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The Sahel, epicentre of drug  
distribution...also to the Middle  
East?

## The Sahel, epicentre of drug distribution...also to the Middle East?

### Abstract:

*The fragility of Sahelian states has turned the region into a geopolitical hub of criminality whose implications should not be ignored. Of the criminal activities that take place in the region, this paper focuses on drug trafficking. The Sahel has become a vital geopolitical hotspot for criminal groups involved in drug trafficking. With the Sahel as the epicentre, drugs are distributed everywhere. Given that drugs are spreading beyond the traditional markets (North America and Europe), it is necessary to take into consideration emerging markets. This paper focuses on one specific market: the Middle East, and particularly the Arabian Peninsula as a new receiving market for drugs from the Sahel.*

### Keywords:

*Drug trafficking; Sahel; Middle East; Arabian Peninsula; Organized crime; terrorism*

**\*NOTE:** The ideas contained in the Opinion Papers shall be responsibility of their authors, without necessarily reflecting the thinking of the IEEE or the Ministry of Defense.

## El Sahel, epicentro de distribución de drogas... ¿también hacia Oriente Medio?

### Resumen:

La fragilidad de los Estados del Sahel ha provocado que la región se convierta en un núcleo geopolítico de criminalidad cuyas implicaciones no deben ser ignoradas: de entre las actividades criminales que se desarrollan en la región, este documento se centra en el tráfico de drogas. El Sahel se ha convertido en un punto geopolítico de vital importancia para los grupos criminales que se dedican a esta actividad delictiva. Con el Sahel como epicentro, las drogas se distribuyen a través de distintas rutas. Teniendo en cuenta que la droga se está extendiendo más allá de los mercados tradicionales (América del Norte y Europa), se hace necesario estudiar los mercados emergentes que ofrecen nuevas oportunidades de negocio para estos grupos. Este documento de análisis se centra en uno de ellos: Oriente Medio y, en especial, la península arábiga como nuevo mercado receptor de la droga proveniente del Sahel.

### Palabras clave:

*Tráfico de drogas, Sahel, Oriente Medio, península arábiga, crimen organizado, terrorismo.*

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## Introduction.

As a previous step before commencing the analysis, a brief contextualisation of the areas under discussion is necessary in order to ensure its the accuracy.

The widely accepted definition of the Sahel is that which defines the region as a strip of about 5,000 kilometres long and 400 kilometres wide, located on the southern edge of the Sahara<sup>1</sup> desert and that crosses the entire African continent horizontally from Mauritania to Eritrea. The term usually refers to five countries in West Africa: Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, Mauritania and Niger<sup>2</sup>. Other countries of the region might be mentioned, but this paper will refer to these five states when discussing the Sahel.

Delimiting the Middle East, on the other hand, is more complicated. The different meanings of the term, due to geographical, cultural or religious considerations, make it necessary to specify the states that form the Middle East. For the purposes of this analysis, the (unofficial) subdivision established by the United Nations will be used, designating the following countries as the Middle East: Bahrain, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, United Arab Emirates, Yemen and Palestine<sup>3</sup>.

Having addressed this, the document proceeds to expand on the raised issue.

## Why is the Sahel an epicentre of illicit trafficking?

The political, social and environmental instability the Sahel countries face (as well as the whole region of West Africa) creates the perfect storm for the development of all kinds of illicit activities that affect governance and security not only regionally, but also globally. Porous borders, limited state presence in certain areas, scarce resources and widespread corruption are just some of the elements that make the situation in the Sahel a threat that

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<sup>1</sup> SÁNCHEZ HERRÁEZ, Pedro. "El Sahel: epicentro yihadista en África Occidental", p.81. Cuaderno de estrategia N.º 214. Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos. 15 de mayo de 2022. Disponible en:

[https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/cuadernos/CE\\_214/Cap\\_3\\_El\\_Sahel\\_epicentro\\_yihadista\\_en\\_Africa\\_Occidental.pdf](https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/cuadernos/CE_214/Cap_3_El_Sahel_epicentro_yihadista_en_Africa_Occidental.pdf). NOTA: Todos los enlaces están disponibles en la fecha de cierre de este documento, 1 de mayo de 2024.

<sup>2</sup> Ídem

<sup>3</sup> Esta designación se puede encontrar en documentos como el Global Cocaine Report de 2023. Disponible en: [https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/cocaine/Global\\_cocaine\\_report\\_2023.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/cocaine/Global_cocaine_report_2023.pdf)

the international community must ignore, especially Europe, since, as Ángel Losada, who was the EU High Representative for the Sahel, stated, the Sahel is Europe's new advanced frontier<sup>4</sup>. The old continent cannot afford to ignore the challenges coming from the south.

As stated by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), although it is not possible to define the conditions that directly produce the development of criminal activities, it is possible to identify certain circumstances that may make states vulnerable to it: high unemployment rates, exposure to violence, collapse of democracy, weak state institutions and great importance of the informal economy<sup>5</sup>. All of these factors, which we can find in the Sahel states, make the region a very attractive spot for the creation and settlement of criminal groups.

The development of illicit activities in the area, such as trafficking in drugs, arms, people or precious metals, has negative consequences for peace and development in the countries where it appears, making their conflicts worse and serving as a method of financing terrorist groups operating in the region<sup>6</sup>, allowing them to carry out attacks with an increased level of lethality.

The presence of transnational criminal groups in the Sahel is not new: historically, the area has been a place of transit: goods, ideas and people have moved through it for centuries<sup>7</sup>. Colonisation and the development of maritime trade altered the land routes that connected the entire region, favouring its transformation into a transit zone for illicit goods and substances<sup>8</sup>, especially in the border areas between states where traffickers and smugglers have controlled the movement of prohibited merchandise, taking advantage of the absence of state presence in the peripheries and the porosity of the

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<sup>4</sup> PUIG, Oriol. "El Sahel, la otra frontera de Europa". Barcelona Centre for International Affairs, 13 de julio de 2020. Disponible en:

[https://www.cidob.org/ca/publicacions/series\\_de\\_publicacio/notes\\_internacionals/n1\\_230/el\\_sahel\\_la\\_otra\\_frontera\\_de\\_europa](https://www.cidob.org/ca/publicacions/series_de_publicacio/notes_internacionals/n1_230/el_sahel_la_otra_frontera_de_europa)

<sup>5</sup> OECD. "Illicit Financial Flows. The Economy of Illicit Trade in West Africa", p. 32. Organización para la Cooperación y el Desarrollo Económico, 2018. Disponible en: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264268418-en>

<sup>6</sup> OECD. "Illicit Financial Flows. The Economy of Illicit Trade in West Africa", p. 5. Organización para la Cooperación y el Desarrollo Económico, 2018. Disponible en: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264268418-en>

<sup>7</sup> PUIG, Oriol. "El Sahel, la otra frontera de Europa". Barcelona Centre for International Affairs, 13 de julio de 2020. Disponible en:

[https://www.cidob.org/ca/publicacions/series\\_de\\_publicacio/notes\\_internacionals/n1\\_230/el\\_sahel\\_la\\_otra\\_frontera\\_de\\_europa](https://www.cidob.org/ca/publicacions/series_de_publicacio/notes_internacionals/n1_230/el_sahel_la_otra_frontera_de_europa)

<sup>8</sup> BAMBAYE, Serigne. "Connections between Jihadist groups and smuggling and illegal trafficking rings in the Sahel", p. 8. FES Peace and Security Series, 2018. Disponible en: <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/fes-pscc/14176.pdf>

borders. The limited state presence along with a population that does not receive the minimum services, create the perfect situation for illicit trafficking to occur<sup>9</sup>.

The political, social and economic circumstances that have been mentioned before have weakened the region's governments and their ability to respond to this threat with forcefulness. The loss of territorial control due, in part, to the limited military and police capacities of African states and their concentration in urban centres<sup>10</sup> allows these criminal groups to establish themselves and take control of important transit routes on the continent.

Now the analysis focuses on a specific criminal activity that has a large regional but also global impact: drug trafficking. It should be noted that in the early 2000s, as a consequence of repressive measures against drug trafficking in America, Latin American cartels had to look for new ways to introduce their drugs into Europe, and turned their attention to West Africa – mainly countries located on the coast such as Guinea Bissau, Sierra Leona and Ghana - using air transport. When this proved ineffective, they considered safer the land route through the Sahel. Criminal groups that already operated in the area decided to take on this activity because of the high profits that it generated, and ever since then, the business has grown to the point where the region has become the global hub of drug trafficking<sup>11</sup>. These kind of illicit businesses, which destabilise the regions where they take place, are highly profitable for those groups whose presence depends on a situation of constant conflict in order to develop. The weakness of the rule of law in the Sahel provides the conditions for the expansion of the drug economy, also providing the financial means necessary to maintain or expand the ongoing conflicts (drug trafficking offers an important funding source for armed groups operating in the Sahel)<sup>12</sup>.

According to the OECD, the main drugs trafficked through West Africa are cocaine, cannabis and methamphetamines. Among these, cocaine is the most lucrative and the one that has had the greatest impact in the illicit economy and instability<sup>13</sup>. It is estimated

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<sup>9</sup> Ídem, p.8.

<sup>10</sup> SÁNCHEZ HERRÁEZ, Pedro. "El Sahel: epicentro yihadista en África Occidental", p.104. Cuaderno de Estrategia N.º 214. Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos, 15 de mayo de 2022. Disponible en: [https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/cuadernos/CE\\_214/Cap\\_3\\_El\\_Sahel\\_epicentro\\_yihadista\\_en\\_Africa\\_Occidental.pdf](https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/cuadernos/CE_214/Cap_3_El_Sahel_epicentro_yihadista_en_Africa_Occidental.pdf).

<sup>11</sup> Ídem, p.10.

<sup>12</sup> TOCTA Sahel. "Drug trafficking in the Sahel", p. 9. UNODC, 2023. Disponible en: [https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/tocta\\_sahel/TOCTA\\_Sahel\\_drugs.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/tocta_sahel/TOCTA_Sahel_drugs.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> OECD. "Illicit Financial Flows. The Economy of Illicit Trade in West Africa", p. 62. Organización para la Cooperación y el Desarrollo Económico, 2018. Disponible en: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264268418-en>

that a kilo of cocaine is worth around 15,000€ when it reaches West Africa<sup>14</sup>, making it something highly attractive in these extremely poor countries, as it provides big benefits.

United Nations offers some worrying data regarding drug seizures in the Sahel which allows to grasp the magnitude of the issue: the amount of cocaine seized is increasing, with around 860 kilos seized in 2022. Cannabis is the most seized drug in the region, with seizures of up to 36 tonnes in 2021, as well as 23 tonnes of cannabis resin<sup>15</sup>. It is also concerning the increase in production and consumption of synthetic drugs, mainly amphetamine-type, of which 5 tonnes were seized in 2021<sup>16</sup>.

This chaotic situation and this potential source of (illicit) wealth not only attracts organised crime: it also attracts terrorist groups.

### **Sahel, epicentre of drug trafficking, epicentre of terrorism?**

This situation of becoming a global epicentre of drug trafficking and distribution, which was already a problem by itself, is joined by the proliferation of terrorist groups with a jihadist ideology in the african continent ever since the beginning of the 2000s. These groups have taken advantage of the insecurity in the area to settle, turning the Sahel into one of the centres of global jihadism today, following the defeat of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. Exploiting elements such as religion, local conflicts, corruption and the general feeling of injustice among the population, they have gained support in the region<sup>17</sup>.

At present, the jihadist groups active in the Sahel are linked to the two major global terrorist groups: Al Qaeda (AQ) and Islamic State (IS)<sup>18</sup>. These groups include The Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims, loyal to Al Qaeda, the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara and the Islamic State in West Africa, not forgetting the presence of Boko Haram

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<sup>14</sup> BAMBAYE, Serigne. "Connections between Jihadist groups and smuggling and illegal trafficking rings in the Sahel", p. 10. FES Peace and Security Series, 2018. Disponible en: <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/fes-pscc/14176.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> UNODC. "World Drug Report", p. 189. Oficina de Naciones Unidas contra la Droga y el Delito, 2023. Disponible en: [https://www.unodc.org/res/WDR-2023/WDR23\\_B3\\_CH8.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/res/WDR-2023/WDR23_B3_CH8.pdf)

<sup>16</sup> Ídem

<sup>17</sup> TOUAZI, Ilas. "African narco-jihadism among Al Qaeda and Islamic State affiliates: waging a halal war by haram means". International Team for the Study of Security, 8 de febrero de 2024. Disponible en: <https://www.itssverona.it/african-narco-jihadism-among-al-qaeda-and-islamic-state-affiliates-waging-a-halal-war-by-haram-means>

<sup>18</sup> SÁNCHEZ HERRÁEZ, Pedro. "El Sahel: epicentro yihadista en África Occidental", p.86. Cuaderno de Estrategia Nº. 214. Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos, 15 de mayo de 2022. Disponible en: [https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/cuadernos/CE\\_214/Cap\\_3\\_El\\_Sahel\\_epicentro\\_yihadista\\_en\\_Africa\\_Occidental.pdf](https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/cuadernos/CE_214/Cap_3_El_Sahel_epicentro_yihadista_en_Africa_Occidental.pdf).

in Nigeria<sup>19</sup>. The situation is alarming: according to the Spanish Department of Homeland Security, in 2023 the Sahel was the region with the most deaths as a result of jihadist terrorism in the world, with 43% of the victims<sup>20</sup>. Among the ten countries with the highest number of terrorist attacks globally, three are Sahelian countries: Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger<sup>21</sup>, being a proof of this sad reality.

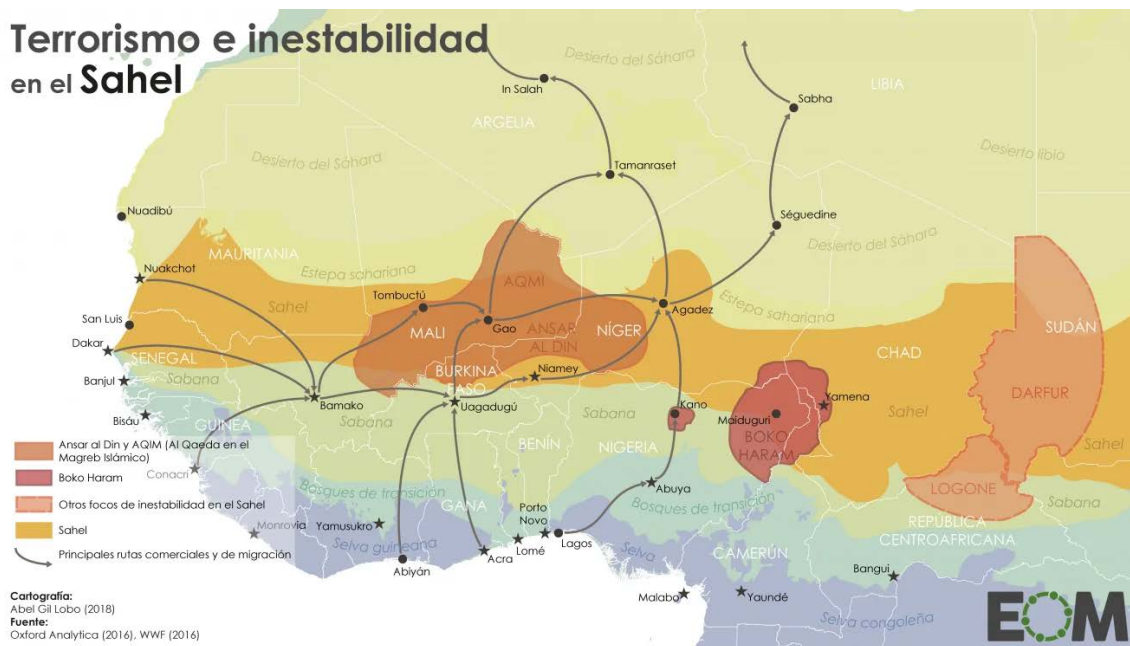


Image 1. Terrorismo e inestabilidad en el Sahel. El Orden Mundial (2019). <https://elordenmundial.com/mapas-y-graficos/terrorismo-e-inestabilidad-en-el-sahel/>

Taking all of the above into account, one of the main problems emanating from the region right now and which poses a serious concern for security forces is the proliferation and settlement of these terrorist groups and their alignment and collaboration with other criminal phenomena such as transnational drug trafficking groups. These two criminal phenomena increase the vulnerability of Sahel states, undermining the authority of governments and making it difficult for them to exercise the legitimate monopoly of violence<sup>22</sup>. The connection between the two is beneficial for both of them: for example, in

<sup>19</sup> Ídem, p.87.

<sup>20</sup> Índice Global de Terrorismo 2023. “África, epicentro mundial de la violencia yihadista”. Departamento de Seguridad Nacional, 26 de marzo de 2023. Disponible en: <https://www.dsn.gob.es/es/actualidad/sala-prensa/%C3%ADndice-global-del-terrorismo-2023-%C3%A1frica-epicentro-mundial-violencia>

<sup>21</sup> Observatorio Internacional de Estudios sobre Terrorismo. “Anuario del terrorismo yihadista 2023”, p.17. 2024. Disponible en: <https://observatorioterrorismo.com/eedyckaz/2024/03/ESP-ANUARIO-2023-1.pdf>

<sup>22</sup> BAMBA GAYE, Serigne. “Connections between Jihadist groups and smuggling and illegal trafficking rings in the Sahel”, p. 7. FES Peace and Security Series, 2018. Disponible en: <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/fes->

those areas controlled by a terrorist group, criminal organisations must pay a sort of "tax" to pass through its routes and to have some protection during the transit. Although terrorist groups have other means of funding - kidnapping, tax collection, source diversion - collaboration with the illegal drug trade will also be a source of income<sup>23</sup>. This is paradoxical considering that the use of narcotics is strictly forbidden under Islamic law, the law to which these groups (supposedly) adhere.

The best example, which constitutes a previous reference as it has been happening for some time, is the case of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). While it was led by Mojtar Belmojtar, in the beginning of the 2010s, any shipment passing through the areas controlled by AQIM was obliged to pay a "tax" that would enrich Al Qaeda and contribute to their development and settlement in the region<sup>24</sup>. This leader, in addition to profiting from tobacco smuggling, is suspected to have taken part in cocaine trafficking between Mali and Algeria<sup>25</sup>.

Also, the earnings obtained from drug trafficking allowed AQIM to control the arms market that emerged as a result of the fall of Gaddafi's regime in Libya<sup>26</sup>. Allegedly, it is these weapons that are making it possible for the group to sustain their ongoing campaign of terror on the continent. Given the lack of evidence and the difficulty to find it, other analysts consider that AQIM's financing when it comes to drug trafficking is more focused on imposing taxes on any merchandise that is intended to pass through "its territory", as well as providing vehicles and members of the group to traffickers in order to guarantee their safety when transiting through uncontrolled areas<sup>27</sup>.

Islamic State is not free from accusations of taking part in drug trafficking. As a result of its weakening in Syria and Iraq, it has had to look for other means of funding on the African continent, and some sources point to the possibility that it has joined the drug trafficking business. For example, the Jund al-Khilafa group (linked to ISIS) has supposedly

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[pscc/14176.pdf](#)

<sup>23</sup> AGUILERA, Ana. "La relación entre el terrorismo y tráfico de drogas en África, Revista Internacional de Estudios sobre Terrorismo", n°7, pp.36 – 44, p.39. 2022. Disponible en: [https://rietjournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/ES\\_RIET\\_2022\\_N7\\_La-relacion-entre-el-terrorismo-y-el-trafico-de-drogas-en-africa\\_Ana-Aguilera\\_art3.pdf](https://rietjournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/ES_RIET_2022_N7_La-relacion-entre-el-terrorismo-y-el-trafico-de-drogas-en-africa_Ana-Aguilera_art3.pdf)

<sup>24</sup> Ídem.

<sup>25</sup> RABASA, Ángel; SCHNAUBELT Christopher.M; CHARLK, Peter et al. Counternetwork. Countering the Expansion of Transnational Criminal Networks, p. 118. RAND Corporation, 27 de enero de 2017. Disponible en: [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR1481.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1481.html)

<sup>26</sup> Ídem, p.103

<sup>27</sup> Ídem.



benefited from providing armed protection to cocaine traffickers in North Africa<sup>28</sup>.

Likewise, these drug trafficking systems (which are based on the already existing conventional trafficking routes) have been taken advantage of by terrorist groups to move other illicit goods, such as weapons or crystals.

The following map clearly shows how the Sahel has become a geopolitical epicentre for the organised crime involved in drug trafficking.

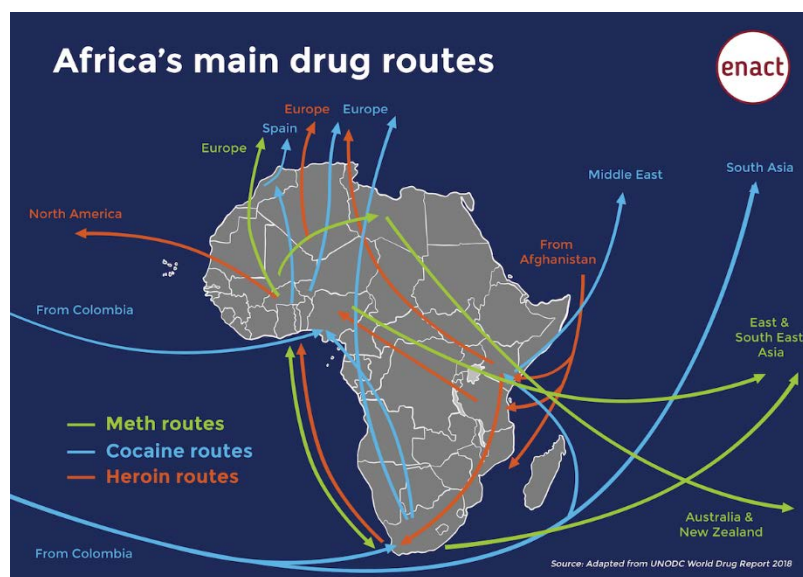


Image 2: Africa's main drug routes Source: ENACT África (2019). <https://enactafrica.org/media-resources/infographics/africas-main-drug-routes>

The most obvious example of collaboration between drug trafficking and criminality in the Sahel is the relationship with Latin American cartels, which began in the early 2000s, as mentioned above. It is not the aim of this analysis, but it is necessary to mention this criminal symbiosis, which allows 35% of the cocaine produced in Latin America to reach Europe via West Africa<sup>29</sup> and, hence go through the areas of the Sahel controlled by terrorist and criminal groups.

<sup>28</sup> CLARKE, Colin P. "ISIS is so desperate its turning to the Drug Trade". RAND Corporation, 25 de julio de 2017. Disponible en: <https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2017/07/isis-is-so-desperate-its-turning-to-the-drug-trade.html>

<sup>29</sup> SÁNCHEZ HERRÁEZ, Pedro. "El Sahel: epicentro yihadista en África Occidental", p.97. Cuaderno de Estrategia Nº. 214. Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos, 15 de mayo de 2022. Disponible en: [https://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/cuadernos/CE\\_214/Cap\\_3\\_El\\_Sahel\\_epicentro\\_yihadista\\_en\\_Africa\\_Occidental.pdf](https://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/cuadernos/CE_214/Cap_3_El_Sahel_epicentro_yihadista_en_Africa_Occidental.pdf).

Even though most of the illicit drug trafficking that passes through the Sahel has Europe as its final destination, this paper presents another route that is becoming increasingly important: the route to the Middle East, especially to the Arabian Peninsula.

### **The Middle East, a growing market for the drugs passing through the Sahel?**

Drug trade, as well as other illicit trades between the Sahel and the Middle East, is not a new or contemporary phenomenon, it has been happening for some time now. The best example is the financing of the lebanese terrorist group Hezbollah which is considered one of the biggest actors in the illicit trade in West Africa<sup>30</sup>, with a large part of its funding derived from cocaine trafficking in the region<sup>31</sup>. According to Interpol data cocaine trafficking in West Africa has financed several Hezbollah operations in Lebanon since 2006<sup>32</sup>.

They collaborate with criminal groups based in the Sahel that are not only involved in drug trafficking, but also in other activities such as money laundering and document falsification. In fact, the group is also accused of playing a dominant part in the blood diamonds<sup>33</sup> trade.

Some analysts claim that part of the earnings generated through trafficking are laundered by exporting cash to African countries, from where they will be legally transferred to banks in the Middle East<sup>34</sup>. The case of Hezbollah is important, as it illustrates perfectly how instability and absence of power in one part of the world can affect the security of other regions, showing the less friendly side of globalisation. For this reason, it is necessary to study the possible new scenarios that could further destabilise the Sahel region, such as the development of a new market for narcotics consumption in the Middle East.

Predicting new trends in drug consumption habits is not an easy task, especially in Arab countries, where drug use is still taboo. However, there are some indications that are

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<sup>30</sup> RABASA, Ángel; SCHNAUBELT Christopher.M; CHARLK, Peter et al. "Counternetwork. Countering the Expansion of Transnational Criminal Networks", p. 97. RAND Corporation, 27 de enero de 2017. Disponible en: [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR1481.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1481.html)

<sup>31</sup> Ídem, p. 118.

<sup>32</sup> Ídem, p. 119.

<sup>33</sup> Ídem. Blood diamonds are those diamonds obtained in countries in conflict, where mining is carried out in conditions of flagrant violation of human rights and whose destination is the financing of illicit activities.

<sup>34</sup> SUN WYLER, Liana. "Illegal Drug Trade in Africa: Trends and U.S Policy", p.6. Congressional Research Service, 26 de febrero de 2010. Disponible en: [https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/20100226\\_R40838\\_99475d8489a68c9e8930d38c218ec2c18871da6e.pdf](https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/20100226_R40838_99475d8489a68c9e8930d38c218ec2c18871da6e.pdf)

useful for the identification of behavioural patterns that contribute to the outlining of possible future scenarios. The indicators that this document will take into consideration are the increase in consumption, the price at which the drug is sold and the quantities seized in the region.

The Arabian Peninsula, which until recently had been a transit zone for drugs to the rest of the Middle East due to the amount of ports, has also been becoming a consumer market in the last decade, based on factors such as the data available on drug use in the region<sup>35</sup>.

Among the drugs that are most concerning in the Middle East, cocaine and synthetic drugs (mainly amphetamines) are the ones considered most alarming among organisations such as United Nations. In the World Drug Report of 2023, it points out (among other issues) that the cocaine market is growing outside their traditional markets (North America and Europe) and expanding in other regions, like the Middle East<sup>36</sup>. Similarly, substances containing amphetamines in various concentrations continue to rise in the same region<sup>37</sup>.

Paying attention to the information provided by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) Global Report on Cocaine in 2023, the Persian Gulf deserves special attention because of its potential risk of becoming a new market for drugs that come from the Sahel, as some of the cocaine arriving in the Middle East has had to go through the Sahel to reach the Mediterranean coast in order to arrive to its final destination<sup>38</sup>. While the main market for cocaine in the region is still in Israel and Lebanon<sup>39</sup>, evidence supports the development of a potential market in the Gulf countries.

Elaborating on the growing importance of this region as a drug consumption market, the United Arab Emirates was identified as one of the top three destinations for cocaine<sup>40</sup>; in

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<sup>35</sup> PANDURANGA, Prashanth; AL – ABRI Seif; AL-LAWATI, Jawad. "Intravenous drug abuse and tricuspid valve endocarditis: growing trends in the Middle East Gulf Region". World Journal of Cardiology, 26 de noviembre de 2013. Disponible en: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4017343/>

<sup>36</sup> UNODC. "World Drug Report. Punto de interés especiales", p. 11. Oficina de Naciones Unidas contra la Droga y el delito, 2023. Disponible en: [https://www.unodc.org/res/WDR-2023/WDR23\\_SPI\\_Spanish.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/res/WDR-2023/WDR23_SPI_Spanish.pdf)

<sup>37</sup> UNODC. "World Drug Report. Resumen Ejecutivo", p. 46. Oficina de Naciones Unidas contra la droga y el delito, 2023. Disponible en: [https://www.unodc.org/res/WDR-2023/WDR23\\_ExSum\\_Spanish.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/res/WDR-2023/WDR23_ExSum_Spanish.pdf)

<sup>38</sup> UNODC. "World Drug Report. Developments and emerging trends in selected drug markets", p. 157. Oficina de Naciones Unidas contra la droga y el delito, 2023. Disponible en: [https://www.unodc.org/res/WDR-2023/WDR23\\_B3\\_CH8.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/res/WDR-2023/WDR23_B3_CH8.pdf)

<sup>39</sup> UNODC. "Global Cocaine Report", p. 129. Oficina de Naciones Unidas contra la droga y el delito, 2023. Disponible en: [https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/cocaine/Global\\_cocaine\\_report\\_2023.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/cocaine/Global_cocaine_report_2023.pdf)

<sup>40</sup> Ídem, p.120.

fact, half a tonne of this drug was seized in the country in October 2021<sup>41</sup>. In the same way, Saudi authorities have detected an increase in cocaine trafficking by air from Nigeria, with Saudi Arabia becoming the main importer of cocaine from that country in 2020 and 2021. Ghana and Benin make the same statement: both countries identify the Saudi kingdom as one of the main cocaine importers<sup>42</sup>.

For its part, UNODC in its World Drug Report 2023 identifies amphetamines in the form of "captagon" as the most concerning drug<sup>43</sup>. Captagon is an illicit substance consisting mainly of amphetamines in various concentrations, mostly produced in Syria and Lebanon and with a high percentage of use in the Gulf countries<sup>44</sup>. Particular concern is the case of Saudi Arabia, where data on the abuse of this substance continues to grow, being the drug of choice for the Kingdom's youth (most of its consumers are between 12 and 22 years old)<sup>45</sup>. As an illustrative fact, more than one billion captagon pills were seized in the Arab countries of the Gulf between 2019 and 2022<sup>46</sup>.

As a result, United Nations points to the possibility of the development of a methamphetamine market in the Middle East<sup>47</sup>. This drug is also expanding beyond its traditional markets, if seizure data coming from other regions such as West Africa are taken into consideration<sup>48</sup>.

This information about the possibility of an emerging market of methamphetamine in the region is even more worrying when contrasted with another fact offered by the United Nations, regarding methamphetamine production: 28 clandestine methamphetamine laboratories were closed down on the African continent between 2012 and 2021. According to the same organisation, clandestine manufacture of methamphetamines is

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<sup>41</sup> UNODC. "Global Cocaine Report", p. 130. Oficina de Naciones Unidas contra la droga y el delito, 2023. Disponible en: [https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/cocaine/Global\\_cocaine\\_report\\_2023.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/cocaine/Global_cocaine_report_2023.pdf)

<sup>42</sup> Ídem, p. 130.

<sup>43</sup> UNODC. "World Drug Report. The synthetic Drug Phenomenon", p. 11. Oficina de Naciones Unidas contra la droga y el delito, 2023. Disponible en: [https://www.unodc.org/res/WDR-2023/WDR23\\_B3\\_CH1\\_Synthetic\\_drugs.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/res/WDR-2023/WDR23_B3_CH1_Synthetic_drugs.pdf)

<sup>44</sup> UNODC. "World Drug Report. Resumen ejecutivo", p. 46. Oficina de Naciones Unidas contra la droga y el delito, 2023. Disponible en: [https://www.unodc.org/res/WDR-2023/WDR23\\_ExSum\\_Spanish.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/res/WDR-2023/WDR23_ExSum_Spanish.pdf)

<sup>45</sup> VOHRA, Anchal. "Saudi Arabia is the Middle East's Drug Capital". Foreign Policy, 20 de diciembre de 2021. Disponible en: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/12/20/saudi-arabia-is-the-middle-east-s-drug-capital/>

<sup>46</sup> SHAAR, Karam. "No quick fixes for the Middle East's captagon crisis". Atlantic Council, 24 de agosto de 2023. Disponible en: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/middle-east-captagon-crisis/>

<sup>47</sup> UNODC. "World Drug Report. Resumen ejecutivo", p. 46. Oficina de Naciones Unidas contra la droga y el delito, 2023. Disponible en: [https://www.unodc.org/res/WDR-2023/WDR23\\_ExSum\\_Spanish.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/res/WDR-2023/WDR23_ExSum_Spanish.pdf)

<sup>48</sup> UNODC. "World Drug Report. Resumen ejecutivo", p. 27. Oficina de Naciones Unidas contra la droga y el delito, 2023. Disponible en: [https://www.unodc.org/res/WDR-2023/WDR23\\_ExSum\\_Spanish.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/res/WDR-2023/WDR23_ExSum_Spanish.pdf)

likely to continue on the african continent<sup>49</sup>.

As for opioids, there is an ongoing epidemic of non-medical use of tramadol in the region, which is also alarming (this concern is shared with West Africa)<sup>50</sup>. Tramadol is a synthetic opioid whose therapeutic purpose is to mitigate moderate pain and which, in doses higher than those prescribed by doctors, generates a feeling of dependence in the same way as other opioid substances (such as morphine).

It is not only the increase and trends in consumption that indicates that the region must to be on the radar; other data, such as the increase in drug seizures, should also be taken into consideration. For example, in 2022, Saudi authorities seized the largest shipment of amphetamines in the country's history, nearly 47 million pills, resulting in Saudi Arabia being referred to as the drug capital of the Middle East, growing as a destination point not only for drug traffickers from the Sahel, but also from other areas such as Syria and Lebanon<sup>51</sup>.

Another interesting aspect to take into account is the price at which the drug is commercialised in this area: the most expensive cocaine is sold in Saudi Arabia, where it reaches \$533 per gram. In the United Arab Emirates, it is sold for \$401 per gram and in Kuwait the price goes up to \$319: of the ten countries where cocaine is most expensive, three are Gulf countries<sup>52</sup>. This may be an indicator that the availability of the drug is still low, but the consumer market is expanding, creating a perfect scenario for drug traffickers: the data indicates that the Gulf countries are one of the largest and most lucrative markets for international drug trafficking, and this phenomenon is only growing.

On the other hand, cannabis resin from Morocco, a drug that is also widely consumed in the region, the price was already at about 4.000 euros per kilo in 2008, as the drug had to transit through Mauritania, Mali and Nigeria until it arrived to the Middle East after crossing the Red Sea<sup>53</sup>.

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<sup>49</sup> UNODC. "World Drug Report. Developments and emerging trends in selected drug markets", p. 169. Oficina de Naciones Unidas contra la droga y el delito, 2023. Disponible en: [https://www.unodc.org/res/WDR-2023/WDR23\\_B3\\_CH8.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/res/WDR-2023/WDR23_B3_CH8.pdf)

<sup>50</sup> UNODC. "World Drug Report. Resumen ejecutivo", p. 41. Oficina de Naciones Unidas contra la droga y el delito, 2023. Disponible en: [https://www.unodc.org/res/WDR-2023/WDR23\\_ExSum\\_Spanish.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/res/WDR-2023/WDR23_ExSum_Spanish.pdf)

<sup>51</sup> POURAHMADI, Adam. "Saudi Arabia is becoming the drug capital of the Middle East". CNN, 2 de septiembre de 2022. Disponible en: <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/09/02/middleeast/saudi-drug-capital-mime-intl/index.html>

<sup>52</sup> UNODC. "Global Cocaine Report", p. 95. Oficina de Naciones Unidas contra la droga y el delito, 2023. Disponible en: [https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/cocaine/Global\\_cocaine\\_report\\_2023.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/cocaine/Global_cocaine_report_2023.pdf)

<sup>53</sup> IEEE. Documento de trabajo: terrorismo y tráfico de drogas en África subsahariana, p.63. Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos, 2013. Disponible en: [https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs\\_trabajo/2013/DIEEET01-](https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_trabajo/2013/DIEEET01-)

When talking about prices and profits, it is necessary to mention the highly lucrative business of captagon. This substance, the drug of choice in the Gulf countries, is cheap and easy to produce and offers high profits: the production of a blister pack of pills costs a few cents (in US dollars), and can be sold for 20 dollars in Saudi Arabia or the United Arab Emirates<sup>54</sup>.

A future research line that could be interesting is the analysis of the reverse route: drugs coming from the Middle East and passing through the Sahel to reach their final destination, usually Europe. An example of this could be heroin which, from the Middle East, enters the African continent via East Africa, from where it is transported to the Sahel and then to other markets<sup>55</sup>: from Iran, this drug arrives in containers that will be transported through the Sahel using complex routes<sup>56</sup>. For its part, captagon, which is mainly manufactured in Syria and Lebanon, seems to be expanding to new destinations, including North Africa and West Africa, but right now there is not enough information to consider it a new consumer market for this drug<sup>57</sup>.

Considering all of the above, it is possible to verify the potential that the Middle East market offers for criminal groups operating in the Sahel, providing a new scenario for their business to expand and continue enriching themselves while also perpetuating the already grave situation of insecurity in the Sahel area.

## Conclusions.

Given the growing demand in Middle Eastern countries for drugs such as cocaine and methamphetamine, and the good economic prospects offered by their markets, especially the Arabian Peninsula, attention should be paid to a possible increase in drug trafficking from the Sahel to the region.

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[2013\\_ IEEE-IMDEP.pdf](#)

<sup>54</sup> GIBON, Clément. "Middle East's drug of choice. Le monde diplomatique", julio de 2013. Disponible en: <https://mondediplo.com/2023/07/03captagon>

<sup>55</sup> UNODC. "The Afghan Opiate Trade and Africa. A Baseline Assessment", p. 33. Oficina de Naciones Unidas contra la droga y el delito, 2016. Disponible en: [https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/Afghanistan/Afghan\\_Opiate\\_trade\\_Africa\\_2016\\_web.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/Afghanistan/Afghan_Opiate_trade_Africa_2016_web.pdf)

<sup>56</sup> BAMBAYE, Serigne. "Connections between Jihadist groups and smuggling and illegal trafficking rings in the Sahel", p. 12. FES Peace and Security Series, 2018. Disponible en: <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/fes-pscc/14176.pdf>

<sup>57</sup> ROSE, Caroline & SÖDERHOLM, Alexander. "The Captagon Threat", p.4 New Lines Institute, 5 de abril de 2022. Disponible en: <https://newlinesinstitute.org/state-resilience-fragility/illicit-economies/the-captagon-threat-a-profile-of-illicit-trade-consumption-and-regional-realities/>

The large profit margin offered by high retail prices (mainly in the Gulf monarchies) and a still relatively low supply may be very attractive to criminal groups involved in drug trafficking.

Such an expansion of the business into Middle Eastern countries would contribute to a further destabilisation of the Sahel countries by financing armed movements and terrorist groups, which is not good news for anyone: neither for the Middle East, nor for the populations of the Sahel, nor for Europe.

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