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Captagon and Syria's Drug Economy

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Reuters/Nikolay Doychinov

Alcohol and drugs have been a part of Middle Eastern social life for centuries. In Iran and Pakistan opium played an important social and medical role, and its use was socially acceptable among some classes of people there [See: Rudi Matthee, *The Pursuit of Pleasure: Drugs and Stimulants in Iranian History, 1500-1900* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005)].

In Iran prior to the Islamic conquest, wine was consumed by the Sassanid elite. With the arrival of Islam, opium replaced wine and was consumed daily in small quantities. The high plains and mountains of Afghanistan and Iran became the main regions for growing opium, and the drug became a major source of income. In Yemen, chewing qat became a popular activity and served similar function to that of opium in pre-modern Iran. [Qat acts like a natural amphetamine](#) and aphrodisiac, with euphoric effects, and it is grown in the mountains of Yemen and the Horn of Africa.



Opium production, unlike qat, was declared illegal in much of the world, including Iran, and as a result prices have risen dramatically. This provides an incentive for armed criminal gangs across the world to take part in its illicit production and distribution, channeling profits into other illegal activities.

[More than 90 percent of the world's heroin](#) (which is derived from opium and which is less bulky and thus easier to transport) is grown in the so-called "Golden Crescent" that includes areas of Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Iran. [According to a report](#) issued by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and the Afghan government, 224,000 hectares were devoted to growing opium in Afghanistan. In 2014, sales were worth \$850 million, a 10 percent decline despite the fact that the amount of land used to grow opium increased. The profits were used, in part, to finance terrorism.

In Lebanon and Syria – a main transit area between Asia, Africa, and Europe – there is a large narcotics industry. The Beka'a valley in eastern Lebanon, which is largely under the control of Hizballah, has been a traditional center for the illicit drugs industry that is controlled by [Syrians and Lebanese Shi'is](#). The major market for this production is [Saudi Arabia](#) and [the Gulf](#). As a result of the war in Syria, much of the drug production has shifted to Syria.

At the end of 2015 five civilians including Prince 'Abdel Mohsen bin Walid bin 'Abdel 'Aziz, a member of the Saudi royal family, were arrested at Beirut's international airport. This followed an attempt to smuggle two tons (11 million tablets) of Captagon onto a privately-owned plane. This was one of many arrests at Beirut airport in recent years according to Colonel Ghasan Shams al-Din, who is the Lebanese police officer responsible for the war on drugs. Earlier, Shams al-Din had been tipped-off about another major shipment that was coming through the Beirut airport. The Lebanese authorities seized [5.5 million Captagon tablets](#) that were being transported from Syria to Dubai and worth \$110 million on the Gulf market. The tablets were hidden in a water heater that was designed to smuggle the drugs, and special equipment was needed to open it. Six weeks later, six million tablets were seized in a container on its way to Saudi Arabia.

[In 2013](#), more than 12 million tablets of Syrian origin were seized, mainly on the Syrian-Lebanese border. In the same year, Turkey reported that 7 million Syrian-made tablets were seized on route to Saudi Arabia. In December 2013, the Dubai

police seized 4.3 million tablets made in Syria. In November 2015, [the Turkish press](#) reported that security forces had foiled an attempt to smuggle nearly 11 million tablets of Syrian origin to the Gulf.

Captagon is the commercial name for fenethylline, an industrially produced drug that acts as a stimulant. First produced in the 1960s, it was used for the treatment of hyperactivity, epilepsy, and depression. In the 1980s, it was banned by most countries because of the risk of addiction. Captagon increases alertness, reduces appetite, and boosts self-confidence and is therefore very useful for soldiers. It is very popular in the Middle East, especially in Saudi Arabia where some 55 million tablets have been seized by the police annually, equal to an estimated 10 percent of consumption.

The UNODC has noted that the collapse of central government in Syria has increased the country's importance in the international drug trade. Since the war began the Beka'a valley has lost its attractiveness as a source of drugs, and production there has dropped by an estimated 90 percent since 2011. This is because production has become easier in largely unpoliced Syria. The price of a tablet is about \$5 in Syria while in the Gulf it is \$20. The huge profit earned by exporting Captagon from Syria to the Gulf has become a major source of income for different groups fighting in the war. Recently, 180,000 tablets worth \$90,000 were seized in the Syrian town of Homs. In the Gulf they would have been worth \$360,000. This was, of course, a tiny proportion of the amount smuggled out of Syria annually.

The ease of production, the profitability, and the size of the export market means that all the groups fighting in Syria – Hizballah, Jabhat al-Nusra, and the Islamic State, as well as Bashar al-Asad's Syrian army – have incentives to be involved in the drug



Noah Zaitar alongside
Hizballah fighters in the
Zabadani region

trade. Hizballah, which dominates the Beka'a Valley, has long been accused of involvement in the Lebanese drugs trade, as were elites in Asad's Ba'thist regime in Syria.

Recent photos of [Noah Zaitar](#), who is wanted in Lebanon for drug smuggling and growing hashish, have been [published alongside Hizballah fighters](#) in the Zabadani region, on the border with Lebanon. The photos embarrassed Hizballah, and Zaitar tried explaining them in terms of his demonstrating support for fighters on the front. According to Matthew Levitt, formerly deputy assistant secretary for intelligence and analysis at the U.S. Department of the Treasury, and the

author of *Hezbollah: The Global Footprint of Lebanon's Party of God*, the party has a long history of involvement in the drug trade, and the manufacture and sale of Captagon is part of it. A senior Hizballah official has rejected this accusation, claiming that the use of drugs is a sin in Islam and that cooperation with those in the drug trade was for intelligence purposes rather than for profit.

According to an addict [interviewed in Beirut](#), the psychotic effects of Captagon are affecting the war in Syria. Those who use it do not feel tired and remain alert for long periods. The drug puts them on a "high," reduces or eliminates fear, hunger, and even pain. A Syrian officer in the anti-drug squad has said that users caught with Captagon are insensitive to pain and have to be held for 48 hours until the effects wear off and only then could they be questioned effectively.



Gamal Kefah al-Asad

Captagon has thus become an important weapon among the different groups fighting in Syria. The Islamic State (IS) supplies it to its fighters and the regime in Damascus is also involved. In December 2015, there were [social media reports](#) that Gamal Kefah al-Asad, a member of President Basher al-Asad's family, was killed in mysterious circumstances in a petrol station in the Qardaha region on the Syrian coast. It was reported that he died as a result of a feud with local drugs barons, and it was reported that along with him, there were other members of his family who were apparently involved in the drug trade.

It seems that the drug industry is rapidly expanding in the former Syrian territories. Drugs are affecting the conduct of the war, not only because fighters are becoming chronic users, but also as a result of turf wars over who is to control a multi-million dollar business. Drugs like Captagon, therefore, are fueling the fighting on the ground, and may help explain the cruelty as well as the duration of the Syrian war.

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