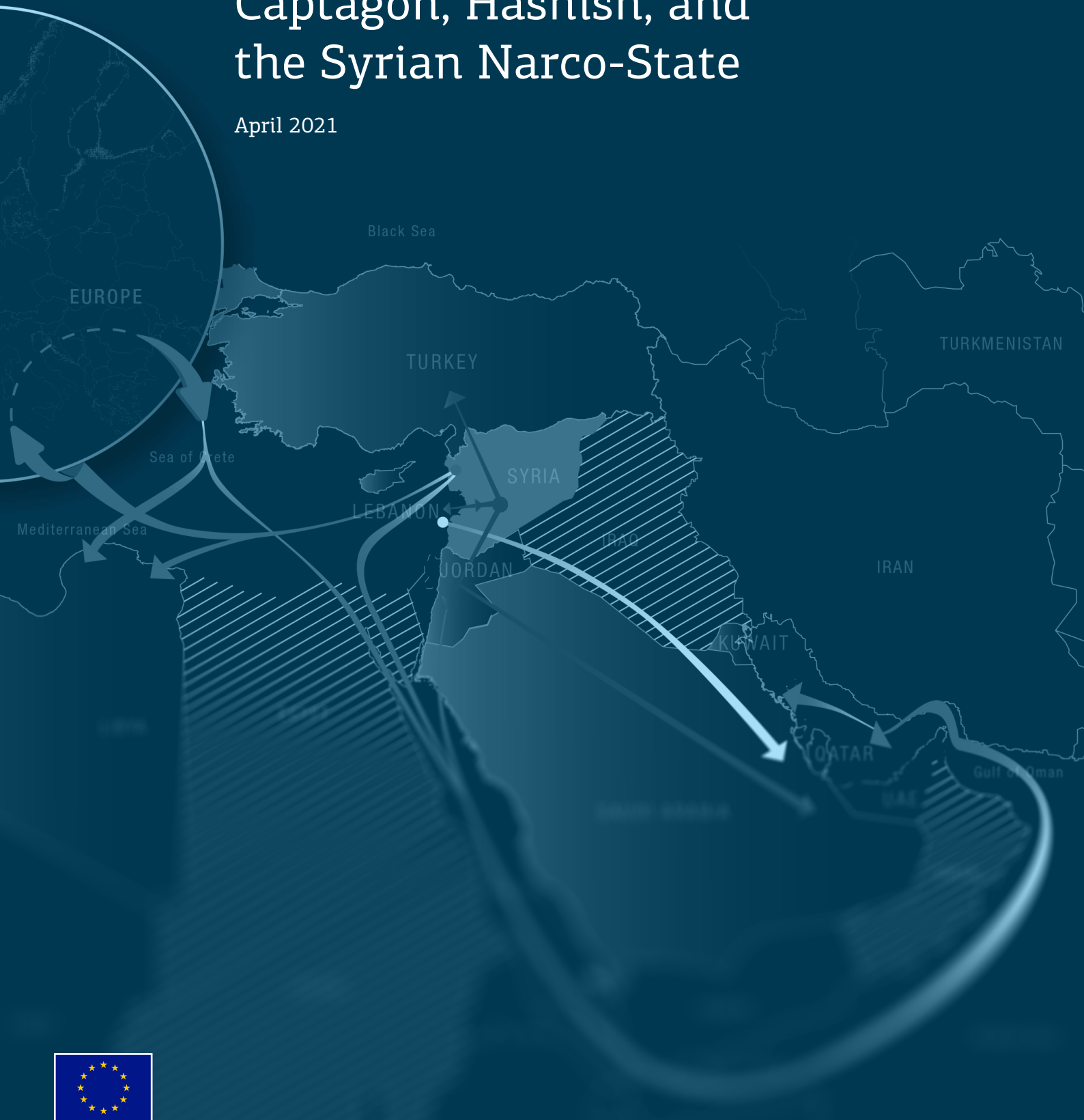


The Syrian Economy at War

PART 3

Captagon, Hashish, and the Syrian Narco-State

April 2021



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This is the third in a series of research papers intended as primers on understudied aspects of Syria's profound economic deterioration. In a decade of unrest, Syria has been reduced from a liberalising middle-income nation to a collapsing state in which nearly 90 percent of the population is mired in poverty. In response to this daunting reality, the papers in this series look beyond conventional econometrics and humanitarian orthodoxies to provide clarity and identify new insights for humanitarian and development actors. For the other papers in this series, please see: [The Syrian Economy at War: Labor Pains Amid the Blurring of the Public and Private Sectors](#) and [The Syrian Economy at War: Armed Group Mobilization as Livelihood and Protection Strategy](#).

Executive Summary

Syria has been engulfed in complex crisis for a decade. Multipolar foreign military intervention, massive refugee outflow and internal displacement, violent extremism, digital misinformation, aid politicisation, and the paralysis of conventional conflict-resolution mechanisms are but a few of the factors that combine to make the Syrian war a defining conflict of this generation. In addition to these challenges, Syria can also lay claim to another ignominious distinction of the so-called new wars: it has become one of the world's foremost narco-states.¹

On 1 July 2020, Italian port officials announced the seizure of 84 million tablets of the synthetic narcotic Captagon, valued at 1.1 billion USD, aboard three cargo ships from Syria. The incident attracted global media attention both because it was one of the largest single drug busts in history and because the drugs were erroneously attributed to Islamic State (IS), which author-

ities claimed had trafficked the drugs to “finance the jihad” (*sic*).² Arguably, narcotics production and trafficking have always been poorly understood aspects of the Syria conflict. Whereas attention has been lavished on drug use among combatants, little attention has been paid to the societal and individual costs of the pervasive spread of narcotics during the conflict. Even more neglected are the structural dynamics of drug trafficking and their impact on the trajectory of the conflict itself. As the Syrian state has re-consolidated control over much of the country since 2018, narcotics trafficking in Syria has become more expansive and widespread. In parallel, the decimation of conventional economic activities has increased the relative attractiveness of industrial-scale drug profiteering, which has been largely captured and controlled by narco-entrepreneurs linked to the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and the regime's foreign allies.³ While no complete picture of these networks has yet emerged, this report is a preliminary attempt to inform a long-overdue discussion concerning the role of narcotics in the complex Syria crisis and — it is hoped — a post-conflict setting in which efforts to suppress the drug trade can begin.

¹ Narco-state is a disputed term. This report adopts the loose, functional definition provided by the IMF in a 2003 report on Afghanistan, which warned of a state “where all legitimate institutions become penetrated by the power and wealth of traffickers”. See: “Islamic State of Afghanistan: Rebuilding a Macroeconomic Framework for Reconstruction and Growth,” International Monetary Fund (2003), 45: <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/CR/Issues/2016/12/30/Islamic-State-of-Afghanistan-Rebuilding-a-Macroeconomic-Framework-for-Reconstruction-and-16881>;

² Lorenzo Tondo, “Italian police seize €1bn amphetamine haul from Syria,” The Guardian, 1 July 2020: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jul/01/italian-police-seize-1bn-amphetamine-haul-from-syria>.

³ A detailed discussion of what constitutes the regime follows below.

Key takeaways

- Syria is a narco-state with two primary drugs of concern: hashish and the amphetamine-type stimulant Captagon. Syria is the global epicentre of Captagon production, which is now more industrialised, adaptive, and technically sophisticated than ever.
- In 2020, Captagon exports from Syria reached a market value of at least 3.46 billion USD. Though conjectural, a market ceiling significantly higher than this is distinctly possible.
- Although Captagon trafficking was once among the funding streams utilised by anti-state armed groups, consolidation of territorial control has enabled the Assad regime and its key regional allies to cement their role as the prime beneficiaries of the Syrian narcotics trade.
- The drug trade will perpetuate conflict in Syria, erode the rule of law, and impede the restoration of holistic economic functionality.
- In addition to social costs borne by Syrians themselves, the Syrian drug trade will also have a destabilising impact on neighbouring and regional states, which will be forced to bear additional societal and law enforcement burdens as a result.

Action Points

- For international donors, policymakers, and aid actors, the Syrian narco-state encompasses two distinct problem sets: regime-controlled narcotics trafficking (which is largely beyond the reach of donor-funded programs) and the social and communal costs of drug use (which can begin to be addressed through a harm-reduction strategy beginning with data collection and programming that targets some of the root causes of drug use).
- The Syrian drug industry likely cannot be curtailed until the conflict itself ends and political conditions allow for international enforcement initiatives to be directly coordinated with the Government of Syria. This is a decidedly long-term proposition.
- A harm-reduction strategy predicated on mental health and psychosocial support addressing conflict trauma may be an effective starting point for harm reduction, although it will remain an incomplete solution to this multidimensional issue.
- Though stigmatised, drug use is a pervasive legacy of the long Syria conflict. Data collection and granular analysis to map and better understand the scope and nature of drug use in Syria can inform more targeted implementation.
- Narcotics exports from Syria are a direct consequence of the protracted conflict. Enhanced coordination with regional customs, border, and law enforcement agencies can mitigate this destabilising regional effect of the Syria crisis. However, it is important that narcotics enforcement initiatives not be conflated with heavily securitised counter-terror operations, or otherwise empower retrograde, socially repressive anti-drug practices.
- Ultimately, policymakers and aid implementers should disaggregate objectives that concern illicit narco-financing and social impacts of drug use. The former are strategic considerations rooted in narco-financing and the crime-conflict nexus. The latter are moral and humanitarian imperatives brought about by the lack of progress toward a sustainable resolution to the conflict.

Introduction

It is impossible to chart the rise of the Syrian narco-state without first identifying its roots in drug enforcement initiatives in Europe. The emerging party drug Captagon came to be produced in Syria as the indirect consequence of stepped-up drug enforcement in Europe, particularly Bulgaria, in the early 2000s (see inset: What is Captagon?). The eradication of Captagon manufacturing in Europe drove production to fragile states closer to the recreational drug's primary consumer markets in the Arabian Peninsula.⁴ In Lebanon, where a weak central state had limited control and

was incapable of enforcing anti-trafficking measures, a Captagon industry rapidly expanded in the mid-2000s. Iranian forces reportedly jump-started the Lebanese industry by providing their local allies with synthetic drug equipment following the 2006 July war.⁵ An illicit Captagon lab detected in Lebanon in 2007 was the first to be officially reported to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) in all of the Levant. As late as 2011, Syria had not officially reported the detection of a single Captagon laboratory, despite the Government of Syria's acknowledgement of "large demand" for the drug domestically and the near-doubling of domestic Captagon seizures between 2008 and 2009.⁶ The fig leaf of plausible deniability would disappear with the onset of violent conflict in the country.



Captagon pills seized in Italy in 2020. Image courtesy of Guardia di Finanza.

4 By 2010, Saudi Arabia accounted for one-third of the global Captagon market, according to UNODC figures. See also: "The nexus of conflict and illicit drug trafficking," Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime, 2016, 7, 17-18; Max Kravitz and Will Nichols, "A Bitter Pill to Swallow: Connections Between Captagon, Syria, and the Gulf," Columbia SIPA Journal of International Affairs, 18 May 2016: <https://jia.sipa.columbia.edu/bitter-pill-swallow-connections-captagon-syria-gulf>, 33-35; "2011 Global ATS Assessment," UNODC (2011), 63-65.

5 Aryn Baker, "Syria's Breaking Bad: Are Amphetamines Funding the War?" Time, 28 October 2013: <https://world.time.com/2013/10/28/syrias-breaking-bad-are-amphetamines-funding-the-war/>; Matthew Levitt, "Hezbollah Finances: Funding the Party of God," Washington Institute of Near East Policy, 13 February 2005, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/hezbollah-finances-funding-party-god>.

6 "2011 Global ATS Assessment," UNODC (2011), 43-47.

What is Captagon?

Syria has a long history of hashish production, yet the drug most closely associated with the ongoing crisis in the country is the amphetamine-type stimulant Captagon, which remains little known outside the Middle East. Captagon is the trade name for a drug that was developed in the 1960s and prescribed as a treatment for attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), narcolepsy, and depression. Captagon's clinical effects differ little from those of better-known drugs that are still commonly used to treat ADHD, although it largely fell out of use in clinical settings by the 1980s. The drug improves users' situational awareness and provides a surge of energy. It can heighten focus, suppress appetite, and mitigate anxiety.⁷ Like the amphetamines and other stimulants consumed in virtually all modern conflicts, the drug is a force multiplier for fighters undertaking long-endurance missions or seeking to banish the fatigue and boredom that are pervasive in combat settings. Media reports that describe Captagon as "chemical courage" and depict its users as "zombie-like" or fearless "superhuman soldiers" have circulated widely. These reports are rooted in hyperbole and orientalist fantasy, not clinical reality.⁸

In Syria today, Captagon is best understood not as a specific drug, but as a generic class of synthetic stimulants. Only rarely do the pills sold as Captagon contain fenethylamine, the active compound found in trademarked Captagon. Instead, the pills produced in Syria today are usually made from a cocktail of more common substances, including caffeine, amphetamine, and theophylline.⁹ Formulas are adapted based on available resources, including diverted pharmaceuticals and pre-synthesised compounds that are transported overland and encapsulated in Syria. Despite these circumstances, the narcotic pills trafficked in Syria are commonly branded with the half-moon that denotes genuine Captagon.¹⁰ Two grades of these so-called Captagon pills are found in the country: low-quality yellow pills and higher-quality white pills. The latter are more expensive and tend to be exported.

A single Captagon pill can be made for very little. Production facilities are highly mobile. Synthesising the drug requires little equipment and only rudimentary chemical knowhow.¹¹ Because 5,000 pills fit inside a shoebox weighing roughly 1 kg, the drug is surpassingly easy to conceal for export at volume.¹² Captagon consumption inside Syria has become a common feature of daily life throughout the country, where a Captagon pill has a street value between 50 cents USD and 1 USD, as of early 2021, according to local sources. However, the primary foreign market for Captagon is the Arabian Peninsula — particularly Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates — where it is used as a recreational drug.¹³ In the wealthy Gulf states, the pill's value skyrockets to 20 USD, or more.¹⁴

7 "TSG IntelBrief: The Drug of War," Soufan Group, 25 January 2016: <https://thesoufancenter.org/tsg-intelbrief-the-drug-of-war/>; "The nexus of conflict and illicit drug trafficking," Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime, 2016, p. 5-16: <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/The-nexus-of-conflict-and-illicit-drug-trafficking-Syria-and-the-wider-region.pdf>.

8 One widely cited report notes that the drug "allow[s] Syria's fighters to stay up for days, killing with a numb, reckless abandon." From Peter Holley, "The tiny pill fueling Syria's war and turning fighters into superhuman soldiers," Washington Post, 20 November 2015: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2015/11/19/the-tiny-pill-fueling-syrias-war-and-turning-fighters-into-super-human-soldiers/>. See also: "Syria named as huge producer of 'chemical courage' drug Captagon," news.com.au, 29 January 2016: <https://www.news.com.au/world/middle-east/syria-named-as-huge-producer-of-chemical-courage-drug-captagon/news-story/58e81985d072843a88281e131eec34da>; "Paris attackers and the 'Captain': Did ISIS gunmen inject Arab amphetamine Captagon to fuel butchery?" International Business Times, 19 November 2015: <https://www.ibtimes.co.uk/paris-attackers-captain-did-isis-gunmen-inject-arab-amphetamine-captagon-fuel-butchery-1526556>. Reports that the IS-linked Paris Bataclan attackers had consumed Captagon were ultimately discredited. Nonetheless, this reporting cemented an image that had been cultivated by the spectacle of adeptly publicised atrocities carried out by IS in Syria and Iraq.

9 For a detailed discussion of Captagon's pharmacology, see: "World Drug Report: 3 Drug Supply, UNODC (2020), p. 58.

10 Throughout this report, Captagon is used to refer to amphetamine-type stimulant pills that are marketed as Captagon, irrespective of their chemical makeup. This is in keeping with UNODC and academic practice, as well as the common parlance within Syria.

11 Max Kravitz and Will Nichols, "A Bitter Pill to Swallow: Connections Between Captagon, Syria, and the Gulf," Columbia SIPA Journal of International Affairs, 18 May 2016: <https://jia.sipa.columbia.edu/bitter-pill-swallow-connections-captagon-syria-gulf>.

12 "Romania seizes the largest drug shipment coming from Syria," Enab Baladi, 2 September 2020: <https://bit.ly/3st8zVn>.

13 Max Kravitz and Will Nichols, "A Bitter Pill to Swallow: Connections Between Captagon, Syria, and the Gulf," Columbia SIPA Journal of International Affairs, 18 May 2016: <https://jia.sipa.columbia.edu/bitter-pill-swallow-connections-captagon-syria-gulf>.

14 UNODC reports that in Lebanon in 2017, Captagon retailed for between 10 USD and 20 USD per pill.

The Rise and Rise of the Syrian Narco-State

Conflict dynamics divide the wartime Syrian narcotics trade into two distinct, albeit ambiguous, intervals. The first lasted from the onset of the crisis in 2011 until approximately 2018. During this period, war economy activities surged as the diverse groups that made up the incipient opposition variously fought the Syrian Government and each other. In parallel, pro-Government militia groups, including armed

factions backed by Iran, gained strategic footholds as the Syrian central state fragmented. By spring 2013, the embattled state had withdrawn to a defensible core, ceding to a patchwork of armed groups nearly all of Idleb and Aleppo governorates, most territory east of the Euphrates River, and major pockets of central and southern Syria. Illicit economies boomed in the space vacated by the state, and Syria emerged as the “Captagon capital of the world” as control over the production and movement of narcotics became an important revenue stream for diverse armed groups.

This had changed by 2018, a year which can be viewed as an inflection point in the conflict. In 2018, the Gov-

Interdiction of Syrian Narcotics Abroad

Volume by Year, in Kilograms
(2011-2020)

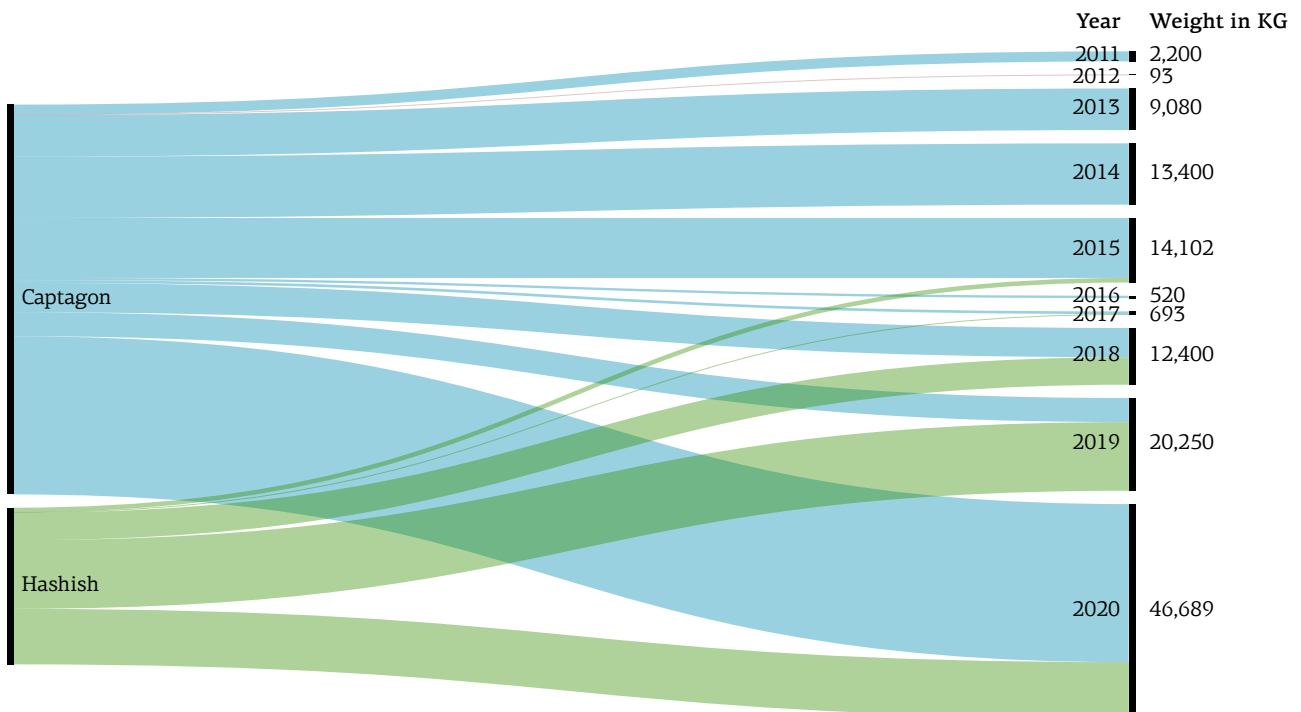


Figure 1

Drug interdiction data in English and Arabic has been manually cleaned after collection via Google News. This data reflects representative keywords (and variant spellings); its sources include reports from independent media, state media, and other open sources concerning narcotics attributed by authorities as having originated in Syria. This research method has important limitations. It reflects only publicly reported interceptions, leading to a likely bias toward high-profile — i.e. “newsworthy” — incidents. However, while this data is far from definitive, it can be seen as indicative of overall trends. Where the reports stipulated the number of pills rather than their total weight (kilograms being this graph’s unit of measurement), calculations have been done on the basis that 5,000 pills amount to one kilogram.

ernment of Syria scored a string of essential military victories, as it recaptured opposition enclaves in eastern Ghouta, northern rural Homs, and southern Syria. Collectively, the campaigns relegated the armed and political opposition to marginal territory along the Syria-Turkey border and re-established state authority over major road networks, strategic international borders, and high-traffic commercial crossing points. The events of that year had an impact on Syria's evolution as a narco-state that was no less significant. The return of state control coincided with a substantial shift in narcotics flows from Syria. Buoyed by commercial-scale narcotics shipments, interceptions of Syrian Captagon and hashish abroad have increased markedly in the period since 2018 (figure 1). In addition to the growth of Syrian drug exports, a profound qualitative change is also apparent, and the concealment of drug shipments has also become more technically sophisticated. A growing body of evidence implicates well-placed Syrian regime figures and their regional allies in the fluid regional narcotics trade that is centred in Syria. Whereas, in earlier periods, narco-trafficking was attributed to armed groups, some of which explicitly threatened the Syrian state, since 2018, drug trafficking has surged as its profits have become a critical financial lifeline for the Assad regime and its international allies.

The Syrian Maelstrom (2011-2018)

The narcotics trade is perhaps the most visible and external dimension of the broader Syrian war economy, which surged as the rule of law eroded following the onset of the conflict. This economy includes activities as diverse as weapons dealing, extortion, human trafficking, forced prostitution, organ smuggling, artifact looting, and kidnapping for ransom.¹⁵ Fundamentally, activities such as these became a financial imperative for armed insurgent and non-state armed groups that had limited resources to sustain their military operations. The tendency of war economy activities to converge with the

interest of conflict actors is one important aspect of what is generally known as the crime-conflict nexus, which posits that criminal activity can itself become a conflict driver.¹⁶ For much of the Syria conflict, armed group financing revolved largely around effective monetisation of territorial control. This took (and, to an extent, continues to take) multiple forms. Wherever possible, armed groups have monopolised local resources such as oil, strategic crops, or incoming humanitarian aid. At other times, military factions or their affiliated businessmen and local stakeholders have exploited gaps in the local economy (see: **Beyond Checkpoints: Local Economic Gaps and the Political Economy of Syria's Business Community**). Almost universally, armed factions have drawn revenues from extractive tax regimes, including protection rackets, checkpoint fees, and crossing tariffs levied on the movement of people, commodities, and illicit goods, including narcotics.¹⁷

Even without playing an active role in narcotics production, then, armed groups are capable of exploiting the so-called checkpoint economy of the cross-line narcotics trade. While accusations of drug trafficking have been made by all sides in the conflict, anecdotal evidence indicates that armed groups' ideology and alliances have little or no discernable relationship with their participation in the narcotics trade — whatever the image they seek to project. For instance, in 2012, the Jabhat al-Nusra — an Islamist group — announced that its forces had uncovered and destroyed cannabis fields and Captagon laboratories in territory seized from the Syrian Government in the Qalamoun Mountains. Soon thereafter, Iranian media reported the discovery of a Captagon lab in territory seized from Jabhat al-Nusra and Free Syrian Army fighters.¹⁸ Ironically, the armed group commonly thought to be most closely associated with the Captagon trade — Islamic State — is, in fact, among the few conflict actors that has had no demonstrable institutional connection to the trade of this drug (see below: Blitzed: Captagon and Islamic State).

15 "Conflict Economies in Syria: Roots, Dynamics, and Pathways for Change," Syrian Center for Policy Research, p. 21-23: <https://www.scpr-syria.org/conflict-economies-in-syria-roots-dynamics-and-pathways-for-change/>. See also: Rim Turkmani and Vesna Bojicic-Dzelilovic, "War Economy, Governance and Security in Syria's Opposition-Controlled Areas," *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development*, 6 April 2018: <https://www.stabilityjournal.org/articles/10.5334/sta.569/>.

16 Armed groups were deliberately firewalled from donor-funded administrative and governance structures, which are in other contexts vital engines of defence funding. Armed groups sometimes sought to monopolise revenue-generating civil or administrative entities such as licensing bureaus, while at the same time facilitating donor-funded projects in costly sectors such as health and education services. Likewise, fundraising appeals to foreign private donors were successful only sporadically. See: Joby Warrick, "Private money pours into Syrian conflict as rich donors pick sides," *Washington Post*, 15 June 2013: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/private-money-pours-into-syrian-conflict-as-rich-donors-pick-sides/2013/06/15/67841656-cf8a-11e2-8845-d970ccb04497_story.html.

17 Christina Steenkamp, "The Crime-Conflict Nexus and the Civil War in Syria," *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development* (2017), p. 62-64; Asher Berman, "Criminalization of the Syrian conflict," *Institute for the Study of War*, 2012: <http://www.understandingwar.org/article/criminalization-syrian-conflict>.

18 "'Captagon', one of the priorities for Jihad in Syria!" *Alam TV*, 24 August 2013: <https://bit.ly/3sNnqtM>

Blitzed: Captagon and Islamic State

No group has been more closely associated with the Syrian Captagon trade than IS. This association has persisted in large part because of sensational foreign media coverage.¹⁹ Erroneous initial reports that the massive July 2020 Captagon shipment intercepted in Italy was intended to finance IS are indicative of the pervasive nature of this false association. However, available evidence suggests that IS has had limited direct links to the drug trade, apart from relatively minor local incidents.

The reasons for this lack of involvement are illustrative of the economies of narco-trafficking in Syria more broadly. IS likely abstained from large-scale narco-trafficking for fiscal reasons, not because of its puritanical ideology. Quite simply, IS had other avenues of financing its activities. Unlike the vast majority of armed groups in Syria, IS succeeded in erecting a well-funded state apparatus. It has been estimated that at the group's territorial peak, its annual revenues ranged between 1.2 billion USD and 2 billion USD. Money poured in from hydrocarbon sales, extortion and racketeering, taxation, kidnapping for ransom, looting, and foreign donations.²⁰ These revenue streams gave the group financing that greatly eclipsed the resources available to rival conflict actors, many of which had grown out of local neighbourhood protection groups and defected military units. For the most part, these other groups did not preside over areas with abundant strategic resources. Funding on such a scale reduced the pressures on the IS organisation to actively enter the narcotics trade.

However, conditions did vary on the community level. Locally, IS combatants reportedly tolerated and taxed smugglers who trafficked in intoxicants, including hashish and cigarettes.²¹ Captagon was likely also trafficked in IS-controlled areas. Local sources note areas in which cannabis cultivation was greater under IS than after the group's defeat, for instance. All told, however, there is little evidence to suggest that IS ever produced or trafficked in Captagon as part of a wide-reaching institutional funding imperative. Likewise, to the extent that IS fighters consumed Captagon or other narcotics, consumption was likely a personal choice rather than a product of institutional combat directives.



Captagon tablets discovered in industrial equipment after detection by Italian authorities. Image courtesy of Guardia di Finanza.

- ¹⁹ Jacob Sullum, "The supersoldier drug that isn't: Captagon captures the imaginations of yellow journalists," *Forbes*, 25 November 2015: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jacobsullum/2015/11/25/the-supersoldier-drug-that-isnt-captagon-captures-the-imaginations-of-yellow-journalists/?sh=7190cdeb2237>.
- ²⁰ Patrick Blannin, "Islamic State's Financing: Sources, Methods and Utilisation," *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses*, vol. 9, no. 5 (May 2017); "The Financing of the 'Islamic State' in Iraq and Syria (ISIS)," Directorate-General for External Policies, European Parliament, 2017: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2017/603835/EXPO_IDA%282017%29603835_EN.pdf.
- ²¹ Fazel Hawramy, "Islamic State turns to cigarette smuggling to fund itself," *Al-Monitor*, 25 November 2016: <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/11/cigarette-smuggling-mosul-isis-terrorism-fund.html>.

Pax Mafiosa (2018-Present)

By 2018 — and far earlier in many areas — the narcotics trade was decisively reconfigured to the advantage of pro-Government forces. Increasingly prominent in this period are narco-entrepreneurs affiliated with the Assad regime. Record-setting foreign drug interceptions since 2018 evince the evolution of Syria’s drug industry, with exports of Captagon and hashish suggesting new levels of mass production.

The Return of the State

Although the Syrian drug trade is fluid across frontlines, its unambiguous nerve centre is Government-held terri-

tory (figure 2). The production of synthetic drugs depends upon imports of chemical precursors sourced from India, Latin America, Russia, and elsewhere. These imports enter Government-held Syria through Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq. Meanwhile, intercepted Captagon exports can be traced via areas under nominal Government of Syria control, including crossings (i.e. the Nasib crossing, with Jordan), smuggling routes (through Dar’a, As-Sweida, and western rural Homs), and port facilities (Lattakia and Tartous). Cannabis cultivation is centred along the highly porous border with Lebanon. That said, cannabis and synthetic drugs are likely produced to varying degrees in every Syrian region.

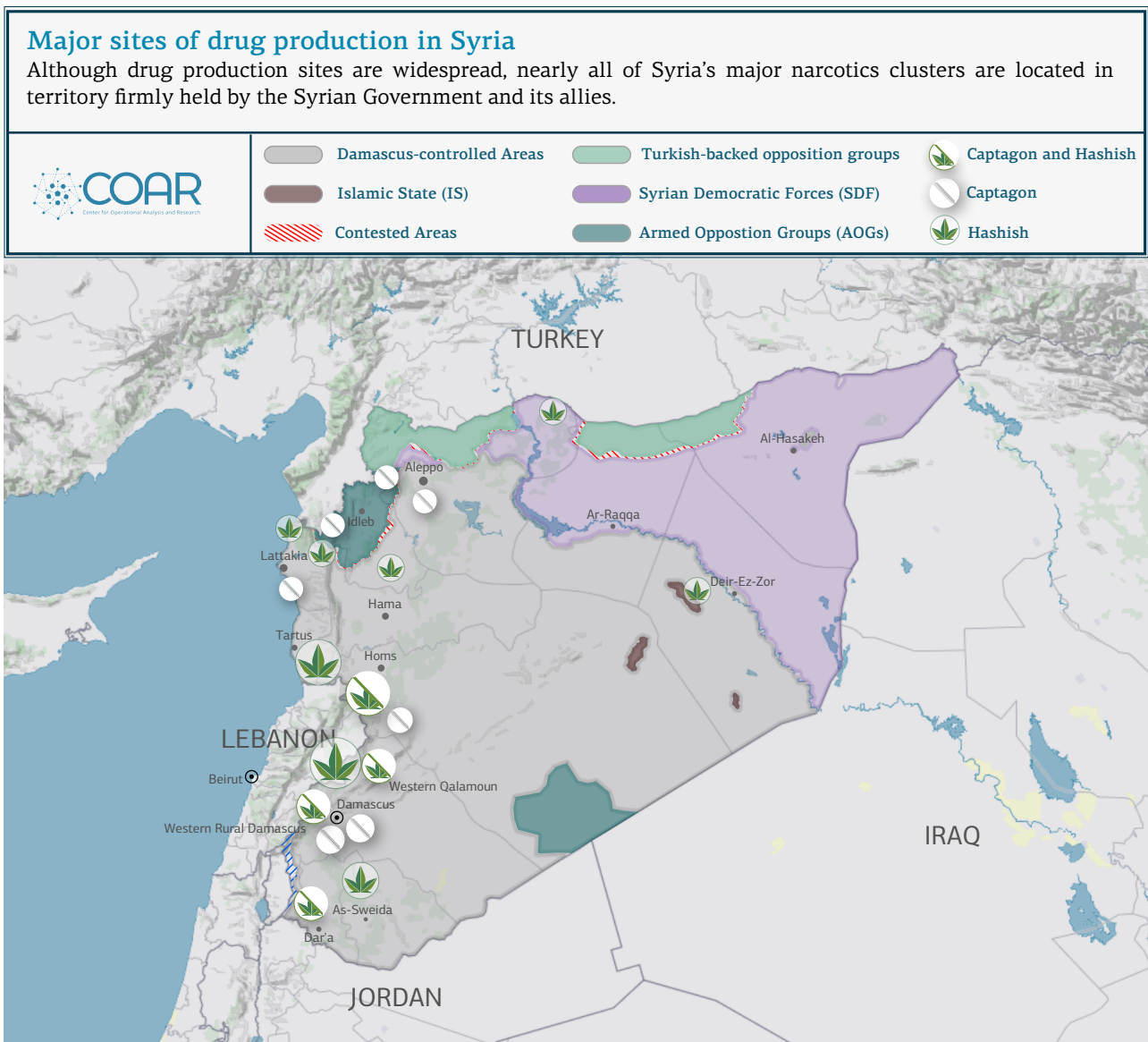


Figure 2
Icon size reflects the density of drug production clusters. Data via local sources.

Geography of the Syrian Drug Trade

Local dynamics in the Syrian narcotics trade reflect the ambiguities of fragmented territorial control. The drug trade centres on Government-held territory, but it is present throughout Syria. In each of the country's three distinct areas of control — the opposition-held northwest, the Syrian Democratic Forces-con-

trolled northeast, and Government-held areas (central, southern, and coastal Syria) — conditions of the trade vary depending on local relationships and resources. Each region has variable access to inputs, markets, and key transit routes.

Triangle Trade: Main Narcotic Export Routes

Narcotics leave Syria bound for three main destinations: North Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, and Europe. Available evidence indicates that Europe currently serves as a transit hub for narcotics bound primarily for markets in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA).

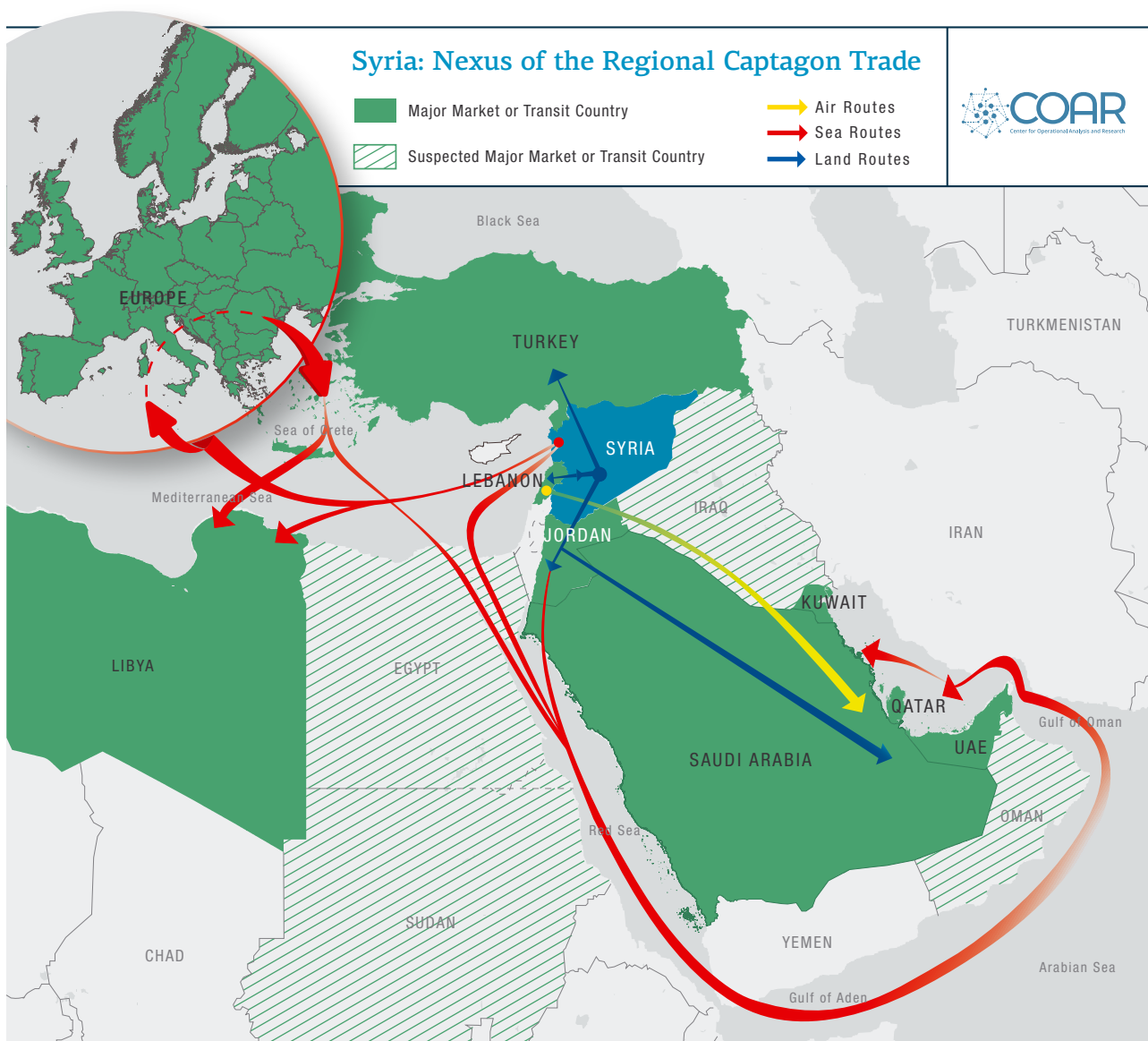


Figure 3

Data informing this graphic was drawn from UNODC, "The nexus of conflict and illicit drug trafficking," *Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime* (2016), local sources, and media reports.

Northeast Syria

Northeast Syria is distinguished from other regions of the country by the comparatively limited scale of its local narcotics trafficking. Locally grown cannabis is exported as hashish to Iraq, but this trade is believed to be limited, although more data is needed. As such, cannabis cultivated in northeast Syria is, in large part, consumed within the territory of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria. Small-scale production takes place near Amuda and Ya'robayah, in Al-Hasakeh Governorate, and along the Euphrates River, notably in the area near Shahil, Deir-ez-Zor Governorate. According to local sources, the northeast's most significant site of large-scale narco-agriculture is near Ain Al Arab (Kobani), in northeastern Aleppo Governorate. Kobani hashish is popular across northeast Syria due to its affordability. Curiously, some cannabis is also reportedly cultivated in Ras Al Ain — now under the control of Turkish-backed armed groups that frequently clash with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) — and smuggled across frontlines into Autonomous Administration areas, where it is consumed directly or trafficked into northern Iraq.

Synthetic drugs are not known to be produced on an industrial scale in northeast Syria, according to local sources. However, the fact that only modest equipment is required for synthetic drug encapsulation means that the existence of clandestine facilities should not be ruled out. Local sources suggest that the market for Captagon and other narcotic stimulants in the region is fueled primarily by active combatants. Captagon and other narcotics enter northeast Syria from opposition-held areas via Menbij (see: [Syria Update 25 January 2021](#)). Meanwhile, low-quality amphetamines enter the northeast via smuggling routes located along the region's extensive border with Government-controlled areas.²² Local sources indicate that drugs also reach northeast Syria from Iraq via Ya'robayah. Though further details concerning this entry point are lacking, it suggests that Syria's relationship to regional drug production is fluid and to some extent bidirectional.

The Kurdistan Route?

The scope of trafficking between Autonomous Administration-controlled northeast Syria and the Kurdish Regional Government area in northern Iraq is unclear;

this is among the most significant data gaps in the current research on Syrian narcotics distribution and production. Narco-trafficking clearly does take place along the Syria-Iraq border, but ambiguities persist. Local sources indicate that hashish is smuggled to Iraq via Ya'robayah by the Sanadid Forces, a Kurdish People's Protection Forces (YPG)-aligned militia composed of fighters from the Shummar tribe, part of the largest tribal confederation in the region, which stretches to the Arabian Peninsula (see: [Tribal Tribulations: Tribal Mapping and State Actor Influence in Northeastern Syria](#)). UNODC has identified Captagon as a “main drug of concern” in Iraq, likely as a spillover consequence of the drug's surging availability in Syria.²³ Heightened drug enforcement along other export routes from Syria will also increase Iraq's attractiveness as a vector between Syria and the Gulf markets. Leakage along this route is possible, as is increased marketing of drugs in Iraq if higher-value Captagon markets approach a saturation point.

Northwest Syria

A more active drug trade exists in northwest Syria, which serves as a market for drugs produced in Government-held territory, particularly along the Syria-Lebanon border. While cannabis is grown in small quantities in northern Aleppo, local cultivation has diminished since IS was displaced, according to local sources. Bulk hashish enters northern Syria via Idleb Governorate. Upon reaching Nabul and Zahraa, in northern Aleppo, it is divided, packaged, and branded. Local sources trace the hashish to cannabis fields in western rural Homs and Lebanon's Beqaa Valley. Northbound trade routes via central Syria are reputedly controlled by foreign Shi'a armed groups supported by Iran. Within northern Syria, drug trafficking is reportedly controlled by Syrian National Army-affiliated actors and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). Individual narco-entrepreneurs facilitate onward trafficking into Turkey and — potentially — Europe.

The clandestine nature of facilities and the ease of manufacturing make Captagon production more widespread than cannabis cultivation in northwest Syria. Sarmada and Jisr-Ash-Shugur are noted as the regional production hubs of Captagon. Local sources indicate that the synthetic chemicals needed to produce narcotic pills enter northwest Syria primarily via Iran-backed

22 “Who smuggled drugs from areas formerly under the influence of the Islamic State,” BBC Arabic, 19 December 2020: <https://bit.ly/3aQWW4L>.

23 “World Drug Report 2020, Booklet 1,” UNODC, June 2020: https://wdr.unodc.org/wdr2020/field/WDR20_BOOKLET_1.pdf.

groups now concentrated around frontlines in eastern and southwestern Idleb Governorate.²⁴ The specifics of local supply chain dynamics are unclear, however. Also unclear is whether foreign militias provide raw precursor chemicals or synthesised amphetamine ready for encapsulation. In the past, HTS has reportedly cracked down on small-scale drug traffickers under the pretext of drug enforcement. But local sources suggest that such manoeuvres are superficial and merely aim to create space for HTS-affiliated narco-entrepreneurs and the group's own security apparatus.

The Northern Route

In northern Syria, Turkey has staunchly cross-border drug flow by imposing significant crossing restrictions. For extended periods, authorities have closed border checkpoints with areas held by the Syrian Government in Lattakia and with areas held by the YPG in northern Aleppo and Ar-Raqqa governorates. Captagon has nonetheless continued to trickle across the Turkish border via established smuggling routes, while more sophisticated narco-enterprises have moved drugs into Turkey at scale. Apart from rare incidents, southern Turkey has apparently functioned primarily as a conduit to consumer markets elsewhere in the Middle East, rather than as a major Captagon production hub in its own right.²⁵

Amphetamine (ATS) seizures in Turkey (kg)

2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
272	291	163	1,150	179	261	251	658	566

Source: UNODC

Government-held Syria

Nearly all of Syria's major drug clusters and drug export channels have been under Syrian Government control since 2018 and, in many cases, far longer. The importance of securing smuggling routes such as western rural Homs and the western Qalamoun Mountains was thought to be a key motivating factor for efforts to recapture these areas by Syrian Government forces and Hezbollah, which maintains a considerable presence in Syrian-Lebanon border communities, where local sources indicate that the group offers both economic stability and

protection to narcotics producers. Cannabis cultivation is widespread across southern and central Syria, with fields abutting the Beqaa Valley. Additional fields are scattered throughout the predominantly Alawite coastal region, primarily in southern Tartous and northern Lattakia governorates. In southern Syria, fields are found in the Lajat region of Dar'a and in northern As-Sweida Governorate. Whether produced from cannabis cultivated in Syria or in adjacent areas of Lebanon's Beqaa Valley, hashish that is trafficked in Syria is reportedly both consumed in the local market and exported abroad, primarily to Jordan.

Captagon production is highly dynamic. It is believed to take place on a limited scale in small underground laboratories and on a large scale in industrial facilities located in manufacturing districts and urban centres. The number of small laboratories is unknown, but Syrian investigative reports indicate that at least 15 large factories produce Captagon alongside other synthetic drugs. These factories are primarily located along the Damascus-Homs road and in other industrial areas. For instance, major production sites are reported to exist in Homs Governorate; in Basa, a neglected area outside Lattakia city; and in a factory managed by the 4th Division.²⁶ Because the cross-border Captagon trade is believed to be highly fluid, Syria should be seen as the epicentre of the regional trade as well as a transit point and a consumer market in its own right. In addition to domestically produced pills, imported pills — whether for consumption or further export to more lucrative markets — are also in circulation.

The Qalamoun Route

Straddling the porous Syria-Lebanon border, the Qalamoun Mountain range facilitates bidirectional smuggling of narcotics and other illicit goods. Though Lebanese authorities supported with Western anti-narcotics funding have aimed to suppress narcotics production in the Beqaa Valley, their initiatives have met with mixed success.²⁷ In the past, suppression efforts have reportedly driven production across the border into Syria, a move that was facilitated by the breakdown in the rule of law as the Syria conflict intensified. Anecdotal assessments indicate that Captagon production in the Beqaa fell by 90 percent between 2011 and 2013,

24 "Map of the military bases and posts of foreign forces in Syria," Jusoor, 6 January 2021: <https://bit.ly/3e5XbJG>.

25 "The nexus of conflict and illicit drug trafficking," Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime, 2016, 9-10.

26 "Der Spiegel reveals the source of the largest drug shipment intercepted in Italy: Basa in Lattakia," 4 July 2020, Jesr Press: <https://bit.ly/3dtXFKQ>; "The Basa landfill," Syria Untold 28 July 2019: <https://bit.ly/2Qcvs2c>.

27 "Regional Report on the Near East," Council of the European Union, 17 December 2014: <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-16959-2014-INIT/en/pdf>.



A bust of Syrian Captagon in Saudi Arabia. Image courtesy of Khaleej Online.

attributed to a shift in production into Syria.²⁸ Although local sources suggest this figure is plausible, an independent quantitative estimate is impossible to provide. By the same token, during periods of intense violence in Rural Damascus and western Homs governorates, Captagon production was reportedly driven from Syria into Lebanon. The proliferation of existing smuggling routes and the high degree of control exercised by Hezbollah, in place of Lebanese or Syrian state authorities, are key factors that have allowed illicit economies including narcotics to leapfrog the border in response to changing local dynamics. In the case of Lebanon, economic drivers are increasing the attractiveness of the drug trade. An anecdotal increase in security force raids on drug laboratories in the Beqaa Valley and in Lebanese border communities, particularly since that country was first beset by economic upheaval in October 2019, suggests that narco-trafficking will remain a concern as Lebanon's

state and economic system progressively collapse (see: **Two Countries, One Crisis: The Impact of Lebanon's Upheaval on Syria**).

In October 2015, a Saudi royal was arrested attempting to smuggle 40 suitcases of Captagon pills out of Beirut Rafic Hariri International Airport.²⁹ Reputedly the largest interception involving the airport to date, it suggests that Beirut airport is a theoretical transit point for Captagon exports originating from Syria — although this is unlikely to be a high-value route, given the risk of detection and the availability of alternate overland routes.

Amphetamine (ATS) seizures in Lebanon (kg)

2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
116	85	263	2,163	5,997	2,561	2,175	1,337	880

Source: UNODC

²⁸ Jon Henley, "Captagon: The amphetamine fuelling Syria's civil war," *The Guardian*, 13 January 2014: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/shortcuts/2014/jan/13/captagon-amphetamine-syria-war-middle-east>.

²⁹ "Saudi prince caught 'with two tons of drugs' at Lebanese airport," *France 24*, 26 October 2015: <https://www.france24.com/en/20151026-saudi-prince-caught-with-two-tons-drugs-beirut-airport>.

The Southern Route

Until its recapture by the Syrian Government in conjunction with Russian forces in 2018, southern Syria was among the most fragmented regions of the country. Violence and occasional clashes between Jordanian security personnel prompted the closure of the Nasib border crossing in 2015, dealing a devastating blow to regional industries dependent on overland trade (see: **Syria Update 18-24 October 2018**). Nonetheless, southern Syria has remained a vital exit point for Syrian narcotics, including smuggling routes through remote desert regions bordering Jordan (see: **Syria Update 25 January 2021**). Critically, the overland route through Jordan furnishes access to the Arab Gulf via Saudi Arabia, which is believed to be the single largest market for Captagon in the world. With the exception of As-Sweida Governorate, much of southern Syria was under the control of various armed opposition and extremist groups until summer 2018. Jordanian amphetamine seizure data suggests that there has been a relatively steady stream of drug trafficking through the country, which can reasonably be linked to Syrian intermediaries.

Amphetamine (ATS) seizures in Jordan (kg)

2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
923	3,544	2,694	3,828	5,394	n/a	13,486	n/a	n/a

Source: UNODC

Drugs and the Assad Regime

On the local level, drug production and trafficking remain a function of territorial control and influence.³⁰ Various military entities of diverse backgrounds and affiliations are involved in supply chains, transit, and protection rackets. These include divisions of national military entities (e.g., the 4th Division, Air Intelligence, Republican Guard, and Military Intelligence Branch 215), local militias and private security companies (e.g., National Defense Forces, Desert Hawks, Baath Brigades, Saraya Al-Areen), and foreign armed groups of various affilia-

tion (e.g., Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, Hezbollah, and Wagner Group). That said, production is geographically fragmented and occurs within set hierarchies, and narco-trafficking in Government-held territory — the epicentre of Syria’s national drug industry — is understood as a monopoly controlled at the uppermost levels by the Assad regime and its close allies. In general, two interlinked networks are thought to exist.³¹

The Assad Regime Network

The first network is reportedly controlled directly by the Assad regime. It is a testament to the Syrian regime’s adaptability that even a decade from the outset of the uprising in March 2011, no definitive definition of the regime itself has come into common use. No doubt, the inner circle surrounding the person of President Bashar al-Assad and his family is central to the regime. Yet, the Syrian regime arguably also encompasses what has been described as a larger “decentralised array of interlocking networks” consisting of military, security, political, and economic actors of varying independent agency.³²

Both portions of the regime play a role in the Syrian drug trade. Among the most noted narco-entrepreneurs in Syria are inner circle figures including Maher al-Assad, Wasim Badia al-Assad, Muhammad Shalish, and Samer al-Assad.³³ The latter, a distant paternal cousin of Bashar, reportedly oversees Captagon production in Lattakia and exercises a high degree of influence over trafficking throughout the Syrian coastal region. Sources suggest that to operate in the area, smaller, upstart narco-entrepreneurs must enter into a “partnership” with Samer, surrendering as much as 40-60 percent of revenues in exchange for access to primary inputs, export channels, and protection. However, specific details concerning these relationships are impossible to verify.³⁴

The Iran-Linked Network

The second main narco-trafficking network operates through Iran-backed armed forces, including Hezbollah,

30 For a good account of local market dynamics and the involvement of security actors in Damascus, see: Karam Mansour, “The hashish and Captagon market in Damascus,” *Jumhuriya*, 1 October 2020: <https://bit.ly/3suwJy0>; “Damascus: Captagon on the bus and sold flagrantly,” *Damascus Voice*, 9 December 2020: <https://bit.ly/3glVYkc>.

31 Based on extensive analysis of open-source reporting, key-informant interviews, local data collection, academic scholarship, and grey literature on the Syrian narcotics trade. Without question, data gaps remain, and it is hoped that future research will shed more light on these networks and relationships.

32 “After Ten Years of War, Who Rules Syria?” *Crown Center for Middle East Studies*, 8 April 2021: <https://www.brandeis.edu/crown/publications/crown-conversations/cc-7.html?fbclid=IwAR1Xr20ySnjeRVna-fXdYRjM00uB4NPym6nmKypjBPIXF0Dn4P1RVcemujA>.

33 Will Neal, “Assad Regime Implicated in Massive Captagon Bust,” *Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project*, 13 July 2020: <https://www.occrp.org/en/daily/12736-assad-regime-implicated-in-massive-captagon-bust>.

34 Diya Audeh, “Al-Assad and Hezbollah’s Captagon: funding that exceeds Syria’s budget,” *Al-Hurra*, 25 December 2020: <https://bit.ly/3vf3fXy> and Mohammad al-Shaykh Ali, “By name, a German magazine discloses the identity of the faction that stands behind the shipment of drugs from Syria that Italy seized,” *Orient News*, 5 July 2020: <https://bit.ly/3v1B8e2>.

influential narco-entrepreneurs, and various other militia groups supported by Iran, which are believed to be among the chief sources of the chemical precursors used in synthetic drug laboratories throughout Syria.³⁵ These networks are presumed to have greater influence over the “franchising” of narcotics production in central and southern Syria, where the state’s authority remains tenuous, and in other isolated pockets of the country.

Ending the Syrian Drug War

It is widely recognised that “drugs and conflict are almost inextricably interlinked”.³⁶ Although analysts of Syria have often explored the way that conflict fuels the drug trade, seldom have they noted the corollary: that drug-trafficking will continue to drive instability in the country. Illegal narcotics trafficking in countries beset by crisis intensifies violence, prolongs fighting, and impedes stabilisation and post-conflict political transition. Arguably, the future trajectory of the conflict in Syria is impossible to understand without a recognition of the scale and economic gravity of the country’s narcotics industry. Nonetheless, it is also important for policymakers, donors, and stabilisation actors to recognise that few tools will be available to counter the Syrian drug economy so long as the conflict itself goes unresolved. For the foreseeable future, the Government of Syria’s pariah status will prevent the close coordination that is likely required to effectively degrade the capacity of the transnational drug-trafficking

networks that are rooted in the country. As a result, Syria’s drug economy will continue to fuel the conflict, enrich the Assad regime and its allies, and heighten the law enforcement burden and social costs imposed on the surrounding region.

Less Money More Problems

The primary reasons for the intractability of Syria’s drug economy are quite simple. The overwhelming contraction of the national economy has increased the Syrian regime’s reliance on the war economy for its own survival, which has always depended to some extent on resource-capture via control over the national economy.³⁷ However, by 2018, Syria’s national GDP had shrunk to 21 billion USD, down from 67 USD billion in 2011.³⁸ More troubling yet is the near-total elimination of foreign exports, which amounted to less than 700 USD million in 2019.³⁹ In 2020 alone, foreign law enforcement agencies intercepted no fewer than four shipments of Syrian Captagon each with an estimated street value exceeding 300 million USD. As the business and economic publication Syria Report has noted in response to such interceptions, the scale of Syrian narcotics exports and the diminishment of legal trade activities combine to make narcotics “by far, the most important source of foreign currency” in the country.⁴⁰

Calculating the size of the Syrian drug economy is, at best, an exercise in informed speculation. Syrian media have estimated that the nation’s Captagon trade is worth as much as 16 billion USD annually.⁴¹ COAR’s own analysis finds that authorities, primarily in Europe and the MENA region, captured no fewer than 173 million Captagon pills (34.6 tonnes) and 12.1 tonnes of hashish exported from Syria in 2020. That quantity of Captagon pills has a theoretical street value as high as 3.46 billion USD. The fact that intercepted drugs represent only a fraction of overall narcotics activity suggests that the total value of Syria’s Captagon industry exceeds this sum many times over.

35 “Life sentence in Lebanon for Noah Zaitar, the most dangerous drug runner and mafioso supported by Hezbollah and al-Assad,” Shaam Network, 28 November 2018: <https://bit.ly/3akTtTU> (AR). Concerning cross-border chemical supplies into Syria, local sources note that Abu Kamal crossing is used by groups transiting through Iraq.

36 Tuesday Reitano, “Making War: Conflict Zones and their Implications for Drug Policy,” International Development Policy, 14 October 2020: <https://journals.openedition.org/poldev/3813>.

37 Stephen Starr, “Syria’s next big export: Illegal pills,” OZY, 12 August 2019, <https://www.ozy.com/the-new-and-the-next/syrias-next-big-export-illegal-pills/95965/>.

38 “Syria’s GDP 2010-2018,” Syria Report, 2020: <https://www.syria-report.com/library/economic-data/syrias-gdp-2010-2018>.

39 “Syria’s Foreign Trade Volumes Stable in 2019, Deficit Remains Severe,” Syria Report, 18 November 2020: <https://www.syria-report.com/news/economy/syria-s-foreign-trade-volumes-stable-2019-deficit-remains-severe>

40 “Drug Exports Represent Main Foreign Currency Revenue Source for Syrian Economy,” Syria report, 8 July 2020: <https://www.syria-report.com/news/economy/drug-exports-represent-main-foreign-currency-revenue-source-syrian-economy>.

41 Ashtar Mahmoud, “Syria: More than 100 million pills in less than a year. The market’s value could reach \$16 billion,” Kassoum, 4 May 2020: <https://kassoum.org/economic/item/64671-100-16>.

However, further considerations should bracket any estimate. Retail Captagon reaches peak value only in the most desirable Gulf markets; its value is cut in half or more if sold elsewhere in the region. Additionally, producers and upstream networks — i.e. the Assad regime and Iran-linked networks — will capture only a fraction of overall revenues. Due to considerable data gaps and uncertainty concerning these limitations, no evidence-based estimate of the total value of Syria's drug economy — or the Assad regime's revenues — is offered here.

Conclusion and Policy Considerations

Active conflict in Syria has ebbed with the general slow-down brought about by COVID-19, while intransigent foreign powers impede progress toward a lasting solution to the conflict. The longer the Syria crisis festers, the more complex its impacts will become. Notionally, however, traditional counter-narcotics approaches will be hampered even in a post-conflict setting by the institutionalised nature of Syrian narco-trafficking and its ties to conflict actors and transnational criminal networks in the Middle East and Europe.⁴² Inside Syria, traditional counter-narcotics approaches rooted in support for alternate livelihoods or disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration (DDR) strategies are therefore unlikely to be effective on a macroscale. Likewise, for narco-entrepreneurs and decentralised drug networks, the economic and protection incentives will far outweigh the risks so long as sustainable livelihood options are lacking. Policymakers and aid actors are not entirely powerless to effect change, however. The Syrian narco-state poses two distinct problem sets. Although one of these hinges on a solution to the current crisis, a harm-reduction approach can reasonably begin to contend with the second.

Approaching the Syrian Narco-State

The first problem set concerns the Assad regime and its instrumentalisation of narcotics as a monetary lifeline. Historic experiences with anti-narcotics campaigns in Syria stand as an important case study. The U.S. State Department branded Syria a narco-state during the Lebanese Civil War (1971-91), as military, security, and regime figures in Damascus extracted enormous profits from the drug trade that fueled that conflict.⁴³ Shortly following the Taif Accord and the end of hostilities in Lebanon, Syrian state security forces began to carry out high-profile (if sometimes superficial) anti-narcotics raids targeting cannabis fields in Lebanon's Beqaa Valley, as well as heroin refining facilities inside Syria. Thereafter, a narcotics industry that had been under the sway of high-level Assad regime figures largely faded from view.⁴⁴ In 1997, the Clinton administration removed Syria from its narco-state list, as it sought to trade access to American exports and U.S. petro-investment for Syria's abandonment of weapons of mass destruction, economic liberalisation, and the possibility of a Syria-Israel peace deal.⁴⁵

Political rapprochement of this type is unthinkable and ill-advised under the current conditions in Syria. That said, Syria's backslide into brutal conflict and deeper international isolation since 2011 should not detract from the evidence of the state's potential capacity as an important counter-narcotics actor, as seen by the successes of the 1990s. In the long term, a successful anti-narcotics strategy in Syria will likely depend on the Government of Syria's capacity to play a proactive and productive role, likely in coordination with regional and border states.

Approaching Narcotics and Syrian Society

Syria's second narcotics crisis concerns widespread drug use and the effects of narcotics on society at large. While the individual impact of Captagon or hashish use must be kept in proper perspective,⁴⁶ the growing pervasiveness of drug use in Syria does reflect worrying fissures

⁴² For instance, the Captagon shipment intercepted in Italy in July 2020 was reportedly arranged between Syrian interlocutors and the Camorra. See: Natalia Mendoza, et al., "From Syria to the Naples mafia: Record amphetamine bust raises questions," *France 24*, 13 January 2021: <https://www.france24.com/en/tv-shows/focus/20210113-from-syria-to-the-naples-mafia-record-amphetamine-bust-raises-questions>.

⁴³ The U.S. State Department defined 'narco-states' as governments cultivating 1,000 hectares or more of opiates or 5,000 hectares of cannabis. "Major Illicit Drug Producing, Drug-Transit, Significant Source, Precursor Chemical, and Money Laundering Countries," U.S. Department of State (2015): <https://2009-2017.state.gov/j/inl/rls/nrcrpt/2015/vol1/238913.htm>; "Heroin Trafficking: The Syrian Connection," US Central Intelligence Agency (1985), 3: <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP86T00586R000200160004-8.pdf>.

⁴⁴ Gary Gambill, "Hooked on Lebanon: Syria after Lebanon," *Middle East Quarterly* (2005).

⁴⁵ Hillary Mann, "Removing Syria from the Narcotics List: A signal to Damascus?" *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 10 November 1997: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/removing-syria-from-the-narcotics-list-a-signal-to-damascus>.

⁴⁶ This need is especially acute as cannabis decriminalisation gains steam elsewhere. Moreover, such issues may come to a head as Lebanon weighs its options for creating a tax base through hashish production for export. See: "Lebanon legalises cannabis farming for medicinal use," *Reuters*, 21 April 2020: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-lebanon-crisis-cannabis-idUSKCN2232YI>.

on a broader societal level. In particular, military-age males have become habituated to stimulants including Captagon during the past decade of intensive combat. Cheaply synthesised narcotics are now among the few palliatives available to Syrians who face grinding, multi-dimensional poverty as the state collapses around them.⁴⁷ For donors and aid actors, devising a strategy to address drug use among Syrians will depend on granular data collection to better understand the scope and prevalence

of the problem. It must be recognised that drug use in this context is a multifaceted socio-political issue rooted in violence, institutional failure, a humanitarian crisis, and personal despair. Approaches based on mental health care and psychosocial support may be important stepping stones to address the root causes that drive drug use. More important yet will be the restoration of livelihood opportunities and an escape from the hopelessness that defines daily life for many Syrians.

⁴⁷ For reference, increasing prices have not diminished alcohol sales in recent years. See: "Sales, and Prices, of Alcoholic Drinks Surge in Syria," Syria Report, 13 January 2021: <https://www.syria-report.com/news/food-agriculture/sales-and-prices-alcoholic-drinks-surge-syria>.

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