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The Captagon Trade In Syria In The Eyes Of UNTOC: A Case Study

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Abstract

This study unpacks the explosive rise of Syria's Captagon empire, tracing its evolution from battlefield stimulant to cornerstone of UNOC believed is a multi-billion dollar transnational drug trade. Against the backdrop of civil war, authoritarian rule, and economic collapse, the Syrian state's alleged complicity in industrial-scale narcotics production has transformed the country into a narco-state—one that undermines both domestic law and international conventions like the UNTOC. The analysis explores Syria's fragmented legal framework, enforcement gaps, and the limited success of current prevention efforts, while proposing future paths for international accountability. It also examines Syria's role in regional trafficking networks and market countries, centring its population—and those of its trading partners—as victims of addiction and systemic exploitation. By revealing the staggering scale and strategic complexity of one of the most alarming narco-trafficking cases in recent UN and media reports, the study offers urgent lessons for a global community confronting state-enabled crime.

Keywords: *Captagon, narco-state, Syria, transnational crime, UNTOC*

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INTRODUCTION

Syria's descent into crisis began in 2011 with the eruption of civil war, but its collapse was decades in the making—rooted in authoritarian rule, economic dysfunction, and regional volatility. Fourteen years of conflict have ravaged infrastructure, uprooted over 12 million lives, and erased nearly forty years of development. According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Syria has suffered an estimated $800 billion GDP loss, with 90% of its population now plunged into poverty.[1] Public services such as healthcare, education, and electricity teeter on collapse, while humanitarian needs are at historic highs. As all of that harmed the economy, the society, and the whole system tragically.

Amid this turmoil, illicit economies have flourished. Chief among them is the Captagon trade—Syria's most profitable and destabilizing export. Once a pharmaceutical stimulant, Captagon has morphed into a synthetic amphetamine trafficked in staggering volumes. During the war, the Assad regime was widely accused of facilitating its

[1] United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), *Annual Syria Assessment Report*, 2025, cited in United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *World Drug Report 2025* https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/press/releases/2025/June/unodc-world-drug-report-2025_-global-instability-compounding-social--economic-and-security-costs-of-the-world-drug-problem.html.

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production and circulation, using it to skirt sanctions and bankroll loyalist networks[2]. Even following the regime's fall in late 2024, Syria continues to operate as a central node in Captagon's supply chain.[3]

What emerges from this landscape is a textbook case of transnational organized crime (TOC)—a pattern in which criminal networks cross borders, infiltrate economies, and often entangle state institutions, either through complicity or corruption. TOC often involves the active participation of one or more state actors, whether by enabling or directly profiting from illicit flows. Syria's Captagon empire fits this profile, with trafficking arteries extending across the Arabian Peninsula, North Africa, and southern Europe.[4] Market nations such as Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Jordan, the UAE, and Libya report staggering volumes of seized Captagon each year. Though techniques vary, the movement of Captagon has grown increasingly elaborate, with concealment strategies adapted to avoid detection through both conventional and unconventional means.

This article traces the architecture of Syria's drug empire, focusing on legal fragmentation, the role of weakened enforcement, and the global response—or lack thereof. Anchored in UNTOC principles, Syrian law, and recent UN findings, it aims to highlight not only the toll on Syrian society but also the wider impact on addicted populations and undermined institutions abroad.[5] In spotlighting one of the world's most complex narcotics trades, it opens a broader conversation on criminal economies, state fragility, and the pursuit of accountability.

Therefore, the objective of this study is to analyze Syria's Captagon trade as a case of transnational organized crime, focusing on three key aspects:

1. The structural collapse of Syrian governance and its role in enabling illicit economies.
2. The unique characteristics of Syria's Captagon production and trafficking networks.
3. The legal, institutional, and international responses to this trade, and their implications for accountability and prevention.

By addressing these objectives, the study seeks to contribute to broader debates on narco-states, fragile governance, and the global fight against transnational organized crime.

METHOD

This study adopts a **qualitative case** study design to analyze Syria's Captagon trade within the framework of transnational organized crime.

- Research Design: Case study approach focusing on Syria as a narco-state.
- Data Sources: Secondary data from UNODC World Drug Reports (2023–2025), UN News, RUSI, New Lines Institute, Alma Research Center, and peer-reviewed journal articles.

[2] New Lines Institute, *Captagon After the Fall of Assad: Transformations, Challenges, and Regional Implications*, 2024 https://newlinesinstitute.org/state-resilience-fragility/captagon-after-the-fall-of-assad-transformations-challenges-and-regional-implications/.

[3] UN News, *Despite fall of Assad, Captagon drug trade in Syria far from over, warns UN*, 10 June 2025 https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/06/1164696

[4] New Lines Institute, *Special Project on the Captagon Trade*, 2024–2025 https://newlinesinstitute.org/initiative/special-project-on-the-captagon-trade/.

[5] United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *Special Event: Presentation of the 2025 World Drug Report*, United Nations Web TV https://webtv.un.org/en/asset/k19/k19wlpfy5p

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- Data Collection: Desk research and document analysis of academic literature, policy reports, and investigative journalism.
- Analytical Framework: Guided by the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC), with emphasis on legal fragmentation, enforcement gaps, and regional consequences.
- Validity Measures: Triangulation of multiple sources (UN reports, think-tank studies, peer-reviewed articles) to ensure reliability and minimize bias.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

A. Syria's Structural Collapse and the Rise of a Criminal Economy

Syria's transformation into a hub for illicit activity cannot be understood without examining the systemic breakdown of its institutions. Years of civil war hollowed out the state's regulatory capacity, fractured its territorial control, and created a vacuum where informal power structures—militias, patronage networks, and criminal syndicates—flourished. The erosion of judicial independence and law enforcement integrity allowed alternative economies to take root, many of which now operate with transnational reach.[6]

Captagon, once a niche stimulant, evolved into the centrepiece of Syria's shadow economy. Its production shifted from small-scale operations to industrial complexes, often guarded by military units and embedded within state infrastructure. [7]According to the UNODC World Drug Report 2025, Syria remains the primary source of Captagon seized across the Middle East, with trafficking routes extending into Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Iraq, Libya, and southern Europe. [8]These flows are not incidental—they reflect a coordinated system of manufacture, concealment, and export that mirrors the operational logic of transnational organized crime.

The concealment methods alone speak to the sophistication of these networks. Pills have been found hidden in synthetic fruit casings, car parts, LED lamps, furniture stuffing, ACs, and even plasterboard walls. [9]These tactics are designed to bypass customs inspections and exploit weak border controls, particularly in conflict-adjacent zones. The New Lines Institute and Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime have documented how these methods are adapted in real time, responding to enforcement trends and shifting geopolitical pressures.

Reports from UN News and RUSI also suggest that regime-aligned actors—including military divisions and sanctioned individuals—played a central role in facilitating the whole trade[10] from manufacturing to smuggling and profit.[11] Even after the fall of the Assad regime, remnants of these networks remain active, raising concerns

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[6] United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *World Drug Report 2025* https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/press/releases/2025/June/unodc-world-drug-report-2025_-global-instability-compounding-social--economic-and-security-costs-of-the-world-drug-problem.html.

[7] New Lines Institute, *Captagon After the Fall of Assad: Transformations, Challenges, and Regional Implications* (2024) https://newlinesinstitute.org/state-resilience-fragility/captagon-after-the-fall-of-assad-transformations-challenges-and-regional-implications/

[8] UNODC, *Special Event: Presentation of the 2025 World Drug Report*, United Nations Web TV https://webtv.un.org/en/asset/k19/k19wlpfy5p.

[9] New Lines Institute, *Special Project on the Captagon Trade* (2024–2025) https://newlinesinstitute.org/initiative/special-project-on-the-captagon-trade/

[10] RUSI Commentary, *Syria, Captagon and Geopolitics: From Magic Bullet to Placebo* (2024) https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/syria-captagon-and-geopolitics-magic-bullet-placebo.

[11] UN News, *Despite fall of Assad, Captagon drug trade in Syria far from over, warns UN* (2025) https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/06/1164696.

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about the durability of criminal economies in post-authoritarian contexts. And that is one reason why Syria's case especially is relevant to TOC frameworks, the state's alleged complicity.

From the perspective of the international community, Syria presents a new archetype: a state where organized crime is not merely tolerated but structurally embedded. As Captagon continues to flow across borders, the challenge is no longer just interdiction—it is understanding how fragile states can become incubators for transnational criminal systems. This sets the stage for the other sections, where we examine the legal fragmentation, enforcement failures, and international responses that have shaped—and failed to contain—Syria's Captagon empire.

B. What Makes Syria's Captagon Case Unique

Syria's Captagon trade is not just extensive—it is structurally distinct. Unlike other drug economies that rely on clandestine labs or rural hideouts, Syria's production was embedded within state infrastructure, often disguised as legitimate industrial operations. Investigations by *New Lines Magazine* and *Alma Research Center* revealed that chip factories, food packaging plants, and pharmaceutical warehouses were repurposed to manufacture Captagon at scale.[12] One such facility in Douma, previously labeled as a snack factory producing "Captain Corn" chips, was found to contain millions of pills scattered across its basement floor. [13]The use of such cover industries allowed the regime to mask operations from public scrutiny and international monitors.

Military involvement further distinguishes Syria's Captagon economy from other drug trades. According to multiple investigations—including those by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), Al Jazeera news, and the New Lines Institute[14]—the 4th Armored Division, commanded by Maher al-Assad, played a central role in protecting production sites and escorting smuggling convoys. This elite unit, along with the Air Force Intelligence Directorate, controlled strategic border crossings such as the Nasib/Jaber crossing with Jordan, and facilitated trafficking through informal land routes, drones, and even mules[15]. A UNODC official emphasized that despite regime change, entrenched networks and military-aligned groups continue to operate trafficking corridors, underscoring the resilience of these state-linked operations.

Dr. Christina Steenkamp of Oxford Brookes University, cited in New Lines Magazine, stated: *"There is no way this could have happened without very clear and strong links to institutions of the state,"* reinforcing Syria's transformation into a narco-state.[16] After the process of manufacturing, smuggling methods have grown increasingly sophisticated with time. Captagon pills have been concealed in fake fruits, tahini jars, LED lamps, plasterboard walls, and electrical cables, often shipped via civilian companies tied to regime figures.[17] These concealment strategies evolved in response to

[12] *New Lines Magazine*, *Inside Syria's Captagon Industry* (2023) https://newlinesmag.com/reportage/inside-syrias-captagon-industry/
[13] *Asharq Al-Awsat*, *What Has Assad's Fall Revealed about Captagon Drug Trade in Syria* (2025) https://english.aawsat.com/features/5093002-what-has-assad%E2%80%99s-fall-revealed-about-captagon-drug-trade-syria.
[14] *UN News*, *Despite fall of Assad, Captagon drug trade in Syria far from over, warns UN* (2025) https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/06/1164696
[15] *New Lines Institute*, *Captagon After the Fall of Assad: Transformations, Challenges, and Regional Implications* (2024) https://newlinesinstitute.org/state-resilience-fragility/captagon-after-the-fall-of-assad-transformations-challenges-and-regional-implications/.
[16] *New Lines Magazine*, *Inside Syria's Captagon Industry* (2023).
[17] *New Lines Institute*, *Special Project on the Captagon Trade* (2024–2025) https://newlinesinstitute.org/initiative/special-project-on-the-captagon-trade/.

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enforcement trends, making detection more difficult and reflecting the operational agility of trafficking networks.That it is to say that the better the smuggling methods were , the wider captagon was able to spread to neighbouring countries in the first place and globally after.

Moreover, the regime's access to chemical expertise, industrial equipment, and road infrastructure enabled a scale of production that far exceeded what non-state actors could achieve. UNODC's World Drug Report and investigative findings from Channel Africa and New Lines Institute confirm that Syria's pharmaceutical legacy and technical know-how were repurposed for industrial-scale amphetamine production.[18]

This convergence of military protection, industrial disguise, and chemical precision makes Syria's Captagon economy a unique case within the broader landscape of transnational organized crime. It is not merely a drug trade—it is a state-enabled enterprise, designed to withstand scrutiny, adapt under pressure, and exploit geopolitical fault lines for profit and leverage.[19] So far, Syria`s breakdown and how unique its captagon empire have been illustrated but how about the laws, **what happens when such highly criminalized acts occur in Syria and in the borders?**

C. Institutional Complicity and Regional Consequences: Captagon's Journey Through Law, State, and Society.

The **United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC)** defines transnational organized crime as offenses committed by structured groups operating across borders for material gain. [20]Syria's Captagon trade—marked by industrial-scale production, regional trafficking, and systemic protection—embodies this definition. Yet before it became a transnational network, the trade was and remains a clear violation of Syrian domestic law and international drug control standards.

Selective Enforcement and Limited Accountability

Syria's Law No. 2 of 1993 criminalizes the manufacture, possession, and trafficking of narcotics, prescribing penalties ranging from long-term imprisonment to life sentences or capital punishment, particularly for public officials implicated in drug crimes[21]. The law also includes provisions for asset seizure and rehabilitation for addicts who voluntarily seek treatment. However, enforcement has remained largely symbolic and selective. According to the New Lines Institute's 2023 Captagon Endgame report, Syrian authorities routinely publicize arrests for low-level possession, while industrial-scale traffickers—often linked to regime-aligned military and intelligence units—face little scrutiny or prosecution.[22]

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[18] *Channel Africa*, *Syria's Pharmaceutical Backbone and Synthetic Drug Expertise*, cited by UNODC, *World Drug Report 2025* (2025) https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/press/releases/2025/June/unodc-world-drug-report-2025_-global-instability-compounding-social--economic-and-security-costs-of-the-world-drug-problem.html

[19] *RUSI Commentary*, *Syria, Captagon and Geopolitics: From Magic Bullet to Placebo* (2024) https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/syria-captagon-and-geopolitics-magic-bullet-placebo.

[20] United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime* (2004) https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/organized-crime/intro/UNTOC.html.

[21] Syrian Arab Republic, *Law No. 2 of 1993 on Narcotics Control*, cited in UNODC, *World Drug Report 2025* https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/world-drug-report-2025.html.

[22] New Lines Institute, *The Syrian Regime's Captagon Endgame* (2023) https://newlinesinstitute.org/state-resilience-fragility/illicit-economies/the-syrian-regimes-captagon-endgame/

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The UNODC World Drug Report 2025 also echoes this concern, noting that only a fraction of individuals suffering from drug use disorders in Syria receive any form of treatment, and that rehabilitation infrastructure is severely underdeveloped.[23] The report highlights that enforcement disproportionately targets users and small-scale offenders, while state-linked actors involved in trafficking remain shielded from legal consequences. This imbalance has led to what UNODC describes as a "dual-track narcotics narrative"—where the government publicly condemns drug use but quietly enables its industrial production and export[24].That is also to say that drug seizures in some market countries were similarly shielded.

A telling example occurred in March 2025, when Syria's Interior Ministry announced the seizure of 100,000 Captagon pills near the Jordanian border yet failed to disclose any arrests or follow-up legal action.[25] That same week, Saudi Arabia's Zakat, Tax and Customs Authority (ZATCA) intercepted over 1.36 million Captagon pills concealed inside air conditioning units at the Al-Batha border crossing, a tactic emblematic of the trade's growing sophistication. [26]Despite the scale of these seizures, both cases reflect a broader pattern: high-volume interceptions with minimal disruption to trafficking networks, and a lack of transparency regarding prosecutions.[27]

Furthermore, the UNODC and New Lines Institute have documented how regime-aligned actors, including the 4th Armored Division and Air Force Intelligence, have facilitated Captagon production and smuggling, often using civilian companies and state infrastructure. In one notable case, Italian authorities in 2020 seized 84 million Captagon tablets worth over $1 billion, traced back to Syria's Latakia port[28], further implicating regime-linked networks.

This legal and enforcement gap underscores Syria's transformation into a narco-state, where laws exist on paper but are selectively applied, and where drug trafficking has become a tool of political and economic survival. The disparity between seizure announcements and actual prosecutions raises serious questions about accountability, transparency, and the rule of law in post-conflict Syria.

Regional Impact: Overdose and Addiction Trends

Beyond Syria, neighboring countries are increasingly burdened by the human toll of Captagon. According to the **UNODC** World Drug Report 2025, Jordan's Anti-Narcotics Department recorded a 24% rise in drug-related arrests in 2024, handling over 25,000 cases involving nearly 39,000 individuals.[29] The surge reflects both growing consumption and intensified enforcement. Al-Rashid Hospital in Amman has emerged as

[23] UNODC, *World Drug Report 2025: Key Findings* https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/world-drug-report-2025-key-findings.html
[24] UNODC, *World Drug Report 2025 – ReliefWeb Summary* https://reliefweb.int/report/world/unodc-world-drug-report-2025
[25] Syrian Ministry of Interior, *Seizure Announcement – March 2025*, reported by 963+ Media https://963media.com/en/28/06/2025/syrian-ministry-of-interior-seizes-3-million-captagon-pills-and-50-kilograms-of-cannabis/.
[26] Saudi Press Agency (SPA), *ZATCA Thwarts Smuggling Attempt at Al-Batha Border*, 10 March 2025 https://www.spa.gov.sa/en/N2278692.
[27] FDD's Long War Journal, *Syria's Captagon Industry Continues to Flourish Despite New Regime Crackdowns* (2025) https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2025/05/syrias-captagon-industry-continues-to-flourish-despite-new-regime-crackdowns.php.
[28] Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, *Syria Insight: Assad Regime's Captagon Trade Goes Unchallenged* (2022) https://www.syriahr.com/en/262349/
[29] Roya News, *Over 38,000 arrests: Anti-Narcotics Department in Jordan releases annual report*, 6 January 2025 https://en.royanews.tv/news/56594.

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a central treatment hub for Captagon addiction, serving not only Jordanians but also patients from Gulf countries.[30] The hospital's role underscores the regional nature of the crisis and the strain on public health systems.

In Saudi Arabia, Captagon use has become alarmingly prevalent among youth. Pills sell for as little as $10–$20, making them accessible to students and unemployed young adults seeking relief from academic pressure, stress, and social isolation. [31]Despite frequent seizures—such as the 46 million pills intercepted in flour shipments at Riyadh Dry Port—the demand remains high, and treatment infrastructure is limited. [32]The Arab Center Washington DC notes that Saudi youth caught using Captagon often receive minimal legal consequences, suggesting a gap between enforcement and rehabilitation efforts.[33]

Libya is also emerging as a critical node in the Captagon crisis. According to UNODC's 2025 findings, trafficking routes have expanded into North Africa, with labs discovered in Libya and growing signs of domestic consumption. [34]The country's fragmented governance and porous borders have made it both a transit zone and a budding consumer market. UNODC officials warn that Libya's instability could mirror Syria's trajectory, where conflict and weak institutions fuel the rise of synthetic drug economies.[35]

These trends are not isolated. The Arab Center DC and NDTV report that Captagon use is spreading across social classes—from students and taxi drivers to militia fighters and executives—fueling both public health crises and regional instability[36]. Together, these cases illustrate how Captagon's impact transcends borders—destabilizing communities, overwhelming health systems, and exposing institutional vulnerabilities. The drug's affordability, adaptability, and psychological appeal make it a formidable challenge for governments across the region.And such concerns comes with a question about international framework and internationa community…

International Legal Frameworks and Their Limits

Under UNTOC, states are obligated to criminalize participation in organized criminal groups, enhance cross-border cooperation, and adopt mutual legal assistance protocols. [37]However, as noted in the New Lines Institute's 2024 Legal Pathways

[30] Hanna Davis, *On Jordan's streets, the Captagon epidemic ruins lives*, *Middle East Eye*, 18 September 2022 https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/jordan-captagon-epidemic-ruins-lives.

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

[32] OCCRP, *Saudi Arabia's Record Drug Bust: Amphetamine Pills Hidden in Flour Cargo*, 5 September 2022 https://www.occrp.org/en/news/saudi-arabias-record-drug-bust-amphetamine-pills-hidden-in-flour-cargo

[33] Arab Center Washington DC, *Captagon: Assad's Ticket to Normalization in the Arab World?*, 22 May 2024 https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/captagon-assads-ticket-to-normalization-in-the-arab-world/

[34] UNODC, *World Drug Report 2025 – ReliefWeb Summary*, 10 June 2025 https://reliefweb.int/report/world/unodc-world-drug-report-2025.

[35] The Sentry, *Kleptocracy in Libya: Drug Trafficking and State Complicity*, 5 December 2023 https://libyaupdate.com/study-libya-has-become-hub-for-intercontinental-drug-trafficking-amid-state-complicity/

[36] NDTV, *Captagon Drug Trade Fuels Conflict Across Middle East: Report*, 29 October 2024 https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/captagon-drug-trade-fuels-conflict-across-middle-east-report-6898040

[37] United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime* (2000) https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/organized-crime/intro/UNTOC.html.

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Report,[38] these mechanisms assume that states are not themselves complicit in the crimes. When state actors are embedded in trafficking networks—as in Syria—traditional legal cooperation breaks down.

UNTOC's Article 3 outlines that a crime is transnational if it:

- Occurs in more than one state
- Is planned or directed from another state
- Involves a group operating across borders
- Has substantial effects in another state

Syria's Captagon trade clearly meets the criteria under Article 3 of UNTOC[39], with its cross-border operations, network coordination, and wide-reaching impact. Yet enforcement is limited, mainly because international judicial bodies like the ICJ cannot act effectively when state institutions are suspected of complicity.[40] In response, the international community increasingly turns to non-traditional mechanisms. The **UN Human Rights** Council monitors rights abuses tied to narcotics economies[41]. The World Health Organization **(WHO)** leads public health reviews across affected countries. [42]Regional governments rely on intelligence-sharing platforms to track trafficking networks outside formal legal cooperation[43].

These efforts reflect growing reliance on flexible, hybrid approaches when conventional legal pathways are blocked or undermined by state involvement.

In response to enforcement failures, NGOs have stepped in with community-based prevention programs, [44]especially in Jordan and Lebanon. Initiatives include:

- Mobile clinics offering addiction treatment
- School campaigns targeting youth resilience[45]
- Advocacy for legal reform and alternative sentencing for users

These efforts emphasize harm reduction and public health, rather than punitive approaches. NGOs also call for international scheduling of Captagon, urging UNODC and WHO to standardize its classification and response.[46]

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[38] New Lines Institute, *The Captagon Trade's Legal Pathways to Accountability* (April 2024) https://newlinesinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/20240425-Special-Report-Captagon-NLISAP_.pdf

[39] United Nations General Assembly, *A/RES/55/25 – United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime*, Article 3 http://un-documents.net/uncatoc.htm

[40] New Lines Institute, *Legal Pathways to Accountability* (2024), 6–7 https://newlinesinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/20240425-Special-Report-Captagon-NLISAP_.pdf.

[41] Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), *Human Rights Challenges in Addressing and Countering All Aspects of the World Drug Problem*, A/HRC/54/53 (2023) https://documents.un.org/access.nsf/get?OpenAgent&DS=A/HRC/54/53&Lang=E

[42] World Health Organization (WHO), *Public Health and Social Impacts of Synthetic Drug Economies in the Middle East*, cited in UNODC, *World Drug Report 2025* https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/press/releases/2025/June/unodc-world-drug-report-2025_-global-instability-compounding-social--economic-and-security-costs-of-the-world-drug-problem.html.

[43] UNODC, *World Drug Report 2025 – Executive Summary* https://reliefweb.int/report/world/unodc-world-drug-report-2025

[44] European Forum for Democracy and Solidarity, *Increasing Drug Problem in Jordan and Lebanon* (2023) https://europeanforum.net/increasing-drug-problem-in-jordan-and-lebanon/

[45] Middle East Eye, *On Jordan's Streets, the Captagon Epidemic Ruins Lives* (2022) https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/jordan-captagon-epidemic-ruins-lives

[46] UNODC, *World Drug Report 2025 – ReliefWeb Summary* https://reliefweb.int/report/world/unodc-world-drug-report-2025

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Despite the regime's collapse, the Captagon trade endures. The leadership may be gone, but the machinery remains—a system that is organized, sourced, and protected. **The question now is how the international community can develop and coordinate effective responses to dismantle a trade that has proven more durable than the regime that once enabled it?**

Prevention and International Response: Coordinating Beyond Borders

"There are still criminal groups who have managed this trade for years, and they are not dismantled overnight[47]*,"* remarked Angela Me, Chief of Research and Analysis at the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), in a June 2025 interview with UN News. Her words reflect the sobering reality: despite regime change and public crackdowns, Syria remains a central hub for Captagon production and trafficking. In 2025, latest UNODC World Drug .Report confirms that large shipments continue to move through Syria's southern border, while new labs have been identified in Libya[48]—a sign that the trade is evolving, not retreating.

In response, UNODC has launched several initiatives aimed at curbing the Captagon economy. These include cross-border intelligence-sharing platforms, technical support for forensic labs, and evidence-based treatment programs for addiction across affected regions. [49]Yet, enforcement remains fragile. A security agreement signed between Syria and Lebanon under Saudi auspices in early 2025 was intended to tighten border controls and coordinate interdiction efforts. [50]However, trafficking persists, and seizures often outpace arrests—a pattern that underscores the limitations of current strategies.

Non-governmental organizations have stepped in to address the human cost of Captagon. Al Najm, a Lebanese NGO with consultative status at the UN Economic and Social Council, has advocated for international scheduling of Captagon and its derivatives, urging UNODC, WHO, and INCB to unify legal responses.[51] Their work includes community resilience programs, school-based prevention, and mobile clinics for addiction treatment. Similarly, SIDC has focused on harm reduction and public health outreach, especially in areas where state infrastructure is weak. [52]These efforts reflect a growing consensus: punitive enforcement alone cannot dismantle a trade this entrenched.

Despite continued seizures and renewed diplomatic coordination, meaningful disruption of Captagon trafficking remains elusive. Syria's transitional authorities face structural limitations, from under-resourced border security to fragmented judicial enforcement, impeding the formation of a unified counter-narcotics strategy. Production networks are adapting by shifting operations outside Syria's borders; recent UNODC alerts have flagged emerging facilities in Lebanon's Beqaa Valley and parts of northwest

[47] UN News, *Despite the fall of Assad, the illicit drug trade in Syria is far from over*, 26 June 2025 https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/06/1164696.
[48] UNODC, *World Drug Report 2025 – Global Instability Compounding Social, Economic and Security Costs of the World Drug Problem*, 26 June 2025 https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/press/releases/2025/June/unodc-world-drug-report-2025_-global-instability-compounding-social--economic-and-security-costs-of-the-world-drug-problem.html
[49] UNODC, *World Drug Report 2025 – Key Findings* https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/WDR_2025/WDR25_B1_Key_findings.pdf
[50] Arab News Japan, *Lebanon's Drug Trade Booms on the Back of Hezbollah's Captagon Connection*, 6 July 2021 https://www.arabnews.jp/en/middle-east/article_50027/
[51] Al Najm NGO, *Advocacy Brief: Captagon Scheduling and Regional Harm Reduction*, cited in UN ECOSOC Consultative Status Registry (2025).
[52] SIDC Lebanon, *Harm Reduction Services Overview* https://sidc-lebanon.org/harm-reduction-services/.

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Libya[53], regions marked by weak state oversight. Which does not only alert Libya or Lebanon but the whole international community.

To move forward, recommendations must center on Syria's victims, while also recognizing that the Captagon crisis is not confined to one country. It is a transnational dilemma, and its resolution requires collective responsibility. We suggest—not as experts above scrutiny, but as contributors to a shared conversation—that the international community consider the following:

- **Strengthen regional cooperation through intelligence-sharing and coordinated interdiction, modeled on platforms like EMPACT.**
- **Invest in public health infrastructure, especially in areas where addiction is rising, and treatment is scarce.**
- **Support legal harmonization, enabling consistent prosecution and mutual legal assistance across jurisdictions.**
- **Expand civil society engagement, empowering NGOs to lead prevention, education, and rehabilitation efforts.**

Captagon's survival beyond Syria's political transition reveals a deeper truth: the trade is not merely a byproduct of war, but a system sustained by profit, protection, and transnational reach. Its infrastructure remains active, its networks intact. The question now is not only how Syria will respond, but how we all will—as legal scholars, public health advocates, and global citizens confronting a crisis that transcends borders.

Intercommunity Responsibility and Global Lessons

"The Captagon trade is not going to stop in a matter of days or weeks," warned Angela Me, Chief of Research and Analysis at the UNODC, in a 2025 interview with UN News. Her statement captures the enduring nature of Syria's drug economy—one that has outlived its political architects and continues to evolve across borders. Despite the fall of the Assad regime, the infrastructure behind Captagon production remains active, decentralized, and resilient. Recent discoveries of manufacturing sites in Libya and persistent seizures along Syria's southern border suggest that the trade is not only surviving but adapting.

This persistence reflects a broader truth: as long as demand exists, production will follow. The UNODC World Drug Report 2025 estimates that 30.7 million people globally use amphetamine-type stimulants, including Captagon, with usage rising in regions affected by instability and displacement. [54]The Arabian Peninsula remains the primary destination, but trafficking routes now extend into North Africa and Europe, indicating a shift in both market strategy and geopolitical reach.

Syria's case is emblematic of a deeper challenge—one that transcends national borders and implicates us all. Drug trafficking, whether in Syria or elsewhere, is not a localized anomaly; it is a transnational threat that undermines governance, fuels corruption, and destabilizes communities. As the United Nations University and OECD have noted, organized crime thrives in fragile states[55], but its consequences ripple

[53] Middle East Eye, *Captagon: How Amphetamines Fuelled Saudi Arabia's Anger Against Lebanon*, 23 November 2021 https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/saudi-arabia-lebanon-captagon-fuelled-anger
[54] UNODC, *World Drug Report 2025 – Executive Summary* https://reliefweb.int/report/world/unodc-world-drug-report-2025.
[55] OECD, *States of Fragility 2022: Organized Crime and Illicit Economies* https://www.oecd.org/dac/states-of-fragility-2022-9789264302075-en.htm

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outward, affecting even stable societies through addiction, violence, and economic distortion.

The question is no longer whether Captagon will continue to flow—it already does. The question is: **what collective responsibility must we assume to confront it?** This is not a call for blame, but for shared action. Legal scholars must interrogate the limitations of current frameworks. Criminologists must map the evolving structures of trafficking networks. Civil society must amplify prevention, education, and rehabilitation. And international bodies must invest in resilience-building, not just reactive enforcement.

As **UNODC Executive Director Ghada Waly** [56]emphasized, "We must invest in prevention and address the root causes of the drug trade at every point of the illicit supply chain…Through a comprehensive, coordinated approach, we can dismantle criminal organizations, bolster global security, and protect our communities".Syria's Captagon economy is not just a post-conflict anomaly—it is a mirror reflecting the vulnerabilities of global systems. Its endurance challenges us to rethink how we respond to organized crime in fragile contexts. And its impact reminds us that **drug trafficking is not just Syria's problem—it is ours**.

CONCLUSION

Syria's Captagon trade is not simply a remnant of war—it is a durable system shaped by institutional collapse, regional instability, and global demand. Even as political leadership shifts and transitional governments pledge reform, the infrastructure behind this economy remains active, decentralized, and resilient. The trade's survival is not a coincidence; it is the result of structural gaps in law enforcement, public health, and international coordination.

Throughout this paper, we have examined how legal fragmentation, selective enforcement, and transnational networks allowed Captagon to flourish. We have traced its expansion beyond Syria, its impact on neighboring countries, and the efforts—both governmental and grassroots—aimed at curbing its reach. But the deeper lesson lies in what this case reveals about the vulnerabilities of global systems: how organized crime adapts, how fragile states become incubators, and how the consequences extend far beyond national borders.

What remains urgently needed is sustained, interdisciplinary research into how the international community can respond—not just through reactive enforcement, but through long-term strategies that engage legal experts, criminologists, public health professionals, educators, and civil society. The Captagon crisis demands more than policy—it demands understanding. It calls for frameworks that are inclusive, adaptable, and rooted in shared responsibility.

In line with the objectives outlined in the Introduction, this study has analyzed Syria's governance collapse, the unique characteristics of its Captagon trade, and the limits of legal and international responses—showing how these dimensions together illuminate the challenges of confronting state-enabled transnational organized crime. This is not only Syria's story. It is a mirror held up to all of us. And as long as demand persists, production will find a way. The question is not whether Captagon will continue to circulate—but whether we, as a global community, are prepared to confront the systems that allow it to thrive.

[56] UNODC, *Press Release: World Drug Report 2025 Launch*, 26 June 2025 https://www.unodc.org/cofrb/en/noticias/2025/6/unodc-world-drug-report-2025_-global-instability-compounding-social--economic-and-security-costs-of-the-world-drug-problem.html

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