



Syria and Captagon: An Assessment

By Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi

Syria and Captagon: An Assessment

Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi

In recent years, widespread concerns have emerged about the transformation of Syria into a “narco-state,” specifically in relation to reports about the allegedly growing production of the stimulant drug captagon inside Syria, and the smuggling of the drug both within the country and outside its borders.

These concerns have been amplified by the interdicting of large quantities of the drug in both Europe and the Middle East, with a growing number of media reports focusing on the topic. It is Syria’s immediate southern neighbor Jordan that seems most concerned about the influx of captagon and other drugs coming from its northern neighbor, even though Jordan has been keen for a normalization of relations with the Bashar al-Assad-led government in Damascus. Jordan believes the support it previously offered for the insurgency in southern Syria damaged its economy by blocking overland trade.

Conversely, opponents of the government now frequently highlight the captagon issue as a reason for countries not to normalize relations with Damascus. The issue has even garnered U.S. attention through the passing of the National Defense Authorization Act for 2023, which requires the development of a strategy to “disrupt

and dismantle narcotics production and trafficking and affiliated networks linked to the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria.”

"Opponents of Syria's government now frequently highlight the captagon issue as a reason for countries not to normalize relations with Damascus."

In light of the issue’s growing popularity in both popular media and think-tank discussions, this report seeks to disentangle the noise and headlines and get to the crux of the matter by determining which parties in Syria are responsible for the production and smuggling of captagon and how serious a problem captagon production and smuggling should be considered. Does the drug’s production and smuggling pose a threat to U.S. interests? Does the issue require a new strategy, or are existing measures to counteract production and smuggling sufficient?

The Islamic State and the Claimed “Crime-Terror Nexus”

While it is undoubtedly the case that concerns about captagon production and smuggling in Syria have become more prominent in the past two to three years, it is worth recalling that discussion about these potential problems were raised several years ago regarding the Islamic State when it controlled substantial territory in Iraq and Syria, particularly from 2014-2016. Examining this episode might provide some sobering historical context from which to judge the seriousness of the problem.

At that time, there was justified concerns that the Islamic State’s control of contiguous territory spanning national borders was unprecedented for an internationally designated terrorist group. Moreover, its access to multiple funding tracks unavailable to other designated organizations called for a new strategy to combat its financing.

Amid this debate on how to thwart Islamic State fund-raising, the possibility was raised that one of the group’s means of acquiring money involved producing and smuggling captagon. This discussion occurred within the wider context of analyzing the “crime-terror nexus,” which posits that terrorism and organized crime are closely linked phenomena. In addition, when a shipment of 84 million captagon pills was seized in the Italian port of Salerno in 2020, the claim of an Islamic State-captagon link attracted renewed interest in this concept, as the Guardia di Finanza (Italy’s agency responsible for combating the drugs trade) initially alleged that the pills had been “produced in Syria by ISIS/DAESH in order to finance terrorism.”

This claim, however, was mocked by the Islamic State in an editorial published in its newsletter al-Naba’. It alleged that blaming

the Islamic State conveniently hid the real source of the drugs: namely, the “Nusayri Taghut” (i.e., the Syrian government under Bashar al-Assad) and the “Rafidite militias” (i.e., Shi’a militias like Hezbollah, which has played a key role supporting the government in the civil war). In addition to this are both entities’ links with organized crime in Europe and possibly officials and businessmen linked to the Italian government. The same editorial implied the affair illustrates how drug cartels and financial institutions linked to them have as much influence over “Crusader governments” (i.e. Western governments) as the oil and arms companies.

"Attempts to tie the Islamic State to the production and smuggling of captagon as part of the so-called “crime-terror nexus” have been weak, and the absence of evidence on several key points argue against it."

Whatever one makes of the Islamic State’s analysis, attempts to tie it to the production and smuggling of captagon as part of the so-called “crime-terror nexus” have been weak, and the absence of evidence on several key points argue against it. All the group’s contiguous territorial holdings in Iraq and Syria have been reconquered by various parties (whether the Iraqi or Syrian governments, the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces, or the Turkish-backed Syrian insurgent groups). In none of these former Islamic State territories has anyone been able to point to facilities or buildings used by the Islamic State for captagon manufacture.

Moreover, large amounts of internal Islamic State documents – both paperwork and electronic copies, files, and databases – have been recovered from those territories. Yet no one has produced any documents proving the group’s involvement in captagon manufacture and trade. This contrasts, for instance, with documentary evidence that illustrates its involvement in the excavation and trade of antiquities. Still, the Islamic State’s engagement in such activity should not necessarily be seen as part of some “crime-terror nexus.” Rather, excavation of antiquities was allowed for the same reason that the group allowed extraction of gold, silver and oil in its territories: namely, such resources come under the concept of “rikaz” (literally, what is buried in the ground), for which the group had established its Diwan al-Rikaz (“Rikaz Department”). Then, when antiquities were excavated, a charge of 20 percent on their value was levied as zakat to be paid to the organization, which could then disburse the fees collected as it wished.

No comparable documents or internal Islamic State literature show an endorsement or justification for production and trade in captagon. For instance, issues of circulation and supply of medical drugs were dealt with by the group’s Diwan al-Siha (“Department of Health”), and no mention of supply and distribution of captagon occurs in documents recovered so far.

It would appear instead that the Islamic State opposed captagon and similar drugs, just as it also was against the sale and distribution of cigarettes, the destruction of which the group repeatedly advertised through its Hisba (virtue-and-vice enforcement) apparatus. For instance, a fatwa (number 594) put out on the group’s al-Bayan radio made clear that “hating the mujahidin” for reasons such as “banning smoking and drugs” constituted “apostasy from the religion.”

It is of course possible that the group’s rules against cigarettes and drugs like captagon were flouted and ignored by some members of the group, but to the extent such rules were broken, they were on the level of individual/personal consumption and perhaps price gouging to members of the population under their control.

In short, it is not wholly impossible that captagon might have circulated in Islamic State territories and that some members consumed or have been consuming it because of personal addiction or to enhance their performance, but no reliable evidence from during the Islamic State’s strongest period proves it was producing and trading in captagon at a substantial level – a conclusion even more applicable now in its post-territorial phase. Belief in an Islamic State-captagon link arises from a dogmatic belief in the phenomenon as part of a broader “crime-terror nexus.”



Syrian Government-Held Areas: The Real Source of Captagon

The origins of shipments of smuggled captagon interdicted abroad can be traced to areas controlled by the Syrian government, including shipments by sea originating from the port of Latakia, and seizures of captagon in Jordan transiting the border in southern Syria. Such shipments suggest that most if not all the captagon smuggled out of Syria is manufactured in those areas. This conclusion is bolstered by pre-war Syria's extensive pharmaceutical manufacturing capacity concentrated in areas today under controlled by the Damascus-based government.

Officially, the Syrian government's security apparatuses are supposed to combat production and smuggling of captagon. The Syrian police forces affiliated with its Interior Ministry maintains a counter-narcotics division (Arabic: far' mukafahat al-mukhaddarat) and there are recurring published reports about the arrests of gangs and gang members involved in smuggling captagon, which at least suggest that production originates within government-held areas. Contrary to some claims, the Interior Ministry did not begin publicizing captagon seizures only after media reports raised concerns about Syrian government involvement in production and smuggling over the past two or three years. For example, Interior Ministry and government media reports about seizures of captagon pills date from 2016 and 2017.

Even so, the quantities of captagon being smuggled beyond Syria's borders suggest that elements within the government and security apparatuses are involved in the drug's manufacture and/or smuggling. It is analogous to the problem of corruption in Iraq: officially, agencies exist within the Iraqi government to combat corruption, and there are legal

mechanisms against it. But in practice, corruption is built into the system in myriad ways. This reasoning, therefore, should apply to government-held Syria.

The general sentiment within government-held areas is that the problem of drug smuggling has become worse over time, as declining economic and living standards makes drug dealing an increasingly viable and lucrative source of income in an otherwise cash-strapped society and state.

However, one should be cautious in speaking of the government and/or security apparatuses as if they were unitary actors in drug production and smuggling. The inner workings of the Syrian government and relations among its security agencies and administrative bodies are opaque.

"The inner workings of the Syrian government and relations among its security agencies and administrative bodies are opaque."

For example, one security body that has been named repeatedly in reports as involved in the production and smuggling of captagon is the Fourth Division's Security Office (Arabic: Maktab Amn al-Farqa al-Rabi'a), headed by Ghassan Nafi' Bilal. This notably includes the production and smuggling of captagon from southern Syria into Jordan, allegedly coordinated with/supported by Hezbollah, whose connections to criminal activities worldwide are well known and fit the "crime-terror nexus" model better than

the Islamic State's. One notable individual in southern Syria who has been linked to the Fourth Division and drugs smuggling is "[Abu Salim al-Khalidi](#)" (aka: [Ahmad Mahawish](#)).

Mahawish owns a house in the west Deraa countryside near the border with Jordan that is rumored to be used as a place for drug smugglers in the area to meet and coordinate efforts to smuggle drugs into Jordan. This house was targeted in an attack by unknown persons in December 2022. Yet the same accounts suggest that Mahawish's smuggling operations have not always run smoothly with elements of the Syrian security services to whom he is connected. In 2019, Mahawish supposedly had a dispute with a colonel called "Muhammad Eisa" in the Fourth Division's Security Office over a shipment of drugs (the specifics of the dispute are not known). This dispute resulted in the Military Security's (i.e., military intelligence) confiscation of this shipment that was to be smuggled to Jordan. Mahawish was then arrested and held for a time in Damascus.

Yet, the Military Security is hardly innocent of participating in the drug trade. At the end of December 2022, for example, an individual called "Akram Sheihan Awair" was assassinated in the same province of Deraa. He was reportedly leading a local militia working with the Military Security branch and Hezbollah in the province and was known for his involvement in the drug trade in Deraa. Likewise, in the province of Suwayda' in southern Syria that neighbors Deraa to its east and borders Jordan, the Military Security sub-branches operating there are, according to local accounts, extensively involved in captagon production and smuggling. The most notable example in this regard is "Raji Falhout," who led a Military Security-linked local faction called "Quwat al-Fajr" ("Forces of the Dawn") that was dismantled last summer in a campaign led by other factions in the province. Inside his faction's base was discovered a mini-factory for the making of captagon. But in January 2023, the head of the Military Security's unit in the town of Salkhad, [Muhammad Ali Ghalia](#), was reportedly arrested by the Syrian government itself, ostensibly to be questioned about his involvement with drug smuggling operations in the province.

These examples and others demonstrate that mapping captagon production and smuggling accurately is very difficult. Generally, the problem of captagon production and smuggling has worsened over time, and some elements of the government and security services are actively involved, despite their official obligation to combat drug smuggling.



Over 127 plastic bags filled with the addictive drug captagon await destruction after being seized by U.S. and Coalition partners in Southern Syria, May 31, 2018.

Conclusion: An Exaggerated Problem

Some analysts exaggerate the scope of the captagon industry to make them appear to take a tough stand against both the Assad regime, which until recently had few friends in the region, and the Islamic State. Were the latter heavily involved with captagon production and smuggling, cracking down on the terrorism financing that resulted would bolster analysts' credentials.

One analyst, who appears to be revising his estimates upwards by multiple factors, has put the value of the captagon industry in Syria in the range of \$55-110 billion in 2021. Yet, this claim is implausible. Such figures would value the captagon industry in Syria at some nine to nineteen times the value of the state budget for 2023, going by official exchange rates, and some fifteen to thirty times the value of the state budget as measured by black market rates.

Were the captagon industry this valuable, even assuming the Syrian government was not fully involved in it, it could use some of this windfall to address its ongoing economic crisis. This would include increasing soldiers' and employees' salaries in real terms, reversing or reducing cuts to subsidies, and launching domestic social and construction projects to buy off local discontent. Such largesse is common among other drug barons and networks.

Common claims about the captagon industry's value, then, do not reflect the cash-strapped reality of the Syrian government. As with many estimates of the illicit drug trade's value, they are based on extrapolation from too little data.

While the captagon industry in Syria has undoubtedly grown over the past few years, it is a topic that lends itself to exaggeration. The U.S. should continue and intensify efforts with partners in the region – especially Jordan –and elsewhere to interdict captagon shipments and smuggling.

New rounds of sanctions or attempts to appear “tough” on this issue – short of changing the existing government – to disrupt the production and smuggling inside Syria are unlikely to yield substantial results for several reasons: First, the networks, including the identity of those involved, are poorly understood, overconfident assertions to the contrary notwithstanding. Second, the issue is linked to demand for captagon and similar drugs within Syria and region, raising the question of how a campaign to reduce demand regionally might proceed. Third, with extensive sanctions in place, attempts to further degrade Syria's economy are likely to increase the attraction of illicit trades that cannot be disrupted by sanctions.

"Escalating ongoing efforts to end smuggling beyond Syria's border, rather than elaborate schemes based on false premises, offers the most effective path forward."

Demand for and consumption of captagon and the deleterious consequences of drug addiction affect primarily Syria and its immediate neighbors. Despite recent hype, the captagon trade is not a major threat to U.S. interests. Escalating ongoing efforts to end smuggling beyond Syria's border, rather than elaborate schemes based on false premises, offer the most effective path forward.

Author

Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi

Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, a Middle East Forum Writing Fellow, is an Arabic translator and editor at Castlereagh Associates, a Middle East-focused consultancy firm. He is a graduate of Brasenose College, Oxford University, with a degree in Classics and Oriental Studies. His work focuses on militant groups of all affiliations in Iraq and Syria, with particular interest in those of jihadist orientation.





The Middle East Forum, a Philadelphia-based think tank, founded in 1994 by Daniel Pipes, promotes American interests in the Middle East and protects Western values from Middle Eastern threats. In the Middle East, we focus on ways to defeat radical Islam; work for Palestinian acceptance of Israel; develop strategies to contain Iran; and deal with advancing anarchy. Domestically, the Forum emphasizes the danger of lawful Islamism; protects the freedoms of anti-Islamist authors and activists; and works to improve Middle East studies.

It achieves its goals in three main ways:

- **Operationally**, exerting direct influence through its projects, each addressing a specific problem.
- **Intellectually**, providing context, information, insights, and policy recommendations through the Middle East Quarterly, conference calls, staff and fellows writings, lectures, and media appearances — clearing a path to victory over opponents.
- **Philanthropically**, distributing about \$2 million annually in separately earmarked funds through our Education Fund, to about 75 groups and individuals working to promote the Forum's goals.

Contact Information

Phone

215-546-5406

Email

info@meforum.org

Location

Middle East Forum

1650 Market Street, Suite 3600

Philadelphia, PA 19103

www.meforum.org

