

## MIDDLE EAST

# Syria's Return to the Arab League: Navigating the Captagon Dilemma

JUNE 9, 2023

Syria's return to the Arab League on May 7<sup>th</sup> and the arrival of its leader Bashar al-Assad in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia (KSA) sparked a loud yet silent shock across the region. Countless lives have been lost in the war that has also forced millions of Syrians to flee their country out of fear of regime violence, only to see Assad rehabilitated in the end. The questions about why the Arab League chose this path rather than clinging to their former calls for Assad's resignation under the banner of "he must go" have circulated repeatedly. The answers lie in how Syria's civil war has affected the region on different levels, starting with the narcotics trade. The League has placed a high priority on stopping this trafficking and expects Damascus's full cooperation. Assad has assured his Arab counterparts that he is prepared to assist in tackling the drug epidemic. However, can he truly deliver on his promise and is he in a position of real authority to do so?

## What are the regime's connections to the narcotics trade?

According to [international sources](#), including the United Kingdom (UK) government, the Syrian regime is directly involved in the trade of a multi-billion-dollar drug empire with Captagon as its flagship. With the government's full acknowledgment and sanction, 80 percent of the world's supply of this highly addictive amphetamine (known as the poor man's cocaine) is reported to be produced in Syria. One detail highlighted in the UK report is that Bashar al-Assad's brother, Maher al-Assad, commands a Syrian army division tasked with the responsibility for Captagon production and distribution. The report mentions how, through the utilization of a pro-Assad stronghold in the city of Latakia, Syria exports shipments from the city's port to global black markets, with most of the supply going to the Gulf.

Local manufacturing sites, both in large- and small-scale facilities, are not limited to Latakia but scattered across Syrian government-supervised areas. According to a Newlines Institute report, production sites can even be found in private properties such as villas and residential compounds. The scale of Syria's Captagon network extends from the coastal Latakia region to the southern provinces of Daara and Suwayda, close to the border of Jordan.

The income generated from the trade of Captagon has given Assad and his circle a financial lifeline at a time when Syria's economy has been destroyed by war, and global trade is limited due to sanctions (particularly from the United States).

Gulf countries like Saudi Arabia have pledged to assist in rebuilding Syria's economy and have already put an initial figure on the amount of their aid. On May 10<sup>th</sup>, Bashar al-Assad and Saudi Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan met in Syria, where an [offer](#) of \$4 billion was made as part of a larger proposal under discussion between the two sides. No doubt, drug trafficking came up in the conversation, for Saudi Arabia has the highest number of users of Captagon, which is the first [drug of choice](#) among the country's youth. Consequently, the kingdom is prepared to go a long way to see the drug trade stopped once and for all. Logically it makes sense for Assad to want a chance to build trust with fellow Arab states, especially the KSA. During his trip to Jeddah, the Syrian president said in a speech at the Arab summit that this was a "historic opportunity" to deal with the region's crises and that it was time to look toward a new future without conflict.

"I hope that it marks the beginning of a new phase of Arab action for solidarity among us, for peace in our region, development, and prosperity instead of war and destruction," Assad told attendees. Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) was seen shaking hands with the former pariah leader, clearing the roadmap for a new course in Saudi-Syria relations. Nevertheless, the ceremonies, smiles, and sound bites will fall short if actions do not quickly follow.

### **Potential obstacles in this new era of cooperation**

As the world is still experiencing the early phase of this inter-Arab reconciliation, scholars and observers are commenting on the potential outcome.

Makram Rabah, a professor from the American University of Beirut (AUB), provided his perspective on the drug trade and how it has benefited the regime, strengthening its hold on power: “The Captagon trade has been one of the financial lifelines of the Assad regime, generating over \$5 billion in revenue—as well as keeping the war economy going for him.” One idea must be considered: Assad’s dependence on Captagon. Drug smuggling may have forced him into a situation he cannot easily escape. How can Assad be trusted to switch from relying on a drug empire that has protected him and move to a “legitimate” way of doing business? According to Rabah, “Assad cannot be trusted simply because if he plays around with the war economy, specifically the gangs and mafia that control the Captagon trade, he will be going against his own people. Meaning, many of the main Alawite militias as well as Hezbollah are making a lot of money from this.”

The Alawite community is widely regarded as part of Assad’s backbone and has helped him survive the war. This is the communal sect he hails from, and he may not want to unnecessarily antagonize the militia involved in drug production. Hezbollah’s role in aligning on the side of Assad was vital in defeating his enemies on the battlefield. Rabah observed that Assad may use a “don’t ask don’t tell policy” regarding the Captagon trade and its ties to his allies, including Hezbollah.

In a discussion about Syria’s re-welcome into the Arab orbit, Syria expert and American academic Joshua Landis gave his opinion on the level of commitment Assad may be willing to make in joining the war on Captagon: “Assad can crack down on the Captagon trade, but he will demand a steeper price than many want to pay. For him, forgoing trade in drugs, which constitutes Syria’s largest export, will require the restoration of legitimate trade. He will demand the lifting of sanctions and return of his territory.” The United States and Turkey still have a military presence in the north of Syria, an area that effectively has autonomy from Damascus rule. Certainly, Assad will make no concessions without this area of contention resolved at the outset.

Asked why the Arab world made the move to normalize relations and what it expects in return, Landis replied, “The Arab League has declared that the status quo is not working. In fact, it is making things worse, particularly the illegal drug trade and the refugee problem. To change

this, the Arabs agree that Syria must be helped with reconstruction and allowed legal trade.”

Everything now depends on the decisions both sides are prepared to make. Is Assad prepared to take bold risks to slowly dismantle the war system that has kept him in power and challenge some of his allies to appease his new Gulf partners? Or will this “new chapter in Arab relations” be a lost opportunity filled with disappointment? These are not easy questions to answer.

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