MAIN TAKEAWAYS

The Middle East is a prominent transit region, particularly for wildlife and wildlife products trafficked between Europe, Africa, and Asia.

Middle Eastern countries can be destination countries for exotic live animals (e.g. cheetahs) and for falcons, particularly saker falcons.

Middle Eastern countries seem to make few wildlife seizures or publicly report few wildlife seizures, likely in large part due to the region’s role as a transit hub and the difficulty of stopping trafficking instances in transit.

Flight routes for specific African wildlife products seem to rely on one Middle Eastern country more than the others (e.g. pangolins tend to fly through Turkey, rhino horn flies through Qatar, and ivory flies through the UAE). Knowing which types of wildlife products tend to fly through which airports can help enforcement target the transport methods most commonly used by traffickers of each product.
The appearance of Syria and Iraq in the heat map is unexpected, given that neither country has a well-known wildlife market. But further examination of the instances reveals that the instances were stopped prior to involvement in a shipment of tiger cubs originating in Ukraine and ultimately destined for Samer al-Husainawi Zoo near Damascus, Syria in March 2017. The seizure only occurred because an NGO, Animals Lebanon, learned that the cubs had been held in Beirut Airport, Lebanon for a week but had not been given additional food or water (see Tigers and Monkeys in Lebanon).

The Iraqi instance involved 142 birds of various species leaving Maastricht Aachen Airport in the Netherlands for Iraq. The birds did not have the appropriate authorization to travel, and a Belgian national had already unsuccessfully tried to ship them once prior to their seizure in February 2016.

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The Middle East heat map primarily reflects the region’s importance as a transit hub for wildlife trafficking by air.

Prominent transit countries

The most significant countries in the heat map (the UAE, Qatar, and Turkey) are all major transit countries for wildlife and wildlife products moving between Africa, Europe, and Asia. According to the C4ADS Air Seizure Database, Dubai in the UAE and Doha in Qatar are two of the most prominent transit cities for wildlife trafficking by air in the world, with a significant portion of smuggled African wildlife and wildlife products passing through one or the other on the way to Asian destinations.

Although not as well-known as either the UAE or Qatar, Turkey also played an important role as a transit country for trafficking attempts flying from Africa or Europe to Asia between 2016 and 2018. Given the country’s lower profile, traffickers passing through Turkey may be hoping to evade the extra scrutiny that flights originating in Africa and passing through Dubai or Doha face in certain Asian airports.

Appearance of Syria and Iraq

The appearance of Syria and Iraq in the heat map is unexpected, given that neither country has a well-known wildlife market. But further examination of the two trafficking instances destined for each country reveals that the instances were stopped prior to arrival in Syria and Iraq. The Syrian trafficking instance involved a shipment of tiger cubs originating in Ukraine and ultimately destined for Samer al-Husainawi Zoo near Damascus, Syria in March 2017. The seizure only occurred because an NGO, Animals Lebanon, learned that the cubs had been held in Beirut Airport, Lebanon for a week but had not been given additional food or water (see Tigers and Monkeys in Lebanon).

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1 Although Turkey can be considered part of either Europe or the Middle East, it could not be included in both the European and Middle Eastern analyses. Because Turkey displayed many of the same characteristics as other Middle Eastern countries in the C4ADS Air Seizure Database, C4ADS chose to group Turkey within the Middle East for the purposes of this report.
As a prominent transit region, the Middle East experiences far more wildlife trafficking activity than it appears able to intercept. For example, wildlife trafficking instances in Middle Eastern airports over the past three years numbered at least five times more than wildlife seizures in those same airports over the same time period. The majority of these instances were later seized on arrival at their destination airports. As a result, the Middle East’s seizure count is not a good indication of the region’s true relevance to wildlife trafficking by air.

This phenomenon is clearly visible in the prevalence of ivory, rhino horn, and pangolin trafficking instances transiting through the region (36, 22, and 13 respectively) compared to only two ivory and rhino horn seizures each and no pangolin seizures over the same timeframe.

According to the C4ADS Air Seizure Database, Middle Eastern countries made few seizures in the air transport sector between 2016 and 2018. The countries’ low seizure counts are indicative of the Middle East’s status as a prominent transit region.

### Difficulty making seizures in transit

Turkey ranked first by seizure count between 2016 and 2018, with more reported seizures than the UAE and Qatar combined. Turkey’s comparatively high seizure count is not driven by its status as a significant transit country for trafficked wildlife and wildlife products, however; the majority of known wildlife seizures made in Turkey between 2016 and 2018 were destined for the country. Turkey’s seizures were therefore likely discovered as they passed through customs screening on arrival.

The only seizure Turkish officials made in transit that was captured in the C4ADS Air Seizure Database involved 34 kg of rhino horn on a Turkish Airlines flight from Mozambique to Vietnam. The seizure occurred after previous flights taken by the Vietnamese trafficker smuggling the horns raised red flags in Ataturk Airport’s Intelligence Information System. The success of this seizure emphasizes the importance of relying on red flag indicators and emerging technologies to reduce time and manpower constraints inhibiting effective screening of passengers and cargo in transit.
Appearance of Egypt

Between 2016 and 2018, Egyptian authorities in Cairo Airport made four known wildlife seizures, ranking second in Figure 3 amongst Middle Eastern countries by seizure count. At least three of the seizures suggested that Egypt may function as an origin point or a “gateway” to live animal markets in other Middle Eastern countries.

Both Egyptian bird seizures in Figure 3 involved falcons leaving Cairo for sale in Bahrain. In one seizure, traffickers sewed shut the eyes of the peregrine falcons they were transporting (see Falcon Smuggling & Corruption). The Egyptian mammal seizure occurred after a “Gulf national” was caught smuggling two lion cubs in boxes to “a Gulf country.” He claimed they were domestic kittens and provided authorities with falsified paperwork claiming he had purchased them in a pet shop, but later admitted he had purchased them from a circus in Marsa Matruh.
Falcon trafficking is common in the Middle East, where wealthy members of the Middle Eastern elite, often royalty or government officials, collect falcons to hunt (usually illegally) and compete in various contests. Though captive-bred falcons can often be sold legally, falcon trafficking remains prominent in the Middle East due to a persistent belief that wild birds are more successful hunters than captive-raised birds. As a result, birds are often caught along the coasts of the Mediterranean, Red, and Arabian Seas and passed into the illegal wildlife trade before being illegally sold to falconers in and around the Arabian Peninsula. Falcons are so prized by their owners in the Middle East that Bentley recently released the Bentayga Falconry, a car with a perch positioned between the two front seats and a “Master Flight Station” designed to hold a “GPS bird tracking unit, binoculars, and hand-crafted leather bird hoods and gauntlets.”

Because so much of the illegal falcon trade involves Middle Eastern elites, there is likely a fair amount of corruption involved in many falcon trafficking attempts, from airport employees who turn a blind eye to a smuggling attempt involving an elite, to the traffickers themselves, to the individuals receiving the birds and flying them back and forth to falconry camps and competitions.

For example, in October 2016, Egyptian officials in Cairo Airport X-rayed bags belonging to an Egyptian passenger and discovered 41 peregrine falcons, prized for their speed and hunting ability, bundled up and drugged with their eyes sewn shut. Officials arrested the passenger, who was allegedly flying to Bahrain to sell the birds “to princes in the Gulf region,” along with a police officer in the Cairo Security Directorate and three lower-ranking police officers in Cairo Airport that he had bribed.

In another seizure a year later, Pakistan officials at Allama Iqbal Airport in Lahore searched the airport in response to a tip-off about a bird smuggling attempt. The officials discovered nine falcons hidden in a carry-on bag owned by a Qatari citizen, Ali Muhammad Al-Sada. He was attempting to board a private flight back to Qatar at the time of the seizure.
The role of the Middle East as the world’s most prominent transit region for wildlife trafficking by air is clearly on display in Figures 5 and 6, with the UAE, Qatar, and Turkey experiencing primarily transit instances. In fact, transit instances accounted for 63%, 69%, and 67% of the trafficking instances involving the UAE, Qatar, and Turkey respectively. Airports in Egypt, Lebanon, and Iraq were also used as transit points by wildlife traffickers between 2016 and 2018, albeit to a lesser extent.

Transit hubs as origin points

Each of the primary transit countries in Figure 5 – the UAE, Qatar, and Turkey – all count at least one origin instance. While it is possible that these represent the attempted trafficking of native species or of non-native animals living in the Middle East, it is also possible that these origin instances involved live animals or wildlife products that were being smuggled through each country in two separate trafficking attempts.

Some traffickers are careful to obfuscate the true origin of their shipments by storing them in a transit location – such as in a warehouse or with an exotic animal trader – for days to months at a time. Dividing flight routes in this way may help to reduce authorities’ perceived risk of a shipment arriving at its destination, thereby reducing the chances it will be stopped and closely scrutinized. For example, Chinese authorities are well aware that flights arriving from South Africa and Mozambique may carry rhino horns, and so often perform enhanced screening on passengers and shipments disembarking from those flights. Flights arriving from Qatar, however, are not necessarily considered high-risk for rhino horn trafficking attempts, and so may undergo less rigorous screening for wildlife products.

Further inspection of the Emirati, Qatari, and Turkish origin instances in Figure 5 reveal that they are likely a mix of both genuine origin instances and delayed trafficking instances. Many involved falcons native to the Middle East on their way from the UAE or Qatar to Pakistan. Others involved non-native species, such as red-eared slider turtles and gray parrots, and wildlife products derived from non-native animals.

Appearance of Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Israel

Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Israel all appear in Figure 5 as destination countries due to domestic demand for live animals, particularly reptiles and birds. For example, Saudi Arabia was listed as the intended destination of a trafficker carrying 10 live juvenile pythons in socks and plastic bags on a Garuda Indonesia flight. Bahrain was the intended destination of 41 drugged and bound peregrine falcons found in the luggage of an Egyptian trafficker (see Falcon Smuggling & Corruption). Israel’s trafficking instances in Figure 5 involved both birds and reptiles. In the first seizure, Israeli officials intercepted two Israeli traffickers in Ovda Airport on arrival from Milan, Italy in November 2018 after receiving a tip off. The officials found eight Gouldian finches in bird cages hidden in the traffickers’ suitcases. One month later, German customs officers stopped a male passenger with a strange bulge in his pants on his way to Israel. Further inspection revealed that he had placed a boa in a cloth bag and hidden the bag in his pants.

Low seizure rates

Of the Middle Eastern countries featured in Figure 6, only Lebanon and Egypt seized more trafficking instances than they missed. The UAE and Qatar, the two most significant Middle Eastern countries
Between 2016 and 2018, Lebanon officials made only two known wildlife seizures in the country's airports. Both seizures involved live animals shipped in poor conditions.

In the first seizure in March of 2017, a Lebanese NGO, Animals Lebanon, alerted the Lebanese Ministry of Agriculture and Customs to a shipment of three tiger cubs arriving in Beirut Airport from Ukraine. The owner of the shipment presented paperwork and permits for the cubs, stating that they were due to fly out again the day after their arrival on a ShamWings flight to Syria (ShamWings, however, allegedly told Animals Lebanon that they did not have the appropriate planes for live animal transport). The cubs did not fly out the next day as promised, and instead spent seven days sitting in the small crate they had arrived in in Beirut Airport. The crate did not comply with IATA’s Live Animals Regulations (LAR) – it was too small, did not have absorbent bedding, and did not include appropriate food and water containers. The bottom of the crate also became increasingly covered in maggots as the cubs remained confined within it. Note that CITES permits require that IATA’s LAR be met, or else the permit becomes invalid.

Note that Dubai Airport tends to report three or four months of seizures in one press release, without describing individual seizures and only referencing combined totals. This format prevents the incorporation of those seizures into the C4ADS Air Seizure Database, and may lead to an artificially low seizure count for the UAE.

**Comparatively high seizure rate in Lebanon**

Lebanon was the only Middle Eastern country in the C4ADS Air Seizure Database to stop the majority of the known trafficking instances linked to its airports (see Tigers and Monkeys in Lebanon). Lebanon only counted three trafficking instances total in its airports between 2016 and 2018, however, so this seizure rate could reflect chance more than a heightened ability to intercept trafficked wildlife.

**Seizures before arrival in Qatar**

Of the trafficking instances linked to Qatar between 2016 and 2018, 54% were seized prior to arrival in Qatar. This suggests that Qatari trafficking instances may be passing through airports with particularly effective enforcement before arriving in Qatar, perhaps along a few commonly used routes. But no clear pattern emerged in the data; the 14 trafficking instances seized prior to arrival in Qatar originated in nine different countries, and involved everything from rhino horn to pangolin scales and falcons. The instances did, however, involve more falcons and rhino horn than any other species or wildlife product, and were seized in either an African country (Mozambique, Nigeria, Morocco, South Africa, or Uganda) or an Asian country (Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Pakistan, or Indonesia). These nine countries do act as common origin points for certain trafficked species, and so perhaps have higher awareness of their exposure to wildlife trafficking, giving enforcement a heightened ability to identify smuggled wildlife on departure.

After seven days, a judge ordered the release of the cubs to Animals Lebanon “because of significant concerns for their health and welfare.”

Five months later, Lebanese officials discovered two rare white-throated guenon monkeys (CITES Appendix II) in a cat crate. The monkeys had flown from Accra, Ghana through another transit location or two before arriving at Beirut Airport, allegedly multiple days after they had left Ghana. They were not given food or water for the trip. Animals Lebanon took the monkeys in after their arrival and said they were in “terrible shape.” The monkeys are believed to be the only white-throated guenons outside of the species’ normal habitat in Nigeria and Benin.
Few Middle Eastern airports made wildlife seizures between 2016 and 2018, with seizures concentrated in primarily two countries, Turkey (five seizures) and Egypt (four).

Lack of identifiable patterns likely reflects Middle East’s status as a transit region

No clear trends are visible in Figure 6, with each airport making too few seizures to portray any real pattern.

A slight emphasis on mammal seizures is visible, however, with three Middle Eastern airports counting at least one mammal seizure between 2016 and 2018. All four involved animals likely destined for the Middle Eastern pet trade. Three involved exotic wild animals (lion cubs, tiger cubs, and white-throated guenons), while the fourth involved 15 Scottish fold and Scottish straight house cats smuggled in the carry-on bags of tourists entering Turkey. Seven of the cats died en route due to a lack of oxygen.

Seizures may not be publicly reported

The exotic pet trade and the falconry trade are both well-known in the Middle East, and yet Figure 6 only counts four mammal seizures and two bird seizures reported publicly in the region in three years. The absence of seizures suggests seizures are either not occurring or that reporting is relatively limited.

Most exotic pets and falcons that are smuggled into Middle Eastern countries are purchased by wealthy members of the Middle Eastern upper class, including royalty. This could put pressure on customs and enforcement authorities within airports to turn a blind eye to suspect shipments (see Falcon Smuggling & Corruption). It is also possible that existing regulations allowing for the movement of falcons with the correct documentation provide a gray area that prevents authorities from easily differentiating between legal falcon movements and illicit falcon trafficking.

Reports of the sixth seizure made in Turkey between 2016 and 2018 (African grey parrots flying between the DRC, Turkey, and Iraq) did not include airport information.
Figure 7. Middle Eastern air trafficking routes recorded in the C4ADS Air Seizure Database (2016 – 2018).

Circle size indicates the number of flights carrying illicit wildlife that departed from or arrived in a particular city. Capital cities are used when specific airports are unavailable.
The Middle Eastern routes maps look like simplified versions of the African routes maps, missing only Africa’s direct flights between East and Southern Africa and Asia. This similarity reflects the use of the Middle East as a stepping stone to Asian destinations by wildlife traffickers operating in Africa.

Importance as a hub connecting Africa and Asia

Most of the flights flying into the Middle East from Africa continued on to Asian destinations. This was particularly true for flights used to smuggle ivory, rhino horn, and pangolin from West, Central, and Southern Africa. Rather than flying into a wide array of Middle Eastern airports to avoid detection, however, these trafficking instances almost always flew into one of three Middle Eastern cities: Dubai in the UAE, Doha in Qatar, and Istanbul in Turkey. This near constant reliance on the same three cities was most likely driven by necessity – Dubai Airport, Hamad Airport, and Istanbul Ataturk Airport (now Istanbul Airport) are the three busiest airports in the Middle East, and so probably offer the most flights and flight routes between the Middle East and other world regions.

Certain wildlife products seem to favor certain transit countries

The Middle Eastern routes maps suggest that certain African wildlife products flew through one transit country more frequently than any others between 2016 and 2018. Seizure data contained within the C4ADS Air Seizure Database reveal a similar trend, with ivory, rhino horn, and pangolin trafficking instances all tending to favor one Middle Eastern country over the rest. For example, pangolin trafficking instances flew through Turkey more often than any other country in the region, accounting for 62% of pangolin instances transiting through the Middle East. In contrast, rhino horn flying through the Middle East passed through Qatar 68% of the time, and ivory flew through the UAE 61% of the time.

The differences in the flight routes used by ivory, rhino horn, and pangolin traffickers between 2016 and 2018 were likely a result of slight differences in the origin and destination points for each. According to the C4ADS Air Seizure Database, ivory usually flew out of East, Central, West, or Southern Africa for Hong Kong, China or Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, while rhino horn almost exclusively flew out of Southern Africa for Hong Kong or Vietnam. Pangolin often flew out of West or Central Africa for China, Vietnam, or Lao PDR.

![Figure 8](image)

**Birds destined for and leaving from the Middle East**

One clear difference between the African and Middle Eastern routes maps is the appearance of multiple bird trafficking instances flying between the Middle East, Central Asia, and Eastern Europe. Many of these bird trafficking instances involved falcons smuggled between the UAE, Turkey, Qatar, Bahrain and several Central Asian countries such as Pakistan and Kazakhstan.

Prevalence of air freight

The significance of different transport methods in the Middle East was largely dependent on the types of wildlife trafficked there, according to the C4ADS Air Seizure Database. For example, of the air freight instances that passed through the Middle East between 2016 and 2018, 69% were either ivory or pangolin scale trafficking attempts on the way from Africa to Asia. Air freight was less commonly used in regions where neither ivory nor pangolin scale trafficking attempts were common (i.e. the Americas, Europe, and Oceania).

Although checked luggage was the most commonly used transport method in the Middle East between 2016 and 2018, it was slightly less significant there (40% of instances moved in checked luggage) than in most other world regions (42% on average), with the exception of Oceania (26%). At the same time, air freight and passenger clothing/items were comparatively more important in the Middle East, with more Middle Eastern trafficking instances concealed in air freight or passenger clothing/items than in any other world region.

*Note that the regional focus of this section may be affecting the analysis – it is possible that these wildlife products more frequently transit through African or European airports than the airports mentioned here.*
Prevalence of passenger clothing/items

According to the C4ADS Air Seizure Database, ivory trafficking instances made up 53% of the trafficking attempts hidden in passenger clothing or items in the Middle East between 2016 and 2018. The vast majority of these ivory seizures occurred in or were destined for China.

In Africa and Asia, trafficking instances moved by passenger clothing/items seemed to be associated with an increase in small-scale (less than one kg) ivory trafficking attempts. In the Middle East, however, ivory trafficking instances carried by passengers or placed in their carry-on bags generally weighed around 20 kg. Further investigation revealed that the vast majority of these instances were linked to a particular ivory trafficking network, dubbed “The Handmade Vest Network” for the purposes of the ROUTES reports, operating between Harare, Zimbabwe; Dubai, UAE; and Hong Kong, China since at least 2015 (see Handmade Vests case studies in Flying Under the Radar and In Plane Sight).

Rhino horns in checked luggage

Of the Middle Eastern trafficking instances moved in checked luggage between 2016 and 2018, 28% involved rhino horns flying from Southern Africa to Asia, usually onboard Turkish Airlines or Qatar Airways. While some rhino horns were placed directly inside a suitcase, others were cut into pieces, wrapped in tin foil, and hidden within industrial machinery or cans of food.
Endnotes


viii “Four police officers arrested for taking bribes to smuggle birds of prey to the Gulf.” Ahram Online, 26 October 2016. http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/246651/Egypt/Politics/-Four-police-officers-arrested-for-taking-bribes-to-aspx.

ix Ibid.


xii “Four police officers arrested for taking bribes to smuggle birds of prey to the Gulf.” Ahram Online, 26 October 2016. http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/246651/Egypt/Politics/-Four-police-officers-arrested-for-taking-bribes-to-aspx.


xvi Ibid.

xvii Ibid.

xviii “General Container Requirements for Pet Animals(1), Farm Livestock and Farmed Deer or Antelope (CR 1-3-)(1).” IATA. https://www.iata.org/whatwedo/cargo/live-animals/Documents/pet-container-requirements.pdf.


xx Ibid.


xxii Ibid.

xxiii Ibid.
