



The reach of the trade in Captagon beyond the Middle East

European View
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Abstract

Over the last five years, illicit trade in the amphetamine-type stimulant Captagon has expanded considerably, both in size and scope, posing new challenges to the rule of law, public health and even security dynamics. With its production hub anchored heavily in regime-held areas of Syria—with sponsorship from Syria's Fourth Division and partnered Iran-aligned militias—the Captagon trade has been used as both an alternative revenue source for the cash-strapped and sanctioned Syrian regime and a tool for influence on the diplomatic stage. The Syrian regime has leveraged its agency over the trade, violent cross-border smuggling clashes and plausible deniability with affiliated actors to achieve its aims of the normalisation of relations with it regionally and the granting of concessions.

However, these normalisation efforts have come under pressure as demands from regional neighbours to reduce the flow of Captagon and interdiction capacity have increased. Incentivised to retain their profits from Captagon, producers and traffickers aligned with the Syrian regime's security apparatus have begun to identify new routes and markets outside its primary destinations in the Arab Gulf. As a result, criminal networks have carved out new transit routes across Iraq and Turkey and through African ports, and have even established nodes in southern and mainland Europe—all with the potential for pills to trickle into local consumer markets over time. With the Captagon challenge no longer confined to the Middle East, European countries and their partners are quickly beginning to focus on key aspects of the trade, implementing policies that address supply, demand and accountability for implicated actors.

Keywords

Captagon, Illicit economies, Amphetamine-type stimulant, Islamic State for Iraq and Syria, Assad regime, Narco-state

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Diverging from EU policy

On 1 July 2020, Italian customs authorities at Naples' Port of Salerno seized a peculiar containerised shipment from Syria's Port of Latakia. The shipment of industrial cardboard cylinders contained over one million pills of the amphetamine-type stimulant called 'Captagon'. The pills were marked with two interlocking 'C's that mimic crescent moons—a key feature of the drug. At the time, this was the largest haul of amphetamines in history, breaking world records (Davies 2020).

Initially, Italian authorities blamed the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) for the drug shipment (BBC 2020). Up until that point, multiple media and analytical reports had pointed to ISIS as the exclusive actor behind the trade in Captagon, claiming that the drug had fuelled a string of terrorist incidents, including the 2015 attack in Paris, and had filled ISIS's coffers for wartime activities (Clarke 2017). However, the link between ISIS and large-scale Captagon manufacturing and trafficking was weak; with lost territories since 2017 and dwindling capacity, the terrorist organisation lacked the resources, transportation networks and access to ports that the shipment dispatched to Italy's Port of Salerno would have required. Soon after the Salerno discovery, a wave of investigators, analysts and journalists identified links to an actor very different from ISIS: the Syrian state (Fox 2021).

With no access to the Port of Latakia—a port owned by the Syrian state and jointly managed by Syrian investment company Souria Holding and French shipping firm CMA CGM—ISIS would have been unable to reach, let alone use, the Mediterranean port to dispatch such a massive shipment of drugs (Ahronheim 2019). Additionally, the size of the shipment indicated a new trend in the trade: industrial-sized production. Non-state actors operating in Syria would not have been able to achieve this as the Syrian state had access to and control over industrial pharmaceutical production facilities and manufacturing tools (Ashour et al. 2019). Finally, through identification of the packaging of the Salerno shipment by a *Der Spiegel* investigation, it was found that members of Syria's security apparatus and prominent, regime-aligned members of Syria's agricultural and industrial sectors had played roles in providing packaging materials, transportation and commercial vessels. They had also supplied the connections to the illicit actors in Italy who would receive the shipment of Captagon—these being the mafia group, the Camorra (Reuter 2021).

The Port of Salerno seizure was not the first seizure of Captagon in Europe, but its massive size and clear links to the Syrian regime and European criminal networks rang alarm bells in Brussels. The Syrian regime's adoption of this illicit trade ran the risk of undermining the effects of the EU, US and UK sanctions imposed on the key officials implicated in mass atrocities and war crimes—the trade has provided an estimated income of more than \$7 billion in the last three years (Shaar et al. 2023, 25). Alongside this financial aspect, it has also strengthened the regime's political and geopolitical standing. The regime's control over the Captagon trade has enabled its forces to push into contested areas such as Daaraa and Suwayda through the establishment of Hezbollah- and Fourth

Division-controlled production sites and the recruitment of community members into regime-aligned smuggling rings and manufacturing laboratories (Albulhusn and Shahhoud 2023). The ability to increase trafficking flows and provoke violent clashes with neighbouring countries has also given the Syrian regime a way to pressure its regional counterparts into the normalisation of relations with the state. This tactic proved successful when the Arab League extended an unconditional invitation for Syrian re-entry. Furthermore, regional states such as Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Iraq and the United Arab Emirates have also pursued bilateral discussions about the normalisation of relations, with counter-Captagon coordination at the top of their agendas (Rasool 2023).

The financial, political and geopolitical empowerment of the Syrian regime through the trade in Captagon does not align with EU interests, sanctions or regional strategy. Seeking to incentivise a shift in behaviour away from the politicisation of aid, use of torture and abuse of human rights, mass killings, and collaboration with adversaries, Russia and Iran, the EU and its partners have sought to keep pressure on the Syrian regime and to isolate its members from the regional fold (Borrell 2023). The Captagon trade has offered a financial loophole for Damascus and an avenue through which to bypass this Western strategy.

Spillover from the Middle East into Europe

Since the early 2000s, Captagon's primary destination market has been the Arab Gulf, with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia being the biggest hub of demand. Captagon's mass appeal has made the drug popular, despite long-term health concerns. The drug enables users facing food insecurity to stave off hunger, those working long shifts or studying for exams to stay up late at night, those seeking recreation to experience feelings of euphoria and those experiencing depression to suppress trauma (Rose and Soderholm 2022, 21). Captagon originated in Europe on the licit market in the 1960s, and was only scheduled in the mid-1980s, with the purpose of improving productivity in those suffering from attention-deficit disorders. It is a drug that is consumed orally, as a tablet, allowing the user to avoid the risks of injections and smoking. According to the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, these factors of oral consumption and the supposed boost in productivity make amphetamine-type stimulants such as Captagon attractive. They are perceived as 'less harmful' and the stigma associated with their consumption amongst users in the Gulf, where there is a more conservative approach to drug usage, is reportedly reduced (UNODC 2011, 10).

The market for consumption has expanded in geographic scope as agents of the Captagon trade have responded to trade constraints by identifying new routes and networks. Since September 2021, after the reopening of the Jaber-Nassib border crossing, Jordan has been used as a major transit route to reach Saudi Arabia's market (Oweis 2022). Jordan has experienced a major uptick in overland smuggling along its border with Syria, and Saudi Arabia has also recorded an upswing in seizures of Captagon and other narcotics, both at the port of Al-Haditha and at nodes along its border with Jordan

(Lucente 2022). Captagon smugglers have also extended their network into Iraq, using the Iran-aligned militias that control and tax important chokepoints on the Syrian–Iraqi border and along the Al-Qaim highway to facilitate shipments across the country, through Kuwait and into Saudi Arabia (Haid 2022). Several seizures along the Iraqi border with Syria have been recorded, as well as raids on storage units further into the country, which indicate the growing presence of illicit Captagon syndicates there (*Arab News* 2022).

Captagon smugglers are not only identifying new routes to reach existing destination markets such as Saudi Arabia, but are carving out new transit routes to outsmart customs and establish new pockets of demand outside the region. As regional customs units have begun to track patterns of Captagon trafficking and adopt new technologies to improve interdiction rates, smugglers have responded in kind, using new methods, ports of entry, shell companies and tactics to successfully bypass detection. In a shift from relying on maritime shipments throughout the Mediterranean and the Red Sea to transport containerised shipments of Captagon to Gulf ports, smugglers are starting to utilise overland smuggling—with Turkey as a route of renewed interest (Albin 2023). In 2023 there has been an upswing in the number of Turkish seizures of Captagon smuggled across overland routes from Syria. The Turkish authorities have reported chases with vehicles carrying Captagon across the border with Syria, have raided storage facilities and have broken up major networks operating in the country (Rose 2023). Importantly, the Turkish authorities have additionally identified several Captagon seizures destined not for demand hubs in the Arab Gulf, but for ‘European countries’—a notable divergence from previous seizures (Kaynağı 2023).

Southern European ports along the Mediterranean are familiar with the patterns of Captagon trafficking and smuggling. Since 2018, ports and islands in Greece, Romania and Italy have seized Captagon shipments dispatched from Lebanese or Syrian ports that had been smuggled onto commercial vessels with the help of shell companies and business magnates closely aligned with the Syrian regime and Hezbollah (Alhaji 2022). Initially, traffickers were not sending Captagon shipments to European ports because they were markets for consumption, but rather because they acted as important re-transit sites to dispatch shipments back to the Arab Gulf, where there is steady demand for Captagon. European ports were initially targeted due to their geographic proximity and local customs’ lack of familiarity with the trade (*Shipping and Freight Resource* 2023). Smugglers would route Captagon shipments to southern European ports before directing them to destination markets in the Arab Gulf, as the containerised shipments would receive an EU customs stamp that, the traffickers believed, would lower suspicion amongst the Gulf port authorities and therefore lower the risk of inspection. However, European and Gulf port authorities have become familiar with the patterns and signs of shipments containing Captagon, and have learnt to flag suspicious shipments, creating new constraints for traffickers to overcome.

The resulting tactic amongst Captagon smugglers has been to shift away from sending containerised commercial shipments through the Mediterranean Sea into Europe, instead

routing smaller shipments along overland routes through Turkey and into mainland Europe. Additionally, there has been an uptick in criminal networks' use of storage facilities, shell companies and businesses in Europe—including in places much further north than the Mediterranean coast—to smuggle Captagon back into Gulf destination markets. In Austria, authorities dismantled a years-old Lebanese and Syrian network that was smuggling Captagon to the Middle East out of a pizzeria in Salzburg, using washing and dryer machines to hide the pills (Widmayer 2022). In Germany's Bavaria, a Syrian network was arrested for using a large warehouse facility to both store Captagon pills sent from the Levant and dispatch them back to the Gulf (Al Wasl 2022). This past July, German authorities additionally identified a Captagon laboratory in Regensburg, signalling that networks are beginning to test the production of Captagon in Europe (*South China Morning Post* 2023). Captagon criminal networks have additionally coordinated with local European organised crime networks to receive and store pills: as noted above, in the July 2020 Port of Salerno shipment, an Italian mafia group, the Camorra, was listed as the recipient of the shipment (Tondo 2020). It is unclear how long the Camorra intended to keep the Captagon pills for or whether the shipment was destined for local consumption or for larger markets in the Gulf, but the Syrian actors' coordination with a formidable Italian organised crime group demonstrates their sophistication and risk-accepting behaviour, aspects which challenge the rule of law, in both the Middle East and its near abroad.

While there is no significant evidence of major Captagon consumption in Europe, the more that Captagon trafficking networks embed themselves in mainland Europe—using storage facilities and collaborating with European criminal networks—the more likely it becomes that Captagon tablets will trickle down into local markets, creating new pockets of demand. While Captagon's amphetamine-type qualities may not make it the most competitive substance on Europe's illicit markets, its broad appeal across demographics and its spectrum of effects mean that authorities and experts should not rule out the possibility of Captagon exacerbating the existing challenges caused by illicit synthetic substances in Europe.

An emerging EU strategy

As the Captagon trade has created new challenges for regional and extra-regional rule of law, security, political stability and public health, the EU has begun to monitor its expansion with concern. The EU, along with its partners, the US and the UK, has started to perceive the Captagon trade no longer as a formidable illicit economy, but as a geopolitical challenge to its interests in the Middle East and at home.

The utilisation of the Captagon trade to create alternative revenue—estimated at \$2.7 billion a year—for the Syrian regime and its partners, Hezbollah and Iran-aligned militias, undermines the interests of the EU and its partners in Syria and the region at large (Shaar et al. 2023, 25). The trade empowers malign security groups operating under the umbrella of the Fourth Division and Iran-backed militias, providing finance to sustain

military and political operations, as well as a justification to push into contested territories to establish manufacturing facilities, recruit local smuggling rings and set up border checkpoints (Hubbard and Saad 2021). The trade has additionally resulted in an increased regime and Iran-aligned presence along borders with countries in which the EU and its partners have invested in border security systems, such as Israel, Jordan, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, thus creating potential flashpoints for substantial direct armed conflict (COAR 2022). The trade has also empowered the Syrian regime diplomatically, providing a bargaining chip through its provocation of increased cross-border violence and agency over supply to pressure its neighbours for the unconditional normalisation of relations. And within the EU's borders, the Captagon trade presents a new challenge: it has the potential to undermine the rule of law and increase corruption with the transfer of trafficking networks into mainland Europe and the empowerment of existing criminal groups through direct collaboration. It also poses a potential public health risk if the drug becomes a popular substance in local consumer markets (Askew 2023).

As a result, the EU has initiated the process for what appears to be the start of a promising counter-Captagon strategy. On 24 April 2023, the EU imposed sanctions on a series of major Syrian and Lebanese players in the Captagon trade who have clear connections with the Assad regime and Hezbollah (European Council 2023). In this listing, the EU additionally provided evidence of their suspected involvement in the provision of trafficking materials, Captagon production and transportation, and the use of shell companies for shipments—an important step in accountability efforts. This listing followed a joint US–UK sanctions announcement on 28 March, indicating that the EU is in lockstep with its partners in leading a collaborative, counter-Captagon strategy (US Department of the Treasury 2023). In Washington, the US Congress passed legislation establishing the US's first inter-agency strategy regarding the Captagon trade, with the intention of targeting regime links and promoting accountability amongst state and Hezbollah-aligned actors who are sponsoring production and smuggling in order to undercut the effects of sanctions (US Congress 2022). Additionally, US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken recently announced the launch of a Global Coalition to Address Synthetic Drug Threats, which will, among other things, work to restrict the trade in Captagon (US Department of State 2023).

There is further room for the EU and its partners to act, particularly as greater exchange of intelligence, tip-offs and best practices is needed to limit the supply and demand of Captagon. On 29 March 2023, after the US and the UK imposed sanctions on Captagon traffickers, Member of the European Parliament Michael Hoogeveen introduced a series of parliamentary questions enquiring about the EU's next steps. He specifically asked whether the European External Action Service had compiled a Captagon trade-specific strategy and increased its interaction with the authorities in Washington, London and the regional capitals to address this illicit trade (European Parliament 2023). While the European External Action Service is actively monitoring the trade and the EU has enacted a series of sanctions against Captagon traffickers, a broader counter-Captagon strategy and multilateral framework is absent within EU policy. It is important that the

EU establishes a parallel inter-agency strategy to monitor and promote the accountability of implicated actors, and increase public awareness of the health implications of Captagon consumption. It is equally important that the EU works with its partners both in the West and the Middle East to assemble a Captagon-specific multilateral mechanism that promotes informational exchange and dialogue on demand, supply, interdiction and effective harm-reduction strategies.

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