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How Syria's Captagon Trade Became a Threat to Regional Security

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Over 13 years of catastrophic civil war, Syria has become the world's largest producer and exporter of manufactured illicit narcotics.¹ Despite measures taken by neighbouring countries to combat this threat, drugs continue to trickle through in vast quantities. According to Syria's Observatory for Political and Economic Networks, 1,251 drug shipments were seized in the Middle East between 2016 and 2022.²

Under the cover of wartime chaos, along with Syria's division into areas of influence dominated by four governments or *de facto* authorities (the Syrian regime, the Syrian Democratic Forces – SDF, jihadi group Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, and the opposition-affiliated interim government) the drug production and distribution network is expanding in both scope and complexity. This also applies in areas where control is contested, such as the Syrian desert, where elements of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and various other militias are active, as well as Suwayda, Daraa and some parts of central Syria. These areas contain drug manufacturing facilities, but it is noteworthy that the areas controlled by the regime are responsible for the bulk of this production.

As the problem grows in severity, the countries it affects are seeking to limit its impact, either through negotiations and agreements, or by strengthening their border controls.³ One country on the front line is Jordan, where border guards and the army regularly engage in firefights with drug smuggling gangs on the border with Syria, even resorting to air strikes, which have also killed civilians, including women and children.⁴ In the West, both European states⁵ and the US have resorted to economic sanctions, such as seizing funds and prosecuting everyone proven to play a role in drug production. These have particularly targeted prominent merchants linked to the Syrian regime.

Section 1: How Captagon is Produced and Smuggled

Both the quantities of illicit narcotics produced in Syria, and the number of individuals involved – including producers, dealers and users – are on the rise. British government data indicates that the country accounts for some 80% of global output of Captagon.⁶ As a result of the ongoing conflict there, armed groups have become the main players in this industry.

The production process has two main stages. The first involves securing the raw materials. Due to the presence of legitimate pharmaceutical laboratories and factories across Syria, Lebanon and Iraq, these ingredients can easily be imported, as most of them are also used in medical pharmaceuticals and there are no restrictions on their import. The second stage involves the acquisition of tablet

1 "Tackling the Illicit Drug Trade Fuelling Assad's War Machine," Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, 28/3/2023, accessed on 20/2/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/tmftzu>.

2 Shaar, Karam, et al, "Sky High: Ensuing Narcotics Crisis In Mena And The Role Of The Assad Regime," *Observatory of Political and Economic Networks*, 2023, accessed on 20/2/2024, at: <https://opensyr.com/ar/pages/p-18>.

3 "Bayan: Sariya tuwafiq al-aqal al-musadda fi inh tahrib al-mukhaddinat abar audidiha," *SwissInfo.ch*, 1/5/2023, accessed 20/2/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/kas8k>.

4 "Maqtal 10 madaniyyin fi gharat yurajjasu bannah surduniyya fi janab sariya," *Al-Jazeera.net*, 18/1/2024, accessed 20/2/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/cpb9v>.

5 "Uqubat sarbiya al muqarraban lil-asad wa-makama bi-lshy tudan muwajan lahu 'bi-janaim sarb," *Al-Jazeera.net*, 22/1/2024, accessed 20/2/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/cd5fp>.

6 "Tackling the Illicit Drug Trade..."



presses, small machines available for less than \$2,500, which can pump out vast quantities of pills in a short time. These presses come complete with stamps bearing the now-infamous Captagon logo, two letters “C” entwined with one other.⁷

Once raw materials and machines have been secured, it takes less than 48 hours to go into production. Captagon can be manufactured on a small scale, meaning the necessary equipment can be installed on trucks, turning them into mobile drug factories that can theoretically be located anywhere. Captagon factories can thus be found just about anywhere in Syria, but are particularly prevalent at the bases of militias – especially Iranian ones – and the headquarters of the regime’s Fourth Division. These operations are usually located near licensed pharmaceutical laboratories, making use of their equipment to ensure high-quality products.

1. Production in Regime-Controlled Areas

Resources and income streams that were long exploited by Syrian warlords have dried up in recent years, encouraging many to turn to drug production as their main source of income. This started with eight factories around Saidnaya and Rankous, in the Qalamoun region,⁸ before spreading to the rest of Syria. According to a New York Times investigation, influential figures in the Syrian regime have established production facilities in Aleppo and Latakia that now compete with Lebanese armed movement Hezbollah’s factories around Homs, Daraa and the Damascus countryside.⁹

2. Production in Opposition-Controlled Areas

Armed opposition factions run Captagon factories in the villages around Afrin, Jindires, and villages in north-western Syria such as Sarmada, where raw materials are obtained from areas controlled by the Syrian regime, then turned into pills and smuggled into Turkey before being sent onwards to the Arab Gulf states.¹⁰

3. Production in SDF-Controlled Areas

Captagon factories are not known to exist in north-eastern Syria, but cannabis cultivation is widespread across Raqqa, Manbij, and rural Hasakah province, under the supervision of senior members of the Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG).¹¹ The drug is packaged and sold locally or smuggled out, either to north-western Syria, regime-controlled areas of Syria, or Turkey.

7 Some Captagon manufacturers have switched to using different logos, including the Mercedes logo or even swastikas.

8 Jörg Diehl, Mohannad al-Najjar & Christoph Reuter, “Syrian Drug Smuggling,” *Spiegel International*, 21/6/2022, accessed on 20/2/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/nohq3>.

9 Ben Hubbard & Hwaida Saad, “On Syria’s Ruins, a Drug Empire Flourishes,” *The New York Times*, 5/12/2021, accessed on 20/2/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/7uw2f>.

10 “Maḥmil al-mukhaddirāt shamāl gharb Sūriya ... Istāʿād wa-taʿāḍir faman al-mustafīd?” *North Press Agency*, 21/3/2023, accessed on 20/2/2024, <https://npasyria.com/145947/>.

11 “Zirḥat al-ashsh fī manḥiq ‘qasad’ fī al-sharqīya,” *Athr Press*, 26/3/2019, accessed on 20/2/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/crx64>.

Manufactured narcotics found in this region are smuggled in along one of two routes: either via areas adjacent to the Euphrates River on the Iraqi-Syrian border, where pro-Iranian militias and transport large quantities via boat to SDF-held territories, or through Manbij.¹² Captagon use is widespread among school students, and the pills are distributed free of charge and in large quantities to SDF fighters during combat missions.

4. Smuggling Routes

Smugglers use illegal crossings to transport drugs out of western Qalamoun, Zabadani, and Madaya in the Damascus countryside, and from Qusayr and Wadi Khaled in rural Homs, into Lebanon's Beqaa region. These areas are under the control of Hezbollah, which works closely with the Fourth Division of the Syrian army.¹³ Along the Syrian-Jordanian border, smugglers make use of modern tools including drones to get their produce out. Shipments headed for Saudi Arabia and the other Arab Gulf states also pass through the Nasib border crossing on the Damascus-Amman Highway.¹⁴ Smaller quantities are smuggled across the Turkish border via two axes. The first is via north-western Aleppo, through the towns of Nubl and Al-Zahra. The second runs from Deir Hafir to Manbij, which is controlled by the SDF,¹⁵ then to the Kurdistan region of Iraq from which it can continue towards Europe or to the Gulf states.

Some pills end up being smuggled by sea, mainly out of the ports of Latakia and Beirut, heading for Europe, North African and Gulf countries. Saudi Arabia is believed to be the world's largest market for the drug.¹⁶

Smugglers have devised many ways to hide the pills. Shipments have been discovered hidden in huge rocks, inside oil filters, inside tile-making machines, mixed in shipments of fruit and vegetables (including grapes, oranges, pomegranates, and potatoes) or buried in coffee and spices to throw sniffer dogs off the scent.

Section 2: Profiting from Captagon

The size and frequency of Captagon shipments has accelerated in recent years. Greece, Italy, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Egypt have all announced confiscations of large quantities of the pills, mostly shipped out of Latakia port. The market value of these shipments alone exceeded a billion dollars, exceeding the value of Syria's legal exports, which are dominated by agricultural products.¹⁷

¹² Ahmad, Adnan, "Mukhaddirat al-Asad taghz manbiq 'qasad' wa-al-muqarraba al-Suriyya," *Al-Araby Al-Jadeed*, 22/12/2022, accessed on 20/2/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/0l8u3>.

¹³ Lina Khatib, "Lebanon's Role in Syria's Captagon Trade," *Analysis*, Global Initiative, 25/3/2022, accessed on 20/2/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/6u47a>.

¹⁴ Mohammed Khair Al-Rawashdeh, "Detainees Reveal Details of Drug Smuggling Operations from Syria to Jordan," *Asharq Al-Awsat*, 15/1/2023, accessed on 20/2/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/u9f05>.

¹⁵ Abu Al-Yaman, Iyad, "Al-mukhaddirat fi manbiq 'qasad' ... khaḥar mutafaqqim yuhaddid al-mujtamaḥ wa-al-amn wa-al-iqtisad sharq Suriyya," *Syria TV*, 31/10/2021, accessed 20/2/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/e433d>.

¹⁶ Sara Nowacka, "Syria's Assad Regime Using Drug Smuggling as a Political Tool," *PISM Bulletin*, no. 92, The Polish Institute of International Affairs, 11/7/2023, accessed on 20/2/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/egeji>.

¹⁷ Hubbard & Sard.



One Captagon pill is sold in Syria for less than one US dollar, while in Saudi Arabia it costs about \$14. According to a New York Times investigation, authorities around the world seized Captagon worth around \$2.9 billion in 2019. That is more than three times the value of Syria's legal exports, estimated at about \$860 million.¹⁸

The Syrian regime and other forces use these revenues to pay the salaries of fighters, finance their military operations, and secure logistical materials. Leaders of armed gangs have thus found a valuable cash cow in the trade of Captagon and other narcotics, which is a relatively easy-to-manage business that is growing rapidly. As a result of this burgeoning market, the value of Captagon seizures grew further in 2020 to about \$3.46 billion, and by 2021 the value of the entire market was estimated at about \$5.7 billion.¹⁹

Many actors are involved in the Captagon supply chain, from manufacturing to smuggling, but its most prominent beneficiaries are Syrian regime officials and the leaders of pro-regime militias. Samer Kamal al-Assad and Wassim Badie al-Assad, cousins of Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad,²⁰ have been placed alongside other regime figures on US sanctions lists for their involvement in the trade, which they have used to feed the war machine and make vast personal fortunes.²¹

It is also noteworthy that the conflict in Syria has left Hezbollah in *de facto* control of the Lebanese side of the countries' shared border, while the opposite side is under the regime's Fourth Division and the Military Intelligence Division. Although Hezbollah was already involved in the drug trade since well before the conflict began in Syria, these partnerships have given it the advantage of access to the port of Latakia as well as enabling it to establish more factories on Syrian territory close to the border.²²

Section 3: Counter-Narcotics Campaigns

1. Domestically in Syria

The Syrian government does not publish official statistics on the number of drug users in the country, but the Syrian Center for Drugs Control – an independent civil institution specialized in combating drugs and treating addiction – estimates that in north-western Syria, around 25% of adolescents and youth of both sexes are drug users.²³

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Rose, Caroline, and Söderholm, Alexander, "The Captagon Threat: A Profile of Illicit Trade, Consumption, and Regional Realities," *New Lines Institute*, 5/4/2024, accessed on 20/2/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/mycpj>

²⁰ "Tackling the Illicit Drug Trade..."

²¹ Chiappa, Claudia, "Drug that Makes Syrian Regime Millions Trafficked through Europe, Report Says," *Politico*, 13/9/2023, accessed on 20/2/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/io3a0>.

²² Khatib.

²³ Diab, Bayan, "Fḡ dḡ'irat al-ḡunf: Al-idmḡn ḡalḡ al-mukhaddirḡt fḡ shamḡ ḡariyḡ yazḡd min al-intihḡkḡt ḡidd al-nisḡḡ," *Syria Direct*, 13/9/2023, accessed 20/2/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/4ixmk>.

Syria's official stance on narcotics is codified in Law No. 2 of 1993, which lays out punishments for drug-related offences, from personal use to smuggling and production. The penalties ranged from fines and temporary detention up to the death sentence, which is stipulated in Article 39.²⁴

Nevertheless, the Syrian regime has had a murky relationship with the drugs trade in order to avoid drawing attention to its own role within it.²⁵ Local testimonies and the volume of drug seizures remain the primary source of information narcotics in Syria. The main sources of illicit drugs are the Iranian militias, whose role is boosted by their relations beyond Syria, followed by influential figures within the regime and their associates. Syrian militias and military units, such as the Military Security agency and the Fourth Division, moved into the manufacturing and export businesses relatively recently, so their role is secondary and mainly limited to protecting supply lines.

According to the Syrian Ministry of the Interior, between 1 January and 28 December 2023, the authorities arrested 2,360 people in Damascus alone for possession of various types of drugs, including 269,657 Captagon pills.²⁶ The ministry also said in the middle of the year that it had arrested 848 people in Aleppo who were in possession of various types of drugs, including 1,005,200 Captagon pills.²⁷

Yet despite these claims and the regime's consistent denial it has anything to do with the manufacture and export of narcotics, the American New Lines Institute has shown that the regime uses the drugs trade – and the trade in Captagon specifically – to ensure its political and economic survival in the face of Western economic sanctions.²⁸

2. Regional Counter-Narcotics Efforts

The border areas between Syria and Jordan are seeing intensified smuggling of drugs of all kinds, but particularly Captagon tablets, which have become a security and public health threat to Jordan and the Gulf states. In recent years, Arab states appear to have placed their hopes on a rapprochement with the Syrian regime, under the impression that by normalizing relations with Damascus and granting it certain privileges to break its international isolation and bypass the international sanctions regime, they could win its cooperation in the fight against the Captagon trade, reducing the danger it poses to the rest of the region.

24 Republic of Syria, People's Assembly, "Al-qānūn 2 li-'ām 1993: Qānūn al-mukhaddirāt," 12/4/1993, accessed at: <https://n9.cl/0j7jh>.

25 "Bayān al-Jumhūriyya al-'Arabiyya al-Sūriyya 'amām lajnat al-mukhaddirāt, al-dawra al-khāmisa wa-al-sittūn, 14-18-3-2022," UN Office on Drugs and Crime, accessed at: <https://n9.cl/vrisz>.

26 According to the Ministry of the Interior late in 2023, since the beginning of year, the Anti-Narcotics Branch in Damascus had arrested 2,360 drug dealers and users, seizing large quantities of drugs. See: Syrian Arab Republic, Ministry of Interior, "Mundhu bidāyat al-'ām 2023 wa-ḥattā tārikhihi, Far' Mukāfaḥat al-Mukhaddirāt fi Dimashq yalqī al-qabaḍ 'alā 2,360 shakṣan min murūjī wa-muta'āṭī al-mawādd al-mukhaddirah wa-yuḍabṭ kammiyāt kabīra min hādhih al-mawādd," accessed 20/2/2024, <https://n9.cl/ejt9d>.

27 Syrian Ministry of the Interior, "Far' mukāfaḥat al-mukhaddirāt fi Ḥalab yatamakkan min ilqā' al-qabaḍ 'alā 848 shakṣan min murawwijī wa-muta'āṭī al-mawādd al-mukhaddirah wa-yuḍabṭ kummiyāt kubīra min hādhih al-mawādd mundhu bidāyat al-'ām 2023," accessed on 20/2/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/3jg48>.

28 Rose & Söderholm.



However, the Syrian regime has not responded to this initiative. Instead, it blames the countries it sees as the cause of its crisis more generally – led by the US and Europe²⁹ – and declaring that the drug trade and corruption are too big for it to tackle even if it wanted to, given the size and strength of the Iranian militias that have now infiltrated the entire Syrian state.

The Captagon trade therefore remains a plague for other Arab countries. Saudi Arabia, the Emirates, and Egypt frequently announce ever-larger seizures of drugs.³⁰ Yet the worst-affected country in the region is Jordan, which shares a 378-kilometre border with Syria that is penetrated by an ever-growing volume of Captagon shipments, often with high-tech means including drones.

Jordan has responded with deadly measures. On 18 January, 10 Syrians, including five children and two women, were killed in air strikes apparently carried out by Jordan against two people working in the narcotics supply chain. This would be only one of several Jordanian airstrikes on Syrian territory against the Captagon trade.³¹

3. International Counter-Narcotics Efforts

The UN has passed a number of international conventions to combat drug trafficking. They include the Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs (1961), the Convention on Psychotropic Substances (1971) and United Nations Convention Against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (1988). These form the legal basis for international coordination and cooperation to prevent drug abuse and address various aspects of illicit trafficking.³² Captagon has become a source of global concern in light of rapidly growing smuggling operations described above, despite all the measures taken to combat them.

Since the Syrian regime is responsible for the bulk of the world's production of Captagon, the US "Captagon Act" is largely focused on Syria.³³ It includes six steps: targeting, weakening and disrupting the regime's drug networks; identifying drug kingpins; leveraging global diplomatic relations associated with the economic pressure campaign against the regime; using multilateral institutions to disrupt the drug trade; mobilizing the media to highlight the extent of the Syrian regime's connection to the drug trade; and identifying destination countries of drug shipments to assess their ability to combat the business.

In order to enforce the law, Washington has added a number of people and entities in Syria and Lebanon to sanctions lists for their direct involvement in the drug trade.³⁴ It also announced the

29 "Al-'Asad: Tijārat al-mukhaddirāt tazdaharu fi al-ḥarb wa-lā nataḥammal mas'ūliyyat dālik," *Sky News Arabia*, 9/8/2023, accessed on 20/2/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/zk9ew>.

30 Nadeen Ebrahim, "Syria's Drug Problem Casts Shadow Over Assad's Rehabilitation," *CNN*, 29/9/2023, accessed on 20/2/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/7us2n>.

31 "Maqtal 10 madaniyyin."

32 "International Drug Control Conventions," *UN Toolkit on Synthetic Drugs*, accessed 2/2/2024, at: <https://cutt.ly/8wNQTr77>.

33 "Captagon Act, in the Senate of the United States," Library of Congress, 21/9/2022, at: <https://n9.cl/6dr4h>.

34 "Treasury Sanctions Syrian Regime and Lebanese Actors Involved in Illicit Drug Production and Trafficking," U.S. Department of the Treasury, 28/3/2023, accessed on 20/2/2024, at: <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy1369>.

formation of an international coalition to combat drug manufacturing and smuggling around the world, which was launched on 7 July 2023, and included more than 80 states alongside more than a dozen regional and international organizations.³⁵ In the European Union, which has also added more people and entities involved in drug production and trafficking to its Syria sanctions list,³⁶ many countries continue regularly to seize large quantities of drugs, often originating from the port of Latakia. Italy alone confiscated some 14 tonnes of Captagon pills in 2020, worth about \$1 billion.³⁷

Conclusion

The production of narcotics in Syria and their export to other countries in the region has ballooned into a grave regional problem that demands urgent attention. The Arab states' approach on the issue, essentially built on asking the Syrian regime to stamp out the trade, has proven deeply ineffective. The regime has not met its pledges under the reciprocal "step-for-step" process of normalization underway. Indeed, the regime's leniency towards drug smuggling may be a form of political blackmail aimed at undermining the Caesar sanctions imposed by Washington and helping to rebuild Syria. Moreover, Captagon production and export represents a major source of income.

On the other hand, given the number of entities profiting from the drug trade and the difficulty of identifying and better monitoring the main manufacturing nodes, smuggling routes, ports and airports involved, regional and international efforts to shut it down remain limited and ineffective. Hardly a day goes by without a government in the region announcing the seizure of a large shipment of narcotics. Even as surveillance intensifies, smugglers are stepping up their game of camouflage and concealment, seeking to ensure the continued inflow of vast revenues generated by their operations.

Despite the US launching an international coalition to confront the threat of synthetic drugs, first and foremost Captagon, its diplomatic efforts have not been accompanied by any practical action on the ground. Without any meaningful treatment, this problem will continue to pose a serious threat to regional and international security.

³⁵ "Al-kalima al-iftitayya fi ijtimā' wazārī iftarāq li-iḥṣāq al-taḥluf al-ḥalam li-ttaḥadd lil-mukhaddirāt al-tarkabiyya," U.S. Department of State, 7/7/2023, accessed on 20/2/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/46c98>.

³⁶ "Syria: EU Sanctions Drug Trade Benefitting the Regime," European Council, 24/4/2023, accessed on 20/2/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/ir5yq>.

³⁷ Askew, Joshua, "How did Europe Help Syria Become a Bigger Drug Dealer than Mexico's Cartels?" *Euro News*, 15/6/2023, accessed on 20/2/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/81jk3>.



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Endnotes