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# Border Traffic: How Syria Uses Captagon to Gain Leverage Over Saudi Arabia

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Since 2011, the Gulf region has seen a significant escalation in the scale and sophistication of drug trafficking. There has been a particular increase in the supply of Captagon, a codrug of amphetamine and theophylline, whose consumption threatens social peace. However, the issue extends beyond organized crime to affect politics. The Syrian regime of President Bashar al-Assad and its allies have leveraged Captagon trafficking as a means of exerting pressure on the Gulf states, notably Saudi Arabia, to reintegrate Syria into the Arab world and secure concessions that would allow the regime to reinforce its position after thirteen years of conflict.

However, even this may not be enough to curb Captagon supplies, as production of the drug is intertwined with the interests of powerful interest groups in Syria, including senior members of the leadership. To secure the Assad regime's cooperation, Saudi concessions would need to be substantial, addressing the regime's critical need for financial resources, reconstruction aid, and political support against Western demands for

regime change. And even then, the external obstacles to an agreement would have to be removed, which is unlikely in the near future. Without a comprehensive package that addresses the various dimensions of the Captagon trade, as well as the broader crisis in Syria, little progress can be expected in resolving this issue.

## A Threat to Gulf Societies

On April 23, 2022, a man from Qatif in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia poured gasoline in his house and set fire to it, killing four members of his family. The offender, who was in his twenties, [carried out the crime](#) while under the influence of Captagon.

The incident was but one example of the ways the drug has damaged lives in the kingdom. Among the Gulf states, Saudi Arabia is the country most targeted by Captagon traffickers, because of its large market and extensive borders with Jordan and Iraq. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime



(UNODC), the [largest quantities](#) of Captagon seized between 2012 and 2021, around 67 percent, were in the kingdom, leading [media outlets](#) to dub it the drug capital of the Middle East.

Captagon was first manufactured in 1961 by a German company, Degussa Pharma Gruppe, as an alternative to amphetamine and methamphetamine, which were used at the time to treat narcolepsy, fatigue, and behavioral disorders. However, Captagon was later found to be highly addictive and detrimental to mental and physical health, so that by the 1980s the medical community had determined that the risks it posed outweighed its benefits, which resulted in a worldwide ban of the drug.

Despite the ban, an [illicit version](#) of the drug continued to be produced in Eastern Europe and later in the Arab world, becoming prominent during the conflict in Syria after 2011. Nicknamed “the drug of jihad” or “the poor man’s cocaine,” Captagon enhances focus and staves off sleep and hunger, partly explaining its popularity among combatants, who need to stay alert. However, it also has the [potential](#) to cause confusion and hallucinations, affecting impulse control and judgment.

While [drug use in Saudi Arabia](#) is not new, it never posed significant social problems until the influx of Captagon. According to a 2023 report by [UNODC](#), Syria and Lebanon are the primary sources of Captagon shipments to the Gulf. This prompted the kingdom to implement an [import ban on all Lebanese products](#) in 2021 to curb drug smuggling. In August 2022, the [Saudi ambassador in Beirut](#) reported that the authorities in the kingdom had confiscated 700 million tablets smuggled from Lebanon since 2014. That same year, the Saudis [discovered](#) 46 million tablets concealed in a wheat shipment to Riyadh. In December 2022, over 2.9 million tablets were [confiscated](#) at the Haditha border crossing with Jordan and the Rubaa al-Khali border crossing with Oman.

Traffickers use both land and maritime transportation routes to export Captagon, sometimes employing itineraries through [Europe](#). All kinds of techniques have been used to conceal the drug. For example, in [March 2023](#) the Saudi Zakat, Tax, and Customs Authority intercepted 3.3 million tablets in three shipments—one hidden in truck tires at the Saudi Red Sea port of Duba, another concealed in a truck’s air tank at the same port, and a third discovered in a [shipment](#) of fruits and vegetables at the Haditha crossing. In April 2023, 12.7 million tablets were found in [pomegranates](#) at Jeddah port, followed by the discovery in May 2023 of 8.3 million tablets in Riyadh concealed in a shipment of coffee creams. In [January 2024](#), the authorities discovered 841,000 tablets hidden in metal boxes in a truck at the Haditha crossing, and in March 2024 the authorities found 1 million tablets hidden in cantaloupes at Duba port.

Though recent statistics on youth usage in Saudi Arabia are unavailable, in 2015 the secretary general of Saudi Arabia’s National Committee for Narcotics Control said that a majority of the kingdom’s drug addicts [were between twelve and twenty-two years old](#). While the factors attracting young Saudis to Captagon require more research, anecdotal evidence suggests that [students](#) use Captagon to cope with exams, while laborers use it to [increase](#) their endurance. Some individuals use it [recreationally](#), out of boredom, because of peer pressure, or just to experiment.

The severity of Saudi Arabia’s Captagon problem has led the authorities to respond in various ways, although [security](#) methods have been prioritized. In May 2023, Interior Minister Prince Abdul-Aziz bin Saud [pledged](#) “to target drug traffickers, smugglers, and anyone seeking to harm the kingdom or its people,” while the General Directorate of Narcotics Control [announced](#) arrests for selling Captagon. The kingdom has bolstered coordination among its security agencies and increased

their budgets to fight drug trafficking. It has also used [artificial intelligence](#) to target the cross-border drug trade and combat money laundering. Despite strict laws against the import, manufacture, possession, and use of illicit drugs, this approach appears to have had limited success.

The kingdom has also adopted other ways of addressing the drug crisis among youths. It has focused on [rehabilitation](#), for example, recognizing that early intervention increases users' chances of recovery and reduces the risk of relapse. At the same time, the government, according to two sources at the Ministry of Culture, has launched initiatives to engage young people in [cultural activities](#), in such a way that they would be less likely to use drugs.<sup>1</sup> Officials believe that engaging them in cultural activities can help foster a sense of belonging, provide healthy coping mechanisms, and boost self-esteem, which can reduce the risk of substance abuse.<sup>2</sup> It is common to see citizens [tweeting](#) about the risks of the drug, while others remind the public about the penalties for involvement in drug-related activities. However, this has done little to lessen the gravity of the problem, forcing the kingdom to turn to political means to prevent or contain the production and distribution of Captagon.

## The Assad Regime's Strategy and the Saudi Dilemma

The Syrian regime, while it has denied involvement in the production and distribution of Captagon to the Gulf states, is trafficking the drug as a [primary source](#) of hard currency. The networks involved in this process include members of the leadership's [inner circle](#). The regime is also leveraging Captagon to [pressure](#) Gulf States into reintegrating Syria into the Arab world and ending its political and economic isolation.

In 2021, the Center for Operational Analysis and Research (COAR), a political risk and development consultancy, [observed](#) that Syria should be regarded as the epicenter of the regional Captagon trade, serving as both a transit point and consumer market. The report also noted that Captagon production had become more industrialized, adaptive, and technically sophisticated than previously. This prompted the passage of the [Captagon Act](#) in the U.S. House of Representatives in 2022. The legislation required that the U.S. government develop an interagency strategy to disrupt and dismantle narcotics production and trafficking as well as networks affiliated with the Assad regime. In response, the Biden administration [presented its plan in 2023](#).

Before the 2011 uprising, Syria was not known for drug production and distribution. In fact, it had stringent regulations against drug use. However, after the [United States](#) and Arab states imposed economic sanctions on Syria starting in 2011, in response to human rights abuses against the population, the regime [turned Syria](#) into the world's [largest](#) exporter of Captagon. The media has since dubbed Syria a "[narco state](#)," as the narcotics trade constitutes a substantial part of its economy.

How much the Assad regime makes off of Captagon's trade is difficult to determine. [An investigation by Germany's Der Spiegel](#) estimated that the income from the drug in 2021 was around \$5.7 billion, while [other sources](#) placed the figure as high as \$30 billion for the same year. The [World Bank](#) estimated Syria's gross national product in 2021 at \$8.9 billion, [a decline from \\$60.04 billion in 2010](#). This showed both the government's loss of income because of the Syrian conflict and the large role the Captagon trade now plays in the Syrian economy. Indeed, the United States and the United Kingdom have [claimed](#) that Syria's Captagon trade is worth around three times that of the combined trade of the Mexican cartels.



The Assad regime relies on a sophisticated network of allies for the production and distribution of Captagon. [According to COAR](#), this includes key military and security units, such as the elite [Fourth Armored Division](#) of the Syrian army, commanded by Bashar al-Assad's brother Maher, [Air Force Intelligence](#), and the [Republican Guard](#). It also involves local militias, including the [National Defense Forces](#), the [Baath Brigades](#), and [Saraya al-Areen](#), a Latakia-based militia, as well as foreign armed groups of various affiliations, such as Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and Hezbollah.

An [investigation](#) by *Der Spiegel* of a confiscated shipment of 14 tons of Captagon at the Italian port of Salerno in July 2020 revealed that the drugs in the shipment had been manufactured by Samer Kamal al-Assad, a wealthy Syrian businessman and the president's paternal cousin. Samer, who manages a variety of corporate entities, [operates one of several Captagon factories](#) situated in Al-Basa, south of Latakia. The investigation further disclosed that the shipment was initially shipped from the Latakia port, which is under the control of Maher al-Assad, who reportedly [oversees much of the production and distribution of Captagon](#) through the Fourth Armored Division.

The extent and depth of this network were evident after the United States and the United Kingdom imposed [sanctions](#) on Syrian individuals involved in the Captagon trade in March 2023, including the freezing of their assets and travel bans. The sanctions list included [Samer Kamal al-Assad](#); [Abdullatif Hamid](#), a prominent businessperson who uses his factories for packaging Captagon pills and has ties to the 2020 Captagon seizure in Salerno; [Imad Abu Zureiq](#) and [Mustafa al-Masalmeh](#), both of them militia leaders in southern Syria; [Taher al-Kayali](#), a business magnate linked to the Captagon industry; [Amer Khiti](#), a Syrian politician who oversees businesses that facilitate the production and smuggling of Captagon; [Hassan](#)

[Mohammed Daqqou](#), dubbed the “king” or “emperor” of Captagon, who has connections with Hezbollah. It also included [Mohammed Shalish](#), who is involved in shipping; [Raji Falhout](#), a militia leader in Suwayda who uses his headquarters for Captagon production; [Wasim Badiia al-Assad](#), another cousin of the president, who assists in Captagon manufacturing and trafficking; and [Nuh Zaiter](#), a prominent Lebanese narcotics trafficker associated with the Assad regime and Hezbollah.

The profit margin from the Captagon trade is extremely high, explaining its attraction for the Syrian regime and its allies. The affluent populations of the Gulf states can afford the drug's relatively high prices, which, though they are lower than other drugs, remain substantial. The [cost of producing a Captagon tablet](#) is around \$1, and it can be sold for \$14–\$20. However, the political objectives behind the trafficking are equally important for the Assad regime, which sees the drug as a lever to mend and enhance relations with the Gulf states. These ties are vital for the regime's legitimacy, as well as for securing reconstruction aid and financial support after years of war.

One of the factors influencing Saudi Arabia's and the GCC states' rapprochement with the Assad regime in May 2023 may well have been recognition [that it was necessary to cooperate with the Syrian regime](#) to address Captagon trafficking. While Syria has agreed to cooperate with Jordan and Iraq in identifying sources of drug production and trafficking, this commitment should be viewed with caution for several reasons.

First, the significant profits the Syrian regime derives from Captagon mean it may be very reluctant to curb this activity without substantial incentives. With the Syrian economy already strained by U.S. and European sanctions—when the U.S. Congress [passed the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act in December 2019](#), Syria's GDP was \$22.6 billion, [while a year later it had dropped to \\$11.16 billion](#)—the Assad regime is unlikely

to abandon a multibillion-dollar industry amid Syria's economic crisis. Moreover, Assad and his associates are heavily reliant on the revenues from Captagon trafficking to sustain the loyalty of military units and militias, a key factor in the regime's survival. It won't sacrifice this without securing alternative funding sources.

Second, even if the Assad regime finds the will to curb Captagon production and distribution, there are no assurances it has the capacity to do so effectively. It may struggle to control all actors involved in the Captagon trade, as the network is extensive and includes many players outside its control. The Syrian army and security apparatus have become [fragmented](#) and corrupt, with pro-regime militias and profiteers pursuing their own agendas, many of them having a vested interest in allowing trafficking to continue. Furthermore, the [proliferation of security actors and foreign involvement](#) has made civil-military relations more unpredictable, increasing the likelihood the regime will be challenged.

In other words, there is no inner circle of trusted generals and advisers around the president dictating actions, but rather "[networks operating in a quasi-autonomous fashion](#)," composed of many domains—the army, security services, business and industry, local militias, organized crime, and traffickers—all operating with a significant degree of decentralization. Moreover, the regime's power rests on [unstable transactional relationships](#) with domestic factions and external players, mainly Russia and Iran. There are no top-down orders Assad can issue, which he would expect to be implemented without complication. Indeed, in the same month that Riyadh hosted Assad at the May 2023 Arab summit, it [seized](#) 8 million Captagon pills originating from Syria.

Third, even if they were inclined to do so, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states are not in a position to meet the Assad regime's demands. While GCC countries can confer some political legitimacy on Syria by including

it in Arab summit meetings, they have limited influence on the ground in the country. More control is wielded by Turkey in Idlib and by the United States in Kurdish-controlled northwestern Syria, while the political process to resolve the Syrian crisis remains stalled due to disagreements among key players, including Russia, Turkey, Iran, the United States, and other Western countries.

With regard to reconstruction, even if Saudi Arabia and other GCC states are disposed to being involved, they could not do anything until U.S. and European sanctions are lifted. However, Washington [opposes any diplomatic or economic rapprochement](#) between the Arab states and Syria. Given these constraints, and knowing that it is improbable the Assad regime will curtail the Captagon trade, Saudi Arabia itself has little incentive to provide financial support for the regime. This underlines a structural problem in addressing Captagon trafficking, which is often recurring when dealing with Syria. The regime goes to great efforts to secure leverage in its dealings with other countries, but is rarely willing to surrender its leverage once it achieves its objectives, seeing this as a step that would deny it the political power it has accumulated. That is why all solutions to Captagon production and trafficking seem so far off today.

## Conclusion

The future impact of Captagon on Gulf-Syria relations will hinge on a multifaceted approach that addresses both the immediate logistical challenges of curbing drug trafficking as well as its broader geopolitical implications. This includes enhancing international collaboration, strengthening border security, and fostering economic alternatives for those involved in the drug trade. Additionally, a shift toward a more integrated regional policy, involving key stakeholders—Syria, the Gulf states, and international powers—may

provide a sustainable solution to the problem. Yet such a strategy requires resolving the Syrian conflict, a tall order.

Tackling the Captagon crisis also requires understanding its deep-seated causes and implications. Only through a comprehensive and unified regional and international effort that circumvents reliance on the Assad regime can the Gulf states hope to mitigate this challenge and move toward a more stable and secure future. Meanwhile, Gulf countries and the international community can support local communities and organizations in Syria who take active roles in counter-narcotics efforts, thereby reducing the regime's influence. Additionally, leveraging diplomatic channels to foster agreements on drug control with nonregime actors can further undermine the Assad regime's control over the Captagon trade.

## About the Author

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## Notes

- 1 Phone interview with a consultant at the Saudi Ministry of Culture, Riyadh, June 3, 2024.
- 2 Phone interview with an expert at the Saudi Ministry of Culture, Riyadh, June 3, 2024.



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