

"Syrian Captagon": A Resource for Sustaining the Crisis and a Tool of Soft Warfare

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Introduction

The production and trafficking of drugs within societies have posed a significant challenge for many governments worldwide, given their destructive impact on individuals and communities across various economic, social, and psychological aspects. However, what further amplifies the risks is when governments, states, and military organizations dominate their production and smuggling, leading to a multiplication of production and the utilization of their proceeds to sustain conflicts and wars. As the objectives of this trade shift from obtaining economic resources to becoming a tool of soft warfare between domestically conflicting forces and internationally struggling states, it has become a concern for all parties targeted by its promoters regionally and internationally. This has prompted some global powers, including the United States, to enact legislations and strategies to contain, encircle, and mitigate its risks.

Undoubtedly, the issue of illicit drug trade, psychoactive substances, and chemical precursors is one of the security agendas that invariably surfaces in any conference, seminar, or international forum. It is recognized as an international problem that, over the past two decades, has increasingly troubled global peace and security.

The Problem of the Study

It is widely acknowledged that issues related to drug production and trafficking are linked to illicit networks operating outside the realm of law and state systems. It is the responsibility of a state to combat such activities. However, in the case of Syria, the state itself has turned into a patron or protector of drug production and smuggling networks. Additionally, many of these networks are connected to regional powers

intervening in Syria, such as Iran and Turkey. This has transformed drugs from being a source of financial gain into a tool of soft warfare among conflicting forces within and outside Syria. Its resources have become instrumental in sustaining the Syrian crisis, exacerbating social and economic collapse within the country, and destabilizing regional and international security.

Another aspect of the problem lies in the fact that the production and export of narcotics from Syria are direct outcomes of its prolonged conflict. The Syrian geography, divided into various zones of control due to the prolonged conflict, has become fertile ground for drug production and smuggling by the warring factions.

However, can the international community put an end to the problem of Syria becoming the world's largest producer of drugs, notably "Captagon," without addressing the root causes of this transformation? Can it effectively end the political crisis, regional and international interventions within its territory? What mechanisms, both local and international, can be adopted to eliminate this dilemma?

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study lies in its exploration of the reasons behind Syria's transformation into a major drug-producing and trafficking state, particularly focusing on "Captagon." It seeks to identify the entities responsible for Syria's shift into the realm of being known as the "Captagon Country" and its connection to undermining societal, regional, and international security. Additionally, the study aims to analyze the consequences of this transformation on the targeted communities.

Furthermore, the importance of this study is underscored by its examination of the methods and strategies pursued by the United States and regional states to curb the production and trafficking of narcotics from Syria. It also assesses the effectiveness of these approaches that do not address the fundamental resolution of the Syrian crisis.

Study Objectives

The study aims to achieve the following objectives:

- To illustrate the extent of drug production and trafficking in Syria and the economic, psychological, and social damages it inflicts upon Syrian society as well as communities within regional and global contexts.

- To explore ways to confront this phenomenon at both local and international levels, and to determine whether political conditions allow for the coordination of international anti-drug initiatives, with or without the involvement of the Syrian government.

- This study raises awareness about certain local and international risks stemming from the increasing production of "Captagon" in Syria. It also proposes solutions and recommendations that have the potential to combat this dangerous phenomenon on both local and global scales.

Study Contents

-Introduction

-Chapter One:

"Syrian Captagon" from Production to Smuggling:

1. Causes of Increased Drug Production and Smuggling in Syria and those Behind It.
2. External Routes and Methods of Smuggling.

-Chapter Two:

Risks of the Transformation of "Captagon" from an Economic Resource to a Tool of Soft Warfare:

1. Transformation of "Captagon" into a Tool of Soft Warfare Targeting Domestic and International Adversaries.
2. Internal and External Risks of Syria's Transformation into a "Drug Country."

-Chapter Three:

Counteraction Strategies:

1. Provisions of the US House of Representatives Resolution to Combat Syrian Captagon.
2. Implementation Methods of the Resolution and its Implications on Drug-Producing Entities.
3. Strategic Objectives of the Resolution Project.

-Conclusion

Introduction

The drug trade is considered a significant avenue in the economies of regimes that have lost conventional state elements. Drug production serves as a vital financial resource that often surpasses regular trade. Among the regimes accused of relying on this funding source are the Syrian regime and its Iranian backers, as well as the Turkish government, which depends on drug "cartels" both inside and outside Syria. Numerous investigations, and Western and Arab documents, indicate that drug production and trade are predominantly managed by the ruling authority and its associates, whether directly or indirectly. Consequently, the proceeds from this trade inherently contribute to sustaining the conflict in Syria, exacerbating the economic, social, and moral deterioration of Syrian society, as well as the societies targeted by drug traffickers.

Given that the massive production and trade of drugs under the patronage of regimes and governments have serious regional and international implications, the United States House of Representatives recently took a step to tighten the grip on the sources of financing for the Syrian regime and Iranian militias in Syria and Lebanon. This move further isolates the Syrian regime politically. On September 20, 2022, the US House of Representatives passed a bill urging the federal government to develop a joint strategy among agencies to disrupt and dismantle drug production and trafficking operations in Syria, recognizing them as a cross-border threat.

This move, at this particular time amid various regional and international developments and changes, raises numerous questions regarding the objectives of the US House of Representatives in passing this legislation to disrupt drug production in Syria. What would be the repercussions of implementing this decision on the Syrian and Iranian regimes, as well as their affiliated militias? Why has Syria transformed into the world's foremost drug-producing state? What are the impacts and risks on Syrian society, regional countries, and the world at large? We will attempt to address these questions through this study.

The Captagon Drug and its Addiction Risks:

Captagon is among the most popular drugs in the Middle East due to its ease of manufacture, distribution, and substantial imports. Captagon is one of the brand names for the drug "phenethylamine hydrochloride," first discovered in 1961 by the German company "Degussa."

Captagon belongs to the family of drugs known as "amphetamines." When consumed, it stimulates the central nervous system, leading to increased alertness, concentration, physical performance, and a sense of comfort. "Scientists state that Captagon is an enhanced amphetamine, incorporating unique chemical compounds that allow it to have a much stronger and faster psychoactive effect compared to amphetamine alone."¹

Reports indicate that Captagon was initially prescribed in the 1960s to treat depression and conditions related to sensory loss. However, by the 1980s, doctors discovered that Captagon's addictive properties outweighed its clinical benefits, leading to its prohibition in most parts of the world. Prolonged use of Captagon can result in side effects such as severe depression, sleep deprivation, cardiovascular toxicity, and malnutrition, according to the US Department of Justice.

In 1986, the use of Captagon was banned in most countries due to its detrimental impact on public health, in addition to its addictive nature.

¹ Alhurra TV, U.S. "Captagon: The Most Popular Drug Story in the Middle East," December 18, 2021.

Chapter One

"Syrian Captagon" from Production to Smuggling

Part One - Reasons for the Increase in Drug Production and Smuggling in Syria and Who Manages It?

After the outbreak of the Syrian crisis and the Syrian regime's loss of local resources such as oil, strategic crops, and even humanitarian aid, coupled with the imposition of international sanctions on the regime, the trade in narcotics emerged as one of the most prominent aspects of the Syrian war economy. The regime began to use it as a means of political and economic survival. According to a study by the Center for Operational Analysis and Research (COAR) on the Syrian economy during wartime, Syria has become "a global hub for Captagon production." The study estimated Syria's exports of Captagon in 2020 to be worth at least \$3.46 billion USD. The size of the Syrian drug economy, particularly the trade value of Captagon pills, is estimated at around \$16 billion USD annually, which is three times the Syrian government's budget for 2022.

The division of Syrian geography into several areas of control contributed to the revival of drug traders' and distributors' activities, especially in border regions. The production and smuggling escalated further with the dominance of numerous armed groups and factions over this trade, which has become a primary source of logistical funding and arms purchases, especially in areas under Turkish occupation. These areas lack natural resources compared to the Autonomous Administration areas, which are rich in petroleum and agricultural resources. Consequently, internal and external crossings have become the main sources of income for these factions, leading to conflicts and clashes among them over control and the resources of these border crossings.

However, who manages the trade of these substances within Syria's various regions of control, and what are the prominent manufacturing areas and smuggling routes?

1. Areas Under the Syrian Government's Control

According to a report by the Center for Operational Analysis and Research (COAR) in October 2022, around 50 current drug manufacturing sites were identified in areas

under the control of the Syrian government and Iranian militias. These sites include approximately 14 Captagon manufacturing centers, 12 crystal meth manufacturing centers, and 23 hashish manufacturing centers. These factories are predominantly located along the Damascus-Homs road and in other industrial areas. Additionally, a report by the "Syrian Observatory for Human Rights" in September last year identified 7 centers in Deir ez-Zor dedicated to Captagon production and managed by Iranian militias.

Despite the Syrian regime's denial of involvement in the drug trade, there has been a noticeable increase in drug trade within Syria. The amount of seizures announced by the head of the Drug Enforcement Administration in Syria, Colonel Nidal Jurayj, is significant. He stated that "during the current year, 6,625 cases were detected, 851,621 individuals were arrested, 1,887 kilograms of narcotic hashish were confiscated, along with 23,915,959 Captagon pills, 107,583 psychoactive pills, 6.5 kilograms of heroin, 45 kilograms of cocaine, 2.3 kilograms of Indian hemp seeds, and 23 kilograms of amphetamines."²

In contrast, numerous reports and investigations conducted by international media outlets accuse "individuals close to the Syrian government, the ruling family, and Iranian-affiliated militias in Syria and Lebanon of running drug production and trade networks." A report by the American "New Lines Institute" on April 5, 2022, revealed the involvement of individuals from Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's family and senior officials in the Syrian regime, in addition to the Lebanese "Hezbollah" militia, in the production and smuggling of Captagon from Syria. According to sources from the "Syrian Observatory for Human Rights," Lebanese and Iranian experts oversee drug production and cultivation of hashish within the areas of influence of Iranian-affiliated militias, especially in the city of Deir ez-Zor and its countryside.

Given that the Iranian side continues its constant efforts to solidify its presence in Syria on all fronts, it also needs diverse sources of income to achieve these goals. Therefore, "drug trade" is one of the primary sources of income for Iranian-affiliated militias in Syria. A report by the "New Lines Institute" emphasized that "the trade of narcotic Captagon pills in the Middle East significantly expanded during 2021, exceeding a value of \$5 billion. It confirmed that Syria is the primary source of Captagon and that

² " Official Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA), September 8, 2022."

the value of Captagon exports surpasses legitimate exports, leading to Syria being labeled a 'drug state.'" Moreover, the French newspaper "Le Figaro," on September 19, reported intelligence sources from Jordan stating that "the Fourth Division militia led by Maher, the brother of Bashar al-Assad, is the main entity responsible for the manufacturing and smuggling of Captagon, in cooperation with Syrian Military Intelligence and Lebanese Hezbollah party." An investigation published by the "New York Times" on December 5, 2021, corroborated this information, listing the militias involved, which include Lebanese Hezbollah, Iraqi Hezbollah, Iran's Revolutionary Guard, "Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq" affiliated with the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces, "Al-Abdal" affiliated with the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces, "National Defense," the Fourth Division, and the "Army of Tribes" comprising fighters from the "Bakara, Busraia, and Shuaytat" tribes.

The German newspaper "Der Spiegel" stated that investigators have come to the conclusion that "all drug deals in Syria are protected by the Assad regime." They found evidence indicating that the "Fourth Division," led by Maher al-Assad, the brother of Bashar al-Assad, obtains funds through drug shipments. It is believed that the unit receives \$300,000 for each container shipped from Latakia, along with an additional \$60,000 that is presumably paid to soldiers to avoid scrutiny.

2- Areas Occupied by Turkey

There is a more active drug trade, particularly in northwest Syria and the regions controlled by armed groups in the northern parts of Idlib and Aleppo. The Turkish mafia has expanded its operations in these areas, using its agents within those groups to engage in the hashish and drug trade. This trade has become a source of funding for the leaders of these armed groups. Recent conflicts between armed factions in northern Aleppo led to the sidelining of one of the key leaders associated with the Turkish mafia, named Mohammed al-Jassem, also known as "Abu Amsha." He used to be the commander of the so-called "Sultan Selim Shah Brigade" and managed most of the mafia's operations. He helped establish several hashish and drug manufacturing facilities and their trade in the occupied Afrin region.

Sources indicate that the Turkish mafia has transformed northern Idlib and Aleppo into major centers for hashish and drug production, which are then transported to Turkish territories and further smuggled to various countries, including Saudi Arabia. The

Turkish mafia has expanded its activities in these areas, purchasing agricultural land and using some of it for hashish cultivation. They secure the raw materials for their secret factories near the Syrian-Turkish border, which often operate under the guise of building material or olive waste processing facilities. These factories are managed by armed members of the affiliated factions, formerly led by "Abu Amsha" before his removal.

With the increase in reports accusing "Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham" of drug trafficking, its leader, "al-Jolani," attempted to clear himself of the accusations directed at him. He "coordinated with drug dealers, conducted some raids, and seized quantities of narcotics to dispel suspicions about him." He also announced - through his organization's platforms on social media - the seizure of numerous factories producing hashish and quantities of narcotics prepared for smuggling within his areas of influence to Turkey and then to Saudi Arabia.³

Furthermore, areas such as Idlib and the northern countryside of Aleppo are considered drug-producing regions. Locations like Sarmada and Jisr al-Shughour in the Idlib countryside, as well as Afrin in northern Aleppo, are centers for local production of Captagon. Simultaneously, these areas serve as markets for the trade of narcotics produced in government-controlled areas, especially those produced along the Syrian-Lebanese border.

Numerous reports confirm that Shia armed groups control the trade routes heading north through Syria. Hashish enters northern Syria through the province of Idlib from one direction and through the towns of Nubl and Zahraa, which are Shia-majority areas in northern Aleppo, from another direction. Drugs are gathered, divided, packaged, and branded there. These substances then enter the areas occupied by Turkey, where they are received by entities affiliated with the "Syrian National Army" supported by Turkey and "Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham", both of which dominate the drug trade within northern Syria. They work on arranging smuggling operations heading towards Turkey and, from there, into Europe. Another portion is sent to the Autonomous Administration-controlled areas in North and East Syria.

3- The Autonomous Administration Areas

³ "Al Mayadeen Website, April 12, 2022."

The regions of North-East Syria stand out from the rest of the country due to the relatively low level of local drug manufacturing and trafficking. However, they remain among the most targeted internal areas by drug producers and traffickers, whether operating from Syrian government-controlled areas or Turkish-occupied zones. The majority of Captagon and other drugs enter North-East Syria from Turkish-occupied areas, particularly through Manbij. Low-quality "amphetamine" substances enter this region through smuggling routes that span the vast border areas between North-East Syria and government-controlled territories, facilitated by networks of traffickers within the Autonomous Administration areas.

Drug smuggling operations take place from the areas under the influence of Iranian militias in Deir ez-Zor to the Autonomous Administration regions via river smuggling crossings connecting the western and eastern banks of the Euphrates River. The militias sell drugs to local traders in SDF-controlled areas for distribution there. Additionally, the drugs are transported to areas under the influence of Turkish government-aligned factions through the same intermediaries. Notable among these crossings, as reported by the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights on October 10, 2022, are:

- Al-Abbas Crossing, situated between the village of Al-Abbas and the Hajeen area under SDF control east of Deir ez-Zor. This crossing is managed by the "Fourth Division" under the supervision of the Lebanese Hezbollah.
- Thiban Crossing, located between Thiban and Al-Mayadeen east of Deir ez-Zor. This crossing is managed by the tribal militia under the supervision of the Revolutionary Guard.
- Al-Qouria Crossing, situated between Al-Qouria and the Shanana area east of Deir ez-Zor. This crossing is managed by the "Fourth Division."
- Al-Ashara Crossing, located between the town of Al-Ashara and the village of Darnaj east of Deir ez-Zor. This crossing is managed by the tribal militia.
- Al-Baghuz Crossing, situated between Al-Baghuz and Al-Bukamal east of Deir ez-Zor. This crossing is managed by the National Defense militia.
- Al-Baghiliyah Crossing, located between the Al-Baghiliyah area and the Al-Jinina area west of Deir ez-Zor. This crossing is managed by the "Fourth Division" and the tribal militia.

The "Internal Security Forces" (Asayish) announced in June 2022 the seizure and destruction of approximately 3.5 million narcotic pills, and the arrest of around 2500 individuals, including dealers and users, in North-East Syria. This indicates that drug-producing entities, whether from Syrian government-controlled areas or areas occupied by Turkey, aim to turn the Autonomous Administration areas into a market for drug trade, targeting its social fabric primarily for political reasons, before economic reasons.

Part Two- External Routes and Methods of Smuggling

The "Syrian Observatory" revealed that the most prominent external smuggling routes are those crossing the Lebanese-Syrian border, where smuggling routes extend to several points controlled by Hezbollah, including within the "Western Qalamoun", "Zabadani", "Madaya" in the Damascus countryside, or "Qusayr" in the Homs countryside.

Meanwhile, the "Jaber-Naseeb" border crossing with Jordan serves as the main smuggling route, in addition to the port of Latakia in western Syria.

After the Gulf countries banned the import of shipments from Lebanon, Iran and its militias resorted to finding new routes towards the Gulf. A report by the "New Lines" Center for Strategies and Policies in Washington, on December 30, 2021, revealed that "smuggled shipments of Captagon pass through overland routes in Jordan and Lebanon, as well as maritime crossings in the Mediterranean Sea and the Red Sea, in order to flood entry ports in the Gulf."

The ban had a devastating impact on agricultural producers and the economy in Lebanon. The inability to access one of Lebanon's major export partners led to a decrease in crop prices, forcing Lebanese farmers to smuggle their products to Syria for re-export to Saudi Arabia. Smugglers adapted to this Gulf decision by either adopting new methods to disguise Captagon pills or by using new smuggling routes outside of Lebanon, primarily through Jordan or Iraq. This became evident through a noticeable increase in seizures at the land border port of Haditha in Saudi Arabia, located along the border with Jordan, indicating that Captagon smugglers had begun increasing traffic on overland routes from Syria through Jordan to bypass the ban.

In general, drugs leave Syria heading to three main destinations: "North Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, and Europe." These substances exit either by land through Jordan or through unofficial crossings between Syria and Lebanon, the most significant being the "Qalamoun Road" that extends through the Qalamoun mountain range along the Syrian-Lebanese border, filled with gaps that facilitate the bilateral smuggling of drugs and other illicit goods. Alternatively, drugs leave Syria by sea through the ports of Latakia and Tartus towards Lebanese ports, and from there, they either continue by sea or air to the Gulf countries and North Africa.

The third destination is Europe. Available evidence indicates that Europe now serves as a transit point for drugs en route to the markets of the Middle East and North Africa. Drugs move from Syria either overland to Turkey and then to Europe, or they are transported to Lebanon and from there, by sea or air, to Europe.⁴

⁴ "Center for Operational Analysis and Research (COAR), October 5, 2021."

Chapter Two

Risks of the Transformation of "Captagon" from an Economic Resource to a Tool of Soft Warfare

When the aim of drug producers and traffickers is solely financial gain, it can have social and economic risks on the country and the targeted society. However, when the objective goes beyond mere financial gains and transforms into a tool of warfare between conflicting international and political forces, the risks increase on the targeted communities and countries. How has Syrian "Captagon" transformed into a tool of soft warfare?

Part One - Transformation of "Captagon" into a Tool of Soft Warfare Targeting Domestic and International Adversaries.

Over several years, Iran and its militias have flooded the Middle East, especially the Arab Gulf states, with Captagon pills. Continuous shipments of this drug have been seized in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Jordan, and Egypt, originating from Lebanon and Syria, which have become the region's prominent producers and exporters of Fenethylline. Notably, the majority of drug shipments have primarily targeted Saudi Arabia, followed by other Gulf countries. The American network CNN described Saudi Arabia as the "drug capital of the Middle East" on September 4th, raising questions about the reasons and objectives behind Iran and its militias targeting Saudi Arabia and the Gulf.

There is no doubt that the declared objective of smuggling and trafficking drugs is the financial gain for local traffickers and certain international criminal groups. However, there are other secret political and undisclosed secret objectives that constitute the true purpose behind these smuggling operations and drug trafficking, orchestrated by Iran. Among these non-material objectives:

Firstly, using the drug scourge as a weapon in conducting its covert and overt wars against the Gulf states. This is aimed at achieving mostly security or political goals, in order to exert dominance, control, or to spread terrorism, insecurity, and harm to the political system. It works towards destabilizing and overthrowing these systems, as the weapon of drugs has proven effective in destroying societies, depleting their national economies, and draining entire generations of human resources and youth.

Secondly, undermining societal values and brotherly relations between Arab and Gulf states, fostering enmity, cutting trade and political ties, and isolating Syria and Lebanon from their Arab surroundings. Thus, the succession of drug smuggling operations has become a critical issue in the deterioration of Lebanese-Gulf relations. The first shockwave was in April 2021, when Saudi Arabia boycotted Lebanese fruit and vegetable products following the discovery of a shipment of pomegranates laced with Captagon. This move came after Saudi Arabia, along with other Gulf countries (Oman, Bahrain, Kuwait, and the UAE), had banned the import of fruits and vegetables from Lebanon. This indicates an Iranian attempt to provoke Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states, pushing them towards reactions against Lebanon, presenting Iran as the only remaining vital lifeline for Lebanon.⁵

Thirdly, Iran and the Syrian regime attempt to utilize the drug smuggling card as part of a game to achieve political gains from Arab and Gulf countries. This serves as a response to the Arab and Gulf states' cessation of dealings with the Syrian regime or their reduced support for Lebanon. This constitutes a form of blackmail, testing these countries' ability to open their borders wide for smuggling operations. The Syrian regime attempted to send a message to the Gulf states that restoring relations with it implies its capability to control the borders. This was achieved by instructing their proxies among the smugglers to directly cease smuggling operations. The evidence is that the Syrian regime attempted to capitalize on the visit of the UAE Foreign Minister, Abdullah bin Zayed, to Damascus on November 9, 2021. When the Assad regime sensed a warming of relations with Jordan and the UAE, it sought to reduce drug smuggling operations towards Saudi Arabia in an attempt to entice them to also normalize relations. Following that visit, the Syrian regime's media resorted to a directed tactic aimed at Arab countries. This tactic involved repeatedly announcing

⁵ "International Center for Strategic Studies in Abu Dhabi, September 25, 2022."

cases of intercepting and thwarting large drug smuggling operations out of Syria through Jordan.

On November 30, 2021, the official Syrian news agency "SANA" reported the security apparatus foiling an attempt to smuggle over 500 kilograms of Captagon pills, hidden within a shipment of pasta bags en route to Saudi Arabia. This came just a week after another seizure of over 500 kilograms of Captagon. In December 2021, three smuggling attempts were thwarted from Syria. Notably, a large quantity estimated at hundreds of kilograms of hashish and tens of thousands of Captagon pills, destined for smuggling into Jordan, were seized. In the same context, Lebanese customs officials confiscated nine million Captagon pills hidden in a shipment of lemons at the Port of Beirut on December 29, 2021. This was intended for dispatch to a Gulf state, forming a new form of blackmail to encourage Saudi Arabia and the Gulf to restore support to Lebanon. In essence, the purpose of announcing these confiscations by the Syrian regime and Hezbollah during this period was mere propaganda, under the pretext of curbing smuggling operations. Following Saudi Arabia's refusal to normalize relations with Damascus, the flow of drugs towards the Gulf increased once again during the current year.

Fourthly, if the initial goal of these operations was purely political, aiming to sabotage the Saudi society specifically, the subsequent economic crises in Iran, Syria, and Lebanon shifted the objective to both political and financial motives. Through the smuggling of vast quantities of drugs, the intention is to launder money from the Gulf countries and extract large amounts of foreign currency from the Gulf, targeting the financial movements within Gulf banks.

Part Two - Internal and External Risks of Syria's Transformation into a "Drug Country."

Section One: Internal Risks

Syria's second crisis involving narcotics revolves around the widespread prevalence of drug abuse and the societal implications of these substances. While it is important to address the individual impact of consuming Captagon and hashish within proper

context, the increasing prevalence of drug abuse in Syria reflects alarming societal rifts on a broader scale. Iran and its militias primarily capitalize on these divisions, seeking to expand drug production of narcotics in southern Syria to inundate the region with drugs. This subsequently makes it easier for Iran to manipulate the local population. Drugs have transformed into an indirect means of recruiting youth for Iran-affiliated militias. Exploiting the youth's addiction and inability to secure funds for drugs, they are enticed with salaries and incentives to join local or Iranian-backed militias.

Another risk of the increasing drug trade in eastern Syria is that the remnants of the ISIS organization have started to benefit from this flourishing trade. They impose a tax of around ten percent on the profits of traders and distributors, who pay it under the threat of assassination on the pretext of "corruption on earth." Especially given that these remnants and cells of the organization possess ample information about the local population, particularly those involved in the drug trade, making it easier for them to gather information about local residents and impose taxes on distributors and traders.

Furthermore, this substantial drug trade will prolong the duration of conflict in Syria, undermine the rule of law, and hinder the restoration of a comprehensive economic performance. Local resources and human efforts have shifted from productive activities to drug production and export. Additionally, the negative reputation associated with Syrian exports has led some countries to refuse to accept Syrian exports, fearing that they might be involved in drug smuggling, which ultimately deprives the Syrian economy of foreign revenue for an extended period.

Section Two: Regional and International Risks

In addition to the social consequences borne by Syrians themselves, the drug trade in Syria has a destabilizing impact on neighboring and regional countries. While Syria's geographical location at the crossroads between the Middle East, Europe, and Asia has historically made it a transit point for drugs coming from Europe, Turkey, and Lebanon on their way to Jordan, Iraq, and the Gulf, Hezbollah has transformed Syria from a mere transit station into a major drug production hub. Hezbollah provided Syrian producers of Captagon with technical expertise and protection, leading to an increase in Syrian production of this popular stimulant to surpass even Lebanon's own production. Syria's previous expertise in the pharmaceutical field contributed to this surge, as experts

shifted their focus to producing Captagon. Furthermore, chemical factories in Aleppo and Homs were converted into facilities for manufacturing these pills. Additionally, the easy access to shipping routes across the Mediterranean to Turkey and Europe and overland routes to the Gulf has contributed to this trend.⁶

The French newspaper "Le Figaro" stated in an investigation published on September 19, that Syria has become the world's largest producer of Captagon, with Saudi Arabia being its primary consumer, and Jordan and Lebanon serving as transit routes. The report noted that 250 million Captagon pills have been seized since the beginning of the current year. The latest seizure was announced by the Saudi Ministry of Interior on September 28, 2022, involving a shipment of over seven hundred thousand tablets of the drug methamphetamine, concealed within a shipment of watermelons in Riyadh. During the seizure, security authorities apprehended five individuals involved in the case, including three Syrian residents and two Saudis.

The escalation in drug production and smuggling from Syria to the Gulf, exceeding 18 times the quantity seized four years ago, presents significant regional challenges. An article published by "The National Interest," an American newspaper, in November 2021, highlighted the accelerating trade of Captagon in the Middle East, posing a regional challenge that requires increased attention from the United States and its partners following Arab normalization with the Syrian regime.

This situation entails several risks of distributing these drugs among the youth in Gulf Arab countries. Such an effort aims at their destruction, transforming them into groups of addicts, turning the human element into a tool of destruction and criminality. This leads to severe damage to the national economy, family, social and cultural structure, and also disrupts security and public order. The proliferation of crime among citizens diverts security agencies' attention from genuine problems, consuming security, national, and economic efforts and directing their preoccupation in fighting drug gangs.

Furthermore, these drugs have negative consequences on families, associates, and work productivity. Scientific research shows that long-term or non-medical drug use leads to significant changes in brain function, which can persist even after cessation. Additionally, these drugs have a myriad of negative effects on physical and mental

⁶ "Al-Sharq Al-Awsat Newspaper, January 16, 2022."

health. Observers note that Saudis are concerned about the impact of these addictive drugs on the younger generation, especially since a substantial portion of users falls between the ages of 12 and 22. Moreover, 40% of Saudi drug addicts reportedly use Captagon originating from Syria and Lebanon.⁷

Numerous intertwined factors, encompassing political, economic, and social dimensions, underscore a strong link between drugs and terrorism. Especially notable is the ease with which drug trafficking has become a straightforward process, and acquiring these substances has become remarkably simple. This presents a formidable challenge for the targeted governments, particularly considering that such criminal operations require the recruitment of individuals possessing a high degree of expertise. These individuals engage in tasks that may seem commercial on the surface but have intelligence implications within the Gulf countries.

Another significant risk is that the funds extracted from the Gulf due to the influx of these drugs contribute to financing terrorist groups, whether in Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, or Iraq. Consequently, these funds amplify the terrorism threat in the Middle East.

The increasing production and trade of narcotics in Syria pose risks to numerous regional and global countries. Available evidence indicates that Europe has now become a transit point for narcotics destined for markets in the Middle East and North Africa. This has prompted a group of Democratic and Republican lawmakers to call on the U.S. administration to include Syria on the list of drug-producing or "drug transit" countries. In a letter addressed to Secretary of State Antony Blinken, lawmakers urged the U.S. State Department to assess the activities of the Syrian regime in the manufacturing and trafficking of drugs. They emphasized that such trafficking "provides a lifeline for Assad, cripples local communities, threatens families, and funds Iran-backed groups in the region." The lawmakers urged the U.S. government to do everything in its power to hinder "the commercial level of drug production currently occurring in Syria," warning that failure to act would allow Assad's drug state to become a "constant fixture" in the region.⁸

⁷ "BBC Arabic Report, January 23, 2022."

⁸ "Al-Sharq Al-Awsat Newspaper, September 22, 2022."

Chapter Three

Counteraction Strategies

Due to Syria's transformation into a global hub for "Captagon" production and a tool for destabilizing regional and international security, the United States House of Representatives recently convened to pass a resolution to combat drug trafficking in Syria. Furthermore, the Combating Captagon in Syria Act has come into effect after being approved by President Joe Biden on December 23, 2022. What are the provisions of this resolution and its strategic objectives?

Part One - Provisions of the US House of Representatives Resolution to Combat Syrian Captagon.

Introduced by Republican Representative French Hill and Democratic Representative Brendan Boyle, the resolution, which still needs to pass through the Senate to become effective, calls on the White House to present the required strategy to Congress for review within a period not exceeding 180 days. However, before delving into the objectives of this resolution, we must become familiar with its content and its most important provisions. Through this understanding, we can comprehend the motivations behind its proposal and the potential strategy for its future implementation. The resolution, approved by the House of Representatives, includes a strategy with six provisions aimed at combating the production and trafficking of drugs from Syria abroad. These provisions are as follows:

First Provision: Develop a strategy to target, disrupt, and dismantle networks that directly or indirectly support the Assad regime's drug infrastructure. This includes diplomatic and intelligence support, as well as building drug enforcement capacities in partner countries. Assistance and training should be provided to law enforcement agencies in countries other than Syria that receive or serve as transit points for significant quantities of Captagon.

Second Provision: Calls for the use of legal frameworks, including the 2019 Caesar Act and the Kingpin Act, to target individuals and entities directly or indirectly linked to the Assad regime's drug infrastructure.

Third Provision: Calls for the use of international diplomatic ties associated with economic pressure campaigns against the Assad regime to target the drug infrastructure.

Fourth Provision: Demands the development of a strategy to leverage multilateral institutions and collaborate with international partners to disrupt the drug infrastructure within the Assad regime.

Fifth Provision: States the need to devise a strategy for a public outreach campaign aimed at raising awareness about the extent of the Assad regime's involvement in illicit drug trade.

Sixth Provision: Calls for identifying countries that receive or serve as transit points for significant shipments of Captagon, and assessing the drug enforcement capabilities in these countries to intercept or disrupt Captagon trafficking. This assessment includes evaluating the assistance and current American training programs aimed at building such capacities in these countries.

Part Two - Implementation Methods of the Resolution and its Implications on Drug-Producing Entities

It is evident that this strategy requires substantial efforts and coordination among the United States, the European Union, Arab and Gulf countries, as well as local forces in areas outside the control of the Syrian regime that are threatened by the influx of drugs. This resembles an "intelligence alliance" to combat drug production and trade. This entails intensive monitoring of this trade through satellite technology and other means, as well as tracking the supply chains of raw materials for the production process. It also involves monitoring manufacturing locations in Syria and Lebanon and uncovering drug smuggling routes.

As a result, if the law is implemented, it would inform targeted countries and regions about incoming drug shipments before they arrive. Additionally, the law would require the United States to provide customs agents in the surrounding regional countries with

devices capable of detecting drug shipments. Ultimately, this would lead to a reduction in this trade and prevent the Assad regime and Iranian militias from benefiting from the proceeds of this trade, due to the significant losses that this strategy would inflict on the producing entity.

Part Three - Strategic Objectives of the Resolution Project

To understand the strategic objectives behind the proposal and approval of the resolution by the US House of Representatives, some of these objectives can be inferred by considering the timing and the accompanying international, political, and economic developments and changes. These objectives include:

1. Preventing Russia from Profiting from Syrian Drug Revenues:

It appears that the United States is attempting to choke Russia in all areas of its influence, including Syria. While Russia is not directly involved in the production and trade of drugs in Syria, it indirectly benefits through its officers and military leaders in Syria, who are reliant on revenues to cover their expenses. The Syrian regime, lacking significant resources to cover its war expenses, is likely to use a portion of the drug trade proceeds to pay off some of its debts and obligations to Russia. As drug trade revenues have become a major source of income, preventing a portion of these proceeds from supporting the Russian economy and its war efforts in Ukraine is a key objective.

2. Pressuring Iran and Depleting Funding Sources of its Militias in Syria and Lebanon:

One of the other objectives, related to timing, is an attempt to deplete the funding sources of Iran and its militias in both Syria and Lebanon. This aims to increase pressure on Iran's already weakened economy, forcing it to compensate for the funding shortfall from its budget. Consequently, this would exacerbate domestic unrest within Iran, which is witnessing widespread popular protests. These pressures are occurring in conjunction with Israel's ongoing targeting of Iranian sites in Syria, collectively serving as factors pressuring Iran to make concessions in its nuclear dossier.

3. Preventing the persistence Al Assad and Foiling Turkish and Arab Normalization with Him:

Another objective of the project is to preventing the persistence of Assad's regime and to caution countries and parties seeking to normalize relations with him. This objective can be understood by observing the resurgence of files regarding Assad's use of chemical weapons and the disclosure of new reports about Syrian regime prisons, particularly the "Salt Rooms" in Sednaya Prison. Shedding light on these matters to condemn Assad for committing crimes and violations and showcasing that his regime threatens regional and international security is due to the increasing efforts by Turkey and Arab countries to normalize relations with Damascus. Therefore, recent French initiatives such as reopening the chemical weapons file and media reports about the "Salt Rooms" in Sednaya Prison, alongside the US opening the file on drug production and trade by the Syrian regime, all indicate efforts aimed at preventing the persistence of Assad and his regime. These initiatives carry warning messages to Turkey and Arab countries to refrain from enabling the persistence of Assad and from engaging with a regime accused of war crimes and drug trade. If the law is implemented, it implies that all countries and individuals engaging economically or militarily with Assad will be subject to sanctions.

As the law requires more than 6 months to become effective, anyone considering normalization with Assad will try to postpone and freeze their positions until the specified deadline for the law's approval is reached. During this time, the United States and the West will assess the implications of the Ukrainian war, the Iranian nuclear dossier, the Geneva track, and the Constitutional Committee for Syria. Therefore, the aim is to politically undermine Assad, along with economic pressure, and further isolate him.

4. Preventing Turkey from Becoming a Route for Syrian Drug Trafficking to Europe and America:

Undoubtedly, the United States and the West view with suspicion Turkey's efforts to normalize relations with the Syrian regime, mediated and supported by Russia and Iran. Their concerns are escalating over the potential for Turkey, terrorist groups, and affiliated factions to join the drug trafficking networks associated with the Syrian regime and Iran. This concern is particularly pronounced as Turkey is also grappling

with an economic crisis and may resort to this method to support its economy. This would turn Turkish territories into a route for drugs manufactured in Syria en route to Europe and America.

Conclusion

The approval of the U.S. House of Representatives for the resolution to combat drug trafficking in Syria, along with the signing by the U.S. President, constitutes an important step in directing global attention towards this critical issue. This could potentially lead to the future dismantling of one of the most illicit resources for the Syrian regime, Iran, and its militias. However, efforts to combat this trade in the near term cannot succeed without finding a solution to the Syrian crisis itself. This problem is intricately tied to resolving the Syrian conflict, addressing the political and economic crises in Syria and Lebanon. Imposing economic sanctions on Syria and its leadership will not effectively curb this trade without a comprehensive settlement that uproots the foundations of this trade before it becomes too entrenched, before Syria turns into another Afghanistan.

Until now, Europe and the United States lack a comprehensive strategy to combat the trafficking of Captagon. This is a partial problem as the Syrian regime and Iran use drug trafficking to circumvent international sanctions and generate billions of dollars to sustain their war efforts. However, there is also a danger that Syria could transition to producing even more dangerous substances, such as heroin and crystal meth, once the Captagon market becomes saturated. It is also expected that drug manufacturing and trafficking will increase in the coming years among regional countries, both to generate financial returns and to pressure regional nations and neighboring countries to restore relations with the Assad regime. This would serve the purpose of border control and preventing the passage of these shipments.

Indeed, the efforts made by various security agencies, customs, and border guards are tangible and involve the exchange of information, reporting on smugglers and contraband between customs points, and reducing the smuggling of such materials into the country. However, addressing this issue requires a comprehensive approach that goes beyond the efforts of security institutions alone. It involves religious, media, and educational institutions as well. Increasing cultural awareness about the dangers of drugs that threaten future generations and instilling proper attitudes towards the perils of this menace is crucial. This approach is not only about addressing the consequences of deviant behavior but also about tackling the underlying motivations behind the

problem. This is where the need to leverage the findings of crime prevention research centers comes into play by adopting their recommendations.

There is an urgent need to elevate the level of coordination and cooperation among the countries affected and targeted by drug producers and traffickers. This necessitates a significant degree of precise security information exchange. Additionally, it's crucial for Arab countries to reintroduce their presence in Syria, Lebanon, and even Iraq and intervene to resolve their political and economic crises. This intervention would cut off Iran and its militias from exploiting these countries as drug production centers.

As drug production and trade fall into the hands of governing regimes, armed groups, and Iranian militias, they can easily transport these drugs, even through official channels, to areas in northeastern Syria, including the Qamishli airport and the crossings between government-controlled areas and the Autonomous Administration areas. Especially within massive shipments that are difficult to thoroughly inspect at these crossings by internal security forces. Therefore, the Autonomous Administration should leverage the US resolution project and demand modern mechanisms, equipment, and even trained police dogs to detect drugs coming from Syrian government-controlled areas or Turkish-occupied regions into northeastern Syria.