

Research Report
Model United Nations
Development Programme
XXV. Annual Session

**COMMISSION ON CRIME PREVENTION
AND CRIMINAL JUSTICE
(CCPCJ)**

**REDUCING SYRIA'S POLITICAL
LEVERAGE FROM REGIONAL DRUG
TRAFFICKING**

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Basic Overview of the Issue

It is well known that countries which see their economy devastated by long wars and civil strife turn to low cost, high price commodities. The best example of such a commodity is narcotics. One need not look further than the past 5 years to see the significance of drug production and trafficking for the economies of war-torn nations. One such example is Afghanistan, which produces around 90% of the world's heroin supply. The focus of this report is Syria, who with the civil war's inception, saw their GDP dwindle from around 250 billion USD to a measly 67 billion (al Jazeera, 2024) increasingly turned to the illicit drug trade to finance their regime. As the civil war erupted and the sides emerged, armed groups in Syria began cooking various drugs, most notable among them: captagon. As Assad and supporters wrestled back more and more territory, they saw more production facilities and traffickers come under their control. With a collapsing economy and devastating sanctions, the government began propping up and increasing illicit Captagon production and trade. At its height, Syria was home to around 80% of the world's captagon production and the drug trade dwarfed the revenue from Syria's legitimate exports. (al Jazeera, 2024) With the collapse of the Assad regime and the transfer of power over to Hay'at Tahrir El Sham (HTS), the future of Syrian and global captagon production and trade is uncertain. New production facilities have begun opening as far as the Netherlands and many traffickers sought refuge in Lebanon and other neighboring countries. While the collapse Assad's regime is by no means the end of Syria's drug industry, it does open up the way for major change: that is, as long as the new Syria gets the foreign economic support it hopes for and citizens can make a living legally, Syrian domination of the captagon trade may be a thing of the past.

Explanation of Important Terms

Sanctions

Sanctions are the deliberate withdrawal, or threat of withdrawal, of trade or financial relations. (U.S. International Trade Commission, 2024). Syria is currently under several sanction regimes from the EU and USA. In addition, Syrian government officials are also under sanction and have had their assets frozen. The sanctions are currently an important area of debate as the HTS wishes for sanctions to be lifted in order to cooperate with Europe and begin reconstruction effectively.



Ba'athism

“the principles and policies of the Baath political party of Iraq and Syria characterized especially by promotion of pan-Arab socialism” (Merriem Webster) Bashar al-Assad and other leaders of Syria were Baathists. Saddam Hussein is another well known Ba'athist leader. The Ba'ath party is currently still powerful in Lebanon, although Syrian Ba'ath party presence has now effectively been nullified due to the fall of the Assad regime.

Captagon

Captagon is an amphetamine-type stimulant that is especially popular throughout the Middle East. It was invented in the 1960s by a German pharmaceutical firm, Degussa, as an ADHD medication and was the main drug synthesized and trafficked by the Assad regime and backers for its chemical simplicity, high profit margins and the large and proximate market in the Middle East.

Hezbollah

“Hezbollah, Shi'i Lebanese political party and militant group that first emerged during Lebanon's civil war as a militia after the Israeli invasion of that country in 1982. Since the 2000s it has been one of the foremost political forces in Lebanon” (Britannica)

The Gulf Region

“The Persian Gulf (or just Gulf for short) is an arm of the Arabian Sea between Southwest Iran and Arabia.” (Dictionary.com) The nations that have access to the sea such as Bahrain, Kuwait, Iraq, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates are often called “Gulf States”. The Gulf States comprise the vast majority of the drug market for Captagon.

Narco State

“Definitions of a “narco-state” vary; some focus on the state's economic reliance on the drug market, others define a certain level of institutional corruption, or comment on levels of insecurity. What is similar between all these countries is that drug trafficking is perceived as a source of political power and economic gain,” (idpc.net)



Detailed Background of the Issue

A Brief History of Syria

Syria, officially the Syrian Arab Republic, is a Levantine country bordering Turkey, Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon. With a population of around 25 million and a coast to the East Mediterranean, the most well known thing about this country is the grueling civil war that recently ended.

Syria Before Bashar al-Assad

While historically “Syria” did not refer to the modern nation but more so to the broader Levantine area, for both its old and new definitions, Syria was a critical hub of trade and culture for many empires throughout history. It gained independence from the French in 1945 by becoming a founding member of the United Nations (UN). As with most other post colonial nations, Syria’s history is laden with coups and coup attempts, and the 1963 coup cemented the Ba’ath party’s rule. This rule lasted until 2024, during which two other coups occurred as a result of internal dissent within the party. The 1970 coup resulted in the seizure of power by Hafez al-Assad. This effectively started the dictatorship of the al-Assad family, as under al-Assad his loyal family members were elevated to positions of influence and power. It is important to mention that the ruling al-Assad family was of the Alawite sect of Islam which represents only 3% of the population. The majority of the nation (74%) is Sunni Muslim (CIA, 2025), which meant that under the dictatorship most of the nation was not able to be employed in or supported by the Shia government.

Syria Under Bashar al-Assad

The death of Hafez al-Assad in 2000 led to his unprepared son Bashar taking power, while he was studying to be a dentist in the United Kingdom. While Bashar’s reign saw initial hope for democracy and social reform (called the Damascus Spring) by the end of his first year many writers and intellectuals associated with the movement were arrested and the movement was suppressed. Overall, Bashar’s reign was similar to his fathers’ in terms of government repression and the preferential appointment and support for Alawite individuals.

In 2011 pro-democratic sentiment catalysed by the Arab Spring and weaved in with



pre-existing anti-Assad sentiments due to widespread poverty, religious conflicts with the regime and past atrocities of the regime against the populace led to country-wide protests. After a brutal government crackdown, various armed rebel groups emerged and by 2012 a full-scale civil war broke out.

Many armed parties and factions emerged in the conflict and numerous alternative Syrian governments formed. Among the major actors were: the Russian and Iranian backed al-Assad government, the Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army, the Islamic State, Al-Qaeda's Syrian branch Hurras al-Din, HTS, the Kurdish-led and American backed Yekîneyên Parastina Gel (People's defense units, YPG for short).

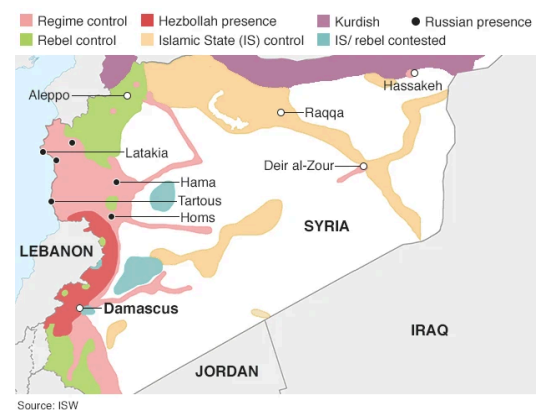


Figure 1: Zones of each actor in the civil war in Syria, 2016 (BBC)

While the civil war was a complex and multifaceted struggle, the scope of this report does not require that it be dealt with in too much detail, i.e. what is more important is less the details of the conflict but more so the existence of a general, devastating conflict itself and the economic, political and social results thereof.

The Economic and Social Effects of the Civil War

The war brought devastation to the Syrian economy, leaving its people incapable of meeting their basic needs. According to a March 2024 report by Rescue.org, over three-quarters of the population (>16.5 million people) was identified as being in need of humanitarian aid, and around 60% of the population was buying food on credit.

A massive humanitarian consequence of the war was the massive amounts of internally displaced people (IDPs) and refugees. Considering that Syria had a pre-war population of around 20.7 million, the direct death toll of 500,000, around 6.6 million IDPs and 5.6 million registered refugees puts into perspective the humanitarian destruction the civil war brought about.



Between 2011 and 2016 alone, Syria's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) contracted by around 63%, which is a cumulative loss of about 226 billion USD in the same period. With a GDP of around 60 billion in 2010, (IMF) it is safe to say that the Syrian economy suffered immensely. It can thus be seen that the crisis not only damaged the people's ability to subsist, but also left the government starved for cash. Both incentivizing quick-and-easy money making.

The Syrian Narco-State

As the civil war proceeded and the armed insurgents began to look for ways to make money, they started cooking drugs. Their drug of choice: captagon. Captagon is far and away the most popular drug in the

Middle East. The drug is a member of the class of amphetamines, and is actually broken down into methamphetamine and theophylline (a less potent stimulant) in the body. Its circulation was restricted in 1986 by the World Health Organization because of its "undesirable side effects and high risks of addiction" (al Jazeera). While certain medical uses

continue to exist for the drug, its main appeal now is as a stimulant for many purposes. In the Middle East, by the time it was criminalized, the drug already had a large recreational following, which persisted after the WHO restrictions. Nowadays, nations such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Kuwait are among the countries where the drug is abused and smuggled the most. Until very recently, Syria was responsible for 80% of this drug's trade.

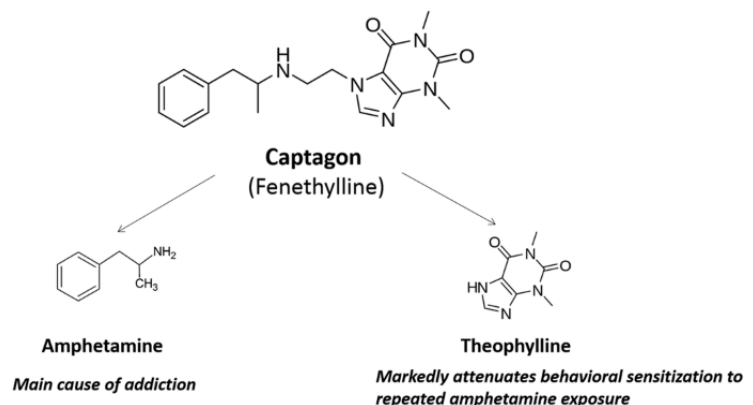


Figure 2: Captagon's metabolism in the body (Nature.com)

Captagon's popularity in the Gulf and for the producers in Syria can be attributed to a few reasons, the first among which is its use among soldiers. Amphetamine type stimulants were famously used by Nazi soldiers in World War II, and the current incentive remains



similar: Soldiers on stimulants can march, work or fight for longer, are more brave, dangerous and powerful. This popularity among soldiers and the Middle East's current situation as a terrorist and militant's hotbet was certainly one reason for the drug's preference for the rebels. Another popular use of the substance is recreational. Particularly in Saudi Arabia and also in other Gulf countries, the use of the drug is widespread among 12-22 year olds for recreational purposes, university students cramming for exams, night club goers or workers looking to make more wages on an extra shift (al-Jazeera, 2024). This common use in the Gulf countries is due to the drug's history as a legal medication, during which time many people started using it recreationally. The restrictions afterwards only led to the drug's supply duty being assumed by nonstate, criminal actors. Moreover, this means that now the contents of the drug are pretty much completely unregulated. This incentivizes traffickers looking to get more people addicted to adding more methamphetamine or other stimulants to increase its stimulation capabilities and induce a deeper addiction. Another cause of the drug's popularity among producers is it being relatively easy to synthesize and having common, affordable precursors. All of these lead to Captagon being the drug of choice for Syria.

While the rebels were profiting off Captagon, ordinary civilians trying to make a living got in on the trade too. The main actor, however, would become the government. As Assad wrestled back territory from the rebels, he and his clique came in possession of many small drug cooking facilities. Starved for cash, the Syrian government began exploiting these facilities and using the traffickers in their territory to traffick their drugs internationally. These operations were so profitable, that "The value of intercepted shipments was estimated at \$5.7bn in 2021, several times greater than Syria's legitimate exports, worth a mere \$860m in 2020." (Al Jazeera). This oversized contribution of drugs into the Syrian economy thus engendered the dubbing of Syria as a "Narco State". As the Syrian government became aware of the profits coming in due to the drugs, members of the Assad family began seizing factories and appropriating them for Captagon production. Influential figures in politics and the military got in the business too, and soon, one of the main forces holding up this clandestine operation was the 5th Legion, the Syrian army's infamous elite forces. The



legion induced fear in the people, helping keep the operations secretive, and added further security and protection to the invaluable product.

The lack of socio-economic welfare and of a means to earn money for the people is one of the root causes of Syria's high drug production, alongside the government led initiatives. Simply put, a nation of people who are starved, displaced and without safety are much more likely to turn to any method they can to survive. Beyond economic need, however, the captagon trade for Syria became an instrument. The large amounts of drug trafficking were taking their toll on the nations the drugs were trafficked to. Drug related crimes were on the increase, and border controls were ineffective against the high amounts of contraband drugs regularly trafficked through hiding them in the tires or gas tanks of trucks or by hiding them in plastic fruit. The Syrians also often mystified the origin of their product, by shipping them through Gibraltar and around Africa before smuggling them into their target markets. This made it difficult for the product to be intercepted, but interceptions were happening and Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries were becoming aware of the situation. However, despite enlarged security and border control measures, the captagon kept flowing, which granted Syria huge leverage over the Arab states desiring to end the flow of the drug into their countries. The Assad government began exploiting their leverage on the Gulf states. The Syrian government's ties to the Gulf states was very important for the regime's legitimacy and support from the Gulf States would be valuable to resist western demands for a regime change. Syria used the social destruction captagon caused in these Gulf States to coerce them into reentering negotiations with Syria and reintegrating Syria into the frameworks it was once a part of, such as its reentry to the Arab League in 2024. It is also likely that Syria was hoping the Gulf States' cooperation would allow him to get reconstruction aid and financial support. (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2024). The policy seemed to be working, and it looked like the Middle East was being *forced* to reconcile with Assad after over 12 years of civil war and stimulant-led conversion efforts.

Assad's Fall

In late 2024, after normalization talks between Turkey and Syria failed, and the opposition forces (mainly under the HTS), backed by Turkey, began their offensive, Assad's



forces began to crumble. Assad's main support was from Russia and Iran throughout the war. However, with the Russian invasion of Ukraine and Hezbollah's ongoing conflicts with Israel, Assad was left without support. Thus, with Turkish backing, the opposition forces were able to quickly push along the coastline of Syria, where the majority of Alawites (Assad's support base) and Russian military installations were. This weakened Assad's position further, and on the 8th of December, 2024 he is reported to have fled Aleppo in the wake of the HTS' capture of the city.

A rapid transfer of power to the HTS ensued. Many backers of the Assad Regime, members of the Assad family and some influential figures fled the country in the wake of the extremely rapid seizure of power by HTS, and left behind their economically relevant holdings. One such example is the captagon factories. Although nothing is clear as of yet, the HTS seems to be in favor of repairing its and Syria's relations with the West, to pave the way for a more prosperous future. These efforts currently include inviting foreign journalists and organizations (BBC, CNN, Channel 6 to name a few) into some Assad family holdings.



Figure 3: The Guardian Reporter From a Captagon Production Factory (The Guardian)

While the current political momentum in Syria seems to suggest that a crackdown on organized Captagon production and trafficking is imminent, the issue is far from over. As is the case with the countries that captagon is smuggled to, it is unclear whether Syria's crackdown will be enough, if it even occurs. Currently, the HTS regime's main goal seems to be reconciliation with the West in hopes of securing economic help. If that fails, it is not unlikely that Syria may need to go back to Captagon production to get all the revenue it can. What will happen to the small scale, mobile facilities in Syria is also another big question, as finding these facilities, let alone cracking down on them, is very difficult, and a regime that recently seized power and has, at best, a weak financial base would probably not succeed in stopping the small scale producers, even if it tried. That said, with the collapse of the Assad



regime, lots of mobile production facilities have shifted to neighboring countries such as Lebanon, Iraq or Turkey. Lebanon itself is in an interesting position as it is also a large producer of captagon and with the influx of new traffickers and producers, it might be the potential heir to Syria's drug operations (although it is very early to tell). The balloon effect, which states that crushing drug production one place will lead production to balloon up elsewhere seems to already be the case, as captagon facilities have started increasing in Iraq, Lebanon, Turkey and have been reported as far as Austria, the Netherlands and Germany. Thus, it is important for the world to tread carefully and set their priorities right: how much is the world willing to collaborate with a terrorist organization (by the UN definition) in hopes of curbing the largest regional drug trade in the world. Are they willing to risk Syria falling back into their old ways and having to leverage their drug trafficking for political favors? Only time can tell.

Major Parties Involved

Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)

Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS, meaning Organization for the Liberation of the Levant) is a paramilitary group led by Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani in Syria that has gone through a lot of changes over the past few years. Currently, it can be described as "An Islamist Paramilitary Organisation that now is in control of Syria". It is worth mentioning that the HTS is, and as per a critical United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolution. Although the group has its origins within Al-Qaeda's previous Syrian branch (called the Al-Nusra Front) and retained a Salafi-Jihadist ideology for much of its existence, in recent years it's ideology has shifted drastically. It cut ties with al-Qaeda in 2016 and since then has continuously tried to position itself as a more democratic and liberal organisation that is open and willing to work together with the West to leave Syria's bloody and difficult days behind. While Syria currently seems to be closing down the largest drug production facilities in the country, the future of Captagon in the country is very precarious and currently unknown. The HTS' authority over the country remains to be tested, and whether they will be able to, if they are even willing to, reign in captagon production by small actors throughout the state remains a mystery. Whether the HTS will try to use its possible drug threat as a political tool to force the Gulf countries into supporting it is also not known, although it could be possible. Western integration of and



investments in Syria is absolutely crucial to create legal jobs and provide people with employment in order to disincentivize drug production as a means of earning one's living.

UNODC

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) is an agency established in 1997 which has the goal of “helping make the world safer from drugs, organized crime, corruption and terrorism.” (UNODC). The organisation reports heavily on the stage and changes regarding the Captagon trade in the Middle East and is an important stakeholder that should be considered for solution efforts.

Lebanon

Hezbollah is a vastly influential paramilitary organization in Lebanon. Its close relations to Iran and the Assad government meant that it also contributed to the Syrian captagon trade, via aiding smuggling or engaging in production and trafficking itself. With the collapse of the Assad regime, by far the most number of collaborators who were in the drug business fled to Lebanon to continue their operations there. It is highly likely that captagon production in Lebanon will increase greatly over the coming years. The Lebanese government, currently in a struggle against Israel and in a dire economic situation, is not prepared or willing to control the drug producers and dealers flowing into its country.

Saudi Arabia

While Saudi Arabia is perhaps the nation that has suffered the most from the Syrian captagon trade, it was not because of a lack of effort. Saudi Arabia has, in recent years, increased funding to border security and internal security forces to hopefully increase the number of drug busts and reduce the amount of product flowing from its borders. It has also, though ineffectively, tried to inform the public as to the negative effects of captagon and decrease demand. All of these efforts have so far failed, as none of the desired effects have been observed. The state remains to find a way to put an end to increasing captagon consumption and thus demand within the nation, and the decentralization of producers away from Syria may only make the situation harder for Saudi Arabia.



Chronology of Important Events

Date	Description of Event
12 November 1970	In a coup from within the Ba'athist party, Hafez al-Assad assumes power over Syria. His most hallmark policies being a strong cult of personality around him and his family and his tyrannical dictatorship.
10 June 2000	Hafez al-Assad dies, leaving way for his unprepared son, Bashar al-Assad to take over the nation increasingly hoping for a more democratic and equitable nation.
2011	As part of the broader Arab Spring and supported by preexisting dissent towards the Assad regime, widespread pro-democracy protests are held across Syria, followed by bloody government crackdowns.
2012	The protests and crackdowns break down into a full scale civil war with many factions vying for power. The different military groups begin to use drug cooking and trafficking as a means to make money and sustain their armed struggles. As the government forces take over these territories and consolidate their power, they start exploiting drug production facilities and investing in more, thus creating the Syrian Narco-State



27 November - 8 December 2024	The HTS forces, backed by Turkey, quickly overrun government forces and the Al-Assad regime leaders and accomplices are forced to flee the country, leaving behind their drug production facilities. The policy of the new government led by HTS regarding drugs is unclear.
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Relevant International Documents

- EU Sanctions package against individuals in the Assad government involved in the captagon trade, May 4th, 2023 (2023R0844)
<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32023R0844>
- International Strategy of the UN Against Drugs, March 2024 (A/RES/2024/371)
<https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n24/371/90/pdf/n2437190.pdf>
- UNODC Report on the Drug Trade in the Middle East, March 18th, 2024 (UNODC/ROMENA/240318)
https://www.unodc.org/romena/uploads/documents/2024/UN_Iraq_ExSum_240318.pdf
- UN Convention Against the Illicit Traffic of Narcotics, December 20th, 1988 (A/RES/73/1988)
https://www.unodc.org/pdf/convention_1988_en.pdf

Past Attempts to Resolve the Issue

Although for Syria and the new regime it is too early to tell whether any new measures have been effective (or taken, even) there have been a number of measures by other parties affected by/interested in the issue. The UNODC, for instance, has reported on the direction of the Captagon trade for years and attempted to inform the relevant governments in their World Drug Reports. This has so far not been successful as the countries are either



uninterested or powerless to take the measures and preventive action that is recommended by the UNODC.

Saudi Arabia has been a leading nation in trying to solve the Captagon issue. While demand flourishes, the Saudis have long focused on increased border control and greater internal security investments to crack down on Captagon consumption. These measures, so far, have all been failures, as the underlying causes of the drug's allure remain to be solved. The work and party culture in these Gulf States is very prone to abusing such narcotics, and education and awareness is the best long term solution in ensuring the elimination of demand. As long as there is enough demand, the supply will find a way, as is apparent in the case of Saudi Arabia, who in trying to eliminate the supply, only lost money and led the supply to be more deceptive and creative. Reporting a teenager using drugs in Saudi Arabia can land that teenager in up to 3 months of jail. Such harsh policies have been taken up by the government in recent years to hopefully reduce addiction among teenagers and young adults. These efforts, like the others, have so far been ineffective.

In 2023, the US congress received a report titled "on A Written Strategy to Disrupt and Dismantle Narcotics Production and Trafficking and Affiliated Networks Linked to the Regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria" which was an inter-agency plan to systematically "disrupt, degrade and dismantle" illicit captagon networks in Syria. Although such efforts could not be really identified, it can be said that the plan was likely to fail because it focused on punitive measures for the Syrian government such as even more sanctions. Seeing as sanctions and international alienation and political isolation led to Syria focusing on drug production, it is difficult to say the plan would have succeeded to good effect. The border strengthening and intelligence sharing initiatives should be considered for future solution attempts, but are not enough on their own without integrating Syria into the effort also.

Solution Alternatives

The economic and political integration of Syria by Europe and the US is of utmost importance to ensure that Syria and Syrians remain interested in legal work. The removal of the current sanctions would go a long way. While totally eliminating all drug production and trafficking in and from Syria is nigh impossible, focusing on redirecting the Syrian people into new jobs that allow them to sustain themselves and their families is essential. To that end,



strengthening the Syrian economy as well as providing humanitarian aid (which the vast majority of the nation now needs in the form of medical, psychological and nutritional aid) is essential. The rapid strengthening of the border to prevent current producers from leaving the country and continuing their work elsewhere could also be attempted.

While strengthening the Middle Eastern borders in order to reduce drug trafficking is essential, curbing the demand is just as important. Since production is incredibly difficult to stop (as banning precursors would require banning very common cleaning materials and is thus very difficult, in contrast to something like methamphetamine) the interception of the drug trade and elimination of demand are the best ways to ensure the drug problem in the Middle East, and thus Syria's political leverage as a result of it dwindles.

To properly deal with the effects of additives into Captagon, regular assessment of the product on the streets could be implemented, as it would give insight as to how to deal with the medical problems that may result from additives or just give a broader compass direction as to the goings-on of drug smuggling into the county. Stigmatization and emphasis on the illegality of Captagon should be emphasized in the Gulf states where consumption is the largest. To prevent the spillover from increasing production in neighboring countries, decisive measures need to be taken to ensure that captagon producers do not have time or opportunity to set. Especially efforts in Yemen and Iraq should be emphasized as they are among those anticipated to be affected most by the drug producer and traffickers' relocation.

Entrenching regional collaboration and diplomacy is also critical as cordial relations would disincentivize Syria from using the drug trade for political leverage. International collaboration is also necessary, and a number of international organizations and experts very knowledgeable about the nature and intricacies of the drug trade in the Middle East would be eager to help if the Middle Eastern nations in question would be willing to cooperate.

Useful Links

- <https://dmp.unodc.org/drug-precursor-type/captagon>
- <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2024/12/18/what-will-happen-to-al-assads-c>



- [aptagon-empire-now](#)
- <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/07/border-traffic-how-syria-uses-captagon-to-gain-leverage-over-saudi-arabia?lang=en>
 - <https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/12/1158126>
 - <https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/ebb9b060753b7019705d1d1dfe9fe2e35-0280032021/original/April-22-Harun-OnderA-Decade-of-War-in-Syria-The-Economic-Side.pdf>
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