



# DRUG SMUGGLING IN SYRIA: INVOLVEMENT BY ASSAD REGIME AND COMPLICATION ON REGIONAL COUNTRIES

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## INTRODUCTION

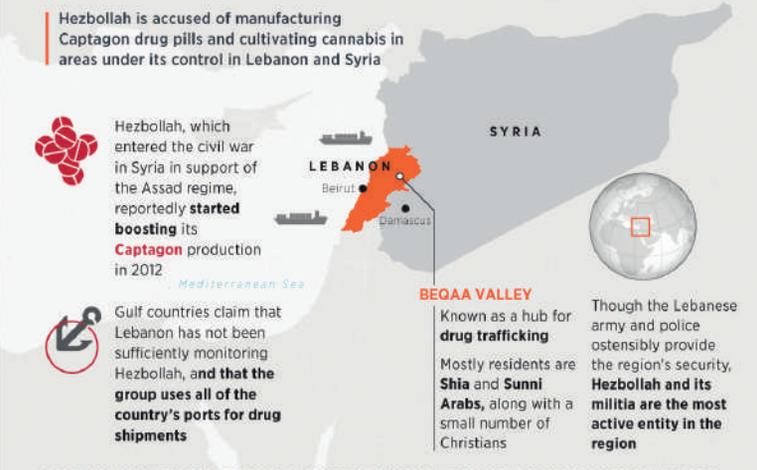
**C**ases of detection of huge shipments of Captagon pills inside commercial goods coming from Syria are increasing in a number of regional and Arab countries, and the efforts of some Arab countries to combat drug smuggling are

increasing in conjunction with a draft resolution in Congress calling on the US administration to make more efforts to combat the manufacture and smuggling of drugs coming from Syria and Lebanon. While there is increasing talk about Arab countries normalising with the Assad regime, the drugs

Drugs issue is not new in the Syrian context, but the recent drugs busts and the location show how it can have consequences that can further destabilise the region.

## Hezbollah accused of turning Lebanon into a drug hub

Hezbollah is accused of manufacturing Captagon drug pills and cultivating cannabis in areas under its control in Lebanon and Syria



Hezbollah, which entered the civil war in Syria in support of the Assad regime, reportedly **started boosting its Captagon production** in 2012.

Gulf countries claim that Lebanon has not been sufficiently monitoring Hezbollah, and that the group uses all of the country's ports for drug shipments.

Known as a hub for **drug trafficking**, Mostly residents are **Shia and Sunni Arabs**, along with a small number of Christians. Though the Lebanese army and police ostensibly provide the region's security, **Hezbollah and its militia are the most active entity in the region**.

RETIRED MAJOR GENERAL FROM THE INTERNAL SECURITY FORCES OF THE LEBANESE INTERIOR MINISTRY

**NAJI MALAYIB**

"Due to the security vacuum created by the government forces, Hezbollah is involved in **the drug cultivation and trade**, especially along the Lebanon-Syria border."

"It is a very open and well-known fact that Lebanon serves as an outlet for drugs going to Europe, Africa, and the Gulf countries."

LEBANESE AGRICULTURE MINISTER

**ABBAS AL-HAJJ HASSAN**

On Nov. 15, he likened the cannabis produced in the Beqaa Valley to "**green gold**," implicitly acknowledging the cannabis production in the region.

LEBANESE CHRISTIAN FARMER PLANTING CANNABIS IN THE BEQAA VALLEY

**GEORGE FAHURI**

"Cannabis in the field costs an average of **\$400** per kilogram, but this price reaches **\$3,000** abroad."

LEBANESE JOURNALIST AND HEZBOLLAH EXPERT

**TONY BOULOS**

"Lebanon has clearly become a center for **drug trafficking**. Alongside it, there is also **Syria**. The Syrian regime and Hezbollah are two important partners in this regard."

"Besides Lebanon, **some border areas in Syria are also controlled by Hezbollah**. These areas function as a free market for drugs."

2017.2018



coming from Syria threaten to cause more social rifts in Arab countries that are already suffering from social and economic crises.

### WHAT ARE THE DRUGS COMING FROM SYRIA?

Captagon is one of the most common drugs in the

Middle East today, and it is the main component of most drug shipments coming from Syria and Lebanon. Captagon appeared in the sixties of last century as a medical drug to treat depression and hypokinetic disorders and to increase energy, before its production was banned in the late 80s due

to the discovery of its harmful side effects, such as addiction and neurological disorders. Captagon originally consisted of the drug Fentanyl, while Captagon, manufactured in Syria, contains a mixture of amphetamine, caffeine, and other substances.

Captagon, as a drug, gives a high sense of strength as it stimulates blood circulation and increases energy production, in addition to increasing focus and not feeling drowsy. It is therefore logical that Captagon trade and manufacturing witnessed a spike in countries that suffer from civil wars since it allows soldiers and fighters to stay without sleep for longer periods and gives them a sense of courage that pushes them to engage in combat operations without fear.<sup>1</sup> The Arab Gulf countries are considered the most important markets for Captagon because of its great spread among young people for several reasons, such as how easy it is to obtain and use, as its price in Saudi Arabia, for example, is about 10 dollars, in addition to its use by foreign workers, especially in the construction and transportation sectors that require physical effort and long working hours. The good quality Captagon

produced in Syria comes in a white colour, while the poor quality is yellow engraved with the letter C and the letter L label on the bags, making it easy to distinguish from other narcotic pills.

Several Arab countries have also seized shipments of the narcotic hashish coming from Syria, bearing the name *al-Amira*, "Princess." These trademarks mean that there is one party responsible for the manufacture, shipment and smuggling of narcotics from Syria, and that the mark is placed to distinguish it from other drugs. Also, the manufacture of Captagon does not require high-tech laboratories or specialised experts like other drugs, and its main components, amphetamine and caffeine, are not considered to be prohibited or controlled substances, which facilitates the process of accessing them.

Although the attempts to smuggle Captagon have increased in the past two years, the manufacture and smuggling of Captagon began several years before the Syrian crisis, as Saudi and Jordanian official data indicate that the two countries seized hundreds of thousands of Captagon pills coming through Syria between

The scale of manufacture and smuggling of captagon in Syria is a clear example of how the Syrian regime is directly involved in it as well as the business elite.

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<sup>1</sup> BBC Documentary, The Drug Fuelling Conflict In Syria, September 21, 2015



Drug pills are displayed at a customs warehouse in the Iskenderun Port of Hatay.

2008 and 2010, while Captagon manufacturing is believed to have started in Lebanon in 2007.<sup>2</sup> It is believed that drug smuggling networks close to Hezbollah increased their activity after the July 2006 war with Hezbollah's encouragement to support the party's treasury, which was damaged by the war.<sup>3</sup> With the beginning of the war in Syria, there were cases of Captagon use by some armed opposition factions and the National Defence Militia, before Captagon pills began to spread in regime-controlled areas. But with the beginning of 2016, several countries in the region, such as the Arab Gulf states, Sudan, Libya, and Turkey, began discovering more shipments of drugs coming from Syria and Lebanon. These shipments have increased since mid-2018 with the return of land transportation and transit between

Syria, Lebanon, and the Gulf states, with the reopening of the Nassib-Jaber crossing between Syria and Jordan, which had been closed since 2015 after the armed opposition factions took control.

### THE DRUG INDUSTRY AND SMUGGLING ARE FACILITATED AND RUN BY THE ASSAD REGIME

Several previous investigative reports revealed the involvement of businessmen close to the Assad regime in the drug manufacturing process in cooperation with the regime's military and security institutions. According to a New York Times investigation based on interviews with regional officials and defected officers, Major General Ghassan Bilal, head of the security office of the Fourth

<sup>2</sup> Amman Net, (400) thousand Captagon pills seized, December 22, 2009

<sup>3</sup> The Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime, Captured by Captagon? Lebanon's evolving illicit drug economy, May 2017

Division, led by Maher al-Assad, the brother of the Syrian president, manages the manufacturing and smuggling network and even protects laboratories in addition to facilitating the transportation of drugs to the port of Lattakia and neighbouring countries.<sup>4</sup> The article also mentioned that the head of the Jordanian Narcotics Control Agency, Major General Hassan al-Qudah, said that the checkpoints and bases of the Fourth Division in southern Syria near the Jordanian border are considered the launching points for drug smuggling operations into Jordan, which the Major General considered a dangerous matter.

Another investigation by Al-Araby Al-Jadeed reveals a drug smuggling network in Libya led by Syrians that operates actively in the areas under the control of Major General Khalifa Haftar in eastern Libya and imports drugs from the port of Lattakia directly or sometimes through Egypt.<sup>5</sup> Libya is considered one of the most important drug destinations in the Middle East due to the conflict that has been going on for years and

the weakness of the security services, in addition to being a gateway for drug transit to African and European countries alike.<sup>6</sup> According to the investigation, the Syrian-Libyan citizen, Mahmoud Al-Dajj, was sentenced to death by the Public Prosecution Office in Benghazi in absentia after the police seized huge quantities of drugs inside the warehouses of a company he owned in the port of Benghazi in 2019, after Greek police tipped that they found a huge amount of drugs in a shipment owned by al-Dajj on the "NOKA" ship at sea in December 2018. The investigation revealed that Mahmoud Al-Dajj was also the exclusive agent for Cham Wings Airlines, which is subject to US and European sanctions, and is one of the companies that Rami Makhlouf, Bashar al-Assad's cousin, owned a part of. Al-Dajj and his company, registered in Syria, would not be able to carry out drug smuggling activities if he did not enjoy strong ties with and protection from the Assad regime.

Additionally, the name of another Syrian businessman, Hasan Daqo, appeared in the

Libya served as a transfer point for drugs from Syria to other African countries, and it happened under the eyes of Khalifa Haftar forces.

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<sup>4</sup> Ben Hubbard and Hwaida Saad, On Syria's Ruins, a Drug Empire Flourishes, The New York Times, December 5, 2021

<sup>5</sup> Hamza Khedher and Sami Ahmad, Syrian drugs... smuggled into Libya through the "al-Tayr Network", al-Araby al-Jadeed, June 28, 2021

<sup>6</sup> Mark Micallef, Shifting sands: Libya's changing drug trafficking dynamics on the coastal and desert borders, The Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime, November 28, 2019

Captagon trade through Lebanon after Saudi customs discovered about two million Captagon pills inside a shipment of pomegranates coming from Lebanon in April 2021. After the discovery of the shipment, the Lebanese security forces arrested Daqo and found in his possession documents proving his relationship with Captagon cargo found on a merchant ship in Malaysia. According to an investigation by Enab Baladi newspaper, Daqo has a close relationship with Hezbollah, which allowed it to forcibly seize vast lands on the Syrian and Lebanese borders in the past two years under the eyes of both Syrian and Lebanese authorities.<sup>7</sup> The investigation reveals how Daqo set up laboratories for the manufacture of Captagon inside Syrian territory under the protection of the Fourth Division, and that the shipment of pomegranates entered from Syria to Lebanon and then was transferred to the port of Jeddah.

Looking at the path of drug shipments coming from Syria, the ways used to conceal the smuggling, and the fact that, in general, the manufacture of Captagon requires laboratories and chemicals, it is logical to suggest that this illegal activity takes place within regime-controlled areas and, most of all, that the regime is facilitating such activity, if not directly leading it. Indeed, despite the strict control exercised by the regime on imported materials through a number of laws regulating the process of selling foreign currencies to importers, this control has not been effective in relation to the tracking of medical and chemical materials that were imported for the purpose of manufacturing Captagon. Additionally, while regional coun-

tries publicly announce their discovery of large shipments of drugs coming from Syria, the regime hardly announces the discovery of drugs intended for smuggling. It seems clear that the checkpoints between Syrian governorates and the border crossings do not inspect commercial trucks loaded with goods, despite imposing royalties on trucks to allow their passage through the checkpoints.

Further evidence about the involvement of Syrian regime-linked businessmen in the smuggling of captagon and drugs out of Syria is found when looking at the main tactic used to transport drugs out of Syria, which mainly occurs by using Syrian commercial goods, sometimes bearing well-known brands, to hide the drugs within them. Captagon was discovered inside shipments of vegetables and fruits, in addition to clothing, metals, electrical appliances, and food products coming from Syria. In April 2020, Egyptian customs at Port Said port discovered about 5 tons of hashish inside milk packages of the Milkman Company, owned by Rami Makhoul. The Greek police discovered millions of narcotic pills on board the Noka ship inside the well-known "Golden Medal" detergent packages owned by Salim Daaboul, the son of Muhammad Daaboul, who served for more than 30 years as Hafez and Bashar al-Assad's secretaries. Moreover, in late April 2020, Saudi Arabia discovered in the port of Jeddah about 19 million Captagon pills inside yerba mate drink bags belonging to the Kabour International Group, one of the most important food trading companies in Syria and owned by businessman Adib Kabour, close to Maher Al-Assad. Although the

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<sup>7</sup> Enab Baladi, Hasan Daqo lays hands on property in Syria and extends the second to drug trafficking, April 30, 2021



Narcotic pills belonging to the PYD/PKK found in the shelters on Bursaya Mountain.

three companies denied their relationship to the presence of drugs in their goods and demanded the Syrian authorities to work to stop drug smuggling because it harms the national economy, the businessmen's relations with the regime and the mutual economic benefit they achieve from it suggest that they are directly involved in drug smuggling, if not also involved in its manufacture.

Indeed, the trade and manufacture of drugs in Syria brings huge material benefits to the Assad regime due to the

ease of their manufacture and the impossibility of detecting all drug shipments, especially those smuggled across the Jordanian borders, in addition to the huge market that extends from the African countries of Libya and Sudan to the Gulf States and Iraq. According to estimated figures from the Centre for Operational Analysis and Research (COAR), the drugs coming from Syria, which were seized by regional and European countries in 2020, amounted to about \$3.4 billion.<sup>8</sup> By comparing this figure with Syrian exports, which

Drugs coming from Syria, which were seized by regional and European countries in 2020, amounted to about \$3.4 billion.

<sup>8</sup> COAR, The Syrian Economy at War: Captagon, Hashish, and the Syrian Narco-State, April 27, 2021

amount to about 700 million dollars, it clearly shows how the drug trade has become a basic income for the regime that goes to the accounts of officials and militia leaders involved in the trade, in addition to the salaries of regime fighters.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR THE MANUFACTURE AND TRADE OF DRUGS

As much as the drug trade contributes to huge revenues for the Assad regime, the regime wants to use the drug trade for other reasons that are no less important than the financial one. The volume of drugs flowing from Syria constitutes a pressure card on the regional and Arab countries that pushes them to re-engage with the regime to try to limit the flow of drugs.

An example of this plan by the Assad regime is the meeting of Jordanian officials with regime officials in Amman in September 2021 or at the meeting of the "Arab Intelligence Forum" in Cairo last November. For example, both Jordan and Saudi Arabia suffer from the spread of drugs, especially among young people. According to Jordanian government figures, the number of cases of smuggling, abuse and drug trafficking reached about 20 thousand cases in 2021, i.e. an average rate of 54 cases, which led to the arrest of 79 people per day,<sup>9</sup> which are high numbers that portend important social and security problems, especially with the high rate of unemployment reaching record levels of 25% by mid-2021 and 50% among youth. According to international statistics in 2019, the percentage of drug addicts in Saudi Arabia is about 9%,

with the possibility of an increase in the rate of addicts due to the COVID-19 crisis. According to official Saudi figures, about 40% of drug addicts in the Kingdom are Captagon users, and the number of pills discovered by Saudi customs in shipments from Lebanon and Syria was estimated at 600 million during the last six years. Iraq also suffers from the addiction of young people to Captagon, which has become the second most commonly used drug after crystal meth. According to Iraqi government figures, the police seized between 50-60 million Captagon pills coming from Syria from the beginning of 2021 until last October, a number twenty times greater than drugs seized in the past two years.<sup>10</sup>

While these figures represent a social problem in the Arab countries, they also pose a great danger in the future due to the contribution of drug trade and smuggling to fuelling conflict in countries experiencing internal conflict such as Libya, Sudan, Iraq and Lebanon, as drug trade and attempts to stop it impose an additional burden on the regional states or the international community to reach understandings and political solutions to conflicts that represent a security threat to Europe, such as the conflict in Libya and Syria. With the discovery of drug shipments coming from Syria in several European countries, such as Greece, Italy, and Turkey, and how Syria is turning into a drug-producing country, will not only harm the countries of the Middle East and the policies of the international community in these countries. Rather, it also poses a direct security threat to the European Union and Turkey.

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<sup>9</sup> Al-Ghad, Every day, 79 people are arrested in drug cases, December 19, 2021

<sup>10</sup> Sinan Mahmoud, Watch Iraqi special forces raid drug rings 'more dangerous than terrorism', The National News, October 25, 2021

## CONCLUSION

The drug issue in Syria is no longer limited to the consumption of drugs by some armed groups or limited attempts to smuggle them to neighbouring countries. In recent years, it has become a profitable business for the Assad regime and its militias that generates millions in light of the dire economic crisis and sanctions imposed on the regime.

It has also become a pressure card in the hands of the regime in a number of regional countries, bringing back to memory the regime's use of the card of jihadist groups and the Lebanese crisis between 2003 and 2010 to push countries to engage with it, but

even normalization will not prevent the regime from losing one of the most important financial resources of its militias. On the other hand, the flow of drugs in this huge quantity remains a factor of instability in countries that suffer from fragile stability, especially in the regional countries suffering from armed conflicts, economic problems, and high unemployment. Regional countries and the international community must deal with the issue of drug manufacturing and smuggling through Syria as an issue of paramount importance that requires a clear position against the regime and those responsible for drug manufacturing, and work together to find solutions and mechanisms to combat smuggling.

## About the Author

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Suhail al-Ghazi holds a Bachelor of History degree from Damascus University. He is a research assistant at ORSAM and a non-resident fellow at the Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy. He specialized in security, economy and governance in regime-held areas.



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