

POLICY REPORT
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Captagon Creeps into Syria's Contested Areas

BY TAM HUSSEIN, CAROLINE ROSE



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Cover Image: Captagon pills seized in Syria. Abobaker Alsaka/Anadolu via Getty Images

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

While the new Syrian government's efforts against drug production and trafficking have disrupted the monopoly deposed leader Bashar al-Assad's regime once had over captagon, the trade in the illicit amphetamine-type stimulant has not been eradicated. The formerly centralized enterprise instead has fragmented into a decentralized network of small-scale producers and traffickers embedded within Syria's postwar economy. Despite official claims that most production has been dismantled, evidence shows the trade persists, driven by high profitability, low production costs, and weak state enforcement – especially in contested regions such as Suwayda and northeastern Syria.

Low-level production and trafficking of captagon now operates through localized networks linked to militias, tribes, and cross-border smuggling routes to Iraq, Jordan, Türkiye, and Lebanon. Continued evidence of large-scale captagon trafficking through Syria has solidified the country as a transit site, though evidence of large-scale production on par with former regime-era levels – even in areas with high trafficking rates – remains scarce. These networks exploit porous borders and political instability, with some areas effectively beyond government control. The trade – although fragmented and downsized – has also become intertwined with local governance and militia financing, posing a long-term threat to state authority and security.

Enforcement alone will not eliminate the trade. Without comprehensive reforms and international cooperation, Syria's progress toward ending its status as a regional narcotics hub will be threatened. As captagon production and sales enrich potential rivals to the new administration's political authority and local security, it represents a possible long-term crime-conflict nexus.

A comprehensive strategy combining law enforcement reform, economic development, financial disruption, and regional cooperation is required. In its absence, captagon risks becoming a permanent feature of Syria's post-conflict economy, undermining stabilization and fueling broader regional instability.

Introduction

The downfall of former Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad reshaped Syria's political, economic, and security landscape, creating both opportunities for reform and new challenges for governance. Among the most pressing challenges is the persistence of the captagon trade, a synthetic drug industry that once operated under centralized, regime-linked control.¹ While the country's new administration has made visible efforts to dismantle large-scale production facilities and disrupt established trafficking networks, captagon has not disappeared from Syria. Instead, it has adapted, fragmenting into decentralized, small-scale operations embedded within the country's fractured postwar environment.

The difficulty in eradicating the captagon trade is largely due to the legacy of Assad's regime. For nearly 10 years, Assad's government profited from captagon trafficking, acting as both a facilitator and protector of the trade. Even before Syria's civil war broke out, Syria's armed forces were involved in illicit drug operations. During the tenure of Bashar's father, Hafez, Syrian officers facilitated hashish trafficking during the occupation of Lebanon, coordinating with Hezbollah and local drug kingpins.² During the reign of Bashar al-Assad, the Syrian regime, too, resorted to engaging in illicit activity, this time not with the trafficking of hashish but the industrial-scale production of a synthetic drug, captagon. What started as a means to prop up the regime during a violent and bloody civil war took on a life of its own. It remains one of the most lucrative ways of generating illicit revenue in Syria today.

Captagon, a synthetic amphetamine-type stimulant, has become one of the most widely used narcotics in the Middle East, particularly among affluent youth populations.³ Despite the progress cited by the current Syrian

1 Caroline Rose and Alexander Söderholm, *The Captagon Threat: A Profile of Illicit Trade, Consumption, and Regional Realities* (Washington, DC: New Lines Institute, April 2022), <https://newlinesinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/20220404-Captagon-Report-NLISAP-final.pdf>

2 John Kifner, "Assad's Brother Exiled 'Forever,' Syrian Declares," *New York Times*, September 12, 1984, <https://www.nytimes.com/1984/09/12/world/assad-s-brother-exiled-forever-syrian-declares.html>

3 See Pergolizzi, Joseph V., Jr., Jo Ann LeQuang, Eugene Vortsman, et al. "The Emergence of the Old Drug Captagon as a New Illicit Drug: A Narrative Review." *Cureus* 16, no. 2 (February 27, 2024): e55053. <https://doi.org/10.7759/cureus.55053>

A 2025 operation in Syria's Homs province netted millions of captagon pills smuggled from Lebanon. Large-scale operations have since been dismantled, but small, localized production and distribution has taken their place. (Abobaker Alsaka/Anadolu via Getty Images)



government in combating the trade, it remains resilient due to its high profitability, low production costs, and adaptable networks. Captagon production and trafficking have evolved in the aftermath of regime change as localized networks across contested regions such as southern and northeastern Syria have emerged. Economic collapse, high unemployment, and weak institutional capacity have enabled the trade to endure. The money it generates often becomes a critical source of income for communities and nonstate actors. At the same time, porous borders and transnational smuggling routes continue to connect Syria with regional and global markets.

Captagon's direct risks to consumers' health, its strain on public health sectors, and the negative impact of criminal syndicates on local and regional security have remained constant as regional demand for the drug has grown since the late 2010s. An examination of these dynamics illustrates the implications of the captagon trade for Syria's stabilization and identifies policy approaches capable of addressing captagon's complex and evolving threat to both public health and security.

Despite claims by officials in Syria's new administration that 90% of the trade has been eliminated,⁴ evidence suggests the trade remains fractured but embedded within Syria's postwar economic collapse, unemployment crisis, and porous borders. Evidence gathered from field work along Syria's border region indicates that the trade is now a cottage industry, with activity in urban and rural areas — particularly contested borderlands. And recent evidence suggests that the captagon problem persists inside Syria's urban centers, too.

Field interviews, open-source intelligence, and on-the-ground reporting indicate that captagon trafficking operations now thrive in contested regions such as Suwayda, where Druze and Bedouin actors finance semiautonomous governance structures, and in northeastern Syria, where cross-border smuggling networks link to Iraq and its Kurdistan region.

Criminal actors continue to use key smuggling corridors, including in Ghouta, Suwayda, and Deir ez-Zor for transporting captagon — with cross-border connections to Türkiye, Lebanon, and Jordan. These border areas are also politically contested, posing accessibility challenges for the new Syrian

⁴ The New Arab Staff, "Sharaa Says US Visit Marks Syria's Return to Global Community," *The New Arab*, September 24, 2025, <https://www.newarab.com/news/sharaa-says-us-visit-marks-syrias-return-global-community>

administration, even as it consolidates territorial control and improves its counternarcotics capacity.

Sustainable progress to end the trade requires an integrated strategy — combining law enforcement modernization, financial disruption, economic alternatives, and regional diplomacy — to weaken the incentives sustaining the trade and support Syria's stabilization as it transitions from conflict to reconstruction. According to estimates by the United Nations, dismantling a trade built over nearly 15 years will take at least multiple years of sustained efforts, given the stockpiled supply that remains in Syria and the region at large.⁵

Background

Prior to December 2024, Syria functioned as a narco state operated by key patronage members embedded within al-Assad's regime.⁶ The new interim administration under President Ahmed al-Sharaa has since cracked down on the production methods previously associated with the Assad family. In the wake of the Assad regime's fall, the new administration seized 15 laboratories and 13 storage sites⁷ and conducted at least 107 seizure operations.⁸ Furthermore, the administration arrested key individuals associated with the captagon trade, such as Assad relatives like Wassim Badia al-Assad and key drug kingpins like Amr al-Sheikh.⁹ In neighboring Lebanon, authorities uncovered four laboratories, arrested key captagon warlords, and made large-scale interdictions, further restricting industrial-scale supply in the Levant.¹⁰ The visible shutdown of large-scale captagon production, however, has decentralized the trade. Evidence suggests that a cottage industry of midlevel and local producers is now operating independently — making it far more difficult to eradicate even if production of captagon has been reduced.

In September 2025, Syrian governmental officials publicly claimed that the Interior Ministry had eliminated the majority of the captagon trade, with 365 million pills later reported seized by the end of the year and major industrial-scale laboratories shuttered. New Lines Institute's Comprehensive Seizure Database recorded the seizure of 256.4 million pills in 2025; while not all seizures are reported through open-source sites, this still represents a data collection gap of nearly 100 million pills. However, it is evident that the captagon problem persists inside Syria¹¹ as recent reports detail raids in the Muhajireen district of Damascus,¹² shootouts in Nayrab, Aleppo, in September 2025, and reports of raids in the outskirts of Damascus.¹³

Before it fell, the Assad regime maintained control of an estimated 80% of known industrial-scale production sites.¹⁴ However, as the regime shifted from maritime to overland trafficking operations, it began to lose hold over its near-monopoly over the trade. As it shifted supply routes from its western

5 United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), "Illicit Captagon Manufacturing Disrupted Following Regime Change in Syria, Says New UNODC Research Brief," December 22, 2025, <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/press/releases/2025/December/illicit-captagon-manufacturing-disrupted-following-regime-change-in-syria-says-new-unodc-research-brief.html>

6 Rose, Caroline, and Alexander Söderholm. *The Captagon Threat*. New Lines Institute, April 2022. https://newlinesinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/04-Captagon_Report-NLISAP-final.pdf

7 United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), "Illicit 'Captagon' Manufacturing Disrupted Following Regime Change in Syria, Says New UNODC Research Brief," December 22, 2025. <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/press/releases/2025/December/illicit-captagon-manufacturing-disrupted-following-regime-change-in-syria-says-new-unodc-research-brief.html>

8 Data obtained from the New Lines Comprehensive Captagon Seizure Database.

9 *Al Majalla Magazine*. "Wassim al-Assad's Arrest Is a Big Win for Syria's War on Crime." July 1, 2025. <https://en.majalla.com/node/326293/politics/wasim-al-assad%E2%80%99s-arrest-big-win-syrias-war-crime>

10 Data obtained from the New Lines Comprehensive Captagon Seizure Database.

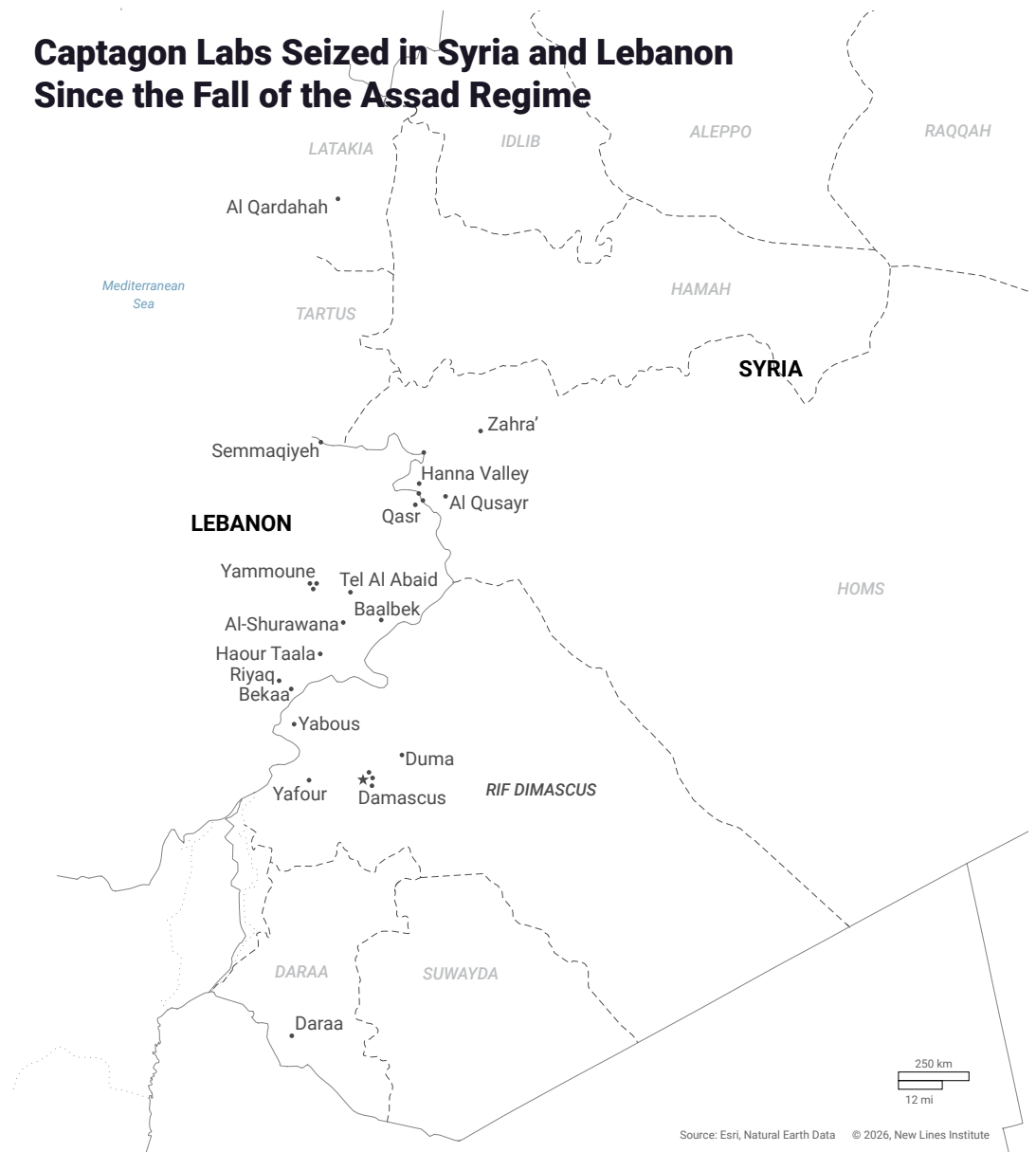
11 *The New Arab*. "Syrian President Ahmed Al-Sharaa Says US Visit Marks Syria's Return to International Community," September 24, 2025. <https://www.newarab.com/news/sharaa-says-us-visit-marks-syrias-return-global-community>

12 *Asharq Al-Awsat*. "Damascus Ramps Up Regional Coordination to Dismantle Captagon Smuggling Network," August 25, 2025. <https://english.aawsat.com/arab-world/5171269-damascus-ramps-regional-coordination-dismantle-captagon-smuggling-networks>

13 *Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA)*. "500 kg of Drug-Making Precursors and Large Quantities of Captagon Seized in Yafour." September 3, 2025. <https://sana.sy/en/local/2265260/>

14 Molana-Allen, Leila. "How the Assad Regime Made Billions Producing and Exporting Party Drugs." *PBS NewsHour*, December 26, 2024. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/how-the-assad-regime-made-billions-producing-and-exporting-party-drugs>

Captagon Labs Seized in Syria and Lebanon Since the Fall of the Assad Regime



Mediterranean coast and border region with Lebanon to diversified routes through Jordan and Iraq, Damascus began to outsource trafficking operations to localized groups — prominent kingpin families, militias, and tribes. In Suwayda, for instance, militias such as the Karama Battalion were known actors that both competed and cooperated with the regime in the captagon trade,¹⁵ while prominent trading families like the Hamsho group and Bedouin tribes were reportedly involved in its distribution.¹⁶ The relatively low cost of manufacturing captagon tablets compared with personnel- and resource-intensive crops like cannabis that once dominated militia economies — further entrenched the trade.

The new government, however, is inadequately resourced and lacks the institutional capacity to confront this challenge effectively. With the departure of significant numbers of former regime forces and law enforcement officers

15 Mansour, Karam. "How Suwayda Became a Drug-Smuggling Hub." *Syria Direct*, March 26, 2024. <https://syriadirect.org/how-suwayda-became-a-drug-smuggling-hub/>.

16 This was according to interviews conducted on the ground. However, Hamsho involvement with captagon is linked to Maher al-Assad, a prominent producer of captagon. See Azhari, Timour, and Feras Dalatey. "Syria Is Secretly Reshaping Its Economy: The President's Brother Is in Charge." *Reuters*, July 24, 2025. <https://www.reuters.com/investigations/syria-is-secretly-reshaping-its-economy-presidents-brother-is-charge-2025-07-24/>.

— much like in Afghanistan after the Taliban takeover — authorities have been forced to improvise, relying on young local men to maintain security rather than trained police. Syria's Ministry of Interior has introduced limited measures, such as recruiting cadres of female police officers to plug operational gaps in counternarcotics enforcement, such as the ability to search and interrogate different demographics, conducting weekslong counternarcotics trainings, and coordinating with partner countries such as Jordan to improve productivity, response time, and effectiveness in antidrug operations.^{17,18} However, these measures are limited in the face of governmental inaccessibility in key, contested areas where illicit activity remains high. For instance, in Suwayda, where there is minimal government control, the captagon trade flourishes. According to numerous analysts and press reports, the captagon trade has remained a feature in the post-regime illicit economy that state actors like Jordan have been involved in curbing it inside Syrian territory. Combined with a prolonged institutional decline, economic collapse, and widespread unemployment, many Syrians have turned to narcotics trafficking as a means of economic survival.

No evidence connects the new government or its affiliated militias, like former foreign fighter battalions, to direct involvement in the captagon trade. Interviews with former fighters, both Syrian and foreign, reveal a surprising degree of ignorance about narcotics trafficking, likely due to their religious convictions, which view drugs as forbidden in the same way as alcohol. Nonetheless, given the trade's profitability — captagon costs just a few cents to produce and it can sell for up to \$25 per pill in Gulf consumption markets, providing a high profit margin for networks — there remains a persistent risk that such activities could eventually infiltrate militia structures, similar to Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Hashd al-Sha'bi militias in Iraq. Notably, the former Assad regime generated an estimated \$2.7 billion annually when the trade was at its peak.¹⁹ The captagon trade is no longer the \$10 billion industry it was years ago,²⁰ and non-state actors will likely be unable to establish the monopoly the former Assad government held. However, illicit actors will try to fill the vacuum left behind by the former regime.

Porous borders exist between Syria and neighboring countries — stretching from Qamishli and the Rai crossing with Türkiye to Tal Abyad, the Jordanian frontier, and the Lebanese border. The difficult terrain in those frontier areas makes it unlikely that the captagon trade will disappear there in the near future. In fact, data collected from the New Lines Institute Comprehensive Seizure Database suggest that Syria remains the premier transit hub for various illicit drug flows, catering to rising domestic demand among its young population as well as regional markets.

The Syrian Ministry of Interior's Counter-Narcotics Department has identified multiple smuggling methods and routes used to transport illicit goods, including overland shipments through legal and illegal crossings, underground tunnels, and maritime and air routes via Latakia port and several airports.²¹ These overlapping pathways underscore the complexity of monitoring and controlling the trade. The agency noted that captagon trafficking has become even more lucrative under tighter restrictions, as scarcity has driven up prices and incentivized smaller producers to fill the gap left by dismantled regime-linked operations. These developments illustrate how the trade has evolved from a centralized, regime-backed enterprise into a diffuse and transnational system that remains deeply embedded in Syria's postwar, post-Assad economy.

17 Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA), "Syria's Interior Ministry Opens Registration for Tourist Police Units," December 16, 2025, <https://sana.sy/en/syria/2283970/>

18 Syria Launches Anti-Narcotics Branches to Confront Drug Trade Legacy, *Levant24*, August 16, 2025, <https://levant24.com/news/2025/08/syria-launches-anti-narcotics-branches-to-confront-drug-trade-legacy/>

19 "Sky High: Ensuing Narcotics Crisis in MENA and the Role of the Assad Regime," *OpenSyr*, accessed June 22, 2026, <https://opensyr.com/en/pages/p-18>

20 Caroline Rose, "The Future of the Illicit Captagon Drug Trade," *CTC Sentinel* 18, no. 10 (October 2025), Combating Terrorism Center at West Point

21 This has been confirmed by the department.

The captagon trade, [interim government officials] argue, is deeply intertwined with Syria's broader economic crisis, political instability, and regional power dynamics.

For example, one network operating a factory in Türkiye provided detailed information on wholesale captagon prices. According to their figures, at the end of last year, 1 million pills were sold for different rates of between \$1.50 and \$7.50 per pill. What is of concern is that these networks are constantly trying to introduce other drugs through the captagon trade. The same network also trafficked substances including heroin, hashish, and crystal methamphetamine as well as illicit prescription medications such as Tramadol, Ritalin, Modafinil, and Lyrica.²²

The network demonstrated a wide distribution capacity, capable of supplying not only within Syria but also across the broader Middle East and beyond. Reported destinations included Saudi Arabia, Oman, Jordan, and Bahrain, and farther afield to Austria, Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, Sudan, Kenya, and Somalia.²³ The longevity and sophistication of these operations suggest that such networks had been established long before the collapse of the Assad regime. Latakia continues to function as a significant export hub, which is unsurprising given its historical ties to the former government.²⁴

As one Syrian farmer explained, "Anyone with a bit of money to invest would put it into the captagon trade — the returns are enormous." He estimated that a \$2 investment could yield between \$5 and \$6 in profit, likening the current state of the industry to the speculative "cottage market" reminiscent of the U.S. investment boom prior to the Wall Street crash of the 1920s. The comparison underscores how captagon remains one of the most profitable illicit ventures in postwar Syria. The Interior Ministry's counternarcotics agency, however, disputed this characterization. Officials emphasized that the captagon trade is far more complex than a series of isolated local operations, noting that it involves interconnected systems of production, transportation, financing, distribution, and money laundering. According to the ministry, the network "extends beyond the local scope — it has extensive regional and international ties."

Although the interim government maintains that major components of the captagon trade have been dismantled, it acknowledges that substantial challenges remain. Officials stress that the illicit economy cannot be fully eradicated without external support and coordinated international engagement. The captagon trade, they argue, is deeply intertwined with Syria's broader economic crisis, political instability, and regional power dynamics.

Despite these difficulties, the government remains cautiously optimistic. As one senior official noted, "Effective solutions require a comprehensive approach — one that combines security measures with economic recovery and social reform."²⁵

In interviews conducted in Damascus and Daraa, ministry officials identified several key challenges hindering efforts to combat the captagon trade.²⁶ Chief among these are unstable security conditions, which limit the government's ability to effectively deploy counternarcotics forces, and Syria's long, porous borders — spanning extensive coastlines and land crossings — that facilitate smuggling and complicate enforcement. Weak technical capabilities, including a lack of X-ray and CT scanners, forensic laboratories, and surveillance systems, further constrain detection and interdiction efforts. Meanwhile, smugglers' evolving tactics require greater regional cooperation and continuous innovation of detection and enforcement technologies.²⁷

22 This is from an infiltrated forum on a messaging app.

23 This is gleaned from a forum on a popular messaging app.

24 Confirmed by both counter-narcotics reports as well as in captagon forums.

25 Confirmed through field interview with an official source wishing to remain anonymous.

26 Confirmed by both counternarcotics responses as well as in captagon forums.

27 According to Counter-Narcotics agency written response.

Locations and Methods

Several regions in Syria remain active hubs for captagon production and trafficking. The primary areas identified include Suwayda, Deir ez-Zor, Daraa, and territories east of the Euphrates formerly under control of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).

One activist reported that six factories continue to operate in Deir ez-Zor, an area nominally under government control. In SDF-held territory, five individuals or networks were identified as having indirect connections to the trade. However, it was not possible to verify whether the SDF leadership itself is directly involved in or complicit with these operations.

These findings suggest that while the captagon trade's large-scale industrial infrastructure has been disrupted, smaller and more localized production networks continue to thrive across fragmented political and security zones.

Southern Syria

Daraa is predominantly an agricultural region with deep economic and social ties to neighboring Jordan — connections that make it an ideal corridor for smuggling and cross-border trafficking. Many residents interviewed, however, deny that Daraa itself has a significant captagon problem. Locals often describe their community as conservative and tightly knit, asserting that they “look out for one another” and attributing any involvement in the drug trade to “a few bad apples.” This reluctance to discuss the issue openly reflects both local pride and the social stigma associated with narcotics trafficking.

Nonetheless, evidence suggests that trafficking activity persists in the surrounding countryside.²⁸ Counternarcotics units have reported multiple seizures involving captagon, crystal meth, and hashish as smugglers attempted to cross the Jordanian border.²⁹ Recent reports have also named places such as Ghadir Wadi Mahmoud, Wadi Abu Sharshuh, Tel Wutaid, and Tel Sada, where illicit drug enterprises within Daraa as well as Suwayda operate.

Officials note that the scale of the trade in Daraa has declined in recent months, largely due to intensified patrols by the Counter-Narcotics Department, including the use of drones, new surveillance tools, and reinforced checkpoints — particularly around the Nasib border crossing. Authorities believe that many of the remaining networks displaced from Daraa have since relocated their operations to neighboring Suwayda province.³⁰ ETANA, a civil society policy organization, reported a proliferation in the use of drones in smuggling operations, easily available to local groups and smugglers.³¹ This has been echoed in recent reports from local outlets that have indicated many kingpins and drug lords have gone into hiding after the fall of the regime, keeping operations relatively quiet.³²

Suwayda presents a distinct challenge because the captagon trade there is deeply embedded in the province's political unrest and strained relations with Damascus. Following deadly summer clashes between Druze civilians and government forces, Sheikh Hikmat al-Hijri — the leading Druze religious and political figure — has sought sponsorship from Israel while renewing calls for autonomy.³³ Although Syrian Druze were initially wary of aligning with a historic adversary, mounting casualties and a growing sense of abandonment by Da-

28 See photos obtained in Daraa.

29 See for example here: Al Arabiya (@AlArabiya). “Video showing captagon seizure at the Syria–Jordan Nasib border crossing.” X (formerly Twitter), September 28, 2025. <https://x.com/AlArabiya/status/1970117699503087707>.

30 This is according to the response provided.

31 ETANA. “Brief: Arms & Drug Smuggling in Syria After Assad.” 2025. <https://etanasyria.org/brief-arms-drug-smuggling-in-syria-after-assad/>.

32 ETANA. “Brief: Arms & Drug Smuggling in Syria After Assad.”

33 Jameel, Rami. “Hikmat al-Hijri: Druze Cleric Struggles Against Syrian Government.” *Terrorism Monitor* 16, no. 2, October 9, 2025. Jamestown Foundation.



Syrian security forces destroy seized captagon pills. (Bakr Alkasem/AFP via Getty Images)

mascus have strengthened al-Hijri's position. The shift has deepened tensions with the central government, leaving authorities with only partial visibility over events beyond Suwayda's main towns.

One of Syria's poorest provinces and home largely to Druze and Bedouin communities, Suwayda long harbored grievances against the Assad regime.³⁴ While the Druze largely remained neutral during the early years of the Syrian uprising, by 2018 the regime had restored ties with local leaders by granting the province de facto self-rule. In practice, this arrangement allowed Druze militias to manage local security and finance themselves through captagon production and smuggling. Suwayda's proximity to the Jordanian border further enabled cross-border trafficking networks operated by militias and influential local families, embedding the illicit trade within the province's political and economic order.³⁵

The fall of Damascus to al-Sharaa's Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham militant group disrupted these networks and threatened the survival of Suwayda's semi-autonomous economy. The new authorities' antinarcotics campaigns, widely publicized on social media, exposed the extent of the province's dependence on the captagon trade. Should the authorities in Damascus be able to shut off the captagon pipeline, it would severely harm the political aspirations of Suwayda's leadership.

Furthermore, notable lone wolves and prominent drug kingpins in the captagon trade even before the Assad regime's collapse, such as brothers Ghassan Abu Zureiq and Imad Abu Zureiq, have reportedly continued their operations. The Zureiq brothers were reportedly able to obtain 10 tons of captagon from the home of Maher al-Assad's right-hand commander in the Fourth Armored Division, Ghassan Bilal, and have sought to traffic these stockpiles and sustain illicit operations in around Nasib without much interruption.³⁶

Access to activists inside Suwayda has been limited, even among those critical of al-Hijri following the outbreak of violence between Druze militias and governmental forces. Many who were interviewed by the authors expressed reluctance to speak because they did not want their comments to be used to justify Damascus' actions or to excuse the deaths that occurred. Nonetheless, several farmers from Suwayda and in Damascus, provided firsthand observations on local dynamics.

According to the Counter-Narcotics Department in southern Syria, Suwayda remains one of the most active areas in the trade. Unlike past industrial operations, much production in Suwayda now occurs in small-scale settings such as pharmacies and workshops. From these sites, consignments are moved south toward Jordan. Smugglers employ a wide range of concealment techniques to evade detection. Reported methods include hiding pills in agricultural shipments, embedding consignments in tanned wool or textiles, and concealing tablets inside animals — placing pills in sealed plastic bags for ingestion by goats or sheep and retrieving them after crossing the border.³⁷

Government officials and open-source accounts also describe the use of aerial delivery (drones and tethered balloons) to exploit gaps in air-monitoring systems. In addition, investigators have discovered ventilated, well-lit tunnels along segments of the Syria-Jordan frontier in areas with limited security control.³⁸ These adaptive smuggling methods complicate interdiction and underscore the need for tailored detection and community-level interventions.

34 Interviews I carried out with activists see also Sinjar, Lina. "Syria: Protests over Growing Economic Hardship Spread in South." *BBC News*, August 24, 2023. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-66607118>.

35 See de Dinechin, Paloma. "In Suwayda, Captagon Barons Survive the Fall of Assad." *Forbidden Stories*, February 8, 2024. <https://forbiddenstories.org/in-suwayda-captagon-barons-survive-the-fall-of-assad/>.

36 ETANA. "Brief: Arms & Drug Smuggling in Syria After Assad." 2025. <https://etanasyria.org/brief-arms-drug-smuggling-in-syria-after-assad/>.

37 This is based on field interviews and open source evidence, October 2025.

38 This is according to the response given by counter narcotics evidenced by open source material as well.



Syria's government maintains that smuggling operations in Suwayda remain rampant and that narcotics are "abundant" throughout the province. In addition to cross-border trafficking, internal routes have also developed. Regular bus service between Suwayda and Jaramana — a Damascus suburb with a large Druze population — provide an easy means of transporting illicit goods. These passenger routes are frequently exploited to move small quantities of captagon and other drugs into the capital, concealed among travelers' belongings.

Northeastern Syria

In northeastern Syria, there has been a noticeable increase in the consumption of both crystal methamphetamine and captagon.³⁹ Drug-using residents within Raqqah — the former stronghold of the Islamic State — have reportedly developed a growing addiction problem with both substances, reflecting the broader social and economic dislocation in the region.

Smuggling activity in this part of the country is particularly difficult to control. The northeast has a porous border and a long history of being a center for cross-border trade, transhumance, and illicit trafficking into Iraq, supported by tribal networks that predate the current conflict. These deeply rooted smuggling traditions have adapted to postwar realities, making the area one of the most challenging for counternarcotics enforcement.

Remnants of the Islamic State continue to operate alongside local tribal groups, forming loose alliances reminiscent of current dynamics in Mosul,⁴⁰ where Islamic State operatives remain in the province, sheltered by sympathetic tribes. Several key entry points and trafficking corridors — identified on available maps — are believed to facilitate the captagon trade into Iraq. This also helps explain why Deir ez-Zor, despite being under nominal government control, remains closely tied to cross-border narcotics flows.

³⁹ Christopher Sims, Antonio Ruiz, and Nicholas Krohley, *Captagon in Iraq and Jordan: Understanding the Problem and Evaluating Solutions* (XCEPT, November 2024), accessed June 22, 2026, <https://www.xcept-research.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/XCEPT-Evidence-Synthesis-Captagon-in-Iraq-and-Jordan.pdf>.

⁴⁰ Interview with soldiers who worked on this issue.

Reported trafficking and smuggling hubs in conducted interviews have been identified in northeastern Syria include Albu Kamal, Faysh Khabur, and the Al-Ya'rubiyah–Rabia nexus, through which much of the captagon trade is believed to transit into Iraq.⁴¹ Approximately 30 kilometers (18.5 miles) north of Faysh Khabur, lie unofficial routes reportedly used for smaller-scale smuggling operations.⁴²

Anecdotal reports suggest that some of the tunnel networks originally constructed by the Islamic State during the height of the caliphate have since been repurposed for smuggling. The SDF has uncovered tunnels in Wadi al-Ajjij,⁴³ while similar systems identified in Manbij and Tabqa⁴⁴ may now serve as clandestine transport routes for narcotics and other contraband. Deir ez-Sor has had extensive tunneling networks as early as 2013.⁴⁵

The transnational dimension of the captagon trade in northeastern Syria is particularly significant. Various militias — including elements of the Hashd al-Sha'bi (Popular Mobilization Forces) — appear to have followed the precedent set by Hezbollah, becoming involved in trafficking networks that sustain their operations.⁴⁶ There are also unconfirmed reports of Iranian involvement, though direct evidence remains limited.⁴⁷

What is clear, however, is that the end of major combat operations against the Islamic State forced many of these groups to seek alternative revenue streams. The production and trafficking of captagon and crystal methamphetamine have expanded in both Syria and Iraq as a result. According to multiple sources, these networks — often spanning Türkiye, Syria, and Iraq — now represent the principal conduits for narcotics entering Iraqi markets.

Much like in Suwayda, there is a strong political dimension to the captagon trade in northeastern Syria. While the SDF publicly announced several drug seizures, multiple sources suggest that certain powerful individuals with indirect ties to the SDF may be involved in corrupt practices surrounding trade.⁴⁸ Locals that the authors interviewed in Raqqa said local SDF checkpoints were involved in the captagon trade, often overlooking captagon shipments in return for bribes.⁴⁹ A former prisoner of the SDF noted that this was common practice.⁵⁰ While it is possible that the sources want to discredit the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), this sort of arrangement would provide SDF members a degree of plausible deniability, allowing local actors to profit while official leadership maintains a stance of enforcement and compliance. There have also been allegations that Iran-backed groups have moved to exploit northeast Syria, sending production materials through Iraq⁵¹ and that

41 Sims, Ruiz, and Krohley, *Captagon in Iraq and Jordan*.

42 This was based on interviews with NGO worker and locals in Raqqa.

43 Abu al-Khair, Waleed. "SDF Operation Targets ISIS Remnants in Iraqi Border." *Diyaruna*, May 11, 2021. https://diyaruna.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi-di/features/2021/05/11/feature-02.

44 Hussam Hammoud told the authors that local sources confirmed this. See Hamoud, Hussam (@HussamHamoud). "Post." X (formerly Twitter). Accessed April 9, 2026. <https://x.com/HussamHamoud/status/1977460048117796917>. See also Lister, Charles (@Charles_Lister). "Post." X (formerly Twitter). Accessed April 9, 2026. https://x.com/Charles_Lister/status/1975319096758837751. See also YPG building tunnels in northern Syria Daily Sabah. "YPG Building Tunnels in Northern Syria Despite March Deal: Report." August 27, 2025. <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/ypg-building-tunnels-in-northern-syria-despite-march-deal-report/news>

45 Reuters, "Tunnels of Syria: Inside the Tunnels Used by the Free Syrian Army," December 2, 2013, <https://www.reuters.com/news/picture/tunnels-of-syria-idUSRTX161D4/>

46 Inna Rudolf, "Tracing the Role of Violent Entrepreneurs in the Post-Conflict Iraqi Economy," *New Lines Institute*, May 17, 2023, accessed June 22, 2026, New Lines Institute article.

47 These findings are based on background interviews conducted by the author; For the Popular Mobilization Forces link see Rose, Caroline. "Iraq and Turkey: Two Transit Countries to Watch in the Captagon Drug Trade." *New Lines Institute*, April 4, 2023. <https://newlinesinstitute.org/state-resilience-fragility/illicit-economies/iraq-and-turkey-two-transit-countries-to-watch-in-the-captagon-drug-trade/>.

48 North Press Agency. "Syria Foils Attempt to Smuggle Captagon Pills to UAE." September 1, 2025. <https://npasyria.com/en/129153/>; also Enab Baladi. "SDF Takes on New Role Combating Regime Narcotics." March 12, 2024. <https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2024/03/sdf-takes-on-new-role-combating-regime-narcotics/>.

49 Interview with anonymous participant, conducted by author, October 4, 2025.

50 Interview with anonymous participant, conducted by author, October 4, 2025.

51 Ahora, Qadi. "Despite Assad's Fall, Captagon Trade Still Thrives in Syria." *Kurdistan24*, March 29, 2025. <https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/story/832287/despite-assads-fall-captagon-trade-still-thrives-in-syria>

Production, distribution, and sales of captagon is a multi-billion dollar industry. (Joseph Eid/AFP via Getty Images)



Iran-backed groups have moved to exploit northeast Syria, sending production materials through Iraq.⁵²

The Kurdish autonomous region is at a critical juncture between major external and internal drug flows into Iraq. This dynamic will likely grow further strained amid the northeast's political transition from the AANES to the new Syrian administration, following clashes and a subsequent integration agreement. Just as security gaps in terrorist detention camps and prisons were exposed during the transition from SDF to government control, blind spots could emerge as Syrian Interior Ministry forces deploy and familiarize themselves with the region.

In background interviews, no source directly accused the SDF leadership of participating in narcotics trafficking. After all, the group has revenue sources outside the captagon trade through oil and agriculture and the control of border trade. Instead, responsibility was more often attributed to PKK elements based in the Qandil Mountains who are believed to exert influence over parts of the SDF's command structure. The PKK's historical reputation for involvement in drug trafficking lends weight to suspicions that the PKK's leadership turn a blind eye to illicit trafficking.⁵³ However, it would be misleading to frame this solely as a PKK issue — perhaps it reflects a broader militia financing problem. As with groups such as the Taliban, the use of illicit economies to sustain fighters and fund operations is a recurring pattern in post-conflict environments.

In the autonomous Kurdish region of Iraq, captagon factories have been dismantled in Sulaymaniyah, a stronghold of the powerful Talabani family, but drug flows from Syria still pass through the region.⁵⁴ The path toward curbing this activity lies with influential regional actors, prominent families, and tribes.

Ultimately, a coordinated, transnational approach — involving the SDF, the Kurdistan Regional Government, Türkiye, and Iraq — will be essential to address the scale and complexity of the trade in northeastern Syria.

⁵² Ahora, Qadi. "Despite Assad's Fall, Captagon Trade Still Thrives in Syria." *Kurdistan24*.

⁵³ See Basra, Rajan. *Terrorism and Drugs in Europe*. European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction, 2019.

⁵⁴ Mhaoud, Selma, Sana Sboui, and Ahmed Ashour Ali Al Ibrahim. "Captagon Drug Networks Adapt and Survive in Middle East After Assad's Fall." *Organised Crime and Corruption Reporting Project*, September 22, 2025. <https://www.occrp.org/en/feature/captagon-drug-networks-adapt-and-survive-in-middle-east-after-assads-fall>

Captagon and the Future of Postwar Syria

The captagon trade remains one of the most enduring and destabilizing legacies of Syria's war economy. The once-centralized, regime-controlled enterprise has splintered into localized and highly adaptive networks stretching from the southern highlands of Suwayda to the smuggling corridors of the northeast. These decentralized systems — rooted in poverty, militia financing, and cross-border criminal alliances — have made the trade increasingly difficult to detect, disrupt, or dismantle.

For the interim government, the challenge is as much structural as it is political. Years of institutional decay, compounded by economic collapse and mass unemployment, have transformed narcotics production from a purely criminal enterprise into an alternative means of survival for many Syrians. The same dynamics that once enabled the Assad regime's monopoly over captagon now sustain a complex, multilayered ecosystem of producers, transporters, and financiers, embedded within Syria's emerging postwar and post-regime economy.

Without comprehensive reform and sustained international engagement, the captagon economy risks becoming a permanent feature of Syria's postwar order — entrenching corruption, fueling regional instability, and deepening social decay. Meaningful progress will require an integrated strategy that combines law enforcement reform, economic revitalization, regional cooperation, and governance reconstruction to dismantle the incentives driving Syria's narcotics economy.

Addressing the captagon trade in Suwayda will require a two-tiered approach. First, viable economic alternatives must be created for militias, families, and communities that have come to depend on the drug trade as a source of income. Without alternative livelihoods, enforcement measures alone are unlikely to succeed. Second, a political settlement between Sheikh Hikmat al-Hijri and the Damascus authorities is essential to stabilize the province. Such a dialogue must occur without external interference and should focus on re-establishing limited governance, integrating local forces into formal structures, and restoring economic activity through targeted investment.

Sustained development and reconciliation will be key to preventing a return to the illicit economy and ensuring that Suwayda does not remain dependent on captagon revenues for its survival.

From a policy perspective, international actors should prioritize building institutional capacity within Syria's interim authorities, strengthening regional intelligence-sharing, and investing in alternative livelihoods in high-risk provinces such as Suwayda and Deir ez-Zor. Targeted financial sanctions, combined with incentives for compliance and rehabilitation, can weaken trafficking networks without alienating local communities. Ultimately, confronting the captagon trade offers not only a path toward stabilizing Syria but also an opportunity to curb the spread of synthetic drugs across the wider Middle East.



Contact

For media inquiries, email
media@newlinesinstitute.org

To learn more about New Lines'
publication process, email
submissions@newlinesinstitute.org

For other inquiries, send an email to
info@newlinesinstitute.org

A: 1660 L St. NW, Ste. 450
Washington, D.C., 20036

P: (202) 800-7302