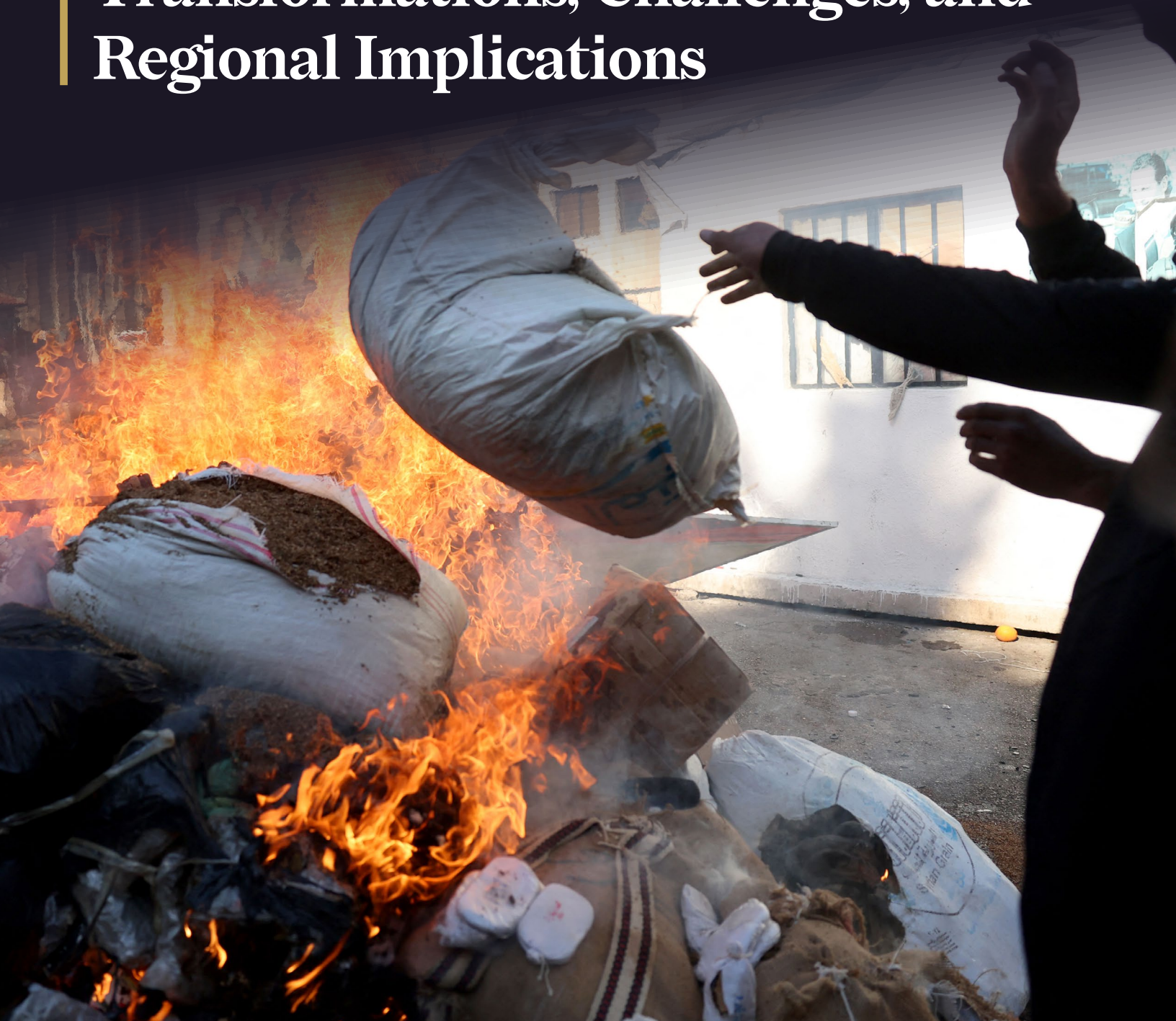


INTELLIGENCE BRIEFING

Captagon After the Fall of Assad: Transformations, Challenges, and Regional Implications





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Karam Shaar and Roaa Obaid

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The content and views expressed in this policy report are those of the authors and should not be taken to reflect an official policy or position of the New Lines Institute for Strategy and Policy.

(COVER) A man throws a bag onto a burning pile of illicit drugs on Dec. 25, 2024, in Damascus as part of an effort by the new Syrian government to dispose of stockpiles of captagon seized from warehouses and industrial production facilities that were allowed to flourish under ousted President Bashar al-Assad.. (Omar Haj Kadour / AFP via Getty Images)



Executive Summary

The regime of deposed Syrian President Bashar al-Assad had been widely accused of sponsoring the country's captagon trade. Media investigations linked state institutions, such as the 4th Armored Division and the Military Intelligence Directorate, as well as members of the Assad family, to the production and trafficking of the synthetic amphetamine-type stimulant, prompting international sanctions. Although the regime denied involvement, its role in the industry helped it sustain loyalist networks amid economic collapse and created political leverage it wielded against consumer markets in Gulf states. In contrast, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), which spearheaded the operation that toppled Assad in late 2024, had enforced a strict antinarcotics stance in northwest Syria. After HTS formed a new government in the wake of Assad's fall, the dynamics of the trade have shifted considerably.

Key findings

Former HTS leader Ahmad al-Sharaa, now Syria's interim president, has publicly committed to ending the captagon trade. His administration's major interdictions of captagon labs and stockpiles indicate genuine steps toward this pledge.

The Assad regime long maintained the narrative that Syria was merely a transit country for captagon. This narrative has now collapsed. Following the regime's downfall, New Lines Institute for Strategy and Policy documented the seizure of over 200 million pills over a span of four months from various production facilities and warehouses – 20 times the amount Assad's forces seized throughout all of 2024. These seizures occurred in former regime strongholds, including military installations like Mazzeh Airport and farms and warehouses owned by Maher al-Assad and other figures linked to the regime.

The scale and locations of these busts – including industrial sites and state facilities – underscore the Assad regime's complicity. Assad's efforts to curb supply to Gulf states in the last year before his ouster now appear to have been driven by political calculations rather than genuine enforcement, as infrastructure remained intact and primed to resume production.

Despite massive seizures following the downfall, arrests of producers, smugglers, and distributors have not

followed. The technical knowledge to produce captagon remains intact and could be redeployed elsewhere. Smuggling networks continue to operate, though likely on a diminishing scale, as regime-linked stockpiles dwindle. Southern Syria, especially Suwayda, remains a key hotspot for captagon trafficking, protected by local armed groups, with signs of labs seeking safe haven in Lebanon.

The regional response has evolved. Jordan has employed both airstrikes and intelligence coordination, while operations on the Lebanese border have intercepted precursor chemicals and counterfeit labeling equipment. A meeting in March, led by Jordan and Saudi Arabia, marked growing regional cooperation with the new Syrian government. Syria and Lebanon also signed a security agreement under Saudi auspices aimed at enhancing security coordination and securing their shared border, following the escalation of violent clashes with armed smugglers along the border.

The interim government lacks institutional capacity for effective counternarcotics operations, reflected in its disposal methods, such as open-air burning and dumping of seized captagon into waterways, raising serious environmental concerns. Counternarcotics efforts within the country are poorly coordinated and suffer from a shortage of skills, financial resources, and necessary technologies.

While industrial-scale production in former regime areas appears unlikely to resume, demand remains steady. With prices rising, makeshift labs may proliferate, though they lack the scale of former operations. The overall rise in prices may also drive users toward cheaper and more dangerous substitutes such as methamphetamine, escalating public health risks.

Policy Recommendations

In the absence of state sponsorship in Syria, which was responsible for 80% of total captagon production, overall supply may decline and become more dependent on sources from other countries or different actors involved in the industry, leading to higher prices. This, in turn, could strengthen the growth and profitability of these entities, thereby increasing their appetite for risk and making the industry more violent. These emerging and highly uncertain dynamics could change the overall architecture of supply for the industry. Policymakers across the region should prepare for



further fragmentation of captagon production and more volatile smuggling patterns, necessitating coordination more than ever.

Affected states and international organizations should establish a regionally led coordination mechanism on amphetamine-type stimulants. This platform should convene regional stakeholders and multilateral institutions and allow for the participation of the current Syrian government. Its focus should be on intelligence-sharing, strategic planning, operational coordination, and the exchange of best practices.

The world should continue to support Syria's economic recovery and territorial integrity: As long as Syria lacks alternative livelihoods, full territorial control, and sustained security – particularly in the southern regions traditionally known for smuggling activities – it will continue to be difficult to contain the captagon trade.

Entities working toward stabilizing the region, such as Gulf states, the U.S., the EU, and the U.K., should support the Syrian government's efforts to secure its borders by deploying advanced surveillance systems and training personnel with the authority and capacity to interdict captagon production, distribution, and smuggling.

The interim Syrian government, with support from international partners, should urgently develop and implement standardized protocols for the safe and environmentally sound disposal of seized captagon and precursor chemicals.

Countries currently affected by the captagon trade should register to use the U.N. Office of Drugs and Crime's International Project on New Psychoactive Substances, enabling law enforcement to engage in intelligence exchange against drug producers and traffickers.

Introduction

Over the five years before his ouster, the regime of former Syrian president Bashar al-Assad had come under growing scrutiny for its alleged sponsorship of Syria's burgeoning narcotics industry, particularly the production and trafficking of captagon. Entities subordinate to Assad, such as the 4th Armored Division and Military Intelligence Directorate,¹ were responsible for supplying a significant portion of Syria's drug supply. These findings contributed to a wave of international sanctions² targeting key entities and individuals, including members of the Assad family.

Reports^{3,4} had long indicated that captagon production was rampant within Syria. The captagon trade served as a vital economic lifeline for Assad and his inner circle after the conflict and sanctions crippled many of their other revenue streams. Assad⁵ provided this industry with security cover, immunity from legal consequences, and easy access to raw materials, enabling the trade to flourish.

Despite the mounting evidence, the regime consistently denied⁶ state involvement in the industry, maintaining that such activities occurred outside government control. Furthermore, one of the key tenets of the regime's narrative was that its areas of control were merely a transit zone, further reflected by the absence of news of lab busts. However, the structure and scale of the trade unveiled following Assad's downfall confirm the depths of the regime's involvement.

The captagon industry served two vital functions for the Assad regime. Economically, it helped sustain loyalist networks amid a collapsing formal economy, providing hard currency and liquidity when other sources had dried up. According to a report by the World Bank co-authored by one of the authors of this report, "actors based in or linked to Syria profited⁷ from the sale of captagon up to \$1.8 billion per year, almost twice the revenue generated from all licit Syrian exports in 2023." Politically, it functioned as a lever of influence: By allowing massive quantities of the drug to flow into neighboring countries, the regime created public health and security crises that it could later offer to temper for political gain, including normalization. This strategy was evident in 2023,⁸ when captagon flows slowed as Assad made gestures toward curbing the trade during rapprochement talks with Arab capitals.

In stark contrast, the part of northwest Syria under the control of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), whose former leader Ahmad al-Sharaa is now interim Syrian president, adopted a strictly prohibitive approach to narcotics. It is also noteworthy that, over the past years, HTS had intercepted several large captagon shipments enroute to Türkiye⁹ and discovered a captagon production facility¹⁰ in the Idlib countryside, with origins traced back to regime-held territories. With the collapse of Assad's rule in December 2024 and HTS's subsequent assumption of security responsibilities, Syria's captagon trade is undergoing a fundamental transformation. On Dec. 8, al-Sharaa¹¹ on his first visit to the historic Umayyad Mosque, a site of great symbolic importance for Syrian Muslims, delivered a victory



speech in which he condemned the ousted Assad regime's involvement in the captagon trade and expressed a firm commitment to combating it, citing its detrimental impact on Syria's reputation and historical legacy. His statements reiterated HTS's stance on narcotics, grounded in both religious ideology and a future-oriented vision of building a clean economy.

This report draws on New Lines Institute for Strategy and Policy's database to assess where the trade is headed in this new phase. It seeks to unpack the shifting dynamics of production, smuggling, and regulation under emerging authorities, offering insights into the evolving political economy of narcotics in post-Assad Syria.

Methodology

The report relies on the New Lines' Captagon Trade Project database,¹² the only comprehensive initiative tracking the industry. The database chronicles nearly 1,600 counter-captagon operations – including smuggling seizures, lab and warehouse raids, arrests, and clashes – across the Middle East and beyond. The data, spanning from 2015 to the present, draws from Arabic and English news articles, social media, and official sources. The information is updated daily and can be interacted with directly on the New Lines website.¹³ Data collection methods and variable definitions are outlined in an earlier New Lines report.¹⁴

While the dataset offers a detailed view of the captagon trade, it provides only a lower-bound snapshot, as smaller seizures can at times go unreported, and authorities occasionally omit details such as pill quantities from reported counter-captagon operations. Nevertheless, the database offers unparalleled granularity, including geolocation, number of casualties, pill color, and country-of-origin information for each entry wherever possible. For this

report, the figures are aggregated into four-month periods so that the latest, from December 2024 to March 2025, covers almost exclusively the period after Assad's downfall. The presented aggregations start from January 2022 to enable comparability over time.

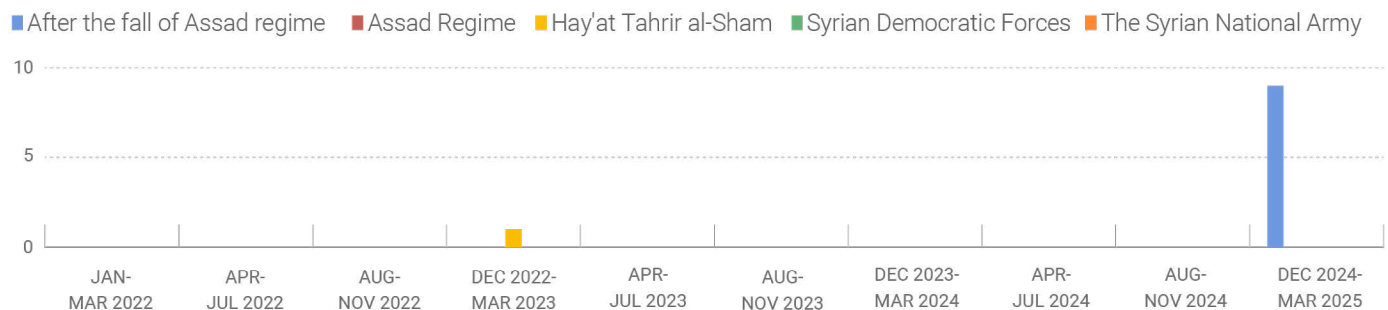
Assad's Narrative Crumbled

The regime-promoted narrative that Syria was merely a transit zone for captagon without state involvement has been debunked. After the swift collapse¹⁵ of Assad's rule, it became evident that groups affiliated with the regime had no time to conceal evidence of many of their crimes. Among the most notable examples were the captagon factories and warehouses, some of which, according to witnesses, were set on fire¹⁶ before being abandoned in a last-ditch effort to hide their contents.

Following the regime's collapse, nine manufacturing facilities containing massive quantities of captagon pills and raw materials for production were seized. Large caches of captagon were discovered at military facilities such as Mazze Military Airport¹⁷ and hidden in warehouses, one of which contained 100 million pills,¹⁸ nearly half the amount seized globally during the entirety of 2024. These seizures disproved the Assad regime's claims that there were no manufacturing facilities within its borders.

Captagon production was discovered in facilities owned by Bashar's brother Maher al-Assad¹⁹ and other influential figures in the Syrian government. Other Assad family members implicated in the industry, such as Bashar's cousin Wassim Badia al-Assad, have fled.²⁰ Additionally, prominent businessmen like Amer Khiti,²¹ an associate of Maher al-Assad,²² turned out to be the owner of a massive warehouse visited by the authors in Douma, Damascus, which was discovered containing large quantities of

Captagon Labs Seized in Syria

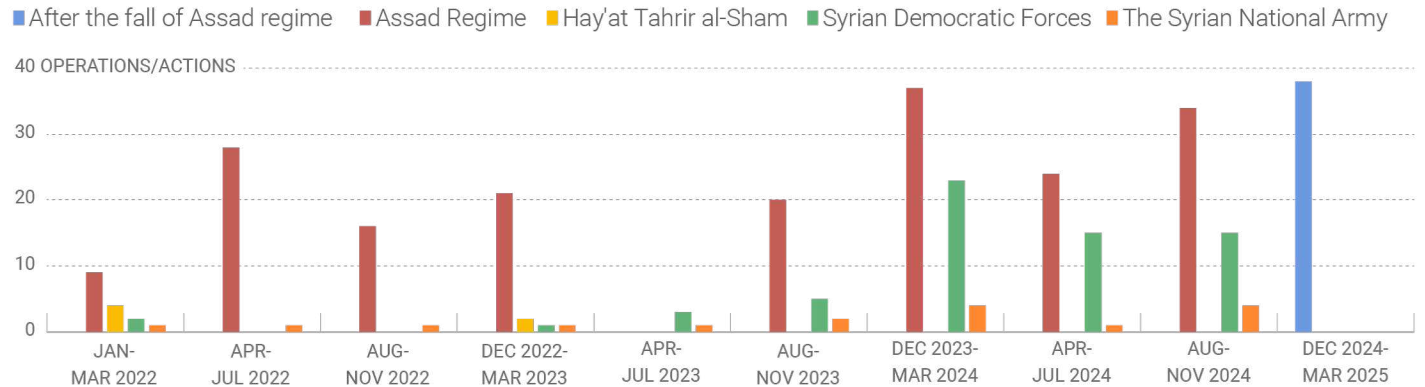


Source: The Captagon Trade Project, New Lines Institute

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Captagon Seizures in Syria by Controlling Authority



Source: The Captagon Trade Project, New Lines Institute

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captagon pills plus licit goods intended to be used to conceal smuggling operations.

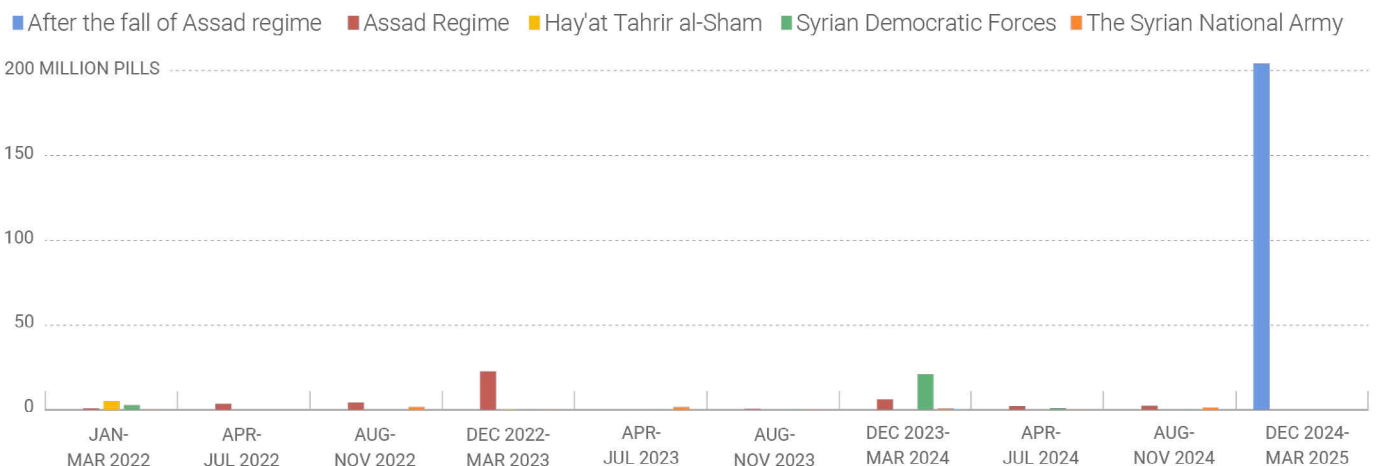
In keeping with the narrative that Syria was merely a transit country for captagon, the Assad regime never announced any production facility shutdown. However, in the four months since the regime's downfall, at least nine production facilities have been seized.

These facilities contained sufficient raw materials to make enough captagon to flood consumer markets alongside advanced industrial machinery that was assembled, connected, and in working condition, still loaded²³ with raw materials. Additionally, piles²⁴ of finished pills were found nearby. This suggests Assad had not intended to scale down or eliminate state-sponsored captagon production capacity over the past two years²⁵ but rather sought to limit its cross-border flow over time to maximize political leverage.

Areas controlled by Syrian Democratic Forces, where there is little evidence of production, reported fewer seizures than in Assad-controlled areas. In places where the Syrian National Army and HTS exerted control, there were significantly fewer seizures, potentially reflecting the lower popularity of the drug there or the severe consequences of being caught supplying it, especially in HTS-controlled areas.

However, while the number of discrete counter-captagon operations performed in regime-controlled areas was nearly as high as in the period following its downfall, this metric does not accurately gauge the regime's intention to combat the industry. Assad's attempts²⁶ to demonstrate efforts to curb captagon trafficking was part of a strategy to achieve regional rapprochement. Highlighting the regime's lack of seriousness is the fact that it seized a total of 10.1 million pills over the entirety of 2024. In contrast, the subsequent government seized over 200 million in only four months.

Captagon Seized in Syria by Controlling Party



Source: The Captagon Trade Project, New Lines Institute

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General Security Administration personnel destroy tons of drugs in Damascus, in January 2025. Packages of drugs were discovered by the General Security Administration at the headquarters of the 4th Division, under the command of Maher al-Assad, the brother of ousted leader Bashar al-Assad. (Hisam Hac Omer / Anadolu via Getty Images)

Counter-Captagon Operations and the Urgency of Capacity Building

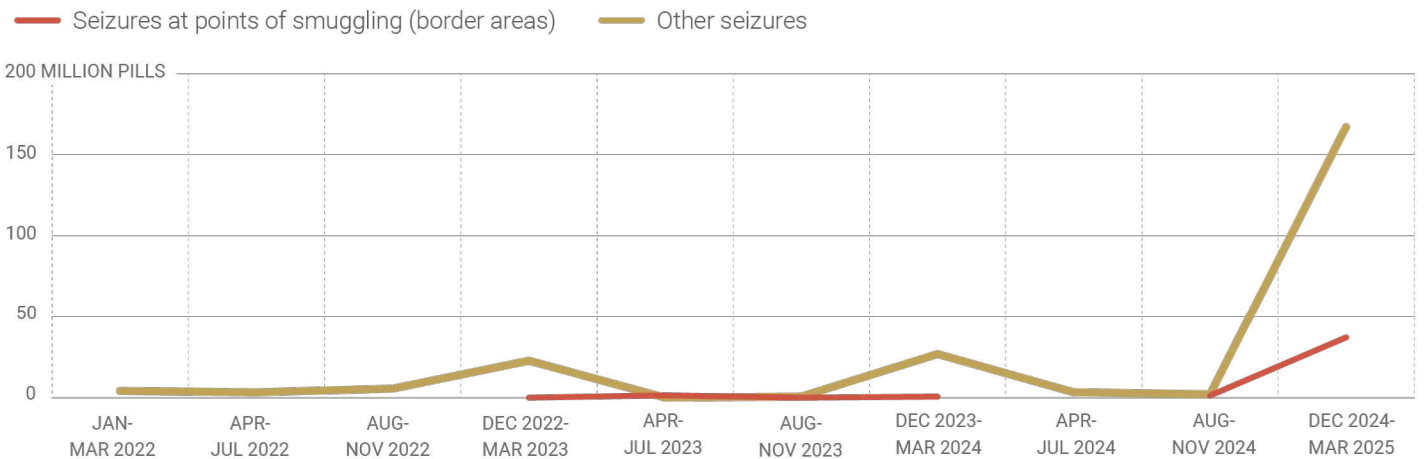
The current Syrian government, drawing its security personnel largely from HTS forces, is ill-equipped to effectively manage counternarcotics operations and properly dispose of seized captagon. The government's approach has largely consisted of publicizing the discovery of facilities and warehouses through media announcements, granting access to journalists to document these sites, and then collecting and disposing of seized raw materials and finished pills by burning them in open-air pits or dissolving them in water,²⁷ which is then dumped into sewage systems.²⁸ These methods raise serious environmental and public health concerns.

Prior to the regime's collapse, Syria's Drug Enforcement Division operated under the Ministry of Interior.²⁹ Recent captagon seizures, however, indicate a shift in operational responsibility: The task now appears to fall under the Public Security Administration, as evidenced by the prominent display of government logos on vehicles, officers' uniforms, and backdrops during official announcements. While Public Security Administration is also subordinate to the Ministry of Interior, it is not specifically mandated to lead counternarcotics efforts.

This institutional ambiguity reflects a broader structural deficiency: Counternarcotics operations are neither clearly mandated nor properly institutionalized. The absence of a dedicated authority, clear command structure, and standardized operational procedures significantly weakens



Domestic vs. Border Seizures in Syria



Source: The Captagon Trade Project, New Lines Institute

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the effectiveness and credibility of the authorities' response to the captagon crisis. However, the Ministry of Interior has taken steps to establish a counternarcotics division with the announcement of a recruitment campaign in late March,³⁰ though it hasn't outlined the structure for that unit. The requirements for applicants include basic physical and criminal background checks and a four-month training course without stipulating prior experience, highlighting the ad hoc and underdeveloped nature of these efforts.

In this context, capacity building emerges as a critical priority. Strengthening Syria's counternarcotics authorities through comprehensive training programs, the establishment of specialized investigative units, and the development of clear operational frameworks is essential to building credibility and dismantling pro-regime remnants and independent criminal syndicates that pose a challenge to the post-regime transition. Efforts should focus not only on basic enforcement capabilities but also on intelligence-gathering, financial investigations, and judicial processes to ensure that seizures translate into meaningful disruption

of trafficking structures. Without sustained investment in institutional capacity, Syria risks remaining a transit and production hub for captagon, with serious security, economic, and public health ramifications for both the country and the wider region.

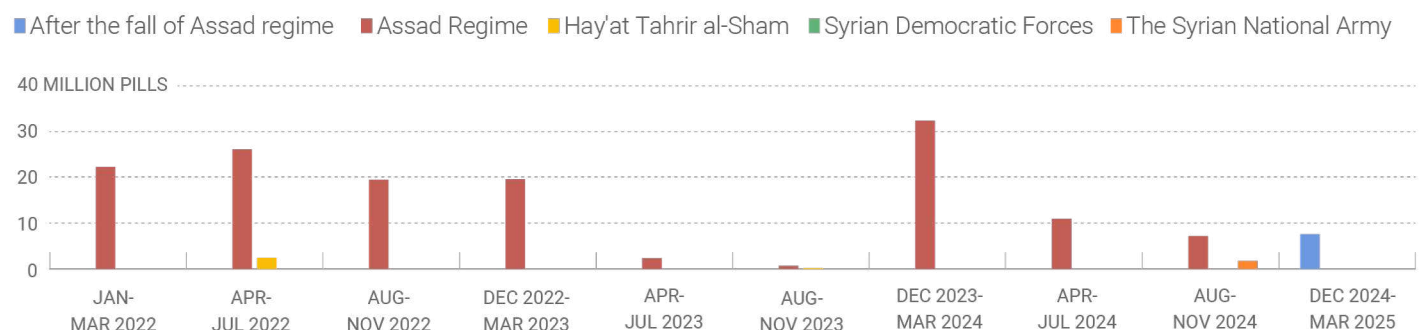
Cross-Border Smuggling Continues

Following Assad's downfall, most captagon seizures in Syria were from stockpiles uncovered during lab and warehouse raids, not from interdictions at points of smuggling.

Prior to Assad's downfall, other countries noted that regime-held areas were often the last areas of consignment before interdiction. From December 2024 to March 2025, the pace of interdictions of captagon shipments coming from Syria slowed compared with the same period in 2023-2024.

In the rare cases where the country of consignment has been reported by the seizing authority, shipments coming from Syria in the four months after Assad have often been

Amount of Captagon Seized – Announced From Syria as a Country of Consignment



Source: The Captagon Trade Project, New Lines Institute

© 2025, New Lines Institute



interdicted by Jordan. Southern Syria, and especially³¹ the Suwayda region, continues to be an active zone for captagon smuggling, in part because Public Security Administration forces have so far been unable to operate there as local militias and influential families and tribes exert control. These groups maintain significant autonomy and have entrenched networks facilitating smuggling activities. Despite that, Public Security Administration forces have managed to thwart two major smuggling operations enroute to Jordan: one at an unidentified location on the Syrian-Jordanian border³² and the other at the Nassib border crossing,³³ where 7 million captagon pills concealed within a shipment of biscuits were seized.

Jordanian-Syrian Border

On the Jordanian side of the border, some smugglers attempting to cross the border³⁴ have been attacked. Jordan has announced drug seizures at the border without specifying volumes or types of drugs. Jordan initiated coordination attempts with the new Syrian government, while Syrian Foreign Minister Asaad al-Shaibani³⁵ affirmed that drug smuggling would no longer pose a threat to Jordan under the new administration. A joint agreement³⁶ was signed between the two governments in January 2025 to establish a joint security committee to secure the borders against drug and arms smuggling.

However, a week later, Jordan conducted two airstrikes³⁷ in the al-Shaab desert area in Suwayda. Subsequently, Jordanian border forces clashed with smugglers attempting to cross the border, killing four,³⁸ indicating continued smuggling but at a lower rate than before. Such unilateral actions by Jordan suggest it might have intelligence on the operations of criminal networks within southern Syria that is superior to that of the central government in Damascus, further highlighting the need for intelligence exchange and cooperation.

Lebanese-Syrian Border

On the Syrian-Lebanese border, violent clashes and seizures³⁹ of drug farms and weapons have been reported, including armed confrontations in the Syrian villages⁴⁰ of Hawik, Jarmash, Wadi al-Hourani, and Akoum. Syrian border forces reportedly⁴¹ faced resistance from armed groups affiliated with Hezbollah and endured artillery shelling. The Syrian forces seized farms, warehouses, and factories involved in the production and packaging of hashish and captagon pills, as well as printing presses for counterfeit currency. Significant quantities of sodium hydroxide, used in the manufacture of methamphetamines, and raw materials for manufacturing captagon were also discovered.

In one incident⁴² near the Syrian-Lebanese border close to the Zeita Dam west of Homs, an armed group reportedly affiliated with Hezbollah abducted three members of the Syrian Arab Army. The group took the soldiers into Lebanon, where they were executed in a humiliating manner, including one who was stoned to death,⁴³ according to reports from the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights⁴⁴ and the Syrian Ministry of Defense. This event triggered intense clashes along the border,⁴⁵ resulting in casualties on both sides and leading to military exchanges and shelling between Syrian and Lebanese forces. A ceasefire agreement between the Syrian and Lebanese defense ministries that halted the fighting included pledges to prevent further escalation and enhance coordination along the border.⁴⁶

Following these bloody confrontations and simmering tensions, Syria and Lebanon signed a security agreement⁴⁷ on March 28, aimed at enhancing coordination and securing their shared border. The agreement, officially concluded in Jeddah with the participation of the Syrian, Lebanese, and Saudi defense ministers, emphasizes the strategic importance of border demarcation, the formation of specialized legal committees, and the activation of coordination mechanisms to address security and military threats along the approximately 375-kilometer-long Syrian-Lebanese border.

Lebanese Internal Security Forces indicated⁴⁸ that drug manufacturers have occasionally relocated labs toward Lebanese territory amid the widespread security chaos that prevailed in Syria at the onset of Assad's downfall. In one recent interdiction, those security forces arrested the driver of a truck carrying drug manufacturing equipment who said that it had been the third such shipment he had transported from Wadi Khaled,⁴⁹ near the Syrian-Lebanese border, on behalf of a Syrian in exchange for money. The Lebanese recipient of the equipment said he had received six similar shipments and claimed he was only storing them and didn't know their purpose. No drugs were found, indicating that manufacturers were relocating their industrial capacity instead of smuggling finished product, given the relative ease of manufacturing a new supply of captagon.

Syrian-Turkish Border

Captagon trafficking from Syria to Türkiye continued over the past four months. Turkish authorities – particularly in Hatay province – have conducted several counternarcotics operations resulting in the interdiction of captagon and other drugs originating from Syria. In one such operation, two Syrians⁵⁰ were detained and about 87 kilograms of captagon and 62 kilograms of hashish were seized. Additionally, regional cooperation has led to the interception of captagon shipments⁵¹ transiting through Türkiye to other



A Syrian rebel fighter inspects a makeshift lab facility that produced captagon at a ranch villa in al-Dimas, northwest of Damascus on Dec. 22, 2024. More than 200 million captagon pills were reported seized from warehouses and production facilities in Syria in the months after former President Bashar al-Assad's ouster. (Omar Haj Kadour / AFP via Getty Images)

countries. Iraqi security forces, acting on Saudi intelligence, seized over a metric ton of captagon pills smuggled from Syria via Türkiye, resulting in the arrest of several suspects, including Syrians and Iraqis. However, production in Türkiye itself, known for its small-scale production of captagon for decades, seems to continue to survive. In Hatay, six people were recently arrested and charged with operating a captagon production facility⁵² after a raid in which authorities confiscated 97.6 kilograms of amphetamine powder, 38,000 captagon pills, a production oven, a printing machine, a fuel tank, two mills, and a packaging machine.

Syrian-Iraqi Border

Iraq also faces significant challenges with narcotics smuggling networks exploiting security gaps along its shared border with Syria. Several attempts to transfer captagon production operations into Iraq itself over the past

four months have been noted. Since the onset of decisive military operations in Syria,⁵³ the Iraqi government has intensified its security efforts, tightened border controls with Syria, and strengthened regional cooperation with Saudi Arabia,⁵⁴ Jordan,⁵⁵ and Türkiye⁵⁶ to improve border monitoring and disrupt smuggling routes. In Iraq, authorities shot down a drone on the Syrian-Iraqi⁵⁷ border carrying two bags of captagon bearing the "Lexus" logo. Demand for captagon remains high, incentivizing suppliers to use various methods and routes to fulfill it. Iraq reported a decrease in captagon seizures and an increase in prices,⁵⁸ pointing to a decline in overall supply, assuming demand remained relatively steady. Primary sources in multiple consumer markets have also confirmed an overall rise in pill prices.

Outlook and Policy Responses

Following the collapse of the Assad regime, many anticipated the unraveling or even the end of Syria's captagon industry. The dismantling of regime-sponsored manufacturing hubs and the loss of state protection suggested that industrial-scale production, which is easier to detect, would cease. Yet despite these efforts, no key producers, facilitators, or smugglers have been apprehended. This enduring impunity has allowed smuggling networks to persist, drawing on pre-collapse stockpiles and perhaps resuming smaller-scale production in Syria or elsewhere.

Although industrial-scale production is unlikely to resume without Assad's state sponsorship, the expertise and technical knowledge needed for manufacturing remain intact. As a result, overall production throughout the region is expected to decrease and become more fragmented. The recent rise in prices suggested by primary sources indicates that the balance between supply and demand has shifted. Assuming demand is less elastic than supply to price changes due to addiction, rising prices might suggest supply is starting to dwindle. Higher prices induce risk-taking among traffickers. In turn, the industry may become more violent, particularly as competition intensifies over territory, smuggling routes, and market share in weakly governed areas due to the fragmentation in supply. These evolving dynamics mark a transformation – not a disappearance – of the captagon threat and require a different set of policy responses.

As supply tightens and prices climb, there is an increasing risk that decentralized manufacturing will spread or that suppliers will substitute more harmful substances like methamphetamine, a more potent and addictive central nervous system stimulant, for captagon. These trends



underscore the limitations of strategies focused solely on supply. Without a concerted effort to reduce demand, the market will continue to incentivize new production.

In response to these changes, regional actors have begun stepping up cooperation. Jordan, for instance, has adopted a dual approach of diplomatic coordination and direct confrontation along its borders. In February, Jordan and Saudi Arabia announced the formation of a joint⁵⁹ antinarcotics task force. This was followed by a high-level meeting on March 9,⁶⁰ hosted by Jordan and attended by representatives from Syria, Türkiye, Iraq, and Lebanon. Discussions centered on joint operational frameworks to combat narcotics trafficking, arms smuggling, and cross-border terrorism, marking a significant step toward regional consensus.

However, the fragmentation of production complicates enforcement. Smaller, more mobile labs are harder to detect and disrupt, and the increasing involvement of both criminal and politically affiliated actors introduces further volatility into trafficking patterns. The collapse of centralized production has therefore created a more fluid and dangerous threat environment – one that defies traditional national enforcement strategies and calls for a nimble, intelligence-driven response.

To address this rapidly shifting landscape, a broad and collaborative regional framework is urgently needed. A regionally led coordination mechanism focused on

amphetamine-type stimulants should be established to fill the current gaps in intelligence-sharing, joint planning, and early warning capabilities. Crucially, this platform must include the participation of Syria's new government and be supported by multilateral institutions such as the U.N. Office of Drugs and Crime to ensure technical credibility and international backing.

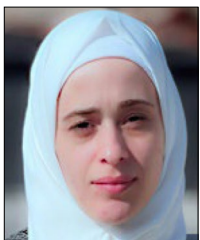
To effectively confront this evolving threat, international stakeholders must also help build Syrian state capacity and provide the interim government with an opportunity to demonstrate credibility, initiative, and effectiveness in counternarcotics efforts. Sustained international support for Syria's economic recovery and territorial integrity remains vital: in the absence of alternative livelihoods, full territorial control, and lasting security – especially in southern regions historically central to smuggling – it will be exceedingly difficult to contain the trade. Stabilizing actors such as the Gulf states, the United States, the European Union, and the United Kingdom should back Syrian efforts to secure borders by investing in advanced surveillance technologies, upgrading infrastructure, and training enforcement personnel empowered to interdict production, distribution, and trafficking operations. Furthermore, the interim Syrian government, with the backing of international partners, should urgently establish standardized protocols for the environmentally sound and safe disposal of seized captagon and precursor chemicals, thereby addressing both immediate enforcement needs and longer-term public health and environmental risks. □

Biographies



Dr. Karam Shaar is a non-resident senior fellow at the New Lines Institute, focusing on illicit narcotics and their nexus with security and politics in the Middle East, particularly Syria and Lebanon. He is a senior consultant at the World Bank, director of Karam Shaar Advisory Limited, and a founding partner at OPEN. Formerly with the Middle East Institute and the New Zealand Treasury,

he has lectured on Middle East politics and published in outlets like Foreign Policy, Brookings Institutions, Carnegie Foundation, and The Guardian. Originally from Aleppo, Syria, Shaar is based in New Zealand. His work is available on www.karamshaar.com. He tweets at [@karam_shaar](https://twitter.com/karam_shaar).



Roaa Obeid is an Actor Mapping Researcher at Karam Shaar Advisory Limited, specializing in open-source intelligence (OSINT) to map networks and analyze relationships. With over eight years of experience in education, protection, and capacity-building, she brings practical expertise to her research. Certified in psychosocial support and case management, Roaa has worked in accelerated education and as a mathematics teacher. Currently studying Pharmacy and certified as a Mathematical Assistant, she combines analytical rigor with community leadership. Her volunteer work in Northwest Syria underscores her commitment to advocacy and justice for Syria.



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