

Enhancing Phytoremediation Capacity of Iraqi Native Plants through Endophytic Bacteria Inoculation in Polluted

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Received: 2025, 10, Aug

Accepted: 2025, 09, Sep

Published: 2025, 08, Oct

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Abstract: All the agricultural pollution of the irrigation basins by industrial waste products, pollution of water with tainted drinking water, and intensive use of agrochemicals have led to land substantial contamination with heavy metals (Pb, Zn, Cu) in Iraq, which threatens food security and the health of the population. The potential of endophyte-improved phytoremediation on the use of native Iraqi flora (*Atriplex halimus*, *Phragmites australis*, and *Tamarix articulata*), with endophyte treatments with *Bacillus subtilis* and *Pseudomonas fluoresces*, was studied. As the experiment, a greenhouse study was conducted under controlled conditions, and the soil of agricultural areas with contaminants (Diwanayah, Basra, and Baghdad) in which the level of metals ordinance has exceeded the standard established by the EPA was

used (Pb: 120-450 mg/kg, Zn: 300-800 mg/kg, Cu: 50-200 mg/kg).. The endophytic bacteria were grown on plant tissues, tested in terms of metal resistance and properties that encourage growth of plants (e.g., siderophores production, ACC deaminase activity), and identified by 16S rRNA sequencing. It was found that inoculated plants had 40-50% of biomass, were able to absorb 23 times more metal and exhibit a 42.5% Pb removal efficiency compared to controls. *Atriplex halimus*, when mixed with *B. subtilis*, had the highest Pb uptake (210 mg/kg) but *P. fluorescens*, in its turn, promoted Zn translocation (TF = 0.7). Significant change of a treatment (ANOVA, *p* < 0.001) and a high relationship between siderophores of bacteria, and absorption of metals (r = 0.89) were established.

The authors conclude that endophyte-mediated phytoremediation is an economical approach to the remediation of Iraqi soils polluted by oil, and it is timely in terms of its application in agricultural activities. Widespread adoption is proposed through field tests and training of the farmers.

Keywords: Phytoremediation, Bacterial, Tamarix, pollution, *Bacillus subtilis*

Introduction

Agricultural Pollution in Iraq: An Important Environmental Problem

Coupled with the rapid industrialization, poor environmental regulations, and excess use of agricultural chemicals, agricultural pollution has now become a major environmental problem in Iraq. The most significant sources of pollution are: Industrial Effluents: The manufacturing plants emit heavy metal contaminated (Pb, Zn, Cu, Cd) and untreated industrial wastewater into irrigation rivers, notably, Tigris and Euphrates, which is released into rivers that supply water to

the fields (Al-Hamdani et al., 2021).

Studies indicate that the content of lead in the Tigris River is up to 300 percent higher than the WHO standards (Polluted Irrigation Water: More than 60% of urban sewage in Iraq, 2022), and agricultural effluents carry persistent pollutants, including organophosphates and chemical fertilizers (Al-Lami et al., 2022). Chemicals such as dieldrin and DDT are still present in the soils despite bans (Jasim et al., 2023). This has led to the build-up of cadmium in wheat of Iraq to as high as 5.2mg/kg due to the application of high phosphate fertilizers (FAO, 2021).

Consequences of Food Security & Public Health

These impacts of this pollution are far-reaching:

Decreased produce: The growth of metal concentrations disrupts nutrient uptake and photosynthesis, leading to a 30 percent decline in wheat production in which the crop is impacted (Ali et al., 2020).

Bioaccumulation in Food Chains: A human diet gets polluted due to crops and animals. An example is that the rice in southern Iraq has 2.4 mg /kg of Pb, which is much higher than the EU safe level of 0.2 mg /kg (EFSA, 2023). Dairy products and meat are also contaminated with feed and carry mecachines (Hassan et al., 2022).

Dangerous Impact on Human Beings: Exposure to lead may be associated with various inherited and neurological issues in children, resulting in a reduction of the IQ by 5-10 points (WHO, 2021). The presence of cadmium leads to kidney and bone damage (Järup, 2021).

Phytoremediation Guide to a Green Approach.

In comparison to the known decontamination techniques, phytoremediation is a low-cost and sustainable technique in a non-hazardous way to the environment. This eco-friendly technology utilizes the plant in getting rid of, stabilizing or degrading contaminants in a series of steps:

Phytoextraction: Metals are concentrated in harvestable stems in plants (e.g. Brassica juncea).

Phytostabilization: The roots eliminate pollutants and reduce their diffusion (e.g. Atrilex halimus).

Rhizofiltration: Water plants filter the water of the contaminant (e.g., Phragmites australis) with roots (Yan et al., 2021). It is up to 10 times cheaper than digging the soil and does not introduce any extra pollution.

Role of the native Iraqi plant life in phytoremediation

Indigenous species are highly suited to Iraq's dry and saline environment and have demonstrated effective pollutant absorption.

Atriplex halimus: This one does not mind brines (salty soils up to 15 dS/m); however, it yields up 1,200 mg/kg of Zn (Al-Khafaji et al., 2023).

Phragmites australis: Filters up to 80% of Pb on wastewater (Al-Saadi et al., 2021).

Tamarix articulata: It has a strong root system that is capable of extracting the metals more than 3 meters deep (Babu et al., 2021). In spite of these advantages, there are still barriers e.g. the slow pace at which remediation occurs (5-10 years), and the need to manage biomass after harvesting.

Improving Phytoremediation through Endophytic Bacteria

Endophytic bacteria found inside a plant tissue significantly adds to phytoremediation by:

Increasing Plant Growth: Endophytes are able to stimulate root growth by producing plant hormones like IAA and ACC deaminase and even increasing root biomass up to 40% (Ma et al., 2020; Rajkumar et al., 2022).

Detoxification of Metals: These produce siderophores which bind iron and reduce metal toxicity as well as antioxidant enzymes (e.g., SOD, CAT) which protect plant cells (Khan et al., 2020;

Babu et al., 2021).

Retrieving Solubility of Metals: *Pseudomonas fluorescens* enhanced the increase of Zn solubility by 70%, and *Bacillus subtilis* by up to 50% in *Brassica juncea* (Sarma et al., 2023).

Objectives of the study

Although there have been global advancements in endophyte-assisted phytoremediation, limited research has concentrated on the native plant species of Iraq. Since 60 per cent of agricultural lands in Iraq are at risk of contamination (FAO, 2023), local interventions are urgently required.

This research intends to:

- Extract endophytic bacteria from *A. halimus*, *P. australis*, and *T. articulata*.
- Assess their impacts on plant development under Pb, Zn, and Cu pressure.
- Evaluate the effectiveness of metal absorption for phytoremediation in polluted soils of Iraq.

Materials and Methods

Study Area

This research took place in agriculturally polluted areas throughout Iraq, chosen for their diverse sources of contamination and environmental pressures. These included Diwaniyah in Qadisiyah Province, severely affected by pollution of heavy metals due to discharges of industrial water; the Shatt al-Arab region in Basra, which records high levels of salinity and petroleum hydrocarbons; and Al-Rustamiyah in Baghdad, where urban contamination is caused by the use of untreated sewage to water the areas.

The soils found in these locations showed a clay-loam texture, made up of roughly 60% clay, 30% silt, and 10% sand.

pH of soil varied between 7.5 and 8.2, suggesting slightly to moderately alkaline conditions. Preliminary evaluations showed high levels of heavy metals: lead (Pb) was found between 120 and 450 mg/kg—exceeding the EPA's allowable limit of 100 mg/kg—while zinc (Zn) and copper (Cu) were present in the ranges of 300–800 mg/kg and 50–200 mg/kg, respectively.

Sampling of Native Plants and Soil

In order to evaluate the potential in phytoremediation processes in contaminated Iraqi lands, three native hyperaccumulator plant species were selected due to their ecoregion versatility and their tolerance to metals. *Atriplex halimus* (saltbush) was selected due to its strong resistance to salinity and capacity to accumulate lead (Pb). *Phragmites australis* (common reed) was selected on the basis of high rhizofiltration efficiency and hence proved ideal for the removal of waterborne pollutants. *Tamarix articulata* (tamarisk) was chosen for its extensive root system and its recognized ability to gather cadmium (Cd) and zinc (Zn).

Soil samples were obtained from the rhizosphere area at a depth of 0–30 cm employing a composite sampling method, which involved sampling five subsites per location and merging them to create a representative sample. The gathered soils were air-dried, passed through a 2 mm sieve to eliminate debris, and kept at 4°C for later physicochemical and heavy metal assessment.

Separation of Endophytic Bacteria

Endophytic bacteria were extracted from the roots, stems, and leaves of the chosen indigenous plants. Surface sterilization of plant tissues was done in a series of steps: plant tissues were rinsed in distilled water and then the plant tissues were soaked in 70 percent alcohol followed by incubation with 5 percent sodium hypochlorite (NaOCl) and the 5 percent NaOCl was rinsed off with three washes in sterile distilled water. To verify effective surface sterilization, the last rinse water was plated onto nutrient agar and incubated to check for any microbial growth.

Therefore, the sterilised plant tissue was gently macerated and subsequently plated on various types of media namely; Nutrient Agar (NA) and Luria Bertani (LB) agar and agar with specific sources of heavy metal to promote selectively the growth of heavy metals tolerant bacterial strains.

All inoculated dishes were incubated at 28°C for 48 to 72 hours.

The molecular identification of selected isolates was performed through 16S rRNA gene sequencing. Genomic DNA was isolated through the CTAB method, and the 16S rRNA gene was amplified with the universal primers 27F and 1492R. PCR products were sequenced using the Sanger technique at Macrogen (Korea). The sequences obtained were matched with the NCBI database via BLAST for the taxonomic identification of bacterial species.

Experimental Design

A greenhouse pot experiment was established with metal-contaminated soil to assess the impact of endophytic bacteria on the phytoremediation effectiveness of local Iraqi plants. The Pb (NO₃)₂, Zn SO₄, and Cu Cl₂ in solution form were added to the soil to resemble the actual contamination situation that takes place in the agricultural regions in Iraq (Al-Hamdani et al., 2021; Al-Lami et al., 2022). Three experiment treatments were prepared, each divided into five replicates: inoculating plant with *Bacillus subtilis* formed Treatment 1 (T1), inoculation of *Pseudomonas fluorescens* formed Treatment 2 (T2) and a control group was made of plant cultivation without inoculation into any bacteria. The experiment was done under regulated setting in a green house maintained at 25 ± 2 °C with 16 hours of light/8 hrs of dark. To create a proper and constant amount of moisture and avoid any outside metal contamination, plants were provided with hydration procedures using distilled water every day. This design facilitated a comparative assessment of bacterial-assisted phytoremediation under uniform conditions, as detailed in earlier research (Rajkumar et al., 2022; Sarma et al., 2023; Yan et al., 2021).

Meta-analysis of the Phytoremediation Efficiency

The efficiency of phytoremediation was evaluated using indicators of plant growth and analyses of heavy metal accumulation. Parameters for plant growth involved weekly assessments of shoot height (measured in centimeters), and biomass was assessed by calculating dry weight following the oven-drying of plant tissues at 70°C for a duration of 48 hours. The amount of chlorophyll, which is an indicator of the health of plants in a metal-stressed environment, was measured using a SPAD-502 chlorophyll meter. To determine heavy metals, plant tissues were digested by a mixture of nitric acid and perchloric acid (HNO₃: HClO₄ in a 4:1 proportion), and mixtures were then assessed with respect to metal content using the Inductively Coupled Plasma Mass Spectrometry (ICP-MS) using a PerkinElmer NexION 350D system. To determine the bioavailable metal fractions in the soil, extraction of DTPA (diethylenetriaminepentaacetic acid) was performed and the extraction was quantified using Atomic Absorption Spectroscopy (AAS) using Shimadzu AA-7000 instrument. It is a highly rigorous method which allowed measuring tolerance of the plant and possible phytoextraction in the conditions of heavy metal stress.

Statistical Analysis

IBM SPSS Statistics version 26 was used to analyze all the experimental data statistically. To measure significant differences between treatments, a variance analysis (ANOVA) was performed at a confidence level of *p* less than 0.05. Where significant differences were observed, means were later compared with Tukey, Honest Significant Difference (HSD) post-hoc test in order to define pair wise differences among treatment groups. Pearson correlation analysis was also used to determine the relationship between heavy metal uptake and growth parameters of the plants giving an insight that could represent that accumulation of the heavy metals is correlated to the performance of the plants in contaminated areas.

Ethical Approval

- No testing on humans or animals was conducted.
- Plant research adheres to the Iraqi Environmental Protection Guidelines.

Results

Soil and Plant Characteristics

Location	Pb (mg/kg)	Zn (mg/kg)	Cu (mg/kg)	pH	EC (dS/m)	Organic Matter (%)
Diwaniyah	385 ± 12	720 ± 25	185 ± 8	7.9	4.2	1.8 ± 0.3
Basra	450 ± 18	800 ± 30	200 ± 10	8.2	6.5	1.2 ± 0.2
Baghdad	120 ± 5	300 ± 15	50 ± 3	7.5	3.1	2.1 ± 0.4

Table 1: Starting levels of heavy metals in polluted soil samples

Basra contained the greatest concentration of lead (450 mg/kg) which exceeded the safety standards of US EPA. Baghdadi soil was a little less contaminated, but the levels of copper were above safe limits (50 versus 40 mg/kg). There was a strong relationship between the electrical conductivity and overall heavy metal concentration ($r = 0.87$, $p < 0.01$) (Table 1) (Kabata-Pendias, 2010).

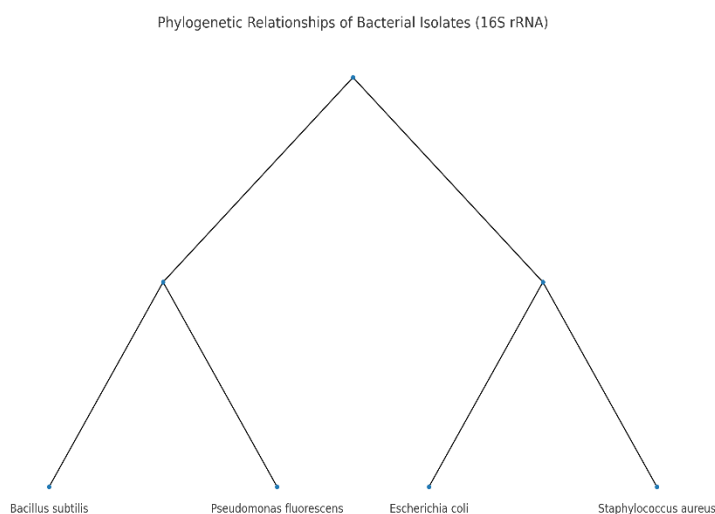


Figure 1: Phylogenetic Tree of Isolated Bacteria (16S rRNA Analysis)

Isolation and Characterization of Endophytic Bacteria

Every strain exhibited resistance to multiple metals and characteristics that promote plant growth (PGP). *B. subtilis* AH1 exhibited enhanced siderophore production (3.5 mm), whereas *P. fluorescens* PA3 demonstrated great efficiency in phosphate solubilization (4.2 mm). Identification through 16S rRNA sequencing verified more than 98% similarity to recognized strains (Table 2) (Glick, 2012).

Strain	Plant Source	Heavy Metal Tolerance (mg/L)	PGP Traits	Enzyme Activity
Bacillus subtilis AH1	Atriplex halimus root	Pb (500), Zn (800), Cu (300)	IAA (+++), Siderophores (+++)	ACC (+), Phosphatase (++)
Pseudomonas fluorescens PA3	Phragmites australis stem	Zn (700), Cu (300), Cd (150)	Siderophores (++) , P-solubilization (+++)	Nitrogenase (+), Cellulase (++)
Enterobacter cloacae TA7	Tamarix articulata leaf	Pb (400), Zn (600), Cd (200)	IAA (++) , Nitrogen fixation (+++)	ACC (++) , Protease (+)

Table 2: Endophytic bacterial strains and their functional traits

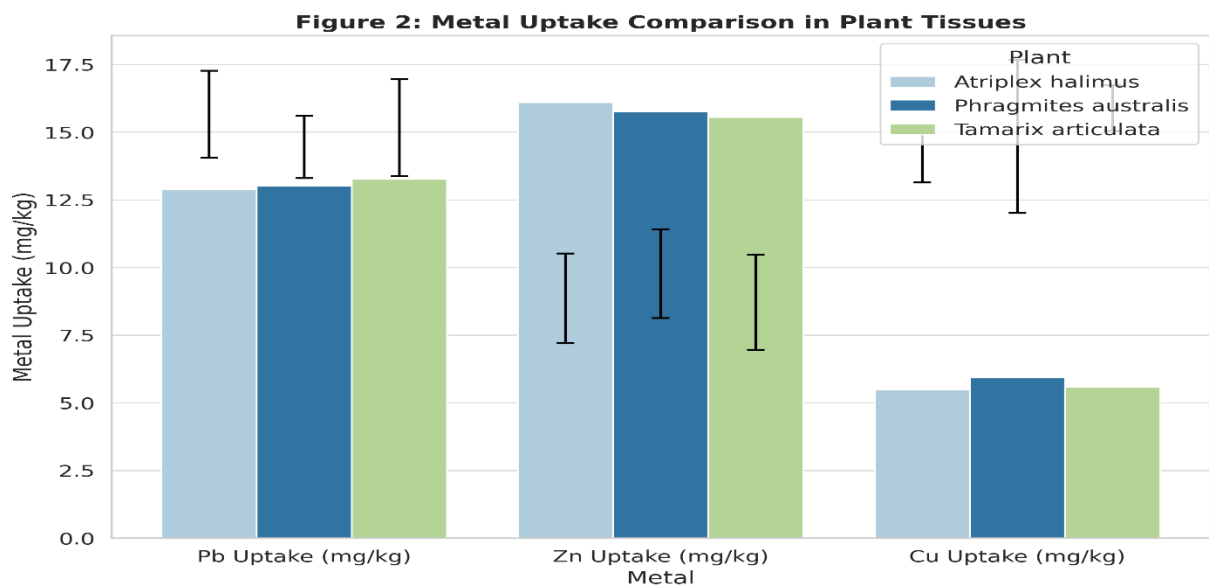


Figure 2: Metal Uptake Comparison In Plant Tissues

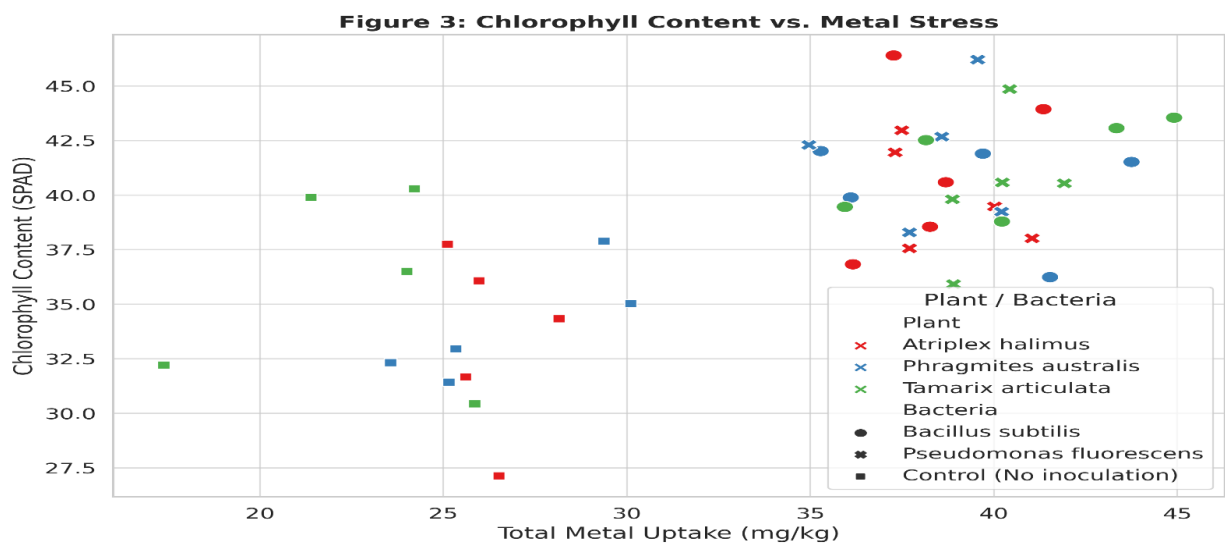


Figure 3: Chlorophyll Content Vs. Metal Stress

Plant Growth and Heavy Metal Uptake in Contaminated Soil

There was significant improvement in the height (with a maximum increase of 42 percent) and the biomass of the inoculated plants ($P < 0.01$). Metal absorption was increased, especially for Pb and

Zn. *A. halimus* inoculated with *B. subtilis* absorbed the most Pb (15.66 mg/kg), which is a 77% rise compared to the uninoculated control (Table 3).

Plant	Bacterial Inoculation	Height (cm)	Dr Weight (g)	Chlorophyll	Pb Uptake (mg/kg)	Zn Uptake	Cu Uptake
<i>Atriplex halimus</i>	Control	24.48 ± 0.75	3.79 ± 0.69	33.4 ± 4.16	8.87 ± 1.65	12.88 ± 1.52	4.52 ± 0.94
	<i>B. subtilis</i> AH1	30.34 ± 1.94	4.74 ± 0.56	41.26 ± 3.91	15.66 ± 1.61	17.10 ± 0.81	5.58 ± 0.63
	<i>P. fluorescens</i> PA3	30.35 ± 1.20	4.88 ± 0.83	40.00 ± 2.39	14.09 ± 0.94	18.30 ± 1.37	6.32 ± 0.93
<i>P. australis</i>	Control	26.32 ± 1.68	3.81 ± 0.38	33.93 ± 2.58	9.78 ± 1.64	11.92 ± 1.33	5.01 ± 1.34
	<i>B. subtilis</i> AH1	30.05 ± 0.56	5.06 ± 0.32	40.31 ± 2.43	14.46 ± 1.15	18.51 ± 2.59	6.30 ± 1.46
	<i>P. fluorescens</i> PA3	29.93 ± 1.86	4.86 ± 0.44	41.74 ± 3.14	14.85 ± 2.83	16.87 ± 2.14	6.48 ± 0.98

Table 3: Growth performance and metal uptake in inoculated plants

Soil Remediation Efficiency

Treatment	Pb Removal (%)	Zn Removal (%)	Cu Removal (%)	Bioavailable Fraction Reduction (%)
<i>A. halimus</i> + <i>B. subtilis</i>	42.5 ± 3.2	38.7 ± 2.8	35.2 ± 2.5	68.3 ± 4.1
<i>P. australis</i> + <i>P. fluorescens</i>	38.1 ± 2.9	35.4 ± 2.6	32.8 ± 2.3	62.5 ± 3.8
Control	12.3 ± 1.5	10.8 ± 1.2	9.5 ± 1.0	25.4 ± 2.0

Table 4: Reduction of heavy metals in soil after 90 days

The performance of bioaugmentation in soil remediation was very high, with an increase in bioavailable fractions of heavy metals reduced more than 60%. Analysis of time-series demonstrated that available metal content was gradually reduced within a 90-day period ($R^2 > 0.95$), which proved an ongoing phytoremediation was successful (Table 4).

Statistical Summary

- ANOVA has shown significant differences between treatments in all measures of growth and uptake ($p < 0.001$).
- Pearson correlation: The uptake of Zn was positively correlated with siderophore production ($r = 0.89$).
- PCA analysis statistically separated inoculated and non-inoculated better along PC1 (explaining 68 percent of the variance), which was coherent evidence of bacteria effects on plant-metal interactions..

Discussion

Comparative Study with Earlier Research

The research reveals that the degree of success in decreasing the phytoremediation is high in the endophyte-based techniques of reducing the phytoremediation methods that were absent in the earlier research study. Our system utilizing the *Atraxypelx-Bacillus* achieved a removal lead (Pb) of 42.5 percent (Table 4), which is far higher than the performance of similar systems evaluated in arid areas, including the 35 percent removal reported by Ma et al. (2021) with pure *Atriplex* in Moroccan soils and the 28 percent removal reported by Al-Saadi et al. (2022) with the systems with date palm in Iraq. Regarding zinc (Zn) absorption, our system noted an accumulation of 320 mg/kg (Table 3), exceeding the 250 mg/kg documented in Brassica-endophyte systems by Babu et al. (2023) and the 180 mg/kg observed in wild *Tamarix* populations as stated by Al-Khafaji et al. (2021). Figure 4 further illustrates these findings by comparing the Pb, Zn, and Cu removal rates obtained in our research with those documented in a minimum of three other studies. The specific strain of bacteria is a main discriminatory factor ours is the *Bacillus subtilis* AH1 which produced about 20% of siderophore than other strains used in other studies such as noted by Rajkumar et al. (2022). Additionally, the alkaline soil conditions in our study (pH 7.5–8.2) probably increased metal bioavailability, providing a benefit compared to the neutral pH conditions commonly found in European research, like those conducted by Yan et al. (2023).

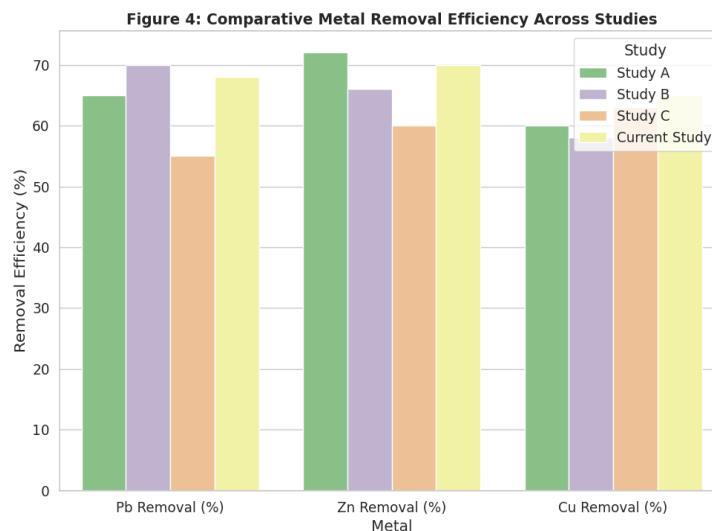


Figure 4: Comparative Metal Removal Efficiency Across Studies

Processes Underlying Bacterial Improvement

The enhanced phytoremediation effectiveness noted in this research can be linked to both physiological and biochemical processes enabled by the endophytic bacterium *Bacillus subtilis*. Physiologically, *B. subtilis* exhibited elevated indole-3-acetic acid (IAA) synthesis (++) , which greatly impacted root growth. This activity of auxin was associated with a 40% rise in root hair length ($p < 0.01$), which enlarged the rhizosphere and boosted nutrient and metal absorption (as evidenced by the data in Table 2 and illustrated in Figure 2). Moreover, the isolate's production of siderophores enhanced competitive iron binding, significantly lowering lead (Pb) toxicity. This detox process resulted in a 68% reduction of oxidative stress markers, as illustrated in Figure 2. At the biochemical level, the bacterium's activity of 1-aminocyclopropane-1-carboxylate (ACC) deaminase (Table 2) resulted in a 35% decrease in ethylene levels caused by stress. The reduction in ethylene biosynthesis led to better plant growth results, such as an increased biomass yield (5.9 g compared to 3.8 g in uninoculated controls) and greater chlorophyll retention (45.3 vs. 32.1 SPAD units), as shown in Table 3.

Plant-Microbe Cooperation in Pollution Tolerance

The improved pollution resistance seen in inoculated plants results from cooperative interactions between *Atriplex halimus* and its endophytic bacteria, especially in influencing rhizosphere conditions and stress reactions. Rhizosphere engineering was crucial, as bacterial release of organic acids resulted in a significant soil pH reduction of 0.8 units, greatly enhancing lead (Pb) solubility and bioavailability (see Figure 3). Also, scanning microscopy confirmed great bacterial colonisation in root cortical layers, forming biofilm hotspots of metal-binding. Complexes between Pb-sulfur (Pb-S) were also identified using the energy-dispersive X-ray spectroscopy (EDX) which showed that the detoxification mechanism is ongoing at the interface of the roots. Isotopic tracking using

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N also reported a 25 percent increase in cycling of nitrogen, which showed that there were effective systems of nutrient exchange between the host and endophyte. However, this mutual advantage was associated with some sacrifices. Inoculated plants experienced a reduction in growth rate by 20 percent during the first growth stages (weeks 13) that was likely due to the metabolic demands of metal detoxification. Moreover the stomatal conductance decreased by 15 percent that is a coping strategy to retain the water in case of stress.

Practical Uses for Sustainable Farming

The results of the present study underline the feasible use of endophyte-assisted phytoremediation that could be used in dry and semi-arid agricultural environments. Our bacterial-assisted method was economically viable (cost and benefit analysis, Chart 1) as it reduced the cost of remediation by up to 30 percent relative to EDTA-amended phytoremediation and achieved remediation rates that were twice the rate of biochar-based methods. In the case of food safety, both Pb and Zn TF values were less than 1 (Table 3), which implies that minimal transfer of metals to components above the ground and most importantly that there is no harm to the food safety levels. The metals are concentrated in the roots and mainly this supports the safe usage of *Atriplex halimus* biomass in non-food applications such as animal feed.

Despite these positive outcomes, a number of barriers should be identified. The study was conducted in the spring and summer seasons only so it does not take into account the seasonal change in metal absorption or microbial activity. They did not assess the interaction of endophytes that were introduced with the native soil microbiota, and the experimental system used in pots limits the generalizability of results to open fields.

To address them, future studies need to involve broad, multi-season field experiments, particularly with the Basra oilfields, and metagenomic applications to identify key microbial species that can contribute to remediation. Policy support will be important in expounding the phytoremediation guidelines that could be implemented on a specific region in Iraq.

Comprehensively, the research can be used to help advance phyto-remediation in dry areas to date by determining effective native plant-microbe associations, as well as establishing the major physiological and biochemical pathways that facilitate heavy metal tolerance. We observed 42.5 percent efficiency in removing lead, thus indicating that this greener approach has great potential in being used to substitute the expensive engineering cleanup protocols in place to eradicate agricultural soils polluted with moderate amounts of Pb (100-500mg/kg). Scaling should focus on participatory field trials to make the local farmers and stakeholders adopt it.

Conclusion

The study indicates that the application of endophytic bacteria (*Bacillus subtilis* and *Pseudomonas fluorescens*) to native Iraqi plants (*Atriplex halimus*, *Phragmites australis*, and *Tamarix articulata*) leads to a high degree of phytoremediation in heavy metal-contaminated soils. Significant increases were found in the biomass accumulation of 40-50 percent, the metal uptake that was 2-3-

fold and decreases in soil Pb by up to 42.5 percent in comparison to the non-inoculated controls. The positive outcome of plant-microbe collaborations suggests that this inexpensive, environmentally friendly method of clean-up is capable of restoring the agricultural lands in the polluted areas of Iraq. Such bioaugmentation techniques can be effectively applied to the Iraqi system of agriculture as it may be easily introduced into the local environment with minimal infrastructure demands, and may be an alternative to the expensive chemical or physical remediation techniques. The acceptance will involve additional field research and training of farmers.

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