

INTELLIGENCE BRIEFING

The Captagon Threat

A Profile of Illicit Trade,
Consumption, and Regional Realities





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COVER: Plastic oranges filled with captagon tablets and hidden in fruit shipments were intercepted by Lebanon’s customs and anti-drug brigade at the Port of Beirut, Lebanon, on Dec. 29, 2021. (ANWAR AMRO / AFP via Getty Images)



Foreword

This project began in January 2019, when the amphetamine-type stimulant known as captagon had largely fallen out of the focus of states and international institutions. While the drug had briefly achieved notoriety for its supposed links to violent extremism, little was still known about the captagon trade, including its actors, production, and markets. This lack of research and understanding was the impetus for this project, which aims to explore the nexus between the captagon trade and actors within Syria's power vacuum.

Following the Islamic State group's rise in Iraq and Syria, there was intense speculation of a strong captagon-jihadist association. Particularly following the 2015 Paris attacks, when false claims spread that ISIS perpetrators had consumed captagon prior to committing the atrocities, terms such as "narco-terrorism," "chemical courage," and "Jihadi drug" were quickly disseminated by the media and policymakers in an attempt to describe the drug and its users. Reportage, analyses, and even some peer-reviewed research about captagon further fanned sensationalist assumptions about captagon by drawing on sporadic data and seizure statistics that enabled stereotyped narratives about captagon being exclusively



Captagon pills seized in Beirut in June 2010.
(JOSEPH EID / AFP via Getty Images)

associated with jihadism. The authors of this report began to investigate the veracity and strengths of these claims, and as the project developed, it became evident that there is much more to the captagon trade than what is signaled by the so-called "narco-terrorist nexus." Today, the captagon trade involves a diverse set of participants, including state actors, non-state groups, and warlords. The trade also affects a large number of civilians traumatized by conflict and violence.

Working within the limits of substantial information gaps, this report traces captagon's evolution from a legitimate pharmaceutical commodity into a sprawling illicit economy and the foremost illicit drug trade in Syria. Contemporarily, this has elevated the captagon trade to a Mediterranean-Persian Gulf zone challenge. Drawing from an array of sources in peer-reviewed academic journals, white papers, open-source intelligence, field research, interviews with subject-matter experts

and practitioners across disciplines, and media reports and investigations, this report both synthesizes the available information and presents new intelligence about the captagon trade, identifying some of the actors that have come to rely upon it as a key means for expanding their economic and political capital. These actors have been key in facilitating the trade's expansion. The report additionally assesses the potential impacts the captagon market may have on the future of Syria, particularly as state and non-state actors use the trade as a tool of financial and socio-political leverage in Syria's power vacuum, raising a series of policy recommendations for the region and the U.S. government.

The report asserts that while captagon's traditional destination markets have been in the Persian Gulf, recent seizures point to southern Europe and North Africa as new transit points and sites of interest. More importantly, the report identifies the captagon trade as a concerning health risk in the region as well as a geopolitical risk to the U.S. and its partners' regional security interests. The trade's role as a revenue source for state and non-state actors such as the Syrian government, Hezbollah, and state-affiliated militias has fueled malign activities that have exacerbated insecurity, encouraged corruption, and empowered authoritarian behaviors.



Executive Summary

The forecast for the impacts of the captagon trade is serious; the expansion of production and trafficking, coupled with the Syrian government's intransigent treatment of people who use drugs and lack of public health provisions, paints a poor picture of Syria moving forward. This special report reveals new insights about captagon's production, consumption, trafficking, and destination markets that have affected the Levant, Mediterranean, and Gulf security landscape:

- Captagon production patterns have shifted in Syria from smaller, fragmented operations in rebel-held areas to industrial, containerized operations in territories held by the regime of President Bashar al-Assad. Smuggling operations are becoming more sophisticated, and new overland and maritime routes are being identified, posing a severe challenge to law enforcement agencies in the region and internationally.

- Elements of the Syrian government are key drivers of the captagon trade, with ministerial-level complicity in production and smuggling, using the trade as a means for political and economic survival amid international sanctions. The Syrian government appears to use local alliance structures with other armed groups such as Hezbollah for technical and



Tablets are displayed at a Turkish customs warehouse after 6.2 million tablets were seized at the Port of Hatay. (Burak Milli / Anadolu Agency via Getty Images)

logistical support in captagon production and trafficking.

- As affiliates of the Syrian government and other actors seek to export captagon, they exploit governance deficits in the region by collaborating with a broad range of criminal networks, militant groups, mafia syndicates, and autocratic governments.

- While the Gulf continues to be the main destination market, this report shows that North Africa and southern Europe have also been targeted by captagon traffickers, although it remains unclear if these are

intended transit areas for other markets or if they are emerging as new consumer markets. Regions beyond are also potentially at risk for increased captagon trafficking from Syria and neighboring states. This requires continued monitoring, especially as traffickers adopt more sophisticated methods of smuggling.

- While some of captagon's health effects have been exaggerated in an attempt to link its use solely to militants, this report regards widespread captagon consumption as a potential serious public



health threat in Syria and beyond due to the lack of adequate public health and drug treatment services and the ever-changing chemical composition of the drug.

■ The captagon trade is a rapidly growing illicit economy in the Middle East and Mediterranean. While the trade had an estimated value of \$3.46 billion in 2020, based on large-scale seizures alone the potential value of the retail trade in 2021 is estimated at over \$5.7 billion.

Policy Recommendations

The illicit production, trade, and consumption of captagon has become deeply embedded into Syria's wartime economy – an indication of weakening institutions and an exacerbated power vacuum. The decade-long civil war has enabled the profiteering of various illicit markets by armed actors including violent and organized crime groups, a dynamic similar to other contexts such as Afghanistan, Brazil, and Colombia. This report identifies the captagon trade in Syria as a multifaceted market, facilitated and administered by a diverse array of actors – local warlords, foreign terrorist organizations, paramilitary fighters, state-sponsored proxy organizations, and a range of Syrian government and government-affiliated officials – perpetuating a trade that will outlast Syria's civil war. This

“ The U.S. and its partners need to converge on a strategy that seeks to disrupt the criminal networks involved in the captagon trade. ”

report identifies a series of policy solutions to mitigate captagon's malign effects, bolster regional law enforcement cooperation, enhance health care sector responses, and undercut actors' production capacity:

■ There is an increasing need for a regional Mediterranean-Gulf forum, law enforcement agencies, and researchers to design a coordinated response to illicit captagon production and smuggling that addresses:

- ▶ Containerized shipments of captagon on maritime commercial routes in response to the potential expansion of the captagon trade into new areas, such as Africa and Europe
- ▶ Identifying key nodes – licit channels, informal maritime and overland routes, and major ports of entry – of captagon trafficking to improve law enforcement monitoring for interdiction
- ▶ Tracking street-level interdiction of captagon in transit and destination countries to monitor the emergence of new consumer markets and systematic forensic profiling

of seizures to develop a database that could link individual batches to specific production sites in Syria

▶ Forecasting how captagon stakeholders, particularly state actors such as the Syrian government, are preparing for long-term development of the trade and how the trade is impacted by port development projects, collaboration with organized crime networks, and the exploitation or use of private-sector entities to handle the logistical arrangements of trafficking

■ The U.S. and its partners need to converge on a strategy that seeks to disrupt the criminal networks involved in the captagon trade. Simultaneously, partners should seek to address, where possible, the drivers of the trade by approaching it as a human security and health challenge.

■ The U.S. specifically needs to assess an internal, interagency process that can conduct a thorough review of the captagon trade's participants and assess how to approach the trade in the context of its existing sanctions campaign.



Captagon's Evolution

Captagon's Tenure as an Over-the-Counter 'Smart Drug'

Captagon has a nuanced history, both as a licit pharmaceutical substance and as an illicit drug. It first emerged in Germany, produced and patented by Degussa Pharma Group in the early 1960s under the trade name "Captagon®." The drug was prescribed by primary care physicians and psychiatrists for treating a wide range of conditions, such as attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, abulia, brain injuries, depression, and narcolepsy.¹ The drug contained fenethylline, an amphetamine-type stimulant (ATS), and metabolized into a combination of 13.7% theophylline and 24.5% amphetamine in an oral dose.² It was legally marketed as a "smart drug," with supposedly lower side effects and abuse potential than other drugs available on the market at the time.

Fenethylline was a widely embraced treatment largely until the 1970s, when reports arose of the drug's negative side effects and addictive qualities and pharmaceutical alternatives emerged on the market. Throughout the 1970s, governments incrementally placed controls on the drug. Fenethylline's, and thus Captagon®'s, time on the legal market ended in the 1980s. In 1981, fenethylline was listed as a controlled substance, and in 1986 it was scheduled under the U.N. Convention on Psychotropic Substances (1971), which was followed by a rise in counterfeiting activities in Europe and the Middle East.³ Since Captagon®'s

international scheduling, cessation of fenethylline production, and depletion of global fenethylline stocks globally by 2009,⁴ all substances branded as Captagon® no longer contain any fenethylline. As such, to differentiate from the fenethylline-containing "original" Captagon® tablets produced until the 1980s, and drawing inspiration from authors such as Laurent Laniel,⁵ in this report we use "captagon" to denote the drug as it is known currently: an ATS with a series of variable cutting agents. Captagon pills vary widely in terms of their composition, which adds to the complexity of monitoring the drug's production, trafficking, and use.

Captagon as an Illicit Drug

Following Captagon®'s international scheduling, counterfeit tablets gained popularity eastward. While the drug's scheduling halted a majority of pharmaceutical production processes, factories and laboratories in Serbia, Slovenia, Montenegro, and Bulgaria continued illicit captagon production and trafficked the drug to emerging destination markets in the Arabian Peninsula through Turkey and the Levant, possibly using up leftover stocks of fenethylline at the outset.⁶ Bulgaria in particular was a key country producing Captagon® after the state-owned pharmaceutical company, Pharmachim, received a license by the Commission for Permission of Medical Drugs in 1981, using Soviet facilities for state-regulated production.⁷ State-affiliated pharmaceutical companies coordinated to develop production technology for

Captagon®'s chemical and tableting process, creating cross-country production lines.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, captagon and other synthetic drugs grew in popularity. Bulgarian factories shifted export cycles to sustain illicit deliveries to the Middle East while continuing to supply the domestic and Eastern European market.⁸ The U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) reported that during this period, Bulgarian chemists and their production skills were dispersed across Eastern Europe and the Levant, indicative of the rise in ATS-related production and trafficking offenses in states such as Turkey, Czechoslovakia, and Serbia.⁹

The decline in demand for ATS in southeastern Europe started in the late 1990s, causing large-scale production of captagon in Bulgarian factories to give way to smaller-scale, mobile laboratories in the Middle East.¹⁰ The collapse of the Soviet Union and the Balkan governments' transition to democracy led to a series of law enforcement crackdowns during the mid-1990s, causing chemists, laboratory production staffers, and traffickers to reduce their domestic activities and relocate their operations.

The Levant: Captagon's Production Capital

Following the decline of Bulgarian production, Syria and Lebanon proved to be natural successors in the mid-2000s. Throughout the 1990s, Bulgarian pharmacists, chemists, and black-market entrepreneurs and organized crime



“ Additionally, following the Israel–Lebanon war in 2006 and Lebanon’s civil war, factions became desperate for alternative revenue sources, expanding the space for the illicit drugs trade. ”

groups knowledgeable about production established a series of contacts in the trade’s primary consumer market, the Middle East, with close ties in Syria in particular. In a report by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GIATOC), experts noted that Bulgaria and Syria established a unique scientific and technical partnership, where Syria pursued technical collaboration by sending chemists to study in Bulgaria in return for large Bulgarian exports.¹¹ The relationships between state-affiliated Bulgarian and Syrian pharmaceutical companies paved the way for an exchange of technical and scientific expertise and the establishment of clandestine labs in Syria and along the Lebanese-Syrian border.¹²

Law enforcement and drug control organizations such as the UNODC also noted that production patterns primarily shifted to Middle Eastern and North African states in the mid-2000s, with drastic decreases in seizures across Europe after 2004 and the first recorded captagon facility raid in Lebanon in 2007.¹³ Syria and Lebanon were closer to destination markets in the Arabian Gulf, which reduced detection risks and transportation costs for producers and traffickers. These states also had fragile, developing economies and vulnerable political systems

susceptible to corruption and collusion with criminal networks.

Syrian state-affiliated actors’ foray into the illicit drugs trade did not begin with captagon. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the hashish trade in Lebanon’s Bekaa Valley thrived under the auspices of Hezbollah networks, with complicit involvement from the Lebanese state and later Syrian armed forces during their occupation of Lebanon the early 2000s.¹⁴ Additionally, following the Israel-Lebanon war in 2006 and Lebanon’s civil war, factions became desperate for alternative revenue sources, expanding the space for the illicit drugs trade.

Both Syria’s and Lebanon’s penetrable political systems and fragmented law enforcement agencies presented an opportunity for illicit drug producers to exploit the potential for trafficking routes closer to consumer markets in the Middle East and Persian Gulf.¹⁵ Since the early 2000s, captagon’s target consumer market has transitioned from southeast Europe to wealthy youth in the Gulf, such as in Saudi Arabia, where some studies have estimated that up to 40 percent of people who use drugs consume captagon.¹⁶ However, given the cultural taboo and strict legal penalties of drug use in the Persian Gulf, there is limited data on the prevalence of

captagon use, and as such these studies need to be viewed with caution. Nevertheless, captagon has frequently been cited as a key factor in an emerging abuse crisis in the region, with its use coinciding with modernization reforms, growing youth unemployment, and, crucially, within a context of limited harm reduction and drug treatment services.¹⁷

An Ever-Shifting Formula

One of the most challenging aspects in tracking the patterns of captagon production, smuggling, and use is assessing its precursors and constantly shifting chemical formula.¹⁸ While drugs in tablet form often have varying levels of purity and adulterants (such as MDMA pills produced in Europe or even methamphetamine pills produced in the Golden Triangle), the contents of captagon tablets seemingly have an even higher variability. While most often these pills contain amphetamine, methamphetamine has also been identified in tablets, in addition to various other adulterants described below. This variance has caused confusion in reporting seizures and monitoring the use of the drug. This variability is likely influenced by the high volatility in accessing precursors and producers in Syria making use of whatever chemicals they have at hand to make the pills. Indeed, by



the mid-2010s, the UNODC and other institutions raised alarms related to the increase of captagon counterfeited with unknown precursors, in combination with an array of additional substances and cutting agents due to low stocks of precursor chemicals.¹⁹

Broadly, there are three forms of illicit precursor supply channels for ATS: extracting them from legal pharmaceutical products (e.g. in the case of pseudoephedrine contained in cold-and-flu pills); the importation of foreign manufactured precursors; and illicit domestic manufacturing.²⁰ Acquiring or manufacturing precursor chemicals is a common challenge for illicit drug producers, requiring extensive financial investment, chemical knowledge, and access to non-scheduled substances and equipment.²¹ Law enforcement agencies and international institutions such as the UNODC and INCB have served as obstacles for captagon and other synthetic drug producers searching for precursors such as phenylacetic acid, ephedrine, pseudoephedrine, alpha-phenylacetoacetonitrile, and benzyl methyl ketone (BMK).²²

In 2016, international agencies flagged increased Syrian state imports of precursor chemicals.²³ This is worrying, considering the link between state-affiliated actors and illicit captagon production (explored later in the report). In its annual report, the INCB recorded that as of Nov. 1, 2020, Syria submitted an annual estimate of its legitimate precursor chemical requirements of 2,000 kilograms of ephedrine and 50,000 kilograms of pseudoephedrine.²⁴ Syria's level

of reported pseudoephedrine requirements is notable, surpassing the United Kingdom, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Canada, and just under half that of Switzerland, one of the world's largest pharmaceutical and biotech hubs, despite a lack of official and explicit reasoning for such large pseudoephedrine imports.

In the early 2000s, producers seemingly predominantly sourced precursor substances from Bulgaria and Turkey, as evidenced by law enforcement seizures of BMK and phenylacetic acid.²⁵ Since then, the landscape has shifted, and changing precursor availability has had a large effect on the content of captagon tablets. The few chemical profiling tests that have been conducted have determined that the drug most often includes amphetamine and other adulterants such as allopurinol, paracetamol, diphenhydramine, procaine, lactose, ephedrine, metronidazole, theophylline, chlorphenamine, chloroquine, acetaminophen, caffeine, quinine, metronidazole, trimethoprim, P-2-P methyl glycidate, and other substances that could cause further harm to consumers.²⁶ Some tablets have also been found to contain methamphetamine rather than amphetamine, which can have much more serious health consequences, especially at higher doses.²⁷

Recent lab analyses have identified an uptick in the production of captagon with higher variability in the purity of amphetamine. An October 2021 study that surveyed captagon pills seized in Saudi Arabia's Jazan region assessed

that tablets contained between 16.29% and 41.23% amphetamine, along with significant levels of additives such as caffeine, lidocaine, diphenhydramine, and 8-chlorotheophylline.²⁸ Some earlier lab analyses, such as studies conducted by Greek and Dutch law enforcement in 2016 and 2017, identified tablets marketed as captagon manufactured with no amphetamine at all, just consisting of concentrated caffeine,²⁹ and a series of Saudi Arabian toxicological analyses found toxic levels of zinc and nickel.³⁰ The high doses of amphetamine identified in some captagon tablets create risks of dependence, nerve damage, cardiovascular challenges, muscular breakdown, and neurotoxicity, while many of the additive compounds have been associated with nerve-blocking, ventricular tachycardia and bleeding, affecting neurotransmission, and other harmful side effects.³¹ Taken together, the high variability in the content of captagon tablets poses a high risk to the health of the user, and public health systems will likely be challenged to deal with the harmful consequences of captagon use.

In the past two years, some evidence has emerged of the production of different captagon pills, potentially targeted at different markets and consumers based on their perceived "quality" level.³² Currently, there are seemingly three main types of captagon pills: white tablets, yellow-brown tablets, and pink tablets. Pills primarily exported to foreign destination markets exhibit a whiter color and are considered better quality, reflected



A Jan. 1, 2021, raid on a captagon laboratory in Boudai, Lebanon, by a Lebanese intelligence patrol resulted in several arrests and seizures of tablets and production equipment. (Lebanese Army Command)

in higher prices. Captagon pills produced and distributed inside Syria — often sold at cheaper prices between 125 Syrian pounds (\$0.50) and 7,000 Syrian pounds (\$2.78) in markets close to production sites — often are yellowish-brown or pinkish in color,³³ though there are some reports of white tablets being sold for 15,000-20,000 Syrian pounds (\$5.97-\$7.96) near production sites in Latakia.³⁴ The yellow pills, often referred to as “Ya Masharni,” “Capti,” and “0.1” on the streets in Levantine countries³⁵ and “Zero One” in Iraqi markets, are mealy and supposedly decrease appetite and increase productivity and focus. The pink pills are often called “strawberry” and supposedly increase feelings of sexual desire and invincibility.³⁶ Based on eyewitness accounts, both yellow and pink captagon

pills tend to be of lower quality compared to the white pills.³⁷

Methods of Production

One of captagon’s most appealing traits to illicit actors is its ability to be clandestinely synthesized in a variety of environments and conditions, with low-cost procedures and materials that can yield high profit margins.³⁸ As there is high variability in the content of captagon pills, the drug’s chemical composition can be very simple, and the techniques and tools required for production are often cheap and legally accessible.³⁹ The methods of captagon production are similar to those of several other synthetic drugs: often elementary and non-labor intensive, with “cooks” not necessarily needing to be experts in chemistry or possess

deep pharmaceutical knowledge.⁴⁰ There have been several identified captagon production methods, through routes of nitropropene, benzaldehyde, nitroethane, and the “Leuckart Synthesis.”⁴¹ Law enforcement agencies have encountered the Leuckart Synthesis method more frequently than others, as it is popular due to its use of the BMK precursor.⁴²

Small-scale production can take place indoors in residences, uninfluenced by environmental conditions and out of sight of law enforcement.⁴³ While some captagon laboratories have been said to emit a unique smell that has helped alert authorities, the production process’ simplicity and mobility has helped producers avoid detection.



Captagon's Health Risks

Due to the high variability in the content of captagon pills, it is difficult to map its health risks. Additionally, most studies on its health and side effects have been on the drug's original fenethylamine formula.⁴⁴ However, a broad range of research exists on the most commonly found psychoactive compounds within captagon as we now know it, mainly amphetamine and to a lesser extent methamphetamine, which have been linked to changes in brain function, increased risk of stroke, increased blood pressure, and risk of dependence. The harmful additives sometimes found in captagon tablets, such as nickel and zinc, have been linked with oxidative damage, neurological and developmental deficits, and decreased immune, lung, and liver functions.⁴⁵

Captagon tablets' high variability in content is itself a health risk. Users are most likely unaware of the contents of different tablets – and are thus unaware of whether they are consuming amphetamine or methamphetamine, for example. By extension, risks such as overdosing are heightened. In Syria, these health risks are likely exacerbated as users among marginalized communities experience converging health crises related to trauma and mental health disorders stemming from the ongoing civil war, within a context of extremely limited public health and drug treatment services.

In lieu of consistent peer-reviewed medical findings, there have been reports from users in Syria and the

region that shed light on the effects of captagon. In an investigation into Syria's captagon trade by the pro-opposition outlet The Horan Free League, an interview with a user highlighted captagon's ability to stave off hunger and generate short-term productivity: "A quarter of an hour was enough for 'life' to return to his yellow cheeks to start long conversations ... forgetting the sound of his stomach 'gurgling' with hunger."⁴⁶

In another account, a Lebanese user described his experience, saying "You can't sleep or even close your eyes ... whatever you take to stop it ... nothing can stop it."⁴⁷ Delusion has been a recorded side-effect of captagon use, providing a sense of invincibility and inability to feel physical pain. In a Reuters interview, a drug control officer in Homs recalled captagon's effects on users: "We would beat them, and they wouldn't feel the pain. Many of them would laugh while we were dealing them heavy blows."⁴⁸ Users have also reported a sense of euphoria, as is common with ATS, with one saying, "I felt like I own the world high ... there was no fear anymore after I took captagon," and that "with one pill, we could dance all weekend."⁴⁹

Filling A Vacuum

Why Syria?

While captagon has been consumed in Syria for nearly 40 years, its role within the Levant's underground markets, amid unravelling regional political stability, has recently expanded and prompted international concern. The captagon trade has

played a tacit but important role in Syria's decade-long civil war, perpetuating and exacerbating existing power vacuums, rule of law and public health crises, and the fragmentation of human security. The trade has empowered both state and non-state actors – warlords, paramilitaries, terrorist organizations, state-sponsored proxy networks, and elements of the Syrian government – while deepening civilians' trauma and the region's ever-fragile security landscape.

The ongoing war has allowed captagon production to thrive and substance use to increase in a context lacking appropriate medical facilities and treatment programs for drug use-related disorders.⁵⁰ Amid civil disarray, breakdown of law and order, violence, and economic deterioration, Syria has become a major source and consumer of the drug.⁵¹ Lebanon has served as an extension of the Syrian captagon trade, a key transit point for captagon flows, with Syrian government-connected Hezbollah leaders participating in the trade's expansion. While small-scale captagon laboratories have been detected in Lebanon, Syria stands as the hub for industrial-sized production that has come to define the country's illicit outflows in the past two to three years.

Syria's Black-Market Trends

Since 2013, captagon production and trafficking by Syrian criminal organizations have increased exponentially. In Syria and the greater Middle East region, the drug is marketed under the street name "captagon" or "Abu Hilalain" – a



reference to the “father of the two crescent moons,” with interlaced ‘C’s representing crescents typically impressed upon captagon yellow-brown and white tablets. In addition to its signature crescent moon imprint, the drug has also been branded with the logo of the luxury car manufacturing division Lexus — a name that has also been commonly used for higher-quality captagon pills with higher purity.⁵² Occasionally, there have been seizures of captagon contained in plastic bags branded with a counterclockwise swastika, the majority seemingly originating from small-scale laboratories in the Lebanese-Syrian border region.⁵³

The drug is usually sold either to groups purchasing a large amount of tablets for retail distribution or to consumers as individual tablets or in a bag of around 200 tablets.⁵⁴ Depending on production source, location, delivery process, and quality of the drug, captagon is usually sold for \$3 to \$7 per pill in Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon⁵⁵ and can run up to \$25 per pill in consumer markets such as Saudi Arabia,⁵⁶ depending on the quality of tablets.⁵⁷ However, captagon is reportedly sold at a cheaper price to particular buyers, averaging around 500 Syrian pounds (roughly \$1.01) for young students and soldiers, reportedly used by distributors as a tactic for recruiting users to their forces.⁵⁸ On the Syrian streets, users have frequently referred to the transaction of buying captagon in Arabic as **يامسهرني**, or “*ya mas-hrny*,”⁵⁹ meaning “something keeping someone up at night.”

Recently, darknet markets have also served as a method

for distributing captagon by Syrian producers. This includes AlphaBay, Agora, Valhalla, and Hansa (some of which have now been dismantled by international law enforcement agencies) and illicit online pharmacies such as Anonymous Pharmacy.⁶⁰ With the rise of informal, unlicensed pharmacies in Syria and the fragmentation of rule of law,⁶¹ there has been some evidence that captagon can be obtained over the counter, such as in Aleppo and other government-held provinces.⁶² However, the majority of the underground captagon economy persists via in-person illicit transactions between buyers, dealers and traffickers, militias, armed groups, and state officials. This makes it difficult to monitor, track, and identify patterns in the captagon trade.

Laboratory Locations and Smuggling Routes

Captagon production labs in Syria have evolved from smaller, makeshift, mobile laboratories to larger, industrial-sized, clandestine production facilities in state-controlled areas, commensurate with the shift in production from non-state to state actors. Production is seemingly concentrated near ports and porous border crossings, as well as in major populated areas such as in and around Damascus, Latakia, East Ghouta, Aleppo, Al-Qusayr, and Homs governorates.⁶³ Syria’s former status as a regional pharmaceutical hub in the early 2000s⁶⁴ has proven helpful for state-affiliated actors involved in captagon production and smuggling, providing existing

facilities that can accommodate industrial-scale production.

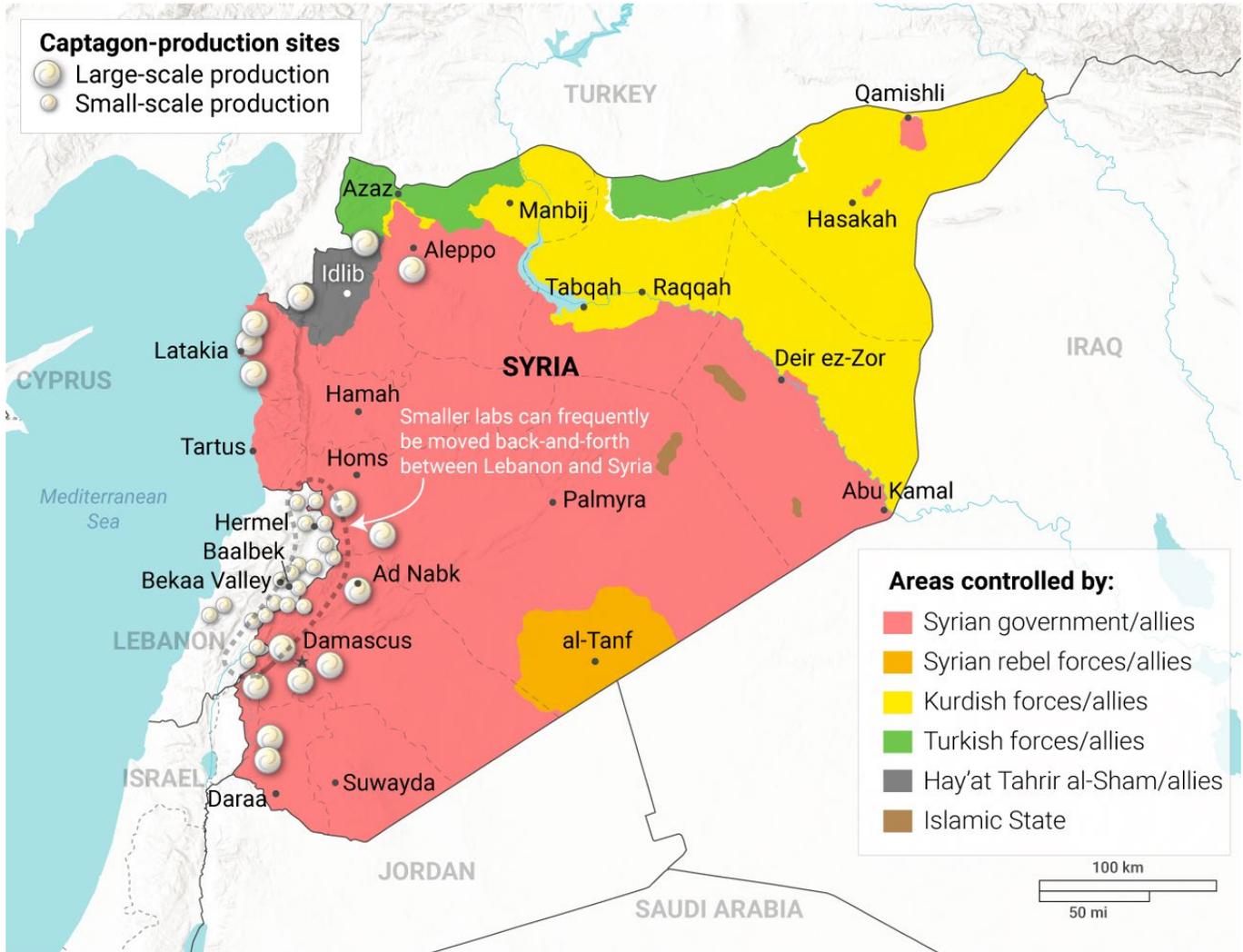
Corruption, state complicity, and fragmented border enforcement have enabled producers to acquire controlled and non-controlled chemicals and find smugglers to transit captagon shipments while diversifying routes toward destination markets.⁶⁵ Seizure data analysis of captagon and precursor chemicals has shown that the trade remains aimed toward Persian Gulf destination markets, although it has grown more transnational, with emerging transit sites and potential consumer markets in Europe, North Africa, and Southeast Asia. Additionally, the trade increasingly relies upon maritime transit to reach sites in Europe, as Turkish intervention in the Syrian civil war has hampered northern overland smuggling.

Furthermore, recent seizures have illustrated smugglers’ adaptation to recent trade constraints and political conflicts. Following the Saudi Arabian ban on Lebanese agricultural products in April 2021 and ban on all Lebanese imports in October 2021, there was an uptick in seizures of captagon along the Saudi Arabian-Jordanian border at the Al-Haditha crossing. This indicated that smugglers had decreased traffic through Lebanon — particularly as the Lebanese government directed more crackdowns on the captagon trade to build goodwill with Persian Gulf countries. Moreover, some evidence has indicated that many of the small-scale, mobile captagon laboratories formerly concentrated in Lebanon’s Bekaa Valley region have been transferred



Major Captagon Production Areas in Syria and Lebanon

- Syria has 15 large-scale production centers in regime-held areas
- Lebanon has an estimated 20 small-scale captagon factories in hubs like Baalbek, Hermel, and the Bekaa Valley



Sources: COAR, LiveuMap, Suriyak, The New York Times, Arab News

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over the Syrian border to dodge increased interdiction efforts in Lebanon.⁶⁶ As smugglers shift to new trafficking routes, seizures have indicated increased transit through alternative overland and underground routes in Jordan and Iraq, intended to reduce suspicion and interdiction risks among Persian Gulf law enforcement as Saudi Arabian trade restrictions with Lebanon continue.

Captagon's Implicated Actors

A Booming Illicit Trade

The literature on the captagon trade's participants is scarce and evidentiary data has been challenging to obtain and verify since 2011. There are competing narratives in Syria between pro-government and opposition

media outlets seeking to pin the trade's expansion on their adversaries. Initially, the data that existed on the captagon trade's participants indicated indirect links with state actors, where governmental officials tax and facilitate illicit cross-border shipments rather than participate in production and trafficking.⁶⁷ However, as the Syrian economy has deteriorated, there has been



increasing evidence of larger-scale, direct participation from the Syrian government in not only trafficking but also production.⁶⁸

The captagon trade has taken a foothold in Syria's declining economy, serving as an alternative revenue source for both state and non-state actors. The devastated infrastructure, poor employment opportunities, and absence of sustainable livelihoods have contributed to captagon's status as a lucrative business. Trade of the drug comes with potential high profits and low risks amid a struggling economy and reconstruction efforts, estimated in 2019 to cost between \$250 billion and \$400 billion.⁶⁹ Meanwhile, some estimates have claimed that captagon's market value transformed from nearly \$1.8 billion in 2017 to between \$2.9 billion and \$3.46 billion in 2020 — more than the country's licit exports that year.⁷⁰ Data compiled by the authors measuring the retail value of annual captagon seizures reflect a retail market worth at least \$5.7 billion in 2021.⁷¹ However, this market estimate is extrapolated from somewhat limited data, solely calculated from reported seizures (mostly large seizures, thus excluding a large number of street-level seizures that go unreported) and the average price per tablet in the region, indicating that the total value of the captagon trade could be much larger. While estimates of the retail market can be useful in developing an understanding of the scale of the trade, the profit margins of captagon producers and traffickers in Syria remain unknown.⁷² Additionally, the value of the retail market should be attributed not

to a singular actor or organization active in production or smuggling but to a plethora of manufacturers, traffickers, middlemen, suppliers, and dealers at different stages of the illicit supply chain.

The rise of the captagon trade is an important case study for wartime black market trades, as the rise of domestic production and trafficking has empowered local Syrian organized crime groups, criminal actors, and insurgents to accumulate wealth and power in a volatile environment that has supported plausible deniability.⁷³

The Nexus of Captagon, Militant Warfare, and Jihad

Illicit drug markets can be lucrative ventures for terrorist organizations to accrue political and economic capital, providing employment opportunities, livelihoods, and economic regeneration to citizens, and expanding their local political allegiance.⁷⁴ While there are some indications of terrorist organization engagement in local illicit captagon production and smuggling practices in Syria, verifiable data on the extent of their involvement remains scarce.⁷⁵ Institutions such as the UNODC have suggested ISIS, the Free Syrian Army, and Al Nusra have had extensive involvement in facilitating the smuggling of chemical precursors for captagon production.⁷⁶ Despite the taboo of drugs in Islamic doctrine, some terrorist organizations have justified captagon consumption under shariah, branding use as a medical necessity due to its productivity-enhancing qualities.⁷⁷

ISIS has received the majority of media attention for its reported

use of the drug as a tool of jihad to fuel its violent campaigns and territorial acquisition.⁷⁸ As the organization has progressively lost territory in Syria and Iraq, its leadership has searched for sources of organizational funding in black-market trades.⁷⁹ Captagon became identified within ISIS' micro-financial model, with experts noting that the trade enabled the organization to raise funds for geographic mobility and resources for future transnational attacks.⁸⁰ ISIS continues to be cited as one of the actors operating and shaping Syria's captagon trade, despite the large reduction in the organization's reach and resources and the curtailment of their territorial control, as well as the growing participation of other non-state and state actors.

Following the July 2020 captagon seizure at the Port of Salerno, the Guardia di Finanza, a financial crime and smuggling investigations unit attached to Italy's Ministry of Economy and Finance, claimed ISIS was behind the millions of shipped captagon tablets.⁸¹ Media outlets and officials circulated this message, despite evidence of the shipment originating from the Syrian government and Hezbollah, as well as the fact that ISIS most likely does not have the capacity to facilitate a drug shipment of this size given their lack of access to factories and seaport where the shipment originated from.

The precise nature of ISIS's relationship to captagon production and trafficking remains uncertain, with differing reports about the role captagon has played in the group's micro-financial model. ISIS's magazine, *Rumiyah*, encouraged



Clashes Over Captagon Smuggling and Production

1. **Aug. 13, 2020:** Violent clashes erupted between Lebanese Hezbollah and the pro-regime National Defense Forces (NDF) in Qunaytirah governorate. The clashes were sparked by a disagreement over drug dealing in the region.
2. **Nov. 27, 2020:** Jordanian Armed Forces and personnel in the Narcotics Control Department killed "a number" of Syrian smugglers.
3. **Feb. 19, 2021:** Jordanian Armed Forces killed two smugglers and arrested several others, seizing an unspecified amount of captagon.
4. **May 19, 2021:** In a battle with 11 Syrian smugglers, Jordanian Armed Forces killed three, injured and arrested two before seizing 1,307,665 captagon pills. The six other smugglers fled back into Syria.
5. **June 2, 2021:** Jordanian Armed Forces seized 377,000 captagon pills after a clash with Syrian smugglers.
6. **Aug. 2, 2021:** A Lebanese Army Intelligence Directorate force raided a captagon production laboratory in Hor Ta'la in the Bekaa Valley, resulting in one smuggler being killed and one Lebanese soldier wounded.
7. **Aug. 7, 2021:** Jordanian Armed Forces killed one smuggler and wounded several others on the Jordanian-Syrian border.
8. **Nov. 29, 2021:** Jordanian Armed Forces killed one smuggler and wounded another as they attempted to enter Jordan from Suwayda, Syria.
9. **Dec. 25, 2021:** Jordanian Armed Forces fought an estimated 200 Syrian smugglers armed with machine guns entering Jordan between Syria's Suwayda and Daraa provinces.



10. **Jan. 16, 2022:** Armed smugglers killed Jordanian Armed Forces Capt. Mohammed Al Khadeirat and wounded three other Jordanian border guards during a confrontation in which Jordanian forces seized 5 million captagon pills.
11. **Jan. 26, 2022:** Jordanian Armed Forces killed 27 smugglers and wounded several others who were attempting to take advantage of a snowstorm along the Syrian-Jordanian border to smuggle "large amounts" of captagon.

Sources: The Syrian Observer, Shaabjo, Arab News, The Jordan Times, Al Arabiya News, North Press Agency Syria, The Syrian Observatory For Human Rights, The National News

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its members to capitalize upon opportunities in Ukrainian and Syrian black markets in May 2017⁸² but did not specify illicit narcotic trades. On the other hand, a 2016 report by Benjamin Crabtree and the GIATOC stated that ISIS has strategically excluded itself from captagon market activities in order to keep its ideological prestige, pursuing sources of income in alternative sectors such

as crude oil extraction and the sale of antiquities on the black market.⁸³ While verifiable evidence is challenging to obtain, the organization has likely participated in some distribution of captagon to its fighters and facilitated cross-border smuggling, similar to other actors in non-government-controlled areas, rather than serving as a major producer and exporter.⁸⁴

There has also been concern in the international community over individual fighters' use of the drug and the role captagon has played in the execution of terrorist attacks. Many outlets have often incorrectly reported that the 2015 attack in Paris, territorial campaigns in Iraq and Syria, and violence against Syrian and Iraqi communities since 2012 were fueled by captagon's effects of



“zombielike” detachment.⁸⁵ In a RAND Corporation review, Colin P. Clark referred to captagon as “jihad pills” for terrorists’ reliance upon the psychoactive effects and dependency on trafficking for funding travel and operations.⁸⁶ However, a range of incorrect assertions regarding the union between captagon and terrorism have ignored other demographic groups that use captagon for a range of reasons, including state involvement in the trade, particularly following ISIS’s decline in the region.⁸⁷ Investigative journalistic efforts and mapping of seizure and production areas have shed light on the key state-affiliated participants in a growing captagon trade, departing from previous assumptions of ISIS being exclusively associated with the trade. With the organization’s territorial defeat in Syria and Iraq, an inevitable void in the Syrian warlord economy has emerged, with taxation, cross-border smuggling, and transit facilitation services carried out by new actors.

Syrian State Involvement

State-level participation has become a defining attribute of the modern-day captagon trade,⁸⁸ which has blossomed into a multi-billion-dollar industry through at least ministry-level knowledge and complicity, using state-owned and controlled resources, personnel, and property to facilitate captagon’s production and smuggling.⁸⁹ State-level participation in Syria’s narcotic trade is most likely a means to an end: to consolidate power and ensure the survival of the political elite. The history of the Syrian government’s relationship

with the illicit drug trade is complex, characterized by both strict anti-drug policies and complicity with pro-Assad criminal networks. During the 2006 Syrian occupation of Lebanon’s Bekaa Valley, state forces offered protection to hashish producers and reaped an estimated \$500 million,⁹⁰ and before the Syrian civil war, the government fostered patronage networks with a large network of pro-Assad industry moguls, businessmen and merchants, peddlers, customs officials, smugglers, and illicit actors.⁹¹

Reports indicate that state-affiliated and protected businessmen and government loyalists have been able to take leading roles in captagon manufacturing due to their access to state resources, infrastructure, and military protection. Assad family members like Wasim Badia al-Assad and state-affiliated business magnates such as Mohammad Shalish and Taher al Kayali have been affiliated with drug operations in Latakia, shell companies such as Neptune Overseas Limited, and black market warlords in the Bekaa Valley.⁹² These connections have enabled them to situate production sites close to state-owned ports, use commercial transportation methods for smuggling, and make use of clientele networks in local agricultural, pharmaceutical, and transportation industries.⁹³ Employees of the Al-Bustan charitable foundation (owned and operated by Bashar al-Assad’s cousin, Rami Makhoul), such as Waseem Omar Al-Masalma, have also seemingly participated in captagon production and supply at government-sanctioned

manufacturing warehouses.⁹⁴ A paternal cousin of al-Assad, Samer Kamal al-Assad, has also been linked to several manufacturing operations near the Port of Latakia,⁹⁵ particularly in the village of Al-Basha and in the upper Qalamoun mountains under the supervision of Maher Al-Assad’s Fourth Division. There, Assad and patronage networks are involved in utilizing corporate entities, development projects along the Syrian coast, and close connections with local and Lebanese drug syndicates to facilitate smuggling operations.⁹⁶

Outside of the Assad family, other stakeholders and businessmen have seemingly participated in captagon production and smuggling processes, such as Abdellatif Hamid, the owner of a factory that the paper rolls used in the huge 2020 Port of Salerno seizure were traced back to.⁹⁷ A New York Times investigation also identified links between forces and prominent businessmen sanctioned by the U.S. such as Khodr Taher, a merchant with extensive access and influence over Syrian Fourth Division checkpoints, and Amer Khiti, a Damascus livestock magnate and new member of the Syrian parliament experienced in wartime smuggling who has purchased real estate in government-held areas and packaging facilities for captagon trafficking with state backing.⁹⁸

In the early stages of the civil war, captagon production was scattered across the country. However, recently it has become concentrated in government-held areas along Syria’s western coast,



Aleppo, Homs, and Damascus, and strongholds in the south where the government has a monopoly over security and border crossings.⁹⁹ The location of these large-scale production facilities alone indicates a degree of Syrian state involvement, supported by a range of further evidence as outlined in this section of the report.

Syria's former role as the region's second-largest pharmaceutical producer, with the majority of its state-affiliated production factories formerly concentrated in Homs, Aleppo, and Damascus, has allowed producers to use existing facilities and equipment to increase supply.¹⁰⁰ However, large- and small-scale production sites have been established in villas, residential compounds, hangars, and other structures in Latakia, Daara, Suwayda, and other areas close to key transit sites such as ports and border crossings.¹⁰¹ In the mid-2010s, Levantine law enforcement agencies tracked numerous organized crime groups' supply chains to the Homs area, where the majority of former state-affiliated pharmaceutical factories are located.¹⁰² The pre-existing infrastructural system of roadways, electricity, waterways, and industrialized buildings in government-held provinces has facilitated the trafficking of the drug by state-affiliated actors.¹⁰³

The absence of seizures in government-held areas where industrial captagon production is located provides further indication that the state is allowing the production and trafficking of large volumes of captagon without interference. While cross-border



Jordan's Public Security Directorate seized 250,000 captagon pills in Jordan's Zarqa Governate near the Syrian and Saudi Arabian border on Dec. 27, 2021. (Jordan Public Security Directorate)

customs authorities in Jordan, Turkey, and Lebanon routinely seize captagon originating from Syria, there has been a noticeable lack of seizures in Syrian government-controlled sites such as airports, commercial maritime ports, and production hubs such as Daraa and Qunaytirah.

Major laboratories and supporting warehouses are concentrated close to key smuggling chokepoints to accommodate cheap transportation, near state-controlled maritime ports along the country's Mediterranean coast as well as crossings in the country's south near its border with Jordan

and Lebanon. Manufacturing facilities reportedly are located in Serghaya, Rankos, Zabadani, Bloudan, Yabrud, Asal al-Ward, al-Jebbeh, Talfita, Bakhaa, al-Tufail, Madaya, Al-Basha, al-Sabboura, and other areas in Syria's Latakia, Aleppo, Homs, Daraa, and regime-controlled points along the M4 international highway.¹⁰⁴ As such, nearly all of the identified major captagon production facilities are located in Syrian government-controlled territories, with at least 15 estimated large-scale captagon manufacturing centers — located in hangars, empty large-scale residences, warehouses, and abandoned factories¹⁰⁵ — in operation, supported by the Syrian state's security, intelligence, and political apparatus and allied, Iran-aligned proxy forces.¹⁰⁶ There is a virtual absence of reported laboratory raids in these areas, and the few captagon traffickers that are arrested reportedly bribe government officials for early release.¹⁰⁷ This raises questions as to whether the government controls the trade by clamping down on producers and traffickers that are not aligned with the state while allowing those aligned with the political and economic elite to produce and traffic captagon as long as they are paying their dues.

The volume of recently intercepted captagon consignments also provides an indirect indication of state involvement. Before 2019, captagon seizures were often small, ranging in the hundreds of thousands of tablets, intercepted by land, at airport customs, from local drug dealers, and occasionally containerized shipments. However, seizure data since mid-2019



collected by this report's authors has revealed new trafficking patterns, with industrial-sized captagon shipments dispatched from state-controlled ports in Syria. Of note, under the country's 2006 Customs Law's provision 38, the Syrian Customs Administration is mandated to conduct inspections on all outgoing goods.¹⁰⁸ Over the course of 2019, 2020, and 2021, investigative reports and law enforcement systems identified that many of the largest captagon interceptions have originated from sites that only can be accessed by Syrian Army personnel and high-level government officials, members of the Assad family's inner circle, and, as of recently, the IRGC.¹⁰⁹ This includes the July 2020 Port of Salerno seizure of 84 million pills,¹¹⁰ the August 2020 Port of Constanta seizure of 4 million pills,¹¹¹ and the 2021 seizure of 14.4 million pills at Saudi Arabia's Jeddah Port,¹¹² which originated from the Port of Latakia, a Syrian state-owned port managed by the Public Company of the Port of Latakia, and from the Port of Tartus. While publicly available data about Syrian ports' exports and imports have been inaccessible since the start of the war in 2011, the uptick in seized captagon dispatched from Latakia and intercepted around Syria's borders — coupled with a lack of seizures within Syria¹¹³ — suggests an uptick in large-scale production.

There also is increasing evidence to suggest that certain officials and security organizations aligned with the Syrian government have leveraged the country's war conditions and civilians' trauma to increase demand for captagon,

capitalizing upon users' anxieties, despair, frustration, and lack of employment and educational opportunities to increase captagon dependency.¹¹⁴ Captagon consumption has been reported among Syrian Army personnel operating in Afrin and forces monitoring the Euphrates-Shield zone, amidst poor supply lines, wage insecurity, and poor morale.¹¹⁵

Additionally, there is some evidence that the Syrian armed forces have used captagon, priced specially for prime candidates, as a recruiting tool.¹¹⁶ One Horan Free League interview with a Fourth Division fighter revealed that captagon provision at a cheaper price was a prominent driver for military recruitment: "The main reason for my joining was to get narcotic pills, so I went on my motorbike through the checkpoints in the area to the town of Kharab ... I buy a quantity of captagon for me and my friends at a special price for the military."¹¹⁷

The Fourth Division and Regime-Affiliated Shabiha Networks

The Syrian government's armed forces have also seemingly served as key agents in captagon smuggling and distribution networks, especially in the government-controlled governorates of Daraa and Qunaytirah, a captagon consumption and manufacturing hub. Particularly embedded within the trade is Syria's Fourth Division, an elite formation of the Syrian Army made up of four brigades and predominantly Alawite, headed by Bashar al-Assad's younger brother,

Maheer, and commanded by Maj. Gen. Ghassan Bilal.¹¹⁸

Some evidence points to elements of the Syrian Army, Fourth Division, and an intelligence apparatus cooperating with loyal elements of Syria's grain, livestock, poultry, and pharmaceutical industries over protection, smuggling, and distribution of captagon in and outside of Syria.¹¹⁹ These elements appear to be using military or commercial vehicles to transport captagon from distribution centers at militia headquarters and checkpoints under the guise of security missions or business activities.¹²⁰

There is also some evidence that Fourth Division officials utilize a series of state-owned official and unofficial ports in the Latakia and Tartus region to dispatch captagon shipments, with bystanders reporting Fourth Division personnel using speed boats to offload shipments onto larger vessels moored further out in the Mediterranean Sea.¹²¹ Government-related militia commanders have supposedly even been found to openly sell captagon at their residences and distribute to villages along the Damascus-Daraa highway as well as facilitate shipments along the Fourth Division-controlled towns of Dimas and Daraa, popular transit destinations for captagon trafficked from the Masnaa point along the Lebanese-Syrian border.¹²² Further, Fourth Division personnel have allegedly been used to guard captagon production sites themselves, such as the Fourth Division's 42nd Brigade, which have served as guards for a captagon



manufacturing center in a former water desalination plant in Kharab al-Shahem, close to the Syrian-Jordanian border.¹²³

Checkpoint economies — the taxation of smuggled substances

by border control officers and “shabiha” client networks loyal to the Assad family — have reportedly afforded tremendous profit for government officials.¹²⁴ Shabiha networks are mobilized paramilitary networks along

broad sectarian and transnational lines, such as religious minority communities, Baathist loyalists, tribes loyal to the acting government, members of the intelligence community, and former military. Many of these actors have

Suspected Participants in Captagon Production and Smuggling

■ Targeted by U.S. sanctions
■ Not targeted by U.S. sanctions



■ **Maher al-Assad:** Bashar al-Assad’s younger brother and head of the Syrian Army’s Fourth Division. Maher has been linked to overseeing a captagon factory in al-Basa, Latakia, and manufacturing centers along the Syria-Lebanon border in the Qalamoun Mountain range.



■ **Khodr Taher:** Businessman in Syria’s agricultural sector and contractor for the Fourth Division with extensive access and influence over Fourth Division checkpoints. Linked to taxing licit and illicit drug flows across Syrian border areas, including captagon smuggling.

■ **Amer Khiti:** Member of the Syrian Parliament and livestock, real estate, shipping and transport, and construction magnate who owns packaging facilities affiliated with industrial-sized captagon smuggling from state ports.



■ **Wasim Badia al-Assad:** A cousin of Bashar Al-Assad who controls local militias in Latakia and is affiliated with drug operations in Latakia, shell companies, and with black market warlords in the Bekaa Valley, situating production sites close to state-owned ports, using commercial transportation methods for smuggling, and making use of clientele networks in local agricultural, pharmaceutical, and transportation industries.



■ **Rami Maklouf:** Bashar al-Assad’s cousin, whose charitable foundation has been found to have employees who have participated in captagon production and smuggling at government-sanctioned manufacturing warehouses.

■ **Mohammad Shalish:** State-affiliated business magnate linked to drug operations in the Latakia region and the co-owner of the vessel management company Neptune Overseas Limited LLC with Taher Al Kayali, which has been implicated in a series of captagon smuggling operations.

■ **Taher al Kayali:** State-affiliated business magnate linked to smuggling operations in and from Latakia, situating production sites close to state-owned ports, using commercial transportation methods such as his cargo ship Noka and vessel management company Neptune Overseas Limited LLC as well as criminal networks in Italy and Libya.

■ **Samer Kamal al-Assad:** Cousin of Bashar al-Assad connected to operating captagon factories near the Port of Latakia in Al-Basha and establishing close connections to Lebanese drug syndicates to facilitate smuggling.



■ **Hassan Muhammad Daqqou:** Syrian-Lebanese businessman and land developer with projects in al-Tufayl under the Caesar construction firm, close to the Lebanese-Syrian border in the Qalmoun region, with commercial activities and close ties with Hezbollah and the Syrian regime. Dubbed the “King of Captagon” in Libya, he has been affiliated with drug smuggling efforts with Hezbollah and Syria’s Fourth Division to Greece, Saudi Arabia, and Malaysia. He and his three brothers were arrested by Lebanese state officials in April 2021.

■ **Abdellatif Hamid:** A factory owner and businessman with close relations with the Assad family who was implicated in the Port of Salerno seizure, providing the industrial-sized paper rolls to shroud captagon pills.

Sources: NYT, COAR, OCCRP, personal interviews

Photos from Getty Images, Twitter, Facebook
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participated in smuggling captagon across the Syrian-Lebanese border.

Assistance from Hezbollah and Other State-Backed Proxies

Assisting the government in protecting, trafficking, distributing, and facilitating captagon shipments is a network of state-aligned proxy militias, including Lebanon's Hezbollah, that profit from port and cross-border taxation and provide an essential security umbrella to their operations.¹²⁵ Many recent captagon seizures have been accompanied by modest amounts of hashish harvested from Lebanon's Bekaa Valley, pointing to additional involvement and coordination with Hezbollah, an active participant in what the U.N. estimated in 2016 as the world's third-largest cannabis producing country.¹²⁶

With its history of controlling Lebanese cannabis production and smuggling out of the southern Bekaa Valley, Hezbollah has seemingly served an important supporting role in the captagon trade.¹²⁷ Hezbollah's technical expertise in drug smuggling, along with the number of potential partner criminal organizations in the Middle East, Europe, and North Africa, has aided the Syrian government's efforts to run an industrial-sized captagon market.¹²⁸ The relationship builds upon a dynamic that has existed since the Lebanese civil war, where Syrian political, military, and intelligence officials collaborated with Hezbollah in cannabis cultivation and production, activities that led the U.S. Department of State to

designate Syria as a narco-state until the Pax Syriana era.¹²⁹

This dynamic has played out in the captagon trade, with Hezbollah supporting smuggling efforts through overland routes and by sea, helping dispatch industrial-sized, containerized captagon shipments from Lebanese ports in Tripoli and Beirut, as well as enabling Lebanese ports to serve as transshipment sites for captagon shipments dispatched from Tartus and Latakia.¹³⁰ Through the Qalamoun region, Hezbollah has protected transit routes between Syria and Lebanon and provided an accommodating climate for the trade in illicit arms, drugs, and chemical precursors, as the group has used its political leverage and security networks within Lebanon to enable uninterrupted illicit flows.¹³¹ Hezbollah fighters and other Iran-aligned proxy networks have reportedly been seen assisting the Fourth Division in controlling and securing key areas of concentrated captagon production and smuggling at key checkpoints along the Damascus-Amman highway, the western countryside of Daraa governorate, the Nassib border crossing, and the Lajat area, and they have been spotted visiting captagon factories in Syria such as in Daraa al-Balad.¹³²

Hezbollah also has facilitated trafficking in Shiite-majority areas under its control, such as the Bekaa Valley. The group had reportedly been associated with 60 small-scale captagon production facilities in 2017,¹³³ but that number had decreased by 2021, when Lebanese Brig. Gen. Adel Machmouchi estimated 20 small-scale captagon

factories in hubs in Baalbek, Hermel, and other areas along the Lebanese-Syrian border.¹³⁴

The group has also been affiliated with running small-scale captagon laboratories and workshops inside Syria, with alleged involvement in operating and protecting facilities in Zabadani, Bloudan, Serghaya, Yabrud, al-Qusayr, western al-Qalamoun, near the Dabaa military airfield, and Qunaytirah.¹³⁵ Yet given Hezbollah's political imperative to preserve its conservative image, particularly amid increasing domestic backlash with political protests and anti-corruption calls, Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah and other political leaders have publicly denied direct involvement in the narcotics trade,¹³⁶ shifting blame to local tribal leaders and political barons with proven ties to the captagon trade and to Syria, such as the Zeaiter family and businessman Hassan Muhammad Daqqou.¹³⁷

Militia groups affiliated with Hezbollah and foreign states, such as the Waseem Masalmeh group and the Dir al-Watan Brigade, have also been implicated in captagon distribution¹³⁸ along with other illicit trades such as cannabis and arms. Since 2019, Iran has leased certain wharfs, quays, and yards of the Syrian state-owned Port of Latakia,¹³⁹ a Mediterranean port that has since become a hub of containerized captagon shipments as the surrounding area has become a major site of production facilities. There is some evidence that foreign state-aligned organizations have also facilitated flows eastward into Iraq, particularly on the al-Qaim



highway from Syria's Abu Kamal to western Iraq's Anbar governorate and through border checkpoints difficult for Iraq's Interior Ministry forces to control, providing an additional access point to Persian Gulf destination markets.¹⁴⁰ However, due to the high degree of control over border checkpoints and infiltration of Iraq's security landscape from the Popular Mobilization Forces, an Iran-aligned militia group,¹⁴¹ there is not enough seizure data of captagon flows into Iraq to measure the scale of the captagon trade in Iraq.

Other Non-State Actors

While the Syrian state and its allies seemingly dominate large-scale captagon production and trafficking in Syria, other non-state actors also participate in the trade. For many non-state actors engaged against the Syrian government and other actors such as the Islamic State, proceeds derived from small-scale production and trafficking have helped equip forces and sustain operations to maintain territorial control.¹⁴²

Some opposition paramilitary and political organizations have seemingly perceived the drugs trade as a means for resistance, with profits paying for armaments and foodstuffs for anti-regime brigades.¹⁴³ During the height of the Syrian civil war, some resistance leaders and warlords turned to captagon smuggling as a source of income for their operations, with Thompson Reuters having reported that one anonymous captagon producer made the equivalent of \$6 million in profit in 2016 alone,



Captagon tablets seized by Romanian police in August 2020 at the Port of Constanta. (Romanian Police)

all of which was donated to 12,000 anti-regime fighters.¹⁴⁴

Rebel groups' territorial access and control over certain border checkpoints has also enabled them to tax the flow of captagon to neighboring markets. For example, groups such as the Syrian National Army and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) are reportedly taxing and facilitating narcotics flows from Northern Syria into Turkey in smuggling hubs in Sarmada and Jisj Ash Shugur.¹⁴⁵ Since Turkey's establishment of a buffer in Northern Syria through a series of military operations in 2016-2020, however, there has been a decrease in cross-border captagon smuggling efforts into

Turkey, which has seemingly been followed by an increase in captagon use in opposition-held areas.¹⁴⁶ More recently, the Syrian National Army and HTS – likely at Turkey's prompting – have conducted captagon interdictions and even engaged in small-scale clashes with drug smugglers.¹⁴⁷

Captagon Use in the Levant, Persian Gulf, and Emerging Markets

A lack of data indicates that there is still much to learn about the prevalence of captagon use in the broader region. While captagon has been popularized as the drug that "fuels" Syria's civil war, with a



focus on its use by armed actors to improve their endurance, the drug's popularity among broad demographic groups, such as students and those displaced by the war — not solely violent actors — demonstrates its diverse appeal and that its use will endure long after the end of the armed conflict.¹⁴⁸

There is a real risk that captagon use may increase as Syria moves out of conflict and civilians and armed forces alike seek a way to cope with war-induced trauma. Simultaneously, there is a risk that use may increase in the Middle East due to a convergence of factors such as rising socio-economic inequality, economic slowdown, and insecurity. The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, sanctions, economic isolation, and continued violence has further exacerbated socio-economic conditions that can propel civilians toward drug use, such as food insecurity and product shortages, rising poverty levels, unemployment, a diminished middle class, and widespread dissatisfaction with government services and general financial conditions.¹⁴⁹

Syria and the Levant

Syrians have turned toward captagon to cope with the burdens of the civil war, fueled by the drug's accessibility and cheap pricing.¹⁵⁰ Captagon's euphoric effects provide traumatized individuals an escape from the effects of war and political disarray, lending feelings of invincibility and strength.¹⁵¹ With proximity to production sites, tablets can be bought for as little as 1,255 Syrian pounds

(\$0.50) for lower-quality tablets and up to 20,000 Syrian pounds (\$7.96) per pill in government-held areas such as Latakia — while consumers in destination markets such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Qatar pay much higher prices per tablet.^{152, 153} A 2020 cross-sectional survey conducted in two main civil prison systems in Damascus and Daraa identified captagon as the second-most-popular substance among incarcerated Syrians, next to hashish, and reported it was easy to obtain from dealers, pharmacies, friends, or even through a doctor's prescription.¹⁵⁴ While verifiable data is non-existent, several reports indicate that overall consumption rates among key demographic groups of students, youth, internally displaced citizens, and refugees have reportedly risen since the war.¹⁵⁵

In other transit and consumer markets in the greater Levant region, a combination of insecurity and socio-economic instability have created favorable conditions for captagon to thrive. In Lebanon, economic disintegration has propelled over half of the population below the poverty line with the Lebanese lira's collapse, a plummeting GDP, and political paralysis from the October 2019 protests and August 2020 Beirut Port blast. The drop in government services and access to basic necessities like electricity and fuel, and the fragmentation of rule of law that has followed, has incentivized actors to rely upon illicit revenue streams and pushed individuals to turn to drug use.¹⁵⁶ Lebanese drug treatment services, such as Skoun Lebanese Addictions Center, reported captagon consumption

among youth in 2019 at the onset of Lebanon's present-day crisis, often consumed in conjunction with an array of other substances.¹⁵⁷ However, given the impression that captagon was a "softer" drug than cocaine, methamphetamine, and other narcotics and carried some pharmaceutical legitimacy from its history as a licit substance, few consumers sought health care or rehabilitation services.¹⁵⁸

Jordan, which lies on the overland captagon smuggling route to Persian Gulf markets, has also felt the effects of the Syrian captagon trade and is at risk of an expanding consumer market due to the stalling economy, COVID-19, and drops in remittances.¹⁵⁹ A rise in trafficking across Jordanian territories is emblematic in recent clashes with drug smugglers and the 87% increase in captagon seizures between 2013 and 2018.¹⁶⁰ The risk of greater captagon use has additionally created anxieties among Jordanian law enforcement agencies, summarized by the Secretary General of the Economic and Social Council Mohamed Al-Nabulsi, who told the Jordanian publication Amman Net, "We used to be proud that Jordan was [only] a transit country, but now it is a host country and there are a large number of cases of drug addiction and drug trafficking [in Jordan]."¹⁶¹

While there have been fewer recorded seizures in Iraq compared to Jordan and Lebanon, increased use of overland smuggling routes among captagon traffickers and worsening political and economic conditions make the country fertile ground for a potential expansion of the captagon trade. Following a



string of major seizures of nearly 60 million tablets originating from Syria in the first half of 2021 — which Iraq’s Interior Ministry estimated to be over 20 times larger than what was seized in 2019 and 2020 combined — Iraqi officials have stated that captagon had become the second-most-popular drug consumed among its citizens, surpassing heroin, Tramadol, and hashish.¹⁶²

Gulf and Mediterranean Destination Markets

Captagon use in other Mediterranean and Persian Gulf destination markets is driven by a diverse set of socio-economic factors. In wealthy, oil-exporting Gulf countries with growing youth populations and low employment rates — despite social reforms — captagon is used alongside other drugs such as khat and cannabis.¹⁶³ Data on the prevalence of captagon use in the Persian Gulf is limited or outdated, with the few existing studies demonstrating use is popular among Gulf youth and migrant worker populations.¹⁶⁴ One cross-sectional survey among Saudi Arabian medical students showed amphetamine use on the rise, with it being the second-most used substance among those surveyed, but this study was conducted in 2010.¹⁶⁵ A 2015 study showed that captagon was a popular drug among Saudi Arabian users and that a majority of users between 12 and 22 years old cited using captagon due to peer pressure, emotional voids, family issues, and mental health issues.¹⁶⁶ However, this study was conducted seven years ago, just when Saudi Arabia emerged as captagon’s

“ In wealthy, oil-exporting Gulf countries with growing youth populations and low employment rates — despite social reforms — captagon is used alongside other drugs such as khat and cannabis. ”

largest destination market, accounting for more than half of seizures in the Middle East.¹⁶⁷

A December 2020 Foreign Policy article included interviews with anonymous Saudi Arabian users who revealed that a primary driver for captagon use was boredom, particularly among young users.¹⁶⁸ Captagon is reportedly popular and sells cheaper in Saudi Arabia’s northern provinces such as Tabuk, where the country’s Department of Statistics measured 80% of the country’s total captagon consumption — and where consumers can reportedly buy directly from traffickers given its proximity to smuggling routes.¹⁶⁹ One of the most recent studies, in 2021, assessed that captagon use has risen in popularity due to a growing class divide and boredom among youth, while worsening economic conditions have

afforded trafficking and dealing opportunities among the working class.¹⁷⁰ The effects of productivity and alertness have also attracted Gulf foreign worker populations, particularly those in hospitality, construction, and transportation.¹⁷¹

It is additionally worth exploring the prevalence of captagon use beyond Syria and the Levant amid an uptick in seizures that may indicate emerging markets outside of the Middle East region, such as in Europe. Unlike the Persian Gulf and the Levant, European ATS markets are not dominated by captagon, but as smugglers use European ports as transit sites more frequently, there is risk that captagon retail markets may take a foothold in Europe. The U.N. determined that in Europe and abroad, the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent quarantine measures sparked an uptick in consumption of some drugs, increasing demand for some narcotics despite supply chain disruptions due to border and travel restrictions.¹⁷² Overall, while the European ATS market is primarily controlled and supplied by European producers, there is a risk that industrial-sized shipments of cheap captagon can break into this market.

Market Trends

Seizure Statistics

While law enforcement seizures are not direct indicators of the Syrian captagon market’s total scale, they can indirectly reflect levels of illicit production and demand. As highlighted previously, the huge increase in large-scale captagon seizures since the start



of Syria's civil war provide strong indications that production has increased significantly.¹⁷³ Since captagon's emergence in Syria, the primary destination markets with high-frequency seizures have been in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, Jordan, and Syria.¹⁷⁴ Over time, new patterns of captagon smuggling have also revealed the trade is expanding, encompassing additional transit countries in Europe and North Africa as smugglers adopt more sophisticated methods by air, land, and sea. Additionally, while the Gulf has traditionally served as a destination market for captagon, the drastic increase in containerized shipments with industrial-sized amounts of tablets — far larger than potential domestic demand — have suggested that captagon smugglers may have begun to use Gulf states as third-country transshipment points.

Since the mid-2000s, at least several hundred million captagon tablets have been seized by customs and law enforcement officials in Turkey, Bulgaria, Italy, Greece, Austria, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Kuwait, Lebanon, Jordan, and even as far east as Malaysia. Based on research conducted by the authors of this report, approximately 795 million pills have been seized since 2015 — based on national law enforcement reporting. While Turkey remained a popular destination market at the start of the Syrian civil war, with captagon seizures by Turkish border authorities increasing drastically from 144,121 tablets in 2012 to 4.48 million tablets in 2013,¹⁷⁵ Turkish operations in

northern Syria cut off smugglers' access to many border crossings, increasing the volume of captagon shipments to existing Persian Gulf markets during the latter half of the war. In recent years, higher rates of captagon seizures have been recorded in Gulf states, as Syrian producers and traffickers have identified new smuggling routes to these destination markets, increased production rates, and used containerized shipping methods.¹⁷⁶ Saudi Arabian ports in particular have emerged as top hubs for over 190 million tablets of captagon in 2021,¹⁷⁷ with the largest seizures at the Port of Jeddah and King Abdulaziz International Port at Dammam. And despite many of these ports being equipped with advanced detection systems, customs officials typically have identified some of the largest shipments through tip-offs and intelligence-sharing efforts.

There has been a notable increase in captagon interceptions in the Levant, indicating the trade's continued prevalence through both land routes and containerized maritime shipments. Jordan, as a prime transit site for Persian Gulf-destined captagon shipments, has experienced an uptick in captagon seizures — with over 15 million tablets seized in 2021 alone — as well as deadly clashes with smugglers, a reality that has overwhelmed its army and border security forces months after Jordan reopened the main Jaber-Nassib border crossing with Syria amid normalization efforts.¹⁷⁸

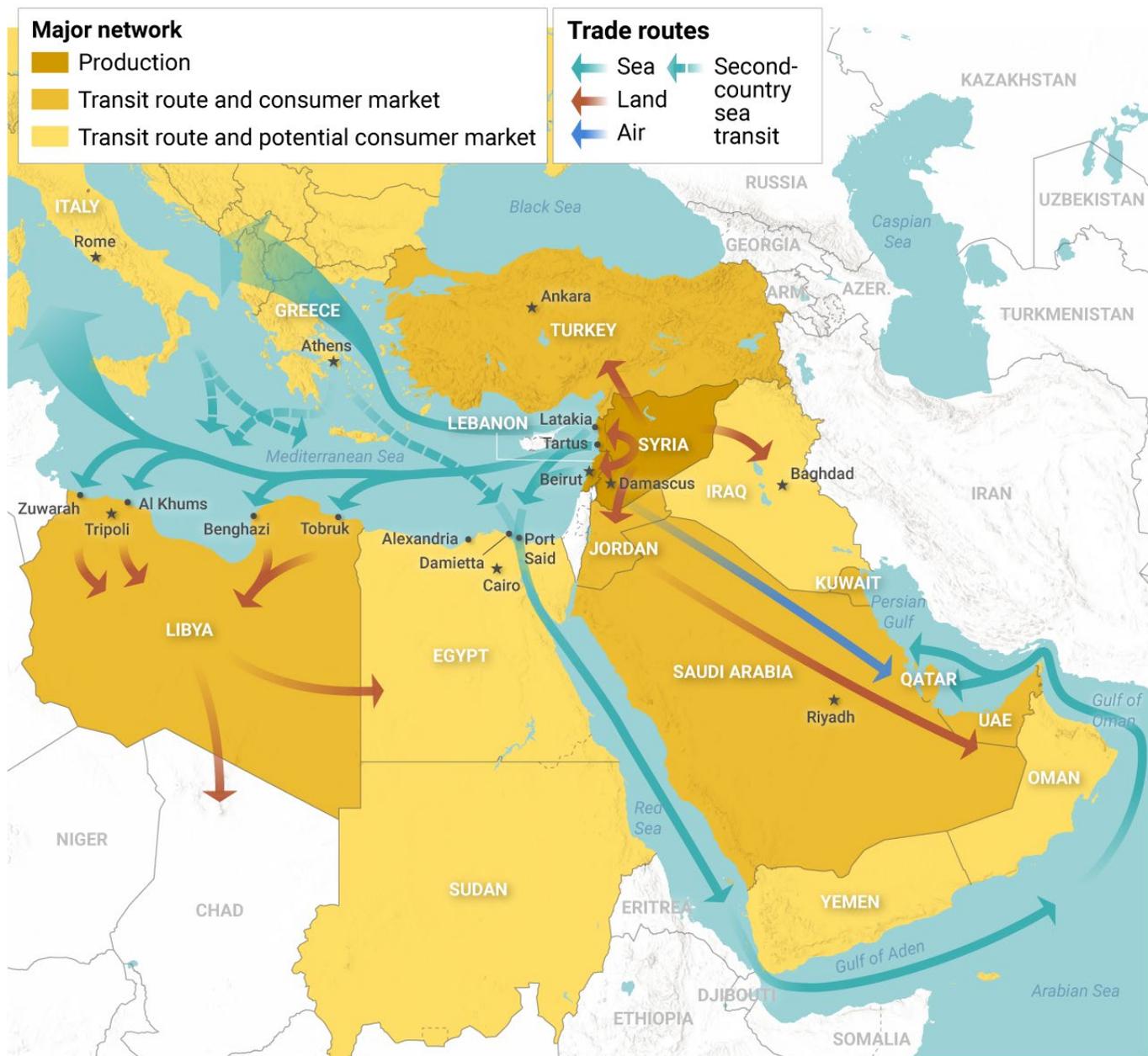
In Syria, there have been occasional publicized smaller-scale seizures of captagon — often affiliated with

opposition forces — that are likely performative efforts to obfuscate state involvement, deflect blame, and improve its image.¹⁷⁹ In 2018, regime forces at the Port of Latakia identified over 2 million captagon pills hidden inside pickled peppers; the shipment was attributed to Assad relatives who had fallen out with the ruling family and militias the Syrian government was looking to crack down upon.¹⁸⁰ In 2021, within weeks of a U.S. congressional amendment to the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2022 seeking to counter the captagon trade, a flurry of statements of concern from regional law enforcement agencies, and a Saudi Arabian ban on imports from Lebanon, a key transit country for captagon, the Syrian government publicized another rare seizure of over 5,000 kilograms of captagon tablets in a van destined for Saudi Arabia.¹⁸¹ However, a considerable gap remains between the level of seizures conducted by Syrian law enforcement and production in the country.

While Persian Gulf customs officials have grown more vigilant in inspecting shipments sourced from the Levant, captagon traffickers have exploited other transshipment points, such as in Europe and Africa, to reroute shipments intended for the Gulf while potentially reaching new consumer markets. There has been an increase in these tactics, in which traffickers ship narcotics to ports not located on popular smuggling routes to obfuscate details related to the original departure locations in Syria and Lebanon and to reduce the likelihood of inspection.



Major Captagon Trade Routes



Sources: COAR, Atlantic Council, Global Initiative, The New York Times, Al Araby

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Indeed, perhaps the most notable recent trend has been the trafficking of huge quantities of captagon through licit, commercial maritime routes through containerized shipments – a method that has helped avert detection at busy transshipment hubs. Traffickers use state-owned resources and licit

goods to camouflage shipments of captagon and other narcotics (predominantly hashish), dispatch the goods from state-owned ports or coastal enclaves to pass through transshipment ports such as Beirut, Damietta, Said, Piraeus, Constanta, Salerno, and others, then re-route the shipments to destination

markets in the Persian Gulf and elsewhere.¹⁸² The emergence of new transit routes has also led to new relationships being forged between African and European criminal networks that help stave off detection by law enforcement and customs authorities, as well as the emergence of potential



smaller-scale captagon consumer markets along transit areas in Europe, Africa, and overland transit routes through Jordan and Iraq. Some captagon seizures have been detected in Salzburg, Austria, in 2021 and Limburg, the Netherlands, in 2017, far from southern European maritime ports.¹⁸³ Furthermore, smugglers have seemingly established strong links with European crime syndicates in both southern and northern Europe to target Syrian and Middle Eastern diaspora communities familiar with captagon.¹⁸⁴

The onset of incremental normalization efforts between Arab states and the Syrian state has seemingly affected seizure data and could have an impact on shifting captagon transit routes. As regional neighbors have sought rapprochement with the Syrian government in hopes of easing refugee outflows, discussing cross-border trade issues, and identifying new economic opportunities with reconstruction, the captagon trade has become a sensitive but dominant agenda item.¹⁸⁵ Additionally, a potential tacit Jordanian-Syrian agreement where the Syrian government and its partners consent to limit the flow of captagon shipments into Jordan could shift illicit flows eastward to transit routes between Syria and Iraq.¹⁸⁶ Such a shift would offer continued proximity to Persian Gulf destination markets for captagon traffickers as well as continued protection from foreign state-aligned proxy networks such as Popular Mobilization Forces that control many Iraqi border checkpoints, roadway systems like the Al-Qaim highway,

and facets of Iraq's security landscape. It is also possible that in the wake of a Jordanian-Syrian arrangement to reduce the volume of captagon traffic through Jordan, smugglers would further increase their reliance upon maritime containerized shipments through the Mediterranean to reach destination markets.

Sophisticated Smuggling Methods

As captagon shipments out of Syria have become larger in size, the methods of packaging and transportation have become more advanced. To accommodate more industrial-sized shipments and evade law enforcement systems in European transit countries, captagon smugglers have adopted more sophisticated methods to bypass detection. This includes the uptick in containerized trafficking mentioned throughout the report, as smugglers have camouflaged illicit drug shipments with licit goods and commodities. Concealing captagon pills alongside and within licit product shipments has required new levels of skill and higher cost. As traffickers' smuggling tactics have become more advanced, many countries with destination markets, primarily in the Persian Gulf, have increased the rate of container checks and have adopted tools, such as the Container Smart Inspection System in Dubai's Jabel Ali port and the country's "A Safe Homeland" campaign,¹⁸⁷ to better detect the presence of captagon and other narcotics. In response, illicit actors have diversified their smuggling behaviors, transit routes, and concealment

methods, to make it more challenging for law enforcement to detect their shipments.

On overland routes between Syria and the Persian Gulf, captagon smugglers have also adopted sophisticated methods that have puzzled law enforcement systems. While captagon has been famously smuggled in plastic bags with a slanted, metallic 'L' (a reference to the Lexus logo) on the front, traffickers have begun to shroud captagon in other licit substances such as fruit, machinery, medical equipment, pickles, and even plastic food made to look like oranges and limes.¹⁸⁸ In addition to shipments on cargo trucks and vehicles used to transport licit goods, smugglers have used unmanned aerial vehicles, donkeys, motorbikes, pickup trucks, cargo and construction trucks, and other mechanisms to transport captagon across borders.¹⁸⁹ While containerized shipments represent the majority of the volume of captagon smuggling, overland smuggling should not be discounted. For example, in Jordan and Lebanon law enforcement agencies conduct seizures nearly weekly using rules of engagement to make arrests, intercept captagon shipments, and even engage in violent — sometimes fatal — clashes with captagon smugglers.¹⁹⁰

There has also been an increase in interaction and engagement between captagon smugglers and organized criminal groups in transit countries, such as mafia groups and drug rings that operate in Italy, Greece, and the Balkans. These new transnational criminal



relationships in both destination markets and transit locations and creation of shell companies have enabled captagon traffickers to exploit corruption to reduce the chance of detection. In the July 2020 Port of Salerno seizure, Italian law enforcement bugged phone calls from the Naples-based mafia group the Camorra and identified them as the recipients of prior Syrian captagon and hashish shipments – supposedly without interception from Italian customs and law enforcement.¹⁹¹

Captagon's Future

An Uncertain Picture

Political uncertainty, interstate violence, geopolitical competition, and economic devastation continue to spoil Syrian security. Proceedings at the Astana Conference and the Geneva peace talks, as well as recent Syrian presidential elections, have illustrated the Assad government's tightened grip on the country, strengthened with Russian and Iranian assistance. Syria's ruling elites have made political survival their primary objective, with conflict and violence reinforcing a "zero-sum existential struggle."¹⁹² The Assad government is poised to become Syria's post-war architect, shaping reconstruction activities to serve state interests, and it will seek to fashion Syria in its pre-2011 image, economic models, authoritarian leadership, and methods of political order.¹⁹³

Captagon production, smuggling and use have risen dramatically during the war and will undoubtedly persist throughout reconstruction efforts. As the Syrian

“ As traffickers’ smuggling tactics have become more advanced, many countries with destination markets, primarily in the Persian Gulf, have increased the rate of container checks and have adopted tools, such as the Container Smart Inspection System in Dubai’s Jabel Ali port and the country’s “A Safe Homeland Campaign” to better detect the presence of captagon and other narcotics. ”

government has barred certain non-governmental organizations and institutions from reconstruction and humanitarian efforts, there is a risk of continued draconian treatment of marginalized drug-involved individuals alongside state protection over key state allies engaged in illicit drug production and smuggling. Additionally, as captagon use persists, Syria's health care system will lag as the government concentrates on reconstruction in key sectors that its officials can monopolize.¹⁹⁴

The Syrian Government's Drug Policy

The Syrian penal code imposes strict punitive measures for drug producers, likely targeting those not aligned with the ruling Baath party.¹⁹⁵ When captagon production first emerged in Syria in the early 2000s, the government imposed an intermittent law enforcement strategy, punishing traffickers and users who were out of favor with the regime under the 1949 National

Penal Code Act, which reserves use of capital punishment against drug traffickers and dealers. This strategy was seemingly profitable for illicit actors in partnership with the Syrian government and as a means to retain political security.¹⁹⁶

In conjunction with the Syrian government's policy on penalizing traffickers and producers, people who use drugs have been met with stigma and demonization, consistently branded as social outcasts and mentally ill.¹⁹⁷ The Ministry of Interior's Counter-Narcotics Directorate has been a key actor in the government's response to illicit drug markets since it was upgraded from branch status to a directorate in 2002.¹⁹⁸ Government officials in the Ministry of the Interior were active in denying the existence of substance use disorders before the war and sought to create a narrative of strong governmental control through frequent announcements of seizures and busts.¹⁹⁹



Notable Worldwide Captagon Seizures

1. July 1, 2020, Port of Salerno: Italy's Guardia di Finanza Napoli identify 84 million tablets hidden inside industrial cardboard cylinders transported on a cargo ship in one of the largest amphetamine hauls in history.

2. May 17, 2021, Iskenderun Port: Turkish forces seize 6.2 million pills in Hatay province near the Turkish-Syrian border.



(Getty Images)

3. Dec. 27, 2021, Zarqa Governorate: Jordan's Public Security Directorate seizes 250,000 pills near the Syrian and Saudi Arabian border.

4. Nov. 8, 2019, Hong Kong: Customs authorities seize 1.57 million tablets at the Kwai Chung Customhouse Cargo Examination Compound. The transshipment container, valued at \$245 million, was headed to Saudi Arabia from Syria. The pills were found hidden inside 84 sofas.

5. March 24, 2021, Port of Klang: Malaysian law enforcement officials seize 94.8 million tablets hidden inside rubber trolley wheels.

6. Aug. 30, 2020, Constanta Port, Romania: 4 million pills hidden inside organic soap containers are seized by police and customs officials.



(Romanian police)

7. Sept. 3, 2021, Apapa Sea Port: Nigerian officials seize 451,807 captagon tablets traced to Lebanon.

8. Nov. 30, 2021, Damietta Port, Egypt: Egyptian customs officials seize 11 million tablets hidden inside water filter packages.

9. July 23, 2021, Al-Haditha Port, Saudi Arabia: 2.1 million tablets hidden inside tomato paste can lids transported on trucks are intercepted by Saudi Arabian customs officials after a thorough X-Ray examination.

10. Dec. 29, 2021, Port of Beirut: Lebanese authorities seize over 9 million pills hidden inside plastic oranges destined for Saudi Arabia.



(Getty Images)

11. Nov. 30, 2021, Damascus, Syria: Syrian law enforcement authorities seize 1,160 pounds of tablets – the first publicly recorded seizure in years – transported in a van and hidden in pasta packages, sprayed with pepper spray to divert sniffer dogs and law enforcement detection.

12. Jan. 13, 2022, on the islands of Rhodes and Kastellorizo in Greece: Law enforcement authorities identify 181,000 tablets at Rhodes and 80,000 captagon tablets at Kastellorizo. The tablets were encased in plastic bags with a counterclockwise swastika logo and were believed to be discarded from a larger vessel traveling the Mediterranean.

13. Nov. 23, 2021, Kabd area: Kuwaiti Ministry of Interior officials identify 17 kilograms of tablets contained in plastic bags smuggled inside the intestines of live sheep.

Sources: Guardia di Finanza, Getty Images, Jordan's Public Security Directorate, Hong Kong's Customs and Excise Dept., Romania's Ministry of Internal Affairs, Saudi Zakat, Kuwait Ministry of Interior

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While the country's law enforcement has touted high seizure statistics and harsh penalties for drug dealers, the Counter-Narcotics Directorate has publicly downplayed cases of drug abuse, claiming no more than 51 per million individuals use narcotics and that such "isolated cases" are to be blamed on mental illness.²⁰⁰ The advent of anti-government protests and civil war in 2011 afforded the Syrian government the opportunity to brand protesters and rebels as drug users incentivized by external forces offering captagon pills.²⁰¹ One Syrian captagon user summarized the fear imposed by the government and lack of resources by stating, "I could not find anyone to help me ... there is no addiction treatment center in my city. I have to go to the center of Daraa city, where I will be subject to intensive investigations and possibly arrest, and at best I become a member of one of the militias."²⁰²

The post-war picture of Syria's health care system, continued state suppression, and slowed economic development will likely contribute to increasing drug use. Moreover, demographic engineering and the enforcement of discriminatory policies in former rebel-held areas, such as restricting property rights, land and housing seizures in known opposition neighborhoods, and preventing the repatriation of opposition figures, will likely impact drug use among marginalized communities.²⁰³ Hard-line policies against resistance advocates and citizens living in former rebel-held provinces will reinforce obstacles to political unity and perpetuate trauma.

Health Care Practices and Drug Treatment

In 2016, the WHO estimated that 57 percent of Syrian public hospitals were damaged and 37 percent were destroyed,²⁰⁴ and in 2018, it reported that more than half of the country's hospitals and health care centers were closed or only partially functional, leaving over 11.3 million people without access to health care.²⁰⁵ The Syrian economy has shrunk by at least two-thirds from its size in 2010, with an estimated one-third of housing destroyed.²⁰⁶ Inequity in the access to and quality of health care was a discernible reality before conflict broke out in 2011 and will likely become exacerbated as the Syrian government further consolidates control, particularly prejudiced against less wealthy and non-government-held provinces.²⁰⁷

While health indicators improved considerably in the decades prior to the civil war, public investment in health care is low, with inequities in capacity of health care services, uneven distribution in human resources, high turnover of skilled medical experts, and unequal standards of care, quality assurance, and accreditation between rural and urban areas.²⁰⁸ The conclusion of the Syrian civil war will confront actors with a devastated and ineffective health care system with drastic reductions in health services amid a backdrop of psychological trauma and other health crises.²⁰⁹

Throughout the war, the captagon trade flourished as government forces and rebel paramilitaries pursued a conflict that devastated

civilian communities, livelihoods, and individual security. Many civilians have reportedly turned to the drug as a distraction or remedy from the experience of years of intrastate violence — an indicator of widespread trauma and mental illness.²¹⁰ Scarce resources for rehabilitation and treatment, combined with the continuity of authoritarianism, economic devastation, and persecution, means the rate of problematic substance use will likely increase.

The Durability of the Captagon Economy

The devastated Syrian economy has created a vacuum in which the captagon trade and other illicit markets have thrived. Meanwhile, the populace is largely living in poverty, as the U.N. estimated in 2016 that more than 80 percent of Syria's population lives below the poverty line.²¹¹ The war severely disrupted the country's licit industry, while the Assad government's targeted airstrikes in populated centers, use of chemical weapons against civilians, and torture in prison systems incentivized foreign powers to impose punitive economic measures.²¹² The COVID-19 pandemic and Lebanon's fiscal collapse in 2019 further exacerbated Syria's economic predicament, given increased supply shortages and the Syrian economy's heavy reliance on the Lebanese financial sector.²¹³ While the captagon trade has persisted in Syria for decades, these socioeconomic conditions have deepened producers' and smugglers' reliance upon such illicit economies.



Employees of Yemen’s Department of Criminal Evidence watch illegal drugs being incinerated in Sanaa in February 2012. Authorities burned 4.6 million captagon tablets and 4 tons of hashish. (MOHAMMED HUWAIIS / AFP via Getty Images)

The captagon trade will likely adapt to Syria’s post-conflict context, particularly among state-empowered power brokers and commercial actors that constructed Syria’s wartime economy — something governance and urban planning expert Omar Abdulaziz Hallaj described as the transition from “creed-based violence” to “greed-based violence”²¹⁴ — embedding itself into the post-war reconstruction process. Even amid reconstruction efforts, incremental

normalization with Arab neighbors, and lessened economic isolation, the state will likely remain complicit in Syria’s captagon trade as long as it serves as a profitable revenue source for allied partners. This is especially likely given the trade’s entrenchment in the Syrian economy, particularly among those loyal to the ruling elite. Taking this revenue-generating mechanism away from the state’s allied parties may indeed cause

fractures that would be too costly for the ruling faction.

Policy Recommendations

A Challenging Landscape

The Syrian government has largely excluded international governmental and nongovernmental organizations from projects relating to humanitarian aid and peace settlements, making international engagement challenging to sustain. Furthermore, Russia, China, and Iran’s exclusive access in Syria’s investment and reconstruction efforts have politicized the post-war reconstruction process.²¹⁵ Because of these restrictions and the Syrian government’s lack of cooperation, when considering solutions to Syria’s captagon crisis it is necessary to use tools outside of the Syrian government and its alliance structure and to implement policies that do not bolster the government, its partners, and any discriminatory policies toward the Syrian populace.

Of course, the challenge posed by captagon is not just limited to Syria, and policy decisions should account for the trade’s transnational impact in the Levant, Mediterranean, North Africa, the Persian Gulf, Europe, and potential new markets (e.g., in the Western hemisphere and East Asia). Solutions addressing the captagon trade should be interwoven into a consultative strategy focused on Africa, the Middle East, and Europe, rather than a Syria-specific policy. This report presents a range of recommendations more resilient to the shocks and spoilers of



violent and warlord-based illicit markets while safeguarding the most vulnerable and marginalized drug-involved individuals and their rights to health care, treatment, and other social services. While there are limitations to identifying all facets of the captagon trade, there is considerable space for researchers, law enforcement, and policymakers to proactively stem the captagon trade's negative effects on human security. Research into the trade has focused largely on the trafficking of captagon rather than on how producers obtain precursor materials to manufacture these tablets. It is important that an inter-agency strategy identify the penetrable aspects of the captagon trade, such as stemming precursor imports and disrupting the linkages between Syrian producers and traffickers and organized crime groups operating in the immediate region and beyond, including tackling illicit financial flows to and from Syria.

Improving Data Collection

One of the most elusive aspects of the captagon trade in Syria has been the inaccessibility of reliable data. Thus, this report has had to rely on some human sources from within the country in addition to triangulating available data from a range of investigative reports and external experts to develop a deeper understanding of how the trade operates in the country, in addition to fieldwork in neighboring Lebanon. While some evidence on production locations, trafficking patterns, and seizures can reflect the scale of the captagon trade, this information is an indirect indicator

of supply, smuggling routes, and overall availability of the drug. While some law enforcement agencies and researchers have reported on the purity, chemical composition, and retail price of captagon tablets, siloed information systems have rendered it difficult to develop an ongoing information exchange between organizations in this field.

While states such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, and Jordan have intercepted a number of captagon shipments, some of their recorded data is incomplete. Often, only the largest seizures are publicly disclosed, sometimes with political framing amidst diplomatic rows with transit countries or among states seeking normalization with Syria. Additionally, many transit and destination countries have failed to identify or pursue domestic organized criminal groups that are facilitating the captagon trade, indicating a breakdown in law and order and a level of corruption.

It is therefore important that regional actors and international law enforcement organizations focus on obtaining information-sharing systems and training resources for its law enforcement agencies to participate in larger intra-regional and inter-state security collaboration. Based on EMCDDA best-practice guidelines, information-sharing systems and practices, for example, should be implemented to reduce differences in instruments, methods, data providers, verification processes, and timeframes.²¹⁶ A regional information-sharing mechanism could partner with key organizations, the DEA, UNODC, INTERPOL, EMCDDA,

INCB, Europol, and the INCB's Operation PILA, which monitors global amphetamine trafficking and precursors, sharing seizure data to generate pivotal intelligence on narcotic patterns.²¹⁷ Countries should build upon the intelligence-sharing mechanism countering the Middle East's captagon trade established in INTERPOL's AMEAP Initiative, expanding the initiative's scope to additionally focus on Europe, Africa, and East Asia.²¹⁸ The INCB's Project Prism in particular should serve as both a model and a partner to address the diversion of precursor chemicals used in the illicit manufacturing of captagon, targeting BMK, P-2-P methylglycidate, pseudoephedrine, and other licit chemical shipments to production hubs.²¹⁹

Partner countries should additionally seek to replicate INTERPOL's models for regional law enforcement cooperation. Middle Eastern, Eastern Mediterranean, and North African actors should adopt INTERPOL's Operation Lionfish model that combines multilateral forces to exchange intelligence and targets drug trafficking along air, land, and maritime routes. INTERPOL's Operation Qanoon is another useful model; the February-April 2020 operation countered illicit trafficking patterns that arose with the COVID-19 pandemic, carrying out inspections and seizures of nearly 5 million captagon and methamphetamine pills at land, maritime, and airports, postal centers, free trade zones, pharmacies, warehouses, and commercial centers to identify illicit substances hidden along with face masks, sanitizing



“ Additionally, many transit and destination countries have failed to identify or pursue domestic organized criminal groups that are facilitating the captagon trade, indicating a breakdown in law and order and a level of corruption. ”

products, respirators, and medical products.²²⁰

The report also recommends systematic data collection on captagon’s purity, potency, and retail prices to build a more accurate understanding of its market. In addition to increased interstate data collection between border security and police forces, local stakeholders should seek to increase data collection among its health care centers and medical research programs by adopting data-sharing programs between hospitals, clinics, treatment centers, and pharmaceutical services on captagon use. Programs such as the Health Resources and Services Availability Mapping System should be utilized to facilitate data sharing among public health care systems,²²¹ which in turn could lead to better cooperation among the health sectors of states that are the intended destination markets of the captagon trade.

Importantly, state health care systems, research institutions, and law enforcement should collaborate to map the evolution of captagon demand in existing destination markets in the Persian Gulf and Levant, as well as potentially emerging markets in North Africa and continental Europe. This is particularly important considering the indications that the captagon

trade is expanding beyond the immediate region.

Investment in Mental Health and Drug Treatment Services

The captagon trade is more than a regime-financing issue; it is a human security issue that affects the Mediterranean region at large.²²² Policymakers are remiss to securitize captagon’s threat without acknowledging its risks to public health.

During the war, airstrikes depleted the majority of Syria’s national health care system, prompting medical facilities to prioritize emergency and urgent care needs exclusively, ignoring long-term and non-communicable diseases, mental illnesses, and drug use-related harms.²²³ A 2015 report estimated that 350,000 Syrians suffer from mental health disorders, with over 2 million afflicted by moderate mental health issues from the civil war²²⁴ — numbers that have likely increased in the ensuing seven years in absence of adequate treatment provision and continued conflict. As such, there is an urgent need to improve medical and mental health access in Syria.

As the psychological trauma of a decade of war has made civilians susceptible to problematic drug use and related disorders and medical

conditions, Syrian health care practitioners will find the provision of mental health and psychiatric services vital. When the World Health Organization conducted its last ATLAS health assessment of the Syrian health system in 2010, it recorded only scarce harm reduction services in the country.²²⁵ The devastation of the civil war has now rendered the country without any adequate and evidence-based drug treatment system. In this context, and if given access by the Syrian state, there is an opportunity for nongovernmental organizations to provide care and treatment of repatriated and returning citizens through village and provincial primary care centers.

In order to adequately address the country’s growing rates of vulnerable and traumatized individuals susceptible to problematic drug use, local stakeholders would be wise to invest resources into evidence-based drug treatment and harm reduction services, particularly considering the rise in unlicensed pharmacies that have prompted an increase in over-the-counter captagon prescriptions.²²⁶ Further collaboration with the WHO and other international governmental organizations in the post-war environment would facilitate the reform and rehabilitation of Syrian health care. However, all these



Saudi customs officials in Jeddah Islamic Port foiled an attempt to smuggle 5.3 million captagon pills in a consignment of pomegranates imported from Lebanon. (Saudi Press Agency)

recommendations are contingent on access, which can only be provided by the Syrian state.

Consumer markets in the Persian Gulf should additionally seek to establish evidence-based drug treatment and harm reduction services, which would also serve to develop a better understanding of the scale and extent of captagon use in these countries. Neighboring countries should establish a concerted, public diplomacy campaign comprising awareness campaigns and educational programs that educate the public on captagon, its effects, and its health risks, particularly among

vulnerable migrant and target user populations.

International Programs and Institutions

It is necessary to establish an inter-regional mechanism between Mediterranean and Persian Gulf states grappling with the challenges of Syria's captagon trade — Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Oman, Kuwait, Bahrain, Turkey, Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, Italy, Greece, with observing members such as the U.S. and international governmental organizations — to coordinate policies to disrupt the trade. Such a mechanism should

prioritize building interagency trust, informational exchange, and access to laboratories for chemical profiling. An inter-regional mechanism countering the captagon trade should prioritize capacity building through data-sharing and disseminating technical assistance to disrupt violent and organized crime groups involved in captagon production and trafficking.

As the captagon trade has expanded, law enforcement systems have primarily operated on a unilateral and bilateral basis, forgoing multilateral cross-collaboration with both



recipient and transit countries. Saudi Arabian customs and law enforcement have by far been the most active in conducting seizures and collaborating with a limited set of partners such as Lebanon and Greece, followed by the anti-narcotics departments of Egypt, Iraq, and Jordan.

Collaboration between regional law enforcement agencies in captagon-related investigations, including interstate information exchange, forensic profiling, developing port control unit capacity, and collaborative investigations, will increase the effectiveness of law enforcement measures. A series of pre-existing frameworks and dialogues should be drawn upon for an international forum on captagon. An example is the Paris Pact Initiative, a UNODC coalition of 58 partner countries and 23 organizations that targets the Afghan opiate trade through regional initiatives, examines illicit financial flows, tracks precursor smuggling, and focuses on the expansion of drug prevention and medical treatment interventions.²²⁷ It is vital that within these frameworks, states identify new smuggling practices, third-country transit destinations, and other adaptive patterns to increase awareness and vigilance among law enforcement systems.

On the regional level, governments should seek to forge formal partnerships and forensic profiling consortiums in an interstate coalition of Levantine, Gulf, and North African governments and law enforcement agencies to collaborate on forensic matches, gain access to advanced laboratory

sites, and share intelligence analysis on captagon seizures throughout the region. It is important that an international mechanism or forum places increased focus on some of the drivers of the captagon trade, particularly precursor availability. A mechanism should include a series of expert working groups to identify new patterns of captagon production, smuggling, and use, to advise counter-narcotic strategies on domestic and intra-regional levels.

An example of such regional collaboration has been the Southeast European Law Enforcement Center (SELEC), the Balkan region's anti-drug trafficking task force. SELEC collaborates with state law enforcement agencies, targeting regional illegal trades through operational units, intelligence exchange, regional operations, a range of control measures and joint investigations, and task forces that determine best practices and methodologies for effective crime-fighting.²²⁸ The Global Synthetics Monitoring: Analyses, Reporting and Trends (SMART) program among 11 Southeast Asian countries should additionally serve as a model for Middle Eastern cooperation, establishing identification and reporting with an early warning advisory system for seized captagon.

A Mediterranean-Gulf captagon mechanism should also coordinate with the UNODC-WCO joint Container Control Programme that uses proactive technology, secure communications systems, and risk analysis to identify trafficked

containerized shipments of illicit goods. Overall, establishing a framework for regional collaboration against the captagon trade is a necessary step toward more targeted counter-narcotics interventions that focus on violent and organized crime groups while reducing consumer harm.

A Proactive U.S. Policy on Captagon

The emergence of the Syrian government as a participant in the captagon trade introduces threats not only to regional security and existing U.S. policy but also toward health and human security. The U.S. should seek to address the drivers as well as the secondary effects of the captagon market, such as access to mental health and rehabilitation services, countering some of the economic and security conditions that have fostered the captagon trade, and law enforcement cooperation. The U.S. and its partners have a unique opportunity to be a proactive force of good by promoting accountability, targeting state officials and non-state actors that perpetuate the captagon trade, and assisting destination and transit markets in disrupting the trade. Importantly, the U.S. and its partners should design a policy solution that accounts for captagon's role as a source of revenue for Syrian state officials, loyalists, and foreign state-backed proxies.

Complementing U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration efforts in data-sharing, law enforcement support, and advisory efforts with partner countries, the U.S. should



seek to establish a specialized fusion center or task force within the State Department's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, Bureau of African Affairs, Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs, Bureau of Intelligence and Research, the U.S. Treasury, and intelligence community to coordinate a strategy on captagon and intelligence-sharing efforts. It is vital that, in creating a mechanism addressing the captagon trade, the U.S. raise this issue to the level of a Mediterranean zone challenge, rather than a Syria-specific issue.

To achieve such a strategy, the U.S. should increase interagency coordination, as proposed by congressional representatives in an amendment to the 2022 National Defense Authorization Act,²²⁹ between the U.S. State, Treasury, and Defense departments; the DEA; and intelligence communities and conduct a thorough assessment investigating the drivers, smuggling and production infrastructure, and extent of the Assad government and non-state actors' participation and profit. Drawing upon these findings, the White House and lawmakers should promote accountability among Syrian governmental officials and affiliated criminal networks, raising public awareness about the nexus that exists between the accelerating captagon trade and state actors.

Additional punitive economic measures should continue incentivizing actors to take part in the trade of captagon and other narcotics. Rather than impose such measures, the U.S. should seek



A Saudi customs official inspects captagon pills inside a pomegranate imported from Lebanon. The shipment's recipients were arrested. (Saudi Press Agency)

to evaluate its existing sanctions campaign on individuals and companies affiliated with the Syrian government and the Caesar Law, businessmen, military officers, and warlords, and identify how these sanctions can be further strengthened to incorporate intelligence on the captagon trade, deter state sponsorship, and disrupt the illicit financial flows of the trade's participants.

Additionally, the U.S. should seek to promote a robust humanitarian aid and health care outreach strategy

with its partners in the Levant and greater Middle East. Specifically, the USAID Bureaus for Global Health and Humanitarian Assistance should coordinate with partners in the region to raise awareness about the challenges, physiological and psychological health risks, and security ramifications of the captagon trade and improve accessibility to care. As the U.S. and its European and Middle Eastern partners adopt proactive strategies to counter the challenge posed by the captagon trade, it is vital that policies address rising demand as well as supply.

Conclusion

Syria's relationship with captagon reflects an important case study in the link between drug markets and violent conflict. The Syrian civil conflict cultivated a new illicit economy intertwined with the country's violent landscape and wartime power structures. Captagon's production, trade, and consumption patterns reflect a diversity of actors, from rebel forces to terrorist organizations, civilians, and importantly government officials and individuals affiliated with the state. This report has shown how conflicts can also become a prime environment for the expansion of production and trafficking in non-crop-based illicit drugs, that can enable the entrenchment of malign state actors and warlord economies.

A lucrative business that is likely to persist in the post-war context, the captagon trade has rendered itself an enigmatic threat within Mediterranean-Gulf illicit markets. An important step in improving



law enforcement responses involves regional partnerships and improvements in data collection and shared information systems. It is crucial that law enforcement coordination efforts include not only Middle Eastern destination and transit countries but also countries in southern Europe and Northern Africa, considering the threat of the captagon trade's expansion into new markets in the Mediterranean, Persian Gulf, and beyond.

Health care systems in the main captagon consumer markets in the Levant and Gulf are in urgent need of reconstruction and reform. In anticipation of civilians traumatized

by decade of violent conflict, investments are urgently needed into mental health and psychiatric services. As part of these efforts, the provision of cost-effective and low-threshold evidence-based treatment services to people who use drugs is urgently required.

The recommendations made by this policy report seek to mitigate the risks posed by the captagon trade to the immediate region and beyond while disrupting its violent actors. The captagon trade will likely continue to expand in size and scope, stretching beyond the Middle East into new transit and destination markets while

producers adapt to geographic, economic, and political challenges through adopting sophisticated smuggling and production methods. The growing prevalence of captagon poses a risk to regional human security, empowering many illicit actors, both state and non-state, that are actively engaged in destabilizing behaviors. As the captagon trade evolves, it is vital that affected countries adopt proactive policies that address the trade's challenge from both sides of supply and demand, while encouraging inter-regional dialogue and cooperation among countries most affected by the captagon trade. □



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Appendix: Notable Captagon Seizures, 2015 to 2022

Date	Location of bust	Origin-destination	# of tablets	Details
Nov. 19, 2015	Turkey (Hatay)	Syria - Persian Gulf	10,900,000	Hidden among a shipment of oil filters bound for Persian Gulf states
Dec. 22, 2015	Turkey (Hatay)	N/A	1,680,000	Hidden inside a shipment of primary school desks
Dec. 29, 2015	Lebanon (Beirut Airport)	N/A - Egypt	30,000,000*	Hidden inside desks at a primary school
Jan. 4, 2017	France (Charles de Gaulle Airport)	Lebanon - Saudi Arabia	350,000	German and Czech law enforcement identified tablets hidden in industrial molds exported from Lebanon
Feb. 1, 2017	France (Charles de Gaulle Airport)	N/A	402,000*	Hidden inside steel molds
March 3, 2017	Greece (Elefsina)	Turkey - N/A	635,000	Tablets stashed in specially-made crypts inside of a truck transporting the goods
Sept. 10, 2017	Lebanon (Sarba)	N/A	1,810	Tablets seized from Syrian and Lebanese individuals caught in possession of captagon and heroin and accused of trafficking
Oct. 22, 2017	Qatar (Hamad International Airport)	N/A - Qatar	200,000	Airport authorities identified tablets inside hollow plates contained in a mail parcel
Oct. 28, 2017	Saudi Arabia (Bat'ha, Safar)	N/A - Saudi Arabia	1,170,588	Saudi customs officials intercepted tablets hidden in different parts of a truck
Oct. 31, 2021	Saudi Arabia (Port of Dhuba)	N/A - Saudi Arabia	478,819	Saudi customs officials intercepted tablets wrapped in carbon paper, hidden in an onion consignment
Nov. 22, 2017	Saudi Arabia (Tabuk)	Jordan - Saudi Arabia	20,500	Saudi customs officials identify drugs hidden in an irrigation hose, inside luggage, and beneath the floorboard of the truck transporting the shipment from Jordan
Nov. 29, 2017	Saudi Arabia (Haql)	Egypt - Saudi Arabia	745,000	Saudi patrol intercepted on a boat traveling from Egypt carrying drug shipment
March 9, 2018	Turkey (Istanbul)	N/A - Saudi Arabia	320,000	Turkish police intercept tablets stashed inside of nine machinery pistons destined for Saudi Arabia
March 12, 2018	Saudi Arabia (Halat Amar)	N/A - Saudi Arabia	4,839,000	Saudi police identify tablets hidden in vehicle doors, reserve tires, vehicle mattresses, and an iron net on the vehicle's ceiling hidden by a cloth, along with 3,497 grams of hashish
April 21, 2018	Lebanon (Tripoli)	N/A	1,140,000*	Hidden inside secret cache in a truck
April 23, 2018	Saudi Arabia (Tabuk)	Egypt - Saudi Arabia	2,851,500	Seized on a vessel trying to cross into Saudi waters
May 31, 2018	Syria (al-Tanf)	N/A	300,000	Free Syrian Army identified drugs during an anti-ISIS operation
Aug. 27, 2018	Saudi Arabia (King Abdulaziz International Airport)	N/A	24,875	Found in a passenger's bag with tablets wrapped in carbon-blue paper under clothing
Aug. 27, 2018	Saudi Arabia (King Khalid Airport)	N/A	569,531	Found inside a 360-kg biscuit kneading machine
Oct. 24, 2018	Turkey (Adana)	N/A	1,500,000	Seized by Turkish authorities in five separate seizures
Oct. 30, 2018	Turkey (Mersin)	N/A	1,900,000	Found inside large pipes in a secret warehouse tunnel
Dec. 5, 2018	Greece (Crete)	Syria (Port of Latakia) - Libya (Benghazi)	3,000,000	Found on cargo ship "Noka" hidden between layers of coffee, spices, and wood shavings along with 6 tons of cannabis
Jan. 8, 2019	Greece (Port of Piraeus)	Syria (Port of Latakia) - UAE (Dubai)	5,000,000	Found packed inside lead plates. The ship was also scheduled to make stops in Greece and Croatia
April 9, 2019	Lebanon (Bekaa Valley)	N/A	800,000	Hidden in a refrigerated truck traveling from town of Chtaura
May 4, 2019	United Arab Emirates (Dubai)	N/A	5,715,000	Found by the UAE Coast Guard, hidden in a boat's fuel tank
July 5, 2019	Greece (Port of Piraeus)	Syria (Port of Latakia) - N/A	33,000,000	Found by the Hellenic Police Force in containers transported on freight ships between June 28 and July 5
Aug. 4, 2019	United Arab Emirates (Dubai)	N/A	274,000	Found hidden inside a vehicle fuel tank
Oct. 23, 2019	Syria	N/A	850,000	Found by the Maghawair al-Thowra found in a supply truck heading to the Rukban camp
Nov. 8, 2019	Hong Kong	Syria - Saudi Arabia	1,570,000	Concealed beneath the seat bases of 84 sofas shipped in a container
Feb. 25, 2020	UAE (Jabel Ali Port)	Syria (Port of Latakia) - N/A	35,700,000*	Hidden inside reels of electric cables
June 17, 2020	Italy (Port of Salerno)	Syria (Port of Latakia) - N/A	1,000,000	Part of a test run for a larger captagon shipment to the Port of Salerno two weeks later, accompanied by a shipment of cannabis



Continued: Appendix: Timeline of Notable Captagon Seizures, 2015 to 2022

Date	Location of bust	Origin-destination	# of tablets	Details
July 1, 2020	Italy (Port of Salerno)	Syria (Port of Latakia) - N/A	84,000,000	Hidden inside industrial-sized steel gears, meter-wide cylinders of cardboard paper filled with 38 cogwheels of captagon
Aug. 30, 2020	Romania (Port of Constanta)	Syria (Port of Latakia) - N/A	4,000,000	Transported by cargo ship, hidden in organic soap containers along with 15 tons of cannabis
Sept. 4, 2020	Lebanon (Baalbek)	N/A		Captagon tablets identified in police raid, contained inside of plastic bags branded with counterclockwise swastika logo
Nov. 15, 2020	Egypt (Damietta Port)	Syria - N/A	3,200,000	Found in container of canned corn
Nov. 27, 2020	Jordan	Syria - N/A	19,500	Intercepted on Jordan-Syria border along with 1,942 hashish palms and a bottle of crystal
Nov. 30, 2020	Egypt (Damietta Port)	N/A	11,000,000	Hidden inside freighter water filters inside of container's 118 cartons
Jan. 6, 2021	Egypt (Port of Said)	Lebanon (Beirut) - Libya	8,000,000	Hidden in a cargo shipment along with 8 tons of cannabis
Jan. 12, 2021	Lebanon	N/A - Africa	812,000	Hidden inside of oil and grease barrels along with 9 kg of hashish, contained in plastic bags with counterclockwise swastika
Jan. 20, 2021	Syria (East Aleppo)	Syria (Regime-held areas) - N/A	900,000	Hidden inside a truck seized by Free Syrian Army personnel
Jan. 23, 2021	Saudi Arabia (Port of Jeddah)	N/A - Saudi Arabia	20,190,500	Hidden inside a grapefruit consignment
Jan. 29, 2021	Saudi Arabia (King Abdul Aziz Port)	N/A - Saudi Arabia	14,400,000	Found hidden inside the recesses of wooden panels
Feb. 1, 2021	Saudi Arabia (Al-Jawf)	N/A - Saudi Arabia	971,676	Seized by Saudi border forces as smugglers tried to cross border
Feb. 4, 2021	Lebanon (Port of Beirut)	N/A - Saudi Arabia	5,000,000	Hidden inside of tile-manufacturing tools, scheduled to ship to Greece then Saudi Arabia
Feb. 5, 2021	Jordan	Syria - N/A	214,000	Seized with 1,060 hashish palms smuggled from Syrian-Jordanian border
Feb. 7, 2021	Syria (Daraa)	Syria (Suwayda) - N/A		Seized along with hashish by the Russia-aligned 8th Brigade after clashes with smugglers
Feb. 24, 2021	Jordan (Qwiesmeh)	Syria - N/A	100,000	Found on smugglers' person after attempting to cross Syrian-Jordanian border
March 7, 2021	Syria (Idlib)	Syria (Aleppo - Saudi Arabia)	2,000,000	Packed in tons of Pyrene (substance formed from olive pomace oil for heating)
March 23, 2021	Malaysia (Port of Klang)	N/A - Saudi Arabia	94,800,000	Packed in three containers on freighter ship dispatched from an "undisclosed location"
March 24, 2021	Jordan	Syria - N/A	3,280,000	Found in vehicle with 765 kg of hashish, firearms, and ammunition, set ablaze after discovery
April 9, 2021	Malaysia (West Port)	N/A - Singapore	3,862,216	Hidden inside shipment of aluminum floor bases for doors
April 23, 2021	Saudi Arabia (Port of Jeddah)	Syria - N/A	5,300,000	Hidden in shipment from Lebanon's Beirut Port inside the skin of pomegranates sourced to Syria
May 6, 2021	Syria (Afrin)	Syria - Saudi Arabia	128,000	Found inside of olive containers by Turkish-backed security forces
May 6, 2021	Jordan	Syria - N/A	100,000	Seized from smugglers along with 30 palms of hashish on the Syria-Jordan border
May 16, 2021	Turkey (Iskenderun Port)	N/A - UAE	6,200,000	Found in 11 containers in Hatay province, close to the Syrian border
May 19, 2021	Jordan	Syria - N/A	1,300,000	Found on smugglers trying to enter Jordan from Syria
May 27, 2021	Jordan	Syria - N/A	1,127,000	Found in pickup vehicle along with 7,620 palms of hashish entering Jordan from Syria
May 31, 2021	Syria (Deir ez-Zor)	N/A	300,000	Seized by a Free Syrian Army group, Maghawir al-Thawra
June 1, 2021	Jordan	Syria - N/A	377,000	Found on smugglers trying to enter Jordan from Syria
June 3, 2021	Qatar	N/A	36,000	Hidden inside of a cavity of a gold-adorned wooden box
June 15, 2021	Lebanon (Rafik Hariri Airport)	N/A - Saudi Arabia	223,200*	Hidden inside consignment of water pumps
June 16, 2021	Jordan	Syria - Saudi Arabia	300,000	Hidden in a secret cache of a vehicle amongst fruits
June 28, 2021	Saudi Arabia (Port of Jeddah)	Syria (Port of Latakia) - Saudi Arabia	14,400,000	Hidden in between industrial-sized iron sheets
June 29, 2021	Lebanon	N/A - Saudi Arabia	10,000	Hidden inside sterilization medical equipment
June 30, 2021	Saudi Arabia (Port of Jeddah)	N/A	4,500,000	Hidden inside a shipment of oranges



Continued: Appendix: Timeline of Notable Captagon Seizures, 2015 to 2022

Date	Location of bust	Origin-destination	# of tablets	Details
July 5, 2021	Jordan	Syria - N/A	61,000	Seized from smugglers on the Syria-Jordan border along with 4 kilograms of crystal and arms
July 19, 2021	Jordan	Syria - N/A	1,033,000	Seized from smugglers on the Syria-Jordan border with 210 packs of hashish
July 23, 2021	Saudi Arabia (Al-Haditha Port)	Syria - Saudi Arabia	2,100,000	Hidden inside hollowed-out lids of tomato paste jars with labels "Made In Syria" on them, transited through Jordan
July 30, 2021	Jordan	Syria - N/A	362,000	Seized from smugglers on the Syria-Jordan border with 273 packs of hashish
Aug. 1, 2021	Saudi Arabia (Port of Jeddah)	N/A - Saudi Arabia	8,700,000	Hidden inside cocoa bean bags
Aug. 4, 2021	Jordan	Syria - N/A	500,000	Seized from smugglers on the Syria-Jordan border at the Jaber border crossing
Aug. 17, 2021	Jordan	Syria - N/A	100,000	Seized from smugglers on the Syria-Jordan border along with unspecified amount of hashish
Aug. 22, 2021	Syria (Afrin)	Syria - N/A	140,000	Tablets hidden inside of pitless olives, identified by Syrian National Army (SNA)
Aug. 29, 2021	Jordan	Syria - N/A	100,000	Seized from smugglers on the Syria-Jordan border
Aug. 29, 2021	Jordan (Jaber)	Syria - N/A	2,310,000	Tablets hidden inside stones and hair combs, along with clothes and accessories with smugglers along the Syria-Jordan border
Sept. 21, 2021	Jordan	Syria - N/A	2,000,000	Tablets were hidden inside of rubber tires of vehicle smuggling shipment from Syria
Oct. 1, 2021	Syria (Aleppo)	Syria - N/A	530,000	Tablets seized and destroyed by Azaz Security Directorate and Intelligence Division
Oct. 1, 2021	Syria (Afrin)	Syria - N/A	10,000	Seized along with firearms by the Syrian Liberation Front in coordination with military police
Oct. 9, 2021	Iraq (Rabiah)	Syria - N/A	108,000	Detected by law enforcement thermal cameras at border crossing near Rabiah
Oct. 11, 2021	Turkey (Istanbul)	N/A - UAE	100,000	Seized in 3 separate operations conducted in Istanbul's four districts, identifying tablets hidden inside of wooden furniture set to be sent to the UAE
Oct. 12, 2021	Syria (Aleppo)	Syria - N/A	500,000	Seized by Syrian Liberation Front amidst crackdown on dealers in northwestern Aleppo
Oct. 17, 2021	Iraq (Al Qaim)	Syria - N/A	93,000	Seized at the al-Qaim border crossing connecting Syria and Iraq
Oct. 21, 2021	Jordan	Syria - N/A		Transported from Syria into Jordan by drone, which was shot down by Jordanian security officials
Oct. 21, 2021	Nigeria (Apapa Sea Port)	Lebanon - Nigeria	451,807	Hidden inside machinery
Oct. 21, 2021	Saudi Arabia (Alkhalji Port)	N/A	961,471	Hidden inside vehicle parts, fuel tank, and spare tire and smuggled in three attempts
Oct. 22, 2021	Saudi Arabia (Al-Haditha Port)	N/A - Saudi Arabia	5,200,000	Hidden in commercial truck crossing from Jordan, found crushed inside consignment of carbonate powder bags
Oct. 22, 2021	Kuwait	Iraq - N/A	50,000	Hidden inside 25 packages in a truck's water tank crossing from Iraq
Oct. 24, 2021	Syria (Homs)	N/A	4,000,000	Found inside a truck headed for Homs to Damascus
Oct. 25, 2021	Turkey (Sanliurfa)	N/A	147	Seized along with 104 kg of cannabis, 7 grams of methamphetamines, 142 grams of heroin, and a firearm
Oct. 26, 2021	Saudi Arabia (Port of Jeddah)	N/A - Saudi Arabia	5,246,000	Hidden inside a shipment of grapes
Oct. 28, 2021	Turkey (Anatakya)	N/A	9,000	Found in an abandoned building by sniffer dogs along with 85 kg of hashish
Oct. 30, 2021	Turkey (Sanliurfa)	N/A	1,100	Found hidden in cornfield irrigation pipes
Nov 1., 2021	UAE (Dubai)	N/A - UAE	79,477	Found stashed inside a vehicle at the Hatta checkpoint
Nov. 10, 2021	Jordan (Jaber Crossing)	Syria - N/A	35,000	Found in a smuggling vehicle from Syria
Nov. 12, 2021	Saudi Arabia (Al-Haditha Port)	Syria - Saudi Arabia	2,302,325	Found in a truck that drove through Jordan
Nov. 24, 2021	Kuwait (Kabd)	N/A	102,000*	Found inside the intestines of live, imported sheep
Nov. 26, 2021	Saudi Arabia (Al-Haditha Port)	N/A - Saudi Arabia	2,138,231	Found in seven attempts, hidden truck floorboard cavities, starch flour bags, truck radiators, truck cabin refrigerators, and other parts of a vehicle
Nov. 28, 2021	UAE (Abu Dhabi)	N/A	174,000	Smuggled through border crossing
Nov. 30, 2021	Syria (Damascus)	Syria - Saudi Arabia	3,132,000*	Syrian government forces stopped vehicle in rural Damascus with tablets hidden inside of pasta packages sprayed with pepper spray en route to Saudi Arabia
Dec. 3, 2021	Jordan (Jaber Crossing)	Syria - N/A	65,000	Hidden in truck hollowed out specifically for smuggling, traveling from Syria
Dec. 11, 2021	Lebanon	N/A	1,500,000	Hidden in wooden pallets intended for export through the port of Beirut



Continued: Appendix: Timeline of Notable Captagon Seizures, 2015 to 2022

Date	Location of bust	Origin-destination	# of tablets	Details
Dec. 12, 2021	Lebanon	N/A - Saudi Arabia	4,000,000	Found inside of coffee shipment destined for Saudi Arabia
Dec. 18, 2021	Jordan	Syria - N/A		Seized from group of 150-200 armed smugglers crossing into Jordan from Syria's Suwayda and Daraa provinces
Dec. 21, 2021	Oman	N/A	1,800,000	Hidden in glass plates
Dec. 23, 2021	UAE (Dubai)	N/A	1,000,000	Stashed inside of plastic lemons stored in 66 out of 3,849 boxes
Dec. 27, 2021	Jordan (Zarqa)	Syria - Saudi Arabia	250,000	Hidden inside of vehicle body coming from Syria and destined for Saudi Arabia
Dec. 29, 2021	UAE (Dubai)	N/A	9,000,000	Identified by Dubai Customs' Jebel Ali and Telecom Centre as in powder form, hidden inside containers
Dec. 29, 2021	Lebanon (Port of Beirut)	N/A - Kuwait	9,000,000	Hidden inside plastic oranges and limes
Dec. 20, 2021	Syria (Daraa)	N/A		Syrian officials seize "tens of thousands" of captagon tablets and "hundreds of kilograms" of hashish
Dec. 31, 2021	Saudi Arabia (Al-Haditha Port)	N/A	1,122,091	Seized in several smuggling attempts where tablets were hidden inside luggage, vehicle tires, truck radiators, inside clothing, and truck floorboards
Jan. 12, 2022	Jordan (Jaber Crossing)	Syria - N/A	2,700,000	Hidden inside two trucks carrying iron plates and fruit consignments entering Jordan from Syria
Jan. 13, 2022	Jordan	Syria - N/A	200,000	Hidden inside fruit truck entering Jordan from Syria
Jan. 14, 2022	Saudi Arabia (Port of Jeddah)	N/A	8,335,250	5.3 million tablets found in silicone barrels and 3 million more tablets inside onion consignments
Jan. 16, 2022	UAE (Dubai)	N/A	9,000,000	Identified in powder, crushed form by Dubai customs
Jan. 16, 2022	Jordan	N/A	5,000,000	Seized from smugglers crossing into northeast Jordan from Syria
Jan. 17, 2022	Greece (Rhodes and Kastellorizo)	N/A	260,000	Found washed up on islands of Rhodes and Kastellorizo in plastic bags branded with counterclockwise swastika logos

* Amount estimated from the weight of seizure

Sources: Thompson Reuters, Agence France-Presse (AFP), Zakat, Tax, and Customs Authority of Saudi Arabia, Lebanese Ministry of Defense - Army Command, Hong Kong Customs, Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan - Public Security Directorate, Yahoo News, The Saudi Gazette, Oxford Analytica, CBS News, Der Spiegel, Saudi Press Agency, Deutsche Welle (DW), Voice of America (VOA), The Jordan Times, Haaretz, Jordan News Agency, The National, Business Insider, Middle East Eye, ERT Greece, The Peninsula, Riyadh Daily, Arab News, Daily Sabah, The Austrian Broadcasting Corporation (ORF), Al Arabiya, The Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation (LBC), Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP), Ekathimerini, Step News, Gulf News, Khaleej Times, Balkan Insight, Ahran News, Egypt Today, Maraya News, Enabbaladi, Horan Free League, Roya News, Zamanalwsl, Andalou Agency, Syrian Observer, The Global Times, Gulf Today



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