



## ***THE DOSSIER***

# **The Syrian Regime's Captagon End Game**

*By Karam Shaar and Caroline Rose*

### **Executive Summary**

Amphetamine-type stimulants, marketed as “captagon,” continue to flood the Mediterranean-Gulf region. At least 370 million pills were seized in 2022 throughout the region, representing only part of the total market as countless captagon pills went unreported or undetected by law enforcement agencies. The hike in captagon’s prevalence has been detrimental to an already volatile region, exploiting gaps in governance, security, and public health. While consumer countries are left to struggle with captagon’s health and security impacts, the drug is empowering the main supplier and sponsor of the industry: the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

The world is scrambling to respond to this crisis. Regional consumption hubs including Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Iraq, and the UAE are enhancing their interdiction capacity; legislators in the U.S. are demanding an interagency counter-captagon strategy; and Western countries are announcing sanctions on suppliers in Syria and, to a lesser extent, Lebanon.

While evidence of regime-aligned participation in the captagon trade builds, a relatively consistent narrative has emerged within regime-controlled areas. This report presents the first comprehensive analysis of that narrative domestically and internationally and compares it with regime actions on the ground.

This report analyzes all articles with the word “narcotics” in the title in the official Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA) from 2015 to 2022. This data



Fighters affiliated with Syria’s Hayat Tahrir al-Sham rebel group display drugs seized at a checkpoint in Daret Ezza, in northern Aleppo province in April 2022. (Omar Haj Kadour / AFP via Getty Images)

is supplemented by Syria’s formal submissions to the United Nations Office on Drug and Crime (UNODC), statements from regime officials, and the death sentences related to narcotics and announced in the gazette. To examine policies on the ground, the authors qualitatively analyze the existing literature and track reported seizure announcements from other countries in the region during 2021 and 2022, where the seizing authority formally and explicitly identified the country or region of origin of captagon shipments.



Over the last three years, there has been a notable rise in captagon shipments directly tied to laboratories, ports, smuggling networks, and packaging materials based in regime-held areas. This has been accompanied by accumulating evidence of regime-aligned security officials and individuals supervising industrial-level captagon production in regime-controlled areas.

Yet the Assad regime has steadily argued there is no captagon production whatsoever within its controlled areas. Furthermore, while the Syrian government reports a high number of seizures compared to other countries in the region, the amounts seized are much smaller. As captagon has become a top agenda item during normalization discussions with the regime, the U.S. and its partners need to recognize the disparity between the Syrian regime's anti-narcotics narrative and its actions.

### Key Takeaways

- The Syrian regime's relatively consistent counternarcotics narrative has been a denial of captagon production in the areas it controls, with little being smuggled across the border, supplemented by a cosmetic series of small-sized seizures.
- The regime's narrative contrasts starkly with accumulating evidence of industrial-scale production concentrated well within its areas and evidence of regime- and Hezbollah-aligned individuals systematically involved in supply and smuggling operations.

- The regime will continue to take advantage of and weaponize the captagon trade as an "agenda item" in regional normalization, framing reported captagon seizures as a goodwill gesture and utilizing its agency over the drug trade to extract political and financial concessions from other countries.

- It is futile to directly partner with the Syrian regime to counter the captagon industry, given that data suggests the government's anti-narcotics rhetoric is designed to deflect attention from regime-aligned production, rather than effectively halt these markets.

### Policy Recommendations

- The U.S. and its partners should discourage countries in the region from tying normalization with Syria to a reduction in narcotics supply, as the regime itself remains the main supplier of captagon with little incentive to reduce production and smuggling.
- The U.S. and its partners should encourage regional actors to coordinate on counter-captagon policies. This can be done by supporting the establishment of a regional task force aiming to lower the supply and demand of narcotics.
- Keeping low-level communication channels with the Assad regime open can be useful for understanding how it operates and interacts with the sector, but high-level cooperation should not be considered as the Syrian regime has not indicated any change in behavior and is incentivized to continue industrial-level captagon production and trafficking.



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not an official policy or position of the New Lines Institute.

COVER PHOTO: Captagon and other seized drugs are displayed for the media in Marea, northern Aleppo, in May 2022. The drug fenethylline, commercially known as captagon and once notorious for its association with Islamic State fighters, has spawned an illegal \$10-billion industry that funds the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, as well as many of his enemies. (AFP via Getty Images)

## The New Lines Institute for Strategy and Policy

**Our mission** is to provoke principled and transformative leadership based on peace and security, global communities, character, stewardship, and development.

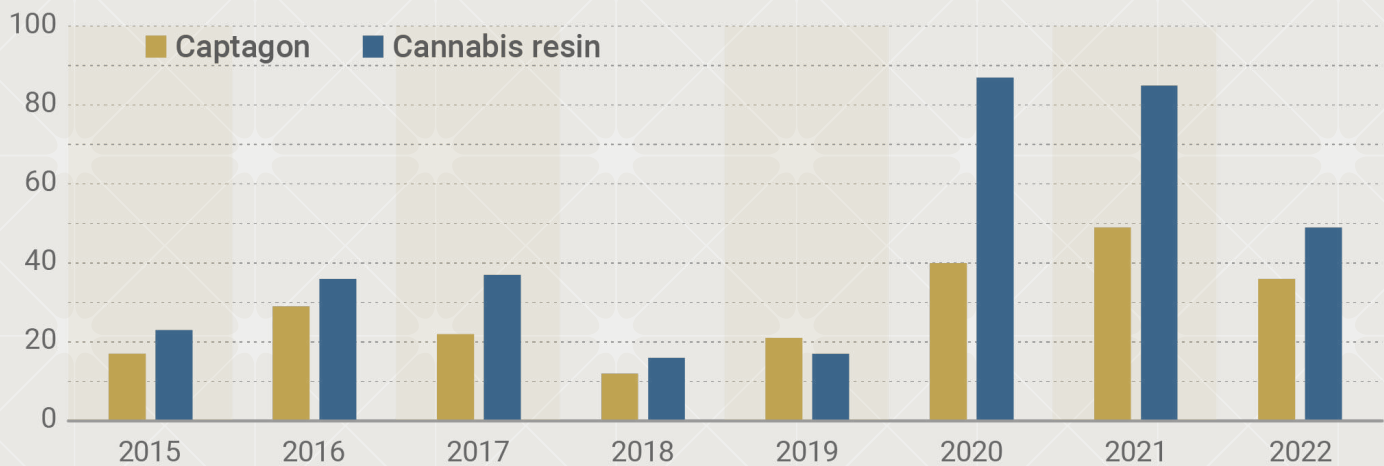
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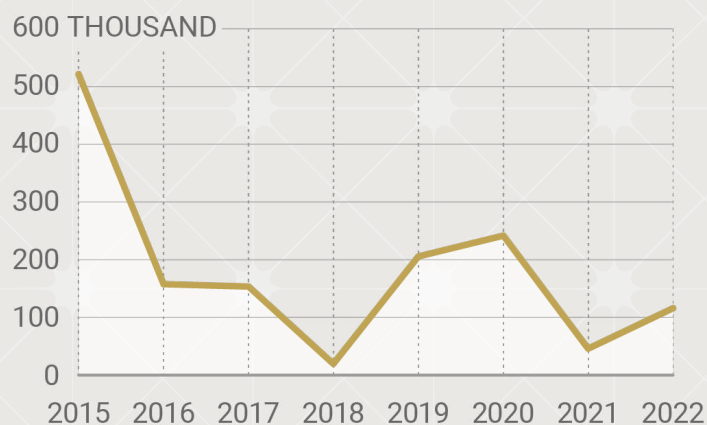
## Drug Seizures in Syria

### Seizures Reported by Drug Type

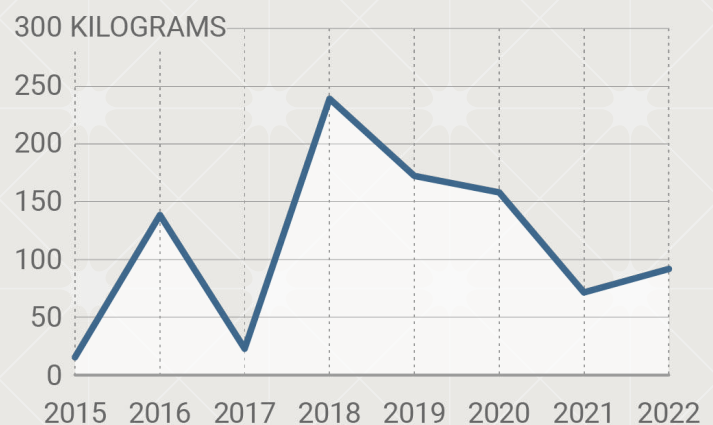


### Average Size of Each Reported Seizure

#### Captagon (pills)



#### Cannabis resin



Source: Data compiled by Dr. Karam Shaar from the Syrian Arab News Agency

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## Discrepancies Between Regime Reports and Policy Execution

On paper, the Syrian state has a robust legal framework barring citizens from producing, trafficking, or consuming narcotics. However, in practice, this has scarcely disrupted trades like captagon inside the country.

[The flagship 1993 Act Number II on Drugs](#) underpins most aspects of narcotics in the country. The law prohibits any person from cultivating, importing,

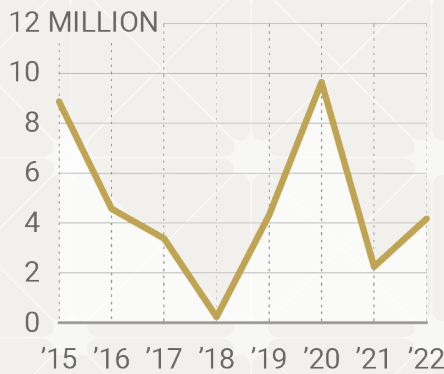
exporting, moving, possessing, acquiring, buying, selling, exchanging, delivering, receiving, or donating drug substances. It also imposes severe punishments, up to the death sentence, for anyone involved in the trade, manufacturing, or cultivation of listed narcotic substances with psychotropic effects. The death sentence is also the punishment for the government employees entrusted with combating drugs or those who enjoy any form of authority by virtue of their position or nature of work or the immunity granted to them in accordance with the law if they are found to be involved in trade, manufacturing, or cultivation of narcotic substances.



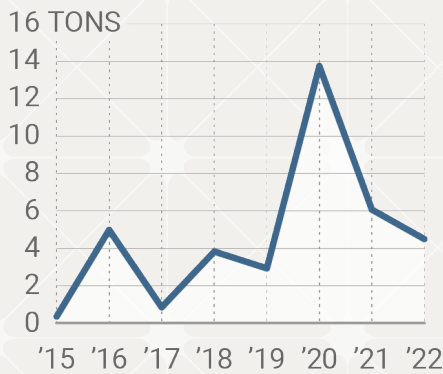
## Drug Seizures, and Arrests in Regime-Held Areas

### Drugs Seized (Reported)

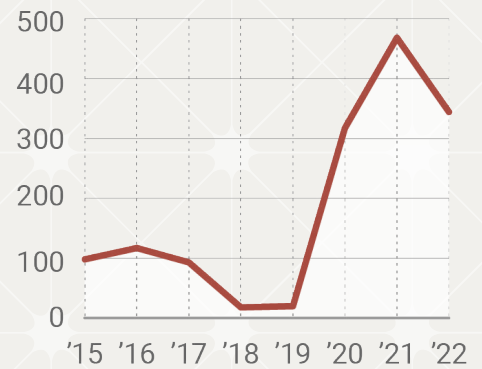
#### Captagon (pills)



#### Cannabis resin



### People Arrested for Narcotics-Related Crimes



Source: Data compiled by Dr. Karam Shaar from the Syrian Arab News Agency

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The Act also regulates the establishment of rehabilitation centers or sanatoriums under the mandate of the Ministry of Health. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor, in turn, is responsible for the care of individuals released from sanatoriums. The Act also stipulates the establishment of the National Narcotics Affairs Committee, [chaired](#) by the Minister of the Interior and responsible for the following:

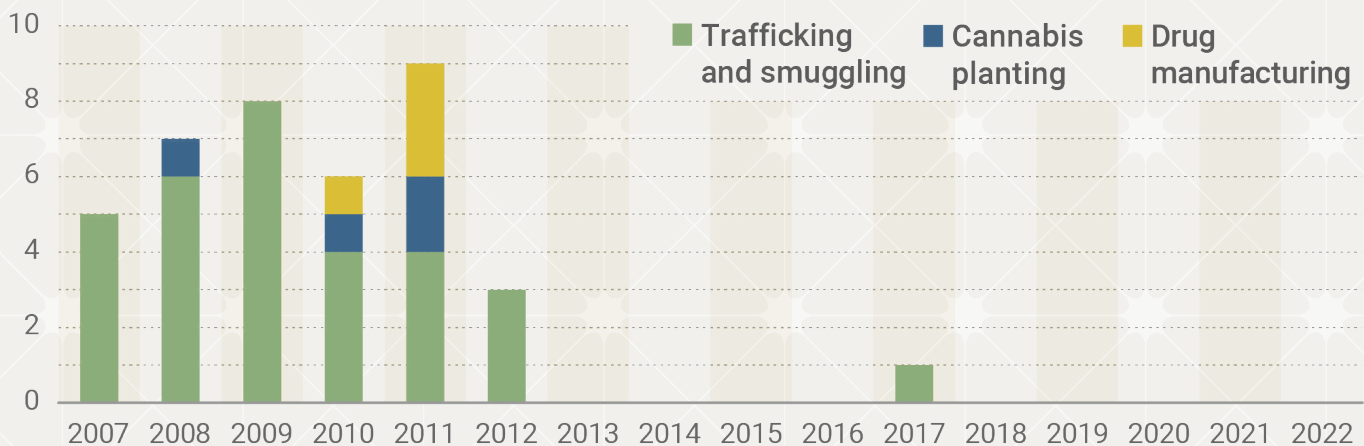
- a. Setting the overall policies on importing, exporting, transporting, producing, manufacturing, cultivating, possessing, acquiring, trading, and

delivering narcotic substances and combating the related crimes

- b. Coordinating between national ministries and departments on drug-related issues as well as the [Arab Office for Narcotics and Crime](#) and other international and Arab bodies
- c. Determining the annual quantity of narcotic drugs that may be imported, exported, transported, produced, cultivated, or trafficked
- d. Developing prevention and treatment plans

The membership of the committee includes representatives from many ministries including justice,

## Individuals Sentenced to Death by the Syrian Government for Narcotics-Related Crimes



Sources: Syrian Gazette

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# Captagon Pills Seized in Saudi Arabia and Syria in 2022

The vast difference between the sizes of captagon seizures in the two countries, despite industrial-sized production happening in Syria, shows the Assad regime’s unwillingness to constrain the trade.

	Syria	Saudi Arabia
Total seized pills	4.1 million	107.1 million
Number of reported seizures	36	31
Average amount seized per bust	0.17 million	3.45 million

Sources: Data collected from the New Lines Captagon Project database and the Observatory of Political and Economic Networks

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health, education, higher education, social affairs, labor, endowments, and media.

Law enforcement aspects, on the other hand, fall on to the Counter-Narcotics Department, which operates under the Ministry of Interior. Such aspects include countering drug trafficking, manufacturing, and consumption operations that are directly reported to the Counter-Narcotics Department.

## Many Busts, Few Seizures

A quick assessment of the seizures reported by Syria’s public news agency creates the perception the Syrian government at large, led by the Ministry of Interior, is trying its best to tackle the captagon trade with an average of at least 90 seizures for all drug types per year since 2019. The data compiled from SANA also indicates a sharp rise in state reporting on seizures since 2018. This spike coincides with major territorial gains by the Syrian regime in the south, which later turned into a production and smuggling hub for narcotics of local and regional concern, as well as with captagon’s increased regional prevalence. The decline in the number of reported seizures in 2022 is accompanied by a slight overall decline in SANA’s coverage of narcotics, keeping the share of articles covering seizures relatively stable compared to the year 2021. It is nonetheless not immediately clear what explains the decline in overall seizure reporting in 2022.

While the number of reported captagon seizures is comparable to the number in major consumer markets, such as Saudi Arabia (36 vs. 31 in 2022), the nature of these seizures is starkly different in

two respects, both of which reflect the regime’s unwillingness to genuinely combat the industry. First, while the more harmful and profitable captagon is more prevalent than cannabis resin (hashish), seizures reported by SANA suggest the opposite.

Second, the amounts of tablets seized per bust were far smaller compared to what was seized in the region, in spite of the presence of [industrial-scale](#) production facilities in Syria. To illustrate, in Saudi Arabia, the average size of seized captagon shipments was 3.45 million pills, a total of 107 million pills, with at least 31 busts reported in 2022. Syria reported 36 busts in regime-held areas, with an average of 169,000 pills per seizure – 5% of the number of pills confiscated in Saudi Arabia. This points to the seizures in Syria being more cosmetic in nature, particularly as Damascus feels greater pressure to combat the supply of captagon as a goodwill gesture amid normalization talks.

The regime’s public narrative on seizures is also inconsistent, reflecting the lack of central coordination between various arms of government. While there are gaps in data, much is due to lack of reporting from a regime seeking to deflect responsibility and accountability related to the trade. Following 2018, while the captagon crisis was emerging, the Syrian government stopped reporting any data to the UNODC. Furthermore, while the data reported by Syria to the UNODC in the last year of reporting stated the seizure of 12.7 million pills, aggregated seizures from SANA articles for the same year stood at only 0.2 million. Similarly, while an official statement submitted by the representative of the regime’s government before the U.N. Committee on Narcotic Drugs [stated](#) the seizure





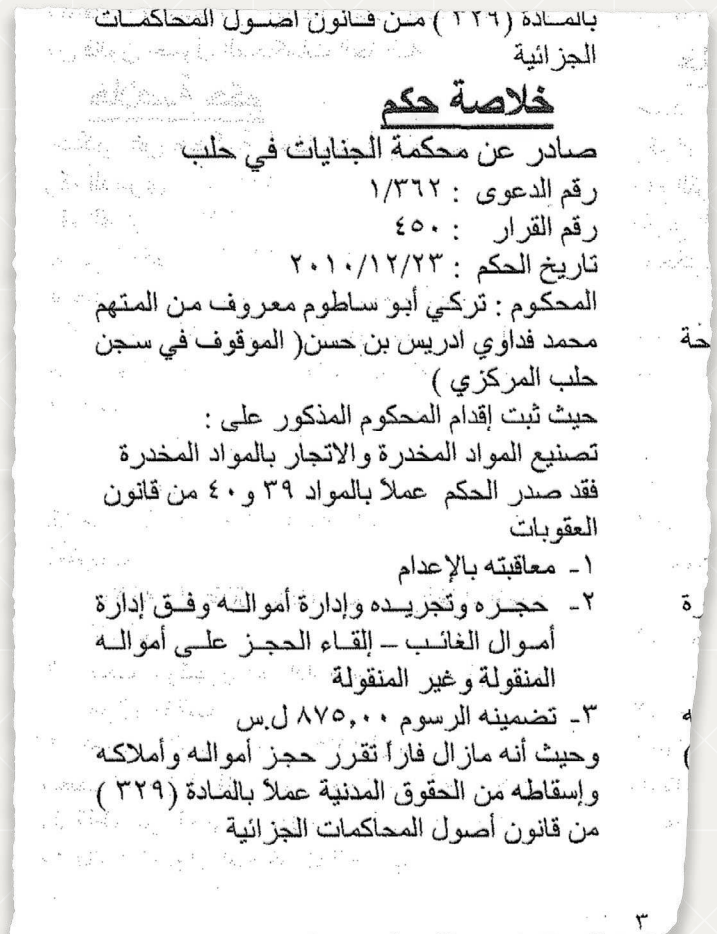
of 50 million captagon pills between 2020 and 2021, the aggregated figures from SANA suggest the seizure of only 11.9 million pills.

Furthermore, some seizures indicate potential fabrication. For example, on July 21, 2022, the Syrian regime allegedly seized 67.6 kilograms of captagon hidden [inside soap bars](#) in Hama, with the drug's powder molded into large blocks. Similarly, on September 6, 2022, regime forces reportedly conducted seized 24 kilograms of captagon powder molded into the shape of [hummus plates](#). The regime [reported](#) that to create the form of bowls, smugglers crushed captagon pills into powder to form "pottery-like dishes coated with a brown adhesive." The seizure was widely reported not only by regime-controlled media sites but also by regional outlets, given the creative and advanced nature of the shipments' smuggling methods. However, experts and toxicologists have told the authors of this report that captagon powder cannot be molded in such a manner.

The regime's lack of willingness to combat the supply of narcotics is most reflected in the clear delineation of responsibilities among state institutions. While seizures were almost exclusively conducted by the Ministry of the Interior, it's the [Fourth Armored Division](#) and the Military Security Branch that sponsor production and smuggling operations. The Fourth Division's relative autonomy and parastate status with civil institutions allows it to operate and oversee captagon production and trafficking with no risk of interdiction. This clear division of labor has enabled the regime to demonstrate interdiction capabilities and willingness to crack down on the captagon trade that enhances plausible deniability, while simultaneously sustaining captagon's alternative revenue stream.

## Regime Claims No Captagon Production in Syria

The most remarkably consistent narrative within various government institutions is the supposed absence of narcotics manufacturing in regime-held Syria. In fact, among the 612 articles in SANA covering narcotics from 2015 to 2022, only two suggest the existence of narcotics production inside regime-held areas: one reported in [2018](#) and the other in [2019](#), both of which discuss the manufacturing of cannabis



An example of one of the death sentences announced in the Syrian Gazette in 2010 states that the convicted man has been sentenced to death for the crime of producing and trafficking narcotics.

resin rather than captagon. This reflects a strong official narrative for the Syrian regime: There is no manufacturing of captagon in regime-held Syria.

In 2019, Maj. Hossam Azar, the Director of the Office of the National Committee for Drug Affairs, [said](#), "Syria's location has made it a compulsory corridor between the countries of production and countries of consumption ... The Syrian Arab Republic to date is a transit country, meaning the absence of manufacturing or cultivation of drugs."

Despite Azar's claim, [at least 15 major captagon production facilities](#) in regime-held areas have been reported by investigative outlets, think tanks, and the U.S., U.K., and EU governments, with ample evidence



of state institutions and the president's relatives, such as Maher, Samer, and Wassim al-Assad playing central roles in captagon manufacturing and smuggling operations on an industrial scale.

This sentiment that Syria is only a transit country has been repeated more recently. In September 2022, the director of the Syrian Drug Control Department, Brig. Gen. Nidal Jreij, [stated](#) that the regime's counter-narcotics campaign led to the arrests of drug dealers and large seizure sizes, claiming the bulk of these arrests and interdictions were in "border areas" or "secret bunkers" that were transiting across Syria, rather than originated from the country. When industrial-scale production was less prevalent in Syria during 2010 and 2011, there were three death sentences for drug-manufacturing crimes. However, as the country has morphed into a narcotics supplier of global concern, especially over the past four years, there have been no sentences related to large- or small-scale captagon production – only arrests of local dealers and smugglers. Additionally, data indicates that there have not been any reported laboratory busts conducted by the regime, indicating that law enforcement forces keep a safe distance from known production facilities.

## Little Smuggling

From 2015 to 2022, at least 70 articles in SANA mentioned regime forces foiling cross-border smuggling attempts. There was a spike in 2019, when captagon smuggling was on the rise in the region at large, particularly in Daraa following the retaking of large swaths of the southern governorate in 2018. However, from 2020 to 2022, the number of reported seizures fell to an average of nine per year. The decline in the number of foiled smuggling attempts is at odds with the rise of seizures reported in other countries in the region emanating from regime-held Syria, further reflecting the regime's lack of willingness to control drug trafficking and the industry more broadly.

Despite evidence of numerous large-scale shipments leaving from the Port of Latakia, few cases of intended smuggling were directly seized or related to the Port of Latakia between 2020 and 2022. In June 2022 – [just days](#) after the International Day against Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking – Syrian counter-narcotics units

seized 249 kilos of captagon hidden inside steel machinery containers that smugglers were preparing to transport to the Port of Latakia. The other seizure was reported in December 2022, with "[about a ton](#)" of captagon pills hidden inside containers of tile stones and wool staged at the Port of Latakia. Most busts of outbound shipments were reported in contested areas of Syria's southern border, particularly in the governorate of Daraa, with repeated claims of repeated claims of non-regime-aligned elements being involved.

## Accusing Nonstate Actors

Before the emergence of evidence of regime-aligned participation in captagon production and smuggling, illicit trades like captagon were associated with nonstate actors involved in the Syrian civil war. At the height of the war, many news outlets strongly associated narcotics trades like captagon with jihadist organizations such as the Islamic State (Daesh), despite limited evidence of large-scale production amongst Islamic State networks.

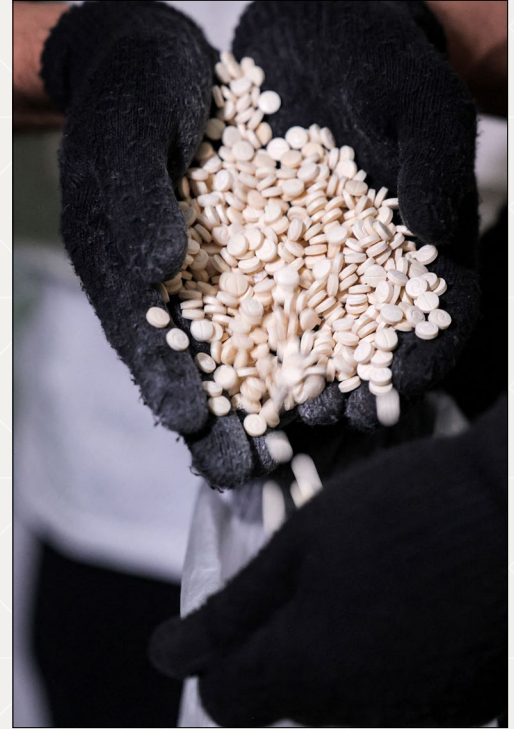
the Syrian regime and its partners have deployed this narrative continually since the advent of the conflict, offloading accusations of drug trafficking and consumption against members of the Syrian opposition and active terrorist organizations in the country. The regime has constructed a narrative that drug trafficking persists mainly in areas outside of their immediate control, fueled by local instability and the need for alternative revenue. For example, Syria's permanent representative to the U.N. office in Vienna, Ambassador Hasan Khaddour, [said](#) in December 2022 at the 31st Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice that terrorist and criminal networks were the primary agents behind the spike in drug trafficking, accusing "countries involved in bringing terrorism to Syria" of using illicit narcotics trades as a tool to fund their activities.

This sentiment has been echoed by other Syrian officials, such as Syrian Ambassador to Russia Riyad Haddad. In a speech in June 2021, Haddad [claimed](#) that there has been an uptick in the presence of drugs in "terrorist-controlled" territories in Syria, and stated that the Syrian Arab Army conducted a number of counter-narcotics clearing operations in areas outside the regime's control. Haddad said the spread





The February 2022 photo taken during a tour organized by the Jordanian Army shows a Jordanian military vehicle patrolling the Syrian border to prevent trafficking. (Khalil Mazraawi / AFP via Getty Images)



An officer of the Directorate of Narcotics Control of Saudi Arabia's Interior Ministry empties a bag of captagon tablets seized in Jeddah on March 1, 2022. (Fayez Nureldine / AFP via Getty Images)

of narcotics trafficking coincided with an uptick in terrorist-related incidents, as terrorist organizations promoted and smuggled narcotic substances to other areas to obtain funds to finance their activities. In July 2019, Maj. Hossam Azar, director of the Office of the National Committee for Drug Affairs, reiterated that Syria is a transit country and [said](#) terrorists weaponized narcotics trades and were responsible for the uptick in trafficking operations during the conflict.

## Arrests and Death Sentences

As the Syrian government has increased its reporting of narcotics-related seizures, it has also increased its reports of arrested individuals in connection to narcotics-related crimes. Data collected from SANA indicates an 18-fold increase in narcotics-related arrests since 2019. However, these reports demand greater scrutiny due to the enormous scale of arrests and trafficking, despite continual state denial of any domestic production. This report's compiled

data indicates that Syrian law enforcement is publicly cracking down on dealers and smugglers only trafficking small-scale amounts of drugs without strong connections to the regime's core security apparatus as a way of consolidating the trade in regime hands.

Jreij claimed that during the first nine months of 2022, there have been 6,625 cases of narcotics-related crimes with [851,621 individuals](#) arrested – a number that amounts to nearly 15% of Syria's adult population. Over the same period the compiled SANA articles indicate just 343 people were reportedly arrested.

Most importantly, none of the supposed mass arrests have targeted publicly known narcotics kingpins such as [Samer Kamal al-Assad](#), [Wassim al-Assad](#), or [Noah Zeiter](#) who continue to roam regime-held Syria. This affirms, once again, the regime's lack of willingness to curb the supply of narcotics to the rest of the region.





Two Syrian Interior Ministry officials participate in an INTERPOL discussion on Operation Lionfish on June 24, 2022, hosted in the UAE. (Syrian Ministry of Interior via Facebook)

## Policy Recommendations

Syria's relative isolation throughout the conflict and active participation in the captagon trade has cut Damascus off from formal anti-narcotics regional law enforcement initiatives until recently. In September 2021, Interpol reintegrated the Syrian state into the international criminal information exchange system. This step [came](#) after nine years of interruption of international coordination with Damascus, particularly since 2012 in the context of sanctions and the international boycott of the Syrian regime.

Early normalization efforts with countries like the UAE have also supported increased Syrian regime agency and representation in regional counter-narcotics matters. The UAE's elevated influence in Interpol has given rise to Syria's interaction with the organization, with two Syrian Interior Ministry officials [participating](#) in the organization's latest conference on counternarcotics strategies under Operation Lionfish in June 2022, specifically at the invitation of Interpol's general secretariat and in coordination with Interpol's Middle East and North Africa office. With Interpol headed by the UAE's Ahmed Naser Al-Raisi until

November 2025, it's likely that the organization will continue to incorporate Syria into counter-narcotics dialogues and strategies as Abu Dhabi deepens rapprochement with Damascus.

While violent clashes related to captagon smuggling along its border with Syria once caused Jordan to slow down normalization efforts with the Syrian regime, Amman has reopened communication with Damascus and its primary backer, Russia, over concerns related to the captagon trade among other issues.

Despite this collaboration, there remain countless connections between the Syrian regime and the captagon trade, with many of al-Assad's immediate subordinates, relatives, and members of the regime's patronage networks directly or indirectly involved in the production and smuggling of the drug. However, different elements of the Syrian regime's security apparatus are serving different goals. While clandestine producers and smugglers operate under the protection of the Fourth Armed Division, led by Bashar al-Assad's brother, Maher al-Assad, and the Military Security Branch, most of the seizures are carried out by the Ministry of the Interior. This division



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**“ Instead, the U.S. and its partners should encourage regional actors to coordinate on counter-captagon policies. This can be done by supporting the establishment of a regional mechanism and/or task force aiming to lower the supply and demand of narcotics. ”**

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of labor has aided the Syrian regime in upholding a consistent narrative of plausible deniability, as well as supported a wave of interdictions that could serve as confidence-building measures for normalization agreements with the region.

Bashar al-Assad has effectively weaponized the supply of narcotics to other countries for political gain. Counternarcotics strategies with Syria have become a top agenda item for Arab Summit discussions, as countries explore feasible ways to build goodwill and progress with Damascus. Notably, a May 2 meeting of Syrian, Saudi, Jordanian, Egyptian, and Iraqi foreign ministers in Amman featured a Syrian-Jordanian-Iraqi agreement to [establish working groups](#) to identify the sources of drug production and smuggling in Syria, in addition to coordination mechanisms to monitor border security. As normalization efforts continue, the Syrian regime is gaining a seat at the table and significant agency in counter-captagon cooperative efforts and turning the tide away from accountability – all while serving as the primary hub of production and trafficking.

Amid normalization efforts, the U.S. and its regional counterparts must recognize that the Assad regime has little incentive to reduce production and smuggling operations. While normalization will incrementally introduce licit streams of revenue into Syria, it will be difficult to immediately compensate for the illicit streams of revenue – and overall support for livelihood for many Syrians in regime-held areas – that the captagon trade provides. Captagon is cheap and easy to produce, and demand remains high in Gulf countries, with potential for new consumption markets in Africa, Europe, and Asia. With sophisticated

manufacturing sites, supply chains, and patronage networks in Syria already established, it would be difficult for regime-aligned actors to concede their role in captagon, making initiatives to directly partner with the regime to stem the flow of drugs futile.

The U.S. and its partners should discourage countries in the region from tying normalization to the reduction in narcotics supply from regime-held Syria. Washington should additionally discourage countries pursuing normalization from offering lucrative packages – whether in the form of financial compensation, infrastructural investment, or other means – that could make up for captagon revenue, to incentivize the regime to either abandon captagon production altogether or redirect trafficking flows away from governments actively pursuing rapprochement with Syria. This would effectively reduce the leverage regional countries have in the political process in Syria, empower the regime, and severely undercut genuine counternarcotics measures seeking to effectively reduce illicit drug trades’ malign impact in the region.

Instead, the U.S. and its partners should encourage regional actors to coordinate on counter-captagon policies. This can be done by supporting the establishment of a regional mechanism and/or task force aiming to lower the supply and demand of narcotics. This mechanism should circulate best practices and pool collective resources to address demand-reduction strategies, build interdiction capacity, improve intelligence-sharing and tip-offs, monitor seizures, enforce anti-corruption practices, grant laboratory access for chemical profiling, and otherwise enhance regional coordination on illicit trades like captagon. The U.S. and its partners



can effectively pursue – and even lead – regional collaborative efforts for demand and supply reduction, but they should discourage placing counter-captagon initiatives on the top of normalization agendas with the Syrian regime.

Keeping low-level operational communication channels with the Assad regime open can nonetheless be useful for understanding how it operates and interacts with the sector, but high-level cooperation should not be considered. As the captagon trade continues to expand in size and scope and as demand markets remain, regime-aligned actors have not demonstrated any incentive to reduce involvement in production and trafficking. While it is important for actors to gauge the regime's position on counter-captagon efforts and obtain information on networks where

they can, direct participation with the Syrian regime on counter-narcotics offers Damascus immense leverage, allowing the regime to obtain intelligence on regional counter-narcotics measures and concessions that support actors behind the trade, rather than constrain them.

The U.S. should highly encourage its partners in the region to reconsider immediate counter-narcotics collaboration with the Syrian regime through bilateral and multilateral working groups, intelligence-collection efforts, and border security initiatives, and instead consult with partners in the region and the West about clear enforcement mechanisms and measurements of effectiveness that can more successfully constrain the trade without offering Damascus concessions.

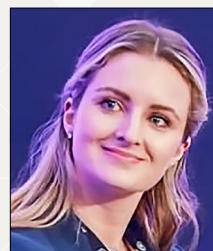


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More of Dr. Shaar's work is available on [www.karamshaar.com](http://www.karamshaar.com). He tweets at [@karam\\_shaar](https://twitter.com/@karam_shaar).



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