



United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime Study Guide



UNODC

**The "Captagon" Crisis:
Countering Drug Trafficking in the
Mediterranean**



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Chair letter

Dear delegates,

We, the chairs of UNODC, are thrilled to welcome you to ODEMUN 2025! We are eager to meet all of you on Monday.

We encourage each of you to approach these discussions with an open mind and a cooperative spirit. Remember that in diplomacy, the strength of your arguments matters, as does your ability to listen, collaborate, and negotiate with others. Your voice is crucial, and your contributions will help shape the outcomes of our session.

From personal experience, we can tell you that Captagon is no joke ;) (it's a joke relax)

We are here for any questions you have about the topic, committee, conference, and MUN in general!

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Introduction to the Committee

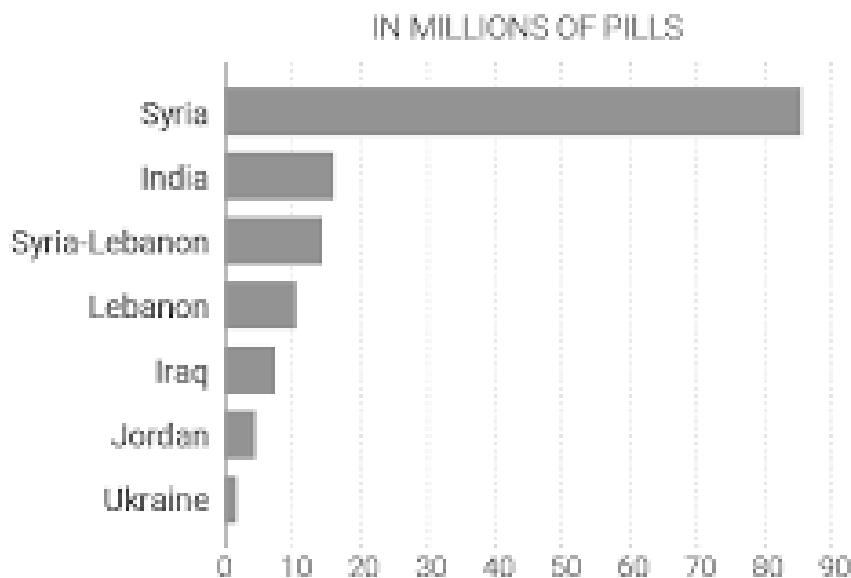
For two decades, to ensure health, security, and justice for all, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) has been helping make the world safer from drugs, organized crime, corruption, and terrorism by addressing these “societal diseases” and promoting peace and sustainable well-being as deterrents to them. Because the scale of these problems is often too grand for states to confront alone, UNODC offers practical assistance and encourages regional and transnational approaches to action. We do this in all regions of the world through our global programs and network of field offices.

Background

Chapter A - From medicine to illicit drug

The captagon, also known as “Abu Hilalain,” a drug that was once a pharmaceutical, was marketed for ADHD, narcolepsy, and depression. It originated in Germany in 1961 and was used as an alternative to methamphetamine. It was sold mainly in Europe and the Middle East and grew in popularity to treat said medical issues. The misuse of captagon as a performance-enhancing substance started in Europe somewhere in the 70’s. Since then, massive illegal manufacturing of the drug began in Southern Europe, Turkey, and the Middle East.

Captagon Pills Seized, by Country of Origin
From 2015 to 2023



Source: The New Lines Captagon Database (compiled from open sources)
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Captagon was made illegal in the 1980s, Eastern Europe and particularly Bulgaria remained the main producers of illicit captagon.

Later on, the United Nations included Captagon in the UN’s 1971 Convention on Psychotropic Substances. By adding Captagon to this international treaty, the UN effectively classified it as an illegal substance, setting the stage for global legal frameworks to combat its production, trafficking, and abuse. This move was a crucial step in formalizing international efforts to curb the widespread misuse of the drug.

Chapter B - De-captagonization

The process of the global illegalization of Captagon was gradual and complex, beginning with its inclusion in the 1986 update to the UN's Convention on Psychotropic Substances. Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, many countries, particularly in the Middle East, were slow to fully address the issue due to political instability, inadequate enforcement infrastructure, and the widespread use of Captagon in certain regions. Many drug abusers are unable to attain or hold full-time employment, and those who do work put others at risk, particularly when employed in positions where even a minor degree of impairment could be catastrophic, the economic consequences of drug abuse severely burden federal, state, and local government resources and, ultimately, the taxpayer.

Despite being classified as a controlled substance, production and trafficking continued, particularly in countries like Syria, where Captagon was linked to both local abuse and organized crime. It wasn't until the early 2010s that a more unified global effort emerged, with many nations, including Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, and Jordan, finally enacting strict laws and significantly increasing efforts to curb trafficking. This shift was driven by the increasing recognition of the drug's harmful impact on public health and security, alongside improved international cooperation, leading to a more consistent global crackdown on Captagon.

Case Study | Lebanon:

Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, Lebanon struggled with political instability, weak law enforcement, and a lack of coordinated efforts to combat the widespread use and trafficking of Captagon, particularly in rural areas. The drug became heavily ingrained in various social and political circles, with some militant groups even reportedly using it. The drug's effects on individuals often led to addiction, psychological issues, and violent behavior, contributing to a rise in criminal activity and a destabilized public health system. Socially, drug use created a cycle of poverty and social disintegration in affected communities, as addiction often led to unemployment and social exclusion. Economically, the illicit trade of Captagon fostered a black market, draining resources and preventing economic growth. Politically, Lebanon's fragmented governance structure and weakened law enforcement made it difficult to implement effective drug policies, further entrenching the presence of Captagon in society. Drug use also fueled corruption, with some political and military factions reportedly benefiting from the drug trade. As a result, Captagon became not only a health crisis but also a driver of Lebanon's broader social and political challenges.

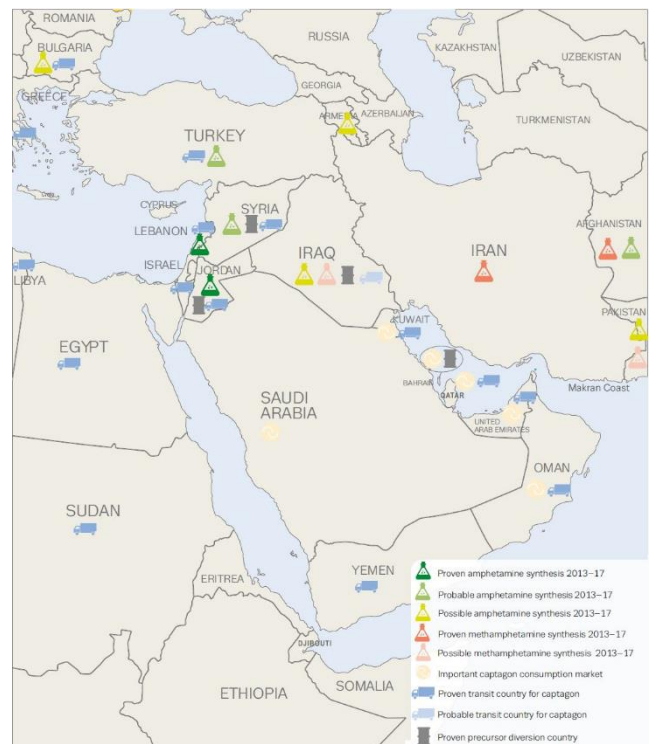
It wasn't until the 2010s, when Lebanon faced increasing international pressure and the government began a more concerted crackdown, that significant efforts to curb Captagon trafficking and use took shape.

Current situation

Chapter A - Illegal Trade Of Captagon

On Syria's ruins, a drug empire flourished

In the earlier stages of the Syrian civil war in the early 2010s, the Syrian economy went into freefall. Economic sanctions and isolation dried up the Syrian reserves. The government needed to find a new source of income. The Assad Regime used its pharmaceutical industry's expertise to begin small-scale production of Captagon. As the civil war severed, Syria began to collapse into a narco-state, with its economic so-called prosperity relying more on the trade of Captagon as the civil war raged on. In the late 2010s, the Assad regime consolidated power over much of Syria, allowing them to industrialize their small-scale Captagon production. The 4th Armored Division, led by Maher Al-Assad, became the de-facto governing body of this industry. By 2019, The "CaptagoNetwork" of Captagon Production and Distribution was vast, with the market value reaching just short of \$3.5 Billion. The regime used their Captagon industry as a diplomatic tool, Controlling the flow of Captagon through Neighboring countries, some of which suffered heavily from its invasion into their markets. Assad was able to achieve political goals by offering concessions and applying pressure, with the most notable one being the re-admission of Syria into the Arab League in 2023. Until its collapse, the Assad Regime was the largest producer and distributor of Captagon in the world. Abu Mohammed al-Jolani, the leader of the HTS (Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham), who overthrew the Assad regime in late 2024, mentioned in his victory speech that Syria became a "Captagon factory" and that it must be purified. It's clear that the new regime's opinion on Captagon negates what the Syrian population has known until now, and massive dismantlement of the Captagon industry is in sight. As of February 2025, no immediate action has been taken by the new regime to get rid of Captagon, however, the regime's collapse has damaged its production and distribution tremendously.



The Silent Operator of the Captagon Market

By far the biggest contributor to the CaptagoNetwork (besides the Assad Regime) was the Iranian Regime and its proxies. Iran-backed militias such as Hezbollah play significant roles in Captagon Distribution. The Iranian regime supported the Syrian Captagon industry through financial support and supplying machinery for their factories. Alongside the obvious financial profit, Captagon's role as a cause of Middle Eastern instability supports the Iranian Regime's interests in destabilizing the region.

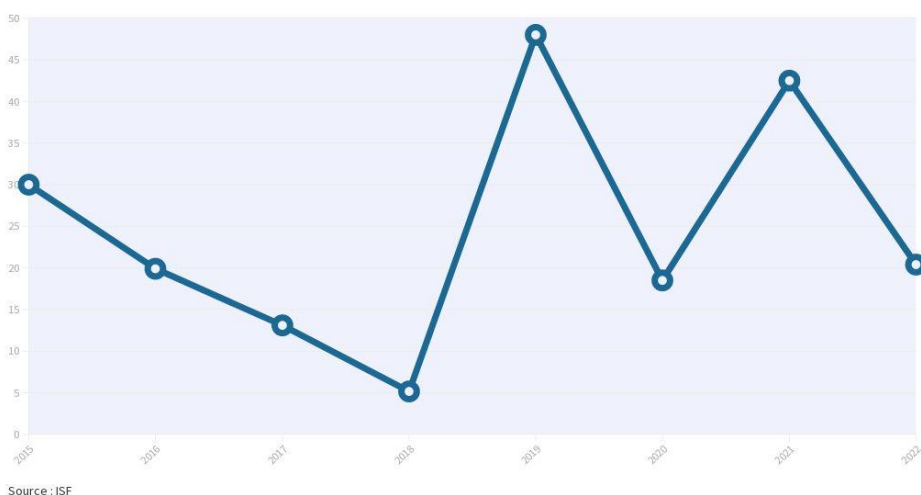
Chapter B - UN Actions

The United Nations has taken steps to combat the invasion of Captagon. However, these have been insufficient and did not bear much fruit. Since 2019, the UNODC has been working with the Iraqi Government at its land borders and airports, aiming to improve detection of Captagon, Hashish and similar drugs. The UN has organized regional forums and cooperation between Mediterranean and Gulf countries to design coordinated responses to Captagon production and smuggling. These efforts focused on Monitoring container shipments on maritime commercial routes, identifying key trafficking nodes and improving law enforcement monitoring, tracking street-level dealings in transit and destination countries, and developing forensic profiling databases to link seizures to production sites. While these efforts have resulted in increased confiscations and improved awareness, the impact on production is minimal, and significant challenges are still facing efforts attempting to curb its reign over the Middle East and the Mediterranean.

Captagon seizures in Lebanon since 2015

The 2022 numbers are the ones available at the date of publication

■ In millions of pills seized



Chapter C - The Socio-Economic Repercussions of the Captagon Trade

The Captagon industry, at its core idea, prioritizes financial gain over society's welfare. The industrialization of Captagon created a new society of Captagon addicts and quickly became the most addicting drug in the Middle East. Studies in Jordan showed that around a fifth of rehab patients are Captagon users, while Usage Tripled from 2016 to 2022. These statistics underscore the growing strain Captagon addiction is placing on treatment facilities and law enforcement in affected regions. So why is it so popular in the Middle East? - In essence, captagon itself is not intoxicating. If you could somehow ingest the captagon without your body metabolizing it, then you would not get high from it. Islamic law forbids substances that "intoxicate" you and since the captagon molecule does not directly intoxicate you, it was historically viewed as being permissible under Islamic Law.

Questions to Consider:

- How was your country affected by Captagon trade?
- What actions were taken by your country and her allies to combat Captagon trade? What did they bring?
- What measures can be implemented to disrupt the production and distribution networks of Captagon locally, regionally, and globally?
- How can we counter Captagon's Socio-Economic consequences?

Final Remarks:

This conference is critically important to the welfare of millions of people, whose lives were destroyed due to Captagon and other amphetamines. We hope that during the sessions we'll come to an active resolution that will make this problem disappear permanently. Happy prep and cya Monday ♥

Yuval and Ella.

Suggested Reading:

New Lines Institute - The Captagon Threat: A Profile of Illicit Trade, Consumption, and Regional Realities:

<https://newlinesinstitute.org/state-resilience-fragility/illicit-economies/the-captagon-threat-a-profile-of-illicit-trade-consumption-and-regional-realities/>

Russel Webster- What is Captagon?

<https://www.russellwebster.com/captagon/>

United States Department of Justice - 'The impact of drugs on society:

<https://www.justice.gov/archive/ndic/pubs11/18862/impact.htm>

France 24 - War on Captagon key to Syria's return to Arab League:

<https://www.france24.com/en/middle-east/20230519-war-on-captagon-key-to-syria-s-return-to-arab-league>

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