## Methamphetamine

- The marked increase in methamphetamine seizures in the region is likely to be a result of growing transport connectivity within Asia, and intensification of methamphetamine manufacture and trafficking from neighbouring East, South-East and South-West Asia.

## Precursors

- India's booming pharmaceutical and precursor exports, combined with its scientific expertise and manufacturing capabilities, may present significant challenges for authorities in exercising controls over the diversion, clandestine manufacture and trafficking of precursor chemicals.
- Trafficking of ATS precursors from India remains significant, with key trafficking destinations including countries in Africa, East and South-East Asia, Oceania and the Near and Middle East.
- Seizures of other synthetic drug precursors including *N*-acetylthranilic acid, *N*-phenethyl-4-piperidone (NPP) and 2-bromo-4-chloropropiophenone trafficked from or within India were also reported.



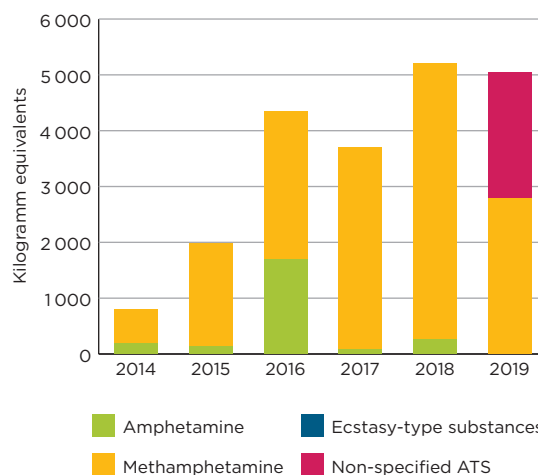
## The emergence of an active amphetamine-type stimulants market in the region

In general, the ATS market has seen an expansion in South Asia in recent years. There was an upward trend in the overall quantity of ATS seized in the region between 2014 and 2018. Significantly, quantities of methamphetamine seized during this period rose eightfold from about 0.6 tons to over 4.7 tons. This was mainly driven by a massive increase in methamphetamine tablets seized in Bangladesh, which accounted for 98 per cent of methamphetamine seizures in the region between 2014 and 2018. After several years of continuous increase, quantities of methamphetamine tablets seized in Bangladesh decreased by 42 per cent to 2.8 tons in 2019.<sup>374,375</sup> This is consistent with the trend in seizures of methamphetamine tablets in South-East Asia, a source area for this drug in South Asia. Seizures in South-East Asia decreased by a fifth in 2019 following record amounts seized annually from 2014 to 2018.<sup>376</sup> Though quantities of amphetamine seized in the region increased by 43 per cent to about 262 kg between 2014 and 2018, there is no clear trend within the seizure data. It is likely that overall ATS seizures in the region would persist at elevated levels in 2019 with India preliminarily reporting over two tons of unspecified ATS seizures in that year.<sup>377</sup>

## Intensification of methamphetamine trafficking from East, South-East and South-West Asia over land and maritime routes

The marked increase in methamphetamine seizures in South Asia is a likely result of growing transport connectivity within Asia, and an intensification of methamphetamine manufacture and trafficking from neighbouring East, South-East and South-West Asia.<sup>378</sup> For instance, Bangladesh reported that most of the methamphetamine tablets seized in its territory were manufactured in clandestine laboratories located in Myanmar and trafficked

Figure 59. Quantities of selected amphetamine-type stimulants seized in South Asia, 2014–2019



Source: UNODC, responses to the annual report questionnaire from Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Sri Lanka; Bangladesh Department of Narcotics Control, *Annual Drug Report 2018*; Bangladesh, Department of Narcotics Control, “Drug Control in Bangladesh”, presented at the Meeting of Drug and Precursor Intelligence Specialists, Mandalay, Myanmar (February 2020); India, Narcotics Control Bureau, “Country briefing on drug and precursor situation in India”, presented at the Meeting of Drug and Precursor Intelligence Specialists, Mandalay, Myanmar (February 2020).

Note: Data for Bhutan and Maldives are not available. Figures for the quantities of methamphetamine seized by Bangladesh, are taken from Bangladesh Department of Narcotics Control (DNC) *Annual Drug Report 2018* and Bangladesh DNC’s presentation at the Meeting of Drug and Precursor Intelligence Specialists in February 2020 and are converted into kg equivalents at 90mg per tablet.

into the country across the Bangladesh-Myanmar border.<sup>379</sup> The increase in methamphetamine seizures in India, and the corresponding decrease in Bangladesh, is likely to be due to expansion and diversification of trafficking in methamphetamine tablets and crystalline methamphetamine along overland routes from the Golden Triangle across north-eastern states of India to Bangladesh, and maritime routes along the Andaman Sea near Myanmar and Thailand which cross the territorial waters of India.<sup>380,381</sup> North-eastern states of India such as Manipur and Mizoram have reported multiple large seizures of methamphetamine tablets and crystalline

<sup>374</sup> Bangladesh, Department of Narcotics Control, “Drug Control in Bangladesh”, presented at the Meeting of Drug and Precursor Intelligence Specialists, Mandalay, Myanmar (February 2020).

<sup>375</sup> The reported figure is converted into kg equivalents at 90 mg per tablet.

<sup>376</sup> UNODC, *Synthetic Drugs in East and South-East Asia: Latest Developments and Challenges* (May 2020).

<sup>377</sup> India, Narcotics Control Bureau, “Country briefing on drug and precursor situation in India”, presented at the Meeting of Drug and Precursor Intelligence Specialists, Mandalay, Myanmar (February 2020).

<sup>378</sup> For more information, please see the sections on East and South-East Asia and South-West Asia.

<sup>379</sup> Bangladesh, Department of Narcotics Control, *Annual Drug Report 2018*.

<sup>380</sup> Bangladesh, Department of Narcotics Control, “Drug Control in Bangladesh”, presented at the Meeting of Drug and Precursor Intelligence Specialists, Mandalay, Myanmar (February 2020).

<sup>381</sup> India, Narcotics Control Bureau, “Country briefing on drug and precursor situation in India”, presented at the Meeting of Drug and Precursor Intelligence Specialists, Mandalay, Myanmar (February 2020).

methamphetamine between 2016 and 2019.<sup>382,383</sup> More recently, Mizoram Police reported a single large seizure of over 3.9 million methamphetamine tablets in February 2020.<sup>384</sup> In 2018, Sri Lanka reported seizures of methamphetamine for the first time since 2013 and Bhutan reported its first seizure of methamphetamine in 2019.<sup>385</sup>

Recent data point to an increase in maritime trafficking of synthetic drugs in the region. The Government of India recently raised their growing concern for synthetic drug trafficking in the Bay of Bengal and in 2019 highlighted two major seizures by Indian authorities in the area.<sup>386,387</sup> In September 2019, the Indian Coast Guard seized 1,156 kg of methamphetamine near the Nicobar Islands in the Andaman Sea.<sup>388</sup> The methamphetamine was concealed in the distinctive teabag packaging used in the Golden Triangle and was destined for Malaysia and Thailand.<sup>389</sup> Indian authorities also intercepted another suspicious vessel in the area carrying over 371 kg of methamphetamine, believed to have left from a port in Myanmar and heading to another port in the same country.<sup>390</sup>

By mid-April 2020, Sri Lanka Navy seized 797 kg of methamphetamine and 581 kg of ketamine within its maritime territories, a significant increase on the 3 kg of methamphetamine seized in 2019.<sup>391,392</sup> Initial reports indicate that a large portion of these seizures was from vessels carrying South-West Asian nationals.<sup>393,394</sup> The recent increase

in maritime interceptions of synthetic drugs also coincides with a small increase in heroin seizures in the Indian Ocean, which may indicate a switch in drug trafficking strategies by organized crime groups from land to maritime routes, possibly in response to COVID-19 measures.<sup>395</sup> However, the increase in such interceptions may also be attributed to a reduction in licit trade along the same maritime routes, making it easier for authorities to identify suspicious vessels.<sup>396</sup>

## Growing amphetamine-type stimulant use in South Asia

ATS use in South Asia seems to have grown alongside the supply-led expansion of ATS trafficking through, and to, the region. In 2018 the annual prevalence of use of amphetamines and pharmaceutical stimulants (excluding “ecstasy”) in South Asia was at 0.18 per cent (or 1.88 million), which accounts for 7 per cent of amphetamine users worldwide.<sup>397</sup> In India, it is estimated that about 0.06 per cent (or approximately 0.68 million) of the general population are ATS dependent.<sup>398</sup> Moreover, Indian states along methamphetamine trafficking routes across South-East Asia and South Asia such as Manipur (4.86 per cent), Mizoram (0.31 per cent), Andaman and Nicobar Islands (0.78 per cent) had a higher prevalence of past-year ATS use compared to the regional average.<sup>399</sup>

The proportion of patients admitted to treatment services for methamphetamine tablets in Bangladesh rose from 18 per cent to 42 per cent between 2014 and 2018, in tandem with an increase in seizures during the same period.<sup>400</sup> A study conducted in 2018 with 2,500 drug users, selected from eight districts in Bangladesh, found that 48 per cent reported recent use of methamphetamine tablets.<sup>401</sup> In addition, Bangladesh authorities reported that methamphetamine tablets are generally perceived to be a “higher-class” drug compared to heroin due to their relatively higher cost, which may partly explain the growing popularity among drug users in the country.<sup>402</sup>

<sup>382</sup> India, Manipur Police, “Good Work Done Narcotics and Affairs of Border”. Available at [www.manipurpolice.gov.in/?p=4830](http://www.manipurpolice.gov.in/?p=4830)

<sup>383</sup> India, Mizoram Police, “Special Narcotic PS seized 100,000 tablets of methamphetamine” (October 2018). Available at <https://police.mizoram.gov.in/special-narcotic-ps-seized-100000-tablets-of-methamphetamine/>

<sup>384</sup> India, Mizoram Police, “Seizure of Methamphetamine at Vairengte” (February 2020). Available at <https://police.mizoram.gov.in/seizure-of-methamphetamine-at-vairengte/>

<sup>385</sup> UNODC, responses to the annual report questionnaire.

<sup>386</sup> India, Ministry of Home Affairs, “Two-day ‘Conference on Combating Drug Trafficking’ for BIMSTEC Partner Nations concludes in New Delhi”, press release (February 2020).

<sup>387</sup> India, Narcotics Control Bureau, “Country briefing on drug and precursor situation in India”, presented at the Meeting of Drug and Precursor Intelligence Specialists, Mandalay, Myanmar (February 2020).

<sup>388</sup> Ibid.

<sup>389</sup> UNODC, *Synthetic Drugs in East and South-East Asia: Latest Developments and Challenges* (May 2020).

<sup>390</sup> India, Narcotics Control Bureau, “Country briefing on drug and precursor situation in India”, presented at the Meeting of Drug and Precursor Intelligence Specialists, Mandalay, Myanmar (February 2020).

<sup>391</sup> Sri Lanka, Navy, “Vessel seized by Navy in high seas while carrying a stock of heroin and crystal methamphetamine escorted to Dikkowita fisheries harbour”, (16 April 2020).

<sup>392</sup> Sri Lanka, Navy, “Navy-seized vessel carrying crystal methamphetamine and ketamine in high seas brought to Dikkowita fisheries harbour”, (1 April 2020).

<sup>393</sup> Ibid.

<sup>394</sup> Sri Lanka, Navy, “Navy seizes another vessel carrying heroin and crystal methamphetamine in high seas”, (11 April 2020).

<sup>395</sup> UNODC, “COVID-19 and the drug supply chain: from production and trafficking to use”, *Research Brief* (May 2020).

<sup>396</sup> Ibid.

<sup>397</sup> UNODC, *World Drug Report 2020* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.20.XI.6).

<sup>398</sup> India, Atul Ambekar and others, Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, *Magnitude of Substance Use in India* (New Delhi, 2019).

<sup>399</sup> Ibid.

<sup>400</sup> Bangladesh, Department of Narcotics Control, *Annual Drug Report 2018, 2019*.

<sup>401</sup> Bangladesh, Department of Narcotics Control and SA Consult International Ltd., “Final Report on Cause and Victim of Drug Addiction and Way Forward for Establishment of Adequate Treatment and Rehabilitation Facilities at Private Sector in Bangladesh”, 2018.

<sup>402</sup> Ibid.

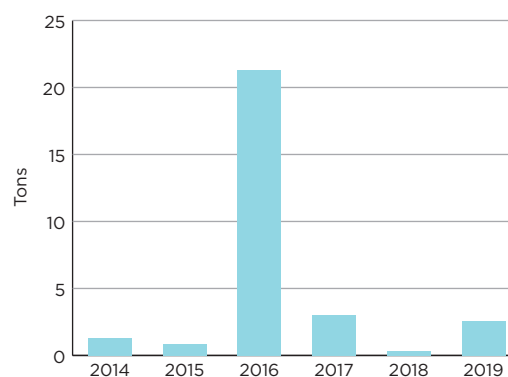
The perception of methamphetamine tablets in Bangladesh, and generally in South Asia, contrasts with that of East and South-East Asia where their use is associated with the lower and working classes. The use of crystalline methamphetamine in East and South-East Asia, however, is linked to the middle and higher upper classes of the population.<sup>403</sup>

### Trafficking amphetamine-type stimulant precursors from India

India has one of the largest pharmaceutical industries in the world, exporting over \$19.14 billion worth of licit pharmaceuticals in the fiscal year 2019.<sup>404</sup> The country is also one of the world's largest exporters of chemicals for which licit uses exist but which can also be used as precursors for the illicit manufacture of drugs. In 2019, licit exports of such chemicals from India included nearly 32,000 tons of acetic anhydride, 3,900 tons of potassium permanganate, 137 tons of phenylacetic acid and 681 tons of ephedrine and pseudoephedrine.<sup>405,406</sup> The sheer volume and projected expansion of India's pharmaceutical and precursor exports,<sup>407</sup> combined with its scientific expertise and manufacturing capabilities of various types of essential chemicals may present significant challenges for national authorities in exercising precursor controls to deter and detect diversion from licit channels, clandestine manufacture and trafficking of precursor chemicals.

Recent interdictions of ephedrine and pseudoephedrine in India are indicative of these challenges. In 2019, India seized over 2.6 tons of ephedrine, pseudoephedrine and their preparations.<sup>408</sup> Notably, in May 2019 the Narcotic Control Bureau (NCB) of India reported a significant seizure of 1.8 tons of pseudoephedrine, which is the largest single seizure of the substance on record in the

Figure 60. Quantities of ephedrine and pseudoephedrine seized in India, 2014–2019



Source: International Narcotics Control Board, reported by India on Form D, 2014–2017; Narcotic Control Bureau of India, “Country briefing on drug and precursor situation in India”, presented at the Meeting of Drug and Precursor Intelligence Specialists, Mandalay, Myanmar (February 2020).

Note: Seizures also include preparations of ephedrine and pseudoephedrine.

country.<sup>409</sup> Though seizures of ephedrine and pseudoephedrine do not show a clear trend, the volume remains large. In 2017, the India NCB reported that these substances are mainly trafficked from the country through airports and via courier and parcel services.<sup>410,411</sup> Significant seizures in 2019 indicate a continuation of these trends with key trafficking destinations including countries in Africa, East and South-East Asia, Oceania and the Near and Middle East.<sup>412,413</sup> Precursors for synthetic drugs other than ATS trafficked from or within India include *N*-acetylthranilic acid (used in the illicit manufacture of methaqualone), *N*-phenethyl-4-piperidone (used in the manufacture of fentanyl and some of its analogues) and 2-bromo-4-chloropropiophenone (used in manufacture of 4-chloro-substituted cathinone derivatives such as 4-CMC).<sup>414,415</sup>

<sup>403</sup> UNODC, “Methamphetamine continues to dominate synthetic drug markets”, *Global SMART Update*, vol. 20 (September 2018).

<sup>404</sup> India, India Brand Equity Foundation, “Indian Pharmaceuticals Industry”. Available at [www.ibef.org/industry/pharmaceutical-india.aspx](http://www.ibef.org/industry/pharmaceutical-india.aspx)

<sup>405</sup> India, Narcotics Control Bureau, “Country briefing on drug and precursor situation in India”, presented at the Meeting of Drug and Precursor Intelligence Specialists, Mandalay, Myanmar (February 2020).

<sup>406</sup> International Narcotics Control Board, *Precursors and chemicals frequently used in the illicit manufacture of narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances 2019, 2020*.

<sup>407</sup> India, India Brand Equity Foundation, “Indian Pharmaceuticals Industry”. Available at [www.ibef.org/industry/pharmaceutical-india.aspx](http://www.ibef.org/industry/pharmaceutical-india.aspx)

<sup>408</sup> India, Narcotics Control Bureau, “Country briefing on drug and precursor situation in India”, presented at the Meeting of Drug and Precursor Intelligence Specialists, Mandalay, Myanmar (February 2020).

<sup>409</sup> International Narcotics Control Board, *Report of the International Narcotics Control Board for 2019, 2020*.

<sup>410</sup> India, Narcotics Control Bureau, “Annual Report 2017”, 2018.

<sup>411</sup> India, Narcotics Control Bureau, “Country briefing on drug and precursor situation in India”, presented at the Meeting of Drug and Precursor Intelligence Specialists, Mandalay, Myanmar (February 2020).

<sup>412</sup> Ibid.

<sup>413</sup> International Narcotics Control Board, *Precursors and chemicals frequently used in the illicit manufacture of narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances 2019, 2020*.

<sup>414</sup> International Narcotics Control Board, *Precursors and chemicals frequently used in the illicit manufacture of narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances 2018, 2019*.

<sup>415</sup> International Narcotics Control Board, *Precursors and chemicals frequently used in the illicit manufacture of narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances 2019, 2020*.



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# **SOUTH-WEST ASIA**

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# Key findings

## Methamphetamine

- The market for methamphetamine has seen a large increase across all countries in the region.
- Seizure quantities tripled from 1.9 tons in 2016 to 6.1 tons in 2018 and further increased in 2019.
- Key opiate trafficking routes in the region are being used to traffic methamphetamine towards other regions such as Asia, Europe, the Near and Middle East and Oceania.
- There appears to be a growing number of methamphetamine manufacturing facilities operating within Afghanistan, especially in the provinces bordering the Islamic Republic of Iran.
- There are indications of increasing concomitant use of methamphetamine and opioids in the region while the perceived risks regarding the harm and dependence potential of methamphetamine remain low among users.

## Amphetamine

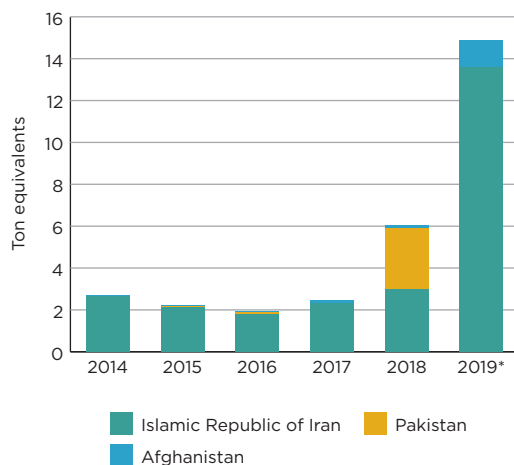
- Amphetamine remains a key fixture in Pakistan, with early indications of an expansion into Afghanistan.

## An expanding methamphetamine market in South-West Asia

The synthetic drugs market in South-West Asia<sup>416</sup> has grown in recent years, with methamphetamine seizures more than tripling from 1.9 tons to a record 6.1 tons between 2016 and 2018.<sup>417</sup> Furthermore in 2019, methamphetamine seizures of 13.6 tons were reported by the Islamic Republic of Iran. This amounts to more than double the seizures reported in South-West Asia in 2018, indicating a continued expansion of methamphetamine supply in the region.<sup>418</sup> Though methamphetamine manufacture, use and trafficking has long been present in South-West Asia,<sup>419</sup> this sudden surge of seizures in recent years is noteworthy.

Generally, the quantities of methamphetamine seized have increased significantly across all countries in the region. In the Islamic Republic of Iran, there has been a resurgence in methamphetamine seizures since 2016. Despite an initial

Figure 61. Quantities of methamphetamine seized in South-West Asia by country, 2014–2019



Source: UNODC, responses to the annual report questionnaire; 2019: Official Communication with the Permanent Mission of the Islamic Republic of Iran to the United Nations and Other International Organizations, January 2020. Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress* (30 July 2020).

\*Data collection for methamphetamine seizures for 2019 is preliminary.

<sup>416</sup> South-West Asia includes Afghanistan, Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan.

<sup>417</sup> UNODC, responses to the annual report questionnaire.

<sup>418</sup> Official Communication with the Permanent Mission of the Islamic Republic of Iran to the United Nations and Other International Organizations (January 2020).

<sup>419</sup> According to the responses to the annual report questionnaire, seizures of methamphetamine in the region has averaged about 2.8 tons annually between 2009 and 2018.

decline between 2014 and 2016, methamphetamine seizures in the country increased almost sevenfold from approximately 1.8 tons in 2016 to 13.6 tons in 2019, amidst a decline in the number of clandestine laboratories that have been dismantled since 2013.<sup>420,421,422,423</sup> In 2018, the Islamic Republic of Iran reported that most of its methamphetamine seizures originated from Afghanistan and were either trafficked directly from Afghanistan or via Pakistan with a majority of it intended for markets outside the country.<sup>424</sup> This surge in seizures was accompanied by a decrease in wholesale prices of methamphetamine from \$8,719–\$12,456 in 2016 to \$5,669–\$11,734 in 2018.<sup>425</sup> While recent information on drug use trends is not available, the pronounced increase in the amounts seized in combination with a decrease in prices points towards increased availability of methamphetamine in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Methamphetamine seizures also increased significantly in Afghanistan from approximately 9 kg in 2014 to over 1.3 tons preliminarily reported in 2019.<sup>426,427</sup> In Afghanistan, methamphetamine has been seized in tablet and crystalline form. Methamphetamine tablets typically contain a variety of other substances including heroin and MDMA while crystalline methamphetamine is reported to be of high purity.<sup>428</sup> Official information on the manufacture, trafficking and use of methamphetamine in Afghanistan is scarce. However, concomitant use of heroin and methamphetamine has been reported by users<sup>429</sup> and public health experts in the country in addition to a perceived increase in ATS use, specifically in 18 to 30-year olds.<sup>430,431</sup>

<sup>420</sup> Official Communication with the Permanent Mission of the Islamic Republic of Iran to the United Nations and Other International Organizations (January 2020).

<sup>421</sup> UNODC, responses to annual report questionnaire.

<sup>422</sup> International Narcotics Control Board, *Report of the International Narcotics Control Board for 2019, 2020*.

<sup>423</sup> The figures presented refer to all laboratories, regardless of the size of the facility or the scale of the output. At present, there are no comprehensive data to assess the scale of the dismantled manufacturing facilities.

<sup>424</sup> UNODC, responses to annual report questionnaire.

<sup>425</sup> Ibid.

<sup>426</sup> Ibid.

<sup>427</sup> United States, Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress* (30 July 2020).

<sup>428</sup> Afghanistan, Counter Narcotics Police, Forensic Laboratory, "Country briefing", presented at the Paris Pact Initiative Expert Group on Precursors, Shanghai, China (November 2019).

<sup>429</sup> UNODC, *Afghanistan Synthetic Drug Situation Assessment* (January 2017).

<sup>430</sup> Official communication with Afghanistan's Ministry of Public Health (February 2020).

<sup>431</sup> United States, Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress* (30 January 2020).



There are recent indications of a growing number of active methamphetamine manufacturing facilities operating within Afghanistan especially in the western Farah, Herat and Nimroz provinces bordering the Islamic Republic of Iran.<sup>432,433,434</sup> In addition, there is anecdotal evidence that clandestine laboratories in Afghanistan extract ephedrine from the ephedra plant material and use it as a precursor for methamphetamine.<sup>435,436</sup> Many ephedra species are a natural source of ephedrine and pseudoephedrine, which were used in the past by the pharmaceutical industry before synthetic routes became common.<sup>437</sup> The plant grows wild in the mountainous regions of Afghanistan and has reportedly been harvested and sold to clandestine laboratories in the country.<sup>438,439</sup> While this has not been officially confirmed, and significant information gaps remain, the extraction of the precursors from the ephedra plant material for the illicit manufacture of methamphetamine is feasible from a technical point of view with limited chemical knowledge. Using the ephedra plant material as a source for precursors may offer advantages, for example, if ephedrine or pseudoephedrine diverted or extracted from pharmaceutical sources are not available or are more expensive.<sup>440</sup> However, the clandestine ephedra-based manufacture of methamphetamine has limitations, for example, the large amount of plant material needed for methamphetamine manufacture and its regular supply, ephedra being a limited natural resource, which can only be collected during the summer season or has to be planted in fields, consuming land and labour.<sup>441</sup> An

unknown question is the potential environmental damage caused by the large-scale collection of wild ephedra and the disposal of chemicals used in the manufacturing process.

Pakistan also experienced a significant increase in methamphetamine seizures between 2016 and 2018. Quantities of methamphetamine seized increased more than 21-fold from approximately 133 kg in 2016 to 2.9 tons in 2018.<sup>442</sup> The spike in seizures in 2018 is attributed to a single large seizure of over 2.5 tons of crystalline methamphetamine, leading to the arrest of an Afghan national. The large number of seizures made at international airports suggest that onward trafficking, for example, to the Near and Middle East<sup>443</sup> plays an important role.<sup>444,445</sup>

### The connection between opiates and methamphetamine in South-West Asia

Methamphetamine appears to be emerging in the region along popular opiate trafficking routes. It seems likely that in Afghanistan, the existing trafficking networks for opiates are also used for methamphetamine and some traffickers trade both.<sup>446</sup> In 2019, EMCDDA and Europol reported the possibility of methamphetamine originating from the Islamic Republic of Iran, being trafficked via Turkey to the European Union as a destination and/or transit point for onward trafficking to Asia and Oceania.<sup>447,448</sup> This route, also known as the Balkan route,

<sup>432</sup> Ibid.

<sup>433</sup> David Mansfield, "Denying Revenue or Wasting Money? Assessing the Impact of the Air Campaign Against 'Drug Labs' in Afghanistan", *The International Drug Policy Unit Reports* (London School of Economics and Political Science, April 2019).

<sup>434</sup> Official communication with the Counter Narcotics Police of Afghanistan (February 2020).

<sup>435</sup> Ibid.

<sup>436</sup> International Narcotics Control Board, *Precursors and chemicals frequently used in the illicit manufacture of narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances* 2019, 2020.

<sup>437</sup> Ehab A. Abourashed and others, "Ephedra in Perspective – a Current Review", *Phytotherapy Research*, vol. 17, no. 7 (2003), pp. 703–712.

<sup>438</sup> International Narcotics Control Board, *Precursors and chemicals frequently used in the illicit manufacture of narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances* 2019, 2020.

<sup>439</sup> David Mansfield and Alexander Soderholm, "Long Read: The unknown unknowns of Afghanistan's new wave of methamphetamine production". Available at <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/usappblog/2019/09/30/long-read-the-unknown-unknowns-of-afghanistans-new-wave-of-methamphetamine-production/>

<sup>440</sup> David Mansfield, "Denying Revenue or Wasting Money? Assessing the Impact of the Air Campaign Against 'Drug Labs' in Afghanistan", London School of Economics and Political Science (April 2019). Available at [www.lse.ac.uk/united-states/Assets/Documents/mansfield-april-update.pdf](http://www.lse.ac.uk/united-states/Assets/Documents/mansfield-april-update.pdf)

<sup>441</sup> United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, "Medicinal Plants of the Arid Zones", *Arid Zone Research – XIII* (France, 1960).

<sup>442</sup> UNODC, responses to annual report questionnaire.

<sup>443</sup> Pakistan, Anti Narcotics Force, *Note: ANF seized 1.091 tons drugs and 1,625 litres acetic anhydride worth RS 1.25 billion; Arrested 27 including 2 ladies involved in drug smuggling and impounded 7 vehicles (12 April 2018); ANF seized 447.51 kg drugs worth INR 1.06 billion in 26 operations; Arrested 43 persons involved in drug smuggling including 3 foreigners (27 September 2018); ANF seized 3,060.495 kg drugs worth INR 2.243 billion, in 11 operations; Arrested 12 persons and intercepted 2 vehicles involved in drug trafficking (7 March 2019); ANF seized 2.14 ton drugs in 32 operations; Arrested 40 persons including 4 ladies and foreigners and impounded 9 vehicles. The drugs seized were worth INR 3.32 billion internationally (2 August 2019); ANF seized 2730.611 kg drugs in 24 operations; Arrested 24 persons including 5 ladies and intercepted 5 vehicles involved in drug smuggling; The seized drugs are worth INR 243 million domestically (21 February 2020).*

<sup>444</sup> Pakistan, Ministry of Narcotics Control, *Year Book 2017–2018*.

<sup>445</sup> Pakistan, Anti Narcotics Force, *1st and 2nd Quarterly Bulletin 2019*.

<sup>446</sup> UNODC, "Voices of the Quchaqbar – Understanding opiate trafficking in Afghanistan from the perspective of drug traffickers", *AOTP Update Special Edition*, 2020.

<sup>447</sup> European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction and Europol, *Methamphetamine in Europe: EMCDDA-Europol Threat Assessment* (Luxembourg, Publications Office of the European Union, 2019).

<sup>448</sup> European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction and Europol, *2019 EU Drug Markets Report* (Luxembourg, Publications Office of the European Union, 2019).



has traditionally been the key corridor for trafficking heroin from Afghanistan and the Islamic Republic of Iran into Europe.<sup>449</sup> Moreover, methamphetamine originating or transiting through the region has also been seized along other opiate routes including the Southern Caucasus route in Armenia and Georgia, and the southern route in Saudi Arabia between 2016 and 2018.<sup>450,451</sup> More recently in 2020, several maritime vessels were intercepted near Sri Lanka (another common southern route used by heroin smugglers to reach South Asia),<sup>452</sup> resulting in joint seizures of at least 260 kg of heroin, 661 kg of crystalline methamphetamine and 579 kg of ketamine, and the arrest of several Iranian and Pakistani nationals on board the vessels.<sup>453,454</sup>

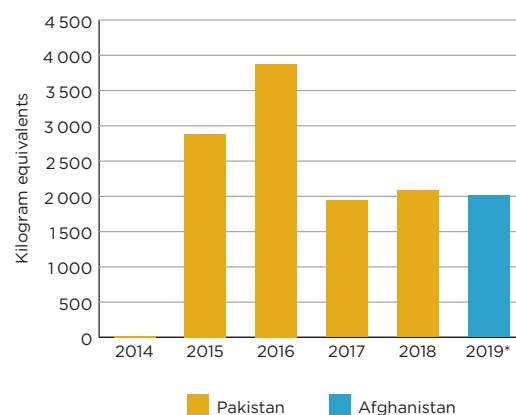
There are also indications of increasing concomitant use of methamphetamine and opioids in South-West Asia. Several studies in the Islamic Republic of Iran estimated that about 50 to 80 per cent of people using methamphetamine were concomitantly using it with other opioids including heroin, many of whom had a history or were currently injecting opioids.<sup>455</sup> Additionally, some studies on specific populations in the Islamic Republic of Iran, such as those in methadone maintenance treatment or in mid-term residential treatment centres, found that the proportion of methamphetamine use and concomitant use of methamphetamine and opioids were higher among females than males.<sup>456,457</sup> A perceived increase in the concomitant use of both substances has also surfaced in interviews with public health experts and methamphetamine

users in Afghanistan.<sup>458,459</sup> Concomitant use was reported by users as a means to manage the side effects arising from methadone maintenance treatment and/or the use of either substance. Moreover, users did usually not know about the risks, harms and dependence potential of methamphetamine.<sup>460,461,462</sup>

### Amphetamine remains a key feature in Pakistan, with early indications of expansion into Afghanistan

Amphetamine seems to have become entrenched in the regional market. In 2015 seizures of more than 3 tons of amphetamine were reported. Since then, seizures of the substance hit a peak of more than 3.8 tons in 2016 before decreasing and levelling at about 2 tons between 2017 and 2018. Between 2018 and 2019, several amphetamine seizures made at international airports in Pakistan were intended for Middle Eastern countries such as

Figure 62. Quantities of amphetamine seized in Afghanistan and Pakistan, 2014–2019



Source: UNODC, responses to the annual report questionnaire. 2019; Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress* (30 July 2020).

\*Data collection for amphetamine seizures for 2019 is preliminary and wholly reported by Afghanistan.

<sup>449</sup> Ibid.

<sup>450</sup> UNODC, responses to annual report questionnaire.

<sup>451</sup> Pakistan, Anti Narcotics Force, *Note*: ANF recovers 672 kgs narcotics valued at INR 1.177 billion in 31 strikes; Nets 37 drug offenders including 6 ladies, 2 foreigners and seizes 7 vehicles (08 February 2018); ANF seized 1.091 tons drugs and 1,625 litres acetic anhydride worth INR 25 billion; Arrested 27 including 2 ladies involved in drug smuggling and impounded 7 vehicles (12 April 2018); ANF seized 3 tons of drugs worth INR 2.44 billion in 26 operations; Arrested 25 persons and impounded 10 vehicles. (18 December 2018).

<sup>452</sup> International Narcotics Control Board, *Report of the International Narcotics Control Board for 2019, 2020*.

<sup>453</sup> Sri Lanka, Navy, "Navy-seized vessel carrying crystal methamphetamine and ketamine in high seas brought to Dikkowita fisheries harbour". (1 April 2020).

<sup>454</sup> Sri Lanka, Navy, "Navy seizes another vessel carrying heroin and crystal methamphetamine in high seas". (11 April 2020).

<sup>455</sup> Ghobad Moradi and others, "Drug use and risk behaviour profile, and the prevalence of HIV, hepatitis C and hepatitis B among people with methamphetamine use in Iran", *International Journal on Drug Policy*, vol. 73 (2019), pp. 129–134.

<sup>456</sup> Hossein Akbari and others, "Profile of drug users in the residential treatment centers of Tehran, Iran", *Health Promotion Perspectives*, vol. 9, no. 3 (2019), pp. 248–254.

<sup>457</sup> Zahra Alammehrjerdi and others, "Methamphetamine dependence in methadone treatment services in Iran: the first literature review of a new health concern", *Asian Journal of Psychiatry*, vol. 31 (2018), pp. 49–55.

<sup>458</sup> UNODC, *Afghanistan Synthetic Drugs Situation Assessment*, 2017.

<sup>459</sup> Official communication with Afghanistan's Ministry of Public Health (February 2020).

<sup>460</sup> UNODC, *Afghanistan Synthetic Drugs Situation Assessment*, 2017.

<sup>461</sup> Official communication with Afghanistan's Ministry of Public Health (February 2020).

<sup>462</sup> Seyed R. Radfar and others, "Methamphetamine Use Among Patients Undergoing Methadone Maintenance Treatment in Iran; a Threat for Harm Reduction and Treatment Strategies: A Qualitative Study", *International Journal of High Risk Behaviors of Addiction*, vol. 5, no. 4 (2016), e30327.

Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.<sup>463</sup> However, in terms of weight, seizures destined for the Middle East represented a very small proportion of the total amphetamine seized by Pakistan. Recently, the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction reported seizures of more than 2 tons of amphetamine by Afghan security forces in 2019.<sup>464</sup>

Due to the lack of recent data on drug use and amphetamine manufacturing in the region,<sup>465</sup> it is unclear whether the entrenchment in amphetamine seizures are a result of active production, demand for amphetamine in the region, or the result of an expansion of amphetamine trafficking transiting South-West Asia.

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<sup>463</sup>Pakistan, Anti Narcotics Force (ANF), *Note*: ANF seized 1.8 tons worth RS 1.735 billion in 26 counter-narcotics operation; Arrested 30 persons involved in drug trafficking and impounded 18 vehicles (6 August 2018); ANF seized 3.395 tons of drugs worth INR 3.96 billion in 9 operations; Arrested 10 persons including a foreigner and also impounded a vehicle involved in drug trafficking (9 November 2018); ANF seized 3,212.446 kg of drugs worth INR 2.648 billion in 29 operations; Arrested 31 persons including 2 foreigners and 3 ladies involved in drug trafficking also impounded 10 vehicles (28 February 2019); ANF seized 3.148 ton drugs in 32 operations; Arrested 31 persons and intercepted 8 vehicles involved in drug smuggling; The drugs seized were worth INR 3.44 billion internationally (25 April 2019).

<sup>464</sup>United States, Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress*. (30 July 2020).

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<sup>465</sup>The last known national study of drug use conducted in Pakistan in 2012 between the Government of Pakistan and UNODC estimated that 0.07 per cent (or 75,000) and 0.02 per cent (or 19,000) of its general population were using prescription amphetamines and methamphetamine respectively; Pakistan and UNODC, *Drug use in Pakistan 2013*, 2014.