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# Captagon and conflict: Drugs and war on the border between Jordan and Syria

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## ABSTRACT

Captagon is an illegal amphetamine that is widely used in the Middle East. Since the civil war started in 2011, Syria has become an international hub for Captagon production. A main Captagon trafficking route runs from Syria to the Arabian peninsula via Jordan. This has caused increasing domestic consumption of Captagon in Jordan. This article asks how Captagon trafficking and use in Jordan intersects with war in Syria and its wider impact. It illustrates how drug trafficking can be the product of violence and can also become a conduit for further violence. The article firstly analyses the drugs-conflict nexus in Syria and emphasizes Captagon trafficking as a new case study to this literature. It unpacks the role of the state in the crime-conflict nexus. The second half of the article draws on critical border studies literature to illustrate how the illegal Captagon trade has increased violence by contributing to an increasingly militarized border, with significant consequences for the communities who live and work there. The study concludes by considering the implications of Captagon trafficking for peace and stability in Syria and the region.

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## Introduction

By early 2022, it was clear that Jordan's northern border with Syria has become the site of a new conflict. While the Syrian civil war was de-escalating, violent clashes between Jordanian border guards and drug smugglers on the Syrian border was an increasing phenomenon. The Jordanian security forces had adopted a 'shoot-to-kill' policy towards drug traffickers on its northern border since January 2022 and by the end of that year, they had killed more than 35 suspected drug smugglers (Al-Khalidi, 2022; Knell, 2022; Luscente, 2022). In May 2023 the Jordanian army further escalated its use of violence and killed a suspected drug kingpin and his family during an attack inside Syrian territory (Mroue & Hehayeb, 2023).

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The drug trade that elicits this response revolves around the illegal amphetamine-type stimulant, Captagon. The Syrian war had significantly increased domestic Captagon production and since the Assad regime's recapture of territory in the south in 2018, Captagon trafficking from Syria has intensified (Sallon, 2022). A record high of 86 tonnes of tablets were confiscated in 2021 (UNODC, 2022) and, in the first five months of 2022, more than 20 m tablets have been intercepted at the Syrian-Jordanian frontier (Luscente, 2022). Captagon has geopolitical impact too as it was an important consideration in Syria's reintegration into the Arab League in 2023: Arab countries had hoped this would encourage Syria to curb its role in the production and trade of the drug (Motamedi, 2023).

Most of the existing literature on Captagon – and it remains a vastly understudied topic – adopted a drug trafficking perspective (COAR, 2021; Herbert, 2014; Kravitz & Nichols, 2016; Rose & Söderholm, 2022), or a substance use perspective (Albals et al., 2021; Katselou et al., 2016; Yasin et al., 2020). In contrast, this article unpacks Captagon's links to the conflict in Syria. The focus is, specifically, on the experiences of Syria's southern neighbour, Jordan. The paper asks how Captagon intersects with the Syrian civil war and its wider impact. It argues that Captagon trafficking and use in Jordan is, simultaneously, the product of violent conflict and the conduit for further violent conflict.

In making this argument, the article pursues two aims: Firstly, it will describe and explain the origins, patterns and extent of the illegal Captagon trade in the Middle East, with particular references to the role of Syria in these processes and networks. In pursuing this initial aim of illustrating how Captagon trafficking is the result of violent conflict, the article uses the crime-conflict nexus framework (and the drugs-conflict nexus, in particular) to unpack this amphetamine-type stimulant's relationship with violent conflict. It argues that the conflict in Syria and its aftermath have enabled a variety of actors to engage in Captagon trafficking. Many of these groups are directly linked to the Syrian regime. Syria's transformation into a global producer of Captagon (Alhajj, 2022; Rose & Söderholm, 2022) will be analysed against the background of its civil war. The article makes two novel contributions to the crime-conflict nexus: it adds a new case study of Captagon to this literature and provides new insight into the role of the state in the relationship between drug trafficking and war. It also contributes to the very sparse general literature on illicit drug trafficking in the Middle East (e.g., Robins, 2016).

Secondly, the paper will analyse the wider implications of these changes in Captagon production within Syria, with a particular focus on the borderland along the Syria-Jordanian frontier. One of the main Captagon trafficking routes runs from Syria to the Arabian peninsula via Jordan and most of the Captagon entering Jordan crosses at the southern Syrian border (UNODC,

2022). The article uses concepts from critical border studies literature to argue that drug smuggling prompts a process of border militarization and how this has been an increasingly violent process along the Syria-Jordanian border – with political, economic and social consequences.

The article concludes with thoughts about the future direction of Captagon trafficking in the Levant and highlights some wider implications for peace and stability.

## Methodology

The data presented in this article derive from a larger study which investigated Captagon's impact on Jordan from a public health and organized crime perspective. The study took a qualitative approach, using 35 semi-structured, audio-recorded interviews (lasting 30 minutes – 1 hour each) with three categories of respondents: policy makers in Jordan who are responding to Captagon trafficking (8 interviews); therapists (such as psychiatrists, sociologists or psychologists) who lead the treatment for Captagon users (7 interviews) and lastly, Captagon users and addicts (20 interviews). In the interviews, respondents were asked about the sources of Captagon, trafficking routes, the effects (such as social, economic or health) of Captagon use and trafficking, as well as the policies to counteract this. Interviews took place from 2017–2022 (including an 18 month break due to the COVID-19 pandemic and travel restrictions), in either Arabic or English (often using a translator). Afterwards, interview tapes were transcribed/translated and analysed using Nvivo qualitative data analysis software.

In addition, the argument in this paper relies on evidence from news reports, policy literature and, where relevant, statistics provided to the author by the Jordanian Public Security Directorate (via the Anti-Narcotics Department).

## Captagon in Jordan

Captagon – or 'Abu Hilalain' – is popular in the Middle East (Kravitz & Nichols, 2016) and authorities in Arab countries seize millions of Captagon tablets every year. Lebanon (Arbid, 2017) and Syria are the main producers of Captagon in the Middle East. Captagon is particularly popular on the Arabian Peninsula in Saudi Arabia and the UAE where it is used as a stimulant and appetite suppressant. Its street value varies widely, depending on supply factors and range from \$10 to \$25 per tablet in Saudi Arabia, for example (Cornish, 2021). Its profit margin is thus considerable, since it costs only a few cents to produce (Gibon, 2023). While Captagon is predominantly used by young people on the Arabian Peninsula, it has gained notoriety as a drug used by combatants

in the Syrian war who reportedly used it to increase aggression, alertness and fearlessness (Baker, 2013; Katselou et al., 2016, p. 3; Kravitz & Nichols, 2016, p. 37), although the actual extent of this is now disputed (El Khoury, 2020).

Captagon originated in the 1960s as a clinical drug containing an amphetamine called fenethylamine used to treat hyperactivity, narcolepsy and depression. It was banned worldwide in the 1980s because of its abuse potential and deadly side-effects.

After its prohibition, south-eastern Europe (particularly Bulgaria, Slovenia, Serbia-Montenegro) were the main producers of Captagon, from where it was trafficked through Turkey to the consumer markets on the Arabian Peninsula (AL-Imam et al., 2017); Crabtree, 2016, pp. 5–7). Since then, Hizballah in Lebanon have become increasingly involved in Captagon production, especially in the Bekaa region. After the 2006 Hizballah-Israel war in Lebanon, Hizballah reportedly used Iranian reconstruction aid to buy the first machines to produce counterfeit Captagon pills (Boaz & Halperin Wernli, 2013, pp. 704–705). While some Captagon production was taking place within Syria during this time (Crabtree, 2016, p. 10), Hizballah in Lebanon was widely considered the main producer in the Middle East, smuggling it via Syria to Turkey in cooperation with the Assad regime (Herbert, 2014). The next section discussed how Syrian became the main producer of Captagon after the outbreak of war in 2011.

The tablets, which are produced as Captagon today, may contain fenethylamine or a combination of substances that mimic its effect, such as amphetamine, caffeine, or lactose (Alabdalla, 2005). Indeed, many of the tablets seized on the drug market in recent years are sold as Captagon but contain little, if any, fenethylamine. Rather, they contain a range of different amphetamine-type substances mixed with other compounds (Dabbagh & Rawson, 2019; EMCDDA, 2018). In Jordan, the term 'Captagon' is used to generally refer to any amphetamine-type stimulant found inside the country.<sup>1</sup>

Today, Captagon mostly enters Jordan at the southern Syrian border, but shipments have also been confiscated at the port in Aqaba, as well as at the borders with Saudi-Arabia and Iraq (UNODC, 2022). More than 21 million tablets have reportedly been confiscated in Jordan (all originating from Syria) between 2015 and beginning 2022 and reports of seizures show a significant increase in batch sizes since 2021 (see Rose & Söderholm, 2022, pp. 36–39). Overall, in 2022, the Anti-Narcotics Department in Jordan confiscated 69 412 697 Captagon tablets.<sup>2</sup> By July 2023, it was recognized that trafficking methods were becoming increasingly sophisticated (Royanews, 2023): smugglers are launching border crossing simultaneously at different spots on the border to distract guards, they use drones to drop shipments and use tunnels and customized vehicles to cross the border (Hubbard & Saad, 2021; Knell, 2022). Although there is little information available on the organized crime groups involved in the distribution of Captagon within Jordan, they are concentrated

along border areas and around refugee camps, with close links to tribal networks (Global Initiative Against Organised Crime, 2023).

Jordanian authorities are concerned about the rise in domestic consumption of Captagon, estimating that as much as one fifth of the drug entering Jordan is consumed within the country (Hubbard & Saad, 2021). By 2018, there was already a clear dramatic increase in Captagon use within Jordan: In 2016, a total of 141 people were officially treated for Captagon addiction, but that increased to 259 in 2017. In 2016, the Jordanian legal system prosecuted 2567 people for Captagon use, which almost doubled to 4182 in 2017 and in 2022 police arrested 6372 people for Captagon possession and use.<sup>3</sup> By 2020, approximately 21 per cent of patients in rehabilitation centres in Jordan were Captagon users (Yasin et al., 2020, p. 1038).

Captagon users in Jordan tend to use it to enable them to work long hours such as long-distance truck drivers, inter-city bus drivers and taxi drivers.<sup>4</sup> Students often use Captagon as a stimulant during exam periods to enable them to stay awake and alert for longer, but some users reported using it as an appetite suppressant.<sup>5</sup> A psychiatrist who works with Captagon addicts in a government-run drug rehabilitation centre explained that Captagon addiction is associated with hallucinations, a detachment from reality and a resulting propensity towards self-harming and harming others.<sup>6</sup> Captagon has long-term health effects, including cardiovascular complications, severe tooth decay, extreme depression, insomnia and malnutrition (Katselou et al., 2016, p. 137).

## Drugs and conflict

The relationship between organized crime and violent conflict is central to understanding the intensity and longevity of civil war (Cornell & Jonsson, 2014; De Boer & Bosetti, 2015). Militant groups in war often engage in organized crime to fund their material reproduction of violence and this organized crime also poses a significant obstacle to the resolution of civil war (Bosetti et al., 2016; UNODC, 2017).

The crime-conflict nexus literature (e.g., Paoli et al., 2022; Steenkamp, 2017) aggregates a wide range of illicit economic activities in its analysis. This article, however, focuses on the intersection between narcotics and conflict (e.g., Clarke, 2016; Goodhand et al., 2021; Meehan, 2021; Meehan & Dan, 2023). Insurgents in conflicts ranging from Myanmar to Afghanistan, and from Peru to Sri Lanka have been involved in the illegal drug trade (UNODC, 2017, p. 35). This is hardly surprising, since the economic opportunities presented by narcotics are particularly desirable in conflict zones: drugs are easily lootable, difficult to obstruct, easily trafficked by a few people and narcotics is a particularly lucrative endeavour for insurgents who are not limited by international prohibition regimes (Ross, 2004). The high profit

margins make drugs attractive to armed conflict actors and, in the process, it opens smuggling routes for other natural resources too (Cornell & Jonsson, 2014, pp. 2–3; Felbab-Brown, 2010, p. 3). Drugs thus serve as an enabling factor in a wider illegal economy.

There exist two causal relationships between narcotics and conflict. Firstly, narcotics do not generally directly cause conflicts, but they play a role in the duration and intensity of war. Drugs provide an important financial motivation for insurgents to continue the war and tend to strengthen the capacity of insurgency movements vis-à-vis that of the state (Cornell, 2007). This makes war possible, and war is likely to last for longer (Kan, 2016, p. 116).

Secondly, while the cultivation and trafficking of drugs often predate the war, the conflict leads to an intensification and increased sophistication in drug production and trafficking (Koehler & Zuercher, 2007, p. 62). The quantity of drugs available also increases as different militant groups gain a stake in the narcotics market (Cornell, 2007).

In contrast to plant-based drugs,<sup>7</sup> amphetamine manufacturing (which includes Captagon) is an industrial process with no direct links to local agricultural economies. It is thus largely exempt from many of the dynamics of rural agrarian power relationships and economies that characterize drug production in other conflict settings. The production of synthetic drugs is particularly attractive to insurgent groups: it is profitable, with only minimal investment required to establish the required infrastructure, distribution is worldwide, products are relatively easily to transport since they are in the form of small pills and lastly, the punishment for producing these drugs is relatively light (Boaz & Halperin Wernli, 2013, p. 703). In addition, since they are produced in small laboratories, they are less like to be detected and destroyed than large fields of poppies, marijuana or coca (Kan, 2016, p. 109).

This article contributes to this existing drug-war nexus literature by adding Captagon (a synthetic drugs) as a new case study to a literature dominated by research on plant-based drugs. However, the novelty of this contribution also lies in its focus on the role of the state in the crime-conflict nexus and the following section unpacks the relationship between Captagon and the Syrian war to show how this provided opportunities for both insurgent groups and the state.

## Captagon and the war in Syria

Political unrest in Syria started in early 2011 in the southern province of Daraa and quickly spread across the country where it was met by a violent state crackdown (Yassin-Kassab & Al-Shami, 2016, p. 37). More than a thousand different armed groups have been involved in the war (Al-Abdeh, 2013; Crowcroft, 2015), many with international sponsors, including the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Russia and Iran (Al Jazeera, 2016). An immense

humanitarian crisis has resulted from the conflict, which generated the largest refugee flow the world has seen since the Second World War. By 2021, the UNHCR reported 6.6 m refugees from the conflict, 6.7 m internally displaced persons, with 13.4 m people requiring humanitarian assistance in Syria (UNHCR, 2021). However, by 2021, the Syrian government of Bashar Al Assad had regained (with the help of its allies Russia, Iran and Hizballah) much of the territory it had lost over the preceding 10 years, except for some areas in the north and north-east of the country (BBC, 2022).

Syria has a long history as a transit point for drugs originating from Europe, Turkey and Lebanon, which are destined for Jordan, Iraq and the Persian Gulf (Al-Hemiary et al., 2014). Since the war, Syria's involvement in Captagon has changed from being a transit country to becoming a producer country. After Damascus regained control of the southern provinces of Daraa and Sweida, southern Syria has become an international hub for Captagon production, with involvement of the Syrian army (Nereim & Abdulrahim, 2023) and foreign militias including Hizballah and Iranian-backed groups (FCDO, 2023). Captagon is now Syria's most significant export (Alhaji, 2022; Rose & Söderholm, 2022). Captagon has become increasingly (although not exclusively) exported through Jordan which has traditionally been a transit country for Captagon tablets from Syria: it is strategically located between the drug-producing countries on its northern border and the drug-consuming destinations to the south and west. In the first two months of 2022, the Jordanian security forces reported the seizure of over 16 m Captagon pills coming from Syria since the start of that year, up from 15.5 m across the entire previous year (Middle East Monitor, 2022).

The increase in Captagon trafficking from Syria to Jordan can be understood through the drug-conflict nexus lens: the narcotics trade provides armed groups during the war with opportunities to fund their use of violence and the provision of political and social goods. In addition, the conflict reduced the opportunity costs for groups and individuals to become involved in the production and trafficking of Captagon. Several protagonists in the Syrian civil war developed a stake in Captagon production early in the war (Kravitz & Nichols, 2016, pp. 38–9). Captagon laboratories were found in the cities of Aleppo and Homs in insurgent-controlled areas and observers believe that ISIS taxed the movement of Captagon through its territory – rather than being directly engaged in the production and trafficking (Crabtree, 2016, p. 23). In the first few years after the outbreak of war, official reports started to confirm a significant increase in Captagon seizures on the borders with Syria (Arslan et al., 2015). This increase was amongst the first signs that the Syrian war creating an environment conducive to the narcotics trade – a trade in which not just insurgents but also the state were key stakeholders.



However, the earlier discussion of the drugs-conflict nexus emphasized how drugs rarely cause war but are instead exploited to further intensify and extend conflict. Several pre-war enabling factors also determine whether narcotics are likely to present itself as a revenue source in any conflict. These include the existence of technical skills and conditions needed to process and manufacture drugs (including a suitable climate and available labour); territories outside the state's control where rebels have autonomy to engage in the production and trafficking of drugs and the presence of favourable market outlets (Cornell & Jonsson, 2014, pp. 13–14).

These conditions were all present in Syria. Syria's excellent pre-war infrastructure is central to Captagon's role in the war-time illegal economy. It has an elaborate road network, good access to ports, a steady electricity supply and a sophisticated pharmaceutical industry with the facilities and skills needed to produce a synthetic drug such as Captagon (Kravitz & Nichols, 2016, p. 35).<sup>8</sup> In addition, the country's geographical characteristics (notably its coastal access and lengthy, porous borders with Iraq, Turkey, and Lebanon) are important factors in the viability of the drug trade in Syria. It lies between important producing countries such as Lebanon and in the middle of important trade routes to Turkey and the Arabian Peninsula. Syria was therefore in the centre of an existing Captagon smuggling network, which new stakeholders in the drug trade could exploit (Global Initiative on Transnational Organised Crime, 2013).

While the markets on the Arabian Peninsula pre-date the Syrian war, the conflict created new opportunities to expand Captagon markets in neighbouring states such as Jordan. The war in Syria provided opportunities for armed groups to control territory, to claim a stake in the Captagon trade and to expand manufacturing within Syria. The war has undoubtedly bolstered underlying conditions for Captagon manufacturing in Syria.

There is widespread recognition in Jordan that the conflict conditions in Syria – and the political, social and economic instability that accompanies war – are directly responsible for increasing Captagon trafficking into Jordan as 'after the Syrian crisis, drugs started becoming a problem inside Jordan and (they are) using Jordan as a market'.<sup>9</sup> Also within the Public Security Directorate, there was recognition of the drugs-conflict nexus in Syria that 'Captagon, weed and meth originate from Syria, Lebanon and Iraq since these are countries of conflict which suffer from security problems'.<sup>10</sup>

Another official in the Anti-Narcotics Department explained the link between Captagon manufacturing and this political instability in Syria:

The producing of it (Captagon) increased during the war because it's a mess, there's no stability over there. There is no authority, so they have, I think, many manufacturers over there. So, it's easy to do that over there.<sup>11</sup>

Significant shifts have occurred in the manufacturing and transportation of Captagon as a direct consequence of the conflict: while Lebanon remains a significant producer of Captagon, Syria has now emerged as the dominant manufacturer of Captagon (FCDO, 2023) and the Syrian-Jordanian border has become increasingly popular as a trafficking route.

But the impact of war on the illegal drug trade is only one side of the coin: on the other side is the way in which the illegal drug trade creates conditions which foster more violence.

Since the Syrian government regained control of the south in 2018, there has been an increasing presence of foreign-backed militia groups. These include Iranian-backed groups such as the Lebanese militant group Hizballah. The Fourth Armoured Division of the Syrian Army (an elite unit commanded by Maher al-Assad, the president's younger brother) is deeply involved in the production and transportation of Captagon in southern Syria (Alhaji, 2022).

By 2022, there was agreement in Amman that the Syrian government has – rather than destroying the drug trafficking routes – become involved in Captagon trafficking itself (Sallon, 2022). There are reports about Syria becoming a 'narco-state', which emphasize the growing links of the Syrian government to the Captagon trade as it recaptured territory (COAR, 2021; The Economist, 2021). While, as Chouvy (2017) points out, the term 'narco-state' has little conceptual value as it masks the complex socio-political and economic realities which surround narcotics production, these reports are useful: they emphasize how the expansion of Captagon trafficking has become increasingly sophisticated since the Syrian government regained the upper hand in the conflict and emphasizes how Syrian government officials and affiliates are working closely with organized crime groups to maintain and expand this trade (Hubbard & Saad, 2021; Rose & Söderholm, 2022, pp. 15–18). It is unlikely that Damascus has full control over Captagon trafficking, but it undoubtedly has strong links to organizations and individuals who are closely involved in this trade.

This example of where a state is heavily involved in the drugs trade, has several implications for the crime-conflict nexus. The state as a significant actor in the smuggling economy is likely to exacerbate corruption levels in state institutions as organized crime groups co-opt officials with impunity. This creates an environment where the distinction between organized crime groups and the state become increasingly blurred as the state's resources are increasingly devoted to the drug trade. Secondly, the state's involvement in drugs smuggling (as opposed to smuggling other commodities such as weapons or food) can entrench these activities in the post-war state and society. While the reliance on illegal weapons and food imports may reduce once the war is over, this is unlikely to be the case for drug demand and supply. Due to the drug trade's profitability and illegality in a context of weak

law enforcement and high levels of corruption, these networks are likely to continue and, indeed expand, after the war. High levels of domestic drug use also create a public health challenge which requires additional resources from the state. In socially conservative societies such as Jordan and Syria, widespread drug consumption damages the social fabric which could lead to further socio-political alienation and unrest. And lastly, the involvement of the Syrian state in Captagon production and trafficking means that it loses reliability as a partner in regional counter-trafficking measures. The following section will illustrate this tension between the state's involvement in drug trafficking and its obligations in international countertrafficking frameworks.

### **'We are surrounded by a ring of fire'<sup>12</sup>: Borders, violence and drugs in Jordan**

Case studies from the European Union and the US-Mexico border dominate the literature on critical border studies and border militarization. A few rare, and indeed welcome, exceptions are the special editions of *Geopolitics* (2018) and *International Affairs* (2017) which focused on bordering practices in the Middle East (Del Sarto, 2017, Meier, 2018; Schofield, 2018). However, these studies analyse border management in the context of perceived security threats stemming from conflict, migration, and terrorism in the region. This article contributes to this literature by arguing that the securitization of drugs, in this case Captagon, provides a similar justification for Jordanian authorities to increasingly militarize their border through enhanced border patrols, the use of the army and surveillance technology. Just as migration and terrorism have become securitized and serve as a justification for changing border control practices, so drug trafficking too has been framed as a security threat to facilitate border militarization.

Some scholarly attention has shunned the traditional view of borders as fixed 'lines in the sand' (Parker & Vaughan-Williams, 2012) to adopt a critical perspective, which views borders as arenas where relationships and identities are performed, shifting, and continually constructed in a process called 'bordering' (Newman, 2006; Van Houtum, 2017). This critical border studies literature recognizes the subjective and constructivist nature of borders. It emphasizes the ongoing and evolving nature of border-making (Johnson et al., 2011; Salter, 2012) where various state and non-state actors interact to continually construct and reconstruct borders (Brambilla, 2015; Parker & Vaughan-Williams, 2012, p. 729). This highlights the way in which borders are 'performed' and enacted as part of a continuous and ever-evolving process of border-making (Johnson et al., 2011; Salter, 2012). While states spend considerable time and resources on formally defining and attempting to control these territorial boundaries, various agents can circumvent this inside-outside dichotomy through their actions and interactions. Borders consist of

a conglomeration of relationships and identities which are constantly developing. Borders are not static.

This following section will provide a critical analysis of the Syria-Jordanian border to explain how and why it became a site for increased violence. Ironically, the illegal Captagon trade has provided a catalyst for the border – which has long been a fluctuating, constantly evolving borderscape (Brambilla, 2015; Rumford, 2012; Schofield, 2018) – to become increasingly militarized, fixed and indeed, violent.

## Conflict borderlands

The conceptual frame of ‘borderlands’ (Brunet-Jailly, 2005; Del Sarto, 2021; Popescu, 2011) encompasses the political, social, and economic relations across the border and unpacks how civilians on both sides maintain networks of cooperation and dependency – or indeed, conflict – despite official demarcations. Conflict borderlands (Schofield, 2018, p. 620) are the physical and societal spaces around the international borders between states experiencing violent conflict – and these borderlands change and shift as a direct result of the conflict. When one state experiences conflict, it can affect neighbouring states as borders become increasingly porous (Del Sarto, 2017, p. 768). In addition, in conflict borderlands and as a direct result of the conflict,

territories that were once peripheral and marginal within their own states have become part of the nexus of internal military strife, an object of competition for control, and also sites of massive, if asymmetric, demographic transformation and intense transborder (legal, and mostly, illegal) activity and flux. (Vignal, 2017: 811.)

The peripheral borderland that used to hold little interest for the centre, now becomes a focal point due to the conflict. The following discussion will argue that the conflict in Syria has affected the nature of this conflict borderland between Syria and Jordan in two ways: firstly, it has led to the border becoming increasingly militarized, and secondly, it has had a devastating effect on the local economy. Both these processes – the border militarization and economic deterioration – are the consequences of the Syrian war and of Captagon trafficking.

At longer than 360 km and largely stretching through uninhabited desert, the border between Syria and Jordan is the main entry point for transporting Captagon into Jordan and is a significant source of vulnerability. Several interviewees identified the land border with Syria as a major focus and challenge in their anti-trafficking strategy.<sup>13</sup> An official in the UNDP country office in Amman described this vulnerability:

Jordan is affected by what happened in Syria and Iraq at the same time. We have long borders with Iraq and long borders with Syria and we must defend

ourselves and we have to stop everything coming abroad, the smugglers who smuggle weapons or drugs, or the terrorists themselves from crossing the borders, coming or going to Syria or Iraq.<sup>14</sup>

For much of the Syrian war, Daraa governate (the southern part of Syria which borders Jordan) was under the control of rebel armed groups.<sup>15</sup> This meant that the government in Damascus had very little influence in responding to trans-border trafficking into Jordan. The lack of a cooperative and capable central authority in Damascus was a complicating factor in Amman's efforts to control trafficking across the border. The instability in Syria provided a significant obstacle to fostering an effective international collaboration against Captagon trafficking. An official in the Public Security Directorate tasked with addressing drug trafficking, expressed hope that the end of the war will increase cross-border cooperation to address trafficking:

Once we have an authority functioning in Syria again, we will have a connection with them, for example, with Saudi Arabia we have a liaison officer, and we talk daily. Once there is authority in Syria, we will solve this problem (with Captagon).<sup>16</sup>

There was considerable frustration in Amman with the lack of a capable and responsible ally in Damascus who could cooperate in the effort against Captagon. This illustrated a central dilemma for Syria's neighbouring states: sovereignty and territorial cohesiveness became one-sided as Syria was unable to effectively negotiate and manage the shared border (Vignal, 2017, p. 823). Post-war Damascus remained a reluctant ally due to its own growing economic interests in the drug trade. This illustrates the tension between the state's involvement in the narcotics-conflict nexus and its obligations under a wider international anti-narcotics order.

Jordan responded to this burden of having to take prime responsibility for managing the frontier, by militarizing the border. Border militarization refers to 'the deployment of military troops, rather than civilian border patrols, along borders ... (and) a broader understanding of militarization includes the pervasive influence of military strategies, culture, technologies, hardware and combat veterans that are now policing the border' (Jones & Johnson, 2016, p. 188). Border militarization implies a change in the police-military relationship along the border and an increasingly visible role for the military in monitoring the frontier, but it is more than just the increased display of military personnel and artefacts. Graham (2010, p. 60) explains that militarization is 'the normalization of military paradigms of thought, action and policy' combined with 'efforts at the aggressive disciplining of bodies, places and identities deemed not to befit ... nation, citizenship or body'. Border militarization is thus visible in an increased military presence but is also detectable in an increasingly extremist narrative about who and what should remain inside or outside the border.

Jones and Johnson (2016) argue that in recent years there has been a resurgence of hard, militarized borders globally because of the securitization of immigration and terrorism threats, the military-security contractor nexus and increased security budgets. Indeed, Jordan has received significant international assistance in recent years to help secure its border by strengthening its border management practices and acquiring more technology and hardware in this process: for example, in 2019 it received €11 million from the EU for a four-year project to strengthen its border management and control capacities.

At the heart of this border militarization, is a blurring of policing and military roles where the military increasingly assumes responsibility for domestic security. The Jordanian army's response to border security has become increasingly violent because of its 'shoot to kill' policy towards drug trafficking, so far killing dozens of civilians, suspected smugglers, youths and border guards. The first impact of the conflict borderland was therefore that the northern border became a focal point for the Jordanian authorities. This initiated a change in border management practices, largely due to Captagon trafficking (combined with concerns about cross-border weapons and migration flows).

The second impact of the emergence of a conflict borderland between Syria and Jordan was on the local economy. The existing literature on drugs and borderlands emphasize the complexity of relationships between local communities and armed groups involved in the illegal trade of plant-based drugs (Goodhand et al., 2021, Meehan and Dan, 2023; Malik & Gallien, 2020).

Whilst Captagon may not be a plant-based drug, it still requires involvement by the local community in its trafficking. Smuggling and unmonitored cross-border traffic between Jordan and Syria are not unique to the conflict. There is a long tradition of international smuggling networks operating across this borderland and the Jordanian communities living along this northern perimeter have long depended on these networks economically. A newspaper editor explained that,

Syria was cheaper. If you have a banquet and you want to invite people for *mansaf*,<sup>17</sup> you can get a sheep for maybe three quarters of the price if smuggled from Syria, than buying it from the local market. They bring sweets and bonbons that are made in Syria and sell them here to people. The community live on this, so the government turned a blind eye. But not with the drugs. They take the drugs seriously.<sup>18</sup>

Nomadism (such as practised by the Bedouin tribes who inhabit northern Jordan/southern Syria) in the arid areas of the Middle East have traditionally driven the contraction and expansion of tribal territories as resource availability fluctuate (Schofield, 2018, p. 614). There is a long-standing tradition of cross-border smuggling between the two countries. These local smugglers,

some of whom are known as *bahhara* (which means ‘sailors’ in Arabic) have been transporting people and consumer goods between Jordan and Syria – legally and illegally – for generations. Leenders argues that the existence of these trans-border social and economic networks is one important explanation for why the Syrian uprising started in this southern region of Daraa (Leenders, 2012, p. 3). These trans-border networks, to which the *bahhara* are integral, were essential in the spreading of political ideas which resulted in the uprising. Southern Syria shares clan ties and a regional Hawrani identity with people living in the northern Jordanian towns of Al-Ramtha and Irbid (Leenders, 2013, p. 278). For example, Al-Ramtha’s economy has always been reliant on cross-border commerce and was known as the centre for high quality, but cheap, consumer goods smuggled from Syria (Mercy Corps, 2013).

Unsurprisingly, these border communities had become dependent on this informal economy. As the Syrian conflict intensified and Islamist groups gained a presence in southern Syria, Jordanian authorities closed the border to civilian traffic in 2014 after becoming increasingly concerned about militants, weapons and narcotics entering the country (Reed, 2015). When the Jordanian authorities suspended the passenger ferrying services provided by the *bahhara* in April 2015 drivers staged a large-scale protest to voice their concern over the adverse economic consequences this will have on their community (Omari, 2015).

Indeed, the border closure badly affected the local economy. A high-ranking official in the Anti-Narcotics Department explained that:

the *bahhara*, the sailors, they are not any more now, because the borders are closed for them. Now, they are not available anymore. There is no border ... It was in the northern border towns, and now they are suffering there because there are no markets there anymore. They couldn’t do anything because they depended on Syria for their livelihoods.<sup>19</sup>

This cross-border trade has suffered as the war destroyed the manufacturing industry in Syria and largely ruined the regional economy. In the border town of Al-Ramtha, poverty increased, along with the number of beggars on the streets, and thousands of shops closed (Tokmajyan, 2021). Even after the reopening of the border crossings in 2018, it was clear that the borderland economy had changed forever: due to continuing western sanctions against Syria and a considerably more restrictive Jordanian border policy, the cross-border trade was significantly reduced and far less lucrative. The increased production of Captagon in southern Syria provide new opportunities for border communities to benefit from this trafficking.<sup>20</sup>

The conflict borderland between Syria and Jordan has witnessed a severe blow to the local economy due to stricter border management practices to stem the flow of drugs from Syria. Yet, this also illustrates the resilience of

informal border economies and helps to explain why Captagon is trafficked along this route as smugglers capitalize on pre-existing smuggling networks and routes. Moreover, it illustrates how borderlands depend on and develop the illegal trade economies which resulted from years of neglect by central authorities (Malik & Gallien, 2020) – and how these routes and the economic and kinship relationships which underpin them outlive the disruption of war and capitalize on new economic opportunities which arise.

## Implications

The conflict borderland between Syria and Jordan and its links to the drug trade has three significant implications. Firstly, Captagon will remain a significant challenge for Jordan. Countries are classified as either producer countries (where drug manufacturing is based); transit countries (which lack major production facilities or whose populations are not the target market, but the drugs are moved across their territory which links producers with markets) or destination countries (the main markets for the drug).

The Jordanian authorities have always described Jordan as a drug transit country, rather than a destination or producer country and domestic Captagon use was explained as ‘accidental leakage’ resulting from batches being moved across the country to destinations in the Arabian Gulf.<sup>21</sup> However, this has changed as the flow of Captagon into Jordan became linked to the establishment of new, sophisticated organized crime networks. As mentioned earlier, Jordanian authorities report the expansion of sophisticated organized crime groups and there were thought to be more than 160 smuggling groups operating on this border (AFP, 2022). The detection of a local manufacturing site in 2018 (The Jordan Times, 2018) is one of the first signs that organized criminal groups are seeking a manufacturing foothold in Jordan.

Jordan’s geographical position and proximity to major user destinations, its good road infrastructure, access to ports, a high unemployment rate of around 30 per cent, airports and shared borders with multiple countries are all characteristics that make it a desirable manufacturing site. While at the time of writing, there was limited data on domestic production of Captagon, it was clear that domestic consumption remained high. In addition, its status as a middle-income country means that it has a population with the financial means to buy ‘the poor man’s cocaine’ (as Captagon is also known) which also explains the rise in domestic consumption (Sallon, 2022). The interviews with Captagon users and rehabilitation therapists confirmed that Captagon is consistently amongst the top three most widely used narcotics in Jordan and it is likely that Jordan has changed from a transit country for Captagon, to a destination country. This will usher in significant public health challenges, including the provision and equitable access to treatment and healthcare, the



reduction of social stigma surrounding addiction and the impact on social cohesion. It remains to be seen whether domestic production in Jordan will rise in response to the growing local market.

Secondly, the presence of militant groups with connections to powerful regional armed groups in Lebanon and Iran, who are directly involved in the illegal Captagon trade, is another source of concern for Jordan and regional stability. This has the potential to be a regional destabilizing presence, as the presence of these foreign-backed military groups on the border can pose a direct security threat to Jordan. It contributes to the continued militarization of society in southern Syria, as exemplified in the clashes in Sweida province in 2022 between local armed residents and government loyalist factions dominating the Captagon trade in which 17 people died (Al Jazeera, 2022). The illegal trade in narcotics can hold devastating consequences for the prospects of peace. The challenges of eradicating drug production and trafficking, high levels of use of narcotics by combatants themselves, and a continued greed for the high profits of the narcotics business, complicate efforts to bring about an end to conflict (Kan, 2016, pp. 117–118). Simply put, conflict can be good for business. War also introduces conditions of drug production and establish trafficking routes which endure long after the conflict has ended (Andreas, 2020, pp. 12–13).

However, as Goodhand (2008) points out, this correlation between drug trafficking and disorder is neither predictable, nor linear. In some parts of Afghanistan, for example, joint extraction regimes involving rulers and private actors have indeed led to political order and stability. Communities involved in drug production may prefer some level of rule-based governance to provide stability for the drug economy to flourish (Koehler et al., 2022). Drug economies could provide stability and economic development for communities who would otherwise experience precarity (Meehan, 2021). While Captagon does not present the varied opportunities for livelihoods as widespread poppy cultivation, it undoubtedly presents economic opportunities for deprived communities who become involved in the transportation of these drugs. This could have a stabilizing effect on borderland communities as it helps to shield them from the devastating economic impact of war.

The longer-term impact of drugs on post-war stability can thus be multifaceted. In the case of Syria, it remains to be seen how the militant groups who are involved in Captagon production and the communities within which they operate, shape these economic relationships – into either cooperation, conflict, or most likely, a bit of both.

Lastly, Captagon trafficking is expanding globally, and new routes are continually emerging. In recent years, Captagon shipments have been intercepted in Greece, Italy, Malaysia, and Libya, suggesting that Captagon networks are expanding in search of new markets. For example, 33 m pills were seized in Piraeus, Greece, in 2019 and the following year 84 m pills were

intercepted in Salerno, Italy (Hubbard & Saad, 2021). It is highly likely that Captagon will soon become an amphetamine widely known and used outside of the Middle East. There is a need for more thorough analysis and understanding of the economic, social, and political drivers and consequences of Captagon use, addiction and trafficking.

## Conclusion

This article has argued that Captagon trafficking in Jordan should be understood in the context of the drugs-conflict nexus in Syria and as a dynamic of the conflict borderland between Syria and Jordan. It contributed to the literature on the crime-conflict nexus by adding a new case study of Captagon which is a synthetic drug, as opposed to the case studies on plant-based drugs such as cocaine and heroin which dominate this body of research. In addition, it sheds light on the role of the state in the crime-conflict nexus by illustrating the tensions which characterize the state's involvement in drug trafficking during (and after) war.

The Syrian war has created conditions which enabled Captagon trafficking and, in turn, Captagon has sustained the presence of armed non-state, state and international actors during and after the war. Whilst synthetic drugs such as Captagon lack the complex agrarian political economies of plant-based drugs, this article has shown how it still has significant implications for the Syria-Jordanian borderland. Captagon trafficking is directly linked to increased border militarization, and it enables militant groups to maintain a significant presence in these communities.

Refugee flows, cross-border trafficking and insurgents' attempts to redraw existing borders challenge the effectiveness of state boundaries in the Middle East. The extent to which borders are regulated and monitored, and indeed, enforced, shift over time as conflict evolves. This article has illustrated how the crime-conflict nexus in Syrian can shape borderlands. The Jordanian authorities' focus on border control changed as Captagon trafficking (amidst other perceived security threats such as migration and weapons smuggling) increased. The northern border with Syria became increasingly militarized – in terms of military hardware and personnel, but also in terms of its perceived links to security threats. The *bahhara's* dilemma illustrates how violent conflict directly affects border regimes (in this case, changing a highly permeable border into a less permeable border) and the disastrous impact it has on local economies. Unsurprisingly, the pre-war informal cross-border trade networks are likely to take advantage of the new economic opportunities provided by the drug trade across the border. Whilst the continued presence of armed groups could be a source of local and regional instability, the illegal drug trade could bring some degree of economic cushioning to vulnerable communities.

Captagon's impact on peace in the region is becoming clear as it continues to provide lucrative economic opportunities for armed actors and civilians in a war-ravaged economic environment. As the Syrian war de-escalates, Captagon use and trafficking are increasing throughout the region and it is likely that Syria will continue as a centre from which Captagon will extend its reach and impact far beyond Syria and Jordan – and indeed, the Middle East.

## Notes

1. This has been confirmed in conversations with policymakers in Jordan. The brief explanation of the changes in Captagon's composition is important, since the term 'Captagon' has become the generic term for all amphetamines confiscated in Jordan – whether it contains the original amphetamine fenethylamine or not. However, no chemical analyses of Captagon confiscated in Jordan have been published since 2005.
2. Personal communication between author and Anti-Narcotics Department, Government of Jordan, on 5 December 2023.
3. These figures have been provided to the author by the Government of Jordan Anti-Narcotics Department in December 2017 and December 2023.
4. Author interview with rehabilitation therapist in the Forearms of Change Centre to Enable Community, Amman, February 2021.
5. Author interview with Captagon user, Amman, December 2020.
6. Author interview with rehabilitation therapist in the Drug Enforcement Administration treatment centre, Amman, February 2021.
7. A recent example of research on plant-based drugs and the associated political economies in conflict contexts (Myanmar, Afghanistan and Colombia), can be found in the Drugs and (Dis) Order project, see Goodhand et al. (2020).
8. The actual involvement of the Syrian pharmaceutical industry in Captagon production is unclear, since most Captagon laboratories are in makeshift warehouse and basements (Slim, 2023).
9. Author interview with UNDP country programme officer, Amman, April 2017.
10. Author interview with senior official in the Anti-Narcotics Department (a division of the Public Security Directorate), Amman, June 2021.
11. Author interview with senior policymaker in the Anti-Narcotics Department (a division of the Public Security Directorate), Amman, June 2021.
12. Quote from an interview with a UNDP policy officer in Amman.
13. Author interview with senior official at the Drug Enforcement Administration, Amman, July 2021; author interview with UNDP country programme officer, Amman, April 2017.
14. Author interview with UNDP country programme officer, Amman, April 2017.
15. Interestingly, while Amman maintained official diplomatic ties with Syria, it also approached the border pragmatically by cooperating informally with the FSA in allowing cross-border movement of activists, fighters and supplies to opposition groups (Vignal, 2017, p. 821).
16. Author interview with senior policymaker in the Anti-Narcotics Department (a division of the Public Security Directorate), Amman, April 2017.
17. *Mansaf* is a local Jordanian Bedouin speciality of cooked lamb and yoghurt.
18. Author interview with editor at *The Jordan Times*, Amman, April 2017.

19. Author interview with senior policymaker in the Anti-Narcotics Department (a division of the Public Security Directorate), Amman, April 2017.
20. This has been mentioned in conversations with key informants in the drug treatment sector in Jordan, October 2023.
21. Author interview with senior policymaker in the Anti-Narcotics Department (a division of the Public Security Directorate), Amman, July 2021.

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## Ethics Declaration

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at The University of Jordan (Reference number 316/2020/19). In addition, the study obtained the approval of the University Research Ethics Committee at Oxford Brookes University in the UK (UREC reference number L20194). Informed consent to participate and to record the interviews were obtained before the interview. Confidentiality, anonymity and the right to withdraw from the study were assured.

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