



Picture: Hal Gatewood/unsplash

## AUTHOR

Caroline Rose  
Senior Analyst & Program  
Head, Strategic Vacuums  
Newlines Institute for  
Strategy and Policy

## CHACR

The Centre for Historical Analysis and Conflict Research is the British Army's think tank and tasked with enhancing the conceptual component of its fighting power. The views expressed in this *In Depth Briefing* are those of the author, and not of the CHACR or the British Army. The aim of the briefing is to provide a neutral platform for external researchers and experts to offer their views on critical issues.

This document cannot be reproduced or used in part or whole without the permission of the CHACR.

[www.chacr.org.uk](http://www.chacr.org.uk)

**I**N RECENT years, the captagon trade has boomed. What was once an illicit trade constrained to the Middle East and primarily associated with jihadist organizations such as the Islamic State in the mid-2010s, has metastasized into a \$5.7 billion trade facilitated by both non-state and state actors that spans the Mediterranean, Africa, and the Persian Gulf. Syria's wartime power vacuum, combined with increasingly unstable security landscapes in neighbouring Lebanon and Iraq, created conducive conditions for widespread drug production, smuggling, and rising demand levels in the region. Furthermore, the captagon trade has served as an alternative revenue for armed groups in the region, reinforcing power structures and exploitable security landscapes in favour of actors such as the Syrian regime's Fourth Division, Hezbollah, IRGC-aligned militias, and illicit networks.

## UNDEFINED FORMULA

Of course, captagon was not always an illicit drug circulated on the black market. The drug was a popularly prescribed substance to treat attention deficit disorders, depression, and narcolepsy, by the German pharmaceutical company, Degussa AG in the 1960s. The drug's chemical composition was fenethylline, marketed under the commercial name "Captagon®." Captagon's time on the licit market was brief, with the drug being scheduled by the World Health Organization (WHO) in the mid-1980s due to its array of health concerns and the arrival of alternative substances in pharmaceutical markets.

The captagon produced, trafficked, and consumed today in the Middle East, however, is not the same Captagon® formula that was on licit [pharmaceutical markets](#). In fact, its chemical composition has evolved drastically from the original fenethylline formula, with

tablets comprising different concentrations of psychoactive stimulants and several chemical additives. The limited laboratory analyses that exist on the formula of captagon show that pills can comprise a range of 16.29% and 41.23% amphetamine – sometimes no amphetamine at all – occasionally including methamphetamine and cutting agents like caffeine, lidocaine, quinine, lactose, and metals likely resulting from tableting machines' residue, such as [copper and zinc](#).

The lack of regulation for captagon's formula has allowed producers to manufacture different types of pills marketed as "captagon," commonly engraved with twin C's that has inspired the street name "Abu Hilalain" (Father of the Two Crescent Moons) among consumers in the Middle East. Recent research on the captagon trade has identified three different kinds of captagon commonly sold on the illicit market: a mealy, yellow pill

(considered of less quality and comprises more cutting agents), a pink pill (believed to alter sexual desire and feelings of euphoria), and a white pill ([considered of the highest quality](#)).

### CONDUCTIVE CONDITIONS FOR PRODUCTION AND SMUGGLING

Captagon production hubs are concentrated primarily in Syria and along the Lebanese-Syrian border. The breakdown in security, law enforcement, widespread corruption, and ungoverned spaces resulting from the Syrian civil war and the political crisis in Lebanon have created conducive conditions for captagon production and smuggling. Economic hardship and food security exacerbated by international sanctions, psychological trauma imposed by years of warfare and marginalization, and political paralysis have shaped new incentives for captagon production and consumption, as individuals seek alternative revenue sources and psychoactive substances that can help them cope with worsening living conditions.

The breakdown in governance, law and order, and accountability, has also contributed to the conditions



Picture: natanaelginting / www.freepik.com

“THE LARGEST CONCENTRATION OF INDUSTRIAL-SIZED CAPTAGON PRODUCTION IS CENTERED IN REGIME-CONTROLLED AREAS OF SYRIA, WHERE ELEMENTS OF THE SYRIAN ARMED FORCES AND REGIME-ALIGNED ACTORS IN THE COUNTRY’S SECURITY, AGRICULTURAL, AND BUSINESS SECTORS FACILITATE PILL MANUFACTURING AND TRAFFICKING ACTIVITIES.”

that allow the captagon trade to thrive. As community leaders, militant groups, and even state-aligned actors and warlords have engaged in captagon production and trafficking, patronage networks and power dynamics have been created around the captagon trade. Widespread corruption and shabiha networks have created degrees of impunity for certain producers, traffickers, and consumers. The lack of risks of interdiction from law enforcement, combined with the Levant region’s relative

proximity to destination markets in the Persian Gulf and smaller consumer markets in Turkey, Jordan, and Iraq, have enabled the trade to grow in both size and scope.

### CAPTAGON’S PARTICIPANTS

Behind the growing captagon trade is a host of state and non-state actors that play key parts in increasing tablet production, adopting sophisticated smuggling tactics, and exploiting rising demand levels across

the region to create a source of alternative revenue.

The largest concentration of industrial-sized captagon production is centered in regime-controlled areas of Syria, where elements of the Syrian armed forces and regime-aligned actors in the country’s security, agricultural, and business sectors facilitate pill manufacturing and [trafficking activities](#). The Syrian government’s Fourth Division, an elite division of the Syrian Army and commanded by President Bashar Al-Assad’s younger brother, Maher, has served as a key agent in both operating and guarding large-scale captagon laboratories in Da’ara, Kharab al-Shahem, and Latakia, as well as facilitating tablets’ smuggling out of Syria through formal and informal land and maritime ports such as the Masnaa point and the Port of [Latakia](#). Additionally, a series of businessmen and Assad family relatives that operate in Syria’s agricultural, industrial, pharmaceutical, and construction sectors have been implicated in production and smuggling efforts. Individuals such as Wassim Badia Al-Assad, Amer Khiti, Mohammad Shalish, Taher al-Kayali, Samer al-Assad, Abdellatif Hamid, and Khodr Taher are providing large facilities for pill manufacturing, security



Picture: wirestock/freepik.com



personnel to guard shipments, goods and packaging materials, and transportation from production laboratories and/or Syrian overland and [maritime ports](#). Throughout the Syrian war, the Syrian regime has maintained that captagon production and smuggling is concentrated within opposition areas. As evidence of regime elements' participation in the captagon trade has grown, the Syrian regime has conducted occasional seizures of captagon shipments in areas like Damascus and Latakia, often cosmetic attempts to deflect blame to opposition forces.

The Syrian regime does not operate alone. Facilitating Syrian partners is Hezbollah and elements of Iran-aligned militias, supporting captagon smuggling operations from Syria into Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and maritime routes to reach destination markets in the Persian Gulf. Along the Lebanese-Syrian border are a series of small-scale captagon laboratories designed to become mobile when the threat of interdiction is high, often moving over the border into Syrian areas such as Zabadani, Bloudan, Serghaya, Yabrud, al-Qusayr, western al-Qalamoun, near the Dabaa military airfield, and Qunaytirah amidst upticks in raids, arrests, and seizures from [Lebanese Internal Security Forces](#). Many of these small-scale laboratories – estimated by Lebanese security forces to be 20 or more – have been affiliated with businessmen and warlords closely aligned with Hezbollah and the [Fourth Division](#). Hassan Mohammad Daqou in particular, a dual Syrian-Lebanese national and construction magnate in Tfail, has been affiliated with a number of captagon production and large-scale trafficking operations with the assistance of Hezbollah – most notably smuggling tunnels between his properties in Lebanon and Syria and assistance with industrial-sized captagon shipments to



Picture: natanaelginting / www.freepik.com

“AMIDST THE UPTICK IN SMUGGLING, JORDAN HAS REVISED ITS RULES OF ENGAGEMENT AND HAS SOUGHT TO INCREASE SECURITY AND INTERDICTION CAPACITY ALONG ITS BORDER WITH SYRIA, ELEVATING THE CAPTAGON TRADE INTO A TOP SECURITY CONCERN IN AMMAN.”

[Malaysian ports](#). While there is evidence of production inside Lebanon among Hezbollah-aligned actors, there is greater evidence of facilitation of large-scale captagon shipments through smuggling routes and Lebanese ports. Providing cover for captagon shipments from Syria and northern Lebanon, Hezbollah's relative control over informal ports and trafficking routes in the Bekaa Valley and the country's north has provided relative impunity for smugglers, as well as access to official ports in Tripoli and Beirut.

In Syria's east, there is greater evidence of IRGC involvement in trafficking operations, facilitating captagon shipments' movement from Syria into Iraq, a transit country to reach destination markets in the Persian Gulf and a growing consumer market for [captagon](#). Recent seizures in northeast Syria, along the Iraq-Syria border, and in Baghdad, Iraq, have indicated both an uptick in captagon shipments [into Iraq](#). These recent seizures have also indicated increased use of trafficking routes along the Al-Qaim highway and porous Iraq-Syria border where a majority of checkpoints are controlled by the Popular Mobilization Forces, a

faction of the Iraq armed forces with loyalty to [Iran's IRGC](#). As elements of the Syrian regime, Hezbollah, and other actors in Syria, have reaped alternative revenue sources from the captagon trade, increased seizures along routes controlled by Iran-aligned militias in Syria and Iraq demonstrate that captagon too, is perceived as a useful stream for financing among the IRGC and its proxies in the Middle East.

#### SECURITY RAMIFICATIONS

As the captagon trade has grown, so has its implications for border and human security. The involvement of armed groups in the trafficking of captagon has militarized recent cross-border smuggling operations, primarily along transit countries that border Syria, as well as strengthened the power dynamic inside Syria in favour of the Assad regime and its partners.

In Jordan, the captagon trade has been a concerning challenge for its border security, with a string of clashes between armed captagon smugglers and [Jordanian armed forces](#). While captagon trafficking was popular along the Syrian-Jordanian border before, the opening of the Jaber-Nassib border crossing in

September 2021 led to a severe uptick in captagon smuggling operations. On November 29, 2021, clashes ensued between Jordanian forces and smugglers that entered from Suwayda, Syria. One month later on December 25, 2021, Jordanian forces faced off reportedly hundreds of smugglers from Syria – with reported ties to the Fourth Division – armed with machine guns and advanced well into Jordanian [territory](#). In January 2022, fatal clashes ensued between Jordanian Army Forces and smugglers, this time killing Jordanian Army officer Captain Mohammed Al Khadeirat, and days later, a clash where Jordanian Armed Forces killed 27 smugglers [from Syria](#). Amidst the uptick in captagon smuggling, Jordan has revised its rules of engagement and has sought to increase security and interdiction capacity along its border with Syria, elevating the captagon trade into a top security [concern in Amman](#).

In Iraq, the porous border with Syria and militias' participation in cross-border taxation and smuggling efforts have too, further complicated its fragile security landscape. In April, officials in Baghdad reported that Iraqi Security Forces were able to bust two criminal groups and seized over 6.2 million captagon tablets from a warehouse in southern Baghdad, arresting several foreign nationals implicated in “[international drug trafficking networks](#)”. The major interception came after Iraqi authorities announced that over three million captagon pills were seized by law enforcement in Iraq in the first [three months of 2022](#). Clashes between captagon smugglers and Iraqi law enforcement have similarly introduced new concerns about border security, along with the added concern of Iran-aligned militias and terrorist organizations, such as Daesh,

reaping profits from the trade.

In Lebanon, the captagon trade has been a point of contention between the Lebanese Internal Security forces and Hezbollah. With increasing political and economic pressure from Persian Gulf destination countries, such as Saudi Arabia's blanket ban on Lebanese imports imposed in August 2021, to crack down on Hezbollah-facilitated captagon trafficking, the Lebanese state has undertaken a series of laboratory raids, arrests, and seizures in Beirut and occasionally in Hezbollah-controlled areas in the country's Beka'a Valley and along the border with Syria. Some of these raids, such as one on August 2, 2021, resulted in fatal clashes between smugglers and [Lebanese soldiers](#). However, Hezbollah's political influence and paralyzed Lebanese government has constrained the Lebanese Internal Security Forces from conducting consistent interdictions, leading to relative

“THE CAPTAGON TRADE REMAINS ANCHORED IN SYRIA'S CIVIL WAR, LEBANON'S UNRAVELLING POLITICAL SYSTEM, AND NEIGHBOURING TRANSIT STATES' FRAGILE SECURITY LANDSCAPES THAT HAVE ENABLED LARGE-SCALE PRODUCTION AND SMUGGLING OPERATIONS.”

impunity for large-scale, high-level captagon operations.

In Syria, the captagon trade has reinforced power dynamics in favour of the Syrian regime's security forces and its partners on the ground, Hezbollah and the IRGC. The country's wartime conditions and relative security vacuum have been conducive to industrial-sized, state-backed production, with little-to-no oversight and threat of interdiction from law enforcement. Ministry-level complicity with access to state-controlled seaports and overland border checkpoints has further empowered regime-aligned security forces and allies, allowing them to increase the

size of shipments at little expense (captagon production is relatively cheap with a simple, [non-labour intensive manufacturing process](#)). Most importantly, the captagon trade counts as an important revenue source for regime-aligned actors. While the trade's estimated market value for 2021 was over [\\$5.7 billion](#), it is impossible to determine exactly how much in profits regime-aligned producers in Syria have made from the trade. In its 2022 assessment of the Assad family's financing, the US Department of State estimated the family earns over \$2 billion in revenue from [illicit streams of income](#). As the captagon trade expands in both size and scope, it is likely that this number will continue to grow over time.

## CONCLUSION

The captagon trade remains anchored in Syria's civil war, Lebanon's unravelling political system, and neighbouring transit states' fragile security landscapes that have enabled large-scale production and smuggling operations. As production capacity amongst Syrian producers in regime-held areas is well on the rise, the trade will likely continue a trajectory of steady growth in both size and scope, outpacing its 2021 estimated market value of \$5.7 billion in 2022, identifying new transshipment hubs in Europe, Africa, and East Asia, as well as establishing new transit routes in Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, and the Persian Gulf. And as state and non-state participants like the Syrian regime's Fourth Division, Hezbollah, IRGC-aligned militias, and other armed groups continue participation in production and smuggling as a source of alternative revenue, the captagon trade will continue to reinforce and exploit insecurity in the Middle East.

