Center for International Trade and Security
School of Public & International Affairs
UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA
MAY 2025

Syria was a Narco-State: The Rise of Captagon in the Middle East

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INTRODUCTION

Captagon has had a meteoric rise in popularity throughout the Middle East in the past few decades. What began as an over-the-counter medication in Germany in the 1960s has come to dominate the Middle Eastern drug market and funded the brutal regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria. Originally synthesized as a substitute for amphetamines, Captagon was used throughout Europe until it was eventually banned due to harmful side effects (addiction, depression, heart failure, psychosis), but despite rarely being seen in the Western world it has managed to become a ubiquitous drug in the Middle East. Captagon is illegal globally, as it was listed as a Schedule II drug in the United Nations Convention on Psychotropic Substances in 1986. Despite this, production and usage run rampant. Its effects are similar to other stimulants and include euphoria, increased concentration, decreased appetite, and increased stamina. After the initial ban, production moved to the Balkans, where counterfeit pills were sold as an alternative to more expensive drugs such as cocaine and amphetamine. Widespread crackdowns, particularly in Bulgaria and Turkey, largely eliminated the production of the drug in the early 2000s. By 2010, the drug was becoming increasingly rare and production had virtually stopped, but the onset of the Syrian civil war in 2011 ignited one of the largest drug networks in the world.

SUPPLY

The Syrian regime became increasingly economically isolated throughout the Syrian Civil War with widespread atrocities, including chemical weapon attacks, which led to sanctions and condemnation. Assad faced a lack of trading partners, decreased

production due to conflict, and a war that grew more expensive as it dragged on. GDP growth had collapsed from a strong 5.2% in 2010 to -26.3% in 2013, in large part due to a similarly dramatic de-cline in oil production. With the help of Russia, the Syrian regime slowly reclaimed much of its territo-ry lost to various rebel groups. By 2018, the regime had control over two-thirds of the territory it held prior to the onset of the war but was unable to fully stabilize the economy. During this period, drug pro-duction began to increase due to direct support from the Assad regime in production and distribution. In 2015, under 50 million pills were seized worldwide. In 2019, seizures increased to around 75 million pills. By 2021, the number had increased to over 300 million. Synthetic drug production was a particular-ly attractive enterprise for the Syrian state, as it did not require natural resources and could be covert-ly produced. Criminal elements within the country already had experience with the chemical processes required for production, as small-scale production had existed in Syria for years. Unlike opium or co-caine, synthetic drugs do not require agricultural operations for large-scale production. With a rudi-mentary lab and enough precursor chemicals, nearly any basement in Damascus could generate millions in profits a year. The inherently covert nature of this form of production gave the Syrian state plau-sible deniability regarding growing calls from other states to crack down on the narcotics trade. These labs could be quickly moved, and often use a mix of legally obtained precursor chemicals and fillers to produce a product with extremely high profit mar-gins. Syria imports very high levels of ephedrine and pseudoephedrine, higher than those of Canada or the United Kingdom, despite having an extremely small legitimate pharmaceutical industry. Precur-sor chemicals are synthesized into Captagon, and

combined with a wide variety of substances, such as methamphetamine, caffeine, acetaminophen, quinine, and lactose, before being pressed into pills for distribution. The wide variety of chemicals, methods, and expertise has resulted in a narcotic with unpredictable effects and severe health risks. Captagon serves more as an umbrella term than a specific drug due to the diverse production ecosystem, but one similarity between many seized pills is the iconic two C's logo. Captagon is sometimes referred to by the slang name "Abu al-Hilalayn," translating into "father of the two crescents," a reference to the two C's commonly found on pills. While criminal elements unaffiliated with the state have likely produced the substance since the 1990s, the 2010s saw an unprecedented increase in the Syrian regime's involvement.

The Captagon trade is estimated to be worth over $10 billion annually, and nearly 25% of that goes directly into the pockets of the Syrian regime. Wasim Badi al-Assad and Samer Kamal al-Assad, both cousins of Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad, were sanctioned by the European Union for their role in the drug trade. The United States has sanctioned many other regime officials. The Syrian army and related intelligence agencies have been directly implicated in smuggling operations transporting pills from Syrian production sites into neighboring states like Iraq and Jordan. Hezbollah, one of the Assad regime's strongest allies in the region, has also directly participated in smuggling operations, moving large quantities of Captagon into Lebanon. Lebanon serves as a vital logistics hub for smuggling operations, where pills are often hidden inside other products and then shipped to Africa before ending up in Saudi Arabia or the Gulf States. Hezbollah and the Syrian regime both take advantage of the porous borders that have come from widespread regional instability in the Levant to smuggle narcotics. Hezbollah's control over the port of Beirut and the Beirut-Rafic Hariri International Airport has enabled this level of distribution. Other non-state actors have also become heavily involved in the Captagon trade, with ISIS notably using the substance to enhance fighter performance. While headlines of "Tweaker Jihadi Supersoldiers" are easily marketable, the actual widespread use of the drug by ISIS members has proven difficult to substantiate. The capability of organizations like the Free Syrian Army, Al-Nusra, and ISIS to produce and distribute narcotics is significantly lower than that of the Syrian state and Hezbollah. While they are involved on a lesser scale, many busts attributed to actors like ISIS are products of the Syrian regime.

DEMAND

While Captagon has failed to find a market in Europe or the U.S., the drug has taken off within the Gulf States and Saudi Arabia, where it is widely used as a party or study drug. While drug use is fairly uncommon in the strictly conservative Muslim societies of states like the United Arab Emirates, Captagon is sometimes viewed as a medicine rather than a drug largely due to its clinical name and pill form, removing some of the social stigma around its use. The continuous demand for the drug in this region has fueled the rise of Captagon production in Syria, and profit margins of up to 20,000% give a strong incentive for producers to continue their work. While overall interdiction of the substance has decreased from 2023, it is difficult to know whether this is due to decreased supply or improved smuggling tactics. Politics plays a central role in different states' responses to the Captagon trade, with Saudi Arabia completely banning agricultural imports from Lebanon after a 2021 bust of over 5 million pills hidden inside Lebanese pomegranates.

Syria and Lebanon both face high levels of income inequality, and the ban on agricultural exports may deepen these economic divides. While the drug trade is extremely lucrative for a small number of actors

involved, very few of these funds enter the greater economy, further worsening inequality. With the fall of the Syrian regime, the future of the region seems even more unsure than during the civil war. The leader of the victorious Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham faction, Ahmad al-Sharaa, formerly known by his nom de guerre Abu Mohammed al-Golani, has pledged that he will form a nationalist Syrian government with a focus on building strong institutions and inclusivity for minority groups. In an interview with CNN, he claimed that his early days as a fighter with links to Al-Qaeda and other radical Salafist movements are behind him, stating, "Everyone in life goes through phases and experiences … a person in their 20s will have a different personality than someone in their 30s or 40s."

CONCLUSION

With the absence of the Assad regime, and an increased focus on traditional Islamic principles in the governance of a new Syria, the Captagon trade may decline dramatically. A strong parallel to this potential outcome can be seen in the decline of opium production under the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. Unlike opium, which has deep historical and cultural roots in Afghanistan, Captagon production in Syria is far more capital-intensive and lacks a long-standing tradition. These factors combined with the top-down nature of a regime-led production model, could lead to the elimination of the Captagon trade in Syria. On the other hand, the vacuum in supply created by the collapse of the Syrian state could empower other groups, such as Hezbollah, ISIS, and other various non-state actors in the region, to increase production massively. Much like the future of Syria, the future of the Captagon trade in the region remains unclear, but in the history of transnational drug crime a pattern can be observed: where there exists demand, supply is never too far around the corner.

This article originally appeared as a publication of UGA's Loch Johnson Society.

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