

Evidence Synthesis

Captagon in Iraq and Jordan: understanding the problem and evaluating solutions

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About XCEPT

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Executive summary

This paper reviews literature from government publications, think tank reporting, academic papers, and long-form journalism examining the political, security, economic, and social challenges associated with Captagon, an amphetamine-style stimulant, in Iraq and Jordan. It aims to shape the foundational understanding from which national governments, non-governmental organisations, international institutions, and civil society attempt to develop practical solutions to the various problems posed by Captagon.

Key findings include:

- **Iraqi militias facilitate Captagon flows into and through Iraq.** In Iraq's security sector, Iran-aligned militias within the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) control key border crossings with Syria, where they actively shepherd the flow of Captagon into Iraq. Put bluntly, when it comes to Captagon flows into and through Iraq, the fox is guarding the henhouse. Operating with general impunity, the militias serve as a conduit for the movement of Captagon (and other drugs) from Syria to a growing domestic market, and also to the Gulf States via the Umm Qasr port near Basra.
- **Iraq's constrained public health capacity inhibits state efforts to mitigate impact.** The dire state of Iraq's public health sector is a further impediment to progress. Decades of war (during which the Ministry of Health was actively weaponised as a tool of sectarian violence), a crushing 'brain drain' of doctors, and endemic mismanagement and corruption have left the public health sector in ruin. As such, any effort to address the health-related challenges of Captagon via engagement with Iraq's official structures of governance and health care face extraordinarily long odds.
- **Political and economic sclerosis in Iraq perpetuates dysfunctional responses.** Iraq thus faces a seemingly intractable dilemma in its fight against the Captagon trade. Militia impunity and governmental corruption preclude effective border security and interdiction campaigns, which prevent meaningful action against Captagon supply. Political and economic sclerosis, enabled and exacerbated by the same Iran-aligned militias that orchestrate the movement of Captagon into and through Iraq, ensures an enduring despair among people and a subsequent demand for Captagon. Finally, rampant dysfunction and corruption within the public health sector and a draconian legal code dictate that only the most meager of state resources are available to manage the ensuing societal fallout.
- **Transparency and reform in Iraq can enhance effectiveness and demonstrate political responsiveness.** To counter the relative impunity of Iran-aligned militias in Iraq, this report suggests the use of technology along the border to better detect and disrupt Captagon trafficking, enabling a more comprehensive understanding of smuggling patterns and networks which will drive transparency and reduce corruption. Concurrently, a redoubled focus on civil society engagement and support to Iraq's NGO community might compensate for the limitations of the public health sector. Such efforts might also engage with grassroots efforts for broader institutional reform within Iraq's political economy.
- **In Jordan, Captagon is part of a wider geopolitical threat to its stability.** Jordan is important to the West as a fulcrum of regional stability, but that stability is increasingly under threat from the Iran-Syria axis. In this light, the Captagon trade is integral to a wider geopolitical contest wherein the Iranian and Syrian governments are seeking not only to fund their various anti-Western lines of effort by trafficking Captagon through Jordan to markets in the Gulf region, but also to destabilise Jordan itself with Captagon.
- **Jordan has more robust security and health capabilities than Iraq but would benefit from enhanced support and strategic clarity.** In

Jordan, the security services and public health sector are robust and growing in capacity. This leaves Jordan well-positioned to absorb and leverage international aid in the fight against Captagon—which is essential, as Jordan has become the primary trans-shipment corridor of Captagon from Syria. Jordan’s principal challenge is thus strategic, as opposed to one of operational capacity or tactical implementation. After years of wavering between collaboration and confrontation vis-à-vis its relations with Damascus on the challenges of Captagon, Jordan must decide on a viable strategy and calibrate its increasingly militarised posture along the border accordingly. Concurrently, Jordan and its international partners must align and integrate defences along the border with domestic law enforcement and intelligence campaigns against trafficking networks within Jordan, while continuing to expand public health resources.

- **Improved inter-agency coordination can strengthen Jordan’s security responses.** To support Jordan’s battle against Captagon, this report suggests focussing on inter-agency information sharing within Jordan’s security sector—most notably between military-led efforts to harden the border and strike Captagon networks along and behind it within Syria, and the intelligence and law enforcement entities responsible for disrupting trafficking and distribution networks within Jordan. The literature presently offers limited insight into the dynamics of trafficking within Jordan, and the relationships between Jordanian networks and their Syrian counterparts.
- **The US government should clarify the scope and focus of the Captagon issue as part of its regional priorities.** The United States, which is orienting its inter-agency apparatus toward making anti-Captagon tracking operations a regional priority, must clarify whether its focus is on countering Captagon as a priority in and of itself—or, alternatively, if the fight against Captagon is a line of attack within a wider geopolitical contest with the Iran-Syria axis. If the former, then the American-driven campaign should heed lessons learned from

prior counter-narcotics and counter-terrorism efforts that have exposed the limitations of top-down ‘decapitation’ strategies and network-centric targeting. If the latter, then stakeholders across the Middle East should anticipate how the production and trafficking landscape may shift as a result of geopolitically-driven American pressure.

- **The Captagon production landscape could shift.** Jordan appears to have contained domestic Captagon production (following a high-profile bust in 2018), while Iraq has uncovered multiple domestic production operations in recent years. Due to the ease with which Captagon is synthesised and the trade’s enormous financial potential, however, the disruption of production and/or transit from Syria could lead to fragmentation and decentralisation of production—with uncertain consequences for the region.
- **European engagement can address issues in the region and at home.** The European Union (EU) and United Kingdom are engaged directly in support of both Jordan and Iraq, building capacity in military, law enforcement, and public health sectors. Within these lines of effort, European actors might pursue a comparative advantage vis-a-vis American-sponsored efforts to focus on civil society outreach and engagement. Furthermore, Europe must also contend with apparent connectivity between Middle Eastern production and trafficking enterprises and operations within the EU itself—from the Netherlands to Germany and beyond.
- **Further research is needed within Iraq and Jordan regarding the demographics and practical realities of Captagon use.** Both countries face enduring stigmas surrounding drug use and treatment, which have thus far acted as impediments to developing a detailed and actionable understanding of related public health challenges. This research might also consider the challenges posed by methamphetamine (aka ‘crystal meth’), which is a major scourge in Iraq and a nascent but growing challenge in Jordan.

- **Deeper regional cooperation among Iraq, Jordan, and the Gulf states could enhance efforts against both supply and demand of Captagon.** At present, regional collaboration on Captagon is limited. This can be attributed to a host of competing geopolitical and security priorities, an uneven historical relationship between Jordan and Iraq, as well as pervasive stigma around open discussion of illicit drug usage. Improved openness, greater transparency, and structured counter-narcotics interdiction and public health campaigns could help the region as a whole to address the dangers of Captagon.

Methodology

This paper focuses on Iraq and Jordan, as opposed to Syria (where the majority of Captagon production occurs). This is because the Captagon trade within Syria is generally well understood, and because the international community has limited reach within Syria to combat Captagon.¹ Looking to Iraq and Jordan (where Captagon flows have surged dramatically in recent years), not only is there less clarity on the dynamics of transit and consumption, but also broader potential for constructive action in cooperation with national governments in Baghdad and Amman and non-governmental stakeholders.² The focus in Iraq is on areas administered by Baghdad, as opposed to the Kurdistan Regional Government.

The authors gathered source material in English and Arabic in two phases. Initially, the authors utilised a traditional approach akin to ‘purposive sampling’ in the social sciences, wherein the bibliographies and footnotes of prominent texts from field-leading scholars and journalists were canvassed for additional leads on topics of interest.³ This process was repeated iteratively with subsequent texts, until the authors found self-referencing cycles and a cessation of new leads or insights. Subsequently, to assess the comprehensiveness of this approach and also to test out the value of emerging technologies, the authors leveraged an artificial intelligence-enabled ‘agentic workflow’ that combined natural language processing with real-time information retrieval to examine online sources in Arabic and English based upon prompts provided by the authors.⁴

Drawing from these sources, this paper considers two inter-related questions:

- How does the literature discuss the challenges associated with Captagon within Iraq and Jordan, and what are the points of consensus, disagreement, or uncertainty?
- How do the strategies being employed and/or advocated by key stakeholders (including the Iraqi and Jordanian governments, as well as leading Western powers) align with the fundamental realities of the Captagon trade?

1 Leading western stakeholders have established a firm line regarding the ultimate culpability of Bashar al-Assad’s government. The US government’s position is laid out forcefully in: United States Department of State, “Report to Congress 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 Sec. 1238(c) of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2023, P.L. 117-263,” Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, 29 June 2023, <https://www.state.gov/report-to-congress-on-a-written-strategy-to-disrupt-and-dismantle-narcotics-production-and-trafficking-and-affiliated-networks>. In 2023 the Council of the European Union placed sanctions on individuals and entities in response to Syrian production and trafficking of drugs, principally Captagon. The Council identified the trade in amphetamine as a “regime-led business model, enriching the inner circle of the regime and providing it with revenue that contributes to its ability to maintain its policies of repression against the civilian population” and closely followed the US Department of the Treasury Office of Foreign Assets Control which sanctioned key individuals supporting both the regime of President Bashar al-Assad and the production or export of Captagon. See: European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction, “Technical Report: Captagon trafficking and the role of Europe,” Publications Office of the European Union, September 2023, and also: Chloe Cornish, “Saudi Arabia drugs haul exposes Syria and Lebanon’s booming illicit trade,” *Financial Times*, 9 May 2021.

2 For discussion of the blurring of lines between “transit, producer, and consumer” states, see: Philip Robins, “Anti-Narcotics Responses in Jordan,” *Middle East Journal* 56, no. 3 (2002): 433-456. Furthermore, significant data discrepancies persist concerning the utilisation of Captagon in Syria and neighboring nations, along with destination markets, particularly within Syrian refugee communities. Reliable information on drug consumption and prevalence in Syria and the surrounding region is scarce.

3 Palinkas LA, Horwitz SM, Green CA, Wisdom JP, Duan N, Hoagwood K. Purposeful Sampling for Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis in Mixed Method Implementation Research. *Adm Policy Ment Health*. 2015 Sep;42(5):533-44. doi: 10.1007/s10488-013-0528-y. PMID: 24193818; PMCID: PMC4012002.

4 The fundamentals of Agentic Workflows are detailed in Sunil Ramlochan, “Agentic Workflows: The Power of AI Agent Collaboration,” Prompt Engineering & AI Institute, 12 April 2024, <https://promptengineering.org/exploring-agentic-wagentic-workflows-the-power-of-ai-agent-collaborationorkflows-the-power-of-ai-agent-collaboration/>.

1. Understanding the challenges of Captagon in Iraq and Jordan

Introduction

Captagon is a synthetic amphetamine-style stimulant. Developed by pharmaceutical companies in the 1960s and 1970s to treat attention deficit and other disorders of the central nervous system with fenethylline as its core component, it was eventually proscribed from commercial use and listed as an illegal narcotic.⁵ At present, much of the Captagon produced in the region no longer contains fenethylline, as producers have pivoted to using a mix of amphetamines, caffeine, and other cutting agents.

Over the past two decades, illegal production of Captagon has accelerated dramatically in the Middle East, where it is easily synthesised at scale using simple chemistry techniques and inexpensive raw materials.⁶ Critically, Captagon production has surged in tandem with large-scale violence and instability, while booming demand has been catalysed by myriad factors detailed later in this paper, ranging from societal malaise

to recreational usage to battlefield readiness—but principally due to a lucrative demand-side market for recreational drugs within the Gulf States. All of this has played out within a cultural context where drug use is taboo, inhibiting recognition of the scope of the problem and key steps toward its resolution.

Lebanese Hezbollah emerged as the primary Middle Eastern Captagon producer in the wake of its 2006 war with Israel, leveraging Iranian funding to develop production infrastructure as part of a larger organisational strategy to finance operations via narcotics revenues.⁷ Over the past decade, Syria has supplanted Lebanese Hezbollah to become the dominant producer, in the midst of its long-running civil war. Captagon sales now serve as the government's principal source of foreign hard currency while under sweeping international sanctions. Of a global trade estimated in 2021 at US\$5.7 billion, as much as 80% of the total may come from Syria (where one estimate cites that networks aligned to the Syrian government earn US\$2.4 billion per year from the trade).⁸

This paper examines how two of Syria's bordering countries, Iraq and Jordan, address challenges arising from the flow of Captagon. This involved a review of government publications, think tank reporting, academic papers, and long-form journalism. The literature on the challenges associated with Captagon within Iraq and Jordan highlights a range of key

5 For a high-level view of Captagon's evolution from a prescription pharmaceutical to a banned narcotic, see Caroline Rose and Alexander Söderholm, "The Captagon Threat: A Profile of Illicit Trade, Consumption, and Regional Realities," *New Lines Institute for Strategy and Policy*, April 2022, https://newlinesinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/20220404-Captagon_Report-NLISAP-final-.pdf. For more detailed scientific discussion, see: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/hup.2548>.

6 Ahmed Al-Imam, et al., "Captagon: use and trade in the Middle East," *Human Psychopharmacology: Clinical and Experimental* 32, no. 3 (2017): 1-8, <https://doi.org/10.1002/hup.2548>. See also Maria Katselou, et al., "Fenethylline (Captagon) Abuse – Local Problems from an Old Drug Become Universal," *Basic & Clinical Pharmacology & Toxicology* 119, no. 2 (2016): 133-140.

7 Christina Steenkamp, "Captagon and conflict: Drugs and war on the border between Jordan and Syria," *Mediterranean Politics* (2024): 1-25; Boaz Ganor and Miri Halperin Wernli, "The Infiltration of Terrorist Organizations Into the Pharmaceutical Industry: Hezbollah as a Case Study," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 36, no. 9 (2013): 699-712. Hezbollah's Captagon production surged after 2006, but Ben Crabtree, "The Nexus of Conflict and Illicit Trafficking: Syria and the Wider Region," *The Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime*, November 2016, <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/The-nexus-of-conflict-and-illicit-drug-trafficking-Syria-and-the-wider-region.pdf> notes that Middle Eastern Captagon production can be traced back to Cold War era collaboration between Bulgaria and Syria in the chemical and pharmaceutical sectors.

8 For a discussion of market value estimates see: Mustafa Abu Sneineh, "Why does the UK think Syria has a \$57bn captagon industry?" *Middle East Eye*, 31 March 2023, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/uk-syria-captagon-industry-57bn-why>; and also, Caroline Rose and Alexander Söderholm, "The Captagon Threat: A Profile of Illicit Trade, Consumption, and Regional Realities," *New Lines Institute for Strategy and Policy*, April 2022, https://newlinesinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/20220404-Captagon_Report-NLISAP-final-.pdf; Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office, "Tackling the illicit drug trade fuelling Assad's war machine," UK Government Digital Service, 28 March 2023, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/tackling-the-illicit-drug-trade-fuelling-assads-war-machine>; and finally "Sky High: Ensuing Narcotics Crisis in MENA and the Role of the Assad Regime," *Observatory of Political and Economic Networks*, 2023, <https://opensyr.com/en/pages/p-18>.

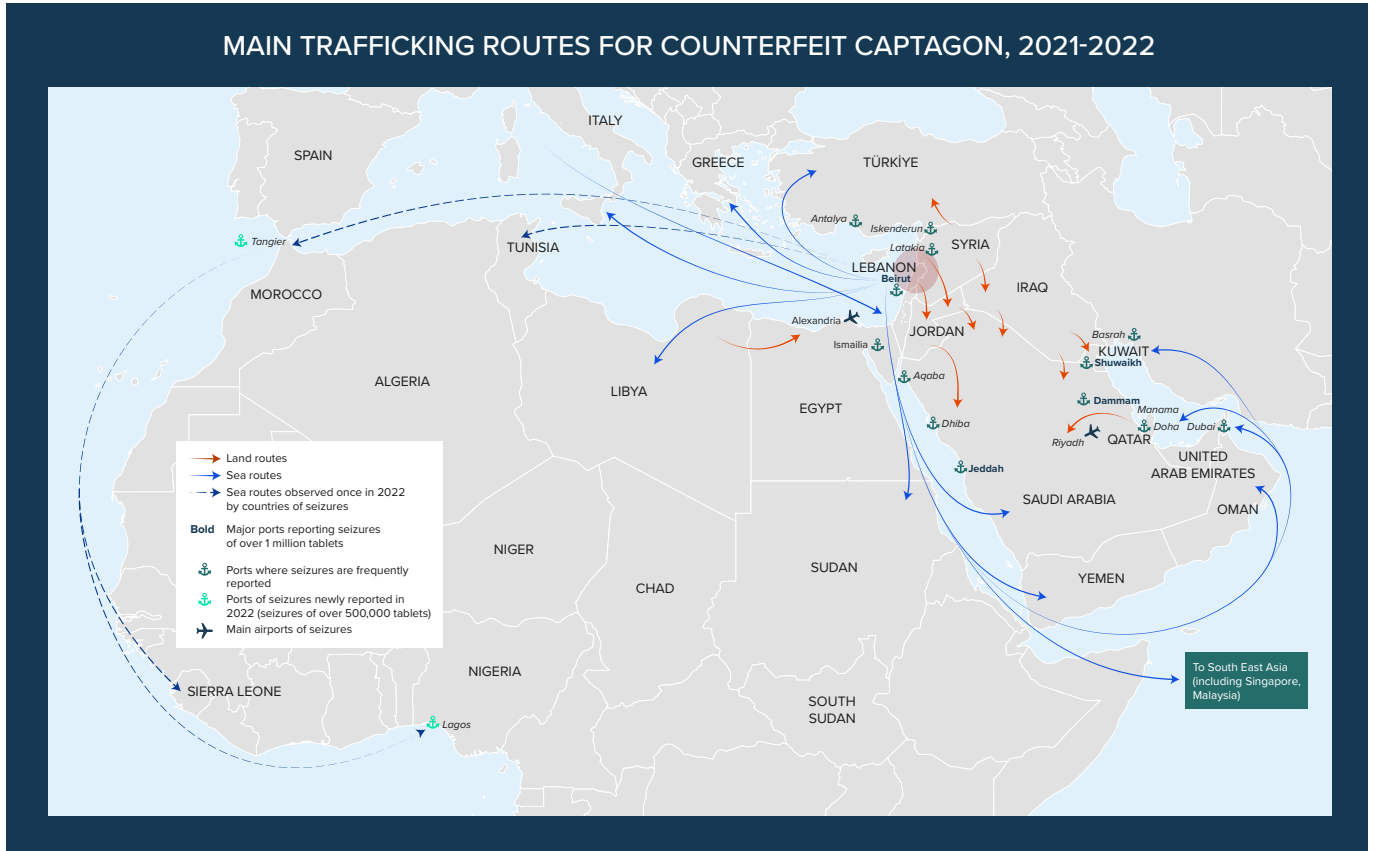


Figure 1: Main trafficking routes for counterfeit Captagon. United Nations, World Drug Report 2023.

thematic issues, reflecting the complexity of the problem and its deep entanglement with political, security, economic and social challenges that are particular to each country. Given the distinct contextual factors in Iraq and Jordan, each country experiences a particular set of challenges unique to its security situation. Therefore, the first section of this paper addresses the fundamentals of the Captagon problem in each country separately. The second section provides a critical overview of the ways in which the United States and leading European stakeholders are working to combat Captagon, as both a counter-narcotics effort as well as a growing geopolitical priority. The final section of this paper outlines gaps in the literature of Captagon and proposes potential lines of inquiry that could unlock innovative and impactful programmatic and policy interventions.

The fundamentals of Captagon in Iraq

The scale and scope of Captagon trafficking in Iraq is significant and expanding: seizures in the country increased by more than 3,000% between 2019 and 2023.⁹ Iraq’s legacy of conflict, long land borders, and young population make the country a hub of increasing significance in the regional network of trafficking. The evidence points to a troubling picture, with the number of people registered with drug use disorders doubling between 2017 and 2021.¹⁰

Fortifying a turbulent border region

The Syrian-Iraqi border has been a focal point for regional tension and conflict for well over a decade,

9 Office on Drugs and Crime, “Methamphetamine and “Captagon” threat in the Middle East,” United Nations, 18 March 2024, <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/speeches/2024/cnd67-methamphetamine-and-captagon-threat-in-the-middle-east.html>.

10 Office on Drugs and Crime, “Methamphetamine and Captagon threat in the Middle East,” United Nations, 18 March 2024.

drawing in various state actors including the United States, Iran, and Israel, as well as extensive activity by al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (IS).¹¹ In response to these challenges, Iraq has been fortifying its border with Syria by constructing a security fence, which includes cement walls, trenches, barbed wire, observation towers, and the deployment of border guard units along with Iraqi Army units.¹²

The core driver of Iraq's recent push to secure its border was the devastating cross-border rise of IS in both Iraq and Syria, which led to 40% of Iraq being controlled by IS, before it was eventually rolled back and routed. As such, while the IS threat has been ostensibly contained within Iraq, continued instability within Syria (where IS activity is once again on the rise) and sporadic attacks by IS cells in both Syria and Iraq make border security a critical national security priority.¹³

Within Iraq's security architecture, the border security mandate falls principally to the Directorate of Border Enforcement (DBE), a paramilitary organisation within the Ministry of the Interior that is tasked with securing Iraq's land and water borders. The DBE operates a network of border forts and annexes while the Coastal Border Guards (CBG), integral to the DBE, safeguard Iraq's water boundary between Basra and the Persian Gulf (where large-scale Captagon shipments flow to consumer markets in the Gulf States).¹⁴

Iraq has implemented various technologies and tactics to enhance border security with robust Western support.¹⁵ The United States, for example, has funded the construction of border forts and provided training and equipment to the DBE, including detection technology and aviation and other surveillance assets.¹⁶ Efforts to secure the border also involve the construction of concrete barriers in complex and rugged areas, particularly from the Fishkhabour crossing between the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) and areas of northeastern Syria under the authority of the Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) to prevent infiltration operations.¹⁷

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime has worked with Iraq since 2019 on border management at Baghdad Airport and its land border crossings, and the government has introduced a national drugs law and counter-narcotics framework that complement national-level initiatives to the Arab Plan for the Prevention and Reduction of Drugs to Arab Societies, launched in March 2023.¹⁸

Impunity of Iran-aligned militias

This pronounced focus on externally funded resourcing at the Fishkhabour crossing illustrates the wider geopolitics of the Captagon trade from Syria into Iraq. Key border crossings between Syria and Iraq, most notably the al-Qaim crossing from Abu Kamal, as well as broad swathes of sparsely populated terrain along the border,

11 Harith Hasan and Kheder Khaddour, "The Transformation of the Iraqi-Syrian Border: From a National to a Regional Frontier," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 31 March 2020, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2020/03/the-transformation-of-the-iraqi-syrian-border-from-a-national-to-a-regional-frontier?lang=en>.

12 Dana Taib Menmy, "Iraq constructs security wall along border with Syria to thwart ISIS infiltration," *The New Arab*, 28 February 2024, <https://www.newarab.com/news/iraq-set-finish-syria-border-security-wall-years-end>.

13 On the rise of IS activity within Syria in 2024, see Jeff Seldin, "Worrying signs exist that IS growing stronger in Syria," *Voice of America*, 5 April 2024, <https://www.voanews.com/a/worrying-signs-exist-that-is-is-growing-stronger-in-syria/7558782.html>.

14 Steven Oliuc, "Iraq's Border Security: Key to an Iraqi Endstate," *Combating Terrorism Center Sentinel 2*, no. 1 (2009), <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/iraqs-border-security-key-to-an-iraqi-endstate/>.

15 United States Department of State, "Report to Congress 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 Sec. 1238(c) of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2023, P.L. 117-263," Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, 29 June 2023, <https://www.state.gov/report-to-congress-on-a-written-strategy-to-disrupt-and-dismantle-narcotics-production-and-trafficking-and-affiliated-networks/>; Office on Drugs and Crime, "Middle East and North Africa," *United Nations*, <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/drug-trafficking/middle-east-and-north-africa.html>.

16 William K. Warda, et al., "Iraq Border Management and Migration Control Regime," Respond Working Paper 2019/23, Hammurabi Human Rights Organization, 2019, <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1343558/FULLTEXT01.pdf>.

17 Dana Taib Menmy, "Iraq constructs security wall along border with Syria to thwart ISIS infiltration," *The New Arab*, 28 February 2024, <https://www.newarab.com/news/iraq-set-finish-syria-border-security-wall-years-end>.

18 Office on Drugs and Crime, "Methamphetamine and "Captagon" threat in the Middle East," *United Nations*, 18 March 2024, <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/speeches/2024/cnd67-methamphetamine-and-captagon-threat-in-the-middle-east.html>.

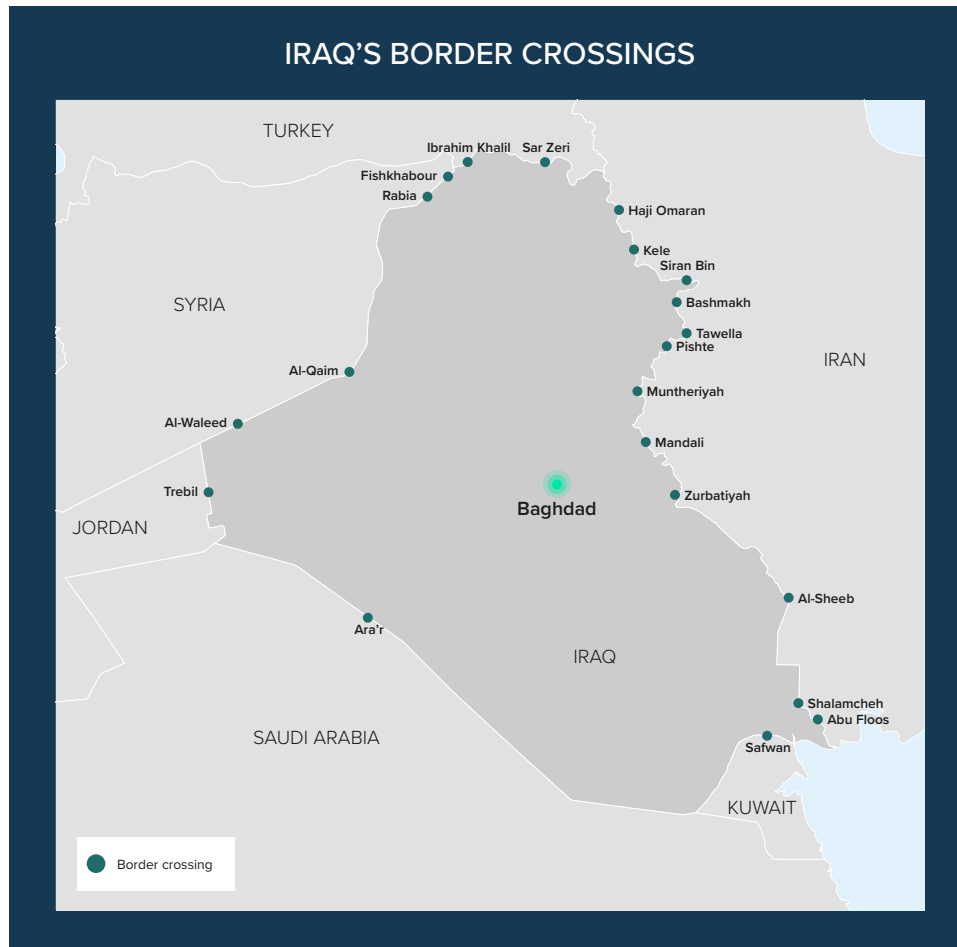


Figure 2: Iraq's border crossings. Iraq has over 3,600 kilometres of land borders with its neighbours. Source and copyright: Iraqi International News Agency.

are under the de facto control of sectarian Shi'a militias within the PMF.¹⁹ These militias, most notably Kata'ib Hezbollah (KH) and other Shi'a factions within Iraq's so-called 'Islamic Resistance' movement, were pivotal to Iraq's war against IS from 2014 to 2017, wherein they compensated for the near-collapse of Iraq's mainstream

security services.²⁰ Having played an essential role in checking IS's advances, and later in the reclamation of IS-held territories across northern and western Iraq, these militias (many with close and controversial ties to Iran, and with limited links to the Sunni communities and tribal networks resident along the Iraq-Syria border) ensconced

19 This paper does not offer a detailed exposition of the PMF, its rise as a volunteer paramilitary force, its role in the defeat of IS, and related controversies surrounding sectarianism within its ranks and Iran's role as a notable sponsor of certain sub-groups as these matters are addressed in detail elsewhere. For added context on these matters, see: Caroline Rose, "Iraq and Turkey: Two Transit Countries to Watch in the Captagon Drug Trade," *New Lines Institute*, 4 April 2023, <https://newlinesinstitute.org/state-resilience-fragility/illicit-economies/iraq-and-turkey-two-transit-countries-to-watch-in-the-captagon-drug-trade/>; Nicole Robinson, "Captagon, the New Cocaine of the Middle East?" *Heritage Foundation*, 24 March 2023, <https://www.heritage.org/middle-east/commentary/captagon-the-new-cocaine-the-middle-east>; Haid Haid, "To stem Iraq's drug trade, rein in the militias that enable it," *The Arab Weekly*, 25 May 2022, <https://theArabweekly.com/stem-iraqs-drug-trade-rein-militias-enable-it>; Hassan al-Obeidi, "IRGC-backed militias complicate Iraq's war on drugs," *Diyaruna*, 15 September 2020, https://diyaruna.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_di/features/2020/09/15/feature-02; Vanda Felbab-Brown, "The battle against captagon," Chatham House, 17 May 2023, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publications/the-world-today/2022-06/battle-against-captagon>; Faris al-Omran, "Iraq battles illicit drug networks facilitated by IRGC, militias," *Diyaruna*, 27 May 2022, https://diyaruna.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_di/features/2022/05/27/feature-01; Intel Brief, "The Growing Influence of Iranian-Backed Militias in Iraq," *The Cipher Brief*, 20 March 2019, https://www.thecipherbrief.com/column_article/the-growing-influence-of-iranian-backed-militias-in-iraq; Renad Mansour, "Networks of power: the Popular Mobilization Forces and the state in Iraq," *Chatham House*, 21 June 2021, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/02/networks-power/03-pmf-set-networks>; and Ranj Alaaldin, "The Origins and Ascendancy of Iraq's Shiite Militias," *Hudson Institute*, 1 November 2017, <https://www.hudson.org/national-security-defense/the-origins-and-ascendancy-of-iraq-s-shiite-militias>.

20 There is an extensive literature on the Islamic Resistance militias in Iraq, and their actions in that country and in Syria. For a concise overview of their presence in Syria, see: Hamdi Mallak & Michael Knights, "Profile: The Islamic Resistance in Iraq," *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 21 October 2023, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-islamic-resistance-iraq>.

themselves in controlling positions where they have operated since with impunity.

Indeed, not only have these militias secured control over Iraqi border crossings, but KH and several other prominent resistance militias maintain an operational presence in Syria and ties to various Iran-aligned Syrian factions, which further enables cross-border transshipments.²¹

Iran-aligned militias within the PMF have controlled key Iraqi border crossings since 2017, aligning neatly with the Syrian government's reclamation of Abu Kamal from IS. On the one hand, they justify their continued position along the border via continued vigilance for signs of an IS resurgence (which, as discussed further below, creates significant tensions with local Sunni communities that are viewed with profound suspicion by militia members as IS 'collaborators'). On the other hand, they exercise selective control at the border, where they are widely understood to shepherd the flow of Captagon from Syria in collusion with Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards' Quds Force (IRGC-QF) and Syrian networks tied closely to Bashar al-Assad's government.²² As a result, and in stark contrast to dynamics along the Syrian-Jordanian border discussed below, sections of the Syrian-Iraq border offer an open door to Captagon flows. For example, the literature notes cases of PMF vehicles and identity cards being used to bypass border controls from Syria into Iraq.²³ The end result is a localized

'checkpoint economy' with regional geopolitical drivers, where strategic connections between Iraqi militias and national interests dictated from Tehran and Damascus pose systemic structural barriers to traditional approaches to border security and anti-Captagon initiatives writ large as designed and supported by the United States government and other key international stakeholders.²⁴

Weak governance and pervasive corruption

Political instability and systemic corruption within Iraq's governance structures are integral to the flow of Captagon through the country, as issues that extend well beyond the border and transcend the impunity of Iran-aligned militias.²⁵ Not only are the militias able to orchestrate the movement of Captagon from the border through central and southern Iraq outside the reach of other elements of Iraq's security apparatus, but those same institutions are also highly vulnerable to corruption and compromise. In 2023, for example, a lieutenant colonel in the Iraqi Army was arrested for drug trafficking in Mahmudiyah, south of Baghdad; while in 2018, the son of the then-governor of Najaf Province was convicted of trafficking cannabis and Captagon pills. Although he was pardoned in 2022, the decision was later rescinded for further investigation amid

21 Hussam Hammoud, "Iran's Strategic Pivot: Tracing Shiite Militias Pathways from Iraq to Syria," *Centre Francais de Recherche sur L'Irak*, 20 March 2024, <https://cfri-irak.com/en/article/irans-strategic-pivot-tracing-shiite-militias-pathways-from-iraq-to-syria-2024-03-20>.

22 The exact nature of the IRGC-QF's role in controlling and directing the Captagon trade from Syria through Iraq and Jordan has not been established conclusively in open-source literature. In the view of the authors (substantiated by discussions with Western and Middle Eastern government officials and subject matter experts), Iran exercises top-down control over key aspects of production and export of Captagon as an important lever within a wider irregular warfare campaign across the region. For reference, see: Nicholas Hargreaves-Heald, "Proving Ground: Iran's Operational Strategy in Syria," *Small Wars Journal*, 27 May 2018, <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/proving-ground-irans-operational-strategy-syria>. Also, see: Vanda Felbab-Brown, "The battle against captagon," *Chatham House*, 17 May 2023, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publications/the-world-today/2022-06/battle-against-captagon>; Caroline Rose, "Iraq and Turkey: Two Transit Countries to Watch in the Captagon Drug Trade," *New Lines Institute*, 4 April 2023, <https://newlinesinstitute.org/state-resilience-fragility/illlicit-economies/iraq-and-turkey-two-transit-countries-to-watch-in-the-captagon-drug-trade/>.

23 Nicole Robinson, "Captagon, the New Cocaine of the Middle East?" *Heritage Foundation*, 24 March 2023, <https://www.heritage.org/middle-east/commentary/captagon-the-new-cocaine-the-middle-east>; Caroline Rose, "Iraq and Turkey: Two Transit Countries to Watch in the Captagon Drug Trade," *New Lines Institute*, 4 April 2023, <https://newlinesinstitute.org/state-resilience-fragility/illlicit-economies/iraq-and-turkey-two-transit-countries-to-watch-in-the-captagon-drug-trade/>.

24 Caroline Rose, "Iraq and Turkey: Two Transit Countries to Watch in the Captagon Drug Trade," *New Lines Institute*, 4 April 2023, <https://newlinesinstitute.org/state-resilience-fragility/illlicit-economies/iraq-and-turkey-two-transit-countries-to-watch-in-the-captagon-drug-trade/>; Office on Drugs and Crime, "Middle East and North Africa," *United Nations*, <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/drug-trafficking/middle-east-and-north-africa.html>.

25 Sinan Mahmoud, "Watch Iraqi special forces raid drug rings 'more dangerous than terrorism'," *The National News*, 25 October 2021, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/mena/captagon-crisis/2021/10/25/drug-trade-spreads-in-conflict-ridden-iraq/>; Fadhel al-Nashmi, "Iraqi Interior Minister: Border Security Is 'at its Best'," *Asharq al-Awsat*, 13 February 2024, <https://english.aawsat.com/arab-world/4851051-iraqi-interior-minister-border-security-%E2%80%98-at-its-best%E2%80%99>.

allegations of a back-door deal involving high-level officials.²⁶

The Iraqi government has fought back against Captagon using both security and public health-oriented approaches. They have had limited success. Large-scale seizures have become high profile and recurring news stories (particularly within the Arabic language media), but the flow of Captagon continues to increase.²⁷ Moreover, sources allege that some of the major interdictions of Captagon shipments within Iraq have been the result of high-level militia figures betraying expendable low-level networks to the government under the rationale that these arrests enable the government to claim ‘success’ in the fight against Captagon without jeopardizing any high-level traffickers.²⁸ In this vein, it is unclear whether the 2023 seizure of three million Captagon pills at the militia-controlled al-Qaim border crossing was a breakthrough achievement of the Iraqi security services, or ‘security theatre’ for public consumption.²⁹

Iraq as a transit corridor and consumer market

While the flow of Captagon through Iraq began as a transit operation from Syria to markets in the Gulf States and beyond, domestic consumption has surged in recent years.³⁰ Iraq’s challenges in managing domestic usage are compounded by pervasive social stigma surrounding the acknowledgement and treatment of addiction, widespread corruption and dysfunction within the public health system (discussed further below), and a draconian legal code designed to punish drug users as opposed to helping them.³¹ However, the literature offers little insight into the realities of drug usage and treatment with respect to demographic, gender, or socio-economic dynamics.

Rising consumption of Captagon within Iraq can be attributed to two key factors. The first is inherently domestic: Iraq’s economic and political stagnation and the failure of repeated bottom-up movements for reform have created a prevailing malaise among Iraqis.³² The structural weaknesses of the Iraqi economy have led to high unemployment rates, particularly among the youth

26 Noted in “The arrest of an army officer who deals drugs,” *Shafaq*, 7 May 2023, <https://shafaq.com/ar/>, and Nicole Robinson, “Captagon, the New Cocaine of the Middle East?” *Heritage Foundation*, 24 March 2023, <https://www.heritage.org/middle-east/commentary/captagon-the-new-cocaine-the-middle-east>.

27 For example, see: Agence-France Presse, “Iraq seizes thousands of captagon pills destined for local market,” *France 24*, 13 June 2023, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20230613-iraq-seizes-thousands-of-captagon-pills-destined-for-local-market>; “Iraqi police seize 250,000 Captagon pills at school building,” *Al Jazeera*, 28 June 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/6/28/iraqi-police-seize-250000-captagon-pills-at-school-building>; “Nearly one million captagon pills seized by Iraqi security forces,” *Al Arabiya*, 24 July 2023, <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2023/07/24/Nearly-one-million-captagon-pills-seized-by-Iraqi-security-forces->; “Iraq seizes three million captagon pills on Syria border,” *Arab News*, 12 March 2023, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2266871/middle-east>; “Iraq captures three million captagon pills near border with Syria,” *TRT World*, <https://www.trtworld.com/middle-east/iraq-captures-three-million-captagon-pills-near-border-with-syria-66052>. For discussion of early interdiction efforts against Captagon, see: Ahmed M. Lutfi, “Fenethylline in the Middle East, a thriving trade in the post-Saddam era,” *Asian Journal of Medical Sciences* 7, no. 4 (2016): 116-119, and Nesif J. Al-Hemiyari, et al., (2014) Drug and Alcohol Use in Iraq: Findings of the Inaugural Iraqi Community Epidemiological Workgroup, *Substance Use & Misuse* 49, no. 13 (2014): 1759-1763, <https://doi.org/10.3109/10826084.2014.913633>

28 Confidential discussions with serving officers in Iraq’s security services, who shared insight anonymously to protect their identities. It was further emphasised that Iraq’s security apparatus is presently under intense scrutiny vis-a-vis the distribution and usage of Captagon, with the attendant assertion that both trafficking and usage are increasingly limited to Iran-aligned militias that eschew oversight.

29 “Iraqi security forces seize three million Captagon pills,” *The National News*, 12 March 2023, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/mena/iraq/2023/03/12/iraqi-security-forces-seize-three-million-captagon-pills/>.

30 For the observation that Captagon seizures in the first half of 2021 were “estimated to be over 20 times what was seized in 2019 and 2020 combined”, see: Caroline Rose, “Iraq and Turkey: Two Transit Countries to Watch in the Captagon Drug Trade,” *New Lines Institute*, 4 April 2023, <https://newlinesinstitute.org/state-resilience-fragility/illicit-economies/iraq-and-turkey-two-transit-countries-to-watch-in-the-captagon-drug-trade/>; DEEP Dive, “Caroline Rose and the Captagon Challenge,” *NATO*, 28 September 2023, <https://deepportal.hq.nato.int/eacademy/deep-dive-podcasts/episode-47/>.

31 Vanda Felbab-Brown, “The battle against captagon,” *Chatham House*, 17 May 2023, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publications/the-world-today/2022-06/battle-against-captagon>; Ahmed al-Imam, et al., “Risk Factors of Suicidal Ideation in Iraqi Crystal Methamphetamine Users,” *Brain Sciences*, 13 (2023): 1279, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC10526952/>; Christina Steenkamp, “Captagon and conflict: Drugs and war on the border between Jordan and Syria,” *Mediterranean Politics* (2024): 1-25, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2023.2297121>.

32 Sinan Mahmoud, “Watch Iraqi special forces raid drug rings ‘more dangerous than terrorism’,” *The National News*, 25 October 2021, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/mena/captagon-crisis/2021/10/25/drug-trade-spreads-in-conflict-ridden-iraq/>; Ali Ahmed Rahmin, “The Toll of Iraq’s Growing Drug Trade,” *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 8 March 2022, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/toll-iraqs-growing-drug-trade>.

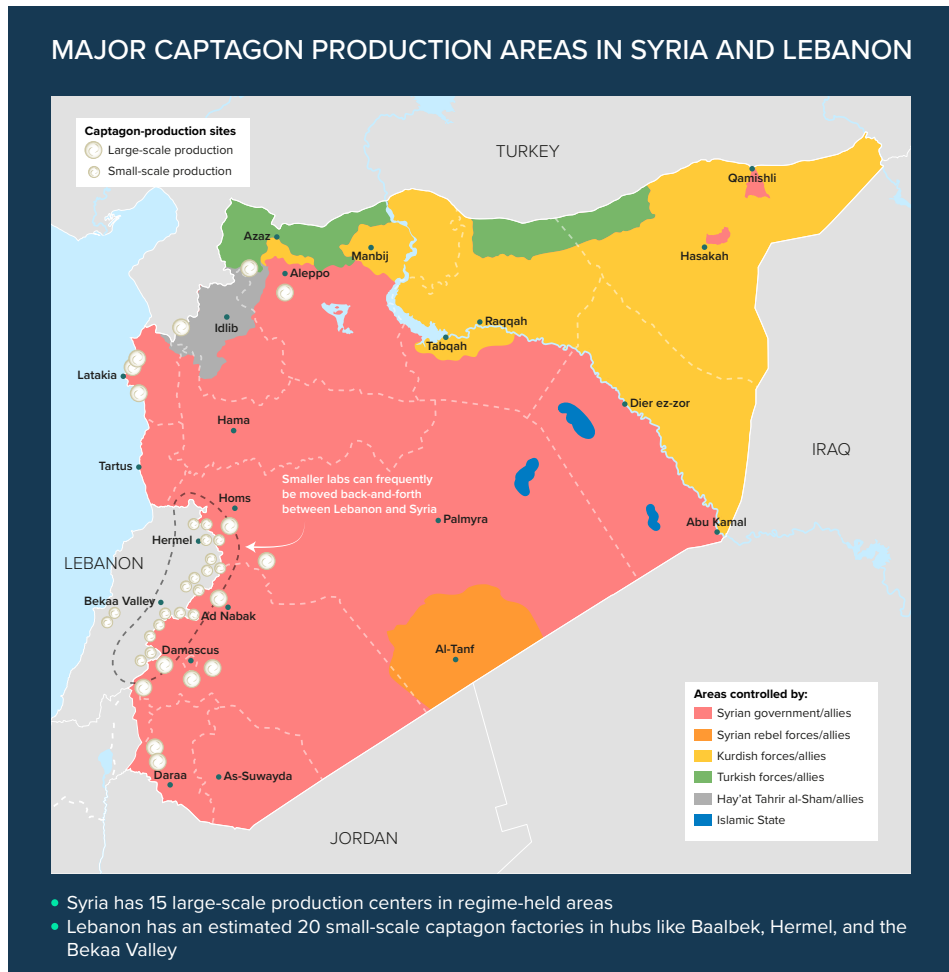


Figure 3: Major Captagon production areas in Syria and Lebanon. Source and copyright: New Lines Institute for Strategy and Policy, 2022.

and those with higher education. Official figures for youth unemployment are around 20%, but the International Monetary Fund suggests the figure is actually twice this amount.³³ This is compounded by pervasive societal distress following decades of war, leading to surging use of narcotics like crystal meth and Captagon as an escape from both day-to-day frustrations and accumulated trauma.³⁴ The Ministry of Interior's Anti-Narcotics Directorate has noted a significant rise in drug consumption in recent years (notwithstanding the fact that comprehensive and reliable data

on drug usage remains inadequate), marking a worrying trend for the country's public health and social fabric at a time when Iraq's sclerotic political economy has proven largely impervious to reform.³⁵

The second key dynamic can be viewed as an external shock: the legacy of Iraq's war with the Islamic State. In that conflict, stimulants like Captagon were used by IS militants and by Iraqi forces—although the extent of its use and the associated narrative of Captagon as the 'jihadi

33 Amin Mohseni-Cheraghloou, "Unemployment Crisis in Iraq and Iran: A Chronic Dilemma for State and Society," *Gulf International Forum*, undated, <https://gulfif.org/unemployment-crisis-in-iraq-and-iran-a-chronic-dilemma-for-state-and-society/>.

34 Ali Ahmed Rahmin, "The Toll of Iraq's Growing Drug Trade," *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 8 March 2022, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/toll-iraqs-growing-drug-trade>; Sydney Verdi, "What to Know About Drug Abuse in Iraq," *The Borgen Project*, 31 January 2024, <https://borgenproject.org/drug-abuse-in-iraq/>.

35 Caroline Rose, "Iraq and Turkey: Two Transit Countries to Watch in the Captagon Drug Trade," *New Lines Institute*, 4 April 2023, <https://newlinesinstitute.org/state-resilience-fragility/illicit-economies/iraq-and-turkey-two-transit-countries-to-watch-in-the-captagon-drug-trade/>.

drug' of choice has been challenged by scholars.³⁶ The resulting prevalence of Captagon on the battlefield, and the concurrent rise of Shi'a militias complicit in the Captagon trade, brought further rises of trafficking and usage.³⁷

“ Iraq’s youth face a devastating one-two punch: first, the militias serve as shock troops that perpetuate violence within the political system and brutally suppress peaceful efforts toward reform, and second, they supply potent drugs to those who despair at their future in a traumatised society and a systemically corrupt political economy

Underpinning these internal and external drivers, the power of Iran-aligned militias and their profit from the Captagon trade has created enormous motivation to maintain a deeply destructive status quo. Many of the Iran-aligned militias that

orchestrate trafficking have also been prominent in the violent suppression of street-level popular protests for political and economic reform.³⁸ This has created a structural blockage to much-needed political overhaul, and a vicious cycle for the Iraqi people. The militias' trade in Captagon and provision of narcotics to domestic markets within Iraq profits from the very same political and economic despair that they are instrumental in perpetuating. Iraq's youth face a devastating one-two punch: first, the militias serve as shock troops that perpetuate violence within the political system and brutally suppress peaceful efforts toward reform, and second, they supply potent drugs to those who despair at their future in a traumatised society and a systemically corrupt political economy.³⁹ Thus, while Iraq has attended regional summits on combating Captagon that included leaders from Damascus and Tehran, fundamental aspects of the problem remain beyond the ability of Baghdad to control and domestic usage is a growing source of alarm (alongside surges in crystal meth abuse and other narcotics).⁴⁰

The bitter legacy of conflict and distrust in border communities

As noted above, relations between Iran-aligned militias that operate with impunity along key

36 For push-back against Western media discussion of Captagon as a key engine of Islamic State operations, see: El Khoury, J. (2020). The use of stimulants in the ranks of Islamic state: Myth or reality of the Syrian conflict. *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 43(8), 679–687. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2018.1495291>. See Caroline Rose and Alexander Söderholm, “The Captagon Threat: A Profile of Illicit Trade, Consumption, and Regional Realities,” *New Lines Institute for Strategy and Policy*, April 2022, https://newlinesinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/20220404-Captagon_Report-NLISAP-final-.pdf for commentary on widespread Captagon usage within the Syrian military as well. Sinan Mahmoud, “Watch Iraqi special forces raid drug rings ‘more dangerous than terrorism,’” *The National News*, 25 October 2021, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/mena/captagon-crisis/2021/10/25/drug-trade-spreads-in-conflict-ridden-iraq/>; Hossein Mohaddes Ardabili, et al., “Tramadol, captagon and khat use in the Eastern Mediterranean Region: opening Pandora’s Box,” *BJ Psych* 19, no. 3 (2022): 58–62, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9540563/>.

37 Nicole Robinson, “Captagon, the New Cocaine of the Middle East?” *Heritage Foundation*, 24 March 2023, <https://www.heritage.org/middle-east/commentary/captagon-the-new-cocaine-the-middle-east>; Haid Haid, “To stem Iraq’s drug trade, rein in the militias that enable it,” *The Arab Weekly*, 25 May 2022, <https://theArabweekly.com/stem-iraqs-drug-trade-rein-militias-enable-it/>; Michael Knights, et al., “Iraq’s New Regime Change: How Tehran-Backed Terrorist Organizations and Militias Captured the Iraqi State,” *Combating Terrorism Center Sentinel* 16, no. 11 (2023): 1–24, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/iraqs-new-regime-change-how-tehran-backed-terrorist-organizations-and-militias-captured-the-iraqi-state/>.

38 For example, see: Mohammad Salami, “The Role of Militias in Iraq: Evaluating their Impact and Strategies for Mitigation,” *Centre Francais de Recherche d’Irak*, 21 February 2024, <https://cfri-irak.com/en/article/the-role-of-militias-in-iraq-evaluating-their-impact-and-strategies-for-mitigation-2024-02-21> and Omar Al-Nidawi, “Avoiding Iranian-Backed Iraqi Militias’ Political Takeover in the Shadow of a U.S. Withdrawal,” *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 3 April 2024, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/avoiding-iranian-backed-iraqi-militias-political-takeover-shadow-us-withdrawal>.

39 Iran-aligned militias within the PMF can by no means be singled out as responsible for Iraq’s political economic dysfunction, which pre-dates their very existence by decades. That said, they presently occupy a unique position as the “muscle” through which vested interests in both Iraq and Iran maintain a deeply unpopular status quo, and likewise as the lynchpin of a large-scale drug smuggling enterprise that is vital to the interests of the Syrian and Iranian governments at the direct expense of the Iraqi people.

40 Giorgio Cafiero, “Making sense of renewed Iraq-Syria ties,” *Responsible Statecraft*, 25 July 2023, <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2023/07/25/making-sense-of-renewed-iraq-syria-ties/>; “First’ Captagon lab found in Iraq, says country’s interior ministry,” *South China Morning Post*, 17 July 2023, <https://www.scmp.com/news/world/middle-east/article/3227926/first-captagon-lab-found-iraq-says-countrys-interior-ministry>.

areas of the Syrian-Iraqi border and local Sunni communities are deeply fraught. The literature offers little insight into the wider details and practices of state-society relations across the border region of Iraq, however, apart from reference to a pervasive, deep-seated mistrust within Iraqi society toward those who lived under IS rule.⁴¹ The literature of modern Iraqi politics notes the marginalisation of Sunni constituencies along the Syrian-Iraq border (and across western Iraq more broadly) arising from this mistrust, raising the prospect of alienation and potential (re)radicalisation.⁴² Looking to matters of border security therefore, the alienation of local communities from the Iraqi state and the concurrent rise of Iran-aligned militias at key border crossings (most notably from Abu Kamal to al-Qaim) leaves the government with dangerous blind spots. Having lost control of the border crossings themselves, mainstream elements of the Iraqi Security Forces have not established the sort of rapport and trust with local communities and tribal networks that might provide them with valuable information and influence alike.

Due to lingering hostility toward resident communities in western Iraq, little has been done to rehabilitate infrastructure or revitalise economic activity in the wake of the war against IS. Frustrations simmer as a result, which are compounded by sectarian tensions between the Iran-aligned militias and the Sunni communities and tribal networks local to the area.⁴³ Little is

said about Captagon within these communities in the literature, regarding whether socio-economic challenges have led to trends in consumption or the incorporation of any local networks into the drug trade itself.⁴⁴

A public health sector in ruin

Iraq's Ministry of Health (MoH) faces three core problems in its efforts to address the societal fallout of Captagon. The first, as also seen in Jordan, is a pervasive societal stigma around drug use and treatment. The supply and demand of proactive treatment and intervention are extremely limited across Iraq, where drug use and addiction are broadly left to fester in the shadows. Thus, while the Iraqi government has acknowledged the societal harms associated with Captagon (and crystal meth as well) and is seeking external support, efforts to date to manage the issue have been inadequate.⁴⁵

The second is the MoH's legacy of weaponisation in Iraq's sectarian civil war during the 2000s. Dubbed the 'Ministry of Horrors' at the time by American military forces, the MoH's network of hospitals and administrative facilities fell under control of the Sadrist movement and its Mahdi Army militia from 2005 onward. In the context of a then-raging civil war between Shi'a and Sunni Iraqi factions, the Mahdi Army and other Shi'a militias transformed Iraq's public health

41 Ali Akbar and Benjamin Isakhan, "The Islamic State, Shia religious clerics and the mobilisation of Shia militias in Iraq and Syria," *Contemporary Politics* 29, no. 5 (2023): 535-553, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13569775.2023.2196875>; Harith Hasan and Kheder Khaddour, "The Transformation of the Iraqi-Syrian Border: From a National to a Regional Frontier," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 31 March 2020, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2020/03/the-transformation-of-the-iraqi-syrian-border-from-a-national-to-a-regional-frontier?lang=en>.

42 Harith Hasan and Kheder Khaddour, "The Transformation of the Iraqi-Syrian Border: From a National to a Regional Frontier," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 31 March 2020, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2020/03/the-transformation-of-the-iraqi-syrian-border-from-a-national-to-a-regional-frontier?lang=en>.

43 Omar Dhabian, "The Continuing Threat of ISIS in Iraq After the Withdrawal of the International Coalition," *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 4 April 2024, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/continuing-threat-isis-iraq-after-withdrawal-international-coalition>.

44 The participation of Sunni tribal networks along the Syrian border appears unlikely due to prevailing sectarian tensions with the Iran-aligned Shi'a militias that orchestrate the trade and the fact that the overall trade is managed by sectarian militias and Syrian government-aligned entities, but there is no reason to assume that ideological or identity-based categories will preclude financial opportunism (as evident in contexts from Afghanistan to Colombia). Alternatively, there is also the prospect of local community-based militias forming to combat the drug trade, mirroring the *autodefensas* in Mexico or the Pepes in Colombia—but the legacy of IS in these areas would make any such militarised mobilisation the target for intensive repression by both the Shi'a militias and the mainstream Iraqi security services alike. For discussion of the *autodefensas* and the Pepes, see: "Mexico's Everyday War: Guerrero and the Trials of Peace," *International Crisis Group*, 4 May 2020, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/latin-america-caribbean/mexico/80-mexicos-everyday-war-guerrero-and-trials-peace>, and "Colombia's Armed Groups Battle for the Spoils of Peace," *International Crisis Group*, 19 October 2017, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/latin-america-caribbean/andes/colombia/63-colombias-armed-groups-battle-spoils-peace>.

45 For example, see: "CND Event: Methamphetamine and "Captagon" threat in the Middle East: Launch of the Executive Summary of the first UNODC Report on the Regional Dynamics of the Trafficking and Responses," *United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime*, 18 March 2024, <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/speeches/2024/cnd67-methamphetamine-and-captagon-threat-in-the-middle-east.html>.

infrastructure into an active tool of terror and large-scale murder—principally of Sunni civilians.⁴⁶

Iraq's overt sectarian war ended in the late 2000s, the Mahdi Army has long been disbanded, and the Sadr movement (which retains operational control over the MoH) is now mired in a fierce rivalry with prominent Iran-aligned militias that are active in the Captagon trade.⁴⁷ Nonetheless, the MoH's recent past, and continued Sadrist control thereof, stand as formidable obstacles toward popular engagement with Iraq's public health sector by Iraqis outside of the core Sadrist demographic within the Shi'a underclass.

The third is a staggering lack of capacity within the MoH itself, where its legacy as an enabler of sectarian bloodshed has, arguably, been eclipsed in the public psyche by its deadly incompetence. Due to factors ranging from systemic administrative corruption to a 'brain drain' of doctors due to Sadrist persecution and abuse, the MoH has been bestowed more recently with the appellation 'Ministry of Death'.⁴⁸ Iraqi hospitals have suffered a series of extraordinary catastrophes (including repeated fires at hospitals across the country, and a tragic explosion in the maternity ward of Yarmouk Hospital in Baghdad). These incidents have claimed scores of lives. When combined with an utter collapse in the standard of care within state-run facilities across the country, this has further debased popular perceptions of the public health sector in Iraq.

Iraq thus faces a seemingly intractable dilemma in its fight against the Captagon trade. Militia impunity and governmental corruption preclude effective border security and interdiction

campaigns, which prevent meaningful action against Captagon supply. Political and economic sclerosis, enabled and exacerbated by the same Iran-aligned militias that orchestrate Captagon's movement into and through Iraq, ensures an enduring demand-creating despair among the people. Finally, rampant dysfunction and corruption within the public health sector and a draconian legal code that prosecutes addicts and smugglers alike mean that a miserly amount of state resources are available to manage the ensuing societal fallout.

The fundamentals of Captagon in Jordan

Enduring border challenges and an expanding problem

Jordan's border with Syria is a key transit point for Captagon, as Jordan sits between the most prominent producers (Syria and Lebanon) and its primary consumers in the Gulf region. The drug is primarily destined for export to Gulf countries but is increasingly used (and occasionally produced) within Jordan itself.⁴⁹

The tri-border area between Jordan, Iraq, and Syria is a trafficking nexus, and the Jordanian government is struggling to cope with the increasing volume and frequency of shipments of Captagon that are passing through the country. In late 2022, for example, Jordanian government officials seized one ton of Captagon – a total of six million pills – found in date paste in two lorries

46 Nicholas Krohley, *The Death of the Mehdi Army: The Rise, Fall, and Revival of Iraq's Most Powerful Militia* (London and New York: Hurst and Oxford University Press USA, 2015).

47 For discussion of the Sadrist hold over the Ministry of Health, see: John Davison and Ahmed Rasheed, "In Iraq, an old U.S. foe grows his political power," *Reuters*, 29 June 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/iraq-cleric/>.

48 Dalia Hussain, "Iraq's Ministry of Death," *New Lines Magazine*, 6 May 2021, <https://newlinesmag.com/reportage/iraqs-ministry-of-death/>.

49 Saud Al-Sharafat, "The Captagon War: Smuggling on the Jordanian-Syrian Border," *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 30 September 2022, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/captagon-war-smuggling-jordanian-syrian-border>; "Jordan kills 5 drugs smugglers on the Syrian border. The area is known for an addictive amphetamine," *Associated Press*, 19 February 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/jordan-syria-smuggling-captagon-gulf-1f094572fa865dc00e0e1784971fd901>; Taim Alhaji, "The Al-Assad Regime's Captagon Trade," 6 October 2022, <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/88109>. On domestic production within Jordan, the sole incident in the public domain is captured here: "Police Find Captagon 'Laboratory' in Jordan," *Synergia Foundation*, 17 January 2018, <https://www.synergiafoundation.org/insights/analyses-assessments/police-find-captagon-laboratory-jordan>.

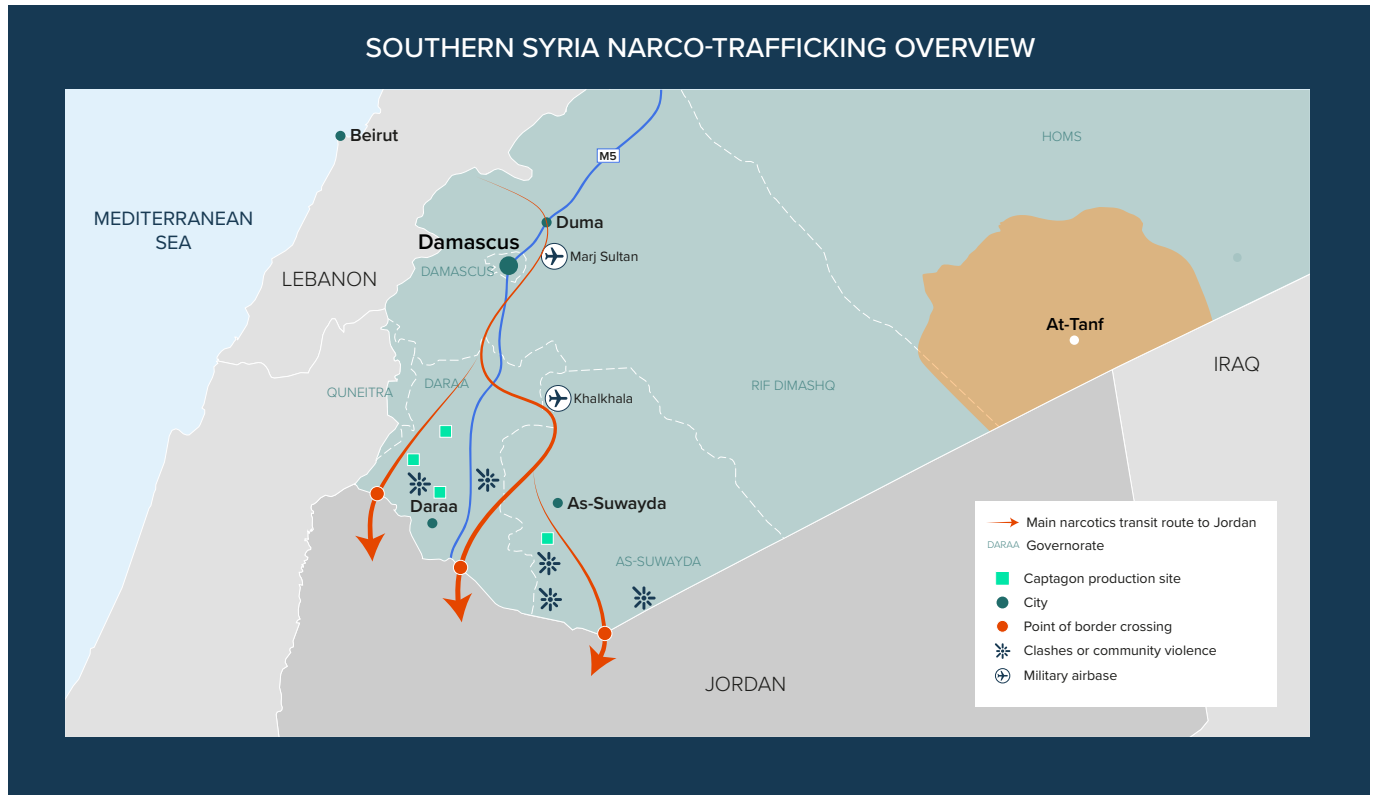


Figure 4: Southern Syria Narco-Trafficking Overview ⁵⁰

at the Jordan-Iraq border; this shipment was described as one of the largest ever intercepted.⁵¹

As early as 2000, there was evidence of significant trafficking with the seizure of 3.5 million tablets in the southern desert bound for the Gulf market (leading to the arrest of both Jordanian and Saudi nationals).⁵² In 2011, officials seized nine million counterfeit Captagon pills in Jordan, and in 2012, Jordanian security services confiscated 1.8 million Captagon pills destined for Saudi Arabia.⁵³

Captagon flows have surged through Jordan since 2018, when the Syrian government re-established control over its side of the Jordanian border (which had previously been in the hands of opposition forces).⁵⁴ As BBC news reporting has shown, since the start of 2022, the Jordanian army seized at least 17 million Captagon pills (compared to 15.5 million Captagon pills in 2021, and only 1.4 million seized in 2020).⁵⁵

Social stigmas regarding drug use and treatment, as well as limited public services, have worsened

⁵⁰ Taken from COAR Global, "Smugglers and Security Agents: Fragmentation and Decentralisation in Southern Syria's Captagon Networks," 30 July 2022, <https://coar-global.org/2022/07/30/smugglers-and-security-agents-fragmentation-and-decentralisation-in-southern-syrias-captagon-networks/>.

⁵¹ Henri Astier, "Captagon: Jordan seizes huge amphetamine haul at Iraqi border," *BBC News*, 25 December 2022, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-64091223>.

⁵² Philip Robins, "Anti-Narcotics Responses in Jordan," *Middle East Journal* 56, no. 3 (2002): 433-456.

⁵³ Boaz Ganor and Miri Halperin Wernli, "The Infiltration of Terrorist Organizations Into the Pharmaceutical Industry: Hezbollah as a Case Study," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (2013): 699-712; "Captagon: Syria's War Drug," *British Broadcasting Corporation Arabic* (2015), transcript, https://www.journeyman.tv/film_documents/6554/transcript/; Christina Steenkamp, "Captagon and conflict: Drugs and war on the border between Jordan and Syria," *Mediterranean Politics* (2024): 1-25, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13629395.2023.2297121>.

⁵⁴ Hadeel al Rawabdeh, "On Tehran's radar: Jordan confronts growing drug threat on northern border with Syria," *Syria Direct*, 18 January 2024, <https://syriadirect.org/jordan-confronts-drug-threat-on-northern-border-with-syria/>.

⁵⁵ Yolande Knell, "Captagon: Jordan's undeclared war against Syria drug traffickers," *BBC News*, 18 April 2022, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-61040359>.

the social impact of Captagon in Jordan.⁵⁶ The drug is used as a coping mechanism among students for academic and personal stress, for example, and in a similar manner as an on-the-job stimulant by labourers.⁵⁷ In this sense, the stigma around Captagon among casual users is less significant than around other hard drugs, as it has quasi-legitimate pharmaceutical connotations of being a catalyst for focus and productivity. This may ease the barriers to entry within a populace where powerful stigmas prevail around drug use in general. As in Iraq, however, the stigma surrounding drug use in Jordan can lead to social isolation for individuals who tip over from casual usage into addiction. This stigma is often compounded by legal and cultural norms that view drug use as a moral failing rather than a health issue. The Jordanian government has been more proactive than its Iraqi counterpart in developing treatment solutions—and Jordan’s public health sector is far more robust than Iraq’s—yet prosecutions for Captagon use still outpace statistics on those seeking treatment.⁵⁸ Furthermore, drug-related crimes are surging across Jordan, with a drug-related crime occurring every 28 minutes in 2022.⁵⁹

Captagon is by no means Jordan’s first cross-border smuggling challenge, as the country has long served as a trafficking crossroads.⁶⁰ There are three core reasons for Jordan’s enduring

“The increasingly militarised Syrian-Jordanian border necessitates a contested transfer of drug shipments from Syrian trafficking networks to counterparts with a robust operational presence inside Jordan. However, the question remains: which networks, exactly, and why is there such a paucity of information on this topic?”

status as a trafficking route. First, entrenched tribal networks facilitate the illicit movement of goods across the borders, particularly along the Syrian-Jordanian and Jordanian-Saudi borders. Indeed, the majority of traffickers caught up to 2000 were settled Bedouin residents of border towns like Ramtha in the north (where there is large-scale inter-marriage between Jordanians and Syrians in the Dara’a area) and Maan and Aqaba in the south.⁶¹ Secondly, sizeable trade volumes across the Syrian-Jordanian border make systemic scrutiny impracticable, a problem that has been exacerbated by displaced persons

- 56 Vanda Felbab-Brown, “The battle against captagon,” *Chatham House*, 17 May 2023, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publications/the-world-today/2022-06/battle-against-captagon>; Ahmed al-Imam, et al., “Risk Factors of Suicidal Ideation in Iraqi Crystal Methamphetamine Users,” *Brain Sciences*, 13 (2023): 1279, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC10526952/>.
- 57 See: Omar al Omari, et al., “Jordanian University Students’ Lived Experience of Misusing Amphetamine (Captagon),” *Journal of Addictions Nursing* 33, no. 1 (2022): 20-26, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/35230057/>, and also Abdulfattah, Sadan MD; Ahmad, Ahmad R. MD; Kitaneh, Razi MD; Alsharaydeh, Toqa MD; Almodallal, Farah MD; Alzoubi, Raha; Abbadi, Rama; Haddad, Tala A.; Wazaify, Mayyada PhD; Alkayed, Zaid MD; Bani Mustafa, Radwan MD; Tetrault, Jeanette M. MD. Nonmedical Use of Stimulants Among Students in Jordan: A Nationwide Study. *Journal of Addiction Medicine* (>):10.1097/ADM.0000000000001308, April 8, 2024.
- 58 For an excellent discussion of the limitations of public health data on Captagon in Jordan, see Mayyada Wazaify, et al., “Qualitative Exploration of the Experiences of People Who Use Captagon and Therapists in Jordan,” *Substance Use & Abuse* 59, no. 5 (2024): 816-824, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10826084.2024.2304012>.
- 59 “A ‘Drugs War’: Syria’s Neighbors Fight a Flood of Captagon Across Their Borders,” *Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project*, 27 June 2023, <https://www.occrp.org/en/investigations/a-drug-war-syrias-neighbors-fight-a-flood-of-captagon-across-their-borders>.
- 60 Jordan’s “long land borders, inhospitable desert conditions, small population, and under-resourced state have made the Kingdom consistently vulnerable to trafficking” in Philip Robins, “Anti-Narcotics Responses in Jordan,” *Middle East Journal* 56, no. 3 (2002): 433-456; Yolande Knell, “Captagon: Jordan’s undeclared war against Syria drug traffickers,” *British Broadcasting Corporation*, 18 April 2022, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-61040359>; Agence-France Press, “Jordan says drug trafficking from Syria is ‘organised’,” *France24*, 17 February 2022, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20220217-jordan-says-drug-trafficking-from-syria-is-organised>; “Jordan army says it killed drug and weapons smugglers from Syria,” *The New Arab*, 6 January 2024, <https://www.newarab.com/news/jordan-army-kills-drug-and-weapons-smugglers-syria>; Iffat Idris, “Serious and organized crime in Jordan,” *UK Department for International Development*, 28 February 2019, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5c87d5efe5274a2a524aacd9/537_Serious_and_Organized_Crime_in_Jordan.pdf Lastly, Steenkamp notes the long-standing cultural and economic legacy of the *bahhara*, who have been largely devastated by the militarised closure of the border: Christina Steenkamp, “Captagon and conflict: Drugs and war on the border between Jordan and Syria,” *Mediterranean Politics* (2024): 1-25.
- 61 For discussion of cross-border intermarriage, see “Mapping of Host Community-Refugee Tensions in Mafraq and Ramtha, Jordan,” *Mercy Corps*, May 2013, https://www.mercycorps.org/sites/default/files/2020-01/MC_ISDC_CSSF_Social_Stability_Policy_Brief_FINAL_16DEC2019.pdf

crossing from Syria en masse since the outbreak of civil war. Third, Jordanian law enforcement has historically struggled with inadequate intelligence and under-resourcing compared to well-equipped and financed traffickers.⁶² As examined further below, recent surges in Western support to the Jordanian Armed Forces are addressing this imbalance at the border itself, but law enforcement entities with domestic jurisdiction may require additional support.

That said, the literature says little about the particulars of local Jordanian networks involved in cross-border smuggling in collusion with state-aligned actors in Syria, apart from highlighting observations that there are over 160 groups of this kind active along the border and that these are growing in sophistication.⁶³ Nor is there substantive detail on connectivity between Captagon smuggling and refugee flows, apart from general allusions that note correlations between areas of refugee settlement and Captagon trafficking.⁶⁴ The paucity of detail on connectivity between Syrian refugees and Captagon can be attributed, at least in part, to concerns among Jordanian NGOs that support refugee communities—as refugee dynamics are politically fraught, and refugee advocates are wary of the further securitisation or hardening of refugee policy by the state. Nonetheless, the means through which Captagon enters Jordan requires deeper understanding. In contrast to Iraq, where militia-controlled border crossings enable secure passage for Captagon shipments, the increasingly militarised Syrian-Jordanian border necessitates a contested transfer of drug shipments from Syrian trafficking networks to

counterparts with a robust operational presence inside Jordan. However, the question remains: which networks, exactly, and why is there such a paucity of information on this topic?

The physical and human terrain of Jordan's northern border also presents challenges and susceptibilities to smuggling efforts. The central section, from Daraa to the Syrian Desert, includes several urban centres that are home to well-established trafficking networks that leverage close tribal and economic ties between communities on either side of the border, as well as drones and rudimentary catapults, to evade checkpoints.⁶⁵ The Mafrq and As-Suwayda regions include the transition from the Jordanian plateau to the Syrian desert, and the presence of the Jabal al-Druze mountain range creates natural routes for smugglers.⁶⁶ Finally, there is the issue of large-scale Syrian refugee communities and their connectivity to cross-border trade (both licit and illicit), which is often referenced in the literature but not examined in the level of detail required to understand the precise connectivity between refugee flows and Captagon flows.⁶⁷

The key role of international partners

To address these challenges, Jordan is receiving substantial Western support.⁶⁸ In October 2022, for example, Jordan's Public Security Directorate signed an agreement with the State Department's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs to strengthen cooperation on countering drug trafficking. The agreement

62 Philip Robins, "Anti-Narcotics Responses in Jordan," *Middle East Journal* 56, no. 3 (2002): 433-456.

63 AFP; Yolande Knell, "Captagon: Jordan's undeclared war against Syria drug traffickers," *British Broadcasting Corporation*, 18 April 2022, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-61040359>.

64 Christina Steenkamp, "Captagon and conflict: Drugs and war on the border between Jordan and Syria," *Mediterranean Politics* (2024): 1-25, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13629395.2023.2297121>.

65 Christina Steenkamp, "Captagon and conflict: Drugs and war on the border between Jordan and Syria," *Mediterranean Politics* (2024): 1-25, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13629395.2023.2297121>.

66 Office of the Geographer, "International Boundary Study, No. 94, Jordan Syria Boundary," United States Department of State, 30 December 1969, <http://library.law.fsu.edu/Digital-Collections/LimitsinSeas/pdf/ibs094.pdf>.

67 For example, the Zaatari camp in Jordan is one of the largest in the world and though originally created to house a maximum of 60,000 people, is home to over 100,000 people. It has 3,000 shops and businesses and trades with the nearby town of Mafrq; Natalia Paszkiewicz, "The worlds of Zaatari and Azraq refugee camps in Jordan," *The Arab Weekly*, 2 July 2017, <https://theArabweekly.com/worlds-zaatari-and-azraq-refugee-camps-jordan>.

68 Barbara Opall-Rome, "Raytheon-Jordan Border Defense Against ISIS Enters Final Phase," *Defense One*, 26 May 2016, <https://www.defensenews.com/global/mideast-africa/2016/05/26/raytheon-jordan-border-defense-against-isis-enters-final-phase/>.

commits both parties to sharing information and technology related to tackling cross-border narcotics flows. Concurrently, the European Union provided eleven million euros in 2019 for a four-year border security initiative, and Jordan has signed an agreement with the United Nations to enhance the capabilities of Jordan's border guards.⁶⁹ In 2022, the Royal Jordanian Air Force received the first U.S. upgraded IOMAX Air Tractor AT-802 Border Patrol Aircraft (BPA). Nearly a decade ago, the UAE gifted six AT-802s to Jordan, and the United States is in the process of upgrading their capabilities to assist in patrolling and defending Jordan's borders.⁷⁰ Counter-narcotics trafficking efforts at the border benefit from the United States Department of Defense resourcing and efforts extended to the Kingdom to interdict weapons of mass destruction and related materials crossing the Syria-Jordan and Iraq-Jordan borders.⁷¹ Recent initiatives include, for example US\$327 million in assistance to the Jordanian military and a further US\$234 million to support Jordan's border surveillance systems.⁷²

This border support is a subset of a larger set of relationships with the United States and Europe that emphasise the importance of Jordan's security to international interests. Jordan occupies a strategically important location in the Middle East, serving as a buffer between several conflict-prone regions. Helping Jordan secure its borders aligns with Western strategic interests in the region, including maintaining stability and countering the influence of adversaries. This issue has become all the more urgent since the onset of the Hamas-Israel war in Gaza. Not only do hostilities in Israel and the Palestinian Territories raise the prospect of turmoil within Jordan's own large Palestinian community, but Iranian strikes

on Israel have been interdicted by the Jordanian military within Jordan's airspace. The ensuing tensions have drawn increased international security focus on Jordan, with the United States exploring the prospect of fielding an integrated air defence system for Jordan, while international partners (including the United Kingdom and Canada) are supporting the development of an intelligence fusion centre along Jordan's border with Syria.⁷³

Increasingly powerful smuggling organisations challenge state resources

In response to surging Captagon flows, growing public health concerns over domestic usage, and the concurrent smuggling of weapons into Jordan by networks active in the drug trade, Jordan has taken an increasingly aggressive posture. For the Jordanians, Captagon is a core national security priority.⁷⁴ Indeed, there is growing recognition within Jordan that Captagon flows into the country are not merely a means to an end for the Syrian-Iranian axis (i.e., a lucrative revenue stream used to fund militancy elsewhere in the region), but also an end in and of itself—with the aim to destabilise Jordan via asymmetric tactics.⁷⁵ Furthermore, the recent growth of an illicit arms trade from Syria into Jordan apparently intertwined with Captagon trafficking raises concerns over the growing militarisation of networks within Jordan as well as possible connectivity to the ongoing war between Israel and Hamas.

Smugglers are adopting ever-more-sophisticated techniques and technologies (from drones

69 "Partnership between the UN and JAF boost the capabilities of Jordan's border guards," <https://jordan.un.org/en/268519-partnership-between-un-and-jaf-boost-capabilities-jordan%E2%80%99s-border-guards>.

70 Jeremy M. Sharp, "Jordan: Background and U.S. Relations" *Congressional Research Service*, RL33546, June 23, 2023.

71 Office of Inspector General, "Audit of Jordan Border Security Program Oversight DODIG-2020-043," *Department of Defense*, 20 December 2019, <https://www.dodig.mil/Reports/Audits-and-Evaluations/Article/2046324/audit-of-jordan-border-security-program-oversight-dodig-2020-043/>.

72 United States Department of State. "U.S Security Cooperation with Jordan - Fact Sheet". 21 May 2021. <https://www.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-jordan/#:~:text=Further%2C%20the%20United%20States%20has,cost%20of%20over%20%24234%20million>

73 Confidential discussions with Western embassy officials in Amman, Jordan.

74 Abdullah Hayek and Ahmad Sharawi, "Jordan's Escalating Border Threats Amid Regional Upheaval," *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 9 January 2024, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/jordans-escalating-border-threats-amid-regional-upheaval>.

75 Confidential discussions with Western embassy officials in Amman. Also, see: David Shenker, "Iran Targets Jordan: The Kingdom Joins the Theocracy's List of Enemies," *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 5 June 2024, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iran-targets-jordan-kingdom-joins-theocracys-list-enemies>.

to catapults to tunnel networks), while the Jordanian government is layering new detection and surveillance capabilities with technical and financial cooperation from Western governments. For example, drones are supplanting past reliance on camel-borne surveillance patrols by Jordanian border guards in rural areas.⁷⁶ Both sides have also grown increasingly lethal. The Jordanian Armed Forces have eased their rules of engagement to what amounts to a ‘shoot to kill’ mandate to counter the smugglers’ enhanced lethality.

“Indeed, there is growing recognition within Jordan that Captagon flows into the country are not merely a means to an end for the Syrian-Iranian axis (i.e., a lucrative revenue stream used to fund militancy elsewhere in the region), but also an end in and of itself—with the aim to destabilise Jordan via asymmetric tactics.

The ensuing clashes have led to the deaths of Jordanian military personnel, as well as dozens of suspected traffickers in gunfights along the border and Jordanian airstrikes within Syria.⁷⁷ An escalatory spiral appears to be underway, as well-resourced government and criminal actors within Syria fight to maintain an enormously lucrative trade.⁷⁸ In contrast to Iraq, where local communities along the border appear largely incidental to the Captagon trade, surging violence along the Syrian-Jordanian border is taking place within local communities. Not only has the resulting militarisation disrupted long-standing cross-border connectivity and informal economies, but it is also wreaking havoc within local communities in southern Syria—most notably in al-Suwayda, where Iran-aligned Syrian smuggling networks have mounted a brutal retribution campaign against locals suspected of passing Captagon-related intelligence to the Jordanian military.⁷⁹

The Syria dilemma: isolation or normalisation?

The Syrian government, its enduring ally Iran, and the IRGC-QF-backed militias within Syria

- 76 Caroline Rose and Jesse Marks, “Jordan is Far From Normalization with Syria,” *New Lines Institute*, 7 July 2022, <https://newlinesinstitute.org/state-resilience-fragility/illicit-economies/jordan-is-far-from-normalization-with-syria/>; Saud Al-Sharafat, “The Captagon War: Smuggling on the Jordanian-Syrian Border,” *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 30 September 2022 <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/captagon-war-smuggling-jordanian-syrian-border>. The lucrative nature of the illicit economies can drive innovation, for example, see: “Jordan foils militant smuggling plot in disused pipeline,” *The New Arab*, 17 February 2018, <https://www.newarab.com/news/jordan-foils-militant-smuggling-plot-disused-pipeline>.
- 77 Christina Steenkamp, “Captagon and conflict: Drugs and war on the border between Jordan and Syria,” *Mediterranean Politics* (2024): 1-25, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13629395.2023.2297121>; <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-60147224>; Saud Al-Sharafat, “The Captagon War: Smuggling on the Jordanian-Syrian Border,” *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 30 September 2022, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/captagon-war-smuggling-jordanian-syrian-border>; Natalie Ecanow, “Jordan Carries Out Rare Strike in Syria Against Assad-Backed Narco Trade,” *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, 9 May 2023, <https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2023/05/09/jordan-carries-out-rare-strike-in-syria-against-the-assad-backed-narco-trade/>; “Jordan army kills drug runners at Syria border amid soaring Captagon trade,” *Al Jazeera*, 12 December 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/12/12/jordan-army-kills-several-drug-runners-amid-soaring-captagon-trade/>; Suleiman al Khalidi and Jana Choukeir, “Jordanian guard wounded, three smugglers killed on Syrian border - military,” *Reuters*, 7 February 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/jordanian-guard-wounded-three-smugglers-killed-syria-border-military-2024-02-07/>.
- 78 Taim Alhaji, “The Al-Assad Regime’s Captagon Trade,” 6 October 2022, <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/88109>; Natalie Ecanow, “Jordan Carries Out Rare Strike in Syria Against Assad-Backed Narco Trade,” *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, 9 May 2023, <https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2023/05/09/jordan-carries-out-rare-strike-in-syria-against-the-assad-backed-narco-trade/>; Matthew Levitt and Lauren von Thaden, “Guns, Drugs, and Smugglers: A Recent Heightened Challenge at Israel’s Borders with Jordan and Egypt,” *Combating Terrorism Center Sentinel* 16, no. 7 (2023): 1-12, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/guns-drugs-and-smugglers-a-recent-heightened/>; Abdullah Hayek and Ahmad Sharawi, “Jordan’s Escalating Border Threats Amid Regional Upheaval,” *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 9 January 2024, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/jordans-escalating-border-threats-amid-regional-upheaval/>; Beth Ellen Cole, et al., “Preserving Stability Amidst Regional Conflagration: US Engagement in Jordan, 2011-2016,” *United States Institute of Peace*, 2017, <https://www.usip.org/3dlessons/jordan>; Saud Al-Sharafat, “The Captagon War: Smuggling on the Jordanian-Syrian Border,” *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 30 September 2022, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/captagon-war-smuggling-jordanian-syrian-border>.
- 79 “Kidnappings, murders, repression: Al-Suwayda reveals the price of normalising Assad,” *Syrian Association for Citizens’ Dignity*, 24 August, 2022, <https://syacd.org/kidnappings-murders-repression-suwayda-reveals-the-price-of-normalising-assad/>.

drive the Captagon trade into Jordan.⁸⁰ Jordan's national-level strategy to combat Captagon flows is thus tied inextricably to relations with Bashar al-Assad's Syrian government. Such considerations are, in turn, connected to geopolitical debates across the region and with Western powers over their respective positions toward both Syria and Iran alike. In recent years, there has been a notable shift towards rapprochement with Syria on the part of key Arab states in the region, particularly after Jordan's King Abdullah II and Syrian President Bashar al-Assad engaged in discussions to enhance cooperation on a range of economic and security-related topics.⁸¹ This thaw in relations has been part of a broader regional stabilisation plan, with economic ties across a long-standing trade route being a key area of focus—and with counter-narcotics cooperation against Captagon used as a key preliminary step toward establishing trust and collaborative success.⁸²

Proponents of normalisation note the structural reliance of the Syrian government on Captagon flows, and the uncertain results being achieved via the militarisation of interdiction efforts along the border. Instead, the argument goes, Syria's economic and political re-integration could enable substantive economic revitalisation (thereby lessening reliance upon Captagon revenues), while also providing countries like Jordan (as well as far wealthier Gulf States) with leverage to tamp down production and trafficking through wider economic incentives to Damascus.⁸³

To date, early steps toward normalisation have yielded extremely modest results. Indeed, high-level meetings between Jordan's King Abdullah and Syria's Bashar al-Assad have occurred in tandem with escalating violence along the border and surges of Captagon into Jordan. Negotiated commitments for border security cooperation from the Syrian government (tied explicitly to Jordanian concerns over Captagon, including the enhancement of Syria's border security and progress in the targeting of Captagon production and export networks) have not translated into action. Instead, the Syrian military and Iran-aligned militias have consolidated and industrialised production leading to ever-larger shipment volumes. Moreover, there is the prospect of a regional 'war' on Captagon leading to substantive trade disruptions. Saudi Arabia, for example, has already enacted import bans on Lebanese produce in response to large-scale smuggling operations that hid pills within fruits and vegetables.⁸⁴ Pending the future trajectory of the Captagon trade and the ways in which regional states posture toward Damascus, wider bans or other trade disruptions are possible—leaving Jordan facing re-export bans or other trade restrictions in their dealings with wealthy Gulf markets.⁸⁵

Illustrating the complexity of the dilemma, in the United States, the so-called Captagon Act (a federal strategy to combat Captagon) and its successor the Captagon Trafficking Suppression Act (that calls for further economic sanctions

80 See: COAR Global, "Smugglers and Security Agents: Fragmentation and Decentralization in Southern Syria's Captagon Networks," 30 July 2022, <https://coar-global.org/2022/07/30/smugglers-and-security-agents-fragmentation-and-decentralisation-in-southern-syrias-captagon-networks/> for further nuance around what is presented as a "decentralised" production landscape in areas of southern Syria, where a thriving black market features networks with varied levels of connectivity to the state (most notably to Syrian military intelligence).

81 Taim Alhaji, "The Al-Assad Regime's Captagon Trade," 6 October 2022, <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/88109>; <https://npasyria.com/en/103017/>; Saud Al-Sharafat, "The Captagon War: Smuggling on the Jordanian-Syrian Border," *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 30 September 2022, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/captagon-war-smuggling-jordanian-syrian-border>.

82 On the rise of Captagon as a key issue in diplomatic dialogue among Arab states and Syria, see: Holly Dagues, "Is Captagon going to halt the Arab normalization deal with Syria? An expert weighs-in," *The Atlantic Council*, 16 October 2023, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/captagon-arab-normalization-syria-caroline-rose/>.

83 Chloe Cornish, "Saudi Arabia drugs haul exposes Syria and Lebanon's booming illicit trade," *Financial Times*, 9 May 2021; Natalie Ecanow, "Jordan Carries Out Rare Strike in Syria Against Assad-Backed Narco Trade," *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, 9 May 2023, <https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2023/05/09/jordan-carries-out-rare-strike-in-syria-against-the-assad-backed-narco-trade/>. It should be noted that various regional states with Captagon usage problems have proposed their own bi-lateral stopgap approaches, featuring rumors of wealthy Gulf states offering to pay Damascus in return for lowering exports of Captagon to their respective countries. This supports a view that Gulf States view Captagon more as a nuisance to be managed than a crisis to be resolved.

84 Gregory Aftandilian, "The Captagon Problem in Saudi Arabia and Other Gulf States," *Arab Center Washington DC*, 22 September 2022, <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/the-captagon-problem-in-saudi-arabia-and-other-gulf-states/>.

85 For pressure between Saudi Arabia and Jordan, see Jennifer Holleis, "Jordan: Crackdown on Syrian drugs, weapons depends on deals," *DW*, 28 January 2024, <https://www.dw.com/en/jordan-crackdown-on-syrian-drugs-weapons-depends-on-deals/a-68095433>.

and the targeting of associated networks) assert that the Syrian government's involvement in the trade poses a 'transnational security threat' to America.⁸⁶ Consequently, the Act specifically targets Captagon production and trafficking networks directly associated with Bashar al-Assad and Lebanese Hezbollah. This legislation serves as a response to efforts aimed at normalising relations with the Assad government, aiming instead to isolate Syria and exert pressure on it to comply with international laws and norms before considering reintegration into the international community.⁸⁷ As Jordan continues to yield only the most limited benefits from rapprochement with Damascus, support from the United States and other Western partners may prove critical in shaping strategy and tactics in Jordan's approach to its northern neighbour.

Jordan's options in a 'war' on Captagon

At the strategic level, Jordan faces a geopolitical choice: to isolate Bashar al-Assad's Syrian government and further militarise its approach to the border, or to pursue political and economic normalisation. Since 2019, a once-chaotic Captagon production landscape within Syria has become increasingly consolidated and industrialised. It has done so under an alliance among the Assad government's inner circle, Iran's IRGC-QF, and a constellation of international Shi'a militias under the IRGC-QF banner (from countries including Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen). In response to this reality, and of Captagon's rise as Syria's principal export and primary source of hard

currency, the Syrian government has been labeled a 'narco-state'.⁸⁸

For the Jordanians, who appear to be heading toward an American-sponsored 'war on drugs', this raises the prospect of a border conflict spinning out of control into something far larger. As discussed further below, Iran's direct involvement via the IRGC-QF adds an additional layer of geopolitical complexity. On the one hand, it draws firm American attention on national security and counter-terrorism grounds, wherein the United States can be expected to push Jordan toward a hard line against Iranian activity. On the other hand, it is part of wider Gulf-led deliberations on whether Syria should be ostracised and punished for its alliance with Iran—or convinced to distance itself from Tehran in exchange for political and economic re-integration with the Arab states of the Middle East.

Looking within its borders, Jordan is presented with a far broader range of viable options than Iraq. As noted above, the increasingly hardened and militarised border with Syria dictates that the flow of Captagon into Jordan requires a contested hand-off when entering the country, and onward logistical control by networks that are native to Jordan itself. This leaves the Captagon trade vulnerable to interdiction at the border by an increasingly well-resourced Jordanian military, and within the country from Jordan's intelligence and law enforcement services. Jordan's security services have an array of increasingly formidable tools to bear against this challenge, and an undoubtedly deeper understanding of the networks involved than is reflected in the literature (as evidenced by their repeated success in identifying and striking targets within southern

86 United States Department of State, "Report to Congress 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 Sec. 1238(c) of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2023, P.L. 117-263," Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, 29 June 2023, <https://www.state.gov/report-to-congress-on-a-written-strategy-to-disrupt-and-dismantle-narcotics-production-and-trafficking-and-affiliated-networks/>; and H.R. 4861, Illicit Captagon Trafficking Suppression Act of 2023, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/118th-congress/house-bill/4861>.

87 "The Captagon Act Explained," *Syria Justice and Accountability Centre*, 12 January 2023, <https://syriaaccountability.org/the-captagon-act-explained-opportunities-and-limitations/>.

88 For example, see: <https://coar-global.org/2021/04/27/the-syrian-economy-at-war-captagon-hashish-and-the-syrian-narco-state/>. Christina Steenkamp, "Captagon and conflict: Drugs and war on the border between Jordan and Syria," *Mediterranean Politics* (2024): 1-25, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13629395.2023.2297121> questions the explanatory value of this term, but it nonetheless serves as a signpost of the Assad government's deep ties into the drug trade and its economic reliance thereupon.

Syria). Intensified counter-narcotics action away from the border thus appears inevitable—to include action against nascent small-scale efforts to produce Captagon inside Jordan.⁸⁹ That said, there remains the challenge of cooperation and information sharing within the Jordanian government. The military continues to harden the border itself—but action within communities near the border and broader efforts toward interdiction and treatment within Jordan fall outside their jurisdiction.

Furthermore, Jordan's public health sector is far more robust and far better positioned to accept external aid than its Iraqi counterpart. Growing activity in the public health sector, from anti-Captagon messaging to treatment and support, alongside support to civil society, thus offer viable avenues to mitigate the impact of Captagon. As such, there is a viable path for an integrated approach to supply and demand alike, blending law enforcement, military action, and public health.

2. Tackling the Captagon challenge: support from the West

Captagon has been a financial windfall for the Syrian government, Lebanese Hezbollah, various localised Syrian criminal networks, the IRGC-QF,

and a fluctuating constellation of Iran-aligned Shi'a militias in Iraq and Syria.⁹⁰ To the extent that these entities are viewed as malign actors by the governments and citizens of Iraq and Jordan, this perpetuates and exacerbates a host of challenges. For the United States and other Western governments, it makes Captagon a national security priority with critical implications for regional geopolitics.

Despite being part of a tri-border insecurity nexus with Syria, neighbours Iraq and Jordan confront the challenges of Captagon from markedly different contextual positions. Iraq has endured a succession of political upheavals, including wars, invasions, and regime changes since the latter decades of the 20th century. This has contributed to a complex political landscape with various factions vying for power and myriad institutional weaknesses. In contrast, Jordan has had a far more stable political system, and presents a solid and reliable partner for the international community.

These contrasting political and security contexts shape each country's options in the face of Captagon. Both Jordan and Iraq recognise the importance of maintaining border security to ensure stability and deploy security forces, surveillance technology, and establish checkpoints. However, internal dynamics dictate the efficacy of interdiction efforts and, likewise, the posture of their Western allies. Furthermore, the two countries have struggled to collaborate effectively.

In Iraq, the presence of Iran-aligned militias within the nation's official security apparatus begets a succession of problems with respect to the management of supply and demand alike. As long

89 The high-profile bust of a Captagon factory inside Jordan in 2018 attracted significant media attention, but there have been no subsequent discoveries of industrial production in the country and the Jordanian government asserts that it has controlled the situation. Discussion of in-country production can be found for example, in "AND raids 'Captagon laboratory' in drugs bust," *The Jordan Times*, 16 January 2018, <https://jordantimes.com/news/local/and-raids-captagon-laboratory%E2%80%99-drug-bust>. The trial provided insights into the number of people involved in production and the lucrative nature of the illicit industry, allowing rapid expansion: "Ruling of the 'drug factory' case," *Roya*, 19 December 2021, <https://www.royanews.tv/news/265564>. For identification of the senior role Jordanian nationals play in Captagon, see Khaled Yacoub Oweis, "Captagon crisis: Jordan's struggle to curb the flow of narcotics from Syria," *The National News*, 22 December 2022, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/mena/jordan/2022/12/22/captagon-crisis-jordans-struggle-to-curb-the-flow-of-narcotics-from-syria/>.

90 "The Syrian Economy at War: Captagon, Hashish, and the Syrian Narco-State," COAR, 27 April 2021, <https://coar-global.org/2021/04/27/the-syrian-economy-at-war-captagon-hashish-and-the-syrian-narco-state/>; Lina Khatib, "How the Captagon trade impacts border communities in Lebanon and Syria," *Chatham House*, 27 July 2022, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2022/07/how-captagon-trade-impacts-border-communities-lebanon-and-syria>.

as these militias are able to shepherd Captagon across the border (and thereafter through Iraq, whether for domestic consumption or overseas distribution) the prospect of Western-sponsored infrastructural or technological support affecting meaningful change is uncertain. Concurrently, as long as these militias serve as a violent obstacle to political reform, Iraq's bottom-up societal malaise can be expected to continue. For the militias, the status quo further entrenches and enriches them. Moreover, the literature makes occasional reference to emergent Captagon production within Iraq, notably deep within militia-held terrain adjacent to the Saudi border, raising the prospect of the militias establishing their own production industry for either domestic consumption or international export.⁹¹

“Captagon has been a financial windfall for the Syrian government, Lebanese Hezbollah, various localised Syrian criminal networks, the IRGC-QF, and a fluctuating constellation of Iran-aligned Shi'a militias in Iraq and Syria.

In Jordan, the security services are reliable and the public health sector is fairly robust. The challenge is to find the right balance on several interconnected questions: how to harden the border against Captagon without cutting off vital economic flows; how to combat the networks involved in the trade without escalating to a larger conflict; how to align the 'carrots and sticks' in Amman's dealings with Damascus; how to manage the issue of Syrian refugees and their oft-noted but rarely substantiated ties to Captagon smuggling; and how to synchronise multi-agency

interdiction efforts alongside public health campaigns to tackle domestic fallout from drug use.

Building from the foundational issues discussed above, this section examines how the United States and Europe see the Captagon challenge, and how they are working to support Iraq and Jordan.

The American approach: targeting, technology, and infrastructure

For the United States, the rapid expansion of Captagon production within Syria (benefitting both the Assad inner circle as well as its patrons in Tehran) fosters regional instability and presents a national security imperative. The recent 'Countering Assad's Proliferation Trafficking And Garnering Of Narcotics Act', signed into the National Defense Authorization Act, seeks to coordinate a federal response to disrupt the trafficking networks associated with the trade. Critical to this effort will be the intelligence activities given the opacity of the Captagon trade, with agencies working to 'identify key actors and distribution networks'.⁹²

Fundamental to the American approach to Captagon in Iraq and Jordan, and to America's counter-narcotics efforts worldwide, is the provision of infrastructure, technology, and technical support to deter, disrupt, and dismantle trafficking networks and interdict narcotics shipments. U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) has been providing aid and training to Jordanian military and law enforcement agencies engaged in counter-narcotics activities, as well as to public health authorities. Additionally, since 2012, CENTCOM has been assisting and training

91 See for example, Sinan Mahmoud, "First Captagon factory found in Iraq, Interior Ministry says," *The National News*, 17 July 2023, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/mena/iraq/2023/07/17/first-captagon-factory-found-in-iraq-interior-ministry-says/>.

92 United States Department of State, "Report to Congress 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 Sec. 1238(c) of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2023, P.L. 117-263," Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, 29 June 2023, <https://www.state.gov/report-to-congress-on-a-written-strategy-to-disrupt-and-dismantle-narcotics-production-and-trafficking-and-affiliated-networks/>.

the Jordanian Armed Forces (JAF) on border security measures.⁹³ Iraq has also been a long-running recipient of training and assistance from the American military since the 2003 invasion— notwithstanding persistent and growing calls from Iran-aligned militias and politicians to terminate the American presence in Iraq.⁹⁴

“ The question for American policymakers is the extent to which a focus on Captagon is rooted in the desire to combat the drug itself, or if it is a means through which pressure can be applied against Syria and Iran.

As the United States institutionalises its Captagon strategy, Jordan and Iraq are poised to receive additional technological resources alongside financial and advisory support. As noted above, there are clear use-cases and opportunities for constructive action on both security and public health lines of effort in Jordan. In Iraq, however, the entrenched impunity of Iranian-aligned militias and the dire state of the public health system limit prospects for state-to-state engagement in the fight against Captagon. Critically, it has been made evident that American advisors and

liaisons have extremely limited ability to disrupt entrenched practices of corruption.⁹⁵

Nonetheless, top-down targeting approaches are already in place, including sanctions and military strikes on key individuals. As this campaign progresses, two caveats are needed. First, recent U.S.-led and U.S.-enabled campaigns in counter-terrorism and counter-narcotics have exposed the limited results achieved through the top-down, network-centric targeting paradigm.⁹⁶ In Iraq, for example, al-Qaeda and the country’s various Shi’a militias endured a withering lethal targeting barrage in the late 2000s, only for the former to regenerate in the form of IS and the latter to eventually take a dominant position in the state.

These unforeseen second- and third-order effects are not particular to the region. In Mexico, for example, there was a decade-long, heavily-militarised effort to break the power of leading cartels using a ‘decapitation’ strategy targeting cartel leadership.⁹⁷ The campaign itself was enormously successful, insofar as scores of prominent traffickers were killed or captured. The resulting fragmentation of the cartels led to an explosion of violence, however, and a collapse of public safety—without achieving substantive results in curbing drug production or trafficking (not to mention ever-powerful demand-side forces within the United States). Furthermore, drug trafficking networks responded by further diversifying their activities and expanding the

93 United States Department of State, “Report to Congress 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 Sec. 1238(c) of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2023, P.L. 117-263,” Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, 29 June 2023, <https://www.state.gov/report-to-congress-on-a-written-strategy-to-disrupt-and-dismantle-narcotics-production-and-trafficking-and-affiliated-networks/>.

94 Mina Al-Oraibi, “Don’t Abandon Iraq: The Case for a Continued U.S. Military Presence,” *Foreign Affairs*, 12 April 2024, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/iraq/dont-abandon-iraq>.

95 In parallel, long-running American efforts to support the Lebanese Armed Forces in counter-narcotics activity have achieved sporadic, notable successes—yet the relative impunity of Lebanese Hezbollah remains a persistent obstacle to strategic success. American military coordination with Lebanon is outlined here: <https://www.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-lebanon/>; and see: for discussion of counter-narcotics efforts in the Hezbollah-dominated Bekaa Valley: <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20210605-lebanon-army-launches-major-crackdown-on-drug-factories/>.

96 Nicholas Krohley, “Moving Beyond the Post-9/11 Manhunt: Translating Tactical Wins into Strategic Success,” *Modern War Institute*, 2 June 2019, <https://mwi.westpoint.edu/moving-beyond-post-9-11-manhunt-translating-tactical-wins-strategic-success/>; Will Davies, “Improving the engagement of UK armed forces overseas: generating a sophisticated understanding of complex environments,” *Chatham House*, January 2022, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/2022-01/2022-01-26-army-engagement-overseas-davies.pdf>.

97 Vanda Felbab-Brown, “How to Win Mexico’s Drug War,” *Brookings Institutions*, 27 March 2010, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/how-to-win-mexicos-drug-war/>; Brian J. Phillips, “How Does Leadership Decapitation Affect Violence?” *Journal of Politics* 77, no. 2 (2015): 324-336, <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/abs/10.1086/680209>.

reach of the black market into mainstream agriculture and manufacturing.⁹⁸

As such, the current American framing of the ‘war’ against Captagon risks the repetition of two prior paradigmatic failures: existing Captagon smuggling enterprises can be expected to adapt and regenerate in the face of top-down targeting, while the selective ‘decapitation’ of key leaders may lead to fragmentation and competition within the remnants of these networks that ultimately exacerbates violence and the collective harm inflicted on Syrians, Iraqis, Jordanians, and others across the region.

Second, the current Syria- and Iran-centric view of Captagon must account for the overall flexibility and ease of Captagon production. As noted in the opening of this paper, Captagon is readily and cheaply synthesised with basic equipment. Furthermore, it is increasingly ubiquitous on the battlefields and in the neighbourhoods of the Middle East. Success against one particular network is by no means a guarantee of success against the overall problem posed by Captagon. The literature notes that production facilities have been exposed within Iraq and Jordan in recent years. There is every reason to expect that, should the United States achieve substantive successes against the networks presently driving the Captagon trade from within Syria, that other groups in other geographies will quickly step in to fill the void. The question for American policymakers is the extent to which a focus on Captagon is rooted in the desire to combat the drug itself, or if it is a means through which pressure can be applied against Syria and Iran.

The European problem: an ongoing intelligence struggle and interdiction challenge

Whereas the United States views Captagon as a regional geopolitical concern tied to ongoing tensions with Iran and Syria, Europe must also contend with the more immediate prospect of Captagon production and trafficking within its own borders. Current emphasis on interdiction at European ports must not elide the importance of connecting the dots between these transshipments and organised crime in the Middle East driving the Captagon trade. Without a greater understanding of relationships between Middle East traffickers, diasporas, and pre-existing European drug ecosystems, the flexibility that the European Union’s complex borders give to sea and air entry to the Arabian gulf will facilitate expansion of the Captagon trade through the continent.

Significant quantities of Captagon have been seized in Europe since 2018, either in cases linked to production, primarily in the Netherlands, or interdicted en route through the European Union (EU) to consumer markets in the Arabian Gulf.⁹⁹ The role of European ports in Captagon trafficking has been highlighted in recent seizures in destination markets: more than a million Captagon tablets were found in a shipping container from Rotterdam in the port of Dammam in Saudi Arabia in January 2019; a month later, 348,000 Captagon tablets were seized at another Saudi port, also in a shipping container from Rotterdam.¹⁰⁰

98 The avocado and lime industries have been a notable target for Mexican cartels. For example, see: Scott Simon, “Mexican Drug Cartels are Getting into the Avocado and Lime Business,” *National Public Radio*, 19 February 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/02/19/1081948884/mexican-drug-cartels-are-getting-into-the-avocado-and-lime-business>. As noted in COAR Global, “Smugglers and Security Agents: Fragmentation and Decentralization in Southern Syria’s Captagon Networks,” 30 July 2022, <https://coar-global.org/2022/07/30/smugglers-and-security-agents-fragmentation-and-decentralisation-in-southern-syrias-captagon-networks/>, the Captagon production ecosystem is far from monolithic. As such, a top-down targeting campaign could yield a host of uncertain consequences not only for the immediate functioning of production and trafficking, but also for the wider dynamics of licit and illicit economic activity across southern Syria and into northern Jordan.

99 European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction, “Technical Report: Captagon trafficking and the role of Europe,” Publications Office of the European Union, September 2023.

100 European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction, “EU Drug Market: Amphetamine – Trafficking and supply,” https://www.emcdda.europa.eu/publications/eu-drug-markets/amphetamine/trafficking-and-supply_en; Al Jazeera, “Europe a transport route for Gulf-bound Captagon shipments: Report,” 14 September 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/9/14/europe-a-transport-route-for-gulf-bound-captagon-shipments-report>.

Such rapid growth beyond the Middle East highlights the urgent necessity for international collaboration, particularly intelligence sharing, on Captagon: supply, production, and distribution spanning at least seventeen different countries globally according to the United States government.¹⁰¹ It is important that the European Union agencies share their intelligence picture of Captagon trafficking on the continent with Middle Eastern partners in order to start to think holistically about countering the burgeoning use of Europe as a trans-shipment route and a venue for Captagon production. This intelligence flow will also contribute to increased capacity building in law enforcement agencies in both regions to respond to the Captagon threat with greater agility and precision.

Critically, the production landscape in Europe appears to be connected to dynamics within the Middle East. European ports, for example, are trans-shipment points for Captagon as it is re-routed from the Middle East for markets in the Arabian Gulf in which Syrian and Lebanese nationals are key to operations on the continent.¹⁰² Existing intelligence on the role of Europe in Captagon trafficking is therefore a departure point requiring deeper understanding of the industrial-level enterprise, and likewise the exact nature of their connectivity to Middle Eastern networks. Reports from the Middle East suggest significant parallels with European production techniques, with indications of involvement from European organised crime factions in amphetamine manufacturing in the area.¹⁰³ There have also

been instances of Captagon production (within Germany, for example) tied principally to Syrian migrant communities—some of which have been small-scale operations, but others which have reached significant industrial production levels.¹⁰⁴

The European Commission has recently begun to address Captagon trafficking through the EMPACT (European Multidisciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats) security initiative. Internally, the European Union strategy has been multi-pronged, focusing on improving intelligence relating to the causes of drug related violence on the continent; strengthening operational responses against criminal networks; investing in capacity-building; and-strengthening international cooperation-with the intention of enhancing assistance and support to nations along crucial drug trafficking routes to Europe, with a focus on bolstering law enforcement, enhancing border control measures, and implementing programmes for drug treatment and harm reduction.¹⁰⁵

Extraterritorially, the United States has led on Captagon interdiction efforts as an international partner in the Middle East. The Council of the European Union followed US and UK sanctions in 2023 on Syrian regime individuals and entities identified as responsible for the production and trafficking of drugs, notably Captagon.¹⁰⁶ A coordinated EU response is critical, but forging stronger partnerships with Middle Eastern nations is imperative to disrupt the complicated and flexible trafficking routes because intelligence and resourcing form the basis for effective

101 United States Department of State, "Report to Congress 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 Sec. 1238(c) of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2023, P.L. 117-263," Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, 29 June 2023, <https://www.state.gov/report-to-congress-on-a-written-strategy-to-disrupt-and-dismantle-narcotics-production-and-trafficking-and-affiliated-networks/>.

102 European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction, "Technical Report: Captagon trafficking and the role of Europe," Publications Office of the European Union, September 2023. For a discussion of the expansion of the Captagon trade, see Boaz Ganor and Miri Halperin Wernli, "The Infiltration of Terrorist Organizations Into the Pharmaceutical Industry: Hezbollah as a Case Study," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (2013): 699-712; Marie Claire Van Hout and John Wells, "Is Captagon (fenethylline) helping to fuel the Syrian Conflict?" *Addiction* 111, no. 4 (2016): 748-749; European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction and Europol, "EU Drug Markets Analysis: Key insights for policy and practice," 2024, https://www.emcdda.europa.eu/publications/eu-drug-markets/analysis-key-insights-policy-and-practice_en.

103 European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction, "Captagon: understanding today's illicit market," Publications Office of the European Union, 2018.

104 For example, see: "German Police Arrest Syrians in Bavaria Captagon Factory Bust," *The New Arab*, 20 July 2023. <https://www.newarab.com/news/germany-police-arrest-syrians-captagon-factory-bust#:~:text=Two%20Syrian%2Dborn%20men%20were,drug%20busts%20in%20recent%20years>.

105 European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction and Europol, "EU Drug Markets Analysis: Key insights for policy and practice," 2024, https://www.emcdda.europa.eu/publications/eu-drug-markets/analysis-key-insights-policy-and-practice_en.

106 European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction, "Technical Report: Captagon trafficking and the role of Europe," Publications Office of the European Union, September 2023; Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office, "Tackling the illicit drug trade fuelling Assad's war machine," UK Government Digital Service, 28 March 2023, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/tackling-the-illicit-drug-trade-fuelling-assads-war-machine>.

operations. Organisations such as Europol and EMPACT will be valuable information sharing forums.¹⁰⁷ However, the cross-border and extra-regional nature of Captagon in Europe requires far greater understanding to develop appropriate policy responses. For example, open-source publications have yet to identify the full extent to which European Captagon trafficking is driven and coordinated by Middle Eastern actors.¹⁰⁸

The EU can expand pre-existing relationships with Middle East partners to capture the dimensions of the trans-continental Captagon trade, working with law enforcement to prevent rerouting through Europe. The EU has already provided training and equipment to Jordanian law enforcement agencies to enhance their capabilities in detecting and disrupting drug trafficking networks. Coordination is essential, because, as a Saudi official noted in late 2023, despite significant Jordanian efforts to secure its borders to trafficking, efforts are complicated by advanced equipment used by traffickers.¹⁰⁹ EMPACT is well-placed to adopt a forward footprint, working in-country with Jordan and Iraq to offer technical and training support and facilitate additional resourcing through its role as a member-state cooperation platform.

British engagement: integration at the border and beyond

The United Kingdom maintains multi-year bilateral training and security initiatives with Jordan, which support border security and Captagon-related concerns. Through the whole-of-government Conflict, Stability and Security Fund (CSSF – recently renamed the Integrated Security Fund), for example, the UK has leveraged military and civilian expertise to the multi-dimensional problems at the Jordanian-Syria border. CSSF-funded work has included training and equipping the Jordanian Armed Forces, as well as assessing regional trends in the context of human rights.¹¹⁰ Indeed, until July 2018 there were CSSF programs active on the Syrian side of the border to address security, narcotics, and human rights issues in conjunction with Syrian opposition forces—but this line of effort ended when the Syrian government reclaimed the area.¹¹¹

At present, UK-funded programmes in Jordan are working to address the ‘perception of poor inter-agency coordination’ within the security sector, which hinders Jordan’s efforts to sync military-led border interdiction with law enforcement and domestic intelligence.¹¹² Furthermore, British support to the Jordanian military’s Quick Reaction Force, including its expansion from a battalion to brigade, features efforts to better integrate military entities with their civilian government counterparts and those in law enforcement and intelligence to address border security challenges

107 Max Kravitz and Will Nichols, “A Bitter Pill to Swallow: Connections between Captagon, Syria, and the Gulf,” *Journal of International Affairs* 69, no. 2 (2016): 31-44; European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction and Europol (2024), *EU Drug Markets Analysis: Key insights for policy and practice*, https://www.emcdda.europa.eu/publications/eu-drug-markets/analysis-key-insights-policy-and-practice_en.

108 For an expose on Syrian complicity in the infamous Salerno interdiction, see: Ahmed Eid Ashour, Sameh Ellaboudy,, Maher Shaeri, and Cecilia Anesi, “Greek Captagon Bust Leads to a Criminal Gang and the Port at the Heart of Syria’s Booming New Drug Trade,” *Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project*, 16 June 2021, <https://www.occrp.org/en/investigations/greek-captagon-bust-leads-to-a-criminal-gang-and-the-port-at-the-heart-of-syrias-booming-new-drug-trade>.

109 European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Training, “EUROMED Police steps up the capacity of South Partner Countries to fight drug trafficking,” 1 June 2023, <https://www.cepol.europa.eu/newsroom/news/euromed-police-steps-capacity-south-partner-countries-fight-drug-trafficking>; Khaled Yacoub Oweis, “Major challenges face Jordan’s anti-narcotics border security plans, Saudi official says,” *The National News*, 13 September 2023, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/mena/2023/09/13/major-challenges-face-jordans-anti-narcotics-border-security-plans-saudi-official-says/>.

110 Ministry of Defence, “Jordan CSSF: Defence and Borders,” *United Kingdom Government*, CSSF-06-000019, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5bf55dd740f0b6078acc6f90/MENA_Jordan_Defence_and_Borders_Programme_Summary_FY_1819.odt.

111 The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, “Non-Lethal Border Security Support to Jordan,” *Hansard*, 12 September 2018, <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2018-09-12/debates/18091224000011/Non-LethalBorderSecuritySupportToJordan>.

112 Alex Walsh, “A Way Forward for U.K.-Jordan Security Cooperation,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 8 November 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/2019/11/a-way-forward-for-uk-jordan-security-cooperation?lang=en>.

within a unified government effort. This work is complemented by Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) programmes, which support a range of civil society, economic, and public health efforts.¹¹³ In 2024, for example, Jordan launched the Shamil consortium. Funded by the FCDO, the effort aims to deliver a sustainable social protection system.¹¹⁴ This features support for vulnerable populations and could expand engagement with at-risk groups often caught up in narcotics trafficking.

3. New ideas and approaches in the fight against Captagon

In light of the challenges and opportunities laid out in sections one and two, this final section highlights several issues that warrant deeper investigation in Iraq and Jordan, paired with prospective courses of action that might be pursued with wide-ranging and enduring support from international partners.

The destabilising effects of Captagon and other illicit drugs have become a prominent regional issue, with cross-border affiliations and transborder economic interests creating a powerful and lucrative illicit ecosystem that increasingly erodes rule of law, public health, and state legitimacy through pervasive corruption.¹¹⁵

Such deleterious effects require sustained and innovative solutions that will necessarily involve action against the supply of Captagon. However, the secrecy surrounding the Captagon ecosystem, its relationship to a burgeoning regional methamphetamine trade, and the involvement of various actors, makes the creation of effective mitigation strategies dependent upon gaining a much better understanding of the networks behind the trafficking.

In addition, combating Captagon will require a significant uptick in global efforts because of the major sponsors of the illicit industry. One analyst has noted that ‘Iran is using the Captagon as one of the tools in its regional arsenal’ and that role complicates Middle Eastern initiatives to combat the problem because there is ‘no incentive’ for Iran to co-operate in any information sharing, or other resourcing for solutions.¹¹⁶ The challenges posed by Captagon are thus inextricably intertwined with geopolitics, necessitating a strategy that addresses both sets of issues concurrently.

Key knowledge gaps in Iraq

Demographics and dynamics of Captagon usage

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime has noted the absence of reliable data on drug use within Iraq.¹¹⁷ Available evidence is therefore largely anecdotal, but reports indicate significant use among lower socio-economic strata and youth and surging usage in urban

113 FCDO programming in Jordan is surveyed here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-jordan-development-partnership-summary/uk-jordan-development-partnership-summary-july-2023>.

114 “Jordan Launches the Shamil Project supported by the UK to Strengthen Social Protection in the Country,” 21 March 2024, <https://www.developmentpathways.co.uk/news/jordan-launches-the-shamil-project-supported-by-the-uk-to-strengthen-social-protection-in-the-country/>.

115 Regional Office for the Middle East and North Africa, “Drug Trafficking Dynamics Across Iraq and the Middle East: Executive Summary,” *United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime*, March 2024, https://www.unodc.org/romena/uploads/documents/2024/UN_Iraq_ExSum_240318.pdf.

116 Khaled Yacoub Oweis, “Captagon crisis: Jordan’s struggle to curb the flow of narcotics from Syria,” *The National News*, 22 December 2022, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/mena/jordan/2022/12/22/captagon-crisis-jordans-struggle-to-curb-the-flow-of-narcotics-from-syria/>.

117 Regional Office for the Middle East and North Africa, “Drug Trafficking Dynamics Across Iraq and the Middle East: Executive Summary,” *United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime*, March 2024, https://www.unodc.org/romena/uploads/documents/2024/UN_Iraq_ExSum_240318.pdf.

centres across the country.¹¹⁸ Without more robust baseline information, there is also no clear way to understand the impact of interventions on Captagon trafficking and consumption. Without deep qualitative insight, prospective intervention strategies cannot be tailored to the local contexts of those who need treatment. Further, without far more robust quantitative data, it will remain all but impossible to accurately understand the scope of the challenge, and to measure the efficacy of different interventions and Iraq's overall success or failure in its efforts.

Security sector rivalries

The fight against Islamic State has greatly altered the landscape of power brokers in Iraq and has complicated the identification of key actors in illicit economies.¹¹⁹ This is particularly pronounced on the border with Syria, where militias hinder the ability to understand the loci of power, control of routes, and cross-group relationships. It is fundamentally important to begin to understand the dynamics between the Iran-aligned PMF and other security sector actors along the border. With a deeper understanding of internal security sector dynamics, policymakers will be better positioned to support and to manage expectations.

Within the Iraqi government, what are the exact dynamics between PMF militia groups beholden to Iran and their counterparts in the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF)? Prevailing rivalries and challenges within the overall ISF umbrella, into which the PMF has been formally integrated, are complex and not simply defined by sheer impunity for the militias. Moreover, the PMF itself is home to a broad constellation of militia groups, and the overarching entity is not simply the domain of IRGC-QF-aligned factions. In the context of ongoing power struggles within the ISF and the

Iraqi government's pursuit of sovereign control thereof, are there particular entities that might be empowered by external support to undermine the position of the so-called 'resistance' militias? How practical would such efforts be, in light of the militias' high-level influence among (and ability to intimidate) key senior members of the Iraqi government?

Local dynamics along the border

The Popular Mobilization Forces have been engaged in a sustained and expansive attempt to build loyalty among communities in which they operate across Iraq, in parallel to state efforts, described as a 'high-stakes struggle' because of the implications for victory and defeat at local, national, and regional levels.¹²⁰ Research has shown that, particularly in low socio-economic strata, the PMF act as middlemen connecting the population with government services, thereby strengthening their position in local communities, despite weak trust.¹²¹ Understanding local contexts will be pivotal to effective policy and will need to unpick how ethnic and socioeconomic variations affect relationships to the PMF.

In relation to Captagon efforts along Iraq's border with Syria, the literature offers little insight into the specifics of how Iran-aligned militias engage with local communities, and the extent to which the latter may be hostile to, complicit in, or consumers of the Captagon trade. To understand the local and regional ramifications of the Captagon trade, deciphering the intersections between trafficking and other illicit activities, such as illegal taxation, extortion, and oil trafficking is imperative. The extent to which militias are involved in this complex network will also underpin the formulation of a major policy question concerning emphasis on targeting key individuals in these

118 "Drug Trafficking Dynamics Across Iraq and the Middle East: Executive Summary," *United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime*, March 2024, https://www.unodc.org/romena/uploads/documents/2024/UN_Iraq_ExSum_240318.pdf.

119 "Drug Trafficking Dynamics Across Iraq and the Middle East: Executive Summary," *United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime*, March 2024.

120 Mac Skelton and Zmkan Ali Saleem, "Living among the Hashd: Relations Between Citizens and Security Actors in Five Iraqi Provinces," *Institute of Regional and International Studies*, July 2021, <https://www.aui.edu.krd/iris/sites/default/files/Living%20Among%20the%20Hashd%20-%20Relations%20Between%20Citizens%20and%20Security%20Actors.pdf>.

121 Mac Skelton and Zmkan Ali Saleem, "Living among the Hashd: Relations Between Citizens and Security Actors in Five Iraqi Provinces," *Institute of Regional and International Studies*, July 2021.

networks versus broadening the scope to address and examine the larger supply route actors. The study of crossing point communities can include a mix of qualitative research, including in-depth interviews, and community engagement. This qualitative data can be integrated with satellite data that examines traffic flows and population densities. Satellite data can be used to analyse patterns and trends in border crossings, helping authorities to identify areas of high risk and develop strategies to address them.

New approaches in Iraq

Technology-enabled transparency

The United States and other Western partners are ready to provide Iraq with additional technological resources to enhance border security in the fight against Captagon. How might technological tools be utilised to establish oversight and transparency along the border, providing a direct line of sight to oversight mechanisms within the Iraqi government and among the Iraqi people writ large? From cameras to satellite imagery to more cutting-edge monitoring systems using artificial intelligence, technology offers the prospect of greater transparency.¹²²

Efforts of this nature would doubtless encounter challenges in implementation and meet formidable resistance from the Iran-aligned militias. On the one hand, the very suggestion of implementing technology-enabled transparency would make any reticence on the part of the militias a source of public debate. On the other hand, emphasis on the importance of countering Captagon's mounting public health impacts (as opposed to an anti-militia narrative per se) might place a further burden of negative perception on any efforts to counter this line of approach.

Community-centric border security

Technology and infrastructure are not border security panaceas. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime highlights the importance of an 'all-of-society' approach to combating Captagon trafficking, in order to build ownership of initiatives and to create enduring strategies through shared understanding and commitments.¹²³ What might this look like along Iraq's border with Syria?

A powerful way to embed sustainable enfranchisement of the local population in counter-trafficking activities and to create a network for collating and disseminating information is through community policing programmes. Formalising law enforcement strategies that engage and involve communities can foster trust, create partnerships, open important lines of communication that capitalise on the significant information in the civilian population, and decentralise decision-making, allowing officers the autonomy to make decisions that benefit the local population. The implementation of this approach could be nested within a wider re-calibration of state-society relations along Iraq's border with Syria, which could reap broader counter-terrorism and stabilisation benefits for Iraq.

Enacting community policing initiatives will require a set of monitoring and evaluation practices that evaluate the effectiveness of these community policing initiatives. In particular, it is important to monitor community perceptions of police legitimacy and effectiveness, as well as the provision of essential intelligence to the police. This can be done through surveys, focus groups, and other community engagement activities. Research to understand how the impact of Captagon trafficking affects community cohesiveness will also shed light on impacts arising from the illicit economy.

122 Hannah Tyler, "The Increasing Use of Artificial Intelligence in Border Zones Prompts Privacy Questions," *Migration Policy Institute*, 2 February 2022. <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/artificial-intelligence-border-zones-privacy>.

123 Regional Office for the Middle East and North Africa, "Drug Trafficking Dynamics Across Iraq and the Middle East: Executive Summary," *United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime*, March 2024, https://www.unodc.org/romena/uploads/documents/2024/UN_Iraq_ExSum_240318.pdf.

Civil society, accountability, and public health

Iraq's public health sector is in ruins. There is a prospect of Western support for the Ministry of Health's long-term rehabilitation. However, prevailing corruption and wider political dynamics mean that the Ministry of Health is ill-suited to absorb large-scale support of this nature. As such, what opportunities might exist to leverage civil society in efforts to counter Captagon usage and mitigate public health impacts?

How might direct liaison by external actors with Iraqi civil society compensate for the failings of Iraq's public health system? In recent years, the Iraqi people have cultivated vibrant grassroots socio-political networks in pursuit of political and economic change. Their efforts have been violently suppressed. That said, could international actors (governments and non-governmental organisations alike) work with these networks on Captagon-related concerns? One line of effort could be toward developing a deeper understanding of Captagon usage within Iraq via civic research. Another could be a messaging campaign about the dangers of Captagon and the treatments available, set within a broader effort to destigmatise treatment for drug abuse. A third could be in the direct provision of treatment itself.

Key knowledge gaps in Jordan

Demographics and dynamics of Captagon usage

While Jordan possesses a far more robust health sector than Iraq, there are critical information gaps around the socio-cultural, demographic, gender-based, and economic dynamics of Captagon trafficking and usage. As a solution, structured

engagement with the Jordanian state and civil society could produce a range of actionable insights. From this understanding, a range of programmatic solutions could be pursued to address drug-related societal stigmas, general public awareness, and the development of evidenced-based treatments and interventions.

Domestic trafficking networks

The movement of Captagon through Jordan requires domestic smuggling networks to evade the state. The literature repeatedly references the numerous networks active across the Jordan-Syria border, and their increasing sophistication.¹²⁴ Beyond this, there are observations of how cross-border socio-economic connectivity between Syria and Jordan has given rise to smuggling trends that predate Captagon, and allusions to connectivity between the flows of Syrian refugees and of Captagon. These networks are not named or otherwise detailed, nor is there substantive insight into connectivity among them or between these networks and the human terrain of southern Syria or Jordan itself.

The border region Jordan shares with Syria is crisscrossed by tribal affiliations and beset by entrenched poverty. In 2022, unemployment ran to 23%.¹²⁵ Some of the cross-border Captagon runners are believed to be young Syrians with tribal ties on both sides of the border who can earn between US\$6,000 and US\$12,000 per run, according to one estimate.¹²⁶ Kinship ties facilitate trust and loyalty, which is of immense value in the fundamentally opaque illicit economy of drug trafficking. The significant human network available from these ties can enable traffickers to bring in trusted individuals to facilitate the drug smuggling process,

Away from the border, the mechanisms facilitating transportation across the interior of the country

124 Regional Office for the Middle East and North Africa, "Drug Trafficking Dynamics Across Iraq and the Middle East: Executive Summary," *United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime*, March 2024, https://www.unodc.org/romena/uploads/documents/2024/UN_Iraq_ExSum_240318.pdf.

125 Khaled Yacoub Oweis, "Captagon crisis: Jordan's struggle to curb the flow of narcotics from Syria," *The National News*, 22 December 2022, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/mena/jordan/2022/12/22/captagon-crisis-jordans-struggle-to-curb-the-flow-of-narcotics-from-syria/>.

126 Khaled Yacoub Oweis, "Captagon crisis: Jordan's struggle to curb the flow of narcotics from Syria," *The National News*, 22 December 2022.

are poorly understood and polydrug criminality may be taking place, with organised groups involved in transportation of more than one narcotic, once the trafficking networks have been established. New research agendas should investigate the extent to which poly-trafficking occurs along existing lines. For example, the many refugees who have fled the Syrian conflict are now highly vulnerable to exploitation and trafficking; organised crime that profits from human trafficking may also be complicit in drug trafficking as illicit corridors in Jordan become embedded. Understanding the ways in which traffickers have evolved their methods to combat increased interdiction efforts is challenged by the ever-improving finances of those involved in the cross-border Captagon trade. In addition, developing feasible policies to fight corruption, and promoting policies that offer alternatives to the lucrative narcotics trade, are imperative to enduring solutions.¹²⁷

New approaches in Jordan

Technological solutions to combat cross-border trafficking have limitations that are exposed by the practical realities of enforcement along a more than 300-kilometer border. For instance, in bad weather, Jordan's tower surveillance system has reduced effectiveness, particularly in the remote al-Harra region of the border.¹²⁸ Moreover, the remoteness of stretches along the border means that 'detection' of potential threats or crossings cannot necessarily lead to interdiction by Jordanian forces. Where there are technological limits, new approaches are needed to combat the lucrative trade. Further, an understanding of the social context could shed light on the extent to which tribal dynamics facilitate trafficking, as well as how internal flows across the country function.

The continued push for integration

Due to the qualities and competencies of the Jordanian government, there is a breadth of opportunities for Jordan's external partners to support an integrated counter-Captagon strategy that blends improved border security, enhanced domestic targeting of trafficking and production networks, and public health and outreach to support those suffering from Captagon usage. As a concurrent and complementary line of effort, Jordanian civil society also offers numerous potential points of engagement in support of public health.

Critically, an integrated inter-agency approach to resolving the Captagon problem requires a shared inter-agency understanding of the issues at hand. Information sharing is thus a critical priority, particularly between the military (which has taken the lead on hardening the border with Syria and targeting Syrian networks active in the drug trade) and the intelligence and law enforcement entities that have responsibility (and jurisdiction) within Jordan itself.

Uprooting domestic networks

The Jordanian government can continue to pursue Jordanian trafficking and distribution networks through traditional military, intelligence, and law enforcement means (lines of effort that are already underway). Concurrently, constructive outreach via the government and civil society alike could be calibrated to uproot these networks from Jordan's human terrain. Central to such an effort would be a nuanced understanding of the social, economic, and demographic dynamics that have drawn Jordanian smuggling networks and

¹²⁷ There are many examples globally of the failure to foresee the effects of supply side disruption efforts being catastrophic for communities, such as forced crop eradication in Latin America driving vulnerable communities deeper into poverty; and, widespread human rights violations arising from militarised state prosecution of interdiction activities. In that region, international efforts were hindered by entrenched corruption that diluted the impact of initiatives. The clear lesson is to promote initiatives that emphasise long-term sustainability and empower local actors, having them lead on the design and implementation of activities.

¹²⁸ Khaled Yacoub Oweis, "Captagon crisis: Jordan's struggle to curb the flow of narcotics from Syria," *The National News*, 22 December 2022.

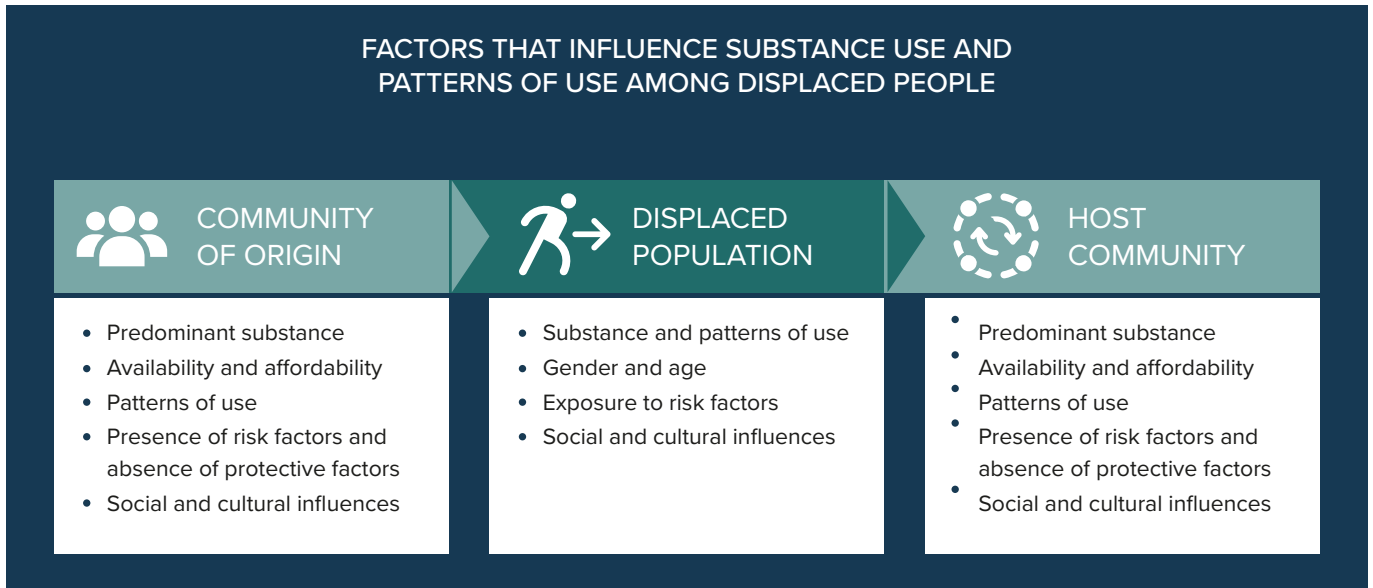


Figure 5: Factors that influence substance use and patterns of use among displaced people. United Nations, World Drug Report 2023.

possibly Syrian refugees into the Captagon trade. Furthermore, along the immediate border area, a deeper understanding of the mechanisms and drivers of long-standing informal economics—and how they have or have not been subsumed into the Captagon trade—might enable a more constructive posture on the part of Jordanian interdiction efforts.

Expanding international coordination for innovative practices

In May 2023, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) held a three-day workshop with Jordanian partners to improve border security in the country: the attendees included INTERPOL, the United Nations, and the European Union in an initiative designed to create powerful multilateral assistance initiatives that develop best practices for the Jordanian Armed Forces.¹²⁹

European partners are well-resourced to form a wide-ranging civil-military framework in Jordan, to enhance border protection and develop multi-dimensional responses to trafficking. In addition, the Jordan civil-military hub can be expanded to encompass a regional response, for as the UN Office on Drugs and Crime notes, addressing this threat ‘requires regional coordination, law enforcement, and criminal justice responses informed by data; balanced with evidence-based and health-centred demand reduction efforts; and owned by the governments and people of the region’.¹³⁰

Civilian efforts will include emphasis on prevention and treatment initiative: the significant numbers of displaced people in Jordan and regionally are highly vulnerable to substance abuse due to stress and trauma, lack of social support, and fragile financial stability accompanied by high levels of unemployment. Tackling these complex issues will require collaboration across a diverse range of actors that include national and local government, civil society, and religious leaders.

129 “NATO and Jordan discuss border security cooperation,” *North Atlantic Treaty Organisation*, 17 May 2023, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_214656.htm?selectedLocale=en.

130 Office on Drugs and Crime, “Methamphetamine and “Captagon” threat in the Middle East,” *United Nations*, 18 March 2024, <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/speeches/2024/cnd67-methamphetamine-and-captagon-threat-in-the-middle-east.html>.

Many European Union initiatives already in place can be expanded or replicated to facilitate this work. For example, the EU4Monitoring Drugs programme funded by the European Union can identify emerging trafficking routes in the Middle East, particularly in Iraq. With the escalating size of the Captagon trade in the region, and its increasing impact on European stability, doing so is a security imperative.

Similarly, the EU's Border Management Programme in Central Asia can be replicated in the Middle East, particularly its focus on capacity building and institutional development at the regional level. It can expand these programs in light of the complexity and scale of the problem, partnering with military alliances such as NATO to create powerful civil-military synergies to disrupt Captagon trafficking and put in place intelligence ecosystems in order to better understand the myriad overlapping dimensions of the Captagon problem.

Conclusion

Captagon is an easily synthesised proscribed amphetamine which has become a staple of illegal drug use in the Middle East and North Africa. High levels of demand – from users ranging from wealthy recreational users in the Gulf States to others in the region including the poor, the young, and soldiers or militants – coupled with relatively simple production methods have driven industrial-levels of supply. As a result, complex cross-border Captagon ecosystems have developed in the region and beyond.

The package of sanctions against members of the Assad regime in Syria, levelled by the US, UK, and EU in 2023 and expanded in 2024, highlights a fundamental geopolitical quality of the current Captagon trade.¹³¹ For Syria, various Iran-backed

Shi'a militias, and for the IRGC-QF itself, Captagon provides powerful financial resources to fund both domestic agendas and regional aspirations alike. As seen in Jordan, meanwhile, the Syrian-Iranian axis has begun to take a further step beyond simply leveraging Captagon as a revenue source, using the drug as a vector of destabilisation and political subterfuge.

Iraq's legacy of conflict has left a fractured political system and a beleaguered populace. Iran-aligned militias are fighting to retain their impunity, and key border crossings remain under their control. As a result, significant trafficking has also resulted in a rapidly escalating consumer market in Iraq; leakage from smuggling particularly impacts the country's young population beset by high unemployment rates.

To counter Iraq's challenges, international partners have resourced technological solutions. The United States has funded the construction of border forts and provided training and equipment, whilst the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime has worked with Iraq since 2019 on border management at Baghdad Airport and its land border crossings. But recent arrests and drug seizures, including the detention of more than 1,400 individuals suspected of involvement in drugs trafficking in February 2024 alone, point to the limitations of technological efforts and the need to better understand the societal dynamics of the trade to improve policy.¹³²

Jordan has historically possessed greater internal political stability than Iraq and has been a long-time partner for the United States in the region. Yet there are profound social stigmas regarding drug use and treatment, as well as limited public services, which have exacerbated the social impact of Captagon in the country and hindered national dialogue. Moreover, Jordan has long-served as a trafficking route due to pervasive tribal systems that ensure cross-border movement of illicit goods, and inadequate border policing

131 For the most recent US-led action on Captagon, see: <https://www.state.gov/sanctions-on-financial-facilitators-and-illicit-drug-traffickers-supporting-syrias-assad-regime/>.

132 Amr Salem, "More than 1,400 suspects arrested on drug-related offenses in February," *Iraqi News*, 5 March 2024.

in the face of sophisticated, well-equipped smugglers.

Jordan is receiving substantial support from international partners to combat trafficking, with the US and EU leading on initiatives that emphasise information-sharing and technological transfers, as part of broader security concerns of material trafficking across the border from Syria. But Jordan and its ally the United States are at odds on a stark geopolitical choice: to isolate Bashar al-Assad's Syrian government and further militarise its approach to the border, or to pursue political and economic normalisation. United States sanctions against elements of the Assad regime in 2023 in relationship to trafficking point to the challenge Jordan faces in integrating two contrasting approaches to the country.

For all the recent activity by the United States and European Union to increase resourcing to combat Captagon trafficking, new ideas and approaches are needed. Effective policy first requires a broader evidence base of activities than that which currently exists. There is a pronounced need to understand the local and regional ramifications of the Captagon trade, and likewise for Jordan and Iraq's Western partners to delineate the extent to which they are interested in combatting Captagon in and of itself, versus an anti-Captagon strategy that is a subset of a regional campaign against the Syrian-Iranian axis.

International partners will also need to cement policies and initiatives as being led by local government and communities. Such an approach will enhance the sustainability and impact of policy by empowering local communities, strengthening capacities, and aligning initiatives with local needs and contexts. In Jordan, the state offers the prospect of a robust and capable local partner—while lines of effort may also be pursued through civil society. In Iraq, the state suffers from structural blockages to efficacy in a counter-Captagon campaign. As such, Western partners might benefit from a redoubled focus on civil society partnership. Tackling the pervasive Captagon problem, with its demand- and supply-side challenges, will need increased focus from public health and law enforcement agencies, and

a commitment to curbing systemic corruption. There is also the wider question facing all parties involved in efforts to combat Captagon production, usage, and trafficking: how are the enormous revenues generated by the Captagon trade laundered, and how might the associated networks and systems be disrupted?



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