

Using Babel Street Solutions to Investigate Captagon in the Middle East

Historically, fenethylline, commonly referred to as captagon, was a drug of war.¹ Governments once 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. The highly addictive drug can cause hallucinations, psychosis, and seizures.²

Because of these reactions, fenethylline was banned in most countries by 1986 — shortly after the World Health Organization included it in the Convention on Psychotropic Substances.³

Now, the drug is widely manufactured illicitly, particularly in the Middle East.⁴ In fact, in March 2025, Iraqi authorities intercepted drug dealers trying to smuggle roughly 1.1 tons of captagon pills into the county.⁵ It was one of the largest shipments of illicit drugs ever intercepted by Iraq, but only a tiny slice of the estimated \$10 billion captagon market.⁶

The regime of Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad, aided by his brother, Major General Maher al-Assad⁷, bolstered the captagon trade. 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 money-maker. In fact, at one point Assad commanded more than half of the captagon market — making captagon Syria's largest export.⁸

Using Babel Street to disrupt the captagon trade

How can Babel Street technologies help governments better stem the flow of captagon?

Perform research

Using Babel Insights, analysts can search social media and news sites for locations of captagon labs, factories, and distribution centers. Analysts can collect names of key individuals involved in the captagon drug trade and legitimate businesses used to launder money. Searches also illuminate political and military organizations involved in captagon trafficking.

Build a profile

With names and social media handles uncovered in Document Search, analysts can quickly pivot to People Search to glean additional identifiers for individuals associated with captagon trafficking — such as phone numbers, email addresses, usernames, and other data that can spur further investigation. People Search also runs names against thousands of international and domestic watchlists, which can uncover individuals with existing sanctions.



Figure 1: A social media post about a captagon lab returned by an Insights Document Search

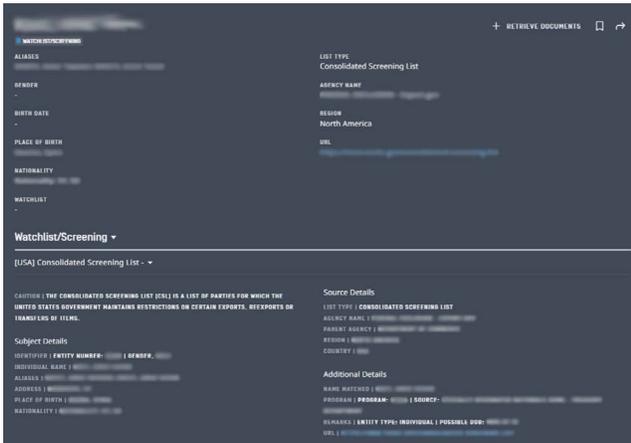


Figure 2: A People Search profile showing that an individual appears on a sanctions list

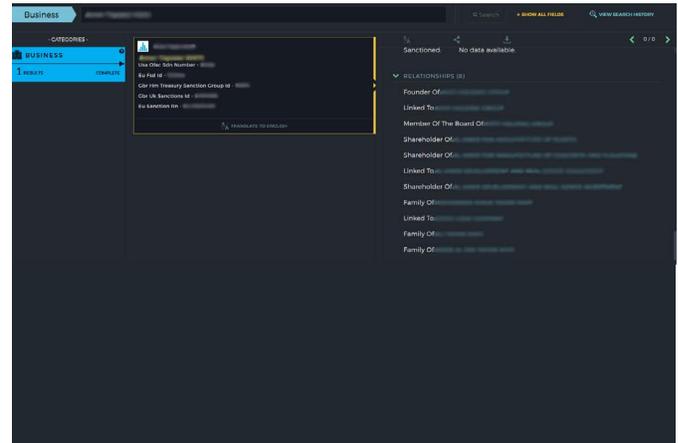


Figure 3: Results from a Business Search showing the business and family ties of the individual being investigated

Follow the money

Using Business Search, analysts can build business connections between individuals and organizations associated with captagon trafficking in Syria and Lebanon. These businesses provide fronts for the captagon trade, while insulating corrupt government officials from production and exportation of the drug. These discoveries provide new leads to explore and expand the known network.

Use location data

Analysts can use geolocational data to expose captagon trafficking routes and highlight new locations of interest. Starting from known captagon facilities, investigators can analyze device activity and perform historical queries of those devices to show trends, patterns, and trafficking routes.

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 World Health Organization, "Convention on Psychotropic Substances," United Nations, accessed April 2025, https://www.unodc.org/pdf/convention_1971_en.pdf

⁴ Wikipedia, "Fenethylamine," accessed April 2025, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fenethylamine>

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 EL Husseini, Rouba and Mojon, Jean Marc, "Captagon connection: how Syria became a narco state," AL-Monitor, November 2022, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/11/captagon-connection-how-syria-became-narco-state?utm>

⁸ Ibid

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