

# Soldiers of *Abu Hilalain*:

An Investigation into Captagon Trafficking by Syrian War Militias and What It Means for U.S.

Foreign Policy

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War is expensive and the need to raise money for weapons and materiel often turns militias to the tactics of organized criminals. The transformation of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) rebels into a major cocaine cartel as well as the Islamist Taliban insurgents of Afghanistan taxing and protecting opium and heroin smuggling routes are but two famous examples. Criminal groups also often capitalize on the breakdown of rule of law in war zones and failing states to proliferate and expand their own illegal profits and activities. As globalization continues to erode sovereign state boundaries and internationalize non-state actors and criminal outfits, the nexus between insurgent warfare and transnational organized crime becomes all the more important to understand.

2013 saw a steep spike in Middle East seizures of Captagon,<sup>1</sup> an illegal amphetamine stimulant known by the Arabic street name of “*Abu Hilalain*.”<sup>2</sup> Noticing this proliferation coincided with a 90% drop in production in Lebanon’s Bekaa Valley, the former center of Captagon production, *The Guardian*’s Jon Henley and numerous other journalists began to identify war-torn Syria as the new Captagon capital of the world and the ongoing Syrian war as the *raison d’être* for the regional Captagon boom. While Henley and other journalists cited a myriad of rumors that nearly all sides in the Syrian conflict are profiting from the Captagon trade to some degree, no major news outlet has been able to independently verify the rumors. Likewise undetermined is whether the Captagon boom stems from official fundraising strategies of Syrian militias sanctioned by their leadership, or whether pre-existing drug trafficking groups have

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<sup>1</sup> Baker, Aryn. “Syria’s Breaking Bad: Are Amphetamines Funding the War?” *Time*. Oct. 28, 2013. Accessed on April 9, 2015. <<http://world.time.com/2013/10/28/syrias-breaking-bad-are-amphetamines-funding-the-war/>>

<sup>2</sup> Sloan, Alastair. “Is Saudi Arabia Losing the Battle to Combat Substance Abuse?” *Middle East Monitor*. Mar. 28, 2014. Accessed on April 9, 2015. <<https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/articles/middle-east/10579-is-saudi-arabia-losing-the-battle-to-combat-substance-abuse>>

capitalized on the breakdown of rule of law in Syria and merely corrupted individual rogue members of these militias.<sup>3</sup>

The central question we will examine is whether any violent actors in the Syrian war are involved in the Captagon trade, and which of these depends most heavily on this illicit activity for its funding. The major Syrian fighting groups to investigate are the Assad regime's army, Hezbollah, the Free Syrian Army, Jabhat al-Nusra (JN), and the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Secondary questions include whether any actor's involvement in Captagon trafficking is sanctioned by its top leadership or if it is limited to rogue corrupt members and if the actor produces the drug, or merely runs a protection for smuggling routes. Determining which Syrian actor depends most heavily on Captagon for its funding and determining its relationship to the trade could have significant foreign policy implications for the United States. If pro-Assad, anti-American militias are found to depend most on Captagon trafficking, then cracking down on the Captagon trade aligns with United States national security interests. By the same token, if anti-Assad and U.S.-backed militias are found to be most dependent on sales of the drug, the United States may prefer to turn a blind eye to the trade or even covertly protect it.

By examining the timing of spikes in seizure data, the geography of seizures and known production sites, each militia's past history and capability of drug trafficking, and information on raids and arrests, we assert that the strongest publicly available indicators suggest that Hezbollah is most deeply involved with, and to a degree, dependent on Captagon for its funding, Hezbollah likely produces the drug directly, and that Hezbollah's highest leadership has sanctioned the fundraising strategy with very probable backing from Iran.

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<sup>3</sup> Henley, Jon. "Captagon: The Amphetamine Fuelling Syria's Civil War." *The Guardian*. Jan. 13, 2014. Accessed on April 9, 2015. <<http://www.theguardian.com/world/shortcuts/2014/jan/13/captagon-amphetamine-syria-war-middle-east>>

Additional findings suggest that members of both Assad's regime and the Free Syrian Army have produced Captagon directly, but this seems to be limited to rogue corrupt members, while JN and ISIS do not profit from Captagon and destroy Captagon factories when they find them. Field research methodology includes access to the latest Captagon seizure records, interviews with myriad anti-drug officials of key countries in the region, journalists, academics, direct aid implementers, Saudi nationals familiar with Captagon, and sources on the ground in Syria. While the dangers of travel into Syria have prevented us from obtaining firsthand knowledge, our evidence exceeds anything else available in the public record.

We begin with a review of the existing literature on past drug-funded insurgencies and criminal groups proliferating in war zones as well as both scholarly and news articles on the Captagon trade in the ongoing Syrian civil war. Our research methodology is then detailed and a general overview of the Captagon trade is provided. The core of our paper uses the timing of drug seizure spikes, the geography of seizures and known production sites, each militia's past history and capability of drug trafficking, and information on raids and arrests to argue that Hezbollah seems to be most deeply involved in the Captagon trade as a fundraising strategy sanctioned by its highest leadership, in limited cooperation with the Assad regime, while the Free Syrian Army's involvement appears mainly through rogue corrupt members, and little to no involvement from Jabhat al-Nusrah and ISIS. The conclusion of this paper provides suggestions for U.S. foreign policy based on these findings.

## Review of Existing Literature

### *Scholarship on Past Drug Insurgencies*

#### Illegal Drug Production and Trafficking Increases in War (or Does It?)

Most scholarship on civil wars and insurgencies insist that a very strong link exists between conflict and illegal drug production and trafficking. Tehseena Usman and Minhas Majeed Khan highlight how the Soviet and U.S. invasions of Afghanistan caused the ancient opium trade there to explode like never before in history, even to the point where Afghanistan has now replaced Southeast Asia as the center of global opium and heroin production. Usman and Khan explain that war increases drug trafficking for three reasons: weakened, war-ravaged state institutions are no longer able to contain crime, insurgent groups are desperate to raise money for weapons and resort to drug trafficking to do so, and average citizens are forced into the black market drug trade because the war-ravaged economy leaves them no other means of earning a suitable living.<sup>4</sup> Frank Shanty,<sup>5</sup> Phil Williams,<sup>6</sup> Douglas Farah,<sup>7</sup> and numerous other scholars agree. Williams, in a 2012 U.S. Army War College paper, traces drug-funded insurgencies and drug booms to cases as diverse as the Vietnam War, the secret war in Laos, the Contra rebels in Nicaragua and the FARC insurgents of Colombia.<sup>8</sup> Douglas Farah even reveals

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<sup>4</sup> Usman, Tehseena and Minhas Majeed Khan. "Drug Trafficking from Afghanistan to Pakistan and Its Implications." *Journal of the Research Society of Pakistan*, 50.2 (December 2013).

<sup>5</sup> Shanty, Frank. *The Nexus: International Terrorism and Drug Trafficking from Afghanistan*. Santa Barbara: Praeger Security International, 2011.

<sup>6</sup> Williams, Paul and Vanda Felbab-Brown. *Drug Trafficking, Violence, and Instability*. Carlisle: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2012.

<sup>7</sup> Farah, Douglas and Stephen Braun. *Merchant of Death: Money, Guns, Planes, and the Man Who Makes War Possible*. New Jersey: Wiley & Sons, 2007.

<sup>8</sup> Williams, Paul and Vanda Felbab-Brown. *Drug Trafficking, Violence, and Instability*. Carlisle: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2012.

the Latin American cocaine trafficking of Hezbollah in Lebanon and AQIM (al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb) in North Africa.<sup>9</sup>

Yet Patrick Meehan argues that the case study of Burma (Myanmar) sharply contradicts this dominant narrative. In Burma, decades of centrally planned mismanagement of the economy pushed scores of peasant farmers into the opium trade to make ends meet. When the government tried to crack down on the booming drug economy in a time of peace, mass protests erupted into armed insurgencies. Meehan notes that the Burmese government eventually bought peace by tolerating and co-opting the opium trade, which saw drug production and trafficking explode just as violence levels plummeted.<sup>10</sup>

#### Insurgent Groups Often Sell Drugs for Guns (With and Without Foreign Backers)

There is universal agreement among leading scholars that illegal drug trafficking is a common source of funding for rebel and insurgent groups and that drugs are often directly traded for guns. However, there is some disagreement over the relationship between foreign backing and drug trafficking. Phil Williams argues that the end of the Cold War has made insurgent groups more likely to sell drugs to raise money for guns because they receive less financial backing from great powers like the United States and Soviet Union.<sup>11</sup> Yet John Martin<sup>12</sup> and Jeremy Kuzmarov<sup>13</sup> insist that the American CIA encouraged its favored insurgent groups in Vietnam and Laos to produce opium and heroin and even provided a protected drug pipeline via

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<sup>9</sup> Farah, Douglas and Stephen Braun. *Merchant of Death: Money, Guns, Planes, and the Man Who Makes War Possible*. New Jersey: Wiley & Sons, 2007. Pg. 7.

<sup>10</sup> Meehan, Patrick. "Drugs, Insurgency, and State-Building in Burma: Why the Drugs Trade is Central to Burma's Changing Political Order." *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 42.3(October 2011). Pg. 376.

<sup>11</sup> Williams, Paul and Vanda Felbab-Brown. *Drug Trafficking, Violence, and Instability*. Carlisle: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2012. Pgs. 39-40.

<sup>12</sup> Martin, John McCullough and Anne T. Romano. *Multinational Crime: Terrorism, Espionage, and Drug Trafficking*. Newbury Park: Sage, 1992.

<sup>13</sup> Kuzmarov, Jeremy. "From Counter-Insurgency to Narco-Insurgency: Vietnam and the War on Drugs." *Journal of Policy History*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (2008).

Air America (CIA front company) planes.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, Usman and Khan,<sup>15</sup> Farhana Schmidt,<sup>16</sup> and Frank Shanty<sup>17</sup> insist the American CIA and Pakistani ISI turned a blind eye to their favored anti-Soviet insurgents selling opium and heroin in Afghanistan. While it is true that Algeria's FLN insurgents saw no need to sell drugs because of their extensive foreign backing,<sup>18</sup> and it is also true that the U.S. Congress cutting off American aid to the Contra rebels in Nicaragua drove them to cocaine trafficking with CIA complicity<sup>19</sup> just as the CIA cutting off aid to the KMT insurgents in China drove them to opium and heroin trafficking.<sup>20</sup> Farhana Schmidt points out that Afghani insurgent leader Gulbuddin Hekmetyar received more CIA money than any of his contemporaries and still enthusiastically trafficked in opium and heroin.<sup>21</sup>

Leading scholars also suggest that insurgencies profiting from the drug trade vary quite a bit in their precise relationship with production and smuggling, though the insurgent drug trade is almost universally transnational. While Usman and Khan,<sup>22</sup> Schmidt,<sup>23</sup> and Shanty<sup>24</sup> explain that Afghanistan's Taliban insurgency protects and taxes the opium and heroin trade rather than

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<sup>14</sup> Martin, John McCullough and Anne T. Romano. *Multinational Crime: Terrorism, Espionage, and Drug Trafficking*. Newbury Park: Sage, 1992. Pgs. 56-57.

<sup>15</sup> Usman, Tehseena and Minhas Majeed Khan. "Drug Trafficking from Afghanistan to Pakistan and Its Implications." *Journal of the Research Society of Pakistan*, 50.2 (December 2013).

<sup>16</sup> Schmidt, Farhana. "From Islamic Warriors to Drug Lords: Evolution of the Taliban Insurgency." *Mediterranean Quarterly*, Vol. 21, Issue 2 (March 2010).

<sup>17</sup> Shanty, Frank. *The Nexus: International Terrorism and Drug Trafficking from Afghanistan*. Santa Barbara: Praeger Security International, 2011.

<sup>18</sup> Williams, Paul and Vanda Felbab-Brown. *Drug Trafficking, Violence, and Instability*. Carlisle: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2012. Pgs. 39-40.

<sup>19</sup> Martin, John McCullough and Anne T. Romano. *Multinational Crime: Terrorism, Espionage, and Drug Trafficking*. Newbury Park: Sage, 1992. Pgs. 80-83.

<sup>20</sup> Kuzmarov, Jeremy. "From Counter-Insurgency to Narco-Insurgency: Vietnam and the War on Drugs." *Journal of Policy History*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (2008). Pg. 359.

<sup>21</sup> Schmidt, Farhana. "From Islamic Warriors to Drug Lords: Evolution of the Taliban Insurgency." *Mediterranean Quarterly*, Vol. 21, Issue 2 (March 2010). Pg. 65.

<sup>22</sup> Usman, Tehseena and Minhas Majeed Khan. "Drug Trafficking from Afghanistan to Pakistan and Its Implications." *Journal of the Research Society of Pakistan*, 50.2 (December 2013).

<sup>23</sup> Schmidt, Farhana. "From Islamic Warriors to Drug Lords: Evolution of the Taliban Insurgency." *Mediterranean Quarterly*, Vol. 21, Issue 2 (March 2010).

<sup>24</sup> Shanty, Frank. *The Nexus: International Terrorism and Drug Trafficking from Afghanistan*. Santa Barbara: Praeger Security International, 2011.

producing or selling directly, Angel Rabasa and Peter Chalk<sup>25</sup> trace the evolving tactics of Colombia's FARC insurgents from opposing the drug trade to taxing and protecting it and finally to directly producing and selling cocaine and even fighting rival drug cartels to take over their business. The Contra rebels of Nicaragua<sup>26</sup> and the Hmong rebels of Laos<sup>27</sup> both produced and sold drugs directly, although both groups relied on more traditional crime syndicates and even drug trafficking dictators (Panama's Manuel Noriega and Thailand's Khun Sa) for international distribution. Martin<sup>28</sup> and Kuzmarov<sup>29</sup> demonstrate that drugs produced or taxed by insurgents almost always get distributed to wealthy and stable countries that have enough people with disposable income to consume often expensive black market drugs.

#### Ideology Does Not Prevent Insurgents from Selling Drugs

All leading scholars agree that ideology, even when religious, has little if any bearing on insurgent groups' decision to raise money by selling drugs. Indeed, Usman and Khan,<sup>30</sup> Schmidt,<sup>31</sup> and Shanty<sup>32</sup> stress that even the devoutly Islamic and puritanical Taliban insurgents of Afghanistan profit from opium and heroin trafficking and rationalize it as a legitimate tactic because most of the drugs' consumers are non-Muslims. Similarly, Douglas Farah notes the cocaine trafficking of pious Shi'a Muslim extremists Hezbollah and pious Sunni Muslim

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<sup>25</sup> Rabasa, Angel and Peter Chalk. *Colombian Labyrinth: The Synergy of Drugs and Insurgency and Its Implications for Regional Stability*. Santa Monica: Rand, 2001.

<sup>26</sup> Martin, John McCullough and Anne T. Romano. *Multinational Crime: Terrorism, Espionage, and Drug Trafficking*. Newbury Park: Sage, 1992.

<sup>27</sup> Kuzmarov, Jeremy. "From Counter-Insurgency to Narco-Insurgency: Vietnam and the War on Drugs." *Journal of Policy History*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (2008).

<sup>28</sup> Martin, John McCullough and Anne T. Romano. *Multinational Crime: Terrorism, Espionage, and Drug Trafficking*. Newbury Park: Sage, 1992.

<sup>29</sup> Kuzmarov, Jeremy. "From Counter-Insurgency to Narco-Insurgency: Vietnam and the War on Drugs." *Journal of Policy History*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (2008).

<sup>30</sup> Usman, Tehseena and Minhas Majeed Khan. "Drug Trafficking from Afghanistan to Pakistan and Its Implications." *Journal of the Research Society of Pakistan*, 50.2 (December 2013).

<sup>31</sup> Schmidt, Farhana. "From Islamic Warriors to Drug Lords: Evolution of the Taliban Insurgency." *Mediterranean Quarterly*, Vol. 21, Issue 2 (March 2010). Pg. 65.

<sup>32</sup> Shanty, Frank. *The Nexus: International Terrorism and Drug Trafficking from Afghanistan*. Santa Barbara: Praeger Security International, 2011.



extremists al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb.<sup>33</sup> While the leftist FLN insurgents of Algeria cited ideology in their refusal to sell drugs, they also had the luxury of extensive foreign backing and Paul Williams doubts that their ideological aversion to drugs would have survived a steep drop in funding.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, while the leftist FARC rebels of Colombia initially opposed the drug trade on ideological grounds, financial desperation drove them to produce and sell cocaine until the relentless pursuit of drug profits seemed to trump their original political goals.<sup>35</sup>

While ideological and often religious insurgent groups may seem strange bedfellows for drug trafficking crime syndicates, Douglas Farah stresses that post-Cold War globalization is increasingly blurring the lines between criminal and insurgent groups<sup>36</sup> and Paul Williams explains that criminals and insurgents often already know each other from running in the same clandestine underworld circles and often share cultural or tribal affiliation as well as hatred for the same enemies.<sup>37</sup>

#### Counter-Narcotics Often Undermines Counter-Insurgency

Attempting to dry up a drug-dealing insurgency's funding with vigorous anti-drug policies may make intuitive sense, yet most leading scholars insist such a strategy is often counter-productive. Jeremy Kuzmarov details how the Nixon Administration's War on Drugs and politically-motivated crackdown on opium and heroin production in Vietnam actually undermined U.S. counter-insurgency efforts because eradicating drug production gave peasant farmers no other way to earn sufficient income in a war-ravaged economy and helped turn the

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<sup>33</sup> Farah, Douglas and Stephen Braun. *Merchant of Death: Money, Guns, Planes, and the Man Who Makes War Possible*. New Jersey: Wiley & Sons, 2007. Pg. 7.

<sup>34</sup> Williams, Paul and Vanda Felbab-Brown. *Drug Trafficking, Violence, and Instability*. Carlisle: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2012. Pgs. 39-40.

<sup>35</sup> Rabasa, Angel and Peter Chalk. *Colombian Labyrinth: The Synergy of Drugs and Insurgency and Its Implications for Regional Stability*. Santa Monica: Rand, 2001. Pgs. 23-26.

<sup>36</sup> Farah, Douglas and Stephen Braun. *Merchant of Death: Money, Guns, Planes, and the Man Who Makes War Possible*. New Jersey: Wiley & Sons, 2007. Pg. 20.

<sup>37</sup> Williams, Paul and Vanda Felbab-Brown. *Drug Trafficking, Violence, and Instability*. Carlisle: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2012. Pgs. 52-53.

local population against U.S. forces and into the arms of the communist Vietcong insurgents. Kuzmarov even quotes an American CIA officer as stating, “You can’t have a war on drugs *and* a war on communism”<sup>38</sup>. Indeed, for the same reasons, Paul Williams insists that the Bush Administration’s tough drug eradication policy in Afghanistan was disastrous to U.S. counter-insurgency progress and that the Obama Administration was wise to tolerate the drug trade beginning in 2009.<sup>39</sup> Beyond alienating the locals, counter-narcotics can even inadvertently serve to increase the profits of a drug-dealing insurgency. Farhana Schmidt reveals that Afghanistan’s Taliban insurgents have long kept hidden stockpiles of opium and heroin so that if poppy fields are eradicated, the steep drop in supply will drive up prices so high that the Taliban’s stockpiles will make them even more money than if poppy fields were tolerated.<sup>40</sup>

#### Both Sides of a Civil War Often Sell Drugs (Even Governments)

While much scholarship is devoted to the drug trafficking activities of rebel insurgent groups desperate for funds, all leading scholars agree that ruling third world governments fighting off a rebellion often find themselves in similar financial desperation. As a result, it is very common for both sides of a civil war to be deeply involved in the drug trade, even legitimate governments and militaries. Jeremy Kuzmarov explains that Vietcong insurgents and their enemy the South Vietnamese government both trafficked in opium and heroin and that part of the motivation for President Nixon’s tough anti-drug policy in Vietnam was to improve the image of the South Vietnamese government and eliminate accusations of its involvement in the

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<sup>38</sup>Kuzmarov, Jeremy. “From Counter-Insurgency to Narco-Insurgency: Vietnam and the War on Drugs.” *Journal of Policy History*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (2008). Pg. 360.

<sup>39</sup>Williams, Paul and Vanda Felbab-Brown. *Drug Trafficking, Violence, and Instability*. Carlisle: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2012. Pgs. 14-15.

<sup>40</sup>Schmidt, Farhana. “From Islamic Warriors to Drug Lords: Evolution of the Taliban Insurgency.” *Mediterranean Quarterly*, Vol. 21, Issue 2 (March 2010).

drug trade.<sup>41</sup> Today's ongoing war in Afghanistan also sees both sides selling drugs as the Taliban insurgency keeps stockpiles of opium and heroin and runs a protection racket over the drug trade and Afghan government officials have deep ties with drug-dealing warlords backed by the CIA as a hedge against the Taliban. Indeed, Afghan President Hamid Karzai's own brother Ahmed was a well-known heroin trafficker.<sup>42</sup>

### *Scholarship on Transnational Crime*

Research into the field of transnational organized crime is relatively new and still maturing. However, current trends in criminal activity indicate that criminals are leaving behind the constraints of recognized borders and taking advantage of the lack of cohesion that exists between various law enforcement organizations within individual countries. William McDonald explores the impediments to cooperation between American and British law enforcement and intelligence services, illustrating how transnational crime creates significant challenges for law enforcement.<sup>43</sup> The case of Viktor Bout is another example of not only the difficulty in coordination between the governmental bodies of different countries, but the effort required for any one law enforcement or intelligence organization to recognize that an illicit actor even exists.<sup>44</sup> This issue is compounded in a region like the Middle East, where individual governments are notorious for their secrecy and lack of cooperation.

In addition to creating impediments in analysis and prosecution, scholarship by Stephen Ellis,<sup>45</sup> Ashley Bybee,<sup>46</sup> and Kwesi Aning<sup>47</sup> on the transnational drug business between South

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<sup>41</sup> Kuzmarov, Jeremy. "From Counter-Insurgency to Narco-Insurgency: Vietnam and the War on Drugs." *Journal of Policy History*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (2008). Pg. 356.

<sup>42</sup> Schmidt, Farhana. "From Islamic Warriors to Drug Lords: Evolution of the Taliban Insurgency." *Mediterranean Quarterly*, Vol. 21, Issue 2 (March 2010). Pgs. 70-71.

<sup>43</sup> McDonald, William F. "McDonaldization, Implosion, and Terrorism." *Transnational Crime*. By Jay S. Albanese. Whitby, ON: De Sitter Publications, 2005. 126-70. Print.

<sup>44</sup> Farah, Douglas and Stephen Braun. *Merchant of Death: Money, Guns, Planes, and the Man Who Makes War Possible*. New Jersey: Wiley & Sons, 2007.

<sup>45</sup> Ellis, S. "West Africa's International Drug Trade." *African Affairs* 108.431 (2009): 171-96. Web.

America and West Africa further illustrate the consistent draw of areas that have or are experiencing civil war and strife for increased illicit activities, especially in areas with a history in smuggling. The record of involvement in smuggling, weakness of government enforcement, and official tolerance of, or participation in, smuggling make these areas ideal.<sup>48</sup>

Using the context of the rebel war in Angola, Carolyn Nordstrom details the way in which illicit economies manifest as people work to survive environments where the licit cannot provide for their needs.<sup>49</sup> Similar to works by experts Kimberly Thachuk and Phil Williams, Nordstrom's exploration of the smuggling activity between Africa and Europe clearly show how smuggling routes are rarely specified for an individual ware or item,<sup>50</sup> instead being specialized in terms of size and durability. To move large items, one needs a freeway, not a goat path. Roads are roads and the "path" rarely discriminates between what travels upon it. Philip Robins' discussion of smuggling into areas like Dubai also illustrate the multi-purpose qualities of smuggling routes and transit hubs.<sup>51</sup> Thus, one does not necessarily need numerous seizures of Captagon itself to identify likely transit points based common routes of other similarly transported items.

Nordstrom's work also illustrates the importance of smaller, less acknowledged goods in the smuggling economy. Cigarettes and beer are important staples in the smuggling economy she finds herself enmeshed in, as they both carry an intrinsic value that hard currency lacks,

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<sup>46</sup>Bybee, Ashley Neese. 2012. THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY EXPANSION OF THE TRANSNATIONAL DRUG TRADE IN AFRICA. *Journal of International Affairs* 66, (1) (Fall): 69-XII, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1243043435?accountid=11243> (accessed April 20, 2015).

<sup>47</sup>Aning, Kwesi. "Are There Emerging West African Criminal Networks? The Case of Ghana." *Global Crime* 8.3 (2007): 193-212. Web.

<sup>48</sup>Ellis, S. "West Africa's International Drug Trade." *African Affairs* 108.431 (2009): 173. Web.

<sup>49</sup>Nordstrom, Carolyn. *Global Outlaws: Crime, Money, and Power in the Contemporary World*. Berkeley: U of California, 2007. Print.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid. 8.

<sup>51</sup>Robins, Philip. "Narcotic Drugs in Dubai: Lurking in the Shadows." *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* (2014): 1-16. Web.

making them part of the backbone of the illicit economy. Frank Madsen highlights cigarettes in his work *Transnational Organized Crime* as well, concurrently discussing that such items function as currency in an environment where no government can guarantee a financial system.<sup>52</sup> Items like cigarettes may not be as sexy as cocaine or heroin, but the demand for them rarely diminishes, they're easy to smuggle, and are a consistent source of revenue for those looking to maintain a steady profit stream. Similarly, demand for Captagon is significant and a production operation that connects production to the Gulf would veritably "print" money.

*Scholarship and News Articles on Amphetamine Trafficking in the Syrian Civil War*

Philip Robins notes at the beginning of his article on drug smuggling in Dubai that the study of illicit activity in the Middle East has yet to be explored in the same manner as it has for other regions of the world.<sup>53</sup> Indeed, very little scholarship exists on the explosion of Captagon and other amphetamine production in the Syrian civil war due to its very recent nature. However, Matt Herbert has broken new ground with his research on Syria's underground war economy. Herbert traces the Syrian government and Syrian Army's long history of drug trafficking, discussing the country's history as a smuggling node and stating that the Syrian government "actively developed and operated smuggling networks."<sup>54</sup> He also highlights an explosion in Captagon supply across the Middle East around 2011 that most experts agree is linked to the Syrian civil war. However, Herbert admits that there is no consensus over which actors in the war are producing Captagon and cites denials from all sides and accusations from all sides pointed at their rivals. Though Herbert states that "there is little indication that government officials systematically engaged with trafficking," our research utilizes sources not necessarily

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<sup>52</sup>Madsen, Frank G. *Transnational Organized Crime*. London: Routledge, 2009. 31-33. Print.

<sup>53</sup>Robins, Philip. "Narcotic Drugs in Dubai: Lurking in the Shadows." *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* (2014): 152. Web.

<sup>54</sup>Herbert, Matt. "Partisans, Profiteers, and Criminals: Syria's Illicit Economy" 38 (2014): 73. *The Fletcher Forum*. Tufts University, Fletcher School of International Studies. Web. 01 Feb. 2015.

available to him.<sup>55</sup> Herbert notes that Captagon production may be one of the ways in which the various actors in the Syrian conflict are financing themselves.<sup>56</sup>

As a major actor in the Syrian conflict, Hezbollah features prominently in this investigation into Captagon and its relationship with those fighting in Syria. Elizabeth Picard's chapter on the political economy of Lebanon during and post-civil war provide a relatively clear and concise background on the relationship between Hezbollah and the Lebanese government, as well as a description of Hezbollah's record of involvement with the drug economy.<sup>57</sup> A joint article by Boaz Ganor and Miri Wernli takes this history and brings it to the present issue of Captagon, connecting Hezbollah's activities in the Bekaa Valley with production of the drug in the region following the 2006 war with Israel.<sup>58</sup> Finally, Marissa Sullivan's paper on the current relationship between Hezbollah and the Syrian government connects two of the major violent actors in this conflict.<sup>59</sup>

Though not directly related to Syrian Captagon, Behsat Ekici and Salim Ozbay's research on Iranian methamphetamine explains why Syrian Captagon traffickers may be using Turkey as a hub on the way to the Gulf despite being in the opposite direction. Ekici and Ozbay explain that Turkey is often used as a hub for Middle East drug traffickers even when inconvenient geographically because the high number of Turkish international flights makes it difficult to target each one sufficiently, and the fact that anti-narcotics services in the Gulf do not inspect

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid. 74.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid. 80.

<sup>57</sup> Picard, Elizabeth. "The Political Economy of Civil War in Lebanon." War, Institutions, and Social Change in the Middle East, edited by Steven Heydemann. University of California Press, 2000.

<sup>58</sup> Ganor, Boaz and Miri Halperin Wernli. "The Infiltration of Terrorist Organizations into the Pharmaceuticals Industry: Hezbollah as a Case Study." *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 36 (9) (2013). Pgs. 699-712.

<sup>59</sup> Sullivan, Marissa. Hezbollah in Syria. The Middle East Security Report, No. 19. The Institute for the Study of War, April 2014.

Turkish flights as rigorously because Turkey is not considered to be a major illegal drug producer.<sup>60</sup>

Despite the dearth of scholarly sources on Syrian war Captagon, numerous news articles exist on the subject. Most news sources agree with Aryn Baker of *Time* magazine's reporting that the first big spike in Captagon across the Middle East was in 2006 during Hezbollah's war with Israel. According to Baker, Iran provided its Shi'a proxy in Lebanon with a factory to produce and sell Captagon to raise money in the wake of the 2006 war with Israel.<sup>61</sup> Captagon production continued to center in the Bekaa Valley of Lebanon with Hezbollah producing it and Lebanese drug gangs distributing it until the second huge spike in Captagon in 2013 and most production shifted to Syria.<sup>62</sup> While the Iranian FARS News Agency insists that only anti-Assad rebels are producing, selling, and using the drug,<sup>63</sup> *Time*,<sup>64</sup> *The Guardian*<sup>65</sup> and most other news outlets agree that all Syrian war factions including the Assad government have been accused of Captagon trafficking and that not enough public evidence yet exists to determine which of the accusations are true. In terms of which actors are using Captagon to fight fiercer and longer, *The International Business Times*<sup>66</sup> reports that audio analysts believe "Jihadi John" of ISIS to be high on amphetamines during his video beheading of British aid worker David Haines and Iraqi

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<sup>60</sup> Ekici, Behsat and Salim Ozbay. "Iranian Methamphetamine and Turkey: An Emerging Transnational Threat." *Trends in Organized Crime*, Vol. 16 (June 2013). Pg. 295.

<sup>61</sup> Baker, Aryn. "Syria's Breaking Bad: Are Amphetamines Funding the War?" *Time*. Oct. 28, 2013. Accessed on Nov. 5, 2014. <<http://world.time.com/2013/10/28/syrias-breaking-bad-are-amphetamines-funding-the-war/>>

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> "Syria Rebels Smuggle Captagon Through Lebanon." FARS News Agency. Sept. 11, 2013. Accessed on Nov. 5, 2014. <<http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.aspx?nn=13920620001323>>

<sup>64</sup> Baker, Aryn. "Syria's Breaking Bad: Are Amphetamines Funding the War?" *Time*. Oct. 28, 2013. Accessed on Nov. 5, 2014. <<http://world.time.com/2013/10/28/syrias-breaking-bad-are-amphetamines-funding-the-war/>>

<sup>65</sup> Henley, Jon. "Captagon: The Amphetamine Fueling Syria's Civil War." *The Guardian*. Jan. 13, 2013. Accessed on Nov. 5, 2014. <<http://www.theguardian.com/world/shortcuts/2014/jan/13/captagon-amphetamine-syria-war-middle-east>>

<sup>66</sup> Kinder, Tabatha. "David Haines' ISIS Executioner 'Was on Drugs' During Beheading, Says Voice Expert." *International Business Times*. Sept. 18, 2014. Accessed on Nov. 5, 2014. <<http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/david-haines-isis-executioner-was-drugs-during-beheading-says-voice-expert-1466017>>

Kurds tell *The Daily Mirror* that they have witnessed ISIS militants taking Captagon pills.<sup>67</sup>

While the most conclusive evidence may point to ISIS members using Captagon, most news articles agree that rumors persist of every combatant group in the Syrian war taking the drug to fighter fiercer and ease pain.

### *Concluding Thoughts on Existing Literature*

Most major scholarship on drug-funded insurgencies agrees that war fuels illicit economies, including drug trafficking, insurgents often trade drugs for guns and equipment with little regard for their level of foreign backing or ideology, counter-narcotics often undermines counter-insurgency, and that it is very common for all sides in a civil war to profit from the black market drug trade. Additionally, scholarship on transnational organized crime establishes elements of illicit cross-border economies that are present in Syria and the surrounding countries. Finally, scholarly and news sources unanimously agree that while source countries vary over time, the Arabian Gulf countries are the consistent market for Captagon. We take these lessons from insurgency and transnational crime scholarship and use them to construct an analytical frame of reference through which we view our field research on Captagon trafficking in the ongoing Syrian civil war. The current dearth of published research on amphetamines in the Syrian civil war and the inability of major news outlets to determine which combatant groups are involved in the drug trade both highlight the need for our field research abroad. Scholarship tells us not to be surprised if all sides of the Syrian war are producing and selling Captagon, including even the Syrian government, puritanical religious extremists, and foreign intelligence agencies. The only way to know for sure, however, is to conduct research in the field.

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<sup>67</sup> Altin, Vanessa. "Inside Kobane: Drug-Crazed ISIS Savages Rape, Slaughter, and Behead Children." *The Daily Mirror*. Oct. 11, 2014. Accessed on Nov. 5, 2014. <<http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/world-news/inside-kobane-drug-crazed-isis-savages-4423619>>



### **Field Research Methodology**

Delving deeper than the inconclusive surface level investigations found in existing scholarly and news articles, we conducted extensive field research. Though travel into highly dangerous war-torn Syria was out of the question, Turkey proved a suitable location due to its close proximity to Syria, its central role in the global Captagon trade, and the generous cooperation of U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) agents posted in Ankara as well as Turkish National Police (TNP) anti-drug and organized crime unit (KOM) officials. Our two main avenues of field research were Captagon seizure records and myriad interviews with experts.

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) maintains a database of drug seizures worldwide and posts drug seizure annual country reports on its website. However, the UNODC website's seizure data is often incomplete and the most recent year for many Middle East country reports is 2012. While The International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL) likewise keeps records of drug seizures across the world, its statistics were not when requested and its staff is notoriously tight-lipped. As a result, we needed to conduct field research in order to obtain a more complete and up-to-date Captagon seizure records of Middle East nations. Fortunately, during our trip to Turkey, U.S. DEA agents provided with us an introduction to their TNP KOM counterparts, who in turn gave us Turkish Captagon seizure records as current as their 2014 annual reports and much more comprehensive than anything available on UNODC or anywhere else on the internet. In addition, a U.S. DEA agent<sup>68</sup> we interviewed by phone gave us the latest Captagon seizure statistics provided by his counterparts in the Lebanese Internal

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<sup>68</sup> DEA 2, Personal Interview, March 12, 2015

Security Forces (ISF) anti-drug unit and another DEA agent<sup>69</sup> gave us the latest Captagon seizure statistics provided by his counterparts in the Saudi and UAE anti-drug units.

We conducted interviews by Skype, phone, e-mail, and in person with four U.S. DEA agents posted in the Middle East, one former FBI Legal Attaché to a U.S. Embassy in the Middle East, one U.S. State Department official posted in the region, one USAID official specializing in the region, one U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) officer posted in the region, and three Turkish National Police KOM officials, one former head of the Lebanese ISF anti-drug unit, fourteen journalists posted in the region from Western and Middle Eastern news outlets, three direct aid implementers, two Saudi nationals familiar with Captagon, and three academic experts. While a larger interview sample would have been ideal, we were constrained by the willingness of knowledgeable and often government-connected people to speak to us, as were we constrained by the scarcity of experts on this still obscure and little understood topic. However, given the variety of backgrounds and variety of potential biases and agendas in our interview subjects, as well as the high level of personal first-hand knowledge and involvement of many of them, we remain confident that our pool of interviews provides a more comprehensive and multi-faceted understanding of Syrian war militias' Captagon trafficking than is publicly available anywhere else. All interview subjects were asked the following standard set of six questions, though ad-libbed follow-up questions often complemented them:

1. Have you come across any indications of which Syrian war militia is most deeply involved in Captagon trafficking?
2. Have you come across indications pointing to the nature of the relationship between involved Syrian war militias and the Captagon trade? Is Captagon trafficking sanctioned by the militia's highest leadership, or is it merely rogue corrupt members involved? Are

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<sup>69</sup> DEA 3, Personal Interview, March 11, 2015.

involved militias producing the drug directly, or merely taxing the trade and running protection rackets over it?

3. Have you come across any indications of state sponsorship of Captagon trafficking in the Syrian war, perhaps to back this state's favored militias?
4. Have you come across any indications that any international non-state actors are involved in Captagon trafficking in the Syrian war?
5. What other questions do you think we should be asking in respect to Captagon trafficking in the Syrian war?
6. Who else do you think I should interview on the subject of Captagon trafficking in the Syrian war?

Due to the politically sensitive nature of the issue and the need for journalists and government bureaucrats to obtain permission to speak publicly, a great many of our interview subjects requested to be quoted anonymously and we have respected their requests.

### **Overview of the Captagon Trade**

#### *What is Captagon?*

Captagon was the most popular brand name for an amphetamine-type stimulant called fenethylamine. West German pharmaceutical company Degussa AG introduced fenethylamine in 1961 as a treatment for children diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and medical prescription usage soon became prevalent across the world. In reaction to studies suggesting fenethylamine's high potential for addiction and abuse and adverse health effects, the United States Food and Drug Administration (FDA) banned the drug as a Schedule I controlled substance in 1981 and nearly every other country in the world soon followed

suit.<sup>70</sup> Though the 1980s near-worldwide ban on fenethylamine ended the official Captagon brand, the name stuck as a slang for fenethylamine in black market drug circles selling it for recreational use. For reasons that are still not entirely clear, Captagon's popularity as a recreational street drug remains limited to the Middle East and particularly the Arab world, where it is known as "al-Kabtagon" and "Abu Hilalain," Arabic for "father of the two crescent moons." The latter Arabic slang derives from the two letter C's resembling crescent moons found on each small, round, and off-white pill of Captagon.<sup>71</sup>

It is important to note that today's street Captagon is not classified by its true chemical composition, but instead by its appearance. According to a Turkish anti-drug official we interviewed, Turkish and other Middle East seizure records count all amphetamine-type stimulants in powder or liquid form as "amphetamines", even when later tested to be fenethylamine, while all drugs found in small, round, off-white pills with two letter C's on them are counted as "Captagon," even when later tested to be methamphetamine or other non-fenethylamine substances. A study done in Jordan in 2004 analyzed 124 samples of seized "Captagon" and determined that there was no fenethylamine present in any of the samples.<sup>72</sup> The TNP official insisted that black market Captagon is just as often counterfeit as it is real fenethylamine, but is always produced to resemble the original pharmaceutical drug to meet black market demand. In addition, many black market Captagon pills are drug cocktails marketed for different purposes such as improved sex or intense euphoria. A Captagon sex cocktail pill is often a mixture of fenethylamine or methamphetamine and Viagra, while a Captagon euphoric high cocktail pill is often a mixture of

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<sup>70</sup> Gerfried, Kristen, Annelies Schaefer, and Ansgar von Schlichtegroll. "Fenethylamine: Therapeutic Use, Misuse, and/or Abuse." *Drug and Alcohol Dependence*, 17 (1986). Pgs. 259-260.

<sup>71</sup> Sloan, Alastair. "Is Saudi Arabia Losing the Battle to Combat Substance Abuse?" *Middle East Monitor*. Mar. 28, 2014. Accessed on April 9, 2015. <<https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/articles/middle-east/10579-is-saudi-arabia-losing-the-battle-to-combat-substance-abuse>>

<sup>72</sup> Alabdalla, Mahmoud A. "Chemical Characterization of Counterfeit Captagon Tablets Seized in Jordan." *Forensic Science International* 152.2-3 (2005): 185-88. Web.

fenethylamine or methamphetamine and heroin.<sup>73</sup> Lebanese journalist Rami Aysha describes a new cheaper sub-brand of black market Captagon called “farawla,” Arabic for “strawberry,” which exclusively originates from Syria. Whereas a typical Captagon pill might go anywhere from \$10 (USD) to \$25 a pill in the Gulf, a “farawla” Captagon pill from Syria would go for only \$7.<sup>74</sup>

Like all amphetamine-type stimulants, Captagon is inexpensive and easy to produce using mostly common ingredients such as pseudo-ephedrine. As the Jordanian study showed, pills labeled “Captagon” can include almost any compound. Also like other amphetamines, Captagon causes increased energy, euphoria, a decreased need for sleep, lowered inhibitions, and in cases of overdose, psychosis, paranoia, violent aggression, and death. Rumors persist across the global news media that many Syrian war fighters are using the drug to fight longer and fiercer and with less fear of death.<sup>75</sup> Indeed, another TNP anti-drug official we interviewed mentioned the use of amphetamines by soldiers in combat all the way back to World War II.<sup>76</sup>

#### *Supply and the Top of the Pyramid*

According to a U.S. DEA agent posted in the Middle East,<sup>77</sup> the top of the pyramid in the global Captagon trade has been since the 1980s and remains the same core group of Lebanese gangsters based in the Bekaa Valley, including the notorious Abu Ali Zaiter.<sup>78</sup> While recent years have seen Syria replace Lebanon as the world’s Captagon production center, the same gangs of Lebanese drug lords operating in Hezbollah-controlled areas reap the largest profits and control the trade, though many Syrian and Turkish nationals are brought in as lower-ranking associates

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<sup>73</sup> Turkish National Police KOM Unit officer #1, Personal Interview, March 11, 2015.

<sup>74</sup> Aysha, Rami, Personal Interview, March 24, 2015.

<sup>75</sup> Henley, Jon. “Captagon: The Amphetamine Fuelling Syria’s Civil War.” *The Guardian*. Jan. 13, 2014. Accessed on April 9, 2015. <<http://www.theguardian.com/world/shortcuts/2014/jan/13/captagon-amphetamine-syria-war-middle-east>>

<sup>76</sup> Anonymous Turkish National Police KOM unit officer #2, Personal Interview, March 11, 2015.

<sup>77</sup> DEA 3, Personal Interview, March 11, 2015.

<sup>78</sup> Baker, Aryn. “Syria’s Breaking Bad: Are Amphetamines Funding the War?” *Time*. Oct. 28, 2013. Accessed on April 12, 2015. <<http://world.time.com/2013/10/28/syrias-breaking-bad-are-amphetamines-funding-the-war/>>

for smuggling.<sup>79</sup> However, there is increasing evidence of Hezbollah and the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) directly producing Captagon themselves in recent years and taking over much of the regional Captagon trade.<sup>80</sup> The evidence implicating Hezbollah and Iran will be detailed later in this paper.

Most Captagon production facilities were located in Lebanon, Bulgaria, and Turkey until 2006, according to a TNP anti-drug officer. After the 2006 spike in Captagon seizures and usage across Turkey and the entire Middle East, the TNP KOM unit began an unprecedented series of crackdowns that even led to the shocking 2008 arrest of prominent Turkish Muslim cleric Ali Kalkanci for secretly running one of the largest Captagon production outfits in the country. The TNP officer insisted that the crackdowns drove nearly all Turkish Captagon production away by 2008 and that any Captagon caught emanating from Turkey since then has merely taken a round-about smuggling route from Syria and Lebanon to end up for consumption in the Gulf. The TNP officer claims that smugglers use Turkey as a Captagon transport hub even when it makes little geographic sense because people and cargo from Turkey are less scrutinized.<sup>81</sup>

While agreeing that such a smuggling diversion does happen, a U.S. DEA agent posted in the region<sup>82</sup> scoffs at the notion that Turkey no longer produces Captagon. According to the agent, a significant amount of the drug continues to be produced in Turkey, though admittedly less than before, and the Turkish National Police are not willing to publically acknowledge it. However, the agent agrees with the TNP officers that production began to shift into Syria as early as 2008 due to the unusually high level of corruption amongst Syrian government officials even before the war began, a fact not well reported by most Western journalists covering

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<sup>79</sup> DEA 2, Personal Interview, March 12, 2015.

<sup>80</sup> Ganor, Boaz and Miri Halperin Wernli. "The Infiltration of Terrorist Organizations into the Pharmaceuticals Industry: Hezbollah as a Case Study." *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 36 (9) (2013). Pgs. 699-712.

<sup>81</sup> Anonymous TNP KOM Unit officer #2, Personal Interview, March 11, 2015.

<sup>82</sup> DEA 1, Personal Interview, March 12, 2015.

Captagon. The agent likewise agrees with the TNP officer that most Captagon production in Turkey has been in rural border areas such as Hatay and has not involved the Turkish mafia, who are largely constrained to the large urban metropolises of Ankara and Istanbul.<sup>83</sup>

Much has been written in the world press about the 2013 boom in Captagon seizures and usage across the Middle East in conjunction with a 90% drop in Lebanese production and a shift into the lawless and war-torn Syria.<sup>84</sup> Indeed, a TNP officer corroborated what numerous journalists have told us in articles and interviews and that is that Syria is now the center of global Captagon production. Specifically, the TNP officer cited a statistic that Syria now leads the entire world in the importation of pseudo-ephedrine, which is a key ingredient in many amphetamines sold as Captagon.<sup>85</sup> However, Lebanese journalist Rami Aysha is careful to point out that the Lebanese government, under heavy influence from Hezbollah, downplays and covers up the extent of continued Captagon production in the Bekaa Valley of Lebanon and prefers to blame the entire problem on Syria.<sup>86</sup> The mistake of so many Western journalists to promote Lebanese ISF anti-drug official Colonel Ghassan Shamseddine's interview statements uncritically will be detailed later in this paper.

### *Shifting Smuggling Routes*

All Turkish and U.S. anti-drug officials interviewed for this project agreed that Captagon produced in Syria, Lebanon, and to a lesser extent, Turkey, is then smuggled through Lebanon, Turkey, and to a lesser extent, Jordan, where the vast majority ends up in Arab Gulf countries such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar. Only one anti-drug official

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<sup>83</sup> DEA 1, Personal Interview, March 12, 2015.

<sup>84</sup> Henley, Jon. "Captagon: The Amphetamine Fuelling Syria's Civil War." *The Guardian*. Jan. 13, 2014. Accessed on April 9, 2015. <<http://www.theguardian.com/world/shortcuts/2014/jan/13/captagon-amphetamine-syria-war-middle-east>>

<sup>85</sup> Anonymous TNP KOM Unit officer #3, Personal Interview, March 11, 2015.

<sup>86</sup> Aysha, Rami, Personal Interview, March 24, 2015.

interviewed remembered a single example of Captagon pills seized at an airport or being transported by airplane, though Lebanese newspaper *Daily Star* reported on two separate incidents of a Kuwaiti national<sup>87</sup> and a Syrian national caught at Rafik Hariri International Airport in Beirut trying to smuggle several kilos of Captagon onto a plane.<sup>88</sup> Instead, far more common for Captagon smugglers is the use of cement trucks, large cars, and other land vehicles. According to a Turkish National Police (TNP) anti-drug official, most Captagon smuggling in Turkey occurs in rural provinces on the border with Syria and Lebanon, namely Hatay, and is carried out by families of primarily Arab and Kurdish descent who live on both sides of Turkey's border with Syria and Lebanon and have specialized in smuggling various goods across the border for centuries.<sup>89</sup> A U.S. State Department official corroborated the importance of these "smuggling families" and noted that while they used to smuggle oil and cigarettes, they are now primarily smuggling foreign fighters into Syria and smuggling out Captagon. No matter what item is being smuggled, the official insisted, the smuggling routes and techniques employed remain largely the same. Since these families routinely cross the border to visit their relatives on the other side, their routine visits become the perfect cover for Captagon smuggling and are very difficult to adequately police given their prevalence, frequency, and the breakdown of any border policing on the Syrian side due to the ongoing civil war.<sup>90</sup> In addition, both the State Department official and a TNP official we interviewed noted the exploitation of Syrian war refugee routes into Turkey for smuggling in Captagon.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> "Captagon Pills Seized at Beirut Airport, Kuwaiti Man Arrested." *The Daily Star*. Nov. 16, 2013. Accessed on April 16, 2015. <<http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2013/Nov-16/238048-captagon-pills-seized-at-beirut-airport-kuwaiti-arrested.ashx>>

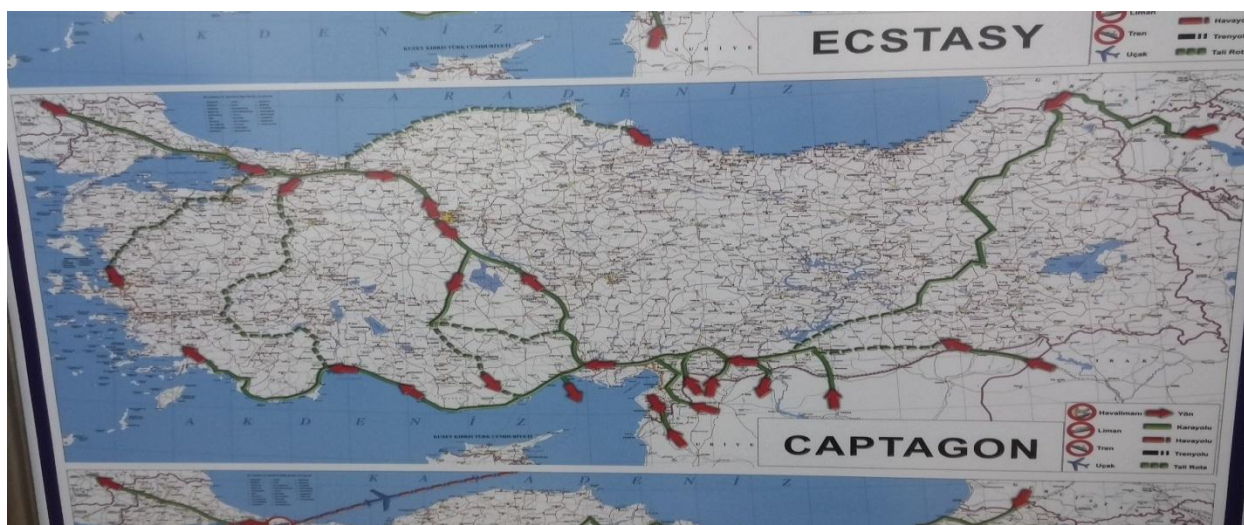
<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> Anonymous TNP KOM Unit officer #3, Personal Interview, March 12, 2015.

<sup>90</sup> Anonymous U.S. Department of State official at the U.S. consulate in Istanbul, Turkey, Personal Interview, March 14, 2015.

<sup>91</sup> Anonymous TNP KOM Unit officer #2, Personal Interview, March 11, 2015.





A map of Captagon smuggling routes through Turkey provided to us by the Turkish National Police KOM anti-drug unit.

Reviewing the latest Captagon seizure records across the Middle East gave us a insight into the shifting nature of the smuggling routes that have not yet been reported in the public global press. Based on our research, it appears that smuggling routes are now increasingly shifting away from Turkey and towards Lebanon and Jordan, as overall Captagon production and usage continues to explode all over the Middle East.

It is important to note that every anti-drug official we interviewed stressed that drug seizure data can be misleading, especially when it comes to Captagon and the sporadic seizures of its factories. One TNP official said that raiding a Captagon factory can result in over a million pills being seized so finding and raiding no factories one year and two factories the following year can present an astronomical spike in Captagon seizures when, in reality, the same amount of Captagon was being produced both years.<sup>92</sup> However, it stands to reason that sufficiently high spikes or plummets in Captagon seizures are indicative of trends that cannot be discounted by varying luck in locating production facilities and all anti-drug officials agreed with this point.

<sup>92</sup> Anonymous TNP KOM Unit officer #3, Personal Interview, March 11, 2015.

After Captagon seizures in Turkey skyrocketed 3,011% from 144,121 pills seized in 2012 to 4,483,632 pills seized in 2013,<sup>93</sup> 2014 saw a 97% plummet in Turkish Captagon seizures.<sup>94</sup> When asked what may have accounted for the steep drop, a TNP anti-drug officer replied that Captagon producers are moving closer to their predominately Arab consumers, rendering Turkey less necessary as a production site and transit hub.<sup>95</sup> Indeed, the latest seizure records from Lebanon and Jordan, provided to us by U.S. DEA agents covering those countries,<sup>96</sup> demonstrate massive spikes in seized Captagon pills in 2014 just as seizures plummeted in Turkey.<sup>97</sup> In addition, the *Middle East Monitor* reported a large amount of Captagon pills seized in Jordan in 2014 along with a large cache of weapons,<sup>98</sup> which may suggest a Syrian war militia engaging in a drugs-for-guns trade not unlike those described earlier in the literature review section of this paper. Another U.S. DEA agent related an anecdote about the Turkish National Police inadvertently catching Turkish foreign intelligence (MIT) smuggling myriad weapons across the border to anti-Assad rebels in the Syrian war. While no Captagon was found at the scene,<sup>99</sup> the question remains as to how the Syrian rebels could afford to covertly purchase such a large cache of weapons from the Turkish government and trading drugs for guns represents one strong possibility, given its myriad precedents detailed in our literature review.

A U.S. State Department official in Istanbul provided us with another important reason for Captagon smugglers' shift out of Turkey into Lebanon and Jordan. The United States and other Western nations have very recently put a tremendous amount of pressure on the Turkish

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<sup>93</sup> Turkish National Police Department of Smuggling and Organized Crime (KOM) 2013 Annual Report (2014).

<sup>94</sup> DEA 3, Personal Interview, March 11, 2015.

<sup>95</sup> Anonymous TNP KOM Unit officer #2, Personal Interview, March 11, 2015.

<sup>96</sup> DEA 2, Personal Interview, March 12, 2015

<sup>97</sup> DEA 3, Personal Interview, March 11, 2015.

<sup>98</sup> Sloan, Alastair. "Is Saudi Arabia Losing the Battle to Combat Substance Abuse?" *Middle East Monitor*. Mar. 28, 2014. Accessed on April 9, 2015. <<https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/articles/middle-east/10579-is-saudi-arabia-losing-the-battle-to-combat-substance-abuse>>

<sup>99</sup> Anonymous U.S. DEA agent posted Turkey, Personal Interview, March 11, 2015.

government to crack down on the foreign fighter smuggling routes in and out of Syria. Since foreign fighter smuggling occurs in the same routes through Hatay and other rural border regions of Turkey as Captagon smuggling and since it involves the very same smuggling families, the increased scrutiny on foreign fighter smuggling has prompted Captagon traffickers to avoid Turkey and increasingly rely on Lebanon and Jordan.<sup>100</sup>

### *Demand*

All anti-drug officials interviewed agreed that the vast majority of Captagon consumption takes place in the wealthy Arab Gulf states, though they all likewise cited persistent rumors that numerous Syrian militia fighters of every faction use Captagon for increased combat courage and stamina and to be able to stay awake for days on end fighting longer and fiercer. According to all documentary evidence and corroborated by U.S. DEA agent posted in the region, Saudi Arabia is by far the number one consumer of Captagon, and Captagon is the drug of choice among young Saudi partygoers, much more so than hashish, cocaine, heroin, or Ecstasy.<sup>101</sup> Indeed, United Nations world drug reports have placed Saudi Arabia as the number one country for amphetamine seizures since 2011, the UN's 2014 world drug report traces 56% of worldwide amphetamine seizures to the Gulf, and according to Google Trends, more people in Saudi Arabia search for "Captagon" online than in any other country in the world. UAE newspaper *The National* also reports that UAE and Saudi police have in the last year routinely intercepted Captagon shipments as large as 17.7 million pills.<sup>102</sup>

"To the Saudis, Captagon is a national shame," another U.S. DEA agent told us. While Saudi authorities are very committed to eradicating the drug and accept U.S. training to do so,

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<sup>100</sup> Anonymous U.S. State Department official, Personal Interview, March 14, 2015.

<sup>101</sup> DEA 2, Personal Interview, March 12, 2015.

<sup>102</sup> Thomas, Justin. "The Gulf Seems Captivated by Captagon, but Why?" *The National*. Dec. 14, 2014. Accessed on April 16, 2015. <<http://www.thenational.ae/opinion/comment/the-gulf-seems-captivated-by-captagon-but-why>>

the agent informed us that they are nevertheless hesitant to share information with their American and other foreign counterparts and wish to cover up the full extent of the problem to avoid embarrassment over failing to live up to their society's conservative Islamic ideals. When asked to profile the typical Captagon user, the agent narrowed the key demographic down to Saudi males in their twenties and thirties, though just as often lower class as they are wealthy. As to why Saudi Arabia and the Gulf consume so much more Captagon than the rest of the world, the agent speculated that it's a combination of their repressed and socially conservative society not providing adequate safe and legal outlets for male youthful rebellion and the extraordinarily high amount of disposable income in the region. A single Captagon pill sells in the Gulf for anywhere between \$10 (USD) and \$25, he told us.<sup>103</sup>

During our field research, we happened to run into two male Saudi nationals in their early twenties in New York and interviewed them about Captagon. The Saudis told us that Captagon usage is indeed widespread among young Saudi men and is generally sold and consumed at underground house parties since there is no nightclub scene in Saudi Arabia. The gentlemen insisted that street prices for Captagon are more often closer to \$30 a pill and that the drug is eclipsing even Ecstasy in popularity among Saudi partygoers. When asked how they would feel if it turned out buying Captagon on the street in Saudi Arabia funded Saudi's enemies Hezbollah and Iran fighting in the Syrian war, our two Saudi interview subjects became visibly uncomfortable and refused to speak with us any longer.<sup>104</sup>

### *Where's the Money?*

Anyone familiar with the ways in which American law enforcement agencies operate would be surprised and disturbed by how little following of money goes into drug trafficking

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<sup>103</sup> DEA 2, Personal Interview, March 12, 2015.

<sup>104</sup> Two anonymous young Saudi business students in New York, Personal Interview, April 12, 2015.

investigations by Middle Eastern authorities. Very rarely are shipments of cash intercepted in the region and none of the Turkish National Police officers we interviewed had any idea of how Captagon traffickers are smuggling their money or where the money ultimately ends up; smuggling money was covered by a different department. To quote Detective Lester Freamon on the acclaimed American police television drama *The Wire*, “You follow drugs, you get drug addicts and drug dealers. But you start to follow the money and you don’t know where the fuck it’s gonna take you.”<sup>105</sup>

When asked why Middle East anti-drug services do so little to follow the money, a U.S. DHS border security expert posted in the region told us that laws against transporting large amounts of undeclared cash are peculiar to the U.S., which means it is very difficult to legally seize or track drug money in most parts of the world.<sup>106</sup> A fear of losing their jobs by exposing high-level political corruption may also be a motivating factor in ignoring drug money for Middle East anti-drug cops. Whatever the reason, very little is known for sure about how Captagon traffickers move their money and where it goes, though all anti-drug officials interviewed agreed that the Captagon trade agree is a multi-billion dollar industry.

Based on informed speculation, one of the U.S. DEA agents we interviewed told us he believes that informal *hawala* banking is most likely employed for smaller transactions, but he doubts *hawala* could handle the hundreds of millions of dollars associated with, for instance, the 17.7 million Captagon pills seized in Dubai in one day last year.<sup>107</sup> A U.S. State Department official theorized that most Captagon cash may be smuggled in the routine trips smuggling families make across borders to visit their relatives on the other side because these trips are

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<sup>105</sup> “Game Day.” *The Wire*. HBO. 2002.

<sup>106</sup> Anonymous U.S. DHS border security officer posted in the Middle East, Personal Interview, March 12, 2015.

<sup>107</sup> DEA 2, Personal Interview, March 12, 2015.

difficult to adequately police.<sup>108</sup> Lebanese freelance journalist Rami Aysha gave us more concrete claims. According to Aysha, a great deal of illegal Captagon profit is laundered through mobile phone companies in the Gulf that are often run by Iranian nationals.<sup>109</sup>

### *What Accounts for the Spikes?*

There is no dispute in the media or among our myriad interview subjects that Captagon seizures, production, and usage have all skyrocketed across the Middle East since 2013, on top of an already large increase in 2006. When asked if the spikes resulted from struggling to keep up with an exploding demand in the Gulf, all of our interview subjects responded with a unanimous no. “It’s not that Gulf demand is going up,” a DEA agent informed us. “The bad guys are making way more of it. It’s that simple. They’re flooding the market.”<sup>110</sup> There was also unanimous agreement among our interview subjects that the ongoing civil war in Syria has prompted “the bad guys” to suddenly produce far more Captagon than ever before.

The question remains, though, whether the Syrian war Captagon spike comes from existing criminal groups taking advantage of the breakdown of rule of law in Syria to produce more Captagon, or if the spike instead comes from Syrian war militias producing unprecedented amounts of the drug to raise money for weapons to stay in the fight. Even more important is which Syrian war actor is most involved in Captagon trafficking, if any, so that the U.S. national security implications of the Captagon trade can be assessed. We argue in the remainder of this paper that all available indicators point to Hezbollah with Iranian backing as most involved in Captagon production as an officially sanctioned fundraising strategy, with an some degree of limited involvement by corrupt members of the Assad regime’s army, and corrupt rogue

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<sup>108</sup> Anonymous U.S. State Department Official posted in Turkey, Personal Interview, March 14, 2015.

<sup>109</sup> Aysha, Rami, Personal Interview, March 24, 2015..

<sup>110</sup> DEA 2, Personal Interview, March 12, 2015.

members of the Free Syrian Army, while JN and ISIS are the least involved and by and large destroy Captagon factories whenever they find them.

### **Timing of Shifts in Trafficking**

Certain spikes in Captagon seizures also indicate different organizations' levels of involvement in the trade and production. There were significant increases in the amounts of Captagon seized throughout the Middle East at the end of 2006 through 2008.<sup>111</sup> This period of time correlates with Hezbollah's specific need to refill its coffers after expending significant funds during the 2006 war with Israel. Boaz Ganor attributes the introduction of Hezbollah-controlled Captagon production facilities to the Bekaa Valley as a means to recoup these funds.<sup>112</sup> Produced cheaply using precursor ingredients that Iran (Hezbollah's backer) has been known to produce and supply,<sup>113</sup> technically simple, and situated in an area with established trafficking routes, the production of Captagon is arguably a "silver bullet" for Hezbollah's financial predicament at the time.

Not only did the 2006 war create a financial need on the part of Hezbollah to raise funds, but 15 Captagon production labs were shut down in Bulgaria and Turkey, creating what could be called a "market opportunity."<sup>114</sup> Ideally located near the border with Syria, and with the protection and consent of Hezbollah, the facilities in Lebanon filled this supply gap to the extent that UNODC attributes a 32% decline in Europe's share of global Captagon seizures due to the increased activity in the Middle East (particularly Lebanon, but also Syria).<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>111</sup>World Drug Report 2010. Vienna, Austria: United Nations, 2010. 98. Print.

<sup>112</sup> Ganor, Boaz and Miri Halperin Wernli. "The Infiltration of Terrorist Organizations into the Pharmaceuticals Industry: Hezbollah as a Case Study." *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 36 (9) (2013). Pgs. 703-704.

<sup>113</sup> Multiple UNODC World Drug Reports cite Iran as a producer of amphetamines, pseudo-ephedrine, and similar amphetamine-type substance precursors, for instance the 2008 report, pg 140. Also, our interviews with TNP officials included their mention of Iran's involvement with this activity, corroborated by DEA officials.

<sup>114</sup> UNODC World Drug Report 2008, pg 144.

<sup>115</sup> UNODC World Drug Report 2008. pg 143. This decline was over a 10-year period of time, but the rapid drop in production facilities in Europe occurred in 2006-2008 time-period.

The next most prominent shift in Captagon production occurred between 2011 and 2013, where there was approximately a 90% drop in Captagon flowing out of Lebanon, attributed to both closures of production facilities in Lebanon and an increase output from Syria.<sup>116</sup> This increased production within Syria has remained, and increased over time. The only major shift has been in the selection of routes out of Syria, from Turkey's south-eastern provinces to the borders with Jordan and Lebanon (as discussed in the following section).

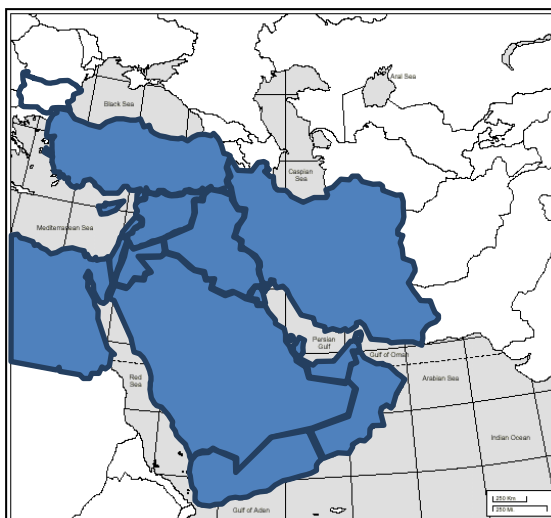
### **The Geographic Angle**

Examining illicit activities surrounding Captagon through a geographic lens allows for a number of trends to be understood for both sides of the supply and demand equation. In terms of supply, production operations existed in a number of countries surrounding the Middle East, always boarding on nations that connect to destinations in the Gulf via air, land, and sea. In terms of demand, the nations most desiring this product haven't wavered over time (except to increase their demand for more). Illicit Captagon trade is a relatively closed system, isolated to one region (see image on next page), and not global which allows for trends to be more concrete and transferable within the smaller universe. Over time, the distance between the supplying facilities and the market demanding Captagon has become shorter and shorter as new facilities are established along the route.

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<sup>116</sup>Henley, Jon. "Captagon: The Amphetamine Fuelling Syria's Civil War." *The Guardian*. Jan. 13, 2014. Accessed on April 9, 2015.





This map was obtained from the internet and altered to indicate the nations of the world consistently involved in the Captagon trade.<sup>117</sup>

Captagon as a substance has always had a relatively definite geographic sphere of interest. As earlier discussed, production of this drug was formerly popular in south-eastern European countries, particularly Bulgaria, that border the Middle East.<sup>118</sup> Based on our understanding of the history and trade, this was essentially the outer geographic limit of activity surrounding this drug. Produced in these areas, nations like Turkey, Lebanon, and Syria were mainly used as transit nations for the drug to the Gulf.<sup>119</sup> These nations acted as conduits to the Arabian Gulf. For over a decade, this has been the destination for most of the world's Captagon.<sup>120</sup> The majority of the Captagon that didn't make it to the Gulf could generally be found along the route, consumed in smaller quantities in the various transit countries like Turkey, Syria, and

<sup>117</sup> Original map obtained from: [http://www.martinsaphug.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/middle\\_east.gif](http://www.martinsaphug.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/middle_east.gif)

<sup>118</sup> This statement, consistently referenced in INCB reports and echoed in both UNODC World Reports and interviews with the Turkish National Police, is based on seizure information. The Turkish National Police also indicated that countries like Bulgaria were well suited to house production facilities as scientists from Eastern European countries had been involved in the production of Captagon at this time. Additionally, the 2005 INCB Annual Report and the 2006 UNODC World Drug report specifically cite Bulgaria as a production center.

<sup>119</sup> Kalin, Stephen. "Insight: War Turns Syria into Major Amphetamines Producer, Consumer." Reuters. Thomson Reuters, 12 Jan. 2014. Web. 21 Apr. 2015.

<sup>120</sup> This is derived from surveying International Narcotics Control Board Annual Reports from 2000 to 2014, corroborated with news reporting and interviews with TNP and DEA officials.

Lebanon.<sup>121</sup> This consumption in these geographic regions has been attributed to supply lines “leaking” their products into the various communities that are trafficked. As a result, one can use reports of increases in the use (abuse) of Captagon and other amphetamine-like substances to help map the routes used in trafficking and the extent to which a nation is involved (i.e. purely a transit nation vs. a production point). Thus, when the International Narcotics Control Board reported that abuse of Captagon was growing in Lebanon in 2010, it substantiates the assertion of increased activity in the country. This correlates with reports of Captagon production facilities being established in the Bekaa valley following the 2006 war between Hezbollah and Israel.<sup>122</sup> With the addition of production facilities in the country, an increase in use and abuse is to be expected.

While the advent of production facilities in the Bekaa Valley was new following the 2006 war, the area was part of trafficking routes from Turkey for years. Lebanon’s location is key as it connects south-eastern Europe to Syria to Jordan and the Gulf via overland routes, and allows for illicit shipments to the sea via its ports. Additionally, the country as a whole has been far from a bastion of stability and centralized security following the various civil and ethnic conflicts over the past forty years. The sectarian, chaotic nature of the country has created spheres of influence where non-state actors are able to exert state-like authority and act with relative impunity. In the Bekaa Valley, Hezbollah is such an actor, dominating the area militarily and economically.<sup>123</sup> Thus, while there are conflicting reports about the level of direct involvement as a whole that Hezbollah had in the actual production of Captagon pills, the

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<sup>121</sup> Interview with TNP officials at KOM headquarters on March 13, 2015. Also corroborated by 2003 and 2010 INCB Annual reports.

<sup>122</sup> Ganor, Boaz, and Miri Halperin Wernli. “The Infiltration of Terrorist Organizations into the Pharmaceutical Industry: Hezbollah as a Case Study.” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*. Routledge: 2013.

<sup>123</sup> Ganor, Boaz and Miri Halperin Wernli. “The Infiltration of Terrorist Organizations into the Pharmaceuticals Industry: Hezbollah as a Case Study.” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 36 (9) (2013). Pgs. 702.

organization was at the very least complicit in the activity as it was intensely carried on in their territory.

As earlier discussed in the *Timing* section, the center of Captagon production moved following the 2006 war from South-Eastern Europe to the Middle East, particularly Lebanon's Bekaa Valley. Not only did this decrease the distance over which the illicit drugs needed to travel, but it removed at least one inspection point at which the drugs could be interdicted (i.e. the Turkish border). As Turkey had recently cracked down on Captagon within their own country, added scrutiny would likely be placed on the border as well, resulting in increased losses for the producers and traffickers.

According to documented seizure activity and facility raids, Captagon activity in Lebanon arguably became the most prolific production in the region.<sup>124</sup> However, in 2012, enforcement operations in Lebanon led to closures of these facilities in the Bekaa Valley.<sup>125</sup> While this government interference with the activities of the de facto power in the area may appear to contradict earlier statements of impunity, reporting indicates that this may have been a result of infighting within Hezbollah itself.<sup>126</sup> In this case, the fact that this production closed down as a result of issues within the workings of an arguably criminal organization<sup>127</sup> supports the concept of the Bekaa Valley being semi-autonomous, controlled by the extra-governmental faction. This adds to the concept of these actors looking for similar areas with weak central-government control. Fortunately for the producers that were put out of business, the conflict across the border in Syria had created just such an environment. More so, Hezbollah was already

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<sup>124</sup> Strum, Beckie. "Syrian Captagon being trafficked through Lebanon." *The Daily Star*, September 11, 2013.

<sup>125</sup> These enforcement operations are noted in the UNODC 2013 World Drug Report (pg. 50), and described in the Ganor-Wernli article (pg. 705).

<sup>126</sup> Ganor, Boaz and Miri Halperin Wernli. "The Infiltration of Terrorist Organizations into the Pharmaceuticals Industry: Hezbollah as a Case Study." *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 36 (9) (2013). Pgs 705.

<sup>127</sup> Designated Terrorist Organization by the U.S. State Department.

actively involved in the conflict, with reports showing that fighters are engaged in actions sympathetic to the Asad regime.<sup>128</sup> This earlier connection in the area, combined with the closure in Lebanon, suggests that the substantial decrease of production in Lebanon and the substantial increase in seizures of drugs moving outward from Syria was due to the producers relocating across the border.

The current location of major production in Syria appears to be a high point in terms of transnational organized drug production logistics. Syria is currently a weakened state that has long-standing smuggling routes for Captagon, in addition to a multitude of other products traveling into and out of the “nation” on a daily basis. The armed forces of this state are completely occupied with fighting the insurgency/revolution/civil war and have abandoned their posts along the border, placing all of the responsibility for enforcing anti-smuggling measures on the neighboring border forces.<sup>129</sup> Additionally, Syria was an industrialized nation with numerous pharmaceutical production facilities that could be used to produce counterfeit drugs as well (or better) than they produced legitimate prescriptions.<sup>130</sup> In totality, an environment has been created where, should one be so inclined, Captagon can be produced and transported to the Gulf via a multitude of overland or seaboard routes with little or no government interference. The only catch is that protection must be provided by an armed faction to ensure that these logistics run smoothly. Thus, even if the relationship is a tangential protection tax for safe passage to the

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<sup>128</sup> Sullivan, Marissa. Hezbollah in Syria. The Middle East Security Report, No. 19. The Institute for the Study of War, April 2014.

<sup>129</sup> Herbert, Matt. Partisans, Profiteers, and Criminals: Syria's Illicit Economy 38 (2014): 74. The Fletcher Forum. Tufts University, Fletcher School of International Studies. Web. 01 Feb. 2015. Also corroborated by Reuters reporter Stephen Kalin, “Insight – War turns Syria into major amphetamines producer, consumer.” January 12, 2014. This was also stated by the Turkish National Police, and U.S. officials interviewed.

<sup>130</sup> Ohrstrom, Lysandra. “Syria War Wreaks Havoc on Drug Industry.” The Daily Star Newspaper. The Daily Star, 1 July 2013. Web. 20 Apr. 2015.; also INCB Report c. 2009 or 2010. Also cite interviews w/TNP and DEA.

border, there is virtually no conceivable way that the armed groups within Syria are not connected to the Captagon production and trafficking.

The current state of Captagon transmission out of Syria appears to be fluctuating in reaction to various enforcement efforts along its borders. This is not to say that Captagon is necessarily being targeted, but overall scrutiny is increasing on cross-border traffic as a result of ISIS activity and reports of transnational smuggling being utilized to supply both fighters and supplies to terrorist entities.<sup>131</sup> During the 2013-2014 time period, the Turkish-Syrian border was the most heavily favored departure point for Captagon.<sup>132</sup> This area, specifically the Hatay, Gaziantep, Reyhanli, and Idris provinces, is uniquely suited for smuggling goods like Captagon due to “smuggling families” located on the border. Ethnically present on both sides of the border, members of these ethnic “families” traverse the border numerous times a day, raising less scrutiny from otherwise attentive border security officials. In terms of Captagon, one kilogram is made up of approximately 5,000 pills and takes up about the size of a shoebox.<sup>133</sup> Thus, in very few trips a significant number of pills can be moved. Once on the Turkish side of the border, drugs can be repackaged into larger quantities for shipment by sea at the port of Mersin. Operations like these are possibly what resulted in the major sea-based interdiction of approximately 4.2 million Captagon pills hidden within a variety of textile rolls on board a vessel headed for Saudi Arabia.<sup>134</sup> The largest seizure in 2014 was sea-based as well, with 17.8 million pills found hidden inside machines used to compress wood on a ship entering UAE’s ports.<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Interview with anonymous U.S. Government official.

<sup>132</sup> Interviews with KOM officials. Also supported by KOM yearly reports.

<sup>133</sup> Average number of pills per kilogram was discussed during an interview with an anonymous DEA official.

<sup>134</sup> Mustafa, Awad. "Four Million Pills Seized in Dh210m Drug Bust | The National." Four Million Pills Seized in Dh210m Drug Bust | The National. The National, 31 Mar. 2010. Web. 20 Apr. 2015.

<sup>135</sup> Shouk, Ali. "Three Arrested after One of the Biggest Drug Smuggling Operations in Dubai." 7DAYS Dubai. 7 Days in Dubai, 17 Nov. 2014. Web. 20 Apr. 2015.

More recently, Turkish authorities have come under significant pressure to secure their border due to their nation being a known conduit for foreign fighters and materiel en route to ISIL. As a result, Turkish authorities have seen a significant drop (roughly 90%) between this year and the last. Alternate overland routes to the Gulf market via Jordan and Lebanon have seen respective increases in the drugs seized at these points, roughly double this year what was interdicted last year.<sup>136</sup> These routes are not particularly new, but overland transportation restricts the size of shipments at one time (even with tractor trailers). Requiring the same number of pills to be shipped using more vehicles increases the probability that the drugs will be discovered during a vehicle search, cutting into profits. However, based on interviews with people knowledgeable on both the smuggling economy and the Turkish border authorities, the Turkish forces can stringently crack down on illicit activities if they are properly motivated,<sup>137</sup> forcing the shift in preferred routing. Additionally, the increased activity of ISIS near the Turkish border, in conjunction with the decreased flow of Captagon through the area, may indicate that other routes are being utilized to avoid dealing with the reportedly anti-drug fighting group.<sup>138</sup>

This ability to shift the favored smuggling routes relatively quickly in reaction to the increased enforcement indicates several possible traits of those involved. First, either there is one organization responsible for the majority of the Captagon smuggling, or the organizations that are involved are coordinated. It is highly unlikely that numerous individual organizations producing the same product with access to the same slate of transit points shifted their preferred routing without any coordination. Second, if it is one organization that is producing the majority

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<sup>136</sup> Statistics provided by DEA with cooperative relationships with anti-drug officials in Jordan and Lebanon.

<sup>137</sup> Interview with AP reporter based in Turkey.

<sup>138</sup> Collard, Rebecca. "Lebanon's Drug Lords Say They're Ready to Join the Fight Against ISIS." PRI online, January 6, 2015. <http://www.pri.org/stories/2015-01-06/lebanons-drug-lords-say-theyre-ready-join-fight-against-isis>

of the Captagon being smuggled out of Syria, it would need to be able to have relatively free reign throughout the country. Transit from production centers to the border require security, and that security needs to be guaranteed regardless of the port of exportation. So, if the traffickers are able to shift their most heavily utilized smuggling routes in under a year, they must have the resources in place to secure the new routing. This suggests that an organization aligned with the As-ad regime is involved, as they are a unified organization holding significant territory throughout the country, and would not need to make significant changes to the distribution of forces to accommodate the new routing.

### **Past Criminal History**

As this investigation seeks to determine the extent of the connections between the fighting groups in Syria and the production and trafficking of Captagon, we ultimately are looking for correlations and linkages to suggest probabilities rather than direct, concrete evidence. Though some interviews have been of dubious credibility, they are often more contradictory rumor than objective observation. Thus, our interpretation and weighing of a variety of variables plays heavily into our conclusions. One of those variables is the historical record of these groups' activities and criminal behavior similar to Captagon production and trafficking. Though Captagon production has a relatively low barrier to entry as it's a very simple compound to produce, organizations with a history in the drug industry are more likely to be involved as they will have the past experience to draw upon. To varying degrees, an organization with a significant history or pattern in this field indicates an understanding of the logistics needed, bribes to be paid, and routes to be used, in addition to connections for securing precursor ingredients.

The following are a brief summary of the extent to which the major fighting actors are experienced in criminal smuggling, particularly drug smuggling. The list of actors only includes five organizations, appearing to ignore the multitude of small groups operating in the country's conflict. These groups were chosen based on their size and relative efficacy. While it is true that smaller organizations could establish their own production as a means of financial support and an "in-house" source of this very popular drug, they are less likely to be able to have the organizational depth, breadth, and logistical expertise required to fulfil the major shipments of Captagon that have been seized.

#### *Jabhat al-Nusra*

Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) is a relatively young fighter organization in Syria. Forming in 2011, its existence was formally declared in 2012 as a Syrian branch of al-Qaeda with strong ties to al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI).<sup>139</sup> This connection to AQI included significant funds and resources smuggled to JN across the Iraqi border.<sup>140</sup> This is the least secure border in Syria prior to the war, with the Government of Syria responsible for the only real impediment to the constant terror flow between the two nations, and until 2009 even that was rather lax as Assad often turned a blind eye to the terrorist traffic. Thus, the routes and interlocutors across that border were likely well known to the original leadership of JN and AQI, helping to facilitate this activity.

JN is known as one of the premiere Salafist-oriented fighting groups in Syria, drawing significant numbers of foreign fighters across multiple borders. Though overland routes through Iraq are numerous, interested "Jihadi" fighters are known to travel to countries like Turkey where they can enjoy relative comforts and an arguably shorter trip prior to being smuggled

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<sup>139</sup>"Profile: Syria's Nusra Front," BBC Online, April 10, 2013.

<sup>140</sup>"Mapping Militant Organizations," Stanford University: <http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/493>



across the Turkish border into Syria.<sup>141</sup> This route also allows for fewer possible interactions with enemy fighting groups in the veritable no-man's land across the Iraqi-Syrian border. JN is known to be active across the country of Syria, and is either actively involved in smuggling or taxing items moving through its territory. However, these items appear to be related to oil and consumer staples, not necessarily drugs.<sup>142</sup> Further, while JN has substantial connections within Syria and Iraq, and is in communication with core AQ, its ultimate global reach is unclear in terms of the logistical coordination that would be necessary for the amount of Captagon moving out of Syria.

### *Islamic State of Iraq in al-Sham (ISIS)*

ISIS is currently the most notorious Salafist-oriented group in Syria. Declaring a new “caliphate” in 2014, this organization’s roots go back roughly ten years to its formation as al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). The declaration of a caliphate and subsequent unilateral actions have caused a relatively public split between the leadership of ISIS and core-AQ. Like most of ISIS’s policies, their stance on drug use is far more severe than those of their contemporaries. For instance, the trafficking of cigarettes is one of the most well-known underground economies in the world, and have been a major staple of Syria’s smuggling economy for decades.<sup>143</sup> However, ISIS is reported to be punishing those found in possession of cigarettes severely, possibly cutting off hands in condemnation. This disapproval stems from a debated interpretation of the permissibility of smoking tobacco that dates back centuries, and the non-haram nature of the activity is accepted by the majority of the global Islamic community.<sup>144</sup> ISIS’s actions are

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<sup>141</sup> Walsh, Nick Patton. “The Secret Jihadi Smuggling Route through Turkey,” CNN online November 5, 2013.

<sup>142</sup> Nichols, Michelle “UN Adopts Resolution, Stifling ISIS, Nusra Front Cash Flows.” Haaretz Online, February 12, 2015.

<sup>143</sup> Matt Herbert article, in addition to personal experience with cigarette smuggling.

<sup>144</sup> [The Heart of Islam](#) by Seyyed Hoseini Nasr details the discourse on this debate and offers a succinct explanation of how cigarette smoking was deemed not necessarily halal, but also not haram.

consistent with its proclaimed pursuit of only the purist adherence to Islam, and thus is unusually harsh in this regard. Additionally, they have burned cannabis fields in the border areas with Lebanon, harming that industry as well.<sup>145</sup>

Based on these policies and past practices, it is hard to imagine that ISIS would permit, on an institutional level, the use, production, and trade in Captagon. However, while not necessarily institutionally acceptable, there are numerous reports of ISIS fighters using the drug to enhance their fighting abilities and stamina.<sup>146</sup> Thus, while ISIS has a history of major trafficking, it is mainly in goods it deems ideologically permissible, like oil. With significant crackdowns on oil smuggling, ISIS may be persuaded to expand its list of permissible income streams, but currently there is no evidence indicating this shift in practices has occurred.

#### *Hezbollah and Syrian Government Forces*

Hezbollah and Syria's military are linked in this discussion due to their linkage on the battle field and within Syria. Hezbollah's reported involvement in the conflict in Syria stems from its interest in maintaining the dominance of the Assad regime, as the Syrian government is a partner of both Hezbollah and Iran.<sup>147</sup> Recently, Hezbollah has been brazenly fighting alongside Assad forces, openly and directly fighting with the Assad army against Salafist ISIS and JN forces, in addition to battling more secular rebels like the Free Syrian Army.<sup>148</sup>

Hezbollah's history of involvement in the drug trade extends to the organizations inception in 1983. Hezbollah has been involved in a variety of drug industries from the moment it began to establish control over territory. Lebanon has been both a transit point for drugs

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<sup>145</sup> Collard, Rebecca. "Lebanon's Drug Lords Say They're Ready to Join the Fight Against ISIS." PRI online, January 6, 2015. <http://www.pri.org/stories/2015-01-06/lebanons-drug-lords-say-theyre-ready-join-fight-against-isis>

<sup>146</sup> Altin, Vanessa. "Drug-crazed ISIS Savages 'raped and Beheaded Children in Kobane'" Mirror. The Mirror, 11 Oct. 2014. Web. 20 Apr. 2015.

<sup>147</sup> Sullivan, Marissa. Hezbollah in Syria. The Middle East Security Report, No. 19. The Institute for the Study of War, April 2014. Pg 4.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid. Pg 4.

moving from the east to western markets, as well as a source location for things like hashish and opium.<sup>149</sup> The Bekaa Valley, a known Hezbollah stronghold, has been a center of these illicit industries for decades. While some of the “drug lords” are only tangentially affiliated with Hezbollah (i.e. paying taxes to avoid disruption), Hezbollah also is known for trafficking these items internationally to Europe and North and South America.<sup>150</sup> In addition to these widely known substances, Hezbollah was responsible for running a number of Captagon production sites in the Bekaa Valley from circa 2006 and 2007 until a 2012 crackdown by the Lebanese government. Sources connected to this crackdown indicate that the equipment for these operations was not totally destroyed, but may have been moved across the border and restarted in Syria.<sup>151</sup> This, combined with their prolific involvement in the country’s civil war suggests a strong correlation between this past activity and the current production and trafficking out of Syria.

Additionally, the connections between the smuggling economy and the government of Syria have been well documented. High ranking military officers have been connected to creating an environment of permissibility for the illicit movement of both grey and black-market goods.<sup>152</sup> The Syrian military in general has a long history of collaboration with smuggling communities that inhabit the borderlands of Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, and Jordan.<sup>153</sup> Established long before the war, the current conflict has lessened the dependence of the smuggling organizations on the military, but those past connections can still be utilized to facilitate the

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<sup>149</sup> Picard, Elizabeth. “The Political Economy of Civil War in Lebanon.” *War, Institutions, and Social Change in the Middle East*, edited by Steven Heydemann. University of California Press, 2000.

<sup>150</sup> Ganor, Boaz and Miri Halperin Wernli. “The Infiltration of Terrorist Organizations into the Pharmaceuticals Industry: Hezbollah as a Case Study.” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 36 (9) (2013).

<sup>151</sup> Ibid. 705.

<sup>152</sup> Marshall, Jonathan. “The Syrian Connection.” *The Lebanese Connection: Corruption, Civil War, and the International Drug Traffic*. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2012. N. pag. Print.

<sup>153</sup> Herbert, Matt. Partisans, Profiteers, and Criminals: Syria’s Illicit Economy 38 (2014): 72. *The Fletcher Forum*. Tufts University, Fletcher School of International Studies. Web. 01 Feb. 2015.

movement of new Captagon production if necessary.<sup>154</sup> The combination of both Hezbollah and the Syrian military includes the logistical know how, breadth and depth of networks, and technical expertise necessary for the establishment and maintenance of a major production operation such as that which appears to be present in Syria.

### *Free Syrian Army (FSA)*

The FSA is a conglomeration of military defectors and armed rebel groups that have chosen to coordinate their efforts against the Assad regime and its supporters. Given its patchwork-like structure, it is unsurprising that there are reports of elements of the FSA that are involved in illicit trafficking of both arms and materiel for the fight against the Syrian Government, as well as consumer staples and illegal substances for profit and funding. Similar to ISIS and JN, fighters of the FSA have been alleged to use Captagon and other amphetamine substances to increase their stamina and fighting ability. There are also reports of FSA involvement in small scale production, though those reports also included descriptions of those facilities being destroyed by rival factions in Syria.<sup>155</sup> Similar to the Syrian Government forces, the military backgrounds of many members of the FSA make it highly likely that members are connected to Syria's illicit economy, though the institutionalization of those connections is unclear at this time. Unlike the Salafist organizations, the FSA is not religiously ideological, and therefore would have fewer concerns about producing and trafficking drugs, at least in the spiritual realm.

### **Raids and Arrests**

While still short of concrete proof, information we obtained from field interviews with sources on the ground in Syria and Arabic news articles about raids and arrests presents the

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<sup>154</sup> Ibid. 79.

<sup>155</sup> Aysha, Rami, Personal Interview, March 24, 2015.

strongest indications available in the public record that Hezbollah is the Syrian war actor most deeply involved in Captagon trafficking and that it is sanctioned by their highest leadership with backing from Iran. Aryn Baker's *Time* magazine article on Syrian war Captagon<sup>156</sup> and most other Western media coverage of the issue have all highlighted the claim, mentioned in the literature review of this paper, that Iran provided Hezbollah with a Captagon factory to raise money to fight the Israelis in the 2006 war. However, several journalists we interviewed dismissed this oft reported allegation as highly unlikely. The *McClatchy* correspondent for Lebanon, Iraq, and Syria told us,

“There is little evidence for Hezbollah being directly involved in it, that would be very out of character from the group, but many [Hezbollah] officials have been embarrassed by family members who have been caught being involved. As for an Iranian-sourced factory to raise money, that sounds silly. The Lebanese are perfectly capable of setting up such an operation themselves and, again, Hezbollah really stays out of the domestic drug trade for moral reasons. Having said that, there's ample evidence that Hezbollah smuggles cocaine and heroin from Central and South America to Europe to raise money, an endeavor that likely raises so much more money than Captagon that I can't imagine them wasting their time. It's a low-end gangster drug.”<sup>157</sup>

Given disputes of the Iran-backed Hezbollah Captagon factory rumor, we decided to interview Aryn Baker, the author of a widely read *Time* magazine article on the subject. Baker was somewhat ambivalent about the validity of the rumor and stated that all Western media mention of it traced back to a single journal article written by Israeli IDC Herzliya academic and founder of the Israel-based International Policy Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT) Dr. Boaz Ganor. When asked about Israeli and American Neoconservative biases against Iran and Hezbollah and their tendency to promote false negative rumors, Baker agreed with the extent of the bias and likewise agreed that further investigation and corroboration were needed. When asked to provide her personal informed opinion on Hezbollah and other Syrian war militias'

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<sup>156</sup>Baker, Aryn. “Syria's Breaking Bad: Are Amphetamines Funding the War?” *Time*. Oct. 28, 2013. Accessed on April 12, 2015. < <http://world.time.com/2013/10/28/syrias-breaking-bad-are-amphetamines-funding-the-war/>>

<sup>157</sup> Anonymous *McClatchy* journalist for Lebanon, Iraq and Syria, Personal Interview, Feb. 13, 2015.

involvement in Captagon trafficking, Baker replied that she believes it is most likely limited to rogue corrupt members of all factions and that she doubts that Hezbollah uses it as an official fundraising strategy in the same sense as the Taliban with opium and heroin trafficking in Afghanistan. To Baker, foreign government involvement in Captagon trafficking to back their favored militia is also unlikely given the complex realities on the ground with fast changing myriad factions that for the most part do not line up well with foreign states' interests.<sup>158</sup>

However, tracing Dr. Boaz Ganor's sources for the Captagon factory allegations and examining patterns of raids and arrests more closely leads to a very different conclusion about Hezbollah and Iranian culpability in the Captagon trade. First, the credibility of Ganor and his International Policy Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT) is bolstered by an article in *Foreign Affairs*. According to the article, while ICT admittedly features a conservative Israeli perspective, its politics do not trump its integrity or "detract from the value of much of the material here."<sup>159</sup> Boaz Ganor and Miri Halperin Wernli published "The Infiltration of Terrorist Organizations into the Pharmaceutical Industry: Hezbollah as a Case Study" in *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* in 2013. In the article, Ganor cites Arabic news articles in Kuwaiti newspapers *Al-Shara'a* and *Al-Seyassa* as well as popular liberal Arab news website *The Middle East Transparent* as his sources.<sup>160</sup> Ali Haidar's April 2012 *Middle East Transparent* news article cites "exclusive insider information" as the origin of the rumor about Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) providing Hezbollah with a Captagon factory in 2006.<sup>161</sup> While many

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<sup>158</sup> Baker, Aryn, Personal Interview, Feb. 19, 2015.

<sup>159</sup> Cohen, Eliot A. "Capsule Review: The International Policy Institute for Counter-Terrorism, Herzliyah Interdisciplinary Center." *Foreign Affairs*. Sept./Oct. 2002 Issue. Accessed on May 1, 2015. <<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/reviews/capsule-review/2002-09-01/international-policy-institute-counterterrorism-herzliyah>>

<sup>160</sup> Ganor, Boaz and Miri Halperin Wernli. "The Infiltration of Terrorist Organizations into the Pharmaceutical Industry: Hezbollah as a Case Study." *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*. Vol. 36, Issue 9 (2013). Pgs. 699-712.

<sup>161</sup> Haidar, Ali. "IRGC-Hezbollah Captagon Ring Compromised by War Over Profits." *The Middle East Transparent*. Apr. 27, 2012. Accessed on April 18, 2015. <<http://www.mettransparent.com/spip.php?article18340>>

Kuwaiti newspapers are of dubious journalistic integrity and often promote anti-Iranian and anti-Hezbollah propaganda from GCC governments, a USAID official we interviewed vouched for the credibility and journalistic integrity of *The Middle East Transparent*.<sup>162</sup>

According to Ganor and Haidar of *The Middle East Transparent*, factional infighting within Hezbollah led to arrests and anonymous insider leaks that began to expose Iran and Hezbollah's deep involvement in Captagon trafficking. The insider leaks revealed that Hezbollah member and Lebanese Member of Parliament (MP) Hussein al-Musawi received a Captagon factory from the Iranian IRGC in 2006 to offset costs of the war with Israel. Hussein al-Musawi's brother, Shi'a cleric Sheikh Hashem al-Musawi, then began hiding Captagon production facilities in Islamic schools and institutions funded by Hezbollah, such as Huzat al-Imam al-Mujtabi in Baalbek, a town in the Hezbollah-controlled Bekaa Valley of Lebanon.<sup>163</sup> This insider account is corroborated by a documentary news series that aired on Lebanon's MTV (Murr Television, not the music channel) independent media network in 2012. The series details Lebanese ISF raids of Hezbollah-run Islamic schools and institutions that were fronts for Captagon factories, especially those directly connected to the aforementioned al-Musawi brothers.<sup>164</sup> Ganor and Haidar insist that Sheikh Hashem al-Musawi even went so far as to order Sheikh Abbas Nasser and others to enlist Bekaa Valley residents making the sacred Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca for smuggling Captagon pills to be sold in Saudi Arabia. Hezbollah also enlisted its own Resistance and Support Brigades to smuggle large quantities of Captagon pills through checkpoints across Lebanon since their identification cards could be used to avoid

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<sup>162</sup> Anonymous USAID official, Personal Interview, April 13, 2015.

<sup>163</sup> Haidar, Ali. "IRGC-Hezbollah Captagon Ring Compromised by War Over Profits." *The Middle East Transparent*. Apr. 27, 2012. Accessed on April 18, 2015. <<http://www.mettransparent.com/spip.php?article18340>>

<sup>164</sup> *Hezbollah Scandal: Financing Its Operations with Drug Production and Drug Trafficking*. Murr Television (MTV) Documentary Series. Aired on March 16, 2012. Translated from original Arabic. Accessed on April 23, 2015. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IKoOvD0YGFs>>

searches and scrutiny. According to Ganor, Hezbollah even managed to corrupt Saudi cleric Sheikh Abbas al-Hizza to become a major Captagon distributor in the Kingdom.<sup>165</sup> Haidar cites exclusive insider sources to assert that high-ranking Hezbollah Shura Council member Sheikh Mohamed Yazbek issued a secret religious ruling, or *fatwa*, permitting the manufacturing and distribution of Captagon pills to raise funds as long as the illegal drugs were not consumed by fellow Shi'a, though selling to Sunni Muslims was fine.<sup>166</sup> Indeed, we have already demonstrated that most Captagon users are Sunni Muslims in the Gulf. A 2011 Arabic news article in Kuwaiti newspaper *al-Seyassa* even goes so far as to assert that Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei issued his own secret *fatwa* permitting Iran's Lebanese proxy Hezbollah to manufacture Captagon and launder the proceeds.<sup>167</sup>

Boaz Ganor and Ali Haidar trace the exposure of Hezbollah's secret Captagon *fatwa* to raids and arrests of Hezbollah-linked Captagon traffickers made possible by factional infighting. Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah, his nephew and designated successor Hashem Safieddine, and Sheikh Naim Qassem represent the southern Hezbollah faction, which has recently been engaged in a struggle for influence with Sheikh Mohamed Yazbek and the Captagon-dealing Bekaa Valley northern Hezbollah faction. According to Haidar's anonymous insider sources, northern Bekaa Valley Lebanese clerics such as Sheikh Tfaily founded Hezbollah, only to feel their power and influence over the organization hijacked by southerners such as Hassan Nasrallah. After reaping enough profits from drug trafficking in the Bekaa Valley, the northern

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<sup>165</sup> Ganor, Boaz and Miri Halperin Wernli. "The Infiltration of Terrorist Organizations into the Pharmaceutical Industry: Hezbollah as a Case Study." *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*. Vol. 36, Issue 9 (2013). Pgs. 699-712.

<sup>166</sup> Haidar, Ali. "IRGC-Hezbollah Captagon Ring Compromised by War Over Profits." *The Middle East Transparent*. Apr. 27, 2012. Accessed on April 18, 2015. <<http://www.mettransparent.com/spip.php?article18340>>

<sup>167</sup> "In a Secret Fatwa... Khamenei Allows Hizbullah to Distribute Drugs and to Launder Money." *Al-Seyassa*. Nov. 24, 2011. Accessed on April 18, 2015. Translated from original Arabic. <<http://al-seyassah.com/?s=%D9%81%D8%AA%D9%88%D9%89+%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D8%B1%D9%8A&x=4&y=9>>



faction began to reclaim influence, which threatened Nasrallah and the southern faction and led to an ongoing power struggle.<sup>168</sup>

We interviewed Boaz Ganor to assess his faith in his sources and to gain any additional insights. Ganor stands by Haidar and his other sources and clarified that the insider leaks occurred around 2010 to 2012 when Hassan Nasrallah and the southern faction bribed Lebanese anti-drug officials and gave the officers the green light to raid northern Bekaa Valley Hezbollah-linked Captagon factories and even arrest some Hezbollah members of the rival northern faction. According to Ganor, Hassan Nasrallah was willing to expose Hezbollah involvement in Captagon trafficking since it cut into profits that the rival faction of Hezbollah used to buy more influence domestically and abroad. As long as the media portrayed the raids and arrests as of rogue and corrupt members of Hezbollah, and not the truth that high-ranking Shura Council member Shiekh Yazbek officially sanctioned it in a *fatwa* with backing from Iran, then Nasrallah was fine with the limited hangout exposure. Ganor believes that Nasrallah was motivated purely by money and power struggles between factions and not by any ideological aversion to drug trafficking when he greenlit the raids and limited exposure. Ganor also stressed that Hezbollah is fully integrated into the Lebanese government in every branch and at every level and essentially serve as landlords of Lebanese territory in which the Lebanese government cannot accomplish anything without Hezbollah's approval. When asked if he had any knowledge of other Syrian war militias involved in Captagon trafficking, Ganor replied that he had only heard rumors, but remained confident that Hezbollah is the actor most heavily involved.<sup>169</sup>

While Boaz Ganor has not yet been able to explicitly trace Hezbollah Captagon production and trafficking to the Syrian war, we found a source on the ground in Syria who has.

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<sup>168</sup>Haidar, Ali. "IRGC-Hezbollah Captagon Ring Compromised by War Over Profits." *The Middle East Transparent*. Apr. 27, 2012. Accessed on April 18, 2015. <<http://www.mettransparent.com/spip.php?article18340>>

<sup>169</sup> Ganor, Dr. Boaz, Personal Interview, April 13, 2015.

Lebanese freelance journalist and documentary filmmaker Rami Aysha, who has also worked contractually for *Time* and *Der Spiegel*, has spent extensive time interviewing sources, researching, and filming in Syria as recently as 2015. While we were not able to venture into war-torn Syria ourselves, we were nevertheless able to interview Aysha over Skype when he was back in Beirut. Aysha told us that he was recently embedded as a journalist within JN as they fought in the Syrian war and even spent extensive time with notorious al-Qaeda-linked terrorist leader Omar al-Atrash. Aysha also told us that he was once detained and tortured by Hezbollah for investigating allegations that Hezbollah members were selling weapons to both sides in the Syrian war, even to anti-Assad militias that would then use those same weapons against them. Aysha's account of his detainment by Hezbollah is corroborated by articles in *Time* magazine<sup>170</sup> and *Vice*.<sup>171</sup> While he no doubt harbors an anti-Hezbollah sentiment stemming from his past torture and detainment by their hands, Aysha's overall credibility is supported by the aforementioned articles in *Time* and *Vice* and he has made concessions that demonstrate a position more nuanced than exclusively blaming everything on Hezbollah. According to Aysha, Hezbollah's arming of both sides in the Syrian war came not from any Machiavellian chess game grand strategy, but instead from rogue corrupt members seeking to earn a few bucks under their bosses' noses. While Hezbollah leadership officially sanctions gunrunning to the enemy on occasion for intelligence-gathering purposes, Aysha stressed that the prevalence of this practice indicated that most Hezbollah guns sold to the FSA or JN stemmed instead from pure corruption.

Yet Rami Aysha made very clear to us that Hezbollah's involvement in Captagon trafficking is a different matter entirely. Rather than a handful of corrupt members trying to line

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<sup>170</sup> Baker, Aryn. "A Journalist Behind Bars: The Dangers of Reporting in Lebanon." *Time*. Sept. 15, 2012. Accessed on April 18, 2015. <<http://world.time.com/2012/09/15/a-journalist-behind-bars-the-dangers-of-reporting-in-lebanon/>>

<sup>171</sup> Katerji, Oz. "An Interview with a Journalist Who Was Tortured for Investigating Hezbollah." *Vice*. Dec. 10, 2013. Accessed on April 18, 2015. <[https://www.vice.com/en\\_uk/read/rami-aysha-tortured-investigating-hezbollah](https://www.vice.com/en_uk/read/rami-aysha-tortured-investigating-hezbollah)>

their own pockets, Aysha insists that Hezbollah's Captagon trafficking is an officially sanctioned fundraising strategy permitted in secret *fatwas* by its highest leadership. Aysha told us that he has personally been inside Captagon factories in Lebanon and in Syria and filmed interviews with Captagon producers who speak of being bossed around by high-ranking members of Hezbollah. Aysha also says that the Lebanese Internal Security Forces (ISF)'s anti-drug unit recently found a Hezbollah-funded school with a suspiciously high electricity bill. Sure enough, when the ISF raided the Hezbollah schoolhouse, they discovered it to be a front for a Captagon factory. While the ISF seized the Captagon production equipment, no arrests were made, and to Aysha, this shows the power Hezbollah holds over the Lebanese government.

Even more illustrative of Hezbollah's iron grip on Lebanon is the ISF Captagon intrigue Aysha detailed to us. Colonel Adel Machmouchi had long been the head of the Lebanese ISF's anti-drug unit, and by Aysha's account, was an honest cop and had no affiliation with Hezbollah. However, in early 2013, Colonel Machmouchi was forced out and replaced with Colonel Ghassan Shamseddine just as the regional Captagon explosion began in earnest, right after the major raids and arrests of northern Hezbollah-linked traffickers, and right before Lebanon's Captagon seizure statistics plummeted. According to Rami Aysha, the timing of the leadership change at ISF's anti-drug unit was no coincidence and Colonel Ghassan Shamseddine is a full-fledged member of Hezbollah. To Aysha, the northern Bekaa Valley faction of Hezbollah needed one of its own in charge of anti-narcotics in Lebanon to protect Hezbollah Captagon trafficking and to eliminate its rivals. Aysha notes that Colonel Shamseddine has largely been arresting Syrian nationals for Captagon trafficking, while protecting Lebanese nationals, and has exaggerated the production shift out of Lebanon and into Syria to the world press. Nearly all major Western media coverage of Captagon trafficking in the Syrian war, including articles in

*Time*,<sup>172</sup> Reuters,<sup>173</sup> and *The Guardian*,<sup>174</sup> have treated Colonel Shamseddine's interview statements uncritically, which may be quite an embarrassing breakdown in journalistic standards given that he is fingered to be a mouthpiece for Hezbollah propaganda. While Aysha concedes that Free Syrian Army members have trafficked in Captagon to a certain degree, he believes that Colonel Shamseddine's interviews with Western journalists are designed to unfairly blame Captagon trafficking solely on anti-Assad rebels and to downplay any Hezbollah Captagon arrests as isolated incidents committed by rogue members.<sup>175</sup>

We were able to briefly interview Colonel Adel Machmouchi by phone, although he was understandably reluctant to provide us with any definitive statements. When asked for any insight into Syrian war militias' involvement in Captagon trafficking, he gave only a rehearsed line that we should direct all questions to the current ISF anti-drug unit since he no longer works there and that he cannot give any public statements without their permission. When asked point blank whether or not it was true that he was fired from the ISF so that he could be replaced with a Hezbollah member, he gave an exasperated sigh followed by an uncomfortably long silence and a repetition of the same canned response about directing all question to the current ISF.<sup>176</sup>

To bolster the plausibility of his claim that Hezbollah can replace the head of the ISF's anti-drug unit when it sees fit, Rami Aysha described to us the circumstances of his own detainment. While investigating Hezbollah's arms trafficking corruption in the Syrian war, Aysha was initially kidnapped by Hezbollah and tortured as a means of intimidating him to end

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<sup>172</sup>Baker, Aryn. "Syria's Breaking Bad: Are Amphetamines Funding the War?" *Time*. Oct. 28, 2013. Accessed on April 12, 2015. <<http://world.time.com/2013/10/28/syrias-breaking-bad-are-amphetamines-funding-the-war/>>

<sup>173</sup>Kalin, Stephen. "War Turns Syria into Major Amphetamines Producer, Consumer." Reuters. Jan. 12, 2014. Accessed on April 18, 2015. <<http://uk.reuters.com/article/2014/01/12/uk-syria-crisis-drugs-insight-idUKBREA0B04Y20140112>>

<sup>174</sup>Henley, Jon. "Captagon: The Amphetamine Fuelling Syria's Civil War." *The Guardian*. Jan. 13, 2014. Accessed on April 9, 2015. <<http://www.theguardian.com/world/shortcuts/2014/jan/13/captagon-amphetamine-syria-war-middle-east>>

<sup>175</sup>Aysha, Rami, Personal Interview, March 24, 2015.

<sup>176</sup>Machmouchi, Colonel Adel, Personal Interview, April 18, 2015.

his unflattering media coverage of the organization. Then, Hezbollah handed Aysha over to the Lebanese police, who arrested him with trumped up charges of arms trafficking intended to discredit him. After international pressure on the Lebanese government to release the wrongfully accused journalist, all charges were dropped and Rami Aysha was released from his Lebanese jail cell. Aysha's recalling of events is corroborated by an article in the Committee to Protect Journalists' website<sup>177</sup> and in *Time* magazine.<sup>178</sup> Aysha stresses that Hezbollah essentially controls both Lebanese intelligence and Lebanese law enforcement and the case of his trumped up charges supports this assertion. When asked why he continued to investigate Hezbollah even after being tortured and jailed, Rami Aysha responded, "I want to show that Hezbollah is not the resistance. They are just a corrupt militia causing problems everywhere."

As our on-the-ground witness in Syria, Rami Aysha agrees with Boaz Ganor and Ali Haidar that Hezbollah is the actor most deeply involved in Captagon trafficking, and that it is officially sanctioned by its highest leadership with Iranian backing, while both the Free Syrian Army and the Assad regime's army are involved as well. However, Aysha characterizes Captagon trafficking by both latter groups as limited to rogue corrupt members and much less extensive than that carried out by Hezbollah and the Iranian IRGC. Aysha says he once personally raided a Free Syrian Army Captagon factory while embedded with JN and that Omar al-Atrash and JN immediately destroyed the factory for being "un-Islamic." Aysha further supports his belief that ISIS and JN are not involved in the Captagon trade with interviews he has conducted of Captagon traffickers who recount anecdotes of both Sunni jihadist groups

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<sup>177</sup>Stern, Jason. "For Journalists in Lebanon, Syrian Dangers Loom Larger." Committee to Protect Journalists. March 17, 2014. Accessed on April 24, 2015. <<https://cpj.org/blog/2014/03/for-journalists-in-lebanon-dangers-of-syria-loom-l.php>>

<sup>178</sup>Baker, Aryn. "A Journalist Behind Bars: The Dangers of Reporting in Lebanon." *Time*. Sept. 15, 2012. Accessed on April 18, 2015. <<http://world.time.com/2012/09/15/a-journalist-behind-bars-the-dangers-of-reporting-in-lebanon/>>

destroying their factories. To Aysha, the official Syrian Army is no longer running the pro-Assad factions in the civil war and the Assad regime has essentially let Hezbollah take over. While Aysha knows Syrian Army members involved in Captagon, he views them as corrupt, rather than officially sanctioned by Assad, and much less extensive than the drug trafficking activities of Hezbollah, who now essentially run the Captagon trade. Given our prior discussions of past involvement and infrastructural capability for major drug trafficking, Aysha's characterization of Hezbollah and IRGC dominance makes sense. Rami Aysha stressed to us that the motivation for Hezbollah and Iran to sell Captagon is twofold; to raise money for weapons to keep the fight going in Syria, but also to flood their enemies in Saudi Arabia with drugs and crime in order to destabilize the Sunni Arab Gulf.<sup>179</sup>

A U.S. DEA agent corroborated Rami Aysha's claim of a deliberate destabilization strategy. When asked if he came across any evidence of state sponsorship of the Captagon trade, the DEA agent replied that his counterparts in the Saudi anti-drug service told him as much. According to Saudi anti-drug officials, Iran and its Lebanese proxy Hezbollah have taken control of the global Captagon trade and are deliberately exploding global supply to flood the Gulf with drugs in order to create a generation of drug addicts and criminals and destabilize the entire region. "The Saudis are in a tough situation," the DEA agent told us, "and so are the Emiratis. Both of their regimes are becoming very vulnerable and weak and [Captagon] can only compound that problem and undermine their Islamic credibility. They view it as a national shame."<sup>180</sup> Given that much of the purpose of the U.S. DEA liaison role with foreign anti-drug services is to share and assess information, the agent's corroboration of Iranian and Hezbollah dominance of the Captagon trade is important and instructive. While one could argue that

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<sup>179</sup> Aysha, Rami, Personal Interview, March 24, 2015.

<sup>180</sup> DEA 2, Personal Interview, March 12, 2015.

perhaps the Saudi government is equally or more involved than the IRGC and Hezbollah in using the Captagon trade to fund their favored actors in Syria, the agent's comments on the Saudi government's mentality on the drug's consumption on their territory makes this highly unlikely.

The *McClatchy* correspondent for Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq likewise corroborates Rami Aysha's characterizations of Syrian Army Captagon trafficking as corrupt and not officially sanctioned. "The Syrian state is certainly rife with corruption and taxes illegal drugs on all levels of the government," he told us. "But this didn't start with the Syrian conflict, so my guess is that money once spent on cars is now being spent on weapons."<sup>181</sup>

Given all we have uncovered on raids and arrests from field interviews and Arabic news media sources, the case against Hezbollah and Iran for Captagon trafficking is fairly strong, though further investigation is needed for full-scale proof. While there is admittedly less information available on the Assad regime's army, the Free Syrian Army, ISIS, and JN, indications point to the former groups' involvement in a limited and corrupt manner, while the latter groups seem not to be institutionally involved at all.

### **Conclusion**

After numerous interviews, emails, and hundreds of pages of documents, we can draw several conclusions about the extent to which fighting groups in Syria are connected to the global Captagon trade. First, while we have yet to uncover any truly direct connection between Hezbollah and Captagon, there is enough correlation to say that there is a high probability that Hezbollah is one of the major, if not the main, Captagon producers and traffickers in Syria. Second, while Hezbollah likely is the major player in the area with the most institutionalized involvement, there is too much circumstantial evidence suggesting that other actors in the region are using Captagon as a fighting aid, if not producing it on their own. Finally, the most

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<sup>181</sup> Anonymous *McClatchy* journalist covering Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq, Personal Interview, Feb. 13, 2015.

unanimous finding of our investigation is that the majority of money feeding into the coffers of those producing and trafficking Captagon originates in the Arabian Gulf states of Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Given these findings, we can state that Gulf money is likely flowing into the coffers of Hezbollah with a substantial degree of confidence, and is also likely funding the Syrian government with whom Hezbollah is allied.

Based on our investigation, Hezbollah has the longest history of actively participating in the production and sale of illicit drugs. Its past operations, as discussed above, give it the ideal set of past experience to set up and manage the operations necessary for this endeavor to be successful. Particularly, the past history in the Captagon trade itself leads one to strongly suspect current involvement. Additionally, its global network and experience in managing the logistics necessary to maintain not only its fighting forces, but its humanitarian efforts as well, make them an ideal candidate for the group in Syria most heavily involved in this illicit enterprise.

In conjunction with Hezbollah, the Assad regime is undoubtedly benefiting from this/these operations, if only in the sense that funds obtained through the Captagon trade should serve to offset whatever expenses would need to be necessary to maintain the assistance of Hezbollah's fighters. Since the conflict began, the Syrian pound has plummeted in global currency markets, and the economy of Syria is in turmoil.<sup>182</sup> This leaves the Assad regime in need of cash to continue its operations. While several nations appear to be interested in extending aid to Assad, namely Iran, producing and trafficking in Captagon is a much more self-sustaining solution than hard-currency transfers. Additionally, while it is unclear how connected the Assad government is in Syrian smuggling, their past history of involvement suggests that they could draw upon to support this activity.

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<sup>182</sup>Miro, Ibrahim. "US Dollar Slowly Replacing Syrian Pound - Al-Monitor: The Pulse of the Middle East." Al-Monitor. Al-Monitor, 17 Feb. 2015. Web. 21 Apr. 2015.



With reference to other actors in the conflict, the FSA appears to be the only other major actor that would attempt to produce Captagon pills for profit and/or consumption. Their lack of serious ideological objections, combined with their need for funds and their control of significant swaths of territory suggest that they have the potential to enter the Captagon trade. However, the majority of our evidence points to cursory, if any, involvement. While several reports stated knowledge of FSA production facilities, these reports came with the caveat that these were likely controlled by low-level members of the organization and were very minor operations.

JN and ISIS are not likely to be producing or trafficking in Captagon, as they have demonstrated a pattern of intolerance and combativeness towards other illicit industries (i.e. hashish). ISIS in particular, does not appear to need to engage in this kind of activity to fund itself, as it has numerous other known streams of income, from oil smuggling to kidnapping for ransom to direct donations from supporters.<sup>183</sup>

In terms of use of Captagon, we are far less confident in our appraisal if one group is using the drug more than others. The numerous anecdotes and videos of fighters of all affiliations, from FSA to ISIS and JN all appearing to be under the influence of an amphetamine-like substance cannot be ignored. Where there is this much smoke, there must be some sort of fire. Therefore, we conclude with a moderate level of confidence that there may be fighters from from FSA, ISIS and JN that have likely used Captagon as a battle enhancement as individuals, but that it is improbable that the organizations are permitting or encouraging the use of Captagon on any institutional level. Notably, in all of our interviews and discussions, we did not hear any mention of Hezbollah fighters using Captagon. In fact, in their institutional acceptance of the Captagon trade, Hezbollah's spiritual authorities explicitly prohibit providing the drug to other

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<sup>183</sup>Lister, Charles. "Cutting off ISIS' Cash Flow." The Brookings Institution. The Brookings Institution - Doha, 24 Oct. 2014. Web. 20 Apr. 2015.

Shi'a. Therefore, it is improbable that Hezbollah members are using the drug on any institutional level, and that currently individual use is, to the best of our knowledge, unreported.

The likely flow of money from the Gulf, particularly Saudi Arabia, to Hezbollah and the Assad regime is quite a surprise. This is directly contrary to the interests of the Gulf countries that have been pouring money into funding the Syrian opposition.<sup>184</sup> More likely than not, their partying youth are helping to fund the counter-rebellion in Syria. As already discussed, the use of Captagon is already considered a “national shame.” One can only surmise how the knowledge that their habit is funding the enemy will be interpreted.

Fortunately for the United States, the most likely source of Captagon is also a declared enemy of both the U.S. and their allies in the Gulf. This being the case, the U.S. needs to work with its allies to counter the proliferation of Captagon and stem the growing use. Based on the reaction of the two Saudis interviewed, publicizing the issue would likely have a significant effect on demand. Though Philip Robbins discusses certain efforts towards opening the social discourse on drug abuse in the UAE and providing resources to stem the demand side, these efforts are still slow and far from wide spread.<sup>185</sup> Additionally, it is doubtful that such an opening of Saudi social discourse would be possible at a time when the efficacy of the ruling family is under intense scrutiny.

Increased cooperation between the nations of the Gulf and those surrounding Syria could have a significant impact on interdiction and stemming the issue from the supply side. The current lack of coordination between the anti-drug authorities in the various countries of the Gulf, Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon is hindering a more concerted effort to halt the flow of pills into the

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<sup>184</sup>Schanzer, Jonathan. "Saudi Arabia Is Arming the Syrian Opposition." Foreign Policy Saudi Arabia Is Arming the Syrian Opposition Comments. *Foreign Policy*, 27 Feb. 2012. Web. 20 Apr. 2015.

<sup>185</sup>Robbins, Philip. "Narcotic Drugs in Dubai: Lurking in the Shadows." *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* (2014): 159-164. Web.

Gulf. As this is seen as an Arab issue, it is unlikely that the U.S. would be given full access to such an information-sharing endeavor. However, the U.S. has a history of providing assistance in building law enforcement capacity to its allies in the Middle East. Continuing this trend, the U.S. can advise these nations on coordinating an information-sharing forum, as well as help individual nations enhance their investigatory capacity through training provided by U.S. agencies such as the DEA, or the INL bureau of the State Department. The nations of the Gulf have the ability to pay for such assistance, and with this new linkage, they have an even greater interest in combating the proliferation of Captagon in their midst.

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