

# When Cartels Collapse

## The Future of Captagon in the Middle East

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# Executive Summary

The sudden fall of Bashar al-Assad has upended the global captagon trade, a multi-billion-dollar narcotics market previously dominated by Assad's inner circle and leveraged by the Syrian regime as both an economic lifeline and geopolitical weapon. Syria's new interim government, headed by Ahmed al-Sharaa and elements of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), has launched an aggressive crackdown. Counter-narcotics forces have targeted major drug factories and seized equipment in highly publicized raids. These efforts have eradicated the primary sources of industrial scale domestic captagon production, marking an important step to satisfy the demands of Syria's neighbors and regional partners, whose support will be vital for the country's reconstruction.

Demand for the drug across the Middle East remains high, however, creating powerful incentives for a resurgence in industrial-scale production and a resumption of rampant regional trafficking. The question explored in this paper is this: Where might production be reconstituted in the post-Assad Middle East, and by whom?

This paper surveys the Middle East region and beyond to examine the fundamentals of the present-day captagon trade. The paper is based on open source data and key informant interviews conducted with sources inside Syria's new counter-narcotics forces in March and April 2025. (NB: The paper was drafted before the outbreak of major intercommunal violence in southern Syria in July 2025). It seeks to identify what remains of the Assad-era captagon ecosystem and to anticipate how production and trafficking dynamics may shift in the near-term to medium-term. Key findings include the following:

- In high-profile raids of major factories, Syria's new authorities have seemingly eradicated factory-scale domestic captagon production. At the time of writing, Syrian output is confined to small mobile facilities in outlying areas and pockets of eastern Dar'a and Sweida in the south of the country, where the central government exerts limited control.
- Remaining production outputs from Syria are inadequate to meet booming demand for captagon across the region—creating a supply vacuum that could generate billions of dollars annually for any actor capable of reconstituting industrial-scale supply elsewhere.
- Trafficking networks and infrastructure remain largely intact in key areas of Lebanon, Iraq, and Jordan. Key players include Lebanese Hezbollah, Iraq's Kata'ib Hezbollah (and other Iran-aligned Shi'a militias), and cross-border tribal and criminal networks that reach from southern Syria into Jordan and the Arabian peninsula.
- Potential centers for post-Assad production of captagon include Lebanon, West Africa, and potentially Iran, though each possibility is faced with a set of challenges.
- Hezbollah-linked networks operating in Lebanon enjoy close relations with the most prominent narco-mediators of the Assad era. With extensive experience in the captagon trade, they are likely the best-positioned actor to fill the void left by Assad. However, the Lebanese state has attempted to crack down on Hezbollah, and the group has been severely weakened by recent confrontations with Israel.

- It is possible that Hezbollah's long-established footprint in West Africa could enable it to establish offshore production hubs that mitigate the risk of blowback within the Levant. West African ports were used previously in captagon trafficking and in illicit financing, and areas with limited or weak governance in this region could be used for large-scale production.
- The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) possesses the regional relationships and technical sophistication needed to play a significant role in the next phase of captagon production in the greater Middle East. While the IRGC lacks Hezbollah's direct experience in the captagon trade, Iran previously enjoyed a front-row view of the Assad-era captagon ecosystem and has been active in trafficking of other narcotics, including methamphetamine.
- The recent battlefield setbacks for both the IRGC and Hezbollah may have near-term implications for the regional captagon trade. In the wake of recent Israeli and American strikes, the IRGC is under extreme pressure. It will need to reconstitute its presence domestically and abroad, and captagon could offer a lucrative funding stream. Reeling from Israel's "pager attack" and a wider multi-pronged pressure campaign from Israel and the Lebanese Armed Forces, and with its relationship to the IRGC in question after refusing to support Iran against Israel during recent hostilities, Hezbollah may also view captagon as an attractive revenue stream.
- Regional states such as Iraq, Jordan, and Yemen appear unlikely to emerge as large-scale production hubs due to mitigating circumstances that are particular to each country.
- Should captagon production remain disrupted, causing a sustained surge in unmet demand, there is a clear risk of this gap being filled with other, more dangerous drugs such as crystal meth—with potentially devastating implications for regional public health.

# Methodology

This report draws from prior work by the authors on behalf of the World Bank and the XCEPT program.<sup>1</sup> The former concerned a market analysis of captagon supply chains and the value of illicit financial flows (IFF) related to the trade, while the latter provided a comprehensive review of publicly available literature on the captagon trade through Iraq and Jordan in 2024.

The research combines a secondary data review (SDR) of existing analysis and grey literature with primary data collected through key informant interviews (KIIs) in March and April 2025 to map evolving captagon trafficking networks in Syria and neighboring states. A table of interviewees involved in captagon and its distribution, and law enforcement efforts, is included below (Table 1). KIIs were conducted as semi-structured interviews focused on thematic topics refined through iterative discussions and snowball sampling based on prior research and existing contact networks. Field-based research was conducted via the authors' personal networks in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Jordan, as well as established localized information networks of field enumerators across Syria retained by COAR and activated on an as-needed basis. Field teams conducted in-person and

telephone-based interviews with counter-narcotics officials in Syria and Lebanon, as well as narco-mediators and distributors based in Gulf states. Additional confidential discussions were held with public and private sector stakeholders in Jordan, while Iraqi academics and civil society activists contributed additional first-hand insights.

Two primary criteria guided the selection of Key Informants (KIs).

- **Past performance.** KIs were selected on the basis of demonstrated first-hand knowledge of captagon production, smuggling, or distribution. In some cases, interviewees have been established as reliable sources over the course of repeated interviews conducted over several years.
- **Relevance.** New sources have been identified at the recommendation of trusted interlocutors and stakeholders. This sampling method is most relevant for sources within the security apparatus of Syria's de facto authorities, whose tenure within government began in December 2024 or later.

<sup>1</sup> "Syria Economic Monitor: Conflict, Crises, and the Collapse of Household Welfare," *The World Bank*, Spring 2024, <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099515505222471242/pdf/IDU12e419274142fc14ff31baf411ef0c0aef81c.pdf>.

Table 1. Type and Number of KIIs

| Interviewee Type                            | Count |
|---------------------------------------------|-------|
| Captagon User                               | 3     |
| Captagon Dealer                             | 5     |
| Captagon Sub-Distributor                    | 4     |
| Captagon Distributor                        | 4     |
| Smuggler                                    | 4     |
| Counter-Narcotics Division Official (Syria) | 2     |
| General Security Official (Syria)           | 2     |
| Regional Government Officials               | 2     |

Several limitations to this research are noted. Most importantly, this report concerns ongoing changes to the trade in illicit narcotics. As such, the developments it describes remain in flux, and changes observed to date may not be reflective of future conditions. This report therefore offers a snapshot of main developments in the post-Assad captagon trade; its findings should be revisited in 6–12 months. In addition, the activities described in this report take place in the informal economy; triangulation and verification of data rely on trusted interlocutors. However, verified statistics regarding the trade are not available for reference. A further complicating factor stems

from the fact that captagon production does not exhibit a distinct visual signature (e.g., chemical emissions) that would allow for measurement by remote sensing tools or satellite imagery. Data is therefore based largely on KIIs. Finally, it is understood that interviewees whose perspectives inform this report have individual and/or institutional political biases. Most critically, figures within the new Syrian government have domestic and international political incentives to present themselves as effective opponents of the captagon trade. These biases were noted during the coding of interviews and when assessing the credibility of such sources.

# Introduction

What happens when a multi-billion-dollar drug cartel goes out of business overnight? Beneath the headlines surrounding Bashar al-Assad's sudden fall from power, Syria is at the epicenter of a rare event in the global narcotics trade. The market for captagon—an addictive amphetamine used widely across the Middle East—has been estimated between \$5.7 and \$10 billion per year.<sup>2</sup> Networks within Assad's inner circle had been the dominant players in captagon production, whereby the drug served as a critical revenue stream for a regime under sweeping international sanctions. The drug also functioned as a geopolitical weapon. Assad's Syria and its patrons in Tehran leveraged captagon as a means to destabilize rival Arab states and gain leverage in ongoing regional contests for power and security.

Since the fall of the Assad government, the captagon trade has fallen into chaos. Industrial-scale production in Syria, overseen most notably by the Syrian Army's 4th Division under the control of Bashar al-Assad's brother and right-hand man, Maher, has ceased. Syria's new government, led by Ahmed al-Sharaa of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), is aggressively targeting the captagon trade in a sustained campaign that evokes the Taliban's crackdown on opium in Afghanistan.<sup>3</sup>

Demand, however, remains sky high throughout the Middle East, where the drug's staggeringly large user base includes laborers, truck drivers, students, partygoers, and warfighters.<sup>4</sup> Incentives for participation in the trade—including economic desperation among smugglers and others along trade routes—also persist. The major interruption to the supply of captagon is thus likely to be a temporary phenomenon. The large market for the drug generates a multi-billion-dollar opportunity for new stakeholders to assume Assad's central place in the production and marketing of captagon, aided by porous borders, weak governance, limited rule of law, and the extensive presence of transnational militias across the region. Based upon extensive interviews with close observers and participants in the captagon trade, it appears that Lebanon's Hezbollah and Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) are the entities best-placed to take over the trade—with serious implications for regional security, stability, and public health.

<sup>2</sup> "Captagon Connection: How Syria Became a Narco-State," *France 24*, November 3, 2022, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20221103-captagon-connection-how-syria-became-a-narco-state>.

<sup>3</sup> "Unprecedented 85% reduction of opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan," *Alcis*, accessed April 5, 2025, <https://www.alcis.org/poppy>.

<sup>4</sup> "Why the fight against drug trafficking in the post-Assad Syria matters," *Le Monde*, April 21, 2025: [https://www.lemonde.fr/en/opinion/article/2025/04/21/why-the-fight-against-drug-trafficking-in-post-assad-syria-matters\\_6740467\\_23.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/opinion/article/2025/04/21/why-the-fight-against-drug-trafficking-in-post-assad-syria-matters_6740467_23.html).

# The Interim Government Aims to “Cleanse” Syria of Captagon

Upon seizing power, Syria’s new rulers declared a war on captagon. On 8 December 2024, HTS forces entered Damascus, marking a radical transition in Syria’s 14-year civil war. In one of his first public acts, al-Sharaa delivered a victory speech in the city’s historic Umayyad Mosque, saying that he would “cleanse” Syria of captagon—not only as a means to resolve a mounting public health crisis, but also as part of a wider campaign to eradicate the vestiges of the former regime and Iranian influence in Syria.<sup>5</sup> He acknowledged that Syria had been the world’s primary captagon provider, a subject that had long been taboo in public discourse, and vowed that this era was over.

In the months that have followed, the interim government’s General Security service has waged a major campaign to crack down on captagon infrastructure.<sup>6</sup> In January, for example, authorities destroyed 100 million pills seized from

raided warehouses and factories associated with the 4th Division of the Assad-era Syrian army.<sup>7</sup> Units of Syria’s new Counter-Narcotics Division have launched large-scale military-style raids of suspected drug labs around Damascus and in the mountainous border areas with Lebanon, battling smugglers, seizing equipment, and destroying both pills and tons of the precursors amassed to synthesize the drug at scale.<sup>8</sup>

In interviews, Syrian drug officials say they believe their efforts have eradicated 95% of captagon production in the country.<sup>9</sup> Separately, a European official who visited the Syria-Jordan border in December suggested that production had fallen by 90%, without providing details on how this assessment was reached.<sup>10</sup> Major facilities in captagon production hotspots—including Rural Damascus, Homs, and the Syrian coast—have been targeted and closed.

5 “The Captagon empire that Assad left behind was generating more than \$5 billion annually,” *Al Arabiya*, December 9, 2024, <https://ara.tv/610d6> (AR); and “Victory speech by the leader of the Syrian opposition carried a message for Iran, Trump, and Israel,” *CNN Arabic*, December 9, 2024, <https://arabic.cnn.com/middle-east/article/2024/12/09/analysis-syrian-rebel-leaders-victory-speech-held-a-message-for-iran-trump-and-israel> (AR).

6 “Syria: A warehouse containing around 3 million captagon pills was seized in Aleppo” *Al Arabiya*, March 21, 2025, <https://ara.tv/3iopz> (AR); and Nada Maucourant Atallah, “Inside a Syrian Captagon Factory: Evidence Uncovered of Assad’s Multi-Billion-Dollar Narcotics Trade,” *The National*, December 15, 2024, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/news/mena/2024/12/15/inside-a-syrian-captagon-factory-evidence-uncovered-of-assads-multi-billion-dollar-narcotics-trade/>.

7 “Syrian security forces seize two warehouses containing large quantities of captagon,” *Al Jazeera*, January 19, 2025, <https://ajawstv/ztgt6w> (AR); and “Syria: The fingerprints of the 4th Division are all over the two captagon warehouses,” *Asharq Al-Awsat*, no date, <https://asharq.co/nd9vg> (AR); and “Video: Discovery of a huge captagon factory in one of Syria’s palaces,” *Sky News Arabia*, December 11, 2024, <https://www.skynewsarabia.com/middle-east/1761381> (AR).

8 “New Syrian Leadership Is Destroying Captagon, an Addictive Drug Made by the Assad Regime,” *NPR*, January 28, 2025, <https://www.npr.org/2025/01/28/nx-s1-5272597/new-syrian-leadership-destroying-captagon-an-addictive-drug-made-by-the-assad-regime>.

9 KII in Damascus, Syria, March 22, 2025; KII in Damascus, Syria, March 23, 2025.

10 “Video: Discovery of a huge captagon factory in one of Syria’s palaces,” *Sky News Arabia*, December 11, 2024, <https://www.skynewsarabia.com/middle-east/1761381> (AR).

Nonetheless, Syrian and regional officials acknowledge the scale of the challenge they face.<sup>11</sup> Captagon dealers in and around Damascus stated in interviews that they held onto existing stocks of the drug following Assad's fall, as they assessed the new landscape and waited to see how street prices changed in an evolving Syria. The movement of old inventory and scattered new production have contributed to continuing interceptions of the drug in Syria. As large facilities have been shuttered and the equipment impounded by security forces, counter-narcotics efforts have become a game of "whack-a-mole." Dealers and anti-drug

officials contend that output is now confined to mobile laboratories established in residential apartments or small workshops across Damascus and other facilities in parts of Syria (most notably in the south, adjacent to the Jordanian border) where central authorities have limited power on the ground. Authorities say the producers move their laboratories regularly to avoid detection, operating in an atomized and agile production ecosystem.<sup>12</sup> This poses a particular challenge in Syria's border areas, where the capacity of security forces is limited.

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<sup>11</sup> KII in Syria-Lebanon border areas, Syria, March 26, 2025.

<sup>12</sup> KII in Rural Damascus, Syria, March 26, 2025.

# The Collapse of the Assads' Captagon Empire

Counter-narcotics officers in Damascus fear that if they are unable to contain the domestic captagon threat, Assad loyalists and insurgent groups will capitalize on unmet demand for the drug to fill their war chests and fund armed resistance to the new government. These fears are justified. In private interviews, captagon distributors in Syria say they largely exhausted their supply of the drug within 1–2 months of Assad's fall as users continued to seek out the drug.<sup>13</sup> With major factories offline and Assad-era extortion a thing of the past, Syrian counter-narcotics officials believe that small factories are far more profitable than ever, creating greater incentive for individuals to enter the trade. The output of these facilities is limited by equipment and supply chains, however.

Under Assad, Syria was home to a large contingent of small, wildcat captagon production operations. Then, as now, narco-entrepreneurs were drawn by the promise of tapping into a bustling regional trade, and their operations were enabled by the fact that synthesizing the drug at a small scale requires only rudimentary chemical knowhow. With adequate supplies of precursors and other inputs, enterprising producers using locally made

pill presses can produce 10,000 to 30,000 pills in a single day. There is little need for consistency in the pills' chemical composition.<sup>14</sup> Like moonshiners and backyard distillers, captagon producers have long adapted their recipes to the raw materials at hand, often substituting caffeine, amphetamine, and theophylline for the fenethylline found in trademarked captagon.

Notwithstanding the activity of small wildcat operators, the Assad era captagon production ecosystem was dominated by industrial-scale production facilities overseen directly by the former president's inner circle. Under Assad, captagon was the most valuable sector of the Syrian economy and the regime's primary source of hard currency.<sup>15</sup> According to interviews with producers and traffickers, roughly a dozen industrial factories accounted for approximately 90% of Syrian captagon production, amounting to billions of pills annually—and these factories, which were essential to meeting regional demand, are now offline. According to these same interviewees, the attendant industrial production is no longer in Syria, and is thought to have been moved to Lebanon.

<sup>13</sup> KII in Damascus, Syria, April 6, 2025.

<sup>14</sup> "Development of a harmonised method for the profiling of amphetamines: II. Stability of impurities in organic solvents," *Forensic Science International* (Vol. 149, 2–3), 10 May 2005, Pages 231–24, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.forsciint.2004.06.019>.

<sup>15</sup> "Syria Economic Monitor: Conflict, Crises, and the Collapse of Household Welfare," *The World Bank*, Spring 2024, <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099515505222471242/pdf/IDU12e419274142fc14ff31baf411ef0c0aef81c.pdf>.

# The Captagon Value Chain

The vast bulk of production during the Assad era came from factories using industrial production lines and modern presses. These large-scale operations were elements of a sophisticated trans-national value chain that had many independent parts, but was ultimately under direct supervision of the Assad regime, which benefitted from a system in which it taxed and supported production, but was not directly responsible for all elements of production.

Syrian pharmaceutical firms were the first link in this value chain.<sup>16</sup> These firms and pharmaceutical traders leveraged industry connections to circumvent restrictions on the import of controlled substances necessary for manufacturing the drug. Commercial suppliers in Europe and North America, India, China, the Gulf, and elsewhere fueled the trade in part through lax enforcement of know-you-customer standards.<sup>17</sup>

Syria's much-feared elite military units and intelligence agencies made up the second link in this value chain. Producers making captagon at scale were forced to pay protection money and hire

security forces as armed guards for their facilities. In interviews, narcotics producers say the 4th Division demanded royalty payments amounting to 50% of profits, with strict accounting procedures and a regime of fear and intimidation in place to ensure compliance.<sup>18</sup>

Trafficking networks inside Syria constituted the third link in the value chain. Maher al-Assad's 4th Division and Lebanese Hezbollah both used their control over transit corridors to export captagon. The entities oversaw consignments of the drug exported via the port of Lattakia and overland to Lebanon, respectively. Smaller entities, including branches of Syria's notorious rival intelligence agencies Military Intelligence and State Security also provided security and transportation for shipments. However, the 4th Division dominated this protection racket, successfully blocking other parties from accessing input materials or export channels at scale. This ensured that Assad profited, even when rival actors operated on the ground. While other military factions aligned with the 4th Division played roles securing and transporting narcotics, no other group had equivalent reach.

16 "Sky High: Ensuing Narcotics Crisis in MENA and the Role of the Assad Regime," *OpenSyr*, accessed April 8, 2025, <https://opensyr.com/en/pages/p-18>.

17 Ed Caesar, "How Syria Became the Middle East's Drug Dealer," *The New Yorker*, November 11, 2024, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2024/11/11/how-syria-became-the-middle-east-s-drug-dealer>; and "OMEN Illuminates Chinese Chemical Companies Helping Fund the Syrian Assad Regime," *3GIMBALS*, September 1, 2023, <https://3gimbals.com/insights/omen-illuminates-chinese-chemical-companies-helping-fund-the-syrian-assad-regime/>; and Qalaat Al Mudiq (@QalaatAlMudiq) on X (formerly Twitter), December 10, 2024, <https://x.com/QalaatAlMudiq/status/1866574249663537209>. Despite prior speculation among analysts over the availability of precursors needed to sustain industrial output during the Assad era, captagon factories inspected immediately after Assad's fall were found with abundant supplies of inputs, which insiders attributed to major shipments that arrived in the summer of 2024. These supplies have enabled a fragmented, decentralized effort by remaining post-Assad producers to continue to manufacture captagon—but only on a limited basis and for a limited duration.

18 "Production-Based Modeling for Captagon Trafficking and Illicit Financial Flows in Syria and the MENA Region," *Tahleel Analysis*, 28 January 2024, Not Published.

Cross-border smugglers constituted the fourth link in the value chain. In Syrian border regions, these included criminal gangs, established smuggling rings, and Arab tribes with the connections and the knowledge of terrain necessary for paying off or evading border security forces in neighboring Jordan and Iraq. On the Lebanon-Syria border, smugglers associated with Hezbollah played a similar role—while Iraqi Shi'a militias like Kata'ib Hezbollah operated on the Syria-Iraq border.

The fifth and final link consisted of trusted narcotics mediators and distributors who reached end consumers in target markets. Mediators

acted as wholesale buyers. They played a leading role managing logistics from Syria to destination countries, ensuring safe passage through military and security checkpoints by paying bribes and leveraging regime connections. Notably, many of the mediators who ensured a steady supply of captagon reached distributors were also involved in the procurement of chemical precursors and other factory equipment, making them knowledgeable insiders who propped up the trade. Interviewees with first-hand experience in the trade noted that in exchange for political protection and access, these mediators were forced to pay the 4th Division royalties as high as 85% of their profits.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> "Production-Based Modeling for Captagon Trafficking and Illicit Financial Flows in Syria and the MENA Region," *Tahleel Analysis*, 28 January 2024, Not Published.

# Captagon Beyond Syria

With the fall of the regime, the industrial narcotics production infrastructure inside Syria has collapsed. Fragmented elements of the former system (most notably localized power-brokers in long-restive areas of southern Syria) retain limited stockpiles and continue to produce captagon in small facilities that move to evade detection, and these groups continue sporadic exports to neighboring countries. For example, Iraqi authorities seized more than 1.1 tons of the drug in Iraq in March 2025.<sup>20</sup>

In the near term, captagon production within Syria is likely to be limited. Key players from Assad's inner circle have fled, shattering the in-country networks that previously orchestrated industrial production. Elements of the Syrian military that enabled and taxed the trade have dissolved as well. Former factories sit empty, stripped of their machinery following raids by HTS-affiliated security services.<sup>21</sup> Key mediators have gone dark, with Syrian drug officials speculating that they have fled to Lebanon. Distributors and other actors in the production chain say in interviews that they have been unable to reach these mediators since Assad's fall.

That said, there are indications that distributors with intact networks capable of reaching lucrative markets in the Gulf are seeking to establish new relationships with producers to revive the

captagon value chain. Previously, the drug was produced in Syria for as little as \$0.04 per pill. Distributors in neighboring Arab states such as Jordan and Iraq paid little more than \$1 per pill to buy captagon in bulk. In Arab Gulf states, the drug commanded wholesale prices as high as \$7–8 per pill at the distributor level, before markups for the end consumer. Apart from transportation and the costs associated with trafficking, much of this price differential was absorbed by the 4th Division in the form of royalties. With the 4th Division eliminated, there are now enormous incentives for someone to fill the production and protection gap—and whoever does so will reap a windfall.

These dynamics illustrate an inescapable reality of the captagon trade: The rise in captagon production has created a steady user base across the MENA region, and as long as users continue to seek out the drug, demand can be met only through organized, industrial-scale production. Mediators and distributors will likely play a key role in efforts to fill these gaps, and any actor who oversees this production infrastructure will control a multi-billion-dollar enterprise. This, in turn, demands one of two conditions: either a complicit government, as was the case in Assad's Syria, or an absence of governance, backed by sufficient protection to secure an industrial-scale production enterprise.

20 Ahmed Rasheed, "Iraq Seizes More Than One Tonne of Captagon Pills Shipped from Syria," *Reuters*, March 16, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/iraq-seizes-more-than-one-tonne-captagon-pills-shipped-syria-2025-03-16/>.

21 William Christou, "Sacks of Chemicals, Plastic Fruit ... and Millions of Pills: Inside a Damascus Captagon Factory," *The Guardian*, December 16, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/dec/16/syrias-captagon-trade-inside-a-damascus-amphetamine-factory>.

Looking to the future, who might take the lead, and where might they operate? This section examines the fundamentals of the evolving captagon ecosystems in Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq, with conditions that will be critical to any resurgence in captagon production. Prior to 2012, Lebanon was the Middle East's captagon production hub, a role it may once again play (although several contextual developments noted below may mitigate against this). Jordan, though well positioned geographically to be a captagon hub, is an extremely unlikely production venue due to internal political conditions. Meanwhile, Iraq—despite the strong presence of Shi'a militias long-complicit in the Assad-era captagon trade—is also an unlikely candidate due to pressures from both the central government and civil society in the midst of a nationwide narcotics epidemic.

## Lebanon

Lebanon was the original epicenter of the captagon trade in the Middle East. With the intent to rebuild and rearm after the July 2006 war with Israel, Hezbollah received Iranian support to create the region's first known captagon factories.<sup>22</sup> Exploiting the weakness of the Lebanese state and Hezbollah's own political and reputational capital after rebuffing Israeli advances, the organization turned captagon into a key revenue stream within a diversified portfolio of narcotics and other illicit trade.<sup>23</sup>

Today, Hezbollah faces a much different reality. After nearly two decades in ascendancy domestically, Hezbollah has been dealt a series of major setbacks. Its battle with Israeli forces—a front in

the broader regional conflict centered in Gaza—escalated dramatically in late 2024. Israeli aerial bombardment and a ground offensive in southern Lebanon devastated Shia-majority communities and Hezbollah's social and financial infrastructure, culminating in the death of Hezbollah's longtime leader and the group's top military cadres.<sup>24</sup> The September 2024 attack detonating Hezbollah communication devices further damaged the group's prestige and operational capacity, killing 39 people and wounding and maiming 3,400 across Lebanon, including both Hezbollah fighters and many civilians.<sup>25</sup>

These setbacks have put Hezbollah on the back foot. The group's retreat has been hastened by the fall of its erstwhile ally Assad, geopolitical uncertainty surrounding Iran's relationship with its regional proxies, and the formation of a new Lebanese government that is backed by popular mandate to implement major reforms. The new government has already sought to assert its authority, at Hezbollah's expense. Since Assad's fall, for example, Lebanon's National News Agency reports that the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) have led more than a dozen raids of captagon facilities, primarily in the rugged terrain of Baalbek-Hermel and northern Akkar, areas that border Homs and Damascus governorates. Syria's new authorities have also targeted these borderlands, working in parallel with Lebanese authorities to close smuggling routes and weed out remnants of drug production by Hezbollah and allied narco-entrepreneurs in remote mountain passes.<sup>26</sup>

In their war on captagon, Syrian counter-narcotics officials have turned their attention to prominent traffickers across the un-demarcated border with Lebanon, which has four official crossing

22 Max Kravitz and Will Nichols, "A Bitter Pill to Swallow: Connections Between Captagon, Syria, and the Gulf," *Journal of International Affairs*, May 18, 2016, <https://jia.sipa.columbia.edu/news/bitter-pill-swallow-connections-between-captagon-syria-and-gulf> and United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *Global SMART Update*, vol. 1 (March 2009), [https://www.unodc.org/documents/scientific/Global\\_SMART\\_UpdateV1-HiRes-Web.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/scientific/Global_SMART_UpdateV1-HiRes-Web.pdf).

23 "DEA Cracks Down on Alleged Hezbollah Terror Financing Operation," *Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP)*, February 2, 2016, <https://www.occrp.org/en/news/dea-cracks-down-on-alleged-hezbollah-terror-financing-operation>.

24 Center for Operational Analysis and Research (COAR), *The Syrian Economy at War: Captagon, Hashish, and the Syrian Narco-State*, May 2023. See also: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/may/07/drug-captagon-turning-syria-into-narco-state>

25 Maya Gebeily, James Pearson, and David Gauthier-Villars, "How Israel's Bulky Pager Fooled Hezbollah," *Reuters*, October 16, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/graphics/ISRAEL-PALESTINIANS/HEZBOLLAH-PAGERS/mopawkkwjpa/>.

26 Ahmad Sharawi, "Analysis: Syria's Crackdown on Smuggling Sparks Tensions with Hezbollah and Lebanon," *Long War Journal*, February 11, 2025, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2025/02/analysis-syrias-crackdown-on-smuggling-sparks-tensions-with-hezbollah-and-lebanon.php>.

points and scores of passes used by smugglers.<sup>27</sup> Rumors circulated in February 2025 that Syrian security forces killed one of the most infamous captagon traffickers in Lebanon during escalating border clashes in Hawik, on Lebanon's northern border with Syria.<sup>28</sup> Lebanese judicial figures have said that the country's clan-based illicit economy has shifted from hashish to captagon in recent years, building on long-established linkages with Hezbollah.<sup>29</sup> Syrian narcotics officials echo this, and have stated in interviews that prominent narco-mediators from the Assad era have connections within Lebanon, suggesting that efforts to revive the captagon trade may be centered in Lebanon.<sup>30</sup>

Within Lebanon, the LAF is stretched thin, and its forces have limited enforcement capacity. It faces persistent resource challenges, as Lebanon's economic implosion has drained state institutions of resources. Its mandate is also expanding, and under the terms of the November 2024 ceasefire agreement between Hezbollah and Israel, the LAF is expected to boost its presence in south Lebanon, which raises the prospect of anti-captagon operations being deprioritized due to resource constraints.

Complicating the LAF's task is the reality that Hezbollah is not alone among actors with entry points to the captagon industry in Lebanon. Nuh Zaiter, one of the most prominent figures associated with the narcotics trade in the country, reportedly enjoys ties to both Hezbollah and its rival Shiite faction, Amal.<sup>31</sup> Trafficking operations rooted in Christian and Druze clans are also known, and these actors may be able to exploit the vacuum created by the

fall of the Assad regime and the setbacks to Hezbollah. In addition, the emergence of captagon as a commercially viable narcotic has altered the political economy of the drug trade in the country. Unlike the cultivation of hashish—the drug most associated with Lebanon—captagon production does not require extensive land holdings, thus allowing smaller clans and actors with fewer conventional connections to enter the market.<sup>32</sup>

The potential future of large-scale captagon production within Lebanon is therefore uncertain. Hezbollah has deep experience in all aspects of the trade and a pressing need for revenues. Yet the group faces formidable pressure on its home turf from the Lebanese government, and the country's leadership fears both costly trade embargoes and Western sanctions over unchecked narcotics trafficking. Previously, Hezbollah enjoyed privileged access to the Beirut airport, an important vector for smuggling. Yet in May 2025, its loyalists were ousted from the airport in order to satisfy U.S. and Israeli security demands.<sup>33</sup> Uprooting narco-financing and the drug trade are priorities of Lebanon's Western supporters and Gulf state allies, who have provided significant support in the past. It remains to be seen how Hezbollah and other actors might respond to this opportunity. Will the group attempt to utilize industrial-scale captagon production within Lebanon as a means to finance its revival? If so, will the LAF and its international partners mobilize the necessary resources to stop them? If Lebanon's authorities succeed in uprooting an emerging captagon industry, will nascent producers relocate to theaters where they face less intense scrutiny?

27 Jeremy Arbid, "Captured by Captagon? Lebanon's Evolving Illicit Drug Economy," *Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime*, June 5, 2017, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/captagon/>.

28 Joanna Farhat, "What should happen at the border? And what is the fate of Nuh Zaiter," *MTV Lebanon*, February 9, 2025, <https://www.mtv.com.lb/news/محلّيات/1546919/ما-يجب-أن-يحصل-على-الحدود---وما-مصير-نوح-زعتير> (AR).

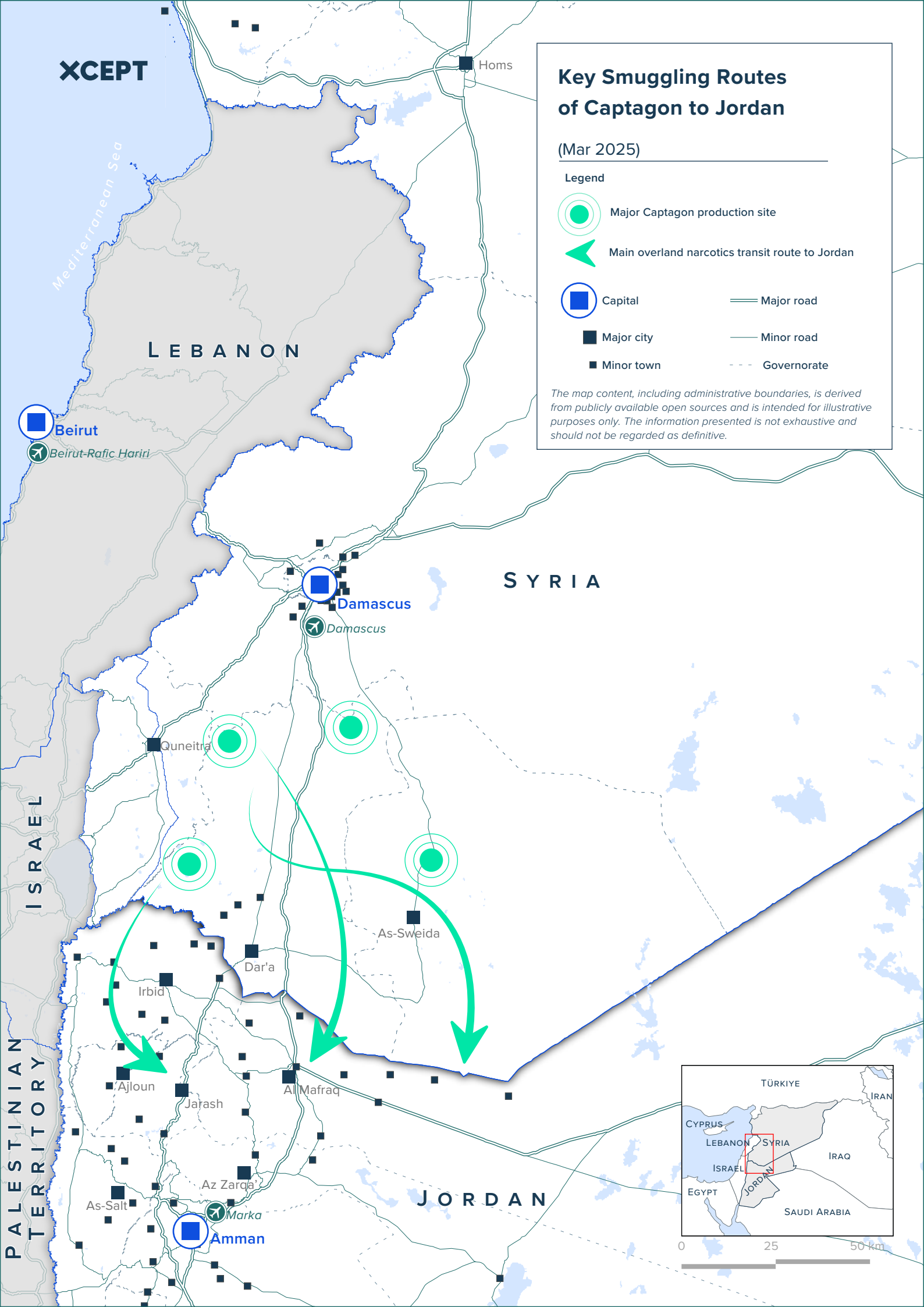
29 Mohanad Hage Ali, "Double Dealers: Lebanon and the Risks of Captagon Trafficking," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, March 19, 2025, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2025/03/double-dealers-lebanon-and-the-risks-of-captagon-trafficking?lang=en>.

30 KII in Homs, Syria, 26 March, 2025; KII in Damascus, Syria, April 6, 2025.

31 Mohanad Hage Ali, "Double Dealers: Lebanon and the Risks of Captagon Trafficking," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, March 19, 2025, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2025/03/double-dealers-lebanon-and-the-risks-of-captagon-trafficking?lang=en>.

32 Ibid.

33 Omar Abdel-Baqi, "Loosening Hezbollah's Grip on Lebanon Begins at the Airport," *The Wall Street Journal*, May 10, 2025: [https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/lebanon-hezbollah-beirut-airport-control-3188b9b4?reflink=desktopwebshare\\_permalink](https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/lebanon-hezbollah-beirut-airport-control-3188b9b4?reflink=desktopwebshare_permalink).



## Jordan

Despite its centrality as a trafficking route in the drug trade, Jordan is perhaps the least likely venue for industrial scale captagon production in the Levant. The Jordanian government has worked assiduously to combat both trans-shipment and usage within its borders, and rare efforts to establish domestic production have been swiftly eradicated.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, the regional geopolitical turmoil of recent years has made Jordan all the more valued as a fulcrum of stability, drawing in substantial Western military and economic aid.

During the latter years of the Assad era, Jordan prioritized the eradication of captagon flows as a major national security priority.<sup>35</sup> Jordan's northern border has thus been heavily militarized, in an effort to interdict captagon shipments as well as the flow of arms from Syria. These efforts featured the large-scale deployment of the Jordanian Armed Forces along the border, as well as cross border operations into Syria such as the May 2023 airstrike that killed Merhi al-Ramthan, the so-called "Escobar of Southern Syria."

Nonetheless, Jordan is likely to continue experiencing the spillover effects of captagon production in southern Syria. In the wake of Assad's fall, such smuggling persists, led by cross-border tribal networks and abetted by a post-revolutionary

governance vacuum and localized conflicts among various Druze and Arab constituencies in southern Syria.<sup>36</sup> The hubs of smuggling operations are two pockets of limited de-facto authority control, where the door is open for exploitation by opportunistic narco-entrepreneurs.<sup>37</sup> In eastern Dar'a Governorate, former armed opposition fighters who reconciled first with Assad and now with the government under Al-Sharaa remain key players in local security, governance, and illicit economic activity. In neighboring As-Sweida, local Druze forces belonging to the Liwa al-Jabal and Rijal al-Karamah factions now vie with Arab tribes over control of smuggling routes and rights.

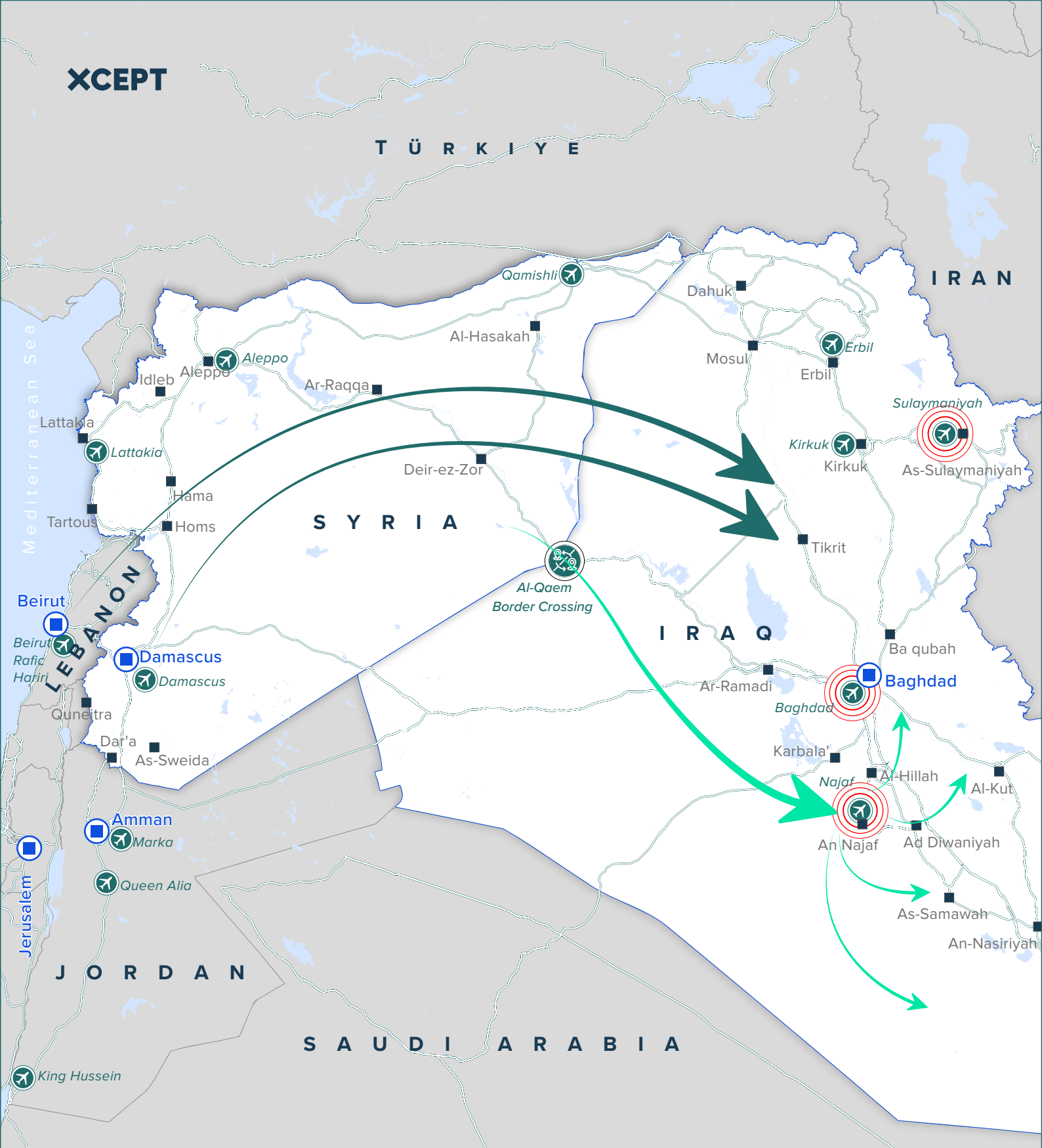
In a context of widespread economic desperation, the incentives for remaining Assad-era narco-entrepreneurs to exploit the governance vacuum in southern Syria are high—but Jordanian authorities are well positioned to defend their borders, and they retain strong Western support. Not only is Jordan an unlikely venue for industrial scale production, therefore, but there are also strong indications that it will become an increasingly difficult transit channel for smuggling of all types out of southern Syria, particularly given stronger cooperation with Syrian authorities.

<sup>34</sup> "AND Raids 'Captagon Laboratory' in Drug Bust," *The Jordan Times*, January 16, 2018, <https://jordantimes.com/news/local/and-raids-captagon-laboratory%E2%80%9999-drug-bust>.

<sup>35</sup> Confidential discussions with British embassy officials in Amman, Jordan, February 2025. Further discussed in <https://www.occrp.org/en/investigation/a-drug-war-syrias-neighbors-fight-a-flood-of-captagon-across-their-borders>.

<sup>36</sup> Lemma Shehadi, "Captagon Smuggler Welcomed by Regime in Damascus Despite Crackdown," *The National*, March 30, 2025, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/news/mena/2025/03/30/captagon-smuggler-welcomed-by-regime-in-damascus-despite-crackdown/>.

<sup>37</sup> KII in Damascus, Syria, March 22, 2025; KII in Damascus, Syria, March 23, 2025.



## Key Smuggling Routes of Captagon to Iraq

(Mar 2025)

### Legend

 Main overland route for narcotics smuggling into Iraq

 Main air route for narcotics smuggling into Iraq

 Airports used for smuggling narcotics

 Capital

 Major city

 Major road

 Major airport

The map content, including administrative boundaries, is derived from publicly available open sources and is intended for illustrative purposes only. The information presented is not exhaustive and should not be regarded as definitive.



## Iraq

To the east, the smuggling networks within Syria that had previously moved captagon from Syria into Iraq are in disarray. During the Assad era, Arab militias like Lebanese Hezbollah and Iraq's Kata'ib Hezbollah enabled the movement of captagon to the Syrian-Iraqi border—most notably to the crossing from Abu Kamal to al-Qaim, which had been under the control of Iraq's so-called “resistance” militias since their successes in the campaign against the Islamic State circa 2017.<sup>38</sup> Once shepherded through border checkpoints, Kata'ib Hezbollah would then move the pills to the logistical hub of Najaf, where a constellation of militias and criminal networks would break down loads of pills for various markets across Iraq and beyond—in a collaborative enterprise among Shi'a militias aligned with Iran and local criminal networks that one interviewee compared to the informal power-sharing agreements that characterize Iraq's political system, wherein consignments of pills are allocated to various groups in a consensus-based system designed to maintain equilibrium among competing factions.<sup>39</sup>

With Assad's fall, however, Iran and its Arab militia clients have lost their footing in Syria. This creates problems not only for production within Syria, but also transport to the Syrian-Iraqi border. The HTS-led government is profoundly hostile to Iran and its supporters, pushing them from the country. Furthermore, Israeli air strikes in the vicinity of the border crossing from Abu Kamal into al-Qaim have compelled both Lebanese Hezbollah and various Iran-aligned Iraqi militias to dramatically lower their profile, while leading Iraqi militias

are now considering disarmament in the face of mounting pressure from the United States.<sup>40</sup>

Looking to the future, Iraq's Iran-aligned militias could attempt to engage in large-scale production, but there are several factors that might check their ambitions. The first is the extent to which narcotics consumption has become a societal catastrophe for Iraq. United Nations figures indicate that the quantities of drugs seized in Iraq increased by 3,380% between 2019 and 2023, while domestic usage of hard drugs is booming.<sup>41</sup> Captagon, crystal meth, and other drugs are endemic across Iraq—catalyzed by endemic societal despair over political and economic stagnation, fed by a decentralized trafficking and distribution ecosystem, and enabled by systemic corruption within the security sector.<sup>42</sup>

Societal backlash is such that the government regularly publicizes large-scale crackdowns, and the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) itself (in theory, the umbrella organization that legitimizes Kata'ib Hezbollah and other Iran-aligned groups active in the drug trade) now portrays itself publicly as a counter-narcotics enterprise.<sup>43</sup> In the words of a source close to security officials in southern Iraq, “the PMF wants to continue to legitimize its existence as an independent actor in Iraq's security architecture, and fighting drugs is now a key argument.” As such, there is tremendous pressure for solutions to Iraq's narcotics epidemic, and entering into industrial production could expose aspiring producers to formidable pressure—not only from the security sector, but also from Iraqi society itself (insofar as Iraq's leading militias are also players in electoral politics).

38 Christopher Sims, Antonio Ruiz, and Nicholas Krohley, *Evidence Synthesis: Captagon in Iraq and Jordan: Understanding the Problem and Evaluating Solutions* (London: Cross-Border Conflict Evidence, Policy and Trends [XCEPT], November 2024), <https://www.xcept-research.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/XCEPT-Evidence-Synthesis-Captagon-in-Iraq-and-Jordan.pdf>.

39 Farah Shakir, “The Power-Sharing Arrangements in Iraq: The Instability Within,” in *Power-Sharing in the Global South*, 261–284, [https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-031-45721-0\\_12](https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-031-45721-0_12) (subscription required). Also, see Mohaned Hage Ali, “Double Dealers: Lebanon and the Risks of Captagon Trafficking,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 19 March 2025, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2025/03/double-dealers-lebanon-and-the-risks-of-captagon-trafficking>.

40 Ahmed Rasheed, “Exclusive: Iran-Backed Militias in Iraq Ready to Disarm to Avert Trump Wrath,” *Reuters*, April 7, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iran-backed-militias-iraq-ready-disarm-avert-trump-wrath-2025-04-07/>.

41 Ghada Waly, “CND67: Methamphetamine and ‘Captagon’ Threat in the Middle East,” *United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime*, March 18, 2024, <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/speeches/2024/cnd67-methamphetamine-and-captagon-threat-in-the-middle-east.html>.

42 Christopher Sims, Antonio Ruiz, and Nicholas Krohley, *Captagon in Iraq and Jordan: Understanding the Problem and Evaluating Solutions* (London: Cross-Border Conflict Evidence, Policy and Trends [XCEPT], November 18, 2024), <https://www.xcept-research.org/publication/captagon-in-iraq-and-jordan-understanding-the-problem-and-evaluating-solutions/>.

43 “Iraq Torchers Giant Haul of Illegal Drugs in ‘Largest Destruction Operation in 13 Years,’” *Al-Mashareq*, December 19, 2022, [https://almashareq.com/en\\_GB/articles/cnmi\\_am/features/2022/12/19/feature-04](https://almashareq.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_am/features/2022/12/19/feature-04).

# Looking Beyond the Levant

Looking further beyond Syria's immediate neighbors, what other venues might exist for industrial-scale captagon production?

## The Kurdish Question

Active cross-border smuggling networks span the Kurdish communities of Syria, Türkiye, Iraq, and Iran. In recent months, interviewees note occasional movement of Assad-era captagon stores from Syria, through Türkiye, and into Iraq.<sup>44</sup> Sources allege that the Turkish government has turned a blind eye to small shipments, on the condition that no captagon is distributed within Türkiye.

This activity is thought to be an opportunistic effort to unload old inventory, as opposed to the opening of a new front in the trade. Moreover, it seems unlikely that Kurdish regions within any of these countries would be viable as large-scale production sites, owing to a lack of past involvement in the trade and the extent to which Kurdish minority communities possess adequate political capital and sovereignty within their respective countries to engage in industrial-scale captagon production in the face of central government opposition.<sup>45</sup>

Thus far, Türkiye has defied regional trends by preventing the proliferation of captagon within the country. This is due to tight inspection regimes of cross-border traffic and heavy policing of its southern frontier, including with Iraq. The country's robust security apparatus and growing cooperation with Kurdish leadership in Iraq increase its ability to squelch cross-border drug movements and the future emergence of a captagon industry within Türkiye.

## The Yemen Alternative?

Yemen is unlikely to emerge as a captagon hotspot, despite sharing a 1,300-kilometer border with Saudi Arabia, the world's most valuable market for the drug. There is no evidence that any actor has produced captagon at scale in Yemen. Ansar Allah (i.e., the Houthis), who control much of the country, including the capital, Sanaa, have little reason to risk poisoning their softening relations with Saudi Arabia. After years of supporting a military coalition against the Houthis, Riyadh has generally concluded that continued fighting on its southern border is an unwelcome diversion that threatens to spoil the Kingdom's ambitious Vision 2030 development plans — the touchstone of Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman's domestic agenda. The Houthis are reluctant to risk a resumption

<sup>44</sup> KII, Iraq, March 24, 2025.

<sup>45</sup> Renad Mansour and Hayder Al-Shakeri, "How Supply Chains Fuel Transnational Conflict in the Middle East," *Chatham House*, November 18, 2024, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2024/11/how-supply-chains-fuel-transnational-conflict-middle-east>.

of fighting with their former Saudi antagonists, and the former belligerents continue to uphold the fundamental terms of a 2022 truce.<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, recent American military pressure has reportedly pushed IRGC elements out of Yemen.<sup>47</sup> If true, the departure of foreign forces would further isolate Yemen. Alongside Yemen's lack of infrastructure needed to support large-scale drug production, these factors mitigate against the country's emergence as a hub in the transnational captagon trade.

## The Offshore Option?

Aspiring producers and traffickers—most notably Lebanese Hezbollah—may find opportunities in parts of the Maghreb and West Africa, where conflict, weak governance, and widespread corruption foster impunity. There is also a history of captagon in these areas, as traffickers have previously routed shipments through countries including Libya and Nigeria, unloading inbound shipments of the drug and repackaging them to disguise their source in response to tightening inspection regimes in the Gulf.<sup>48</sup>

In October 2021, Nigerian authorities intercepted a shipment containing more than 450,000 captagon pills inbound from Lebanon.<sup>49</sup> Only two months earlier, Spanish officials reportedly intercepted 20 tons of hashish en route to Nigeria, on a

ship chartered by a Lebanese company associated with previous drug busts.<sup>50</sup> Authorities also intercepted consignments of captagon in Sierra Leone in 2024 and, more recently, in March 2025.<sup>51</sup>

For two decades, Hezbollah and IRGC-affiliated networks have been accused of funding their core operations in part through racketeering and illicit trafficking in diamonds, weapons, and narcotics in Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Côte d'Ivoire, and Guinea. Hezbollah in particular has succeeded in diversifying its global funding streams through fundraising activities—and extortion—among a large Shi'a Lebanese diaspora in West Africa and South America.<sup>52</sup> At present, no evidence directly indicates that large-scale captagon production has, as yet, shifted to West Africa. However, Hezbollah enjoys the advantage of established trafficking networks and critical relationships with security personnel and authorities in West Africa. These factors have been critical in the illicit Hezbollah activity in the region, and they may provide the group the infrastructure to build out industrial-scale captagon production without the risk of directly implicating its operations in Lebanon, where the group faces far greater scrutiny.

More recently, reporting has indicated that Sudan is emerging as a hub of the captagon trade. At least 19 separate interdiction incidents linked to the country have been recorded since 2015,<sup>53</sup> although the true scale of the trend may be larger, due to complications in monitoring and detection within

46 "A Fragile but Enduring Truce in Yemen," *Arab Center Washington DC*, August 27, 2024, <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/a-fragile-but-enduring-truce-in-yemen/>.

47 "Iran Abandons Houthis Under Relentless US Bombardment," *The Telegraph*, April 3, 2025, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2025/04/03/iran-abandons-houthis-us-air-strikes-trump-yemen-israel/>.

48 "Greek Captagon Bust Leads to a Criminal Gang and the Port at the Heart of Syria's Booming New Drug Trade," *Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP)*, accessed April 30, 2025, <https://www.occrp.org/en/investigation/greek-captagon-bust-leads-to-a-criminal-gang-and-the-port-at-the-heart-of-syrias-booming-new-drug-trade>.

49 Murtala Abdullahi, "Nigeria Facing Security Risk From Pills Associated With Syria's Civil War," *HumAngle*, November 10, 2021, <https://humanglemedia.com/nigeria-facing-security-risk-from-pills-associated-with-syrias-civil-war/>.

50 "Video: Spanish Police Intercept Cargo Ship with 20 Tons of Hashish," *The Maritime Executive*, August 11, 2021, <https://maritime-executive.com/article/video-spanish-police-intercept-cargo-ship-with-20-tons-of-hashish>; and "Spain: Drugs Seized in Ship Coming from Lebanon with Syrian Crew," *The Syrian Observer*, August 12, 2021, <https://syrianobserver.com/foreign-actors/spain-drugs-seized-in-ship-coming-from-lebanon-with-syrian-crew.html>.

51 Amin Kef, "Sierra Leone Government Destroys Over \$94 Million Worth of Illicit Drugs," *The Calabash Newspaper*, July 22, 2024, <https://thecalabashnewspaper.com/sierra-leone-government-destroys-over-94-million-worth-of-illicit-drugs/> and Beirut Time (@beiruttime\_leb), X, April 30, 2025, [https://x.com/beiruttime\\_leb/status/1898086081007919194](https://x.com/beiruttime_leb/status/1898086081007919194).

52 Noé Hochet-Bodin, Arnaud Deux, and Cyril Bensimon, "How Hezbollah Raises Funds in West Africa," *Le Monde*, October 12, 2024, [https://www.lemonde.fr/en/le-monde-africa/article/2024/10/12/how-hezbollah-raises-funds-in-west-africa\\_6729206\\_124.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/le-monde-africa/article/2024/10/12/how-hezbollah-raises-funds-in-west-africa_6729206_124.html); Toulou Akerele, "The Iranian Revolutionary Apparatus and Hezbollah in West Africa," *Hudson Institute*, October 22, 2021, <https://www.hudson.org/node/44280>; and Clara Broekaert and Colin P. Clarke, "How Hezbollah Diversified Its Funding," *Foreign Policy*, November 25, 2024, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/11/25/hezbollah-funding-crime-terror-nexus-trump/>.

53 Caroline Rose and Rafaella Lipschitz, "Sudan's Emergence as a New Captagon Hub," *New Lines Institute*, August 12, 2025, <https://newlinesinstitute.org/nonstate-actors/sudans-emergence-as-a-new-captagon-hub/>.

the country. Contextual factors in Sudan create a strongly enabling environment for the production of captagon. As in Syria, multi-party conflict and the proliferation of armed groups have shattered the control once asserted by central authorities. The vast extent of Sudan's territory and the influence of foreign actors further hamper interdiction. In addition, the country's proximity to the Red Sea gives smugglers favourable access to the Saudi littoral, a major factor that may enable sea-borne smuggling operations to key Gulf markets.

## The Iranian Moment?

Although there is little evidence to identify Iran itself as a significant source of captagon, the country has a checkered history with narcotics, and the IRGC enjoys structural advantages that would allow it to fill the void left by Maher al-Assad's 4th Division. Iran's ambivalent position in the regional drug trade reflects both its internal social challenges and its position as a key backer of the Middle East region's most prolific narcotics traffickers. Domestically, Tehran has struggled (much in the same way as neighboring Iraq) to address an addiction crisis fueled by widespread social malaise, which is in turn the product of a repressive social climate and economic stagnation aggravated by sanctions.<sup>54</sup> In the past, Iranian officials have called for greater international cooperation on narcotics control and have criticized the West for a failure to recognize domestic counter-narcotics efforts, which reflect both the conservative bent of Iran's clerics and genuine popular concern over rampant drug use.<sup>55</sup>

At the regional level, Iran has reportedly enacted serious measures to combat the infiltration of drugs on its eastern border with Afghanistan and Pakistan—which is intertwined with the activities of armed separatist movements within the Baluchi communities that inhabit this cross-border region. Nonetheless, a 2024 special report by the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) identified Iran as a major corridor for the flow of heroin, opium, and methamphetamine into the Gulf states and Europe, and transnational narco-traffickers continue to exploit Iran's rugged frontier terrain, including extensive marshland, mountains, and desert.<sup>56</sup>

Analysts disagree over the extent to which the IRGC plays an institutional role in narcotics trafficking across the region, and there is no firm evidence of significant captagon production in Iran to date.<sup>57</sup> However, the IRGC has fostered and systematically supported military and paramilitary groups that dominate regional drug trafficking, and numerous IRGC commanders have been sanctioned for involvement in the opium, heroin, and cannabis trades. In 2012, for example, the U.S. Treasury Department sanctioned an IRGC general for drug trafficking, the first use of the Kingpin Act to target an Iranian official.<sup>58</sup> Many IRGC commanders have been listed since.

The IRGC's regional partnerships with "Axis of Resistance" groups are built on a shared network of logistics, military protection, and informal money transfer arrangements.<sup>59</sup> Crucially, the IRGC has embraced a partnership model that allows its client groups to achieve a degree of financial autonomy through narco-financing. Until recently, of the

54 Vanda Felbab-Brown and Bradley S. Porter, "Out with the Old, in with the Old: Iran's Revolution, Drug Policies, and Global Drug Markets," *Brookings Institution*, January 24, 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/out-with-the-old-in-with-the-old-irans-revolution-drug-policies-and-global-drug-markets/>.

55 Ahmad Majidiyar, "Iran's Double-Edged Track Record in Fighting Drug Trafficking," *Middle East Institute*, October 20, 2017, <https://mei.edu/publications/irans-double-edged-track-record-fighting-drug-trafficking>; and Hossein Mohaddes Ardabili et al., "Tramadol, Captagon and Khat Use in the Eastern Mediterranean Region: Opening Pandora's Box," *BJPsych International* 19, no. 3 (August 2022): 58–62, <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9540563/>.

56 United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *Drug Trafficking Dynamics Across Iraq and the Middle East: Trends and Responses, 2019–2023*, Executive Summary, March 2024, [https://www.unodc.org/romena/uploads/documents/2024/UN\\_Iraq\\_ExSum\\_240318.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/romena/uploads/documents/2024/UN_Iraq_ExSum_240318.pdf).

57 National Strategic Research Institute (NSI), *ViTTa Q2 Report: IRGC and the Black Economy*, December 2020, [https://nsiteam.com/social/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/NSI-ViTta\\_IRGC-Black-Econ\\_CENTCOM-Q2\\_final-for-posting.pdf](https://nsiteam.com/social/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/NSI-ViTta_IRGC-Black-Econ_CENTCOM-Q2_final-for-posting.pdf).

58 U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Designates Iranian Qods Force General Overseeing Afghan Heroin Trafficking Through Iran," March 7, 2012, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/tg1444>; and Ian Larson, "Narcos: Syria Edition—and What the US Can Do About It," *Atlantic Council*, March 9, 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/narcos-syria-edition-and-what-the-us-can-do-about-it/>.

59 Veena Ali-Khan and Thanassis Cambanis, "Down but Not Out: Reassessing the Axis of Resistance," *The Century Foundation*, March 19, 2025, <https://tcf.org/content/report/down-but-not-out-reassessing-the-axis-of-resistance/>.

five most notable Iranian proxy groups, only two—the Houthis in Yemen and Hamas in Gaza—were not among the region’s most prolific narco-traffickers. Captagon production and smuggling have served as financial lifelines for the remaining three: the Assad regime in Syria (prior to its collapse), Hezbollah in Lebanon, and Shi’a militia groups in Iraq.

If IRGC figures do step up to play a more central role in the captagon trade, they will enjoy numerous advantages. Iranian forces have benefitted from an inside view of captagon production and distribution in Syria, and the IRGC maintains operational ties to partners producing and smuggling captagon, including Hezbollah in Lebanon and a constellation of militias in Iraq. UNODC data indicate that eastern Iran is the most active regional hotspot for methamphetamine seizures, suggesting access points are already present for both trafficking networks and inputs. The Iran-Iraq border is already an active narcotics smuggling route, primarily for crystal methamphetamine, a drug that has surged in popularity in recent years in Iran, Iraq, and throughout the region. The main routes flow from Iran through the ungoverned marshlands and into the Iraqi provinces of Amarah, Wasit, and Basra.<sup>60</sup>

The near-term actions of the IRGC with respect to captagon will be shaped by the aftermath of recent open warfare between Iran and the Israeli-American alliance. In the event of wider diplomatic rapprochement and stabilization, pressure from regional Arab states may mitigate against an IRGC-led captagon production ecosystem. Arab states have long criticized Iran over its role in narcotics trafficking, accusing it of using drugs as a pressure tactic. Jordan views captagon as part of an Iranian-sponsored campaign to undermine Jordan’s stability. Anti-Iranian constituencies in Iraq hold the same view, seeing captagon and

crystal meth trafficked by Iran and its proxies as “weapons of mass destruction” intended to weaken Iraqi society.<sup>61</sup>

Authorities in Saudi Arabia, the largest market for captagon, have made the issue a pillar of the kingdom’s regional diplomacy. Objections from Riyadh are likely to carry weight in Tehran. Iran and Saudi Arabia restored relations in 2023, following years of proxy warfare across the region. Diplomatic and defense ties between the countries have deepened in the intervening period, and both countries place a premium on the stabilizing impact of the rapprochement, which has allowed each party to concentrate resources on higher-level priorities.<sup>62</sup>

In the event, however, of spiraling regional tensions, the revenue potential of industrial captagon production might appeal strongly to the IRGC. From Iran’s perspective, reconstituting industrial captagon production chains—or pivoting to play a more active role in the trafficking of crystal meth—could create a diplomatic lever at a time when Tehran is facing heightened pressure, including the risk of military confrontation with the U.S. and Israel. This could provide billions in revenues and a potent source of leverage. Hezbollah and affiliated narco-entrepreneurs in the region and abroad may also seize this opportunity. The qualities that made captagon a critical pillar of the Assad regime’s finances sustain its appeal today. The drug is cheap and easy to produce, and a large market already exists across the Middle East. The ensuing challenge to Arab states and Western counter-narcotics authorities remains the fundamental dilemma of the Assad era: are various stakeholders in the region and beyond concerned with captagon as a catalyst of societal harm, or will the captagon trade revert to its status as a core battleground between the region’s Tehran-led bloc and their Arab and Western foes?

60 Faris al-Omran, “Iraq Tackles Proliferation of ‘Crystal Meth’ Smuggled from Iran,” *Diyaruna*, October 26, 2022, [https://diyaruna.com/en\\_GB/articles/cnmi\\_di/features/2022/10/26/feature-01](https://diyaruna.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_di/features/2022/10/26/feature-01).

61 Faris al-Omran, “Iraqi Youth Seen as Target of IRGC-Backed ‘Crystal Meth’ Smuggling Operation,” *Al-Mashareq*, April 25, 2023, [https://almashareq.com/en\\_GB/articles/cnmi\\_am/features/2023/04/25/feature-01](https://almashareq.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_am/features/2023/04/25/feature-01).

62 Holly Dagres, “Iran and Saudi Arabia Deepen Defense and Bilateral Ties,” *Foreign Military Studies Office*, February 15, 2025, <https://fms.o.tradoc.army.mil/2025/iran-and-saudi-arabia-deepen-defense-and-bilateral-ties/> and Veena Ali-Khan, “The Saudi-Iranian Détente Has Proved Vital for De-escalation. But Regional War Could Still Break It,” *The Century Foundation*, October 28, 2024, <https://tcf.org/content/report/the-saudi-iranian-detente-has-proved-vital-for-de-escalation-but-regional-war-could-still-break-it/>.

## Conclusion

Regional captagon trafficking is in abeyance. Assad's fall has disrupted the production ecosystem, and existing stocks of the drug have been largely exhausted since the regime's collapse. However, due to the significant demand for the drug across the region, there is intense financial incentive for narco-entrepreneurs to revive at scale production. Looking ahead, captagon markets remain in place, and the primary question is where and how supply chains can be reconstituted.

Crippling Western sanctions give Iran a strong economic incentive to tap into the billion-dollar revenues of the regional captagon trade. If the IRGC steps up to play a larger or more direct role in this new phase of production, the resulting challenge will intersect with broader Western efforts to manage Tehran's regional influence and nuclear ambitions, both of which are sources of leverage. Although captagon could become a lever against Tehran's regional foes, Iran's warming relations with countries that are major destinations for the drug, particularly Saudi Arabia, may act as a brake on its willingness to play an active role in producing captagon.

Fundamentally, Iranian activity in the production of captagon will likely hinge on wider geopolitical developments. If Iran is able to navigate toward continued rapprochement with regional Arab states, and perhaps reach a "deal" with the Trump administration, entrance into large-scale captagon production would seem unlikely. Alternatively, should regional tensions escalate and Iran wind up pushed into a geopolitical corner, then captagon could provide the IRGC with a novel instrument of irregular warfare.

Hezbollah's potential consolidation of narcotics revenue—especially amid conflict with Israel—raises the prospect of a more financially autonomous Axis of Resistance in which the activities of individual members are less reliant on Iranian backing. In part because of increasing financial pressures in Tehran, Iran's regional partners have already charted semi-independent courses. If Hezbollah is able to fill the void left by the Assad regime and add substantial captagon revenues to its coffers, the group will reap a financial windfall, allowing it to rehabilitate its forces and granting it a more independent hand to engage Israel. Facing pressure within Lebanon, the group may also seek to diversify its production chains, partnering with experienced narco-mediators and distributors from the Assad era to site production facilities in third countries, particularly in West Africa. The result will be a significant destabilizing impact for Lebanon, Israel, the West Bank and Gaza, Syria, and throughout affected West African nations, which may experience blowback in the form of trade embargoes, heightened scrutiny of financial transactions, and 'leakage' of the drug into local markets.

Meanwhile, regional actors—including the Gulf States, Jordan, and Iraq—have intensified their efforts to disrupt trafficking. Their capacity to improve interdiction is genuine, but uneven and incomplete. Demand-side interventions remain important, yet they are insufficient in isolation. In fragile environments such as Iraq, supply alone is capable of generating demand, and widespread social stress has created conditions where narcotics use is now endemic.

In the longer term, Western ambivalence toward the drivers of captagon demand and lingering societal taboos within Arab states create pervasive risk. Regional counter-narcotics strategies promoted by Western powers have addressed captagon primarily as a financing vehicle for the Assad regime. The inability to address broader societal challenges related to captagon, including the societal and public health dimensions of widespread addiction, will make it impossible to fully eliminate the captagon threat.

In this context, the collapse of captagon production could produce unintended harm. Drugs with

far more dangerous pharmacology, most notably crystal meth, have already gained a foothold in the wider region, in part through a “gateway drug” effect, and in part as a means of utilizing existing production and smuggling networks. The emergence of methamphetamine as the next dominant narcotic would entail significantly more destructive public health consequences. This risk is particularly acute in Iraq but also relevant to Jordan, the Gulf, and Syria itself. A chaotic, leaderless narcotics ecosystem—absent industrial-scale captagon supplies—could mark the transition to a far more dangerous phase in the region’s drug economy.

