

INTELLIGENCE BRIEFING

# From 2015-2023: The Captagon Trade's Trends, Trajectory, and Policy Implications





# From 2015-2023: The Captagon Trade’s Trends, Trajectory, and Policy Implications

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(COVER) Sacks of captagon pills sit at the police headquarters in Kafarshima, Lebanon, in July 2022.

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

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## Executive Summary

The trade of the amphetamine-type synthetic stimulant captagon has become a prominent feature of an illicit landscape stretching from mainland Europe to the Arab Gulf and Horn of Africa. In just over six years, it has become one of the most in-demand illicit drugs in the Middle East, with production steadily anchored in regime-held Syria. The trade has quickly evolved into an industry, with seizures by authorities in the millions of pills across ports in the Mediterranean and Red seas, Levantine and Gulf state border crossings, and international airports. Furthermore, captagon traffickers have posed security risks, militarizing smuggling operations for both resiliency to interdiction and geopolitical leverage with neighbors.

While these realities are now well known, myths and incorrect assumptions about the captagon trade abound. To address these inaccuracies and compile a comprehensive picture of how the trade has evolved, this report reflects on aggregated data compiled from 2015 to 2023 to identify key patterns and findings about captagon's supply, demand, and operational networks.

## Key Findings

- The captagon trade experienced significant growth from 2018 to 2022, with seizures peaking in 2021, suggesting either a stabilization of supply or reduced interdiction capacity. Saudi Arabia, despite being a major consumer market, has seen a continuous decline in captagon seizures, in part due to the enhanced interdictions in transit countries.
- Counter-captagon operations have also become increasingly kinetic, with violent clashes between smugglers and security forces on the rise, particularly following Jordan's heightened enforcement along its border with regime-held Syria, which is where most captagon continues to originate.
- While there was a decrease in seizures of captagon pills, a notable increase in arrests related to captagon smuggling and production has been recorded, particularly in Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Jordan. Jordan has intensified its counter-narcotics strategy against captagon smuggling, deploying military assets along its border with Syria to bolster interdiction, yet arrests against smuggling agents within the kingdom remain notably sparse, suggesting potential internal impunity. The nationalities of those arrested across the region also reveal that Syrian nationals are more likely to be involved in production and smuggling than in local distribution in consumer markets.
- Smuggling methods, including specialized packaging and concealment techniques, have evolved, indicating increasing trafficker sophistication. It is also becoming harder to determine a consignment's origin based on packaging, branding, or chemical formula alone, posing an obstacle to law enforcement and intelligence.
- Maritime smuggling has become less prevalent over the past two years, with land shipments becoming more common.
- While Syria remains the anchor for industrial captagon production, small-scale production has sprouted in Iraq and mainland Europe as suppliers seek to diversify manufacturing and trafficking methods. However, the presence of these smaller production sites has not squeezed out large-scale production in Syria, with large-scale production entrenched in regime-held areas.
- Trafficking via drone has increased along the Syrian-Jordanian border, mainly for crystal methamphetamine rather than captagon.
- Despite wide media coverage of a nexus between Hamas and the captagon trade, there is little evidence to support captagon playing a meaningful role among Hamas fighters in their attacks on Israel on Oct. 7, 2023. However, the onset of Israel's war in Gaza shifted the dynamics of captagon smuggling on the Syrian-



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

Jordanian border considerably, evidenced by a fourfold increase in captagon seizures and a notable rise in crystal meth confiscations. This evidence suggests an expansion in smuggling attempts. Of note is the rise in illicit drug shipments accompanied by illicit weapons.

- Jordanian airstrikes against trafficking networks in Syria's Daara and Sweida regions indicate a new level of coordination and intelligence exchange between the Jordanian military and local communities, as well as the ability to target mid-tier smuggling rings, storage warehouses, meeting points, and local kingpins. However, this strategy cannot target large-scale manufacturing sites located farther into in regime-held territory and has reportedly resulted in multiple deaths of innocent Syrians.

## Policy Recommendations

- The U.S. government should take the lead on establishing a formal working group that solely focuses on the captagon trade, rather than synthetic drugs as a whole, within the Global Coalition Against Synthetic Drugs led by the U.S. Department of State's Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs.
- Governments should provide the framework for a regionally led counter-captagon mechanism that

convenes regional stakeholders and international organizations to exchange intelligence and best practices and identify coordinated strategies to best curb the flow of captagon across the Mediterranean-Gulf zone. This initiative should be independent from existing working groups involving the Syrian government, a key sponsor of the captagon trade.

- The U.S. government and its partners should work with local actors in Syria to combat the production and smuggling of captagon.
- Countries currently affected by the captagon trade, as well as those at risk from captagon shipments, storage sites, and production facilities, should register to use the United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime's International Project on New Psychoactive Substances – known as Project ION – enabling law enforcement to engage in feasible intelligence exchange and coordination against drug producers and traffickers.
- The U.S. and its partners should coordinate with the Jordanian Armed Forces, Combined Task Force – Operation Inherent Resolve partners in Northeast Syria and Iraq, and other interested regional stakeholders to equip border security forces for the likelihood of clashes with smugglers, interdiction strategies, and improving border surveillance.
- Countering the supply of captagon from Syria should not be used as a bargaining chip with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's regime, which continues to be the main supplier of the drug. Countries countering captagon should not give in to the extortion of the Assad regime and should not tie countering narcotics to normalizing relations with the regime, influencing the country's future political settlement, reconstruction funding, or the return of refugees.
- The U.S. government and its partners should offer seizing countries access to laboratory facilities for more comprehensive chemical profiling, enabling governments to track captagon's evolving formula and eventually identify patterns that can help trace consignments back to individual production sites.



## Introduction

The prevalent captagon trade poses significant challenges across the Mediterranean-Arab Gulf zone. This report is motivated by the urgent need to dissect the trade's dynamics and the evolving tactics of traffickers that hinder law enforcement efforts. It will offer actionable insights and policy recommendations that address the captagon crisis at both its source and throughout its supply chain, aiming to mitigate its impact on global and regional security, geopolitical stability, and public health.

Employing a bespoke database, this report integrates data from 993 counter-captagon operations, including seizures, warehouse raids, and law enforcement encounters, from 2015 to 2023. The database aggregates open-source information from news articles, official social media pages, and governmental news releases. The methodology underscores a conservative approach to data collection, prioritizing accuracy and the reliability of sources over coverage, while acknowledging inherent limitations such as sampling bias and the challenges posed by the method Google uses to rank and filter web search results in capturing the full scope of captagon-related web articles.

The findings reveal a complex and evolving landscape marked by both a decline in captagon seizures, suggesting potential shifts in trafficking routes or a stabilization in production, and a diversification in trafficking and production methods. The report highlights an increase in violent counter-captagon encounters and arrests. The research also illuminates the pivotal role of Syrian regime-aligned networks in sustaining large-scale captagon production, alongside emerging trends in drone use for smuggling other drugs and the expansion of production sites beyond Syria. These dynamics underscore the adaptability of captagon trafficking networks and the imperative for concerted international response strategies.

Section two explains the data underlying the findings, how it was compiled, and its strengths and weaknesses. The findings section delves into the shifts in seizure patterns, explores potential implications for trafficking routes and production strategies, and highlights the marked increase in the violent

crackdown on smugglers, producers, and distributors outside Syria. It then highlights smugglers' evolving tactics, including the innovative use of technology and the diversification of smuggling methods to elude detection. The report also provides an analytical discourse on the involvement of regime-aligned networks in the captagon trade, highlighting the geopolitical and economic dimensions that facilitate the trade's persistence. It concludes with a summary of the broader implications of the captagon trade on regional security, public health, and governance and reviews the effectiveness of regional countermeasures.

## Methodology

The data underlying this report was collected from open sources. The database covers counter-captagon operations: seizures, warehouse raids, arrests, and law enforcement encounters with smugglers. The coverage includes operations that happened from the start of 2015 to the end of 2023, both in the Middle East and beyond.

It documents 993 operations, mostly relating to seizures and sourced from news articles indexed by Google in Arabic or English by querying "amphetamines," "captagon" or "كبتاجون" over a specific time range. Some seizures of unnamed drugs were visually analyzed and determined as captagon. Some official social media pages and websites such as that of the Zakat, Tax, and Customs Authority of Saudi Arabia, were constantly monitored and reviewed over the period of the study.

The New Lines Institute Captagon Trade Project compiled the data in collaboration with the Observatory for Political and Economic Networks.<sup>1,2</sup> For a full list of variables in the database, visit the appendix.

The inclusion criterion in the database is that the source reports news related to captagon explicitly or implicitly, such as using the term "amphetamine pills." Once this is ensured, a new entry in the database is added only if it provides information on a specific event, such as a seizure, an arrest, or a warehouse raid. Articles providing analytical assessments are excluded from the database.



Seized drugs, including Captagon, are displayed in Marea, Syria, on May 24, 2022, following clashes among different Turkey-backed factions. (AFP via Getty Images)

For multiple reasons, it should be noted that sampling bias has affected data entry: the amounts of pills seized, number of people arrested, all other variables in this database only reflect part of total counter-captagon operations. For example, some seizure authorities only mention the seizure of “large amounts” of captagon without specifying the exact number of pills, preventing an exact count in the database. Some counter-captagon operations go completely unreported in some cases, especially for small busts. This database should therefore only be interpreted as a partial reflection of the total scale and scope of the captagon trade.

The seizures database has many strengths. First, the variables covered are more extensive than those reported by individual countries to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). Geolocation data collected with each entry offers one case in point by allowing researchers to determine whether a shipment was seized within a country or at the border. Second, these data are more recent than other sources. For example, Saudi Arabia – the main destination for captagon as implied by the seizures data collected in this study – did not report any statistics on drug seizures to the UNODC after 2019.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, the Syrian government stopped reporting in 2018. In fact, UNODC lacks data entries for any narcotics smuggling beyond 2020 for the entirety of Arab Asia.

Researchers took a conservative approach while collecting these data, supporting their overall validity. Recorded seizures were cross-referenced across up to three sources and followed a tightly defined set of rules. For example, when it came to

a shipment’s country of origin, the nationality of arrested individuals, and the transportation means of smuggling, only official statements were incorporated into the database.

The database has at least three shortcomings. First, Google’s indexing limits the reach of keyword research, ultimately inhibiting efforts to note all applicable entries. As a result, some drug seizures are likely to have not been recorded. However, there is a higher likelihood of those missing seizures being small, as large seizures tended to be covered by multiple sources.

Second, limited reporting from seizing authorities hampered a deeper understanding of the scale of the captagon trade. Even when a seizure was reported, the seizing authority may have intentionally or unintentionally failed to report some critical details underpinning the incident. This could include the intended destination or the point of interdiction. In such cases, the conservative data collection approach prioritized accuracy over coverage.

Third, while the statistics presented here rely on official reports on individual counter-captagon activities and incidents, some countries’ reporting relates to whole time periods instead of individual incidents. This means the seizure figures presented are lower than the actual number of pills circulating on the market. For example, in 2022 aggregated seizures suggest that 319 million pills were seized throughout the world, while aggregate reported seizures show 286 million. Reconciling the two by picking the higher official claim for a given country reveals that at least 378 million



pills were seized over that year. While reconciling the data grants greater accuracy for the overall number of seized pills in a given time period, the research findings presented below rely exclusively on aggregated individual seizure data due to its granularity; pill type, color, origin, country of consignment, etc., are only available using data on individual counter-captagon incidents.

## Findings

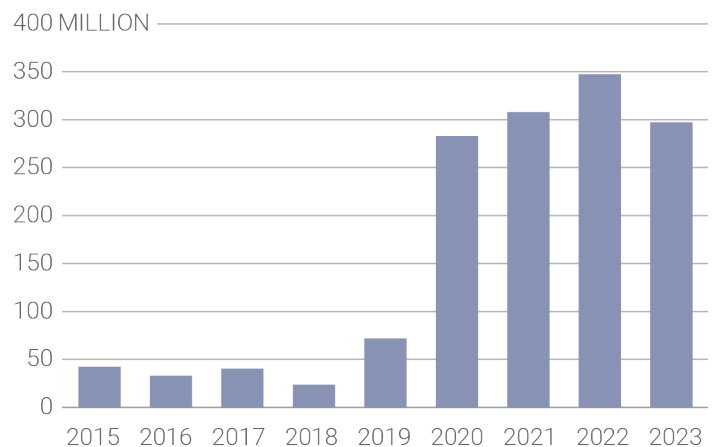
### Captagon Seizures Slowdown

Since the late 2010s, the captagon trade was characterized as a booming illicit trade primarily confined to the Levant and Arab Gulf region. The trade skyrocketed between 2019 and 2020 when producers began identifying precursor materials and advanced manufacturing equipment for industrial-scale production and smuggling operations. It was around this time that traffickers commandeered commercial maritime shipping routes throughout the Mediterranean and the Red Sea to accommodate for industrial-scale consignments of captagon. At the same time, evidence began to mount that the drug’s production in its primary source country, Syria, was being supported by the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

However, from 2020 to 2023 captagon seizures remained between 300 million and 400 million pills, with the size of seizures peaking in 2022 and decreasing in 2023. Fluctuations in seizures do not necessarily reflect a change in the level of production or consumption; they could also indicate changing capacity among law enforcement systems to intercept illicit shipments, prompted by a deficit in intelligence exchange, coordination, or even corruption within customs and police systems.

This relative stabilization masks significant changes in seizing countries. Saudi Arabia, which as the key consumer market tends to seize the largest amounts, has seen continued declines over the past two years. The decline in 2022 can be attributed to a rise in seizures in Jordan, Lebanon, and Iraq – transit countries often used for consignments trafficked through overland routes to Arab Gulf destination markets.

### Captagon Pills Seized Worldwide



Source: The New Lines Captagon Database (compiled from open sources)  
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In 2023, however, declines were also observed in Jordan and Lebanon. These declines were almost entirely offset by a single seizure in 2023 in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), where the Dubai Police disrupted one of the biggest captagon smuggling operations, capturing five containerized shipments of nearly 86 million pills hidden inside 651 doors and 432 decorative panels worth reportedly well over 3 billion dirhams – equivalent to \$817 million in market value.<sup>4</sup> Shortly after the raid was conducted, UAE Minister of Interior Saif bin Zayed announced, “The six members of the criminal gang were arrested red-handed.”<sup>5</sup>

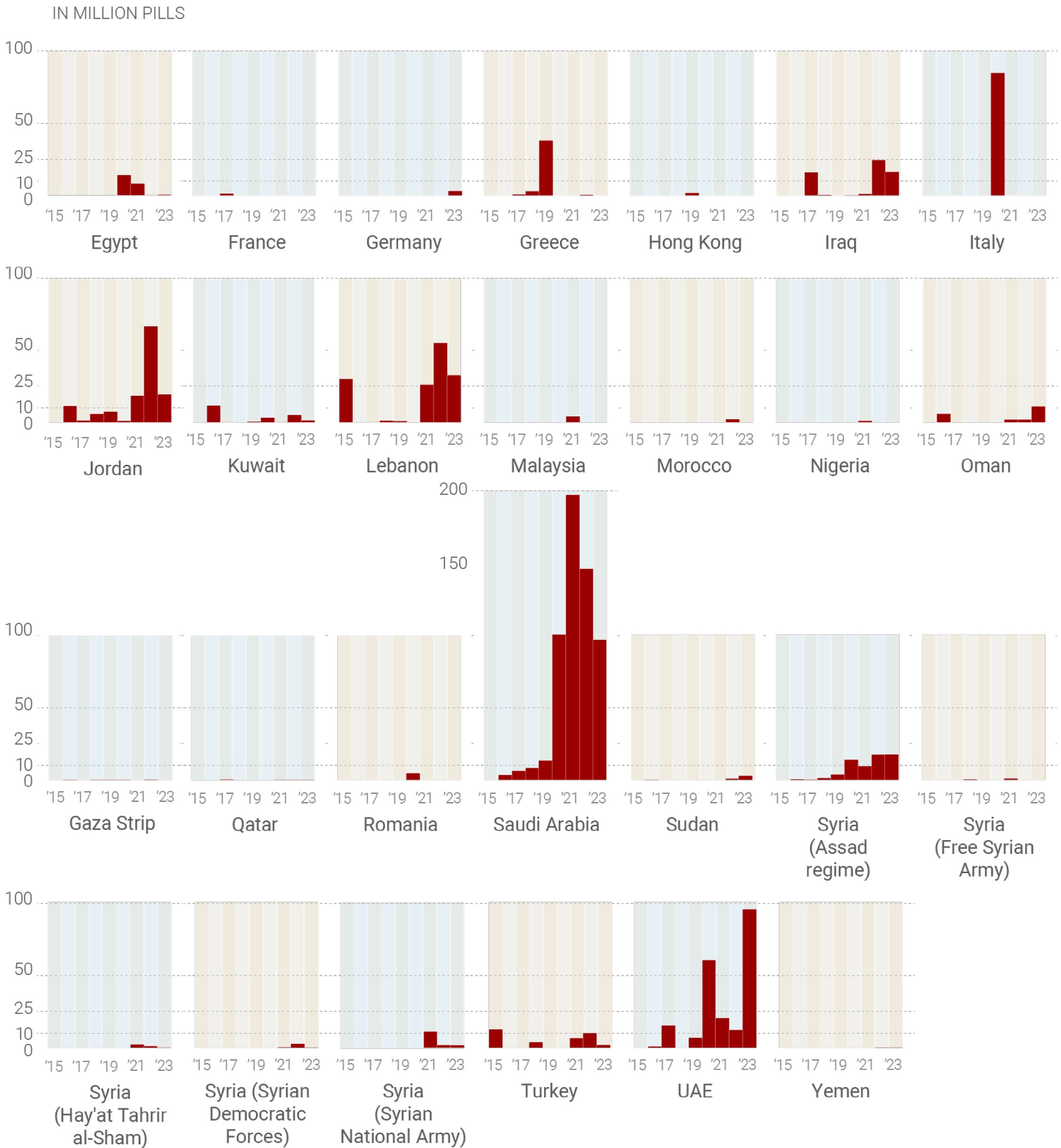
While there was a slight decrease in the number of captagon pills seized in the past year, the number of pills circulating on the illicit market still indicates that producers are manufacturing the drug at levels similar to 2020 and 2021. It is possible that if captagon’s illicit actors identify new pools of demand either within or outside the region, there could be an uptick in seizures that *may* indicate broadened production. However, if interdiction capacity suffers among customs systems and law enforcement within destination markets, the level of seizures could continue to decline.

### Alternative Routes or Improved Interdiction?

Fewer seizures could mean the emergence of two potential realities. First, captagon suppliers could be finding better ways to penetrate consumer markets and using alternative transit routes, bypassing law enforcement and improving interdiction resiliency.



## Captagon Seized, by Territory of Seizure



Source: The New Lines Captagon Database (compiled from open sources)

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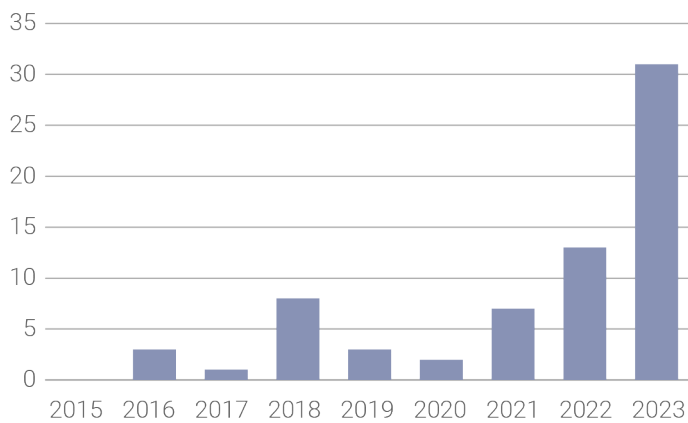
Another explanation might be a reduction in supply, which largely stems from Syria.<sup>6</sup>

Given the data available, it is not possible to explain which factor or whether a combination of both is at play as seizure data cannot always paint a clear picture of changes in the drug trade, given fluctuating interdiction capacity, changing trafficking strategies, and the reality that not all seizures are publicly announced.

### An Increase in Violent Clashes

Better enforcement in some consumer and transit countries, leading to fewer smuggling attempts through them, is supported by the rise in violent clashes with smugglers and the rise in arrests.

### Counter-Captagon Clashes



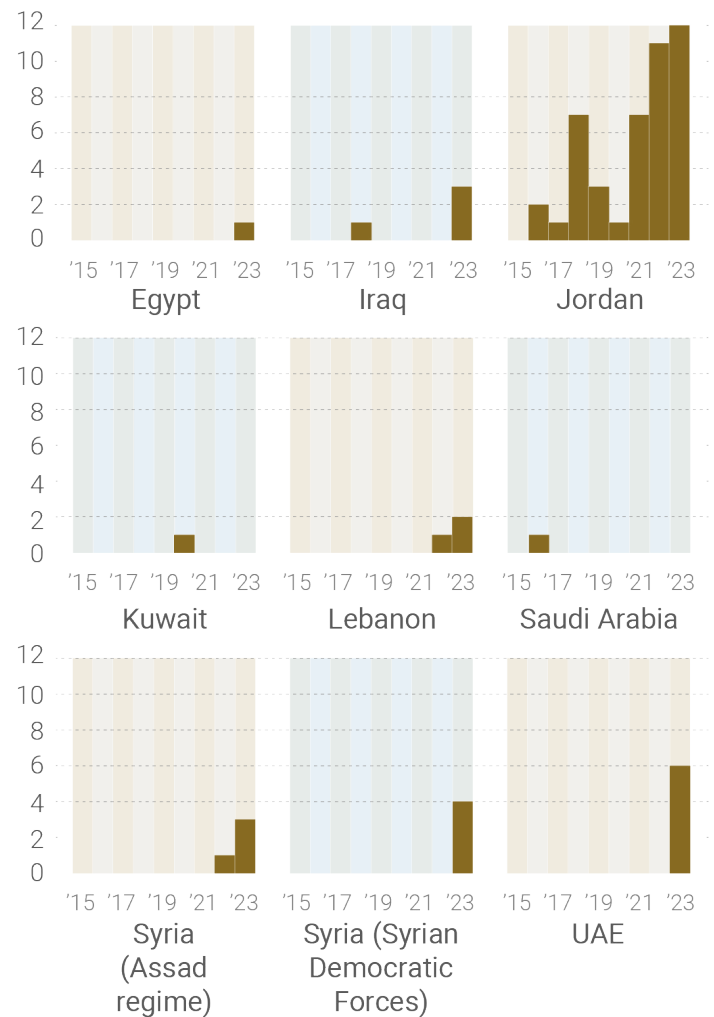
Source: The New Lines Captagon Database (compiled from open sources)  
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While clashes have increased in Iraq, Lebanon, the UAE, and the areas of the Autonomous Administration of Northeast Syria (AANE), nowhere is the increase more pronounced than in Jordan, where the rise in clashes has accompanied a decline the seized amounts of captagon. Despite limited local consumption, Jordan has long been a transit route for the captagon trade, enabling overland consignments to enter neighboring Saudi Arabia, the trade's most lucrative destination market. However, the size, scope, and nature of captagon overland smuggling incidents have significantly evolved since the fall and winter of 2021, following Jordan's decision to fully reopen the Jaber-Nassib border crossing with Syria.<sup>7</sup>

The crossing represents a strategic chokepoint for trade and commerce – a busy trade route before the war and only partially reopened in 2018.<sup>8</sup> Jordan's rationale behind reopening the crossing stemmed primarily from economic incentives, seeking a boost in trade that would mutually alleviate both countries' economic slowdowns. Counter-smuggling operations represented greater risk acceptance among captagon suppliers and advancing capacity, suggesting that narco-trafficking networks in Syria could be utilizing operations as political leverage over neighboring counties.

Captagon traffickers engaged in more armed clashes with Jordanian Armed Forces even after Jordan

### Counter-Captagon Clashes by Country



Source: The New Lines Captagon Database (compiled from open sources)  
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relaxed their rules of engagement in January 2022<sup>9</sup> and deployed sophisticated strategies such as the occasional use of drones and coordinated, militarized formations, to try to transport captagon across the border. Smugglers also deployed sophisticated weaponry such as antipersonnel mines, explosives, semiautomatic rifles, rocket launchers, and other tools to derail the Jordanian Armed Forces’ attempts to interdict shipments and push well into Jordanian territory.<sup>10,11</sup> Smugglers continued this trend even following improvements to Jordan’s border surveillance system and Jordanian strikes into southern Syria targeting trafficking networks. Smuggling networks in Syria have notably doubled down on trafficking operations and engaging in violent clashes with Jordanian security, partially starting in the fall of 2023, following Israel’s offensive into the Gaza Strip that October. It is possible that the uptick in smuggling operations, clashes, and integration of captagon and small arms along with broader regional escalation is not coincidental; given reported support Iran-aligned militias have offered to Syria’s 4<sup>th</sup> Armored Division and local smuggling groups in Syria’s south, the increase in violent trafficking operations may be an intentional pressure tactic against Jordan and, indirectly, its partners such as the U.S.

As the Jordanian government continues to respond to smuggling attempts more punitively, smugglers are likely to search for alternative routes for getting to consumer markets. While new routes through alternative neighboring countries may lengthen the timeline and distance to reach destination markets, local fragility, weak governance, and low interdiction risks will continue to support traffickers’ operations.

On the other hand, the targeting of captagon supply facilities on Syrian land is unlikely to result in pushing production into other countries in a “balloon effect;” large production facilities are well within the Assad regime’s hinterland, especially near the coast, which have not been targeted by Jordanian air forces before. Furthermore, despite grievances and a shared incentive to disrupt captagon supplies, most regional actors will refrain from striking captagon production and trafficking facilities deep into regime-held territory in Syria; the cost-benefit analysis of these strikes would not only yield greater diplomatic fallout with Gulf powers but also create backlash from the Syrian

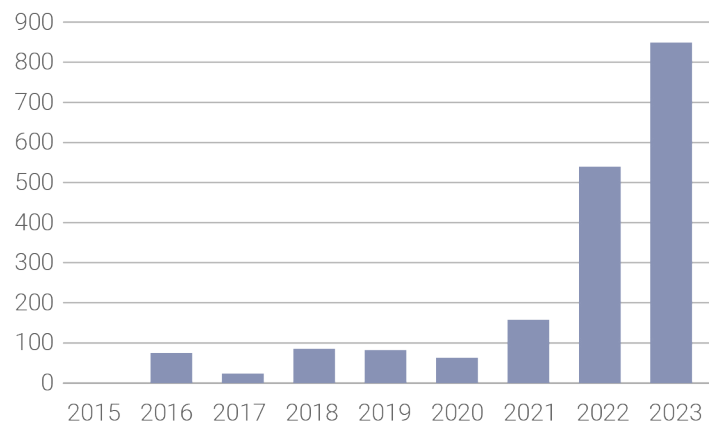
regime and its partners, Iran and Russia. Because of this, as long as there is complicity from regime-aligned actors, captagon production and large-scale trafficking operations can operate with relative impunity within regime-held territories.

Of note are claims by Assad regime-aligned media that captagon seizures and clashes with smugglers have increased over the past two years. The Syrian regime consistently denies the production of captagon within the areas it controls and highlights its continued fight against local smugglers. This narrative is contradicted by evidence of both industrial-scale production concentrated within regime-held areas and regime-aligned security officials and individuals supervising industrial-level captagon production.<sup>12</sup>

### Spike in Arrests

The finding that crackdowns on suppliers have resulted in fewer captagon pills making their way to final consumers is supported not only by the rise in clashes with smugglers but also a rise in arrests. The New Lines Captagon Trade Project database recorded a notable increase in arrests of members of captagon smuggling networks within Iraq, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Turkey, with the majority in the latter two countries. This has coincided with an uptick in not only clashes with smuggling networks along key routes and border regions but also crackdowns on captagon production sites – particularly outside Syria – as well as storage warehouses, dealers, and consumers in destination markets.

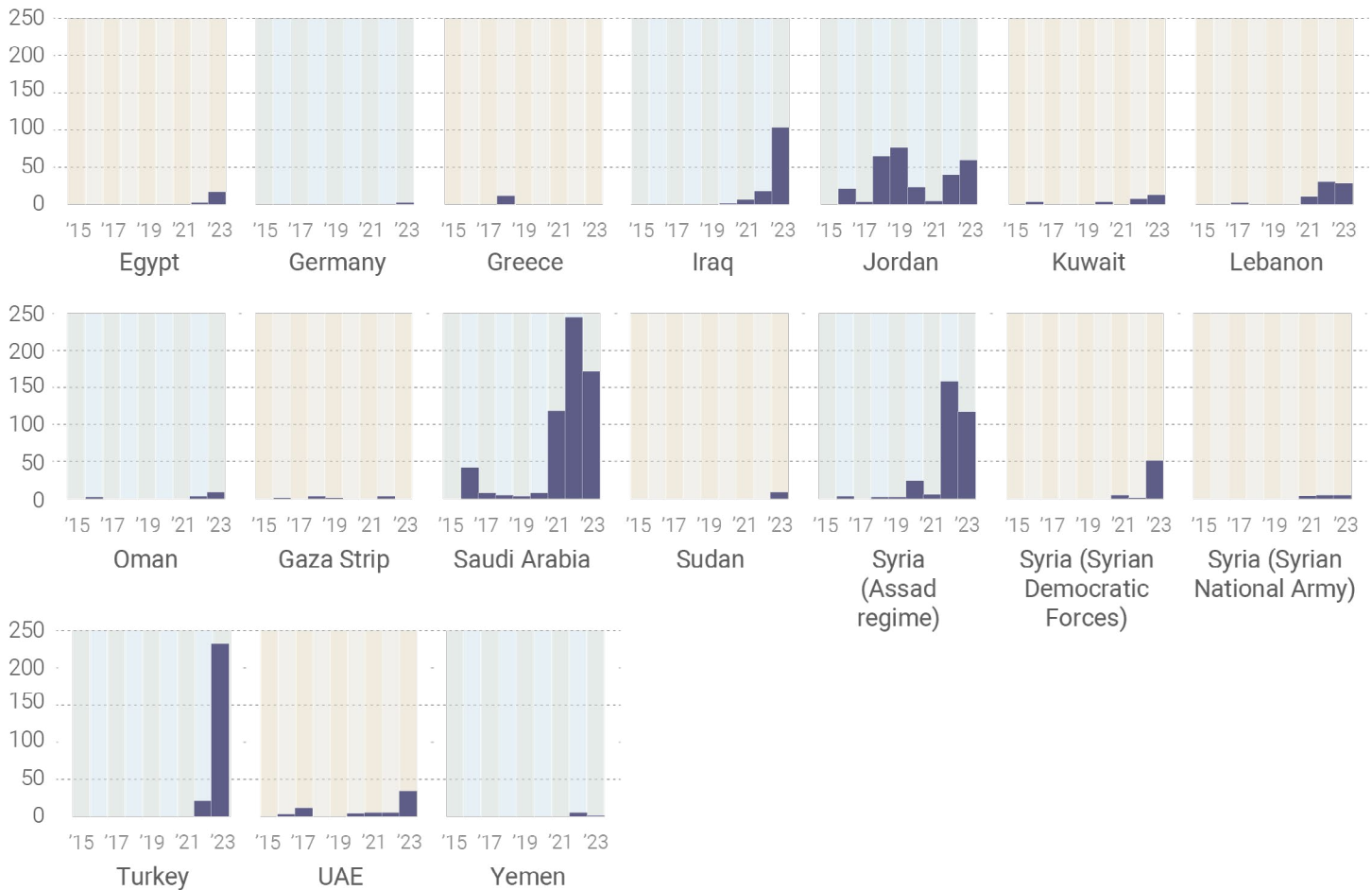
### Counter-Captagon Arrests



Source: The New Lines Captagon Database (compiled from open sources)  
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## Reported Counter-Captagon Arrests by Territory



Source: The New Lines Captagon Database (compiled from open sources)

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A notable increase in captagon-related arrests occurred in Turkey in 2023, supporting findings that traffickers are increasingly using the country as a transshipment route. Much as in Iraq, authorities largely arrested traffickers smuggling captagon from its border with Syria rather than conducting mass arrests against local distributors or production networks. Turkish officials particularly encountered challenges with smugglers passing through southern provinces from the Syrian border, sometimes engaging in car chases with traffickers.<sup>13</sup> Some captagon consignments have also contained other illicit items, such as a shipment of over 84,000 pills accompanied by seven automatic rifles in a car trunk that was seized on Jan. 13, 2023, by Turkish police forces, which ultimately led to 176 arrests.<sup>14</sup>

Iraq recorded a spike in captagon-related arrests, as the country has experienced a notable increase in

both trafficking and local production, making it a key transit country to watch in the captagon trade.<sup>15</sup> On April 30, 2022, Iraqi authorities conducted a raid on a warehouse just outside Baghdad; the warehouse indicated that criminal networks were seeking to use Iraq as not only a trafficking route but also a distribution hub and potential consumption market.<sup>16</sup> The next year, Iraq's Rapid Response Force and General Directorate of Narcotics Control seized the country's first flagged production site and 27.5 kilograms of captagon tablets in Iraq's southern Muthana province, just along Iraq's border with Saudi Arabia, indicating that illicit networks were quickly seeking to carve out small-scale captagon manufacturing operations closer to destination markets.<sup>17</sup> However, the bulk of arrests in Iraq have been conducted against trafficking networks coming from Syria. Iraq's security forces have seized captagon consignments along transit



routes with Syria, such as the Al Qaim Highway, and most arrests have resulted from large-scale raids conducted against trafficking networks rather than captagon producers and distributors.

A handful of notable operations and arrests conducted across the region are discarded in the database and analysis due to lack of specificity and/or credibility. After an October 2023 raid, Iraq’s General Directorate of Narcotics and Psychotropic Substances Affairs in the Ministry of Interior claimed its “Second Deterrence Operation” arrested 16,000 drug dealers and promoters, a claim difficult to directly connect to the captagon trade.<sup>18</sup> This uptick in arrests is not reflected in the database, which includes only individual counter-captagon operations to avoid double-counting.

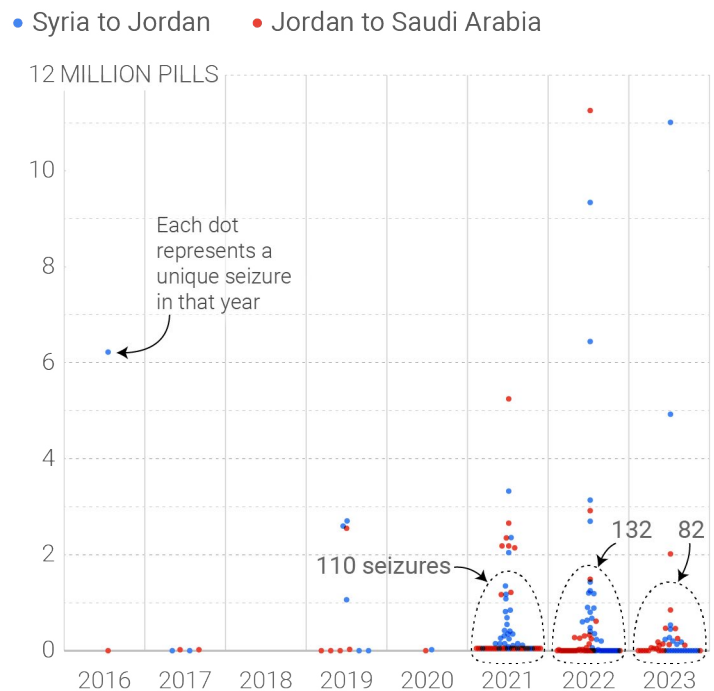
The statistics presented here also exclude the claims of the Syrian regime, not only because they do not relate to an individual operation but also due to their implausibility. In September 2022, the Syrian Drug Control Department director, Brig. Gen. Nidal Jreij, claimed that during the first nine months of 2022, there were 6,625 cases of narcotics-related crimes with 851,621 individuals arrested – nearly 15% of Syria’s adult population. Over the same period, a compilation of SANA articles reported the arrests of only 343 people.<sup>19</sup>

Northeastern Syria saw captagon-related arrests in 10 separate incidents in 2023, up from two for each of the two preceding years. This coincides with a greater emphasis on interdiction among AANES’s Asayish police forces and participation in the U.S.-led Global Coalition Against Synthetic Drugs, of which the captagon trade is a component.<sup>20</sup> While the nationality of those arrested is not explicitly reported by officials in northeastern Syria, we can assume they are Syrians due to the near total absence of people from other nationalities in the region.<sup>21</sup> The origin of seized amounts is also not reported. Still, due to the absence of evidence suggesting production in AANES areas, it is likely that the drugs originate from regime-held Syria. The amounts involved tend to be small<sup>22</sup> and, combined with the reports of seizures in neighboring Iraq and Turkey, indicate local distribution rather than cross-border smuggling.<sup>23</sup> AANES and its Asayish forces view counter-captagon and broader counter-narcotics efforts as an additional point of collaboration

with the U.S. and the ongoing mission of Combined Joint Task Force – Operation Inherent Resolve.

It’s notable that there are no reported arrests within Jordan in our database. While there have been limited arrests,<sup>24</sup> such reports do not relate to a specific operation and, therefore, do not qualify for inclusion in the database. These limited arrests, despite the known activity of Jordanian criminal networks in local distribution and smuggling to Saudi Arabia, reflect the kingdom’s focus on curbing the flow of the drug into the country along its border rather than crackdowns on smuggling networks. The active role of smugglers in Jordan is evident in the chart below, highlighting how many seizures at the Saudi-Jordanian border are larger in size than those at the Syrian-Jordanian border.

### Size of Pill Seizures: Syria-Jordan vs. Jordan-Saudi Arabia borders



Source: The New Lines Captagon Database (compiled from open sources)  
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In contrast, Saudi Arabia has undertaken a major crackdown campaign against local smuggling and distribution networks.<sup>25</sup> While captagon traffickers have targeted the kingdom for decades, in recent years consignments containing millions of pills



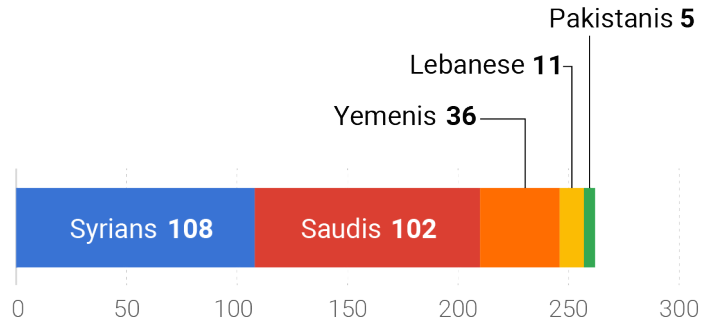
have flooded Saudi ports of entry. Both the rate and scale of these shipments would be impossible without a level of complicity among law enforcement, customs, and criminal justice system officials within Saudi Arabian criminal syndicates to receive and distribute the captagon.

The nationality of persons arrested for domestic seizures varies considerably by country. Among the key nationalities arrested for supplying captagon throughout the region, Saudis take second rank. However, within Saudi Arabia, most of those arrested are Saudi and Syrian, followed by expatriates from Pakistan, Nepal, and Yemen. These emerging transnational networks from recorded arrests suggest complex, dynamic criminal syndicates collaborating deep in destination markets like Saudi Arabia and between established production hubs like Syria.

Focusing on instances of arrests relating to cross-border smuggling, the database shows that such operations are led primarily by Syrian

### Most Counter-Captagon Arrests by Nationality of Arrestees

From 2015 to 2023



Source: The New Lines Captagon Database (compiled from open sources)  
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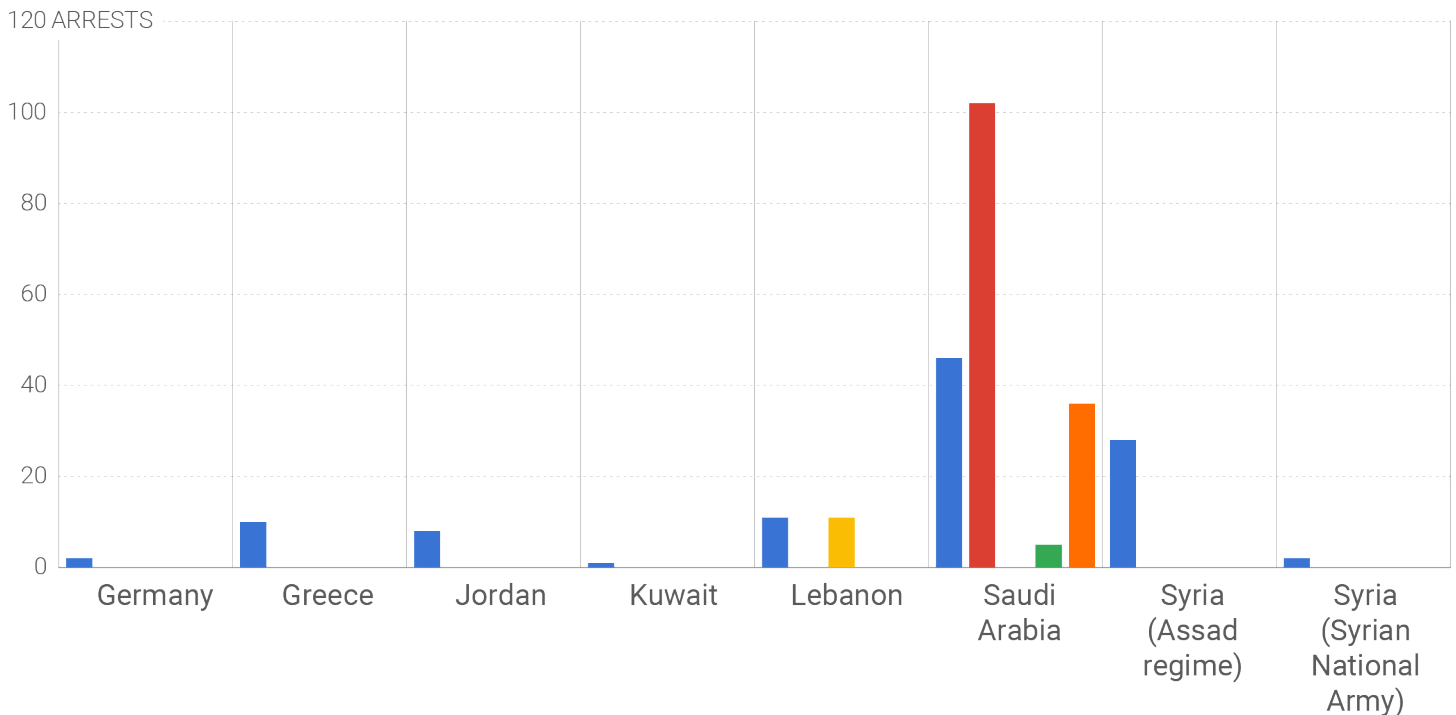
nationals, where the primary focus is transporting captagon to consumer markets elsewhere in the Mediterranean-Gulf zone. However, findings indicate that once captagon is smuggled across the border with the help of transnational criminal networks, locals are more likely to conduct the distribution.

### Global Counter-Captagon Arrests by Nationality and Country of Arrest

From 2015 to 2023

#### Arrestees' nationality

■ Syrians ■ Saudis ■ Lebanese ■ Pakistanis ■ Yemenis



Source: The New Lines Captagon Database (compiled from open sources)

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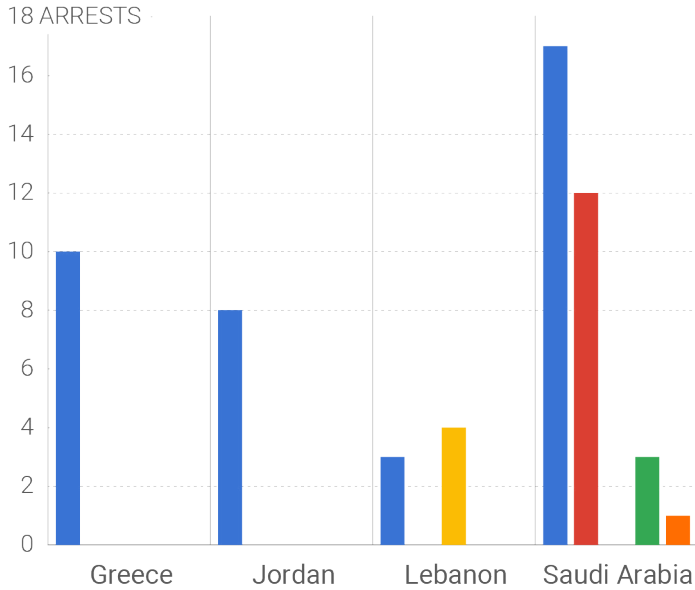


## Captagon Arrests by Nationality and Country of Arrest for Cross-Border Smuggling

From 2015 to 2023

### Arrestees' nationality

■ Syrians ■ Saudis ■ Lebanese ■ Pakistanis ■ Yemenis



Source: The New Lines Captagon Database (compiled from open sources)

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## Changing Means of Smuggling

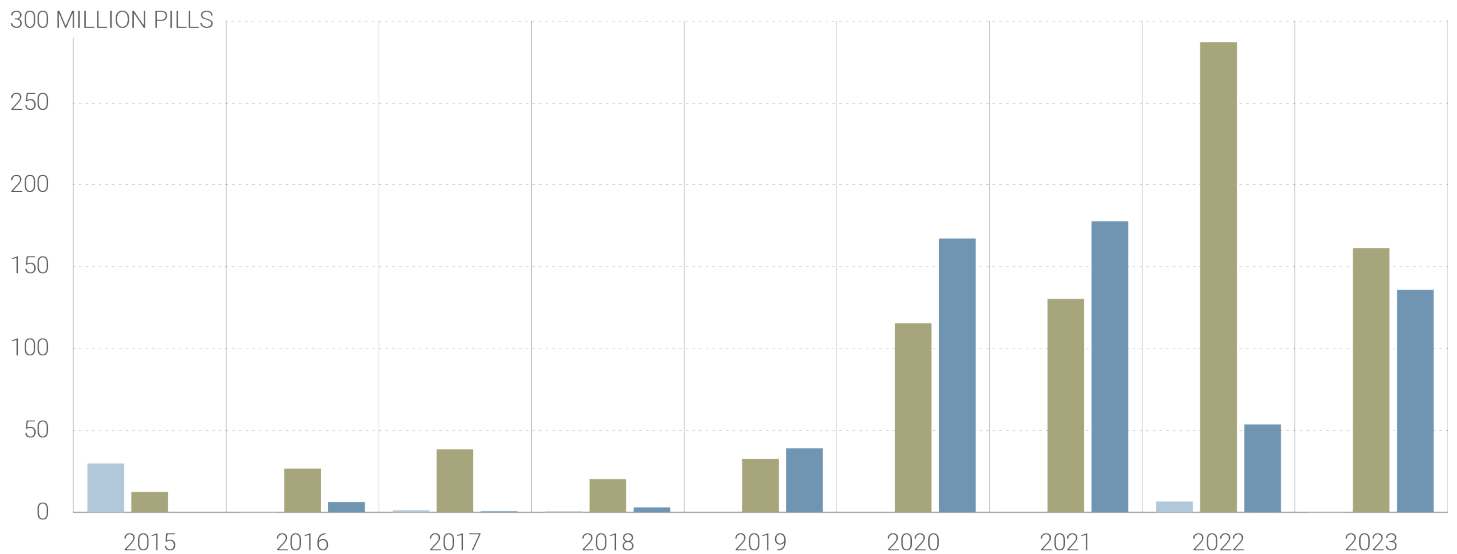
Over 2023, there was a notable uptick in the use of drone technology to smuggle illicit drugs, particularly along the Syrian-Jordanian border. However, this has been a pattern mostly confined to crystal methamphetamine rather than captagon, with only two reported incidents of drones smuggling captagon in the database: one in October 2021<sup>26</sup> and the other in June 2023.<sup>27</sup> The amounts involved are often negligible due to the difficulty of carrying the heavy weight of pills, limiting the usefulness of drone usage for larger, industrial-scale shipments. One other aerial machine – outside of commercial and private airplanes – that has been able to accommodate larger captagon shipments has been gliders, which can transport hundreds of thousands of pills in one shipment. However, use of gliders has been extremely rare, with only one flagged case in our database. One incident in Iraq's Basra city on June 3, 2022, involved a homemade glider carrying over 1 million captagon pills.<sup>28</sup>

The majority of detected aerial seizures in the graph below, however, relates to captagon consignments shipped through civil aviation at airports rather than drone usage. Still, airports tend to have more strict

## Seized Pills by Smuggling Means

From 2015 to 2023

■ Aerial ■ Land and unknown\* ■ Maritime



NOTE: "unknown" smuggling means indicates a lack of exact geolocation and smuggling method but is categorized with land-based seizures due to its high likelihood of overland trafficking.



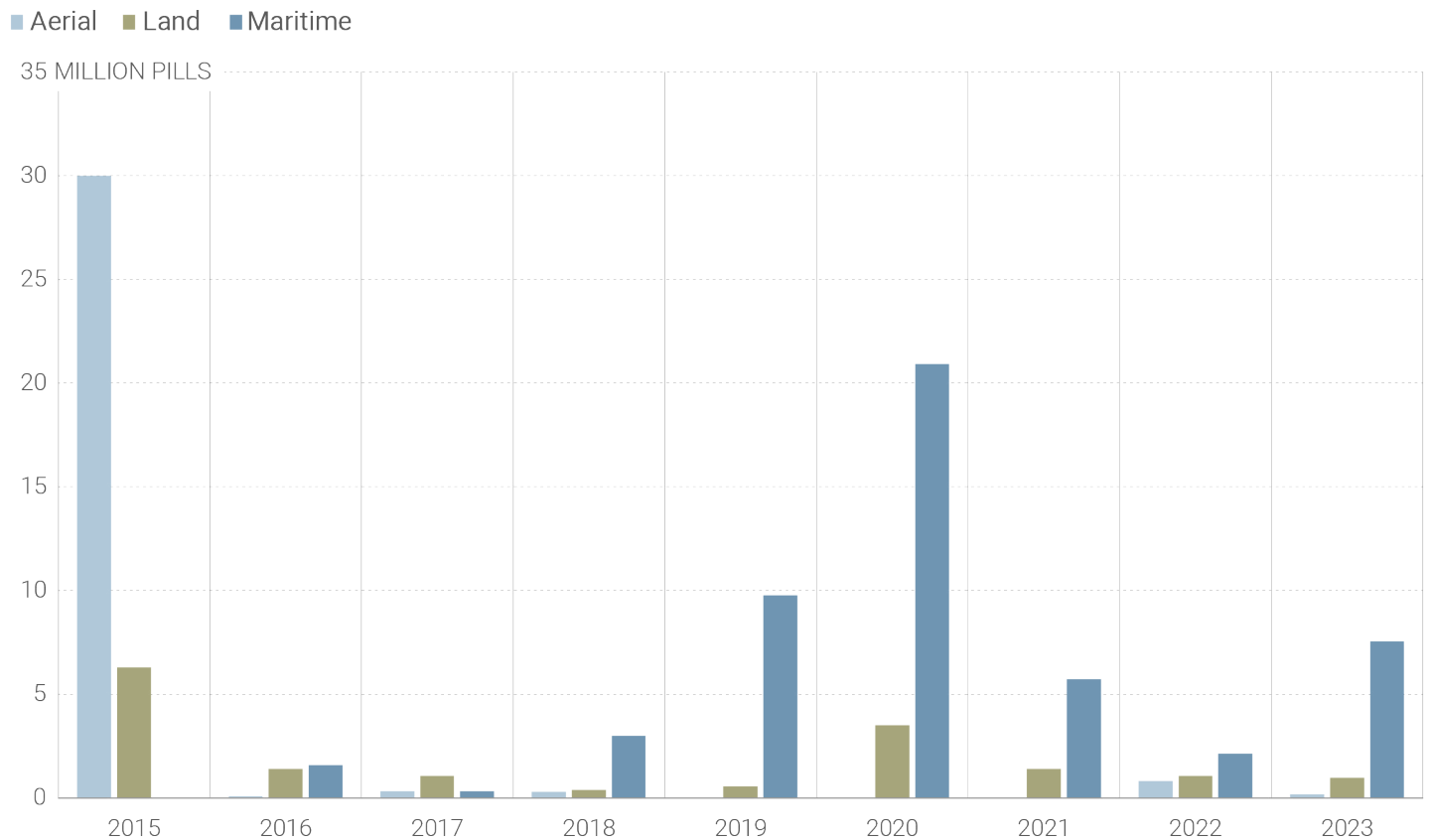
monitoring and more advanced detection technologies, and the likelihood of authorities identifying the illicit shipment arresting the smuggler is higher, which perhaps explains why smugglers tend to rely on maritime and overland smuggling more often.

In general, maritime shipments tend to be the largest due to the ability of commercial vessels to accommodate industrial-size shipments. Maritime routes are also lucrative to traffickers seeking to make use of transshipment sites, such as ports in the EU, to make consignments more challenging to track and to conceal a shipment’s suspicious origin. However, while maritime shipments have proved useful to smugglers – particularly those dispatching industrial-sized shipments from ports near production sites in Syria and Lebanon – the New Lines Captagon Trade Project database shows that overland smuggling, rather than maritime smuggling, is now on the rise.

This is supported by an upward trend in seizures from Jordan, Turkey, Iraq, and other existing or emerging transit routes – countries also targeted as sites of burgeoning demand.

While land shipments are generally smaller than maritime shipments, they occur far more frequently. On balance, land shipments over the past two years have been the primary means for getting the drug to consumer markets. The decline in maritime shipments can be attributed to three factors. First is the 2021 arrest of the “Captagon King” Hasan Daqqo, a Lebanese-Syrian businessman based in Tfail-Essal al-Ward who was behind some of the largest shipments in the industry dispatched from informal and formal ports in Lebanon to faraway transshipment sites such as in Malaysia’s Port of Klang, which required commercial maritime routes.<sup>29</sup> Second is the viability of Iraq as an alternative to Jordan for overland shipments after Jordan’s crackdown on cross-border

### Average Size of Shipment by Smuggling Means



Source: The New Lines Captagon Database (compiled from open sources)

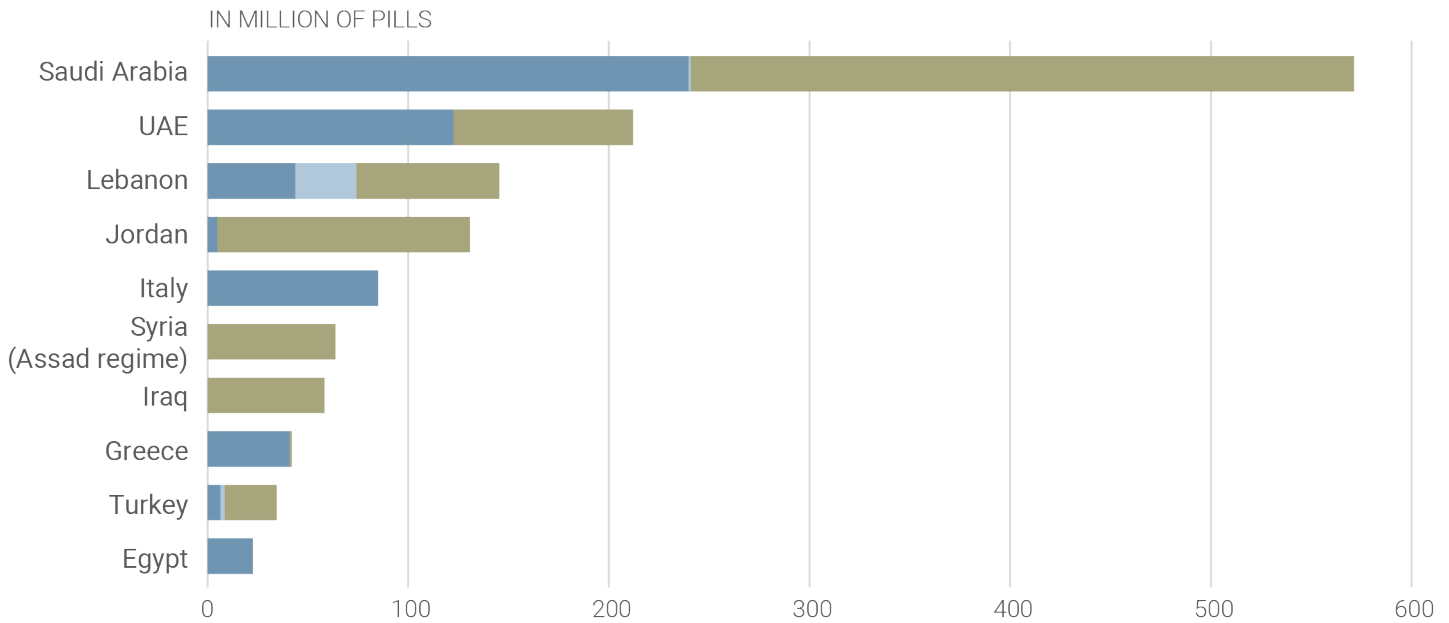
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## Captagon Seized by Country

From 2015 to 2023

■ Maritime ■ Aerial ■ Land



Source: The New Lines Captagon Database (compiled from open sources)

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trafficking. Third is a likelihood that traffickers have responded to increased awareness and prevention among ports across the Mediterranean-Gulf zone that were initially targeted as transshipment sites in the past five years. It is likely that traffickers, acknowledging increased risks, have identified alternative overland routes through neighboring countries such as Jordan and Iraq to diversify their approach and increase resiliency.

Furthermore, our database identified no significant increases in smuggling incidents during the fall and winter months, as opposed to spring and summer. This contradicts previous observations and expectations of a seasonal pattern in smuggling incidents and accompanying clashes along overland border routes, with the assumption that smugglers take advantage of harsh weather during winter months.

Forecasting future smuggling methods is inherently difficult because it's hard to predict where and when interdiction capacity will improve. This is further complicated by the adaptability of smuggling operations, which change routes based on their ability to reach consumer markets. Moreover, each

country affected by the captagon trade has different circumstances, requiring unique policy responses tailored to their specific transit and destination market challenges.

### Diversification in Production and Smuggling

As the captagon trade has begun to stretch beyond the Mediterranean-Gulf zone, producers and traffickers have adopted new, sophisticated methods to identify alternative precursor materials, production mechanisms, and locations; broaden their criminal networks; and tap into new pockets of demand. With these changes, agents have also advanced methods of smuggling to adapt to new challenges and demands. The New Lines Institute Captagon Trade Database cataloged several factors related to smuggling methods including method of transport, packaging materials, whether the pills were shrouded within licit goods, and, when relevant, branding of accompanying commercial products.

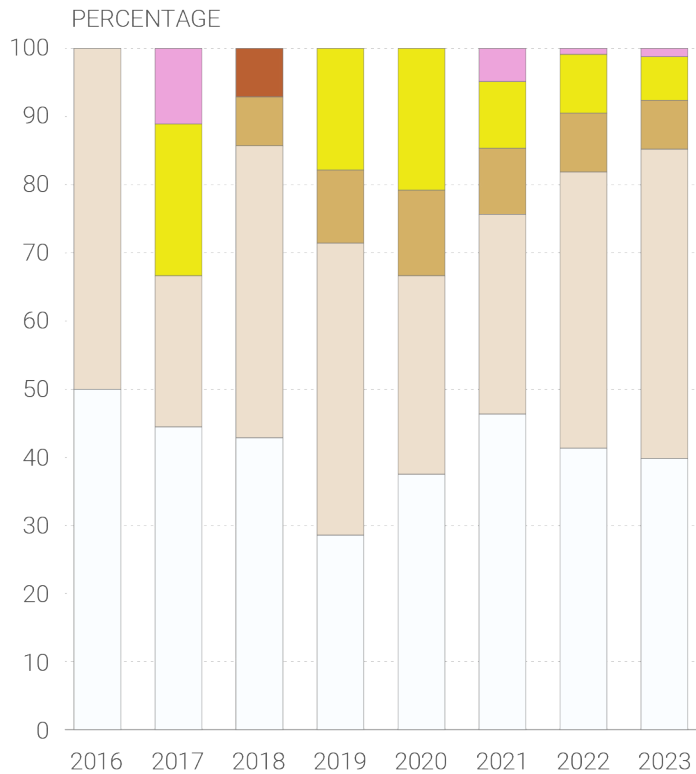
Analysis of the database indicates that smugglers are adopting increasingly sophisticated methods to smuggle captagon, hiding pills amongst licit goods





## Percentage of Annual Pill Seizures by Color

□ White □ Beige □ Brown □ Yellow □ Rust □ Pink



Source: The New Lines Captagon Database (compiled from open sources)

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and often utilizing methods and products tailor-made for individual consignments. There are many seizures where bags of captagon were hidden inside a vehicle part;<sup>30</sup> among licit produce like grapes,<sup>31</sup> or inside machinery,<sup>32</sup> coffee creamers,<sup>33</sup> or even household items like doors.<sup>34</sup> However, the database notes increased use of specialized, labor-intensive trafficking methods, such as wrapping thousands of individual pills with a mesh film to mimic chickpeas,<sup>35</sup> producing bespoke plastic oranges capable of holding hundreds of pills,<sup>36</sup> and fitting granite tiles with blank spaces to shroud pills.<sup>37</sup> These methods indicate an increasing level of sophistication among traffickers that will hinder law enforcement interdiction efforts.

### Insights from Pill Colors and Logos

Demand for the drug has also evolved. As typical with synthetic drug trades, producers and traffickers

have sought to diversify alternative chemical additives – “designer drug” precursor chemicals – to decrease production costs, increase output, and establish new “brands” of captagon pills to increase competitiveness.<sup>38</sup>

In the years that captagon has boomed in Middle Eastern markets, new brands of captagon have popped up on the market, differentiating themselves from the more traditional, white “Lexus” variant that has been flagged in seizures the most prominently. Mealy brown pills, yellow “capti” pills, and strawberry-tinted pills sometimes referred to as “Ya Masharni” have emerged alongside the Lexus variant, with most recent seizures indicating brighter yellow, dark brown, and rust-tinted hues that could indicate a new combination of chemical inputs.

With seizures, the New Lines Captagon Project database cataloged pill color and packaging material to properly assess patterns of trafficking and production. The database found no strong correlation between pill color and specific countries of consignment or origin. Furthermore, no statistically significant correlations appeared between pill colors and the year or country of seizure, with white and beige dominating the scene.

This indicates constantly evolving chemical compositions consumed throughout the region *carte blanche*, rather than varying demand levels for certain types of pills in particular destination markets. This challenges the ability of law enforcement services and governments to trace particular variants of captagon pills from their destination to origin.

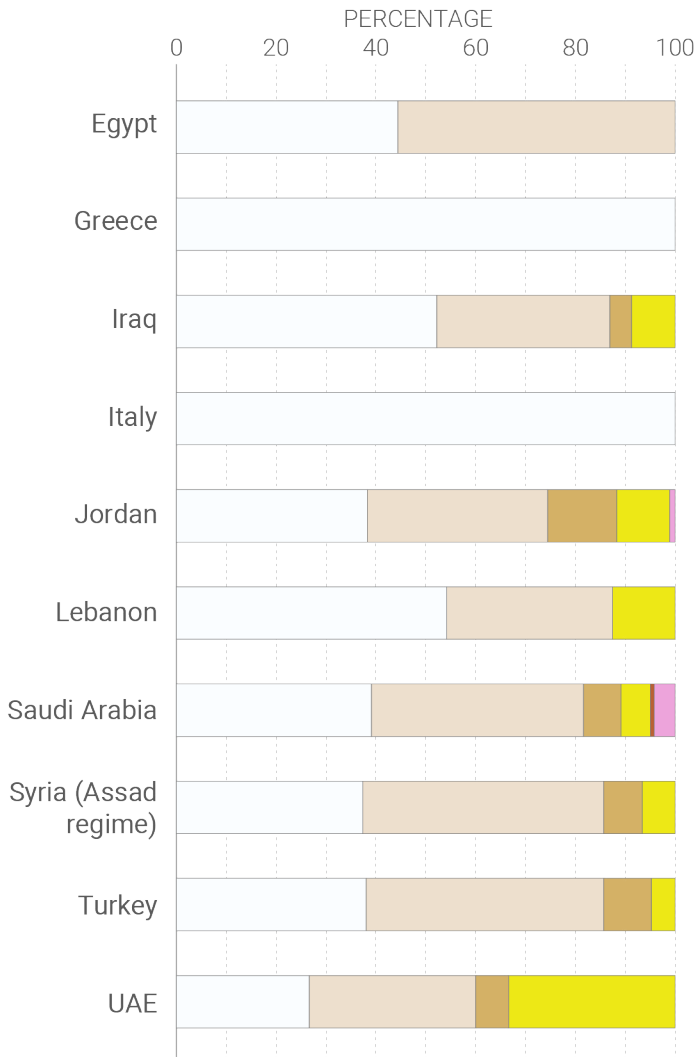
Along with pill color, packaging plays a role in establishing the different brands of captagon. Although plastic resealable packaging emblazoned with the logo and name of the automobile manufacturer Lexus has been a prominent feature of seized captagon consignments, new branding methods are emerging. Recent seizures have included pills branded with the Lamborghini logo and a sitting camel graphic, among others. However, much like pill color, the New Lines database indicates that there were ultimately no strong associations between the logo branded on pill packages and certain recipient countries. This finding is further supported by raids on production sites



## Countries' Percentage of Seizures by Pill Color

From 2015 to 2023

White Beige Brown Yellow Rust Pink



Source: The New Lines Captagon Database (compiled from open sources)  
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outside Syria, such a laboratory in southern Iraq, where the Lexus branding was being used.<sup>39</sup> This, too, serves as an obstacle to law enforcement and intelligence seeking to trace captagon consignments as they circulate throughout the region.

The absence of statistically significant correlations may partly stem from the fact that most reported seizures fail to include photos showing the logos, colors, or packaging. This underscores the importance

of cross-country collaboration in documenting the characteristics of each seizure, which would enhance the ability to trace the pills back to their origin.

## The Disputed Role of Hamas and Post-Oct. 7 Smuggling Dynamics

Despite wide media coverage speculating on captagon's role in Hamas's Oct. 7 attacks,<sup>40</sup> there is little evidence to suggest the group is consuming or trafficking the drug.<sup>41</sup> Video footage and pictures circulated following the attacks purporting to show captagon in the possession of Hamas fighters have actually depicted other drugs such as cocaine, and statements asserting captagon was found in both powder and liquid form – a rarity in captagon seizures – are difficult to prove.<sup>42</sup>

The immediate linking of captagon with Hamas post-Oct. 7 underscores a broader tendency to inaccurately associate the drug with armed conflict and terrorist operations, a narrative previously seen with groups like Daesh, also known as the Islamic State group.<sup>43</sup> Captagon has been seized in the Palestinian territories before, though with much less frequency and size compared with seizures in other areas. Since 2016, there have been three reports of captagon seizures in the West Bank and nine in Hamas-controlled Gaza.<sup>44</sup> In 2022, for example, a total of 175,000 pills were seized across the strip in Gaza and Rafah, which constitutes 0.05% of the amount seized in the region in that year.<sup>45</sup> Such trivial amounts and the lack of local coverage on the issue suggest local consumption in some circles but no systemic involvement for the de facto authorities in the industry and the regional trade. In 2023, there were no reported seizures of the drug in the Gaza Strip.<sup>46</sup>

Following the war on Gaza, the dynamics of smuggling in the region, especially on the Syrian-Jordanian border, shifted considerably, with a sharp rise in the number of seizures, quantity of seizures, arrests, and clashes. Notably, on Dec. 23, 2023, Jordanian authorities reported seizure of captagon tablets trafficked alongside a cache of ammunition.<sup>47</sup> Jordanian authorities then seized weapons from smugglers coming from Syria on Jan. 6, 2024, after engaging in violent clashes that resulted in five traffickers killed.<sup>48</sup>



## Counter-narcotics operations at the Syrian-Jordanian border before and after the Oct. 7 attacks

	Five months before Oct. 7	Five months after Oct. 7
Reported clashes with Syrian smugglers	0	8
Arrests	2	31
Death / Injuries	0	1 killed, 10 injuries announced, reports of unannounced injuries
Seizures accompanied by weapons	2	3
Number of captagon seizures (number of pills seized)	3 (243,000 captagon tablets weighing 67 kg)	12 (12.02 million captagon tablets, in addition to two seizures of unspecified number)
Number of crystal methamphetamine seizures (quantity seized)	5 (3.5 kg for the three where quantity was declared)	3 (5.5 kg for the two where quantity was declared)

It's possible that the militarization of illicit shipments and integration of ammunition and arms have been designed to send a message to Jordanian authorities that regime and Iran-aligned militia networks have the capacity to authorize more violent smuggling operations along the Syrian-Jordanian border and criminal syndicates inside the kingdom, giving Damascus and its partners leverage and creating a severe security challenge for Amman. Jordan has responded by continuing to target trafficking networks and production facilities in southern Syria, increasingly without the approval of the Syrian regime.

### The Role of the Assad Regime

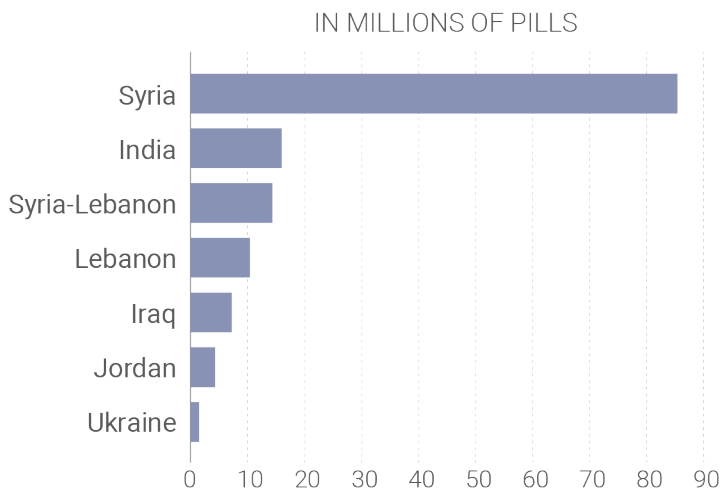
While there has been evidence that production sites have spilled over from Syria, industrial-scale production of captagon is still anchored in regime-held Syria. While the demand for more accessible precursor materials, greater proximity to trafficking routes and demand hubs, and interdiction resiliency have incentivized traffickers to move some operations beyond regime-held territories – even as far as mainland Europe – there is little incentive to completely uproot major manufacturing sites that can accommodate for industrial-scale output. Given the degree of governmental complicity, government-aligned sponsorship, and existing infrastructure for substantial captagon production, producers and traffickers can sustain operations within Syria while diversifying production and trafficking modes to dodge interdiction.

Data compiled from the New Lines Captagon Trade Project database supports this observation, as most seized consignments of captagon in which the origin country was stated by authorities came from Syria. The database cataloged different categories of origin sites within Syria, given the fragmentation of the country's current security landscape where different authorities control different areas. Additionally, the database flagged seizures that seizing authorities suspected but were not directly specified as originating from the Syrian-Lebanese border region.

Evidence of the Assad regime's sponsorship for the captagon industry is overwhelming as evidenced by the Captagon Trade Project's previous report<sup>49</sup> and earlier investigative reports. However, the regime's role in the trade is nowhere clearer than in the confessions of Daqqou, the drug lord, known as the "Captagon King" to the Beirut Criminal Court before being sentenced in 2022 to seven years in prison.<sup>50</sup> The confessions, seen by the authors of this report, show information and images of drug shipments, along with correspondence where Daqqou requested the purchase of materials used in manufacturing captagon.<sup>51</sup> Daqqou's defense narrative relied primarily on his affiliation since 2014 with an official government entity, the Security Office of the 4<sup>th</sup> Armored Division of the Syrian Arab Army, headed by Bashar al-Assad's brother Maher. Daqqou claimed that the Security Office requested he communicate with drug smugglers to monitor their activities and control shipments entering



## Captagon Pills Seized, by Country of Origin From 2015 to 2023



Source: The New Lines Captagon Database (compiled from open sources)  
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Syria.<sup>52,53</sup> He supported those claims by presenting passes for army checkpoints and security cards affiliated with the 4<sup>th</sup> Armored Division.<sup>54</sup>

The details of confessions and the content of messages found on Daqqou’s phones indicate the involvement of the 4<sup>th</sup> Armored Division in smuggling operations from the moment the shipments enter Syria, passing through the Division’s checkpoints until they reach Latakia port or are transferred from Syrian territories to Lebanon. But it should be noted that the 4<sup>th</sup> Armored Division has no legal mandate over counter-narcotics operations, so the fact that they are involved at all raises questions about the 4<sup>th</sup> Armored Division’s role in local illicit trades.

Daqqou stated that he received a “percentage of profits” if he reported drug shipments to the 4<sup>th</sup> Armored Division rather than receiving a “reward” for it – funds that amounted to hundreds of thousands of dollars each month.<sup>55</sup> This is significant; if the 4<sup>th</sup> Armored Division is tasked with controlling drug shipments (i.e., ostensibly stopping them), it would have no linkage with the captagon consignment’s profits and no ability to bestow a percentage to intelligence sources, as Daqqou alleges. Additionally, seizing shipments of drugs would effectively curtail its chances for reaching consumer markets and making a profit, further contradicting Daqqou’s assertion.

Daqqou claimed that the Security Office still owes him just under \$900,000 for services rendered, including reporting of drug shipments and providing security files for wanted individuals.<sup>56</sup> This claim raises the question: If the 4<sup>th</sup> Armored Division is performing a legitimate role in controlling drug shipments, where does Daqqou’s “profit” come from?

For example: Daqqou stated in his confessions to law enforcement that he received a call from Abu Fares Al-Ghufayli, his partner in a major consignment of an industrial rollers concealing over 94 million captagon pills,<sup>57</sup> seized in Malaysia.<sup>58</sup> Al-Ghufayli asked Daqqou to secure protection for drug shipments he intended to move through Syria. Daqqou told the 4<sup>th</sup> Armored Division that Abu Fares sought protection for his drug shipments; the 4<sup>th</sup> Armored Division told Daqqou to continue working with Abu Fares for a prepayment amount ranging from \$500,000 to \$2 million – approximately 40% of the amount Abu Fares would pay to ensure the passage of his shipments. The rest would stay with the Security Office.<sup>59</sup>

The interrogation transcripts revealed another link between the 4<sup>th</sup> Armored Division and drug smuggling operations, especially the shipment of rollers seized in Malaysia. Daqqou communicated with a person registered in his phone as “Abu Ali Jadid Muallim” (Daqqou refused to disclose his full name), discussing the forgery of certificates of origin and shipping documents related to the shipment.<sup>60,61</sup> He later admitted that Abu Ali works for Customs Clearance at the Latakia port, and that the 4<sup>th</sup> Armored Division provided facilities and direct support to Abu Ali in exchange for serving as their eyes at Latakia Port, providing information about drug smugglers using the port of whom the 4<sup>th</sup> Armored Division had no prior knowledge.<sup>62</sup>

The extracted phone messages provide additional evidence of the 4<sup>th</sup> Armored Division’s involvement as a partner in smuggling operations. WhatsApp messages were exchanged in January 2021 between Daqqou and a person in his phone listed as “The Boss” with the phone number “00963933333331” This repeated number, referred to as a “Golden Number” in Syria, is typically designated for influential individuals and high-ranking officials.<sup>63</sup>



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**“ ... interrogations and court documents outside the realm of open-source material indicate a robust illicit syndicate operating between the margins of the Assad family, 4th Armored Division, Hezbollah, Iran-aligned militias, and prominent kingpin families. ”**

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The intercepted correspondence on Daqqou’s phone and Daqqou’s confessions further reveal that Brig. Gen. Mahmoud Aboud of the 4<sup>th</sup> Division’s Security Office facilitated the passage of drug shipments through Syrian army checkpoints. He did this by assigning “movement missions” to smugglers to prevent army checkpoints from inspecting the shipments and facilitate their passage. A year later, Aboud was mentioned again as the officer in charge of 4<sup>th</sup> Armored Division checkpoints in a video by local activist Kamal Rustom, commenting on a large drug shipment discovered by mistake due to an accident on the Homs–Tartous road in September 2022 – a road under the control of the 4<sup>th</sup> Armored Division.<sup>64</sup>

While evidence of the Syrian regime sponsoring the captagon industry continues to accumulate, interrogations and court documents outside the realm of open-source material indicate a robust illicit syndicate operating between the margins of the Assad family, 4<sup>th</sup> Armored Division, Hezbollah, Iran-aligned militias, and prominent kingpin families.

## **Implications**

As noted within the database, captagon production and large-scale trafficking operations continue to be steadily anchored within regime-held Syria. The involvement of numerous regime-aligned individuals and networks – through connections to the Assad family, the 4<sup>th</sup> Armored Division, and/or the business sector – has been well documented in both this project and external publications. This reality has provided hindrance and opportunity to the Syrian regime. On one hand, the regime’s usage of the captagon trade as an alternative revenue source has invited sanctions against it by the United States, United Kingdom, and

European Union specific to trafficking and production networks.<sup>65,66,67</sup> On the other, relative control over the largest hub of captagon production and large-scale trafficking operations has provided Damascus leverage in normalization discussions and pressure against regional counterparts.

Following the February 2023 earthquake that devastated southern Turkey and northern Syria, the Syrian regime pushed its neighbors for diplomatic rapprochement. It leveraged the demand for humanitarian aid within areas affected by the earthquake, the March 2023 Chinese-brokered normalization deal between Saudi Arabia and Iran,<sup>68</sup> and other factors to incentivize regional stakeholders to come to the table. Counter-narcotics and specifically the captagon trade played a central role in normalization talks. With the fast pace and scale of captagon consignments overwhelming customs systems at border checkpoints and maritime ports, as well as rising captagon consumption posing a serious long-term public health risk, countries like Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Oman, and others sought to gauge whether the Syrian regime – if incentivized properly – could effectively cooperate to reduce the captagon trade.<sup>69</sup>

While the subject of counter-captagon efforts was primarily used as a primer for more contentious agenda items, such as a political process in accordance with U.N. Resolution 2254, talks did lead to formalized steps such as a joint Jordanian-Syrian-Iraqi working group tasked with investigating the sources of narcotics smuggling and production.<sup>70</sup> While countries such as Jordan initially conducted counter-captagon campaigns into southern Syria – likely with regime approval or knowledge – in the initial months of normalization, regional cooperation



with the Syrian regime over the captagon trade largely fell through. Apart from the February 2024 summit among Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and Iraq to discuss counter-narcotics collaboration,<sup>71</sup> discussion of the trade did not translate into comprehensive, regionwide collaboration or a reduction in the flow of captagon.

Syria continues to deny its role in captagon production and trafficking, asserting that captagon stems from terrorist organizations operating outside of areas it controls. The regime has adopted a narrative of victimhood in the captagon trade to align with its neighbors, while carrying out a campaign of small-scale arrests – a campaign this project has assessed as likely cosmetic to mask senior-level complicity.<sup>72</sup>

### **Regional Responses to Syria's Production of Captagon**

By late 2023, with the advent of the war in Gaza and more widespread frustration among regional actors with the Syrian regime's lack of interdiction, captagon's role as a key agenda item in normalization quickly faded. The regime and its Iran-aligned partners in Syria have continued to utilize captagon as a pressure tactic both within the country and against its neighbors. However, with normalization processes paralyzed, affected governments such as Jordan have begun to conduct unilateral strategies to counter captagon instead of a coordinated approach.

Jordan's counter-captagon strategy has largely played out along its border with Syria, where its armed forces have encountered not only frequent smuggling operations but also armed traffickers that have engaged in violent clashes – even in the face of relaxed rules of engagement from Jordan's armed forces. Utilizing its intelligence on production sites, meeting houses, storage facilities, and even the residences of drug kingpins in southern Syrian provinces like Daara and Sweida, Jordan has launched a series of airstrikes against these targets to stem the flow of captagon. These attacks have targeted the middle tier of the trade: key drug lords and traffickers that play a pivotal role in exporting overland captagon consignments of Syria. They have also targeted a growing number of small-scale production sites that have been staged in southern Syria closer to trafficking nodes.

However, these strikes have not always accurately hit their intended targets, resulting in civilian casualties. One Jordanian strike into the Sweida province's town of Arman resulted in 10 fatalities, which included civilian women and children.<sup>73</sup> The May 2023 strike on notable trafficker Marai Ramthan's residence reportedly killed not only Ramthan but also his wife and six children, although the casualty count has been disputed.<sup>74</sup> Due to the risk of inaccuracy and the fact that these strikes primarily target intermediaries involved in key trafficking nodes, rather than the trade's larger production sites and higher-ranking operators located deeper into regime-held territory – many of whom are tied to the Assad regime – the air campaign will likely only have a limited effect.

The Syrian regime has notably engaged in a counter-narrative, issuing a rare condemnation of a deadly Jordanian strike on Jan. 18,<sup>75</sup> stating that Jordan was not justified in launching airstrikes into its territory – a clear break with the working group that it had established with Jordan just months before. It is possible that to counter Jordan's campaign to stem the flow of captagon, regime forces and partners in the south – i.e., Hezbollah and Iran-aligned militias – will seek to disrupt local community coordination with Jordanian intelligence and armed forces, either introducing clashes, kidnappings, or establishing greater regional control within Daara and Sweida.

### **Policy Recommendations**

Over the last five years, the U.S. and its partners have come a long way in designing policies to respond to the captagon trade. In the last two years alone, the U.S. has adopted an interagency strategy to counter the trade as it relates to Syria and U.S. adversaries in the region, in addition to coordination with partners such as the U.K. in introducing sanctions against captagon traffickers and producers (the EU followed with similar sanctions). Additionally, the United States has worked with partners such as Jordan to further improve border security mechanisms that would aid interdiction capacity and reduce the likelihood of violent clashes, while launching a formal, multilateral coalition against synthetic substances, of which captagon is a part.

Still, U.S. and partner policies addressing the captagon trade are often shortsighted or ad hoc, lacking a



coordinated, long-term strategy that tackles the trade from both sides of supply and demand.

This report recommends:

- Establishing a formal working group on the captagon trade within the U.S.-led Global Coalition Against Synthetic Drugs. This working group should convene regular meetings among coalition members currently affected or at risk of being affected by the captagon trade, creating greater awareness, discussion, and informational exchange.
- Supporting and building momentum among partners to launch a multilateral mechanism against the captagon trade, led by regional stakeholders such as Jordan, Saudi Arabia, or Qatar, but excluding state and non-state actors actively involved in the trade, such as the Syrian regime. This mechanism will convene trusted regional stakeholders and international organizations active on the captagon file, illicit economies, counterterrorism, and public health to exchange intelligence, best practices, and strategies to manage the flow of captagon across the Mediterranean-Gulf zone. It will also provide a useful alternative to existing organizations, such as Interpol, that have provided the Syrian regime access and a platform in counter-captagon activities.<sup>76</sup>
- In the face of a diversifying, evolving chemical formula for captagon, increasing access among regional law enforcement and customs systems to laboratories for seized pills' analysis. This strategy can best enable researchers, governments, and health care systems to monitor captagon's ever-changing chemical composition, identify trends of production, trace pills to sites of origin, and manage health effects.
- Identifying pathways to advance the U.S. interagency's counter-captagon strategy, building upon existing sanctions, to bolster capacity-building and advisory efforts to partners interdicting captagon. The U.S. should seek to build out an integrated, comprehensive database of intelligence on captagon-related seizures, arrests, laboratory busts, and network analysis that its agencies can share with trusted partners within the region and, if established, a counter-captagon regional mechanism. And as the captagon trade becomes more embedded in domestic criminal syndicates within destination countries like Saudi Arabia and the UAE, the U.S. should encourage these actors to actively share intelligence that can further clarify the scope of captagon's inter-regional criminal networks.
- Carefully monitor the Syrian-Iraqi-Jordanian border region and provide technical assistance to relevant partners to improve border security, provide supplemental intelligence, and deconflict strikes with broader security developments in the Levant region amid the war in Gaza.
- Addressing the issue of captagon production and trafficking from Syria is crucial for the long-term stability and security of the region. It is imperative that efforts to counter this drug trade are not manipulated into a tool for negotiation or compromise with the Assad regime, which remains the principal source of captagon. Countries actively working to combat the spread of this narcotic should resist the pressure to use their anti-trafficking efforts as leverage for negotiating broader political concessions, such as the normalization of diplomatic relations, influencing Syria's political future, funding for reconstruction, or the conditions for refugee repatriation. The importance of maintaining a clear separation between the fight against narcotics and geopolitical bargaining cannot be overstated. Conflating these issues not only risks legitimizing a regime deeply implicated in the narcotics trade but also undermines the integrity of international efforts to ensure peace and stability in Syria and the surrounding region.
- Encouraging U.N. member states' law enforcement systems to register for the International Narcotics Control Board's Project Ion system, tasked with tracking the production, shipment, and trafficking of new psychoactive substances. As many countries as possible should consistently contribute their seizure data to the system, capturing all details related to shipment weight, pill count, pill color, packaging materials, and other information that could be useful for tip-offs and identifying captagon criminal syndicates.
- Taking note of Jordan's method of tackling the captagon trade. Jordan is leading the charge of working with actors in Syria to counteract the captagon trade, coordinating with networks in Syria's south to identify locations of laboratories, warehouses, meeting sites, and individuals

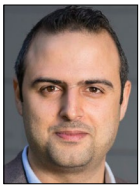


implicated in captagon trafficking and/or production. The U.S. and regional partners should implement this strategy as well and coordinate to build a more comprehensive picture of the robust, interstate network facilitating captagon's growth in the Mediterranean-Gulf zone. This will lead to a more effective, concerted strategy headed by regional players with the support of governments like the United States, U.K., and EU.

As the captagon trade continues to evolve, it is vital that governments actively monitor its trends of supply

and demand, using patterns to trace and predict behavior of the illicit trade's network of producers and traffickers. Recent initiatives, such as two congressional acts aimed at countering the captagon trade, sanctions on captagon producers and traffickers from the U.S., U.K., and EU and an emerging American inter-agency strategy have raised the captagon trade as an important feature of Syria's illicit landscape. However, it is paramount that governments begin to understand the captagon challenge as an expanding, evolving trans-regional industry that requires a multifaceted and joint response. □

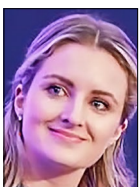
## Biographies



**Dr. Karam Shaar** is a non-resident senior fellow at the New Lines Institute, where he focuses on illicit narcotic flows and their nexus with security and political systems in Middle East, particularly in Lebanon and Syria. In addition to his work at New Lines, Dr. Shaar is also a consultant on Syria's political economy and an establishing partner at the Observatory of Political and Economic Networks. Originally from Aleppo, Syria, he has traveled extensively and is currently based in New Zealand. Prior to joining New Lines in March 2023, Karam was affiliated with the Middle East Institute. He also previously served as the research director of the Operations & Policy Center. Before focusing solely on Syria and the region, he worked as a Senior Analyst at the New Zealand Treasury, a Researcher at the Reserve Bank of New Zealand, and a Senior Lecturer on the Arab-Israeli conflict at Massey University.

Karam's work on Syria has been published in the Middle East Institute, Foreign Policy, the Carnegie Foundation, The Guardian, the Brookings Institution, and the Center for Strategic and International Studies. He's a frequent media contributor and has been interviewed, quoted, or hosted by The Washington Post, CNN, the Sunday Times, Aljazeera, BBC, The New York Times, Chatham House, the Brookings Institution, University of Oxford, the United Nations, and others.

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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## Appendix: Data Dictionary

Variable	Type	Description
ID	Number	Unique identifier
Publication date	Date	Publication date of the source reporting the counter-captagon operation.
Seizure date	Date	
Description	Text	Describes how the drugs were sealed, the activities involved in the operation, deaths, arrests, and other variables as reported by the source.
Country of seizure	Text	Syria is reported in five different ways since the country is split into various control areas: the Assad regime, the Free Syrian Army, the Syrian National Army, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, and the Syrian Democratic Forces.
Seizure location	Text	Location names can include a city, a village, a crossing, or an airport.
Exact geolocation?	Categorical	Yes, the source specified the exact geolocation. No, the source specified only an approximate geolocation. Unknown, the source did not mention where the operation happened.
Seizure latitude	Number	
Seizure longitude	Number	
Country of consignment	Text	For seizures, this variable specifies which country the drug was last routed through before being seized in the country of seizure.
Country of origin (official)	Text	Specifies which country the seized drugs originated from.
Destination Country	Text	Suspected destination country as reported by the source.
Domestic seizure?	Categorical	Yes, the source specified that the operation happened within the country. No, the source specified that the operation happened at the country's points of entry, such as land crossings, ports, and airports. Unknown, the source did not mention where the operation happened.
Maritime shipment?	Categorical	Yes, the source specified that the operation happened at a seaport. No, the source specified that the operation did not happen at a seaport. Unknown, the source did not mention where the operation happened.
Aerial Shipment (Drone/Air Cargo)?	Categorical	Yes, the source specified that the drugs were being transported via a drone or a plane at the time of interception. No, the source specified that the shipment was not aerial. Unknown, the source did not mention whether the shipment was aerial.
Amount seized (pills)	Numerical	Number of captagon pills seized. When the amount seized is stated as a weight instead of a number of pills, we convert it to approximate pill numbers, assuming a pill weighs 0.17 grams.
Amount other	Text	Specifies whether the amount of captagon seized is reported in a quantity other than pills.



Variable	Type	Description
Other drugs accompanied	Text	States which other drugs were discovered in the operation.
Amount seized (other)	Text and numbers	Specifies the amounts of other drugs seized using different units of measurement depending on the drug: weight, stamp, plant, etc.
Seizure Authority	Text	The official name of the public institution conducting the counter-captagon activity.
Number of arrests	Numerical	
Stated nationality of the arrested	Text and numbers	This variable is later broken down into multiple variables, each for a different nationality, to enable the analysis presented in this report.
Unstated nationality of the arrested	Numerical	Number of people arrested whose nationality is not stated.
Number of casualties	Numerical	
Rules of Engagement Applied (Clashes/Car Chases)?	Categorical	Yes, the source specified that the counter-captagon operation involved clashes or car chases. No, the source specified that the counter-captagon operation did not involve clashes or car chases. Unknown, the source did not mention clashes or car chases.
Warehouse raid?	Categorical	Yes, the source specified that the counter-captagon operation related to busting a warehouse. No, the source specified that the operation did not involve busting a warehouse. Unknown, the source did not mention whether the operation involved a warehouse raid.
Laboratory Raid?	Categorical	Yes, the source specified that the counter-captagon operation involved raiding a laboratory. No, the source specified that the counter-captagon operation did not involve raiding a laboratory. Unknown, the source did not mention whether a laboratory raid happened.
Source URL 1	Webpage link	The first source of the counter-captagon operation.
Source URL 2	Webpage link	The second source of the counter-captagon operation.
Source URL 3	Webpage link	The third source of the counter-captagon operation
Suspected Captagon value USD	Number	The market value suspected in the article in USD. For seizures reported in values other than the USD, Google's exchange rate converter is used to determine the conversion rate at the time of the operation.
White Color	Numerical-Binary	Yes/no In cases where there is a photo of the seizure, the color is reported using visual assessment. Therefore, this variable might be inaccurate due to subjectivity.
Beige Color	Numerical-Binary	Yes/no. See the limitation above.
Brown Color	Numerical-Binary	Yes/no. See the limitation above.
Yellow Color	Numerical-Binary	Yes/no. See the limitation above.



Variable	Type	Description
Rust Color	Numerical-Binary	Yes/no. See the limitation above.
Pink Color	Numerical-Binary	Yes/no. See the limitation above.
Logo	Text	Name of the logo showing in photos of the packaging or pills.
Country of origin (suspected)	Country name	The researcher's attempt at speculating where the drug originated from. Due to the difficulty of making such judgments with reasonable certainty, this variable is dropped from the analysis.
Packaging	Text	Describes the way seized captagon was packaged. Due to the limited availability of data on this variable, it does not feature in the analysis.
Hidden with licit goods?	Categorical	Yes, the source stated that the drug was seized in a shipment including licit goods.
		No, the source stated that the drug was not seized in a shipment including licit goods.
Accompanying licit goods	Text	Unknown, the source did not mention whether the drug was not seized in a shipment including licit goods.
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