

Addressing the Captagon Challenge with Babel Street Solutions

BABEL STREET INSIGHTS

In the Middle East, users sometimes call fenethylline “the Jihadist’s Drug” or “chemical courage.” Most often, it’s referred to as “captagon,” after an early trade name. Whatever the moniker, use of the methamphetamine-like stimulant is an ongoing drug crisis across the Middle East.¹

First manufactured in the early 1960s as a treatment for narcolepsy and other disorders, captagon quickly became a drug of war.² Governments fed it to military combatants for the feelings of invincibility and aggression it induced. Civilians in war-torn areas used it as a psychological bulwark and to suppress appetite. As side effects of this highly-addictive drug became better known — extreme aggression, hallucinations, seizures, and irreversible changes in brain chemistry among them³ — it fell out of official favor. Many countries had banned it by 1986, shortly after the World Health Organization included it in the Convention on Psychotropic Substances.⁴

However, captagon gained a foothold in the Middle East under the regime of Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad. During the Syrian Civil War, international sanctions levied against Assad and his deputies left the regime short of cash. Captagon production and sales became Assad’s primary source of funding. In fact, at one point Assad, and his brother, Major General Maher al-Assad, commanded more than half of the estimated \$10 billion captagon market.⁵

After Assad’s ouster in late 2024, Syria’s new government vowed to abolish the drug. Still, political instability and lack of effective security have merged with easy, nimble drug-production methods to keep the supply of captagon flowing. In 2023, Middle Eastern authorities seized more than four tons of trafficked captagon.⁶ In March 2025, Iraq intercepted drug dealers trying to smuggle roughly 1.1 tons of captagon pills into the country, hidden in a shipment of ironing boards.⁷ Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and other nations have also been affected.

Outside of Syria, captagon operations can be found in Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, Turkey, and certain countries of Northern Africa. But the pills don’t stay where they’re created. Often, captagon is trafficked through European countries, finding its way to users in Germany, the Netherlands, and elsewhere.⁸

Captagon’s highly addictive nature is one factor contributing to its popularity. Its broad appeal is another. The Middle East is a diverse region with significant financial and cultural disparities. Captagon offers something for every rung of the societal ladder. Among the rich it’s a \$20-a-pill party drug. Far cheaper doses help poor people labor in hot and unforgiving environments. Students use captagon as a study aid. And terrorist organizations value captagon for the aggression it induces among their members.



What's at risk?

Middle Eastern nations view the cross-border captagon trade as a major threat to national security. Why? Because it:

- Threatens public health. In addition to its near-term side effects, long-term captagon use leads to serious health problems — including organ failure — that can potentially strain already-overburdened public health systems in the Middle East.
- Increases crime. Captagon is typically sold by organized crime rings. These rings engage in violence, bribery, and government corruption.
- Worsens conflicts. Combatants and terrorists in countries including Syria, Iraq, and Yemen have been known to use captagon to increase aggression. Increased aggression heightens the possibility of war crimes.
- Increases the law-enforcement burden. Authorities in the Middle East and Europe spend time and money to combat the flow of captagon.

How Babel Street can help

The Babel Street Ecosystem of technologies rapidly aggregates structured and unstructured data from thousands of online sources published in a broad array of languages. Leveraging natural language processing and machine learning algorithms, our technologies analyze terabytes of data to:

Monitor social media — Using Babel Street Insights, analysts can search social media and news sites for locations of captagon labs, factories, and distribution centers. They can also collect names of key individuals, political organizations, and military organizations involved in the captagon trade — along with the names of businesses used to launder drug money.

Analysts also use Insights to search chats. While traffickers prefer encrypted messaging applications, they do communicate on searchable social media platforms and chat apps. In these instances, they use code to plan and discuss operations. For example, drug networks deliberately misspell the drug's name ("cptgn," "captagOn") to avoid detection by law enforcement. Since captagon pills are typically marked by two crescent moons, drug networks may avoid use of the word "captagon" completely in favor of crescent-moon emojis. Babel Street Insights can search for these misspellings and symbols.

Identify players in the captagon trade — Babel Street Insights Batch People Search can help analysts glean additional information about members of trafficking rings, including identifiers such as phone numbers, emails, and usernames. Babel Street Match compares suspect names against sanctions lists, watchlists, and other data sets. It simultaneously considers numerous name variations across 25 languages — including Arabic.

Map connections — Babel Street Insights Synthesis can quickly map traffickers' social media ties, providing valuable insight into relationships among ring members.

Follow the money — Babel Street Business Search allows investigators to research seemingly legitimate businesses and networks of front companies that are used to launder money in the captagon trade. Business Search screens businesses against more than 3,000 global watchlists to check for designations or sanctions. As supply chain risk management and vendor vetting become an increasingly important aspect of due diligence investigations, these capabilities help streamline that workflow and highlight bad actors.

Access regional data — Babel Street Elite Regional Access data augments Babel Street Insights with a continuous stream of information from hard-to-reach online sources originating in the Middle East.

Search anonymously — Babel Street Secure Access, a managed attribution platform, protects the identity of investigators along with law enforcement networks and infrastructures. It shields users and their IP addresses through a hardened proxy network providing in-country access to internet sites worldwide.

With investigative tools from Babel Street, law enforcement professionals can maximize the use of open-source information to spot captagon traffickers, disrupt the captagon epidemic in the Mideast, and halt its spread.



Endnotes

1. Pergolizzi Jr., Joseph, LeQuang Jo Ann et al, "The Emergence of the Old Drug Captagon as a New Illicit Drug: A Narrative Review," National Institutes of Health, February 2024, <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10977473/>
2. Ibid
3. Ibid
4. World Health Organization, "Convention on Psychotropic Substances," United Nations, accessed April 2025, https://www.unodc.org/pdf/convention_1971_en.pdf
5. The National, "Iraq confiscates 1.1 tonnes of Captagon pills shipped from Syria," accessed via MSN.com, April 2025, <https://www.msn.com/en-ae/news/middleeast/iraq-confiscates-1-1-tonnes-of-captagon-pills-shipped-from-syria/ar-AA1B22nE>
6. Ibid
7. Ibid
8. Schaer, Cathrine, "Syria's dictator is gone — but his drug dealers are still busy," DW, March 2025, <https://www.dw.com/en/syrias-dictator-is-gone-but-his-drug-dealers-are-still-busy/a-72033154>

Babel Street is the trusted technology partner for the world's most advanced identity intelligence and risk operations. The Babel Street Insights platform delivers advanced AI and data analytics solutions to close the Risk-Confidence Gap.

Babel Street provides unmatched, analysis-ready data regardless of language, proactive risk identification, 360-degree insights, high-speed automation, and seamless integration into existing systems. We empower government and commercial organizations to transform high-stakes identity and risk operations into a strategic advantage.

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